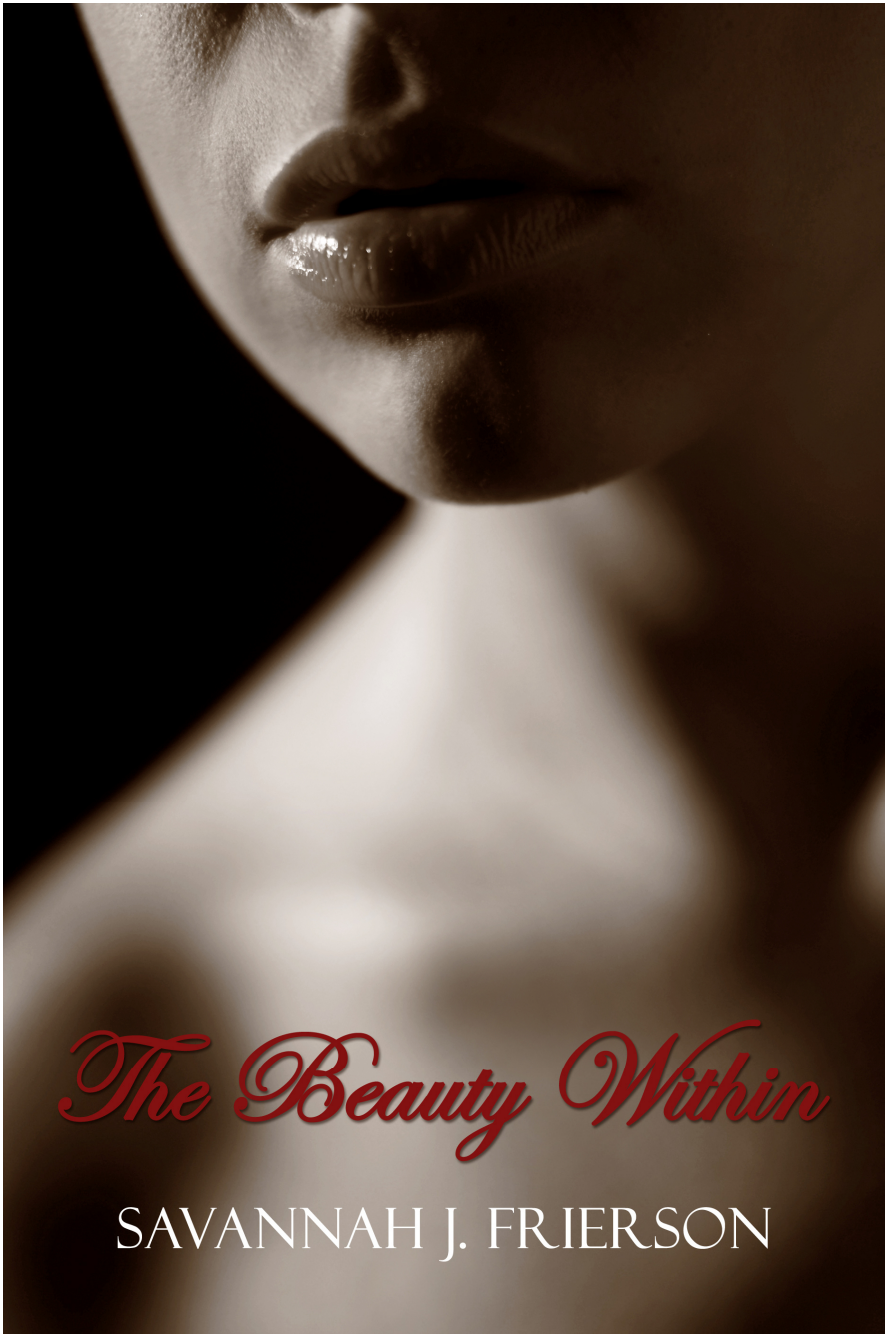
The Beauty Within
SAVANNAH J. FRIERSON

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Cover Image: *Moonlight Body* © Daniel Sroga. Image from BigStockPhoto.com

To my uncle Greg who never let me settle for anything other than my best; to my uncle Pete (Lt. Col. James T. Curry) who never let me forget from whom and whence I came; to my daddy Matthew who never let me think I wasn't beautiful.

ONE

One month. It had taken Tyler Carver exactly one month to buck up the courage to use the coupon. As she stood inside the facility, watching the precision-toned bodies operate the equipment with expertise and ease, she suddenly grew very nervous her bucked-up courage would leave her.

Tyler tugged on her too-big T-shirt and clutched her bag like a lifeline. She didn't see Damon anywhere. She'd called him yesterday to make absolutely *sure* he would be there to greet her. That was the deal she'd made: It was he or no one at all. She trusted Damon to be patient with her and not embarrass her. She knew she looked as if she were long overdue for this personal training session, and the last thing Tyler wanted or needed was some cocky beefy jerk continuously reminding her of that fact.

"Where *are* you, Damon?" she muttered under her breath, still hovering at the gym's entrance.

Someone muttered "excuse me" and Tyler moved aside so a gorgeous woman wearing an exercise outfit Tyler could never imagine herself in could pass. The longer she remained inside of the doorway the more she wanted to bolt, but she wouldn't let Damon down...*herself* down. It was the New Year, and that meant keeping resolutions.

Taking a deep breath, Tyler walked further into the clean, state-of-the-art gym to the service window where a man with light brown hair in desperate need of a cut and gunboats for arms stood bent over a clipboard. He looked to be in a hurry, so she cleared her throat to get his attention.

"Yeah?"

His brusque tone made her pause and wince. "Um...I'm here to see Damon?"

"Damon's not here. Can I help you?"

He still hadn't looked at her and she frowned. "I have a session with him. Tyler Carver? I called him yesterday and he said he'd be here..."

He looked at her then, and Tyler had to work not to cuss in approval. His hair fell into the most piercing gray eyes she'd ever seen, and everything about him screamed masculine and chiseled.

Those eyes went wide as they catalogued her features before falling flat with disinterest and borderline dismissal. "You're a girl."

The flow of attraction within her dammed immediately. She wanted to glare at him. "Am I?"

The man rolled his eyes and picked up another clipboard. "According to the schedule you're three minutes late…"

He left the room, came out to the main area, and began walking. Tyler gaped at him. No "Follow me, please?" or "Right this way?" Damon better have a damn good explanation as to why he wasn't here.

"Are you coming or are you determined to waste more of my time?"

Tyler clamped her mouth shut. She had half a mind to leave, but she refused to give this rude man the satisfaction. His stride was assured—autocratic—and he was working the hell out of his track pants and too tight sleeveless tee. She followed him to a relatively open area where there was a mat, free weights, and a rowing machine. She set down her bag and tugged on her shirt again, anxious about what he would want her to do.

"We're going to stretch first," he said on a sigh. "So you don't hurt yourself. God forbid you should pull a muscle…"

Again, she said nothing. He had a point even if he could've been nicer in delivering it. She sat on the mat and followed the stretching exercises he demonstrated. While not nearly as limber as he was, she clearly surprised him at how flexible she was by the way he grunted in satisfaction.

Once they were fully stretched, he gave her two-pound weights. She looked at him askance. Did he think her a weakling?

"Low weight and many reps help tone muscles better, especially for women," he said in a bored tone. "Again, it's better to start nice and slow so you won't hurt anything."

He really needs to work on his people skills, she thought as she tested the weights in her hands. He still hadn't told her his name, but she wasn't going to ask, either. She hoped this was the first and last time she would have to deal with him.

He began showing her the movements for the exercise. At first they started with simple shoulder shrugs. Tyler gained confidence with each set of reps completed; and though her muscles started to burn, it was a good feeling instead of the ones she had feared she would experience. As the time passed, however, Mr. Gunboats, with his fifty-pound weights, started doing more complex combinations and positions. Tyler did her best to copy his movements perfectly; but her arms and legs weren't holding the positions correctly, and she felt silly as she damn near slipped and fell multiple times.

"You know, there's nothing wrong with just buying a treadmill and trying that for a few weeks."

The blood in her body ran cold. "*Excuse me*?"

The man, who hadn't even flushed or broken a sweat, sighed again as if he were struggling for patience with speaking to a slow child. "I just mean you can't walk before you crawl."

"I walked in here just fine."

"Maybe if you'd do more walking—"

"Oh, *no*," Tyler said, standing up straighter, the dumbbells still in her hands. "You don't know me to judge me; and even if you did, you ain't God—"

"At this rate, He's the only one who can help you anyway!"

Tyler could *not* believe this man's gall! So what he looked like he peeled right off an Abercrombie & Fitch billboard, he had no right to speak to her that way! It was proof that no matter how good looking a person could be on the outside, an ugly attitude could ruin that very quickly.

Tyler didn't even think she was in *that* bad a shape. Of course she had a little more hips, booty, and belly than she would have liked, but she still earned some catcalls walking down the streets of Durham. She had "junk in her trunk" as her sister and best friend Wendy would say almost enviously; and while she didn't plan on gracing any fashion magazine covers anytime soon, she didn't consider herself a walking advertisement for those needing gastric bypass, either.

Tyler wasn't here for cosmetic reasons anyway. She wanted to get healthy. After a recent chiropractor's appointment, the doctor had said even losing twenty pounds would do wonders for her lower back problems. Damon, Wendy's boyfriend, had been eager in wanting to help her. Since he was one of the few people she absolutely trusted, she had finally agreed.

Now she wished she hadn't.

"Where is Damon?"

"He got sick. I had to cover him. Your time is ticking, lady. Some of us have plans."

The way he'd said it clearly implied "these plans" were of the "dating" variety, something with which she would have *no* knowledge. Tyler was vaguely aware they were also gaining an audience, and her russet cheeks burned in anger and embarrassment.

She calmly put the weights back on the rack before walking up to the man and poking him in the chest. Her voice was low but firm as she spoke. "I may not be the world's slimmest or healthiest woman, but even fat people deserve respect. We breathe and bleed just like the rest of you 'damn near perfect' people; and just like us, you'll die eventually too. So you can kiss my big, chocolate, black ass Mr. Abercrombie. I don't need this shit from you."

His face remained emotionless, but his chiseled jaw ticked. With one final poke to his chest, she picked up her bag and left the gym with her head held high.

☼

Gunnar Daniels refused to look at anyone as he stalked to his office. He felt the stares of nosy customers follow him along his walk, which only served to send him deeper into his foul mood.

Damn her.

Who did that woman think she was, coming into his establishment and...what...put him in his proper place? His parents and sister would be so ashamed if they had heard how he spoke to her. Just because his plans for the day had taken an unexpected and unappreciated turn didn't mean it was her fault. If he really wanted to blame someone, he could blame the restaurant that had served the undercooked fish that had caused Damon to go home sick. Or he could blame Kaci for *demanding* they moved their date from Saturday to today because she had a "prior engagement."

What kind of plans did she have that didn't include him? Weren't they supposed to be giving their on-and-off relationship another shot? Gunnar didn't know why he bothered sometimes, but Kaci really was a nice girl if she kept her mouth shut for more than sixty consecutive seconds.

Gunnar groaned, plopping into his chair and throwing an arm over his eyes. He really had messed things up big time. The woman...Tyler...she hadn't deserved his anger or his rudeness, and he definitely deserved the dressing down she'd given him. She hadn't even raised her voice or made a scene—that had been *his* doing—but she'd effectively made him feel as small as the dumbbells she'd carefully put on the rack before she laid into him.

He'd tried to be unaffected by her presence from the moment he'd seen her. Her dark skin was smooth and flawless and her almond-shaped eyes had a hint of vulnerability that called to him. The wild riot of curls that was like a halo around her head beckoned him to sink his fingers into it. Her body...not even the big T-shirt she wore could hide her abundant curves. Though she was definitely larger than the women who usually frequented the gym, Gunnar couldn't deny the pull of his groin when he saw her. She was of average height, and she carried her extra weight in all the right places: breasts, hips, and behind.

Gunnar had tried to convince her and himself that he didn't find her the least bit appealing. It was bad to get involved with clients, and the fact she wasn't the type of woman who usually garnered his interest left him confused and disconcerted. It also wouldn't do well to be thinking about one woman when having a date with another in a matter of hours.

What did it matter anyway? Ms. Carver wouldn't be back. Though his gym was doing very well, any loss of business was bad. Besides, he had opened GD Gym and Fitness to help people lose weight safely and effectively, not for it to be the pretty people's club. If she had come in at any other time…on any other day…the reception she would have gotten would have been much better and much closer to his real personality.

At least he'd like to think so.

Gunnar certainly wouldn't have tried to sneak peeks at her as she stretched or watched as the shirt pulled across her chest when she'd gone through the exercises. Tyler had been a quick learner, someone who was definitely eager to make a change in her life despite her anxiousness, and he'd gone and snuffed that out with his mean-spiritedness.

"Way to go, Gunnar," he muttered.

How would he explain this to Damon? Damon Wilkes was one of his best employees, and had had been bringing in business continuously since he'd been hired. The gym was diverse because of him, whites and blacks working out in a relaxed environment free from the racial tensions that simmered underneath in Durham. The fact he'd treated one of Damon's referrals so poorly was sure to bring that trend to a screeching halt.

Unable to think about the consequences of his actions any longer, Gunnar packed up his bag and left the gym early. Valerie would close up…

He slapped his forehead. He should've passed Tyler on to Valerie when he'd realized Tyler was a woman, and then he remembered Valerie didn't come in until after Tyler's session was over.

"Shit," Gunnar said, hopping into his Jeep and revving the engine. It was just not his Friday at all.

He made it to his split-level home relatively quickly. He entertained calling Kaci and cancel, definitely not in the mood for this date anymore, but then Kaci would throw a fit and he didn't have the patience to deal with that, either. Kaci, with her long, curly brown hair and buxom hourglass figure didn't cotton to men turning her down for any reason, so why was Gunnar trying to start something with her again?

"Because she's easy," Gunnar answered aloud. She didn't make him expend much energy. There was little passion outside of the carnal, and even that didn't last very long. They were very compatible sexually and made a very handsome couple, but Kaci also loved drama. Having spent ten years of his life in LA, Gunnar had had his fill of drama for at least the next twenty years.

So why am I going out with her again?

Damon had said he needed to get laid; he was wound too tight. Gunnar, apparently, agreed, or else he wouldn't be two hours away from spending his hard-earned money on Kaci Mondale.

"And *then* he starts talkin' 'bout how only *God* could help me lose the weight! I swear to all that is good and holy, Wen, I was *two seconds* from putting my size tens in that tight ass of his!"

Tyler chose to ignore the knowing look that crossed her sister's pretty face, too caught up in her righteous indignation to recognize she was admitting her attraction to "Mr. Abercrombie."

"Tight ass, huh?"

Tyler rolled her eyes. "I may be mad, but I'm not blind. He had a really nice ass...for a white guy..."

Wendy laughed out right then, plucking a fry and pointing it at her. "While I admit homeboy was wrong for comin'atcha like that, are you more upset at him being rude or at yourself for still being attracted to him despite it."

Tyler scowled before she slouched in her booth seat. "Both. And the fact he seemed cool as you please while I proceeded to make a complete fool of myself in front of him. Damn Damon...I hope he feels better, of course, but damn him anyway."

Wendy chuckled and shook her head. Tyler had been all set to sulk into a bag of potato chips while watching a movie from her extensive DVD collection, uncaring she was only proving Mr. Abercrombie's point, when Wendy had called and demanded she accompany her on a night on the town. Wendy wasn't above coming to Tyler's house and stripping her down and dressing her in appropriate clothes, either, so Tyler had grudgingly agreed. Tyler had asked if Damon was okay with her going out considering he was sick, and Wendy had said Damon was knocked out on medicine and would be okay for a few hours. The doctor had said he needed to sleep it off since it seemed he'd purged all of the contaminated fish out his system already.

"I don't see how Damon can work with someone who's such a jerk," Tyler muttered, stirring her straw in her sweet tea. "And he said he loved being a personal trainer too. He should find someplace else to work."

Wendy shrugged. "Maybe you caught him at a bad time."

"Bad time or no, I'm a client. He should know how to squash all that when he's on the job."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you. He didn't have a bad suggestion about getting a treadmill, though."

"No, but dag, can a sista get some respect? White man or no I still deserve it!"

"Preach!"

Tyler shot Wendy a look but ended up chuckling. Wendy had an uncanny knack for dragging her out of her dark periods, and for that, Tyler was grateful. The other woman, a producer for one of the local news stations, could have easily been in front of the camera instead of behind it with her caramel skin,

large eyes, and short and sassy haircut, courtesy of Soul Cuts Barbershop—Tyler's business. In fact, that was where Wendy had met Damon almost three years ago. Wendy had come in for a rush while Tyler had been putting the finishing touches on Damon's fade. It had definitely been lust at first sight for both, but the pair had formed a deep and loving relationship.

Tyler would have hated Wendy if she didn't love her sister so much.

"Well, you know how I feel about this whole 'losing weight' thing. You better be doing it for yourself and for the right reasons and not because of some man."

Wendy had been the most vocal about her concern for Tyler's sudden body consciousness. Tyler wanted to say it was easy for her, who had taken after their mother's side of the family with her tall, slim form. Tyler took her father's genes, the X-chromosome he'd given her more reflective of the women in his family with their plentiful curves and tendency to hold weight. There were many times people didn't think she and Wendy were sisters, and whenever Wendy would introduce them to people, sometimes Tyler would say, "Why, yes, I am the fat one." It would irritate Wendy immensely, but it was worth it to see the other person brought down a peg or two.

Tyler pulled a face. "What man? There hasn't been a man in forever!"

"I know that. That's not because of your weight, either, I hope you know."

Tyler didn't respond to that.

"I'd kill for your curves," Wendy added.

"For what? Damon loves you just the way you are."

Wendy grinned and shrugged. "Yeah, but I feel like a stick compared to you. I wish I had more meat on my frame. Mama Dee, may she rest in peace, was always complainin' Mama wasn't feedin' us and yet I ate more than you did half the time!"

Tyler smiled remembering Sunday dinners their paternal grandmother would always attend. Tyler and Wendy knew Mama Dee and their mother barely got along but tried for the sake of their father. Tyler missed those dinners. "You got Mama's metabolism."

"Hmm," Wendy murmured, her eyes staring covetously at Tyler's plate.

Tyler pushed her unfinished plate of fries over to her. "Have at it. These should definitely help slow it down!"

Wendy rolled her eyes, but she did take her fork and transfer the fries to her plate. "You don't know what you're missing!"

Tyler looked longingly at the fries. "Yeah...I do..."

It would be his luck Tyler Carver would be at the same restaurant tonight. So far she hadn't noticed him, and for that he was grateful. His date, on the other hand, was a grade-A disaster, especially since Kaci flirted with the waiter

and a table full of men opposite them as if he weren't even there. He was irrationally angry with Kaci, and part of him wanted to leave her to her own devices. But his mother raised him to be a gentleman, so he would stick it out until the end.

His eyes searched out Tyler again. How different she looked when she wore clothes that flattered her frame. Apparently he wasn't the only one who appreciated it, either, for plenty of men kept looking at her table, and it wasn't Tyler's companion who was pulling the attention. Gunnar groaned. What the hell had he been thinking talking to her like that? He should go over there and apologize, but considering the way she'd spoken to him earlier, he wasn't in the mood for another telling off.

"I gotta go to the bathroom, 'kay?" Kaci announced absently, looking at her reflection in a spoon.

"Whatever," Gunnar said, taking out his wallet and throwing bills on the table. This had been a horrendous waste of time. "I'll be ready to leave when you get back—"

"But I'm not done!" Kaci pouted, still staring into the spoon.

"You barely touched your salad!"

Kaci fluttered her eyelashes and ran her hands along her curves. "I've got to keep my figure right, you know. Don't you like it?"

"It's lovely."

"Gunnie!" Kaci said, her pout even more pronounced.

He *hated* it when she called him that, but he was too indifferent to correct her this time. After this date, they would be off permanently. He was never so hard up for sex he would settle for anything. Then again, when he and Kaci had first gotten together six months ago, he'd been extremely inebriated, but that was neither here nor there.

Kaci put down the spoon and sashayed off towards the restrooms, taking the majority of the male attention with her, and Gunnar shoved his arms into his jacket. He could catch up on his expense reports and updating his orders for new equipment...maybe shore up enough courage to go apologize to Ms. Carver.

His pride kept him as far away as possible, however, and he breathed a relieved sigh when Kaci sauntered back.

She chattered unceasingly as he drove her back to her apartment complex, his headache mounting with every syllable she spoke. When he reached her complex, he debated whether or not to just drop her off; but he'd already fulfilled his jerk quota for the day, so he walked her to her door.

"You wanna come inside?" Kaci asked, playing with the lapels of his leather jacket.

He took her hand and removed it before stepping back. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because..." He ran a hand through his hair. "I don't think we should see each other anymore."

"Why?"

He shrugged helplessly. "Things just...can't work out between us. Every time we've tried it's ended in disaster."

It was her turn to shrug, her breasts pulling tight against her blouse. Though it was barely fifty degrees outside she hadn't bothered with a jacket. "How about one last go for the road?"

"I'd rather not."

Kaci sniffed. "Hmm. I guess Sheila was right. You're gay. That's funny, though, because my gaydar is usually spot on..."

Gunnar laughed, unable to help himself. "Whatever helps you sleep at night."

"It could've been with me if you were smart, but you're not. Toodles!"

Kaci entered her apartment and slammed the door in his face. It was just as well. She took this "break up" a little too breezily for his liking. She probably had some poor dude's phone number and was calling him to come over right now.

"Whatever," Gunnar muttered, going back to his Jeep. He could do better than Kaci anyway.

He refused to think he'd just *met* "better than Kaci" too.

TWO

"Yo...you gotta apologize, man. I do *not* like being on the receiving end of a Tyler Carver cuss-out!"

Gunnar chuckled, going over the schedule for the classes he would be teaching for the rest of the week. It was Wednesday, the first day Damon had been back for work because of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday that Monday and the fact he had Tuesdays off. Gunnar felt really bad for getting his employee-turned-friend in trouble; and though he'd admitted to himself he would have to apologize, doing so in person?...not so much.

"I can't just send her a card—?"

"How the hell you gonna apologize to a *black* woman with a card! You gotta be a man and show your face! And given the way you treated her, I'd borrow some kneepads 'cause you gon' do some *serious* grovelin', Son!"

Gunnar rolled his eyes. Damon certainly had a flair for hyperbole. "I don't know where she is, Damon, and since I doubt she'll be coming back here anytime soon, I don't see how that will happen."

"Go to Soul Cuts. She works there. Hell, her info is even on her contact sheet. Next try."

Gunnar gnashed his teeth but said nothing. He really had no excuse not to apologize now. He would make it quick, like ripping off a Band-Aid. Maybe the instant attraction he'd felt for her would be gone since there would be no shock at the sight of her anymore.

Yes...that sounded good.

For the rest of the day Gunnar was distracted, especially since Damon kept dropping none-too-subtle hints about making his apology. He also tried to tell Gunnar the sooner he apologized the better, but Gunnar had gotten caught up on the phone with one of his equipment suppliers so the lunch date to Soul Cuts had been postponed until after work.

Damon even threatened to follow him just to make sure he went, but Gunnar threatened to revoke his free Tuesdays if he did such a thing. "I'm not a preschooler!"

"You damn sure sulk like one!" Damon shot back.

Gunnar groaned and for the second time in a week, dreaded the end of the workday.

On Gunnar's way out, Damon shook a fist at him, and though Gunnar knew the other man was kidding, he really didn't want to call Damon's bluff. He hopped into his Jeep and made the twenty-minute drive across town to the black section, not the least bit intimidated by that as opposed to the woman he was to meet.

It was dark by the time he pulled onto the street where Tyler's business was. Her space was tucked between a Laundromat and a knickknacks store. He peaked inside to see it was empty, but the lights were on, and he tested the door.

It was unlocked.

Taking a deep breath, Gunnar opened the door and stepped inside. "Hello?"

"I'll be right with you!"

Gunnar stood and listened to grunting, crashing, and cursing. He bit his lip to keep from grinning, and a magazine for black hairstyles caught his interest. Intrigued by the photos, he picked up the magazine and began flipping through it, sitting in one of the plastic chairs along the wall as he waited for the shop's proprietor.

☼

Of course, the one set of clippers Tyler needed would be all the way in the back of the junk she had in her storeroom. She had intended to straighten things out over the long weekend; but laziness had bitten her hard, and the sudden cold snap had her less inclined to go out when it wasn't necessary. Once she got purchase on the clippers—brand new and top-of-the-line—Tyler blew out a breath and ignored the boxes and magazines that had fallen from their precarious stacks to the ground. The next time she asked Damon and Wendy to help her "organize", she would make a "do not touch" pile so she could find her important things better.

Shaking the unopened clippers in victory, she walked out of the storeroom, barely sparing her walk-in a glance. "I'm sorry for the wait. What can I do for you?"

"Um...accept my apology?"

Her head snapped up and she whirled towards the sound of the voice. What was *he* doing here? And why did he still look suave and fine even as he flipped through her *Black Hair* magazine?

Damon had said he would get his boss—Gunnar, what kind of a name was *Gunnar*?—to apologize for his behavior, but she hadn't believed he would come. Gunnar was the employer, Damon the employee, and no matter how protective Damon was of Wendy and her, Damon couldn't make his superior do what he wanted him to do. Besides, Tyler would get over it. She'd gotten over worse insults.

She shook her head and crossed her arms underneath her breasts. "What apology? I ain't hear an apology."

He grinned then, still flipping through the magazine. He seemed very captivated by what he saw, and Tyler pursed her lips to keep from chuckling at him. He used his forefinger to hold his page and he looked up at her. Those gray eyes lanced right through her, and she fidgeted imperceptibly.

"I'm waiting."

He smirked slightly. "I'm sorry."

Tyler raised an eyebrow. "Sorry for what?"

"Being rude. I was having a bad day and I took it out on you. I apologize."

He sounded sincere enough, but it was hard to forget what he said, especially given the rather large grain of truth to it. "Apology accepted. Now you don't have to worry about Damon punching you in the nose."

Gunnar chuckled out right then and shook his head. "I know how to bob and weave."

Tyler's eyes skipped to his arms and she shook her head. She was sure he knew how to do more than that too. "Right."

She grabbed a broom and began sweeping the hair and other debris from the floor. She felt those eyes on her and became self-conscious. Why did she wish she wore something more alluring than her ratty black smock? It wasn't as if what was underneath was much better—a long-sleeved tee and old jeans—but usually she didn't come to work to impress people, especially not on slow Wednesdays.

Yet there he remained throughout her chore, watching, studying, arousing her to the point she wanted to kick him out. She already knew he found her borderline repulsive. Hadn't he done what he came here to do?

"Can you cut my hair?"

Gunnar was just as surprised as she was by the question. She'd looked at him as if he'd suddenly taken leave of his senses, and he ran a hand through his hair to tamp down his embarrassment. He needed one, anyway, and what better way to make up for his rude behavior than to give her business? Hair was hair after all, even if his was European instead of African. He thought she would be able to do a good job. Damon's hair always looked great after a cut, after all.

"*You* want *me* to do *your* hair?"

"Yes."

"You know this is a *black* barbershop, right?"

He shrugged. "I know you get mostly *black* customers, but I doubt this is a *black* barbershop."

"Not many white people make the drive to this part of town unless they want soul food," Tyler said frankly. Gunnar pinked a little. He rarely came to this side of Durham himself.

"You're not doing this to sue me if you get a craptastic haircut, are you?"

He laughed. "Craptastic!"

"Yes! You pullin' my leg, ain't you?"

Arching an eyebrow, he shrugged out of his leather jacket, walked slowly to her, turned her chair, and sat in it. "You're far too professional to botch a job. I trust you."

She looked shocked at that confession. "You do?"

"Yes. The fact you so succinctly put me in my place *and* the fact Damon speaks so highly of you tells me you are a trustworthy person. So...have at it. I'm at your mercy."

Those brown eyes met his cautiously in the mirror. He grinned at her. "This is your last chance to back out," she warned.

"You scared?"

Her nostrils flared. Gunnar remembered them doing that during the session when he issued a challenge. He knew Tyler was definitely up to meet it.

"Would you like a wash too?" she asked politely though he knew she was annoyed.

"I've already washed my hair in the shower, but thanks for asking."

Tyler rolled her eyes, but she took a spray bottle from her cart and began misting his hair to dampen it. His brown hair turned darker and the cool sensation relaxed him. When her fingers began combing through his hair he almost purred. She had a gentle, skillful touch, and he glanced at her face through the mirror. She was all professionalism now, and she looked very sexy that way.

He never realized the scalp could be such an erogenous zone, but between her body brushing against his head, her tender fingers, and the calming snap of the shears, Gunnar's body was working to a fevered pitch. He gripped the handles of his chair to keep from squirming.

"Am I making you that nervous?" Tyler asked with a bit of an edge.

"No...I actually have to go to the bathroom," he said sheepishly.

Tyler's eyes went wide in surprise, and she ducked her head to hide the grin he saw anyway. "Go straight through that door to the back. It's the door on your left."

Gunnar walked quickly there, and once he was inside, he locked the door and sagged heavily against it. The pressure in his jeans was too much, and he unzipped them to relieve it. Did the woman have any idea how enticing she was? He'd never gotten so aroused from a haircut, and he'd had females cut his

hair before. No, this reaction was solely Tyler's and he was at a loss on how to control himself.

Refusing to jack off, Gunnar took a series of deep breaths and went to the sink. He could do this...he had to...she wasn't done with his haircut yet! He thought of numerous unpleasant things—at the fore of his mind was the last date he'd had with Kaci—and Gunnar finally felt fit to go back out there. He zipped up his pants, washed his hands, and splashed water on his face, drying it with a paper towel afterwards. When he went back into the shop, Tyler was cleaning out one of her clippers.

"Did you wash your hands?"

Gunnar's eyes snapped to Tyler's. "Um...yes?"

"It's a pet peeve of mine," she explained, still cleaning out the clippers and not looking at him. "If you go to the bathroom, please wash your hands! I make sure it's always stocked with soap and paper towels!"

Gunnar smiled a little and relaxed. "You sound almost as anal retentive about cleanliness as I am. When I first opened the gym, it would take me at least an hour and a half to disinfect every single piece of equipment. Me and germs do *not* get along!" He sat back in the chair.

"That's why everyone and their mama's always sick all the time," Tyler said, starting her soothing and arousing cutting again. Gunnar was better prepared for it this time, however, and he willed his body to stay calm.

The duo managed to fall into a comfortable stream of small talk. How sad was it this was the most enjoyable experience he'd had with a woman in weeks, and she hated his guts!

He closed his eyes and enjoyed the feel of her fingers through his hair. Maybe it *wasn't* so sad...

His hair felt like silk. That was the only way Tyler could describe it. The strands were fine as they slid through her fingers, but not so fine they would be considered thin. She was used to thick, tightly curled strands that fell in puffy clumps on the floor, so seeing the light-brown sleek strands by her feet was a bit fascinating.

"I can't believe you're letting me do this," she muttered absently, pulling the comb through a section of hair she was about to cut.

"Why?"

"Why? I know you know I don't get many...*European* hair textures in my shop," she said

"*European*?"

"Yes!"

Gunnar snickered. "My mom is Norwegian and my dad comes from a line of Scottish settlers. I guess you can't get anymore European than that!"

Tyler grinned in spite of herself. "That explains 'Gunnar', huh?"

"Yes. My sister is Inge. I think she has it worse!"

"Oh, *my*!" Tyler laughed, but that wasn't bad compared to some of the names she'd heard. Young mothers who came into the shop sometimes had children whose names Tyler could only *pray* they would learn how to spell eventually. It was as if the mothers had put all twenty-six letters on a dartboard and threw at them, then constructed a name from whatever had been hit. Then again, her name was Tyler after her grandfather because her father had been determined she would be a boy—no other name would do.

Gunnar chuckled. "I got teased awfully when I was in school. Not many southern boys with a name like mine."

Tyler stood behind him, their eyes locking in the mirror. Once again, they blew her away. Never before had a pair of eyes affected her so. Throughout the entire cutting she'd forced herself not to stare at them, at the way his eyelashes seemed too long for a man like him, yet only served to enhance his handsomeness. His eyebrows almost looked tweezed, so perfect were their arches over his eyes, but Tyler knew that was because of the perfect cocktail of genes he'd inherited from his parents.

She noticed his mouth curving into a slow smile and she ducked her head immediately. "Uh...is that why you started working out?"

"Hmm?"

Tyler huffed out a breath, but had to force herself not to drag her hands along his arms. "The teasing. You decided to work out to stem it, or did this body happen later?"

There was a short exhalation of breath. "You've been checking me out?"

She scowled at him through the mirror. "You own a gym, and it's obvious you're in peak physical shape. I *notice* things. And actually Damon has a better body than you anyway."

Liar!

Gunnar shrugged slightly. "That would probably hurt my feelings more if it weren't true."

"You agree with me?"

"He's had more time to work out than I. I've gotten lazy trying to get the gym off the ground, though after a year and a half you'd think I'd be done with that."

"You're never done. The market is always changing...gotta keep things fresh."

Another slow smile. "Exactly. It's nice to talk to someone who understands that."

Though she'd inherited Soul Cuts from her father, and with it many of his regulars, there was still the need to expand business. With many chain barbershops coming into town, she had to offer something a little more. She hired many kids and younger people in her neighborhood for jobs here—many times their first—and she rented out stations for people who could do hair but didn't have the money to open up their own shop. It was a way to keep

everyone more connected to the business, and she liked her set up just fine. She was, however, talking to some local television networks, Wendy's station primarily, about getting ads on the channels and she would start putting in calls to radio stations as well.

Sighing, Tyler put down the shears and picked up the portable hair dryer. She had finished styling his hair and would now dry it so he could get its full effect. She didn't get too crazy with it, but she cut it much shorter than she imagined it had initially been. It was short in the back and a little longer in the front. It made him appear younger, bringing out his boyish charm and enhancing his piercing eyes.

Damn, but this man is fine!

"So," Tyler said, handing him a mirror so he could look at the back of his head, too, "what do you think?"

It was a simple haircut, but it rivaled many of the hair stylists his agent had forced upon him during his years in LA. She really had found her calling, and he suddenly realized why Damon was always in a better mood after he'd gotten a haircut. Tyler was as personable as she was professional; and despite the way he'd treated her upon their first meeting, he'd never felt unwelcome in her establishment.

He shook his head, bemused and once again humbled by her. "You're an amazing woman, Tyler Carver."

"What?"

The absolute shock coloring her voice had him chuckling. He turned his chair around so he could face her head-on and he nodded. "You could've easily given me the haircut from hell, and yet you gave me one of the best cuts I've had in years. I find that incredible."

Tyler shrugged, averting her eyes from his as she took the mirror from him. "You're my client. I always treat my clients with respect irrespective of how I really feel about them."

He ignored the way his heartbeat had accelerated in his chest. "And how do you feel about me…when I'm not your client?"

Tyler made a big show of putting up the mirror and cleaning her clippers and shears. "What does it matter?"

That was a very valid question, and Gunnar didn't have the balls to answer it just yet. He stood from the chair and reached into his pocket. "How much?"

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. "Fifteen."

Gunnar reached into his wallet and pulled out a twenty. She reached into her pocket and pulled out some cash, preparing to make change, but he put his hand over hers. "Keep it."

Her eyes were wide and luminous as they looked into his. Her hand was dry, but he could still feel the softness underneath. He wanted to rub his

thumb along the back of her hand. He wanted to bend his head and see if her lips were as pliant as they looked.

"Wow, that's mighty generous of you."

Her voice was huskier than it had been and he grinned. So it seemed he wasn't the only one affected. "I figure it's a thanks for making me look good and a sorry for treating you like crap earlier—to go along with the initial apology of course."

Tyler placed the twenty with the other bills and flashed him a small smile. "All right."

Gunnar didn't want to leave. He had to, though, before he made a complete ass of himself around her again by kissing her.

He stepped away from her and went to the chair where his jacket was. Their eyes remained on each other as he slipped his hands through the sleeves.

"Thank you, Ms. Carver," Gunnar said in a low voice.

"You're welcome Mr...."

"Daniels."

"Daniels. Thank you for your business."

They stood there staring at each other a moment more before Gunnar found his sense. He gave her a tiny wave and smile, then walked out the barbershop.

Gunnar couldn't let this be the last time he saw her; and since she swore she'd never set foot in his gym again, he would have to return for another haircut.

THREE

"I sent you to Soul Cuts to apologize and you sat there and got a *haircut* instead?"

"Not instead. Too."

Damon rolled his eyes but didn't miss a rep as he bench-pressed two hundred pounds worth of weights. Gunnar was spotting him, both taking time to enjoy the free day of no classes and actually get some exercise in themselves. The hum of the machines being used by other members was welcome to Gunnar, calming, and Damon's short bursts of exhalation had his body primed for his own set of reps that would come as soon as Damon finished his.

"It's a nice cut, though. She did a good job."

"Thanks."

"So y'all made up?"

"Made up? I apologized and she accepted. There was more I had to do?"

Damon lifted his shoulders slightly before pressing the weights up again. "Dunno. When I spoke to her last night she ain't try to snap my head off, so I reckon you did good."

"Gee, thanks."

"I'm just saying! She's gonna be my future sister-in-law—I'mma need to be on good terms with the woman!"

Gunnar raised an eyebrow as he helped Damon put the weights back on the stand. "Future sister-in-law, huh?"

Damon grinned sheepishly as he sat up, wiping a white towel over his hazelnut face. "Maybe. I've been thinking about it, y'know?"

Gunnar dapped Damon's fist. "Congratulations, man! Wendy seems like a nice..." He trailed off as it finally dawned on him what Damon had said. "*Sister-in-law*?!"

"Yeah," Damon chuckled. "Tyler and Wendy are sisters. Wendy's older."

Gunnar was surprised. He'd met Wendy briefly during the first few weeks Damon had worked at GD, but he'd never asked for a last name, and she and Tyler looked so different…

"I know what you're thinkin', man," Damon said, getting up so Gunnar could take his place on the bench. "Thought the same thing, too, but they're more alike in personality than in looks. Wendy is very protective of her lil' sis—"

"There's nothing 'lil" about her—"

"Hey, man—!"

"I mean that as a compliment," Gunnar said hastily, getting a solid grip on the bar before beginning his reps. "She can definitely hold her own."

Damon was quiet for a moment, adjusting Gunnar's positioning. Gunnar didn't like the silence, but he didn't force Damon to say anything, either.

Gunnar went through twenty reps before Damon decided to speak again. "I'm trying to decide if I like your tone."

Gunnar chuckled breathlessly. "What?"

"I don't know yet. I need to think on it."

"Think on *what*?"

Damon didn't speak again until Gunnar finished his workout. Gunnar had no idea what was going on in his friend's head, but he wished he didn't feel so anxious to find out.

Damon assisted Gunnar in putting the bar and weights back on the rack. Gunnar took a long swig of water as Damon sat next to him on the bench. The pair looked at the other members of the gym working out for a few moments, both taking pride in how well the facility was doing. Though Damon hadn't been Gunnar's first hire, he'd been his best by far. He had an eye for the person-to-person side of the business that GD Gym and Fitness had been missing. This wasn't to say Gunnar wasn't pleasant, but given how he'd treated Tyler earlier, he definitely could do with a little more people skills when under the heavy strain of stress.

"She doesn't seem your type."

"Who?" Gunnar said, tearing his eyes away from a female member. He hadn't even been looking at the woman with interest, but rather noting how her form on the treadmill was making her workout more difficult than it had to be. He'd been about to help correct it when Damon spoke.

"Not her, although she's fine, but Tyler."

"Tyler?"

"Yeah, man. It sounds like you're in the beginning stages of 'sprung.'"

"Sprung?"

Damon snorted. "You repeatin' me ain't gonna make it *not* true. What the devil happened during your haircut, man?"

Gunnar shook his head and stood, deciding to help the woman later because it wouldn't do to approach her while sporting a blush. Damon had a little too much emotional intelligence for Gunnar's liking sometimes.

"Yo, don't think you're gonna leave here without tellin' a brotha somethin'!" Damon said, following Gunnar to his office. "Spill! I mean what I said."

"I don't understand your confusion," Gunnar evaded.

"Are you serious?"

Gunnar just looked at him.

Damon closed the door and sat opposite of Gunnar's desk. He allowed Gunnar to make a show of doing paperwork before he went for the jugular. "Do *not* string her along, man. I just may forget you're my boss if you do."

Gunnar looked at Damon with an arched brow. "String her along?"

"I'm a man, and I have male friends, and mostly all of my male friends are heterosexual. I know that tone—hell, I've *used* that tone—you're interested. You just be real sure about what exactly your interest is. It may not be official yet, but Tyler's my baby sister in every sense of the word, and I will fuck you up if you fuck her up, you understand?"

Gone was the amicable and open expression that usually graced Damon's face. He was all seriousness, and Gunnar didn't even bother to deny what Damon had said. He was interested, but he wouldn't try anything with Tyler. Though he knew she found him attractive, Tyler didn't seem the type of woman who would give a man consideration just because he was easy on the eyes. She was a woman who needed substance, and while he thought he had some, his might not be the kind of substance that would interest her.

"Is this because I'm white?" Gunnar asked. He didn't think Damon would care, but Gunnar thought it better to ask anyway.

"Hell no! You could be blue and brown with yellow and orange stripes! Trust, 'asshole' is not designated to one race."

Gunnar heard the bitterness in Damon's tone that he had a gut feeling it had little to do with this present conversation. He wanted to ask what had happened to make Damon so protective over his girlfriend's sister, but it really wasn't any of his business. He still planned to go to Soul Cuts again—the prices were fair and the barber was talented—but it would only be a professional relationship.

Nothing more.

Tyler really wished she were more surprised to see Gunnar walking through the door than she was, but she'd been expecting...hoping...he would stop by for another haircut again.

She refused to think of the implications of doing so.

It had been two weeks since his first visit, and she hadn't seen or spoken to him since then; but given the way Damon had interrogated and Wendy had teased, Tyler had deduced Gunnar had said something to warrant such reactions. It was bad enough her sister had sniffed out her attraction from the beginning, but the fact Damon all but said Gunnar had some interest in her was a little more than disconcerting. Wendy, of course, had taken that and ran all the way to the altar and a house in the suburbs, and Tyler had to tell both of them just because there was a possible mutual attraction, that didn't necessarily mean anything would come of it or that she even wanted something to happen. It was possible to window shop without going into the store and making the purchase, after all.

Possible, but damn hard sometimes.

Gunnar was wearing his usual leather jacket and smirk, but instead of the breakaway pants he'd been wearing the last time, black jeans hugged his strong thighs and ass she knew damn well would make an excellent trampoline for a quarter. He took off the jacket and hung it on the coat rack this time, revealing a deep blue crew neck sweater that enhanced the musculature of his torso and arms.

She *really* needed to buy a new smock!

Tyler shook her head. The smock she wore had been her father's, and its sentimental value made it priceless. She would not become so silly over a man to replace her father's smock for one that would make her, what, sexier? Please.

"Hello, Mr. Daniels," she said. She'd been sweeping when he entered, and she hadn't paused in her chore.

"Ms. Carver. How are you?"

"Fine. You? How may I help you?"

He brushed a hand over his head. "Can I get a haircut? I know I didn't make an appointment, but I figured it would be okay to walk in since the last time I was here it wasn't busy."

Tyler shrugged, trying to go for a nonchalance she didn't feel. "Sure. You can have a seat—"

"Ah...I was wondering if I could get a wash too? I figure I should go for the full effect since I missed out on it last time."

Tyler eyed him. His smirk didn't seem as cocky as it had been in the past. In fact, there was a hint of red in his neck and cheeks, and she was suddenly struck by the fact he seemed nervous. She blinked at him, not knowing what to do with that revelation.

"Oh..."

"I mean it's okay if—"

"Sure," Tyler said quickly, then shook her head in bemusement. This was the strangest man she'd ever met. "It won't cost extra if that's what you're thinking."

"That's very nice of you to throw in a wash," Gunnar said with a wink.

She refused to acknowledge the heat that had flooded her body. "You can have a seat at the bowl. I'll be right with you."

She quickly swept the debris into a neat pile on the dustpan and threw it in the trash. She set the broom and the dustpan in the corner before going to her bathroom and washing her hands. When she returned Gunnar was still sitting up right, looking at her with a tiny grin on his face.

"What?"

"You're so thorough."

"Thorough?"

"Yes. It's not a bad thing. It's actually quite refreshing."

"Is it?"

Gunnar nodded. He was staring at her again. She'd never known eyes to have such a presence of their own, but his did. It didn't matter that the rest of him was such an impeccable specimen of the male form, his eyes ensnared her every time. He probably spoke more with his eyes than with his mouth, and Tyler admitted she tended to like what his eyes said.

She shivered slightly.

"Are you cold?"

"A little," she mumbled, though that was the farthest from the truth. She went to him and pressed against his shoulders to get him to lean back. His eyes were ever on her, piercing as always, and Tyler wondered if she would be able to complete her job without making an absolute fool of herself.

"Let me know if the temperature is okay," she murmured, turning on the water. She took the nozzle and wet his hair gently, breathing a sigh of relief when his eyes slid closed. Now she would be able to work.

"Feels great," he said, his voice a low hum. Her body matched that hum. She was dismayed by how it reacted to him. She hadn't felt this way since...

She shook her head, refusing to darken her day with thoughts of *that* time.

Tyler squeezed a dime-size amount of shampoo on her hand and began washing his hair. Again, the unusual sensation of his strands on her skin struck her, but it wasn't unpleasant in the least. He seemed to be completely relaxed, and she smiled a little. Ever since Tyler was young, she'd been intrigued by hair, especially since her father had owned the barbershop. She and Wendy had loved coming into the shop on weekends, but Wendy had been more interested in the gossip than in their father's profession. As soon as Tyler became old enough, her father had begun apprenticing her on the skills of a barber. He'd also started talking to her about what would happen to the shop once he retired. Of course, they had both agreed she would go to college, but whenever she had wanted to return home and work she always had a station with her name on it.

Tyler had gone to North Carolina Central University and earned a degree in Business Administration. During this time, she also attended Carolina Beauty College part-time, and by senior year in college, she'd had her cosme-

tology license. Wendy had thought her insane doing all that work, but Tyler had wanted to be completely prepared upon graduation from NCCU.

It was a good thing she had been.

"How are you doing?" Tyler asked, rinsing his hair. She would give him one more shampoo before cutting it.

"You have very calming hands."

Tyler grinned. She'd been told that before. "My daddy used to say a gentle touch was the best touch."

Those gray eyes opened and seared her. "He's right, you know."

Tyler squeezed more shampoo on her hand and began washing his hair again. "He usually was."

His full lips curled slightly before he dragged his eyes back closed. It was very awkward to wash his hair with her arms completely extended, but she was afraid he would feel how hot and primed her body was if she were any closer to him. He *must* know what he did to her, making her crazy from his nearness. Perhaps she would need to blindfold him whenever he came for a cut so she could function properly!

Eventually Tyler talked some sense into herself and positioned herself more comfortably by the bowl. She ignored how her breasts would brush against his head whenever she adjusted to wash his nape, or whenever she needed to wash the farther side of his head. She took the nozzle and rinsed his hair once more.

This was going to be a long appointment.

Perhaps getting a wash was a bad idea. How Gunnar managed to control his body, he would never know, but he was thankful for it. Feeling Tyler's hands and...other...parts against his head nearly had him needing a new set of boxers. She was far too attractive for his liking, and he wondered if she knew just how appealing she was. But he'd promised Damon he wouldn't be the one to show her, no matter how his body yearned otherwise.

She dried his hair with a towel, and it was all he could do not to rest his head against her breasts. His hands itched to roam every voluptuous curve of her, but Gunnar knew that would only earn an elbow in the eye or worse.

"You can go sit in the chair," Tyler said, pulling the towel from his hair. He nodded and did as told, watching her rinse out the shampoo bowl and throw the used towel in a hamper through the mirror. She returned with a fresh towel and folded it along his neck before putting a styling cape around him. "Would you like the same cut as last time?"

"Sure."

Their eyes met briefly in the mirror, but she averted hers quickly. Gunnar was glad he'd given her this robe-thing to wear; it hid his reaction to her very effectively. They were quiet when she first started, Gunnar unwilling to break her concentration, but he didn't want to waste this trip with silence. He

struggled with trying to find something to say, then mentally kicked himself for not asking the obvious.

"How long have you had the shop?"

Her eyes skipped to his in the mirror before going back to his hair. "Almost six years, but it's been in my family going on fifty years. My grandfather started it, though it had been an unofficial thing from his house, then in '67 Daddy got a lease on this place and named the business Soul Cuts—it was the height of the Civil Rights/Black Is Beautiful movement when he did that. Then since Daddy only had two girls and I was the one who was interested, it came to me right when I graduated college. I've been the owner ever since."

"Did he retire then?"

Tyler cleared her throat. "He passed."

"Oh…" Gunnar felt like the world's biggest loser. "I'm sorry…"

"It's okay," Tyler said, giving him a tremulous smile. "He prepared me well to take over the business, so the transition had been relatively seamless. It may seem like I don't get a lot of business whenever you come, but every day except for Wednesdays this place is hopping and full of activity. I'm actually glad there's the reprieve. It gives me a day to recharge for the rest of the week."

Gunnar smiled, fully appreciating the sentiment. Tuesdays were his slow days, which was why Damon had the day off. It was nice to have one day of the week to relax and catch up if necessary.

"Do you do more than cut hair?"

"Yes, though primarily I function as a barber. I have folks who rent out the other stations here, and I have a nail technician come Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday because she has classes Monday and Wednesdays, and two hair stylists who come every day but they leave before four so they can pick up their children. It's a very fluid shop, and it works because all the customers have different schedules, and there's always someone here. I pick up the slack if one of the stylists can't make it, though. I'm here every day except for the weekends. I know it's untraditional, but my father and grandfather were never open on the weekends and our customers seem to respect that. If it's an absolute emergency then we will, but those are generally rare."

Gunnar was fascinated by what he learned. He thought old-school business had been abandoned, but he was glad Tyler was committed to leaving the intangible qualities of an enterprise intact. Many times they made the difference between success and failure.

"I'm glad you're doing well. Your father would be proud," Gunnar said sincerely.

Her smile was genuine and it touched a place inside of him. "That's what I strive for everyday."

Gunnar returned her smile, and was glad hers didn't leave her face for a long time once she returned to her task.

Another stretch of silence fell upon them, but Gunnar was content to let it be. With her, he didn't feel the need to talk to remove the awkward pall that would fall for lack of conversation. Their silence was companionable, providing a space where thoughts and speech were equally regarded. Besides, it was nice to be with a woman who didn't seem enamored by her voice and her appearance. Tyler had a job to do and would do it well, and her confidence in her abilities only added to her attractiveness in her eyes.

So why had there been such apprehension when she'd walked into the gym?

Even as he thought the question, the answer piggybacked behind it. His stint in LA had given him unusual insight to how a person operated, especially when it came to insecurities. In LA, those insecurities were hidden in the packaging—everyone had to look the best in order to hide his worst. Bodies, clothes, houses, cars—everything on the outside had to be perfect so folks didn't know that the inside was a complete mess. Gunnar himself had gotten caught up in it; and while he would like to think he wasn't as bad off as many of his contemporaries, that shiny carrot of fame could make anyone lose complete sense.

Tyler, on the other hand, did the exact opposite. It seemed she was well put together in terms of personality and ability, but she didn't have as much faith in her outside package. Though he hadn't done much to encourage that faith, Gunnar thought all she needed was to tone some things and maybe lose a few inches in other areas, but a drastic body makeover was definitely not necessary.

"Do you know why Damon referred you to GD?"

Tyler sighed. "I've been having back problems and my doctor recommended I do some strength training and lose a few pounds. I didn't know where to go but I knew Damon was a trainer, so he gave me the card and set up the appointment."

"Is that the only reason?"

Her eyes snapped to his and she frowned. "What other reason do I need?"

Gunnar shrugged, wincing internally. They'd been doing so well, but the frost was back in her voice and he wanted desperately to thaw it.

"I didn't mean for that to come off condescending. I apologize."

She sighed again and shook her head. "Sorry for snapping at you. My sister asked the same thing. I asked if she was blind. It's obvious I need to lose some weight, and given you've basically said the same thing—"

"I thought we've already established I'm an insensitive jerk?"

She giggled, and it sent warmth throughout his entire body. She had a great laugh, as if it were the audible embodiment of joy.

"Not all the time," Tyler said after a moment.

"Really."

"Really. You've been very nice these last two times."

"So I only have 'jerk-ish' tendencies, huh?"

"All guys do."

"Ouch!"

"If it makes you feel any better, Wendy's called me a heffa numerous times."

"It doesn't, but thanks for the attempt to lighten my mood."

Tyler grinned. She didn't take herself too seriously, and Gunnar liked that about her. In fact, there were very few things he didn't like about her. Even during their first meeting he couldn't say there was something he innately disliked about her. Though he knew Tyler had flaws—no human didn't—he had the niggling suspicion he would find those uniquely endearing as well.

I'm in trouble!

What had he been thinking making such an impossible promise to Damon. There was no way Gunnar could pretend he didn't want to pursue a friendlier relationship with Tyler Carver, and he wouldn't.

Damon would understand. He was dating her sister, after all.

She finished his haircut. He seemed very pleased with it, which in turn made Tyler pleased. He barely noticed her taking off the styling cape as he inspected her work.

"Even better than last time."

Tyler snorted. "It looks exactly the same!"

"Maybe the wash had something to do with it."

Tyler refused to look at him, afraid he would see the heat that flared in her eyes at the mention of the shampooing. Never before had she had such a sensual experience washing someone's hair, and she doubted it would be so sensual with anyone else. Gunnar was a complete mystery to her, especially since she wasn't usually attracted to white men. This wasn't to say she'd never noticed them. She and Wendy had attended a mixed school, and both had taken accelerated classes, so it was usually them integrating majority-white classrooms. They both laughed and gossiped about the cute white boys, but neither had entertained actually dating one. Tyler never knew if Wendy ever had a real interest to do it; and while she hadn't, either, she'd been curious about "jumping the fence" as her Aunt Mabel would call it. Her son had married a white woman and they had a two-year-old son. Aunt Mabel hadn't been too happy with the union at first; but she loved her grandson to bits, and everything was well now.

Tyler didn't know how her remaining family would feel about her dating interracially. She knew Wendy wouldn't care, especially given how she had teased Tyler after hearing about the first "haircut incident." In fact, Wendy had said they should go on a double date, but Tyler had to remind her sister she was being a bit presumptuous.

"True," her sister had conceded. "Why don't you be instead? Worst he can say is 'no'."

Tyler shook her head at the memory. She'd been told "no" so often she wasn't too keen on hearing it again.

"Something wrong?"

"Nope," she replied quickly, hanging the cape on a peg. "Fifteen."

He remained sitting in the chair. "That eager for me to leave? I thought we were having a decent time."

"A decent time? This is a hair appointment!"

Gunnar grinned slightly and lifted a shoulder. "Yeah...sue me if this has been one of the most relaxing times I've had in weeks. I've enjoyed your company, Ms. Carver."

"Tyler."

"Tyler?"

"That's my name, you know. Ms. Carver makes me feel like a teacher or a spinster."

Tyler began straightening up her cart, giving herself something to do so she wouldn't notice how gracefully he rose from the chair or how fluid his movements were as he approached her.

"I could never consider you a spinster," he said, reaching into his back pocket to pull out a worn brown leather wallet.

"Hmm."

What else could she say to that without sounding like an idiot?

"You can call me Gunnar," he said, holding out another twenty. As before, Tyler pulled out her bills to make change, and his hand covered hers. "Keep it."

Like last time, Tyler was rendered breathless. She wanted to twist her hand until they were palm to palm, wanted to link their fingers together to get the maximum pleasure from his touch. His gray eyes went dark with something she refused to name, and the pulse in her hand jumped where his fingers touched.

She wondered how they would feel on other parts of her body.

"Thanks," she said softly, licking her lips as his fingers dragged away from her skin.

"You're very welcome. You deserve it."

"So this isn't payment for a future apology?"

"So sure there will be a future apology, huh?"

Her cheeks and ears burned, and she turned away from him in a show of putting her money in her pocket. She felt him stand behind her, his strong solid frame begging her to lean against him. His body wasn't Mr. Universe big, but he reminded her of those men who "worked out" on the machines sold on infomercials on the weekend.

Just the right size if Tyler had anything to say about it.

But she didn't, and she would do well to remember that. Besides, what was she thinking? As if someone like him could genuinely be interested in someone like her. They didn't fit, and not necessarily because of the race thing. She looked like she and the couch were best friends while he owned a gym for goodness sake! What did they really have in common? What could they really talk about? She fascinated him, and he definitely fascinated her, but that was it.

It had to be.

She turned to face him and smiled, trying to ignore how close he actually was. "If you come back for a haircut, there may be a future apology. You *are* a man, after all, which means you're bound to say something stupid!"

The skin around his eyes crinkled in amusement and he shook his head. "You sound just like Inge."

"Your sister."

"You remember. That's good. Many women I date don't remember half the things I say. End up repeating myself. I don't like mimicking a broken record!"

"We're not dating," Tyler said, trying to keep her tone light despite how crestfallen she felt inside.

"True, but even if we were, I doubt you'd be the type to forget. You pay attention to detail."

"You've got me figured out in three meetings?"

"Hell no! I'm learning, though. Only someone who is very attentive could give such flattering cuts. It would be easy to give a standard boring style, but you actually make sure it works with the client's unique features."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "You metrosexual? That's the only thing I can say because you don't seem gay at all." And if he were, she'd go home, curl into a ball, and weep!

He laughed, and she was glad he took the question in stride. "No. You live in LA and you learn things."

"Did you go to school out there?"

"USC."

Tyler's eyes widened. "Football! Though I understand that. North Carolina isn't known for the gridiron; though why didn't you go to Florida or Auburn or even Clemson if you wanted to stay ACC? Why all the way out there?"

He chuckled. "A football fan."

Tyler blushed and shrugged. "From the crib. I used to sit on daddy's knee and cheer, though it wasn't until I was ten I actually figured out what exactly was going on!"

Gunnar laughed and slid his hands in his pockets. Though his stance was relaxed, he radiated power to Tyler. "Why did you assume I played football?"

She blushed harder. "Well…you don't have basketball player's body. Though you're tall, you're not that tall, and it just seemed like the right build. Or you could play baseball, but I don't follow baseball that much."

"It's football," Gunnar admitted, though his voice had gotten quiet. "Cornerback."

Before she could stop herself, Tyler touched his bicep in an attempt to give him comfort. He obviously didn't play anymore or else he wouldn't have opened a gym. He had to have been good if he went to USC to play football, and whatever had made him stop must have been painful.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice as quiet as his.

Gunnar's hand came up to hers, pulling it off his arm. He didn't let go immediately, however, instead squeezing it as if needing more of whatever she'd tried to offer. "Not your fault."

Tyler squeezed his hand again. His practically swallowed hers and she tried to dismiss how safe she felt right then.

"I should go," Gunnar said, the reluctance in his voice matching how slowly he allowed her hand to drop from his.

"Okay."

She remained standing by her cart as he went to his jacket and slipped it on. He gave her a tiny smile. "See you next time, Tyler."

"You, too, Gunnar."

With a final nod, Gunnar left the shop. How she wished it were next Wednesday.

FOUR

"I know I've said this before, but I think it bears repeating: Wal-mart is the devil!"

"But with *oh-so-low* prices!"

Tyler glared at her sister even as she picked up a package of beef that would've cost almost twice as much if they had gone to the grocery store. "I know. That's why they're the devil. How many things in our buggy are deviations from the list we said we *weren't* going to deviate from?"

Wendy shrugged and put two packages of steaks in the buggy. Deviations. Tyler sighed but let them remain. They were shopping for the Super Bowl party that would be at Wendy and Damon's place tomorrow, and given Damon's friends tended to be very hungry *all* day, the more food the better. This time they had much more of a stake in it, considering it was the Carolina Panthers against the San Diego Chargers. They had local heroes on the Panthers team; and since the Chargers were a touchdown favorite, their little crew was going to cheer loud and hard in Wendy and Damon's living room.

They went into the chip aisle and put every version of chips in their buggy. They had no doubts all of them would be gone by the time the final seconds ticked down in the game, either. Tyler was perusing the dips when she felt her sister's stare.

"What."

"Gunnar's gonna be there."

Tyler was glad she didn't do anything that expressed her interest in that bit of news. "I wasn't aware Gunnar and Damon were friends like that."

"Yeah. We've actually gone on double dates before. The girls Gunnar dated though...wow...it was just hard to watch."

"Why?"

"They had the depth of a raindrop! Or if they didn't, they would only talk about their favorite subject—themselves. Gunnar is a man, though, so what can you expect?"

"Standards? Taste?"

Tyler saw Wendy shrug out the corner of her eye. "Maybe he hadn't found a woman who met those things yet. And if you haven't noticed, Gunnar is a fine man, and he has needs. Going with those women would assure those needs are met—"

"*Why* are we talking about this?"

"Because your big sister isn't an idiot, and she knows when her baby sister is interested in someone."

"You're only two years older than I am! And it's not like I've never—"

"It's been a minute and you know it!"

"This is new—older sis is trying to get younger sis some action!"

"Not action," Wendy said, her demeanor becoming serious. "Some love."

"Love," Tyler scoffed.

"You can't find it unless you put yourself out there."

"I *have*."

She didn't want to talk about it, either. They still had shopping to do.

Tyler dumped the dips into the buggy and went down to the sodas, getting an eclectic array of two-liter bottles. Though she much preferred sweet tea herself, she wouldn't deny the easy convenience of the carbonated drinks.

Wendy came behind her, sliding her arms around her sister's waist and resting her chin on Tyler's shoulder. "You know I'm right."

Tyler's nostrils flared. "And so now you're playing cupid for me and Gunnar?"

"Not necessarily. Damon has other single friends too."

"That would be awkward."

"Why?"

"They're more like brothers!"

"And Gunnar?"

"*Why* are you bringing him up?"

Wendy took the bottles Tyler held and put them in the buggy. She then grasped Tyler's shoulders and turned her around so they faced each other. "I'm bringing him up because he's the first guy since—" Wendy took a deep breath, clearly discomfited by the murderous look Tyler gave her. "You know I hadn't been overly excited by some of the fools you've dated recently, but Gunnar seems different—"

"He's white!"

"So the hell what? You think only black men can cross over? Don't you get *that* twisted, hon! Does his whiteness bother you?"

"Not enough for me to reject him," Tyler admitted.

"Then what is it?"

"It's not him at all."

Wendy's frown went from confused to absolutely livid. "Tyler Carver! There is *nothing wrong* with you—!"

"We need to hurry up and finish here. I gotta get started on preparing the food and all that…"

Tyler went behind their buggy and began pushing, blinking furiously at the tears that had come unbidden. It was easy for Wendy to say there was nothing wrong, especially since she had the perfect body her own self. Besides, Wendy was her sister and she was supposed to say things like that, even if they weren't completely true. Tyler knew she wasn't repulsive, she'd gone on dates before, and she wasn't a virgin, but her sister had been right as well. None of those guys had been "long-haul" candidates, not like Damon was for Wendy. Perhaps it was subconscious on her part, to choose men who wouldn't mean a damn to her on that all-important level, but someone had dwelled there before, and when he'd moved out, he'd left it wrecked and close to inhospitable. Tyler was slowly rebuilding, but she knew it would be a long time before she could welcome a new resident.

"Just because *he* sold you short doesn't mean *you* have to."

Wendy's voice was a gnat, especially so since she was right. "I know."

Wendy came beside Tyler and kissed her temple. "I know you know. Doesn't mean I shouldn't remind you sometimes."

They managed to finish shopping quickly, Tyler silently thanking her sister for suggesting they come at dawn to beat the Super Bowl party rush. Checkout was painless, and they used the buggy to transport the many bags to Wendy's dark-green Jetta. Tyler offered to take the buggy back, deciding to forgo the drop-off points in the parking lot and go back to the store. The exercise would be good for her…

"Excuse me, Miss?"

Tyler started. She'd been so busy trying to shove the buggy in its proper place in line she hadn't been aware someone was calling her. She turned towards the voice and damn near dropped her mouth in lust. He was tall, almost taller than Damon, and was the color of dark chocolate. He had a sharp mustache along his top lip and his hair was cut short and close to his head. He wasn't as large as Damon or Gunnar, but it was obvious the man took care of himself, given the workout jacket and matching pants he wore.

Her hands immediately went to her hair, which was covered by a worn bandana, though her own outfit of sweats wasn't that much better, either. "Yes?"

He grinned and Tyler wanted to whimper. "Normally I'm not so bold but, I wanted to ask you a question."

She frowned, curious. "Okay."

He shuffled a little and put his hands in his pockets. His hesitation charmed her. "Your friend is...extremely beautiful. I was wondering if she was single?"

Tyler felt like an idiot, and her throat began closing with tears. "She's my sister, and no, she's not."

The shock that overcame his features didn't make her feel any better. "Oh! I had no idea—I'm sorry."

Tyler knew he meant more than his inquiry about Wendy. "That's all right."

The beep of a horn made them both jump, and she wished the concrete would open up and swallow her. "That's my sister. Apparently we're in a real hurry at six-thirty in the morning."

He chuckled. "Apparently. Well...um...have a good one. And sorry again."

"No problem, you too."

Tyler got in the car with as much dignity as she could muster, but cursed when Wendy slapped her shoulder. "Damn! *What*?"

Wendy was unfazed by her sister's rough tone. "That man was *fione*! Did you get the digits?"

"No, but he sure wanted yours," Tyler said, leaning her head against the cool window. And here Wendy wanted her to try something with Gunnar! If Mr. BroFine wasn't interested, how could she think Gunnar would be? Sometimes Wendy was a little too optimistic for her own good.

"Well, goes to show fineness ain't an indicator of intelligence. He's a fool not to want to get to know you better," Wendy muttered, pulling away from the curb and beginning the drive to her house.

Tyler grinned but said nothing. High optimism or not, when Wendy was right, she was right.

☼

Tyler really *did* love her football. She was unapologetic in her passion, cursing, cheering, celebrating, and carousing with as much fervor as the other guests watching the game. The Panthers were down by a field goal and they were on what could only be the last drive of the game, and everyone was on the edge of his seat.

Except Tyler. She'd gone into the kitchen because "she couldn't take it."

Wendy and Damon had called her a wuss while Damon's other friend cackled in agreement, but Gunnar completely understood Tyler's flight. She needed to hold on to the last vestige of her sanity she had left, for the game had taken her on an emotional gamut, especially these last thirteen minutes of it. The two teams had exchanged leads with as much frequency as tennis volleys, and with the game on the line, Gunnar couldn't blame Tyler's reluctance to see how it all went down.

"That's what TiVo's for, after all," Tyler had called when Damon had teased her about leaving. Even still, every time they screamed, Tyler would poke her head out the kitchen to see what was going on, unaware to everyone but him. He couldn't help it, though. She made it impossible for him to ignore, even if she wore an oversized jersey of a Panther's player (last name Peppers, apparently some popular defensive player) and jeans. It reminded him of a light-blue version of her smock at the barbershop, and it was just as ineffective at hiding her curves as the smock was.

He tried not to stare, but every time she bent over to place a fresh bowl of chips on the coffee table or refill someone's drink, that abundant bum of hers mocked him to touch. He noticed another one of Damon's friends noticing, too, but Tyler had been completely oblivious to the perusal. Gunnar couldn't help but feel smug about that. He shouldn't be the only one suffering frustration.

"I'mma tell RayRay on you," Wendy had teased when Tyler had come down in the jersey. "You know you should be wearin' his numbers!" Rayshon Powers apparently was the hometown hero who was having a very good season in the running back position.

"I love RayRay, I do, but you know I'm marryin' Peppers!" Tyler said, winking at Damon.

"Does Peppers 'know' that?" Damon had asked.

"I've yet to inform him of our upcoming nuptials, but he's been rather busy getting ready for the game, hasn't he?" Tyler said, not missing a beat.

Though Gunnar knew they were only joking, the thought of some other man having indisputable rights to touch her made him irritable. He'd been quiet during the first quarter of the game, trying to dismiss the idle ribbing, and it wasn't until Tyler of all people had nudged him in the side did he get his head in the game.

"Are you all right?" she'd asked in his ear, her tone kind and understanding. Clearly she was remembering their conversation from almost two weeks ago, and he couldn't help but feel pleased she'd deemed the conversation important enough to be memorable.

"I'm fine. How about you? I've never seen you so into something."

He knew Tyler had blushed, though he couldn't see it, and she'd shrugged her shoulders. "Can't be helped. Football turns me into a fiend!"

"Never that," Gunnar had said sincerely, and Tyler had turned her attention back to the game, her invisible blush even more intense.

Now, as the game ticked down to the final quadruple zeroes, Gunnar found his attention more on Tyler than the actual contest.

He'd had a blast, admittedly touched Damon had thought to include him in the festivities. He liked football as much as the next person, but he hadn't made any real plans to watch because he was only vaguely interested in the two teams. He didn't have any real loyalty to one of the thirty-two franchises, but since he was a North Carolinian, he did have a soft spot for the Panthers.

Damon's friends were welcoming, seeming unfazed he was the only white person in the room, and brought him into the fold easily. Then again, given he'd played football for a good number of his life, and many of the team's players had been black, Gunnar didn't feel very out of place himself. It was only Tyler's presence that had him edgy, and the fact both Damon and Wendy had been watching him like hawks whenever they were together.

Damon had backed off from his earlier threat regarding Tyler, but Gunnar knew that didn't mean he was completely off the hook. Damon knew better than to stop an attraction from running its course, especially with Wendy apparently threatening bodily harm if he didn't let *her* sister live her own life. Wendy, on the other hand, seemed pleased as punch someone was showing a shining to Tyler, but Gunnar actually had more fear of her than Damon. If he did something to hurt Tyler, he had no doubt Wendy would kill him and dispose of his body so it would never be found.

It was, apparently, in the Older Sister's Creed.

Shaking his head, Gunnar chose this latest commercial break to go into the kitchen. Tyler was reaching into the cabinet, causing the jersey to pull tightly across her body, and Gunnar stifled a moan. He waited until she was flat on her feet before speaking.

"You need any help?"

She whirled toward him, her hand over her chest as if to still the rapid beating of her heart. She glowered at him. "You scared me!"

He grinned a little. "Sorry."

She looked over his shoulder into the den. "Commercial?"

"Yeah. Carolina's on San Diego's thirty-five. First down. About forty-five seconds remaining."

Tyler shook her head and leaned against the counter. "I can't take it. I can't *take* we're so close we can taste it! I know y'all think I'm a wuss but I really just..." She let her speech fade and she shook her head again.

"I understand," Gunnar said, approaching her slowly. "Many times when I sat on the sidelines I had my head bowed with a towel over it. It's nerve-wracking, especially when all you can do is watch—"

"Exactly!" Tyler exclaimed, seemingly happy someone understood her plight. "I can scream and cheer and cuss myself hoarse, but at the end of the day it's up to twenty-two players, and I ain't one o' 'em."

As if on cue, the roar of the television interrupted their conversation, and Tyler eased to the threshold of the open den. Gunnar stood beside her, glancing between the set and the woman, listening to her mumbled prayer underneath her breath. Though the team was only down by three, everyone in the room wanted it to go for the touchdown. End the drama now instead of stretching it out to overtime. Go out with a bang even if it wasn't with a win.

Gunnar eased closer to Tyler, not on purpose, but because he couldn't think of anything else to do. She'd turned her face into the wall when a pass

went incomplete, burning up a precious down. A few moments later, boisterous yelling let her know her team had made progress, eating up eight yards leaving them with only two to convert. Spurred by some unknown force, Gunnar took her hand in his, and Tyler, perhaps too caught up in the drama to notice or protest, squeezed it for support.

"Two yards, baby…two yards…"

The team got it and then some, Powers going on a breakaway only to be tackled at the seven-yard line. Tyler squealed and jumped, still holding Gunnar's hand, and he smiled. He hoped the Panthers won if only to see that joy light up her face.

Four downs to go.

The first was a modest gain of two yards with the running game. The second down featured a deflected pass that could've been an interception had the defender had better fingers. Tyler sagged against the wall but still hadn't let go of his hand. He rubbed the back of hers.

"They have at least two more downs," Gunnar reminded her.

"But the time…"

There was less than twenty seconds to go.

The Panthers called a timeout and Gunnar could practically feel the anxiousness humming under her skin. He tightened his hold on her hand. Tyler's eyes remained transfixed on the screen, and when the whistle blew signaling the resumption of play, she practically went stiff in anticipation.

The action on the set drifted to slow motion, five seconds of play feeling like fifty. There was a snap ball, a drop back, the quarterback's frantic search for an open man, and then to the brief horror of all in the room, a run. Their quarterback was *not* known for running, and the fact he was doing so now during the most important drive of the game made everyone breathless.

So did the fumble.

The sight of the pigskin skidding on the ground into the end zone unattended even stopped Gunnar's heart, and when an avalanche of Panthers and Chargers fell upon it, no one knew who would come out the victor.

It was deathly quiet in the den. Player after player was peeled off the pile, both sides claiming they had possession. Tyler hid her face in Gunnar's shoulder, muttering, "Please, please, please, please!" as if her will alone could make it so.

Damon gasped. "Oh, my goddamn."

The shouting happened a split-second later. Even Gunnar was shocked to see the referee hold his arms straight in the air. Touchdown. The Carolina Panthers had won.

Pandemonium had taken over the den. Popcorn and chips became confetti as everyone was too excited to remember or care each had laps full of food.

"Did that just happen?"

Gunnar looked to Tyler, who was leaning heavily against the wall, her eyes fixed on a faraway place, glazed. He smiled and stood in front of her, dropping her hand in favor of grasping her shoulders.

"They won."

"Oh, my goodness..."

"They won—!"

Her shriek almost burst his eardrums, but he didn't care because he suddenly had an armful of Tyler Carver. Her ecstasy was contagious, and he began laughing and twirling her in celebration. Wendy came in the kitchen and he let Tyler go so the sisters could hug each other. Damon came behind her and gave Gunnar an appraising look.

"What a game, huh?" Damon asked, lifting his beer in congratulations.

Gunnar's eyes drifted to Tyler and his smile softened. What a game indeed.

FIVE

Tyler was clearly still riding the high of the Panthers' victory when Gunnar came into the shop that Wednesday. Her greeting was warm and her smile was bright, and he could do naught but return it. Like the last time, Gunnar hadn't washed his hair, knowing he was throwing himself into the lion's den but the wash extended his time with her by at least fifteen minutes, not to mention she had really magical hands.

"Evening, Gunnar," Tyler said cheerily, her hair pulled back with a headband. It made her appear younger, more innocent. She wasn't wearing a smock today, just a sweatshirt from what he guessed was her alma mater and black pants that hugged her hips and legs.

"You're in a good mood," Gunnar said, walking straight to the shampoo bowl.

Tyler arched an eyebrow at him. "I see."

"You see what?"

Tyler shook her head, grabbing a clean towel and a shampoo cape. "No need to ask if you want a wash, huh? I forgot to put this around you last time. I hope you didn't get too wet."

"No, it was fine," Gunnar said, hoping he wasn't as breathless as he sounded while she put first the towel, then the cape around him. He remembered how soft and warm she'd felt in his embrace, and he gripped the arms of the chair so he wouldn't try for a repeat performance. "You smell like oranges."

She pulled back and grinned at him. "One of my clients spilled orange juice all over me earlier. Misha. Three goin' on thirty I swear! She was trying to tug my hair and the sippy cup's top wasn't on as tightly as it should've been!"

He smiled, thinking of his own rambunctious nieces. One was five and the other was two, and both had the looks of an angel with the mischievousness of the devil. "Totally understand."

"You do?"

"Inge has two daughters around the same age as your client. Inge says they're a handful but they're good with me."

"Is Inge older or younger?"

"Younger by three years."

"Gotcha."

She began washing his hair and they paused the conversation briefly. As before, her fingers were firm but gentle, and his body relaxed. This was a far better reaction from the arousal he'd felt the first time. The spray from the nozzle soothed him, and he reached a serenity he hadn't felt since his days in LA when he'd dated a New Age chick who had insisted he get himself "cleansed" once a week.

For some reason this shampooing seemed to take less time than the first one, but Gunnar didn't mind too much. He sat up as she began drying his hair with a towel, and he gave her a smile that she returned.

"And Wendy's older?"

"By two years."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"*Really*?" He had no idea she was that young.

"Yes. How old did you think I was?"

"Older than that."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-four."

She blinked at him, stilling her movements. "I thought you were younger!"

"Boyish good looks," Gunnar said with a wink.

Tyler snorted and pulled off the shampoo cape. "That's a theory. But yeah, Wendy's thirty, which means Inge is older than both of us! Y'all's ancient!"

Gunnar laughed. "You have a maturity beyond your years."

Tyler nodded, pointing to her chair. He went to it and sat, watching her progress through the mirror. "I've heard that before."

"Does it bother you?"

She shrugged. "It is what it is. I'm not really inclined to change it."

"Don't. It works for you."

She smiled slightly and picked up her shears. "Same cut or do we want to branch out this week?"

"We can branch," Gunnar said, interested to see what she would do this time.

She put down the shears and turned on the clippers, the buzz making him sit up in anticipation. Her skillful hand pulled the clippers through his hair. Gunnar didn't have time to be concerned with how much of his hair floated to the vinyl floor; he was too busy watching her. That look of concentration was back on her face, and he noticed she had a tendency to draw her bottom lip

between her teeth and her nostrils would flare gently. He remembered Tyler had done the same thing when she'd been trying to repeat his movements during the abysmal training session. He wondered what else would make her face fall into such an expression.

She turned off the clippers. "So...what do you think?"

It was a buzz cut, though not as close to the scalp as it could've been. It brought out the sharp angles of his face and his eyes, and though he'd never worn his hair that short, he liked it.

"Nice."

"Nice?"

"Yes," Gunnar said, running his palm over his hair. "Easy maintenance at least."

"That's what I was thinking. Man, if I had enough guts I'd do the same to my hair."

"No...I like your hair as it is."

"Looking a piping hot mess!" Tyler chuckled, her hand going into her hair self-consciously.

"Oh, well in that case, give me the clippers and I can fix it for you!"

Tyler giggled and popped him on the head with a comb she'd picked up to put away. "You're so silly! I would've never thought you were so silly when we first met."

"I left quite a first impression, didn't I?"

Tyler's giggles faded away, but the remnants of a smile remained. "Then that was mutual. I wasn't all that nice to you, either."

"But that's changed. We're nice to each other now."

"Yes."

"We might even be friends?"

"Maybe."

Gunnar grinned and nodded. If they weren't now, they were well on their way towards friendship. He doubted she would let a non-friend lift her in his arms as she celebrated her favorite team's victory. Gunnar was a patient fellow; he could wait for her to admit what he already knew.

They liked each other.

It shocked Tyler a little to discover how *right* he was. This man, who had been so rude to her that she'd wanted to claw out his striking eyes, had actually turned out to be among the nicest men she'd met outside of Damon in a long time. Even Damon's friends, with whom she did get along very well, didn't make her feel completely comfortable as Gunnar had.

Well, not *completely* comfortable, as there was still that nagging matter of her attraction to him.

Nevertheless, he hadn't teased her when her emotions had gotten away from her and she had practically jumped in his arms. Had he been any other

guy at the party—including Damon—she would've never heard the end of it. And she hadn't broken Gunnar's back, either, which was always a definite plus.

Tyler shook her head and chastised herself. She really should stop. She acted like she was the weight of the *Titanic*! Gunnar hadn't crumbled under her weight, and in fact, he'd held her as if she'd weighed nothing more than a large sack of flour. It had been nice. She hadn't been lifted like that in a long time.

It was intoxicating.

"That's a Mona Lisa smile if I've ever seen one."

He startled her, causing her to knock the clippers from the cart. She winced at the device smacking the floor, and when she bent to retrieve it, her lower back pinched in a most awful way.

"Damn!"

"You all right?"

No, she wasn't. She grabbed the clippers and stood slowly, hoping the cramp would ease soon. Maybe her excitement over the weekend had made her body tight, so that meant no sudden movements for a while.

"Tyler?"

"I'll be fine. No need to worry about me," Tyler said, hoping her smile didn't come out as a grimace. The pain was starting to fade, thank goodness, but she didn't want to aggravate it further so she kept her movements slow.

"Here," Gunnar murmured, and before she could protest he was behind her and kneading the trouble spot. Tyler damn near moaned as his strong hands and fingers worked out the spasm, and she gave a silent chuckle as she remembered her doctor jokingly prescribe a young man who could massage the kinks out for her. Of course, it had been awkward because Damon had gone with her to the appointment, and the doctor had thought he was her boyfriend, but she couldn't forget the irony of the prescription now.

"You are so tight," Gunnar said, though it was more to himself than to her she imagined. Tyler stood straighter but didn't move away from him. "Better?"

"Much, thanks," Tyler admitted.

"Took classes in LA. Well, they weren't official ones, but the trainer for the team gave us some pointers—partly to keep ourselves safe during the off-season, and because he found it won over the ladies!"

"I'm sure it did," Tyler said absently, unable to stop herself from leaning more into his hands.

His mouth dropped to her ear. "Is it winning you over?"

"Hmm..."

Her noncommittal answer seemed not to bother him. In fact, he turned her in his arms and brought her flush against him. She tried to ignore the way her curves melded into his hard, muscular planes, or the fact his hands and fingers hadn't stopped their tasks. He looked at her with a mild expression, and after a

moment's hesitation, she rested her hands on his forearms, for it was uncomfortable to have them suspended in air.

Gunnar grinned slightly. "I know…you said you would never come into my gym again, and since it seemed to intimidate you when you first went, I don't blame you. However, you're a young woman, and you seem healthy irrespective of your back pain and…"

He trailed off, but Tyler nodded, not needing him to explain that he was referring to her weight. "I got you."

"Well, in my completely bumbled way, I'm trying to ask if you wouldn't mind me helping you, training you. I can make house calls, that way you don't have to worry about strangers watching you or feeling self-conscious."

Her hands squeezed his forearms and he stopped his massage. What did he just ask her?

"I'm offering to train you. Discount even, since you give such fantastic haircuts."

Tyler would've stepped back had his hands not tightened against her. His offer wasn't bad. In fact, it was very fair and equitable, but the strangers hadn't been the ones who had made her feel the most self-conscious.

"I promise I won't behave like such an ass again. If I'm in a bad mood I'll tell you beforehand."

Tyler sighed, backing up again, and this time Gunnar allowed it. Damon could easily train her; he'd already offered to make up for the missed session. The only reason she hadn't taken him up on it again was because Damon would be at GD Gym and Fitness, and she'd been dead set in her perception of Gunnar as a jackass. Since Gunnar had effectively disproved that notion, the reason why she was resistant now was *because* he was such a good man, and good men had the uncanny knack of having her assessing them as boyfriend material. In Gunnar's case, it would no doubt end fruitlessly. There was no other way that whatever she was feeling would be reciprocated, yet even Tyler knew Gunnar had to play nice in order to stay on Damon's good side. She hadn't missed the knowing looks Wendy had given her during the party, but she firmly refused to let her mind go down that delightful little path.

She pursed her lips. "How much would you charge if I agreed to this?"

"Half-off. I would say for free, but since we're both businesspeople, I wouldn't insult your sensibilities like that."

Tyler smirked. "Thank you *ever* so much!"

"So…are you game? I can even pick you up and drop you off."

"Not even Damon offered chauffeur services!"

"I have an 'in' with the boss," Gunnar said and winked. "Besides, you can't change your mind if I do."

"Who says I can't?"

He leaned forward and tapped her nose with his finger. "You won't. It's not in you to back down from a challenge."

She took a deep breath and turned away from him. "Fifteen. Though given this is your third time, you should know the price by now."

"Maybe I should open up a tab?"

"This isn't a bar!"

"And yet," Gunnar began, taking out a twenty and putting it in her hand. He closed her fingers over the bill and didn't let go. "I feel even more intoxicated leaving here than when I leave there." And with that, he squeezed her hand, flashed her a tiny smile, and grabbed his jacket as he left.

Tyler blindly reached for her chair before plopping into it, her body still thrumming from his smile and touch.

Gunnar glanced at the paper sitting on the passenger's side of his Jeep before turning right into a residential street. It was Tyler's address, and Gunnar thought he would've had to sacrifice his first-born in order to wrest it from Damon. True, he could've called Soul Cuts and gotten the directions from her, but Damon was *there* and...

Fine. He was shy. Gunnar Daniels was too shy to call a woman.

It had already been long established Tyler Carver wasn't just any woman, however. His usual methods would fall flat with her. Pretty words were doubted, enticing looks scorned. He actually had to be himself completely, and he was decidedly out of his element with that. Also, he thought he'd played his hand too early with his parting confession. Afterwards, he'd hit his head against the steering wheel at every red light he had on the way to his house in self-chastisement.

Intoxicated, indeed.

"I better not have a niece or nephew running around in nine months," Damon had said after he, grudgingly, had passed over Tyler's home contact information.

"A baby can't run at birth," Gunnar had said absently as he looked over the address. He had a vague idea of where the street was, and he was already mapping out the route to get there from his house. "And you haven't married Wendy yet!"

"You bein' smart with me?"

Gunnar had raised an eyebrow. "You bein' insubordinate with *me*?"

Damon hadn't been the least bit intimidated, especially since both had known there was nothing behind the threat. Damon had warned Gunnar if these training sessions were some big elaborate scheme to get in Tyler's pants he might as well put an end to it. The scheme would fail and lead to castration.

"And it wouldn't be me," Damon said, a smirk coloring his face. "Their last name is 'Carver' for a reason!"

His lap twitched as he remembered the caution, and it didn't help he found Tyler's home to boot.

It was a simple one-level brick structure with white shutters framing the three windows. She had a decent-sized yard, and a pick-up truck was in the driveway. That made him smile. Of all the cars he'd imagined her driving, an old-model Ford F-150 had not been among them.

He pulled his Jeep behind her truck. He wasn't in a hurry, so he decided to inspect her vehicle. It was tan, and though it was at least ten years old, it looked like she took good care of it. The interior was clean, and there was a new stereo system installed with a CD player.

Somehow, it fit her personality.

Grinning, Gunnar moved away from the truck to the front door. He rang the rusted rectangular doorbell and waited, the fake flowers on the door a cheery, feminine touch.

"Who is it?"

"Gunnar."

Locks tumbled, and a second later Tyler appeared, another large shirt, sweatpants, and bandana completing her look. "Afternoon. You found the place okay?"

"Damon gave good directions. You ready to go?"

"I need to grab my water bottle and coat and I'll be set. You can come in if you like. I know it's a little nippy."

He followed her inside her living room, and the first thing he noted was how cozy everything seemed to be. Neutral and brown was the color scheme, from the bran-colored shag carpet to the oaks, mahogany, and cedar furniture throughout the room. There were wooden African masks on the light yellow walls as well as abstract African art prints, and there were magazines ranging from *Essence* to *Sports Illustrated* fanned out on the coffee table. The red microfiber couch he'd stopped behind looked comfortable, as did the matching easy chair and ottoman opposite it. Though this wasn't the most opulent living room he'd ever seen, Gunnar thought it was among the most pleasant.

"All right, I'm ready."

Tyler came across the room from the kitchen, and Gunnar slipped her bag from her shoulder and put it on his. "I can take this."

"Full service. You're expecting a ginormous tip, aren't you?"

"I'm sure we can arrange something," Gunnar said, glancing at her lips quickly before turning and leading the way out her home. He needed to get himself together. He was here to help her, not lust after her! Shaking his head, he put her bag in the backseat on the passenger's side, then opened the front door for her.

"You're spoiling me," Tyler teased gently.

"Full service, remember?"

They smiled at each other, and Gunnar got into the driver's seat and revved the engine.

It was a leisurely, quiet drive from her house to his. Tyler looked at the scenery, as if cataloguing everything on the way. Gunnar guessed that made sense; he doubted she would want him to pick her up for every session, so she would need to take heed of the route. Gunnar wanted to speak, but had no idea what to say to her, so he focused on the road and what he'd planned for her today. Their main target would be on strength training and light cardio. She had to build up muscles so she would have a stronger back, therefore less likely to experience back pain. Besides, he suspected she would never be a slim woman, her genetics had determined otherwise, but Gunnar didn't mind that at all. It was nice to hold a woman he had no fear of breaking.

"You live *here*?!"

Gunnar blushed as he turned into the subdivision. Though there were gates at the entrance, they were more for show than anything else. Admittedly, he'd been turned off when his realtor had suggested the community. It was a few miles outside the city and its personality screamed snooty to him. However, he'd fallen in love with the split-level home the realtor had showed him, and the neighbors were very friendly. Though the neighborhood lent itself more to families, and Gunnar didn't have one, a few single people lived here also. Added to that, it was more racially mixed than many of the other neighborhoods around; and after years of living in LA, Gunnar found he needed that diversity.

Tyler remained speechless as he pulled into the driveway of his rustic-style dwelling. It wasn't the largest house on the street, but it was larger than Tyler's quaint home. Gunnar got out the Jeep and opened her door, then grabbed her bag again. Once the Jeep's doors were closed and locked, he led the way into his home.

"It's...gorgeous," Tyler said, hovering in the foyer as if afraid to go further. To her left was a spacious living room, though sparsely furnished and decorated, and farther down the hall there was the beginnings of a kitchen. To her right there was a door that led to the lower level where the garage, family room, and laundry were. He'd turned the family room into a small home gym and added another bathroom so he wouldn't have to go all the way upstairs to shower whenever he finished his workouts.

Gunnar shrugged, pleased she liked his home. "Who knew taking pictures could lead to this, huh?"

"You're a photographer too?" Tyler said, surprise on her face.

He smirked and shook his head, stepping in front of her to lead her to the lower level. "Model."

☼

Tyler couldn't focus on anything, not with him smelling like sweat and masculinity and ocean salt. His breath fanned against her neck as he fixed her positions during her stretch, and all she wanted to do was lean back against his hard chest than forward to stretch her hamstring. They had just completed the workout for the day, and her body burned from exertion. She felt energized, however, primed, and she wondered if that had more to do with the workout or the man behind her.

Gunnar had been very patient with her throughout the entire one-hour session, his voice gentle and his hands competent as they guided her through the movements on his equipment. He had started her on the treadmill with a light walk to warm her up, but his constant adjusting of her posture and his complete attention on her made Tyler temporarily forget how to do such a simple task. He'd asked if the conveyor speed was too fast, and Tyler had silently thanked him for offering her an out to explain her clumsiness.

After that they had begun stretches, him in front of her to show her how to do them properly. Soon after, he'd crawled towards her and began fixing her form, and the tension in her body had become so noticeable he'd bent his head toward hers and whispered for her to relax.

Fat chance of that.

It had become easier when there was a hulking home gym machine acting as a buffer between them. His touch on her shoulders and arms hadn't been as swoon-worthy because she'd been concentrating on the reps and feeling the fatigue in her muscles that came with proper exercise. It had been here the line between professional and pupil was clearly delineated, and both had slipped into their roles easily. But soon the session had ended, and with it their designations.

They were just man and woman now.

"Be careful not to bounce," he said low in her ear, adjusting her back and leg for the maximum stretch. Her body tingled where he touched her.

"Okay…"

He was quiet for a few moments. "Now that I think about it, I probably should keep you on free weights for a few sessions. It's not that you did a bad job on the machine, but we have more flexibility with the weights. Can't have you getting bored on me!"

Tyler switched her legs. "Doubt that's possible."

"Is that good news or bad?"

"Haven't decided yet."

Once again, he was behind her and adjusting her posture. "You let me know when you do?"

Tyler allowed herself a secret smile and finished stretching. While she still hadn't firmly committed to anything, she had a feeling she would be checking the "good news" column.

"Are we done?" Tyler asked as Gunnar moved from behind her. They sat next to each other, Gunnar reclining on his forearms and Tyler in tailor-style. Though she appeared relax, she actually felt antsy, as if her muscles needed to move more. She hadn't had so much energy since she was in college, and it was invigorating.

"Yeah. Did you bring a change of clothes?"

"By default. It's actually the bag I had when you all but kicked me out your gym."

"I did *not*—!" He glared at her when she let out a giggle. "You're such a witch!"

"Heffa," Tyler said haughtily. "The putdown of choice is *heffa*."

"I'm not gonna call you that," Gunnar said seriously.

"Why not? Wendy and Damon do."

"So we're friends then? Like you are with your sister and her boyfriend?"

There was no use denying it. "Yes. Don't know when that happened, but I like you, Gunnar. I think you're swell."

Gunnar laughed and reclined fully on the floor. "Swell! I haven't heard that in a while!"

"Gotta keep things fresh, you know."

He looked at her with a contemplative expression, but Tyler didn't feel nervous about it. In fact, she returned his look openly, noting the sweat that had dampened his dark blue shirt and the way his basketball shorts were hiked up to show more thigh than they would if he were standing. The hair on his legs did not mask their muscular definition, and it made them very masculine. She wondered how they would feel underneath her hands.

"I have a shower just around the corner if you want to use it," Gunnar said. "I usually take one after I work out."

"What about you?"

His smile was slow and amused. "This *is* my house. I have showers upstairs."

Tyler got up quickly so she could hide the blush he couldn't see anyway. "Gotcha. Lead the way."

He smirked at her but said nothing. They left the home gym and walked a few steps to the door next to the stairs. He turned on the light just inside the room. The bathroom wasn't large at all, just big enough for a shower stall, toilet, and sink. It was all white with a mostly used bar of soap in the soap dish in the shower and liquid soap on the sink.

"I'll go get fresh towels," he said. She nodded and stepped further inside. The bathroom mat felt soft even underneath her shoes, and she couldn't wait to feel it with her bare feet.

Tyler caught her reflection in the mirror. Her face was sweaty and flushed, and her hair was wild. She didn't think she could ever look anymore unattrac-

tive, but she didn't mind. She'd earned her current appearance, and it was all Gunnar's fault anyway…

She blushed, recognizing she could've looked this way with a *different* type of exercise too!

"Back."

She jumped, and he grinned at her. "Sorry. Didn't mean to frighten you."

"Lost in my thoughts," Tyler mumbled, taking the white towels from him. On top there was a washcloth. "Thanks so much."

"No problem. You'll let me know if you need any help?"

She understood what he meant, but she couldn't stop from teasing him. "I've been bathing myself for almost twenty-five years. I think I got it," Tyler said with a wink.

He flushed and cleared his throat. "Uh…right. Well…just in case, I'll be upstairs taking my own shower." Tyler snorted, throwing the towel over the curtain rod, but her body froze when his lips grazed her ear. "And I'm never too old for help."

It was a full minute before she could move again, and he'd been long gone, even courteous enough to close the door behind him.

Tyler shuddered and licked her lips. It would definitely have to be a cold shower.

SIX

The local Top 40 station tried to break up the tense silence that rode with them back to Tyler's house. Gunnar was tapping his fingers on the steering wheel to the song playing, and Tyler was trying to pretend his hands or the rest of him didn't interest her in the slightest. And it also didn't help he had confirmed a fleeting thought she'd had about him having the body of a model...being that he'd been one.

Jerk.

And why had he left her with that parting shot, and why did she think about it as she washed her body? Never too old for help...goodness...she was sure he wasn't, just as she was sure he'd had plenty of willing "helpers" too. Tyler didn't think she would be able to handle seeing the man beside her in the buff. He fully clothed had her reacting strongly enough as it was.

Ten minutes later, they were pulling into her driveway. He shut off the engine, but neither made an immediate move to leave. What did one say, "Thanks for the training session at your house and making me take cold showers because you're too fine for words," or—?

"Are you hungry?"

Both looked surprised at her question, but Tyler wasn't going to retract it now. His laugh was breathless. "You may have to be more specific."

She rolled her eyes. "For food?"

"More specific."

Tyler frowned at him. "Does it matter? I promise it's food from the grocery store and not something I hit in the road as I drove around!"

"Hmm..." He rubbed his chin. "You're going to feed me, huh?"

"Well...yeah. I'm hungry, and since you're here and I have enough food, I figure, why not? It's sort of a thank you I guess."

His eyes bored into her and he nodded, the corners of his mouth lifting. "And what's for dessert?"

Tyler shrugged and unbuckled her seatbelt, treating it as the benign question she instinctively knew it wasn't. "I think I have some ice cream in there but I'm not sure. I forgot to pick some up on my last grocery run." She reached into the back for her bag and hopped out the Jeep, her mind whirring with thoughts of what dinner should be. While she did have enough food for two, she hadn't necessarily planned for it. She had spaghetti and she could always make the meat sauce…

"Do you eat meat?" she asked when she felt him behind her. Her keys were buried all the way at the bottom of her bag and being difficult to retrieve.

"Yes. I'm a Southerner. You're hard-pressed to be vegetarian if you live down here you know."

She chuckled. "So being in LA didn't have you eating grass and calling it a 'decent' meal?"

"I tried it for about two weeks. I damn near bought out Jack in the Box after I gave it up!"

She laughed, doing a mini jig when she found her keys. She let them inside and she threw her bag on the couch as she started for the kitchen. "You can sit and relax in the den," she said, point to the room on the left. "It's not much, but then again it's just me so…"

Gunnar was looking around the living room in awe. "Is the art real or reproductions?"

Tyler shrugged. "Probably a combination of both. I really don't know, and I should've asked my dad before he died. These are just my favorites. There's more in a spare bedroom—I'm using it for storage—and then Wendy has some of her favorites at her place. She keeps them in her bedroom, though, because Damon's friends can get a little rowdy!"

Gunnar laughed. "I can imagine!"

Tyler smiled and pointed into the den. "Have a seat. Kick back and indulge yourself with my modest, yet beautiful entertainment center. Spaghetti with meat sauce okay? If not I'll check to see what else I can whip up…"

She didn't wait for him to answer, going into the kitchen and pulling out the ingredients for the dinner. She cursed briefly when she realized the meat wouldn't thaw in time to be able to eat (she hated thawing things in the microwave), but she did have a frozen pasta meal that said it was enough for two.

Hmm…shrimp scampi it would be, then.

She pulled out a frying pan and dumped the frozen contents inside it, then turned on the eye and covered the food. She wouldn't have to do anything to it for ten minutes, so she looked through her refrigerator to see what else she could add to dinner.

"Can I help?"

Tyler jumped, jerking her head out the refrigerator. "Boy!" Hadn't she left him in the den?

He had the grace to look contrite. "Sorry. I was just wondering if I could help. I feel guilty for just sitting in there by myself…"

Tyler winced. "Sorry. I didn't want you to be bored just sitting in the kitchen watching me…"

His smile was slow, seductive, and Tyler gripped the fridge's handle to keep herself standing upright. "I could never be bored watching you, Tyler."

"So I amuse you then?" Tyler asked, trying to inject irritation in her tone, though she was the farthest from it.

"Among other things," Gunnar said deadpan.

Tyler didn't have the guts to challenge him on that, so she rolled her eyes and went back into the fridge. She had a prepackaged salad in an effort to pretend she'd eat healthier, and light Italian dressing. "I'm making shrimp scampi because the ground beef's frozen. And I have a salad. That okay? I can make homemade garlic bread too."

"Sounds perfect," Gunnar said, though he did eye her numerous packages of cookies, including her coveted boxes of Girl Scout cookies. "We're going to get you on a nutrition plan."

"Are we?"

Gunnar's grin was lopsided. "Yes. You can exercise all day every day, but you have to make nutritional changes as well. How often do you eat these cookies?"

She wouldn't admit she kept a box of them at work, so she shrugged and opened the salad. What he said made much sense, but she wasn't too keen on cutting out her precious cookies!

"What does it matter?"

Gunnar looked at her with an amused expression and picked up a box of Thin Mints. "Tyler…"

She sucked her teeth and snatched them out his hands. "None of your business! And I paid good money too!"

He laughed, his eyes following her progress as she replaced the box atop the fridge. "I'll build a nutritional plan for you anyway. I'll make sure to add cookies for you."

"You're too kind."

He came closer to her. "So how can I help? Idle hands and all that…"

Tyler glanced at the hands that were halfway stuffed in his front jeans pockets and blew out a breath. "I doubt they could ever be idle…"

They were now standing so close they could touch if either leaned a centimeter forward. She felt his breath drift over her forehead, and stood straighter when he eased his hands out his pockets.

"Then let me put them to use."

Gunnar was playing with fire, and damned if he cared. He'd noticed her body tremble at his words, but he wasn't at all surprised when she had averted her eyes and gone to the stove without answering him. Instead of following her as he wanted, he let her attend to the food on the stove while he dumped the opened package of salad in a large salad bowl. He tossed the greens, his body very aware of hers in the small kitchen, especially when she came beside him to make the garlic bread.

"Hamburger rolls, huh?"

She smirked. "Gotta be creative and all."

"Can't wait to try it."

She glimpsed his progress. "Salad treating you okay?"

"I think I can handle it, especially since all the work has already been done for me."

They fell into silence as they set about their tasks, and soon they were seated at her humble kitchen table eating a very delicious meal. Conversation flowed, but there was the ever-present undercurrent of mutual attraction. He tried not to stare at her mouth as it closed over her fork, or the way her strong, yet gentle hands curled around her glass as she took a sip of her sweet tea. He was glad there was a table hiding his body's reaction to her benign movements. Yet Gunnar was also frustrated, because Tyler's poker face was ironclad. He knew he was attractive to her, but she gave him few opportunities to exploit that knowledge. She kept discussion topics on her barbershop, his gym, and his family.

"Inge came out to California for school as well. She had loved it whenever she came to visit me, so she went to UCLA for Communication Studies, met her husband Roger, became a talent scout and about ten years ago started her own agency. They're doing very well."

"Do you see them often?"

"They actually stayed with me while they were getting the agency up and running. I already had established income and housing and all that, so it was the best bet. Besides, my house was big enough for three, and I didn't have to worry about them invading my privacy or vice versa. It also helped that Roger's dad was apparently some big-to-do screenwriter, but Roger had wanted to 'go at it' alone."

"Well, wouldn't it make sense for him to use his father's contacts?"

"He did, but it was strictly a business relationship in regards to this—no putting him up in some ritzy condo or anything. That's not to say Inge had any qualms about using me as her landlord!"

Tyler laughed and nodded. "I lived here with Dad until he passed. I thought about moving out eventually, but that never happened, and I couldn't bear to sell it after he died. This house had seen at least three generations of Carvers. Who knows? Maybe Wendy and Damon will start the fourth…"

"What about you?"

Tyler shrugged but didn't look at him. "I'm not holding my breath."

Her tone sounded so defeated, and he frowned. While it was true Wendy seemed to have already found her partner for life, why did Tyler think she wouldn't do the same? She had so much to offer any man.

Suddenly she grinned at him, but her eyes dropped from his quickly again. "That's sweet of you to say."

Apparently, he'd said that aloud, and instead of being embarrassed, he reached across the table to grab her hand. "I mean it, Tyler. You're a wonderful woman. Don't let a few idiots tell you otherwise."

"A few?"

Gunnar shrugged. "I may be presumptuous, but I refuse to believe you've not had a single boyfriend in your twenty-eight years. All the men cannot possibly be *that* stupid."

A haunted look entered her eyes and she pulled her hand from his slowly. "No..."

Gunnar frowned again. "Who—?"

"What kind of modeling did you do?"

Gunnar allowed her to change the subject. They had been having a decent conversation thus far, and he didn't want to darken it with ghosts of past relationships. "All kinds."

She snorted and quirked an eyebrow. "That's not an answer!"

He smiled, conceding her point. "Fine. I did clothes, a bit of runway work, but mostly print...magazines...billboards."

"Really?"

"Yeah, there was a big one of me on the Sunset Strip. I was selling a watch, but apparently I had to be in my skivvies to do it!"

Tyler's eyes flashed and her face flushed. Gunnar's eyes fixated on her tongue wetting her lips and his body reacted accordingly. Finally, a break.

"You wish you could've seen it?" Gunnar asked, his voice dropping an octave.

"Um...I'm sure it was a sight to see."

"It brought in a lot of business for me after that."

"I'm sure."

She'd licked her lips again and Gunnar couldn't muffle his moan. He wanted to feel that tongue, those lips, on his body...anywhere and everywhere she deemed fit. He wanted to taste her, that sweet tea, the garlic sauce from the shrimp scampi, her singular flavor.

"Tyler—"

"How did you get started modeling?"

He was jarred out of his lustful thoughts, then pinked as her question entered his mind. He shook his head, not wanting to answer but doing so anyway. "Inge."

"Your sister!"

"Yeah. We were at the mall shopping for random things, and catching up. A talent scout had stopped us, saying what an 'attractive couple' we made. I had turned a little green but Inge had laughed saying we were siblings, and the talent scout gave us a card with some agent's information on it. I told Inge I thought it was a scam, but Inge wanted to go anyway. She turned the puppy dog eyes on and that was that."

"Did she become a model also? I'll bet she's gorgeous."

Gunnar nodded, smiling as he thought of his baby sister. "Briefly, but the bookings were interrupting her schooling, so our parents made her stop. She looks like Heidi Klum but better, in my opinion, and she's so humble about it. Da was always whining to our mother about why she had to make his daughter so damn beautiful!"

"I'll bet she came back with why he had to give her such a gorgeous son!"

Gunnar would've teased Tyler about her admission of his attractiveness had what she said not been true. "Apparently we gave both parents a lot of concern to worry. The phone really did ring off the hook, but I was too concerned with football to really give girls a thought."

Tyler's look was incredulous. "Really?"

"Yeah, Inge and I both weren't into the whole dating thing until college. Then when the modeling started...I got hooked. It surprised me, modeling, because I didn't think I'd like it, but that check...the checks were almost as gorgeous at the ladies."

"Ah! There it is!"

Gunnar blushed again and shrugged. "I admit it. You were never lonely if you were a model, especially a male model. Things happened very quickly for me, even my agent was surprised, but I made sure I graduated before I took on more intensive bookings."

"And what about football?"

His smile became pinched. "By that time there was no football for me to worry about. I'd blown my knee bringing down an interception during the last game of the season."

It had been hard, especially when his coaches and team scouts had been talking about his pro options. San Diego, San Francisco, Arizona, Minnesota had all been interested, and suddenly, no pro options were viable anymore.

It was Tyler's turn to offer comfort, and she squeezed the hand that had covered his. "It was an escape."

"I was needed, necessary again. I'd gone from a has-been to the new-thing once more. It's hard to lose the taste of it."

"I know." She sounded as if she had experience with that sort of thing, even if it wasn't exactly identical to his. Gunnar wondered how she'd bounced back, and from what.

"Anyway, I did that for almost ten years, lived the high life, then decided it was time for a change so I moved back here."

"A change?"

"Life was going too fast. I needed to slow down. Unlike Inge, I never found someone who could ground me…everyone I knew was going just as fast as I was, if not faster. I needed to breathe."

Tyler nodded again. "I've heard stories, but you look like you came out the other end better. Does your knee still give you problems?"

"No, but if I were still playing football, that would be another thing."

"Do you miss it? Football and modeling? LA? You think you'd go back?"

"Only to visit! And no…those were times in my life that I definitely don't want to relive again. Things helped me put life in perspective, so while it was good, even great times back then, I'm too old now!"

Tyler rolled her eyes and stood. "You're not old."

"I'm not?"

"Thirty-four? That's not old at all! Then again, you are a man. Apparently y'all peak at nineteen!"

"Peak!"

"Yes! Biology 202 or something, right?"

Gunnar chuckled and stood as well, collecting his dirty dishes. "I can guarantee you I have a lot more 'peak' left in me."

Tyler bit her bottom lip and gave him a heady look before shrugging and going over to the sink. Her nonchalance bothered him, especially since he knew she wanted to test the theory just as much as he did. What was the problem? They were both grown adults who had a healthy attraction to each other.

And he would work that fact to his advantage.

Did he have to be so close to her? Did he have to be so solid and smell so good and make her yearn in ways she hadn't in ages?

Damn Gunnar Daniels!

They were side by side washing dishes. Though she had a dishwasher, she lived alone, and she thought it was silly to waste energy and water for one plate, one glass, and one set of utensils. Even with the addition of Gunnar's dishes, there was still no need to use the appliance, so she'd set about to rinsing out the dishes so she could wash them later.

However, Gunnar had picked up the sponge, squirted liquid soap onto it, and had begun washing his plate. Tyler had looked at him as if he were crazy.

"I like this soap too. The foaming action…it's really amazing, isn't it?"

"You're washing dishes?"

"Yeah…doesn't make sense to use that dishwasher for these few plates and glasses, does it?"

Tyler shook her head in disbelief. "What?"

"I live alone, so usually after I eat…if I cook…I just go ahead and wash the dishes. Some days I wonder why I even bothered going to Sears for the dishwasher anyway."

"But—"

"Could you pass me that plate? I meant to bring it over with me."

Tyler tried very hard not to go slack-jawed by how sexy he looked in his domestication. His biceps and triceps bunched and flexed with his scrubbing motion, and his arm brushed against her chest every time he set a dish down in the drying rack. She would've moved back had she had the wherewithal to do such a thing, but surprise and a little amount of desire had her stuck by the sink.

"Where did you get these dishes? I like them."

"Uh…I think they're older than I am."

"This is quality work. Don't see that much nowadays."

"No…"

He flashed her a smile, then frowned at her, shaking off excess water before gripping her chin lightly in his hand. "Hey. You all right?"

"Hmm?"

He turned off the water with the hand that wasn't holding her, then turned his complete attention on her. His thumb drifted along her lips and she sighed, unused to the tender action but wanting more of it. When he began moving his head closer to her, however, she panicked.

"You want dessert? That ice cream? Or coffee? Tea?"

He grinned slightly, though he moved his thumb back to her cheek. "Do I make you nervous?"

"No, I just…I would be a poor host if I didn't offer."

He glanced at the clock over the kitchen door and sighed. "Actually, I think I should go. It's almost nine."

Her head snapped to the clock for confirmation, astonished by the time creeping to 9 PM. "Oh! I'm sorry! You no doubt have plans…"

She was shaking, embarrassed, aroused, and fumbling as she walked to the front door, not even bothering to register Gunnar didn't immediately follow. Tyler felt like an idiot. It's a Saturday, and he was Gunnar, of course he had things to do! He probably had a date waiting for him somewhere…just because she was a homebody or that it was Durham instead of LA didn't mean *he* wouldn't have other fun things to do.

"Tyler."

He'd caught her by the arm and spun her around to face him. The tears that came unbidden in her eyes made her even more humiliated, and she blinked rapidly to hide them from him. What was *wrong* with her? Why was she…hurt…about Gunnar's possible plans. They weren't dating, and they were barely friends! She was being silly and she felt ashamed of herself.

"I'm sorry I kept you out so late," she said a bit huskily, and she winced.

"Hey." His hands were still a little damp, but they were large and warm as they cupped her face. He tilted her head so her eyes met his, and when two tears feel down her cheeks, he brushed them away with tender thumbs. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm being stupid."

"You're not stupid," Gunnar said with a frown. "Did I say something? Do something?"

"I feel humiliated," Tyler admitted.

"Why?"

His sweet, caring tone had her heart cracking a little. She shook her head, knowing if she spoke, she would break down. It had been a while since a man had shown her compassion, and the fact it was Gunnar Daniels threw her for a serious loop. She couldn't go down this path again. "Compassion" was what got her burned the first time; she was too old and gun-shy to go through that again.

When Tyler didn't answer, Gunnar sighed and brushed her cheeks again, though she hadn't shed another tear. "I had a really good time today, Tyler."

"You did?"

He smiled. "Yeah. You're one of the best students I've ever had. And then you feed me? What can be better than that?"

She smiled as well, growing warm at his compliment. "You know, I never did pay you."

"We'll keep a running tab. Only fair since I have one at the barbershop, no?"

Tyler snorted, but the smile never left her face. "I guess so."

Gunnar's chuckles faded, and his face grew contemplative. Slowly, as if to give Tyler time to register what he was doing, his mouth lowered until it touched her forehead softly. Tyler's entire body sighed and she leaned into the kiss, her hands coming up to grasp Gunnar's wrists. She became breathless when his mouth lowered, and for a few heart-stopping moments, she thought he would kiss her, but his lips brushed her cheek instead.

"Have a good night, Tyler."

"You as well. Goodnight."

With a final caress of his thumbs, Gunnar dropped his hands and left. Tyler stayed at the door long after his taillights had been swallowed up by the night.

SEVEN

"He is not Quincy."

Tyler groaned and shook her head, clutching a pillow to her chest as she and her sister sat on the couch in their childhood home. Tyler had just finished telling Wendy about the day before and her personal training session, then the dinner and all the confusing feelings Tyler had been experiencing throughout the day.

Well, less confusing and more problematic, because the last thing she needed was romance.

"Why are you even bringing him up?"

"Because, Tyler Marie, you've not looked like that *since* Quincy Lucas, and you need to realize not all men are jackasses like Quincy Lucas, either."

"But Gunnar was a model—"

"*Was*—"

"I could never compare—"

"Of course you can't. You're ten times better than any woman Gunnar could've ever been with. You're a Carver, girl! We're one of a kind!'

Tyler smiled sadly and shrugged. "I wasn't the kind Quincy wanted, though. I don't...I really loved him, Wendy."

Older sister grasped younger sister's hand and squeezed. "I know you did, baby, but don't miss out on possibilities because the past has hurts and haunts. We all have those, you know. True, Quincy was a bootleg bastard, but don't let *his* whackness shadow *your* greatness. He'll win if you let him do that."

Tyler knew Wendy spoke truth. Hell, she'd given herself that pep talk multiple times during the past six years, but some days it still was hard to reconcile the fact Quincy had dumped her because of law firm politics. He hadn't even the decency to do it to her face, rather he had behaved like a punk

and had broken up with her on the phone, knowing she was home making funeral arrangements for her father.

Yet even still, she couldn't turn off the tender feelings he had inspired within her. He'd been her first true best friend outside of Wendy, her first serious crush…her first love. She couldn't forget that, no matter how badly he'd done her at the end of it. He'd been the first and only man outside her father to make her feel beautiful; how ironic that it was he who had ended things with her because his firm had apparently decided she wasn't slim enough, sleek enough…beautiful enough.

Since when did a lawyer's significant other determine whether he would be an effective attorney, anyway? Perhaps the break up had been good timing, because she hadn't had the mental capacity to focus on the completely ludicrous notion while dealing with the aftermath of her father's death; but in the years since, it had always been in the back of her mind.

How had she gone from beautiful to liability in Quincy's eyes? She hadn't changed from the time he'd met her, except for maybe ten extra pounds, but they had been happy. Quincy had supported her, had even given her his business when she would've cut his hair for free. She'd made sure he remained healthy when he'd studied for his LSATs and had gone to law school. Then when he'd gotten an internship at one of Raleigh's top law firms, she'd been his loudest cheerleader. And what had all that gotten her? The curb.

"Jackass."

Tyler snickered as her sister's voice echoed her own thoughts. "Yeah, but he was a fine jackass, wasn't he?"

Wendy's smile turned wicked. "Girl! Man…All tall and mahogany…I couldn't be mad at that—until he did you dirty. Then I was spittin'!"

"And what *killed* me is he was like, 'Baby this is only temporary.' *What*? He thinks he's the only man who could ever want me?"

"Clearly not!"

"I may not be model thin or look like you, but I think I'm pretty enough—"

"You can't compare yourself to me or anyone else, Ty—"

"That's easy for you to say—"

"Is it? I know I may have the more 'standard preferred' body, but I've always said you were gorgeous, a knockout. I couldn't understand why boys couldn't see that for themselves, but I figured better a man who could appreciate it than someone who couldn't. Enter Quincy, and like you, I thought boy was the second comin', but then he went and pulled that mess…you can't *tell* me a law firm told him to do you like that. You know I think he was cheating on you."

Tyler nodded and sighed. Even now, she couldn't go there with it, despite the fact that was the most logical scenario. Would it make her feel better or worse if he'd been? Did it even matter? He had already played her for a fool; why not drive the proverbial nail in the coffin?

"Do you think I'm angrier that he made me look like an idiot or that I fell in love with one?"

Wendy looked at her for a beat before bursting out in laughter. Tyler blushed, but joined her when Wendy enveloped her in a huge hug. "Golly, I love you, girl!"

"That's good. I appreciate it."

Wendy shoved her slightly as they broke the hug. "So when you gon' let Gunnar dip his cream in yo' coffee?"

Tyler gasped, then hit her sister with the pillow she held. "You goin' to hell!"

"Ain't like you ain't in the passenger seat with me!" Wendy said, adjusting so she could face Tyler fully. "Let a sista know! Man, if I didn't have scruples..."

Tyler laughed. "This is a discussion you should have with Damon."

"Nope. Y'all might not be *together*, but y'all together. Even Damon sees it."

"Damon."

"Apparently he's given Gunnar 'the talk'."

"Why?"

Wendy rolled her eyes. "Because he's not trying to have a Quincy repeat, either. You know you his girl!"

Tyler smiled and nodded. Damon was a great older brother figure. She wondered when he would make it official with Wendy. "It's a bit odd he's so angry over someone he's never met."

"He doesn't need to know Quincy. He knows you, so clearly any man who thinks you aren't good enough doesn't *deserve* you and should be treated like the dumbass he so clearly is."

Tyler stood and grabbed Wendy's hand, tugging her sister up. "Enough of Quincy Lucas. Aren't I supposed to be doing your hair for some special function?"

"Valentine's Day!"

Tyler's scowl was automatic. "Already? When is that?"

"Wednesday!"

"So why are you here on a Sunday?"

"I have *work* and *plans* on Wednesday."

"Rub it in," Tyler groused. She hated the pink holiday with a passion.

"Don't hate. Participate! It's not like you don't have some very yummy prospects—"

"We're friends—"

"Best foundation for a relationship if you ask me!"

"Quincy had been my friend before he became my love too."

Wendy's face fell and she sucked her teeth. "Quincy Lucas doesn't count, and how many times I gotta remind you Gunnar Daniels *is not* Quincy Lucas?"

Tyler gave a noncommittal shrug and led Wendy to the kitchen. "Come on. Let's get this hair did."

Leave it to Wendy to complicate things even further for her, for that Sunday discussion had rattled around in her mind all week. By the time Wednesday arrived, Tyler was glad for the rare influx of business, for it kept her from thinking about the day's significance or the fact she really wished she had a particular significant other with whom to share it.

"Thank you, Ty, for squeezin' us in. I know you probably wanna get on outta here to celebrate the holiday yourself…"

Tyler grinned absently as she pulled the clippers through the young boy's hair. Loretta Banks had been one of her first customers since before she'd taken over Soul Cuts, and she'd been doing her son's hair since he was old enough to sit in the chair. At the moment he was coloring with one hand and eating chocolate Kisses with the other as he sat like a good boy and got his hair cut.

"Girl, no problem. Will here is so well behaved, aren't you?"

"Yup!" the first grader agreed, breaking his focus briefly to answer.

"I've been meanin' to come in for weeks, but work's been so busy at the dental office. I decided to take a chance and bring him along with my appointment. Jason's taking me to dinner and salsa dancin' tonight! We leavin' Will with Jason's mama and she said she'll take him to school for us the next day."

"That sounds like fun!" Tyler said sincerely, setting down the clippers and picking up the shears. "I bet you got a cute dress and everything."

"Girl, I'mma be lookin' too fine! I went to the mall the other day and saw it right as I walked into Penney's…like it was callin' my name!"

The women's laughter was punctuated by Will's demand that they look at his artwork. Tyler and Loretta were praising his expertise when the door dinged open, signaling another customer.

"Hi, may I help…you?"

Gunnar grinned and nodded to them, shrugging out his leather jacket and sitting in the chairs along the wall. "Evening."

"Well, all right, now!"

Tyler gave Loretta a soft glare before turning her attention to Gunnar. "Are you here for a cut?"

"If that's all right. I know it's close to closing but…it shouldn't take long?" he asked, brushing a hand over his already-short hair.

"Um…" Tyler said, going back to Will's hair and ignoring the knowing look Loretta was giving her. "No, it shouldn't, although I don't know why you'd want to cut it. It looks short enough."

"Just a trim, actually."

"Oh…"

"Mama, I added purple. See?"

"That's nice, baby," Loretta murmured, giving the drawing a cursory glance in favor of watching Gunnar. He was flipping through another hairstyle magazine, just as intrigued as he'd been the first time.

"What he doin' here?"

"He works with Damon. He's a referral."

"Damon, huh? I ain't know they made white men like that—!"

"Loretta!"

"He come here before? You act like you know him—"

Gunnar coughed, and Tyler bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing. Loretta wasn't known for tact or discretion, and her whisper was about as soft as a jet engine. Tyler was very glad she was almost finished with Will's haircut, or Loretta would squeeze out Gunnar's life story and those of his unborn children should she get the chance!

"Yes," Tyler said, putting down the shears and picking up a soft bristle brush for Will's hair.

"You know him?"

"He's come here before," Tyler evaded. She put down the brush and kissed the top of Will's head. "All done, sweetie."

"Thank you, Miss Tyler," Will said, turning on his knees and kissing Tyler's cheek, heedless of his book and crayons falling on the floor. "I give you a kiss!"

He dropped a half-melted chocolate Kiss into her palm and slid off the seat, grabbing his belongings carefully.

"You are too precious," Tyler said, touched by Will's consideration.

"That's my baby," Loretta said proudly. She put three twenties in Tyler's smock pocket. "You know I'mma need the 411 when I see you again, girl!" Loretta eyed Gunnar, and Tyler saw the sly smile on his face. She would not hear the end of it once they were alone.

"You want information about a haircut?" Tyler asked. Gunnar coughed again.

"You need a cough drop, Mister?" Will asked Gunnar as he came back to the women and put on his coat. "I have one..." He began checking his pockets, the empty sleeve flopping wildly.

Tyler muffled a giggle behind her hand and Loretta rolled her eyes, kneeling to help her son. "Lord, let me get outta here. Last thing I need is Jason gettin' mad 'cause I'm late. You have a good one, Tyler. Come on, Little Man." She righted the coat on him.

"Bye Miss Tyler! Bye Mister!" Will chirped, and mother and son left the establishment. Gunnar and Tyler stared at each other for a moment before both cracked up with laughter. Tyler looked at the Kiss Will had given her and shook her head. He would be a heartbreaker when he got older!

"He was too cute," Gunnar said after they had calmed down.

"He is. He showed me all the Valentines the girls in his class had given him...he's stealing hearts at six years old!"

"That include yours?" Gunnar asked, pointing to the Kiss she held.

Tyler chuckled slightly and put it on her cart. "Yep. Felled by a first grader!"

"Hmm..." Gunnar reached into his jacket and pulled out a pink rectangular box with a gaudy red bow. "Mind if I try to up the ante?"

Tyler couldn't help the smile that began forming on her face as she approached him. "Those are *not* what I think they are!"

"All Abouts," Gunnar nodded, matching her smile. "One of my clients has a daughter who is a Girl Scout and she came Monday to sell cookies. I remembered your stash and didn't remember seeing this variety so..."

She hugged him, touched by his gesture and the fact he'd remembered something so...randomly significant about her. She hadn't gotten this kind yet, and was in fact waiting for her resident Girl Scout Nikki to come with her wares. Though Tyler now had a box, she would still buy some from the fifth grader to support her. She might keep Gunnar's unopened for a while.

"Thank you," she whispered, hoping she kept it together long enough not to cry.

He had clearly surprised her, and Gunnar felt giddy and humbled for making Tyler happy. He heard the tears in her voice and hugged her tighter.

"These are happy tears, right?" Gunnar asked, going for levity.

She nodded, letting out a watery chuckle. "And shocked tears and just...disbelief tears. I never expected anything, especially not cookies!"

She pulled back and took the box from him, looking at the picture on the front before flipping it to the spine and looking at the nutrition label. "How many of these will you allow me to eat?"

Gunnar cupped her face and brushed away a tear with his thumb. "I won't keep count today."

Her smile was brighter and she hugged the box to her chest. "I can't believe it!"

"I could've gone the traditional route with flowers and candy, but I thought you'd appreciate the cookies more."

"Do you usually give Valentine presents to all your barbers and clients?"

"Only the pretty ones," he said with a wink.

Some of the light when out of her eyes and her smile dampened. "Well, I thank you, Gunnar. I feel awful because I don't have anything for you—"

"Do men usually get something for Valentine's Day?"

Tyler shrugged and gave a self-deprecating laugh. "I'm a little out of practice with the customs of the holiday."

He only realized he'd still been cupping her cheek when she moved away from him. He put his hands in his jeans pockets, watching her set her box on the counter of her station. Gunnar didn't want to leave. When he'd come, he had expected Tyler to be alone as she usually was on Wednesdays, so the presence of the mother and son had him concocting the story of needing a haircut. He definitely didn't need one, but if it meant prolonging the visit...

"You want a wash too?"

Her voice was incredulous, and he grinned as he took his seat at the shampoo bowl. "Is that a problem?"

"Not necessarily…your hair is already short, Gunnar," Tyler said. "Do you want to go completely bald?"

"It's not too early for a trim, is it?"

"Your hair looks fine!"

"I know you're not turning down good business," Gunnar said, appealing to her entrepreneurial sensibilities.

Tyler twisted her mouth in resignation, but took her sweet time coming to the bowl in favor of cleaning up her station and sweeping the hair and other debris from her chair. Gunnar allowed it, needing the time to get himself together as well. Ever since the dinner at her house, he'd wanted to see her again. That had been the best dinner date he'd had in years, and they hadn't even been on an official date! Damon had noticed Gunnar's distraction during the day, but he hadn't ribbed him about it as Gunnar had expected. In fact, Damon had asked Monday if he had any Valentine's Day plans, and Gunnar had said no. Damon had shrugged and said neither did Tyler, all the while giving him a pointed look.

Gunnar still hadn't decided if it was a good thing his employee dated Tyler's sister or not.

Nevertheless, the cookies had been borne of inspiration after that, but he hadn't planned anything more elaborate. He hadn't wanted to assume anything…she was his friend…

A friend he wanted to kiss senseless.

Tyler finally came to the shampoo bowl and pressed her hands on his shoulders. "You know the drill. Lie back."

He did, but kept his eyes on hers. She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth as she turned on the water, and the smock tightened around her torso as she prepared to shampoo him. When her hands touched his scalp he let out a little moan, and he knew she heard it by the brief pause in her movements.

"You all right?" Tyler asked. There was concern in her voice.

"Not really…"

"What's wrong—?"

He'd reared up and pressed his lips against hers, hearing the nozzle clunk into the basin and swallowing her yelp in his mouth. His hand came up to cradle and anchor her head, and he moved his mouth expertly over hers. She tasted like butterscotch and Gunnar didn't think he would ever be able to separate the two again.

Tyler pushed against him, and reluctantly he broke the kiss, though he didn't let her go far.

"What are you doing?!" she asked, her breath whooshing against his lips.

His smile was naughty. "Kissing you."

"*Why*?"

"Because I've wanted to from the second time I saw you, and I couldn't take it anymore."

"What?"

He smiled, tangling his fingers in her hair. "Your lips are gorgeous, Tyler."

She blinked and bit her lower lip unconsciously, and her fingers tightened in his hair. "Is this a prank?"

Gunnar shook his head and brought hers down. "Not at all."

This time she relaxed against him, and he smelled shampoo, peroxide, the various perfumes and colognes of her previous customers, and her own fresh scent. He opened her mouth with his and slipped his tongue inside, moaning at her tongue's texture and the myriad of flavors she held. She was sweetness personified.

"Gunnar..."

He ended the kiss with a final peck, pleased to hear her heavy breath and see her eyelids flutter as she calmed down her body. He removed his hand from her hair slowly.

"I'll let you get back to the wash," he said, his voice deep and husky.

Tyler nodded and bit her bottom lip again, now swollen from his kisses. As before, Gunnar gripped the arms of the chair while Tyler stood straighter and fumbled for the nozzle to rinse his hair. Her fingers trembled as they massaged his scalp, and her eyes kept darting to his. She had a tiny frown on her face, as if she were trying to solve a mystery.

She shook her head, perhaps with dismissal of a solution, and turned off the water. She grabbed a towel and began drying his head, and Gunnar grasped her wrists gently.

"You can either let me do that or find yourself in another breathless kiss."

Tyler immediately dropped the towel and mumbled something about cleaning her shears.

He rubbed the towel hastily over his head before letting it fall into the basin behind him. Tyler stood on the other side of the cart, away from the chair, using it as a barrier from him. His lips quirked at her defense. He'd made the first move and was emboldened by her response to it. They were friends all right...friends who did an excellent job of kissing one another.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Tyler asked, not looking at him. She wasn't fooling him with her complete focus on her shears, or that her question was only about his trim.

"Yes."

She frowned. "This doesn't make any sense."

"Why not?"

"It's perfectly fine the way it is!"

"Is it?"

She glared at him. "Of course!"

He shrugged. "You've already committed to it. Might as well go full out."

"Committed how?"

His eyes fall to her lips before gazing back into her brown orbs. "I'm not going to force you to do anything you don't want to do."

"That's not an answer!"

"It is. Just not the one you want to hear."

Tyler huffed and moved from around the cart. "Fine. You want to mess up a good thing then by all means…"

He behaved as she trimmed his hair, although it took about five minutes because he didn't have that much hair to trim. As soon as she put down the shears, however, Gunnar spun the chair around and wrapped an arm around her waist, bringing her flush between his thighs. He said nothing as he grazed his hand from her waist to the curve of her breast to her jaw, all the while keeping his eyes on her. Hers swirled with anxiousness, and he brushed his thumb against her jaw.

"I want to kiss you again, Tyler Carver," he whispered, dragging his thumb against that arousing bottom lip. "May I?"

She blinked once, then nodded as she met him halfway. This kiss was gentle, tentative, with Gunnar giving her lips swift soft pecks that had her moaning in a most delectable way. Those sinful hands of hers found their way to his head, caressing him there and making him moan in return.

Tyler began nibbling at his upper lip, leaning further into him, and Gunnar scooted to the edge of his seat to get the maximum out of this kiss. He brought her closer, his arms growing tight around her waist, and he groaned when she brought his head forward.

He could've easily spent all night kissing her, but he knew she had to close up shop. He framed her face and pulled away, his upper lip ricocheting as he pulled it from her teeth. Tyler refused to look at him, but he bent his head so their eyes would meet.

"Tyler?"

"I can't…"

He frowned as his hand caressed her neck. "You can't what?"

"We're friends. We shouldn't."

"Why shouldn't we?"

Tyler moved away from him and shook her head. "We're already clients of each other as well as friends. Don't you think that's enough entanglement?"

"Not even scratching the surface of enough."

She blushed and sank a hand in her hair. "Gunnar, be realistic about this. I think both of us just got caught up in the holiday, you know? Or maybe you felt pity for me because I'm alone—"

"I don't pity you," Gunnar said seriously, standing. "And even if I did, I wouldn't take advantage of you like this. I wanted to kiss you. I *like* kissing you. And you can bet I plan to kiss you many more times in the very near future."

He'd been approaching her slowly throughout his speech, secretly proud and impressed she didn't back away from him. He touched her cheek with the back of his fingers and kissed her forehead gently.

"I promised I wouldn't force you to do anything you don't want to do," he said against her skin. "And I mean it. But I'm also not going to sit idly by, either. We have something here. I feel it and I know you do, too, and I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure you feel safe enough to explore that."

"Gunnar..."

His index finger pressed against her lips and he kissed her forehead again. "You don't have to say anything. Just...just let that sink in for a day or two. We're still on for Saturday?"

"Saturday?"

"Training. I should have a meal plan for you by then too." She nodded shortly and he brought his other hand to her cheek. "Tyler?"

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"I'll be there."

"I mean it, Tyler—"

"I said I was comin'!" she snapped, yanking her head away from him.

Gunnar's smile was nothing short of predatory, and he leaned his mouth to her ear. "I look forward to that also."

He left her there slack-jawed, appearing far more confident in his exit than the quivery jumbled mess her kisses had made him become.

EIGHT

It was almost impossible to maintain a professional relationship with Tyler during the next few training sessions; it must have been a test administered by God. Big shirts and shapeless sweatpants should *not* make Gunnar almost lose it, but on Tyler, they did. The one saving grace was she drove to his house now, so he didn't have her torturing him for fifteen minutes in a tight, enclosed space to and from her home.

He made it a point not to touch her unless it was absolutely necessary, and even they were fleeting and clinical. Her scent wreaked havoc on him, and multiple times he had to physically back away so he wouldn't bury his nose in her hair or her neck.

Gunnar also didn't know whether to be grateful or disappointed Tyler was such a fast learner. She was becoming increasingly proficient with his equipment, and her form improved every single time she did weights or ran on the treadmill. She wasn't giving him many opportunities to touch her, either, and Gunnar had a sneaking suspicion it was because she also couldn't handle it.

He felt a little better about that.

"How are the sessions goin'?"

Gunnar nodded as Damon took a seat opposite the desk. Gunnar was going over the expense reports before he taught his kickboxing class at the top of the next hour.

"Good. She's improving. I'm thinking about upping the intensity for next week."

"She'll be able to handle it. Tyler's a trooper."

"Yes..."

It was awkward for Gunnar to talk about Tyler, even if nothing had really been going on between them. Outside of the kiss, they hadn't done anything to breach the student-teacher/friendship relationship they had decided to pursue.

No, not they. *She*.

"You seem unhappy about that."

Gunnar closed his eyes briefly and tried to ignore Damon. "Not unhappy."

"Frustrated, then?"

"Damon..."

The other man chuckled. "Contrary to popular belief, black women don't give it up with a two-for-one coupon. You gotta *earn* the panty drop!"

"It's not even about that—"

"Isn't it? I know you're physically attracted to her—"

"It's not *just* that, either," Gunnar insisted, throwing down his pen. "She won't even give me a chance!"

"A chance to do what?"

Gunnar sputtered, trying to find the true answer. He meant it when he said it was more than physical; there was just *something* about Tyler he couldn't explain. She was an enigma he wanted to explore and discover, an intrigue who demanded more of his attention than any other woman ever had.

"When you first met Wendy...what was your immediate thought?" Gunnar asked, hoping to glean something that would be of use to him.

Damon smiled, a faraway look in his eyes. "That she was fine as hell."

"And?"

"'And'? 'And' what? That was the immediate thought."

Gunnar rolled his eyes. "How long did you have that thought?"

"Until she asked me if she could help me because I was staring at her too hard. I almost ended things before they began, because I had *wanted* to say 'all night long', but if you hadn't noticed, Carver women don't appreciate being sexualized."

"Or any woman," Gunnar murmured.

"True...but still...something about those Carver women—"

"*Exactly*," Gunnar said, nodding agreement. "Exactly."

Damon nodded as well. "I get you. I get you."

At least someone got something, because as Gunnar walked into the barbershop that Wednesday, spotting Tyler eating something he *knew* wasn't on her meal plan, he was no closer to figuring her out than he'd been the moment he'd first met her.

She hadn't noticed him yet, but from the way she closed her eyes as she bit into the deep-fried piece of meat, he knew she was in culinary heaven. She wiped away juice and grease that had dribbled down her chin, and the low moan of approval had the consequential effect of making him tighten in his jeans.

"You're being very naughty."

Tyler started, but to her credit and his burgeoning arousal, merely stretched her mouth into a slow smile and took another large bite of her fried chicken. "*Mmm*..."

He allowed a corner of his mouth to curve as he stalked towards her, shrugging out his jacket and throwing it aimlessly to the waiting chairs against the wall. He stood behind her right shoulder and looked into the Styrofoam tray: two fried chicken thighs, fries with honey mustard sauce, coleslaw, biscuit. Next to the tray the *pièce de résistance*: a large paper cup of sweet tea. He knew because she didn't drink anything else.

"And how many crunches, wall push-ups, and miles on the treadmill are you willing to do to counteract all of this?"

"That would be a grand total of zero, Bob," she said in a mockery of a game show announcer's voice, picking up two fries completely covered in sauce. "You want some?"

"I like my arteries clog-free, thank you."

"Don't judge me," Tyler muttered before eating the fries. She moaned again and licked her fingers. "So good…"

"So bad for you, Tyler," Gunnar said, shaking his head. He picked up the drink. "So many calories you don't need—"

"You're killin' my buzz," Tyler mumbled, wiping her hands on a napkin before taking the cup from him. She took a long drag from the straw, her eyelids fluttering closed and another moan sounding from deep in her throat. Gunnar knew she was putting on a show, but damn if he weren't enjoying it. He wanted to feel that moan vibrate on the column of his throat or elsewhere, feel those soft, wet lips dance along his chest and abdomen, feel those fingers smooth against his back and lower…

"You're doing this on purpose," he almost whined. He hated sounding so childish, but it really wasn't fair she enticed him so much.

"Man, I've been cravin' this *all day*! A coworker brought it in for all of us at lunch and I didn't decide to eat it until *just now*! So I'm eating reheated fries and biscuits and chicken—all of which taste better *immediately* from the stove and oven, and you're bein' a killjoy! Leave me alone!"

"I can't—"

"You *won't*," Tyler corrected, glaring at him.

Gunnar had no idea if they were still teasing each other or not, but as she took another bite of fries, Gunnar knew he'd been teased enough. When she reached for her tray again, Gunnar grabbed her wrist and brought her flush against him. Her eyes went wide with indignation.

"Gunnar! What are you—?"

His tongue tangled with hers, effectively cutting off her speech. He tasted grease, salt, sugar, and her own personal flavor, and he wanted more.

He began walking backwards slowly, keeping Tyler close and his mouth attached to hers. Her hands gripped his biceps, but Gunnar knew her brain hadn't quite caught up to the fact he was kissing her and she was enjoying it. The backs of his calves found a chair and he sat down, grasping Tyler's bum

and bringing her to straddle his lap. Groaning, he bucked, pressing his hardness against her heat, and she whimpered in response.

"Gunnar," she gasped as she broke away briefly, looking at him with wild, confused eyes.

"Tyler."

His hand cupped her cheek and he kissed her harder. The look of pure bafflement in her eyes bothered Gunnar more than he wanted to admit, and he vowed he would make his feelings for her explicitly clear from now on.

He wanted her. Badly. Completely.

He smiled a little when her hands timidly drifted from his biceps to his shoulders, and her mouth became more insistent against his. His hands moved back down to her waist and he brought her ever closer, pressing her down into his lap so she could feel him again.

"*Elskling*," he mumbled, moving his mouth from her lips to her cheek and neck. His fingers walked up her torso until they found the generous mound of one breast. Unable to resist, he curled his fingers around it, moaning at how soft and full it was.

"Gunnar!"

"Baby," he whispered, kissing her mouth again as his other hand cupped the remaining breast. He wanted to know every contour and shape of them, and when he felt the stiff points of her nipples against his palms, he thrust up his hips and bit her bottom lip in reaction.

"You like this," he murmured against her lips. He slowly opened his eyes, yet hers remained closed. Her eyelids fluttered, and her breath came out in spurts against his nose. He could smell her dinner on her breath, but instead of being repulsed, he was turned on even more.

He bit her bottom lip gently. "Admit it, *elskling*, you like this. My hands on you, my lips. You want me just as much as I want you—"

"No!"

Everything crashed to a standstill, and she began scrambling to get off him. Gunnar was breathing as heavily as she was, and he moved his hands to her waist to make sure she didn't fall in her mad dash to leave.

"Tyler—"

"If you're not here for a cut, you gotta go," she said, refusing to meet his gaze.

Gunnar clenched his jaw and helped her stand, but he remained seated, watching her go back to her tray of food. She stared at it, biting her bottom lip, then closed the lid. There was still plenty of food, but if Tyler felt even the slightest of what he did, that wasn't the hunger needing the most satisfaction right then.

"Why are you running?" Gunnar asked quietly.

She refused to look at him, grabbing a paper towel from her station and wiping down the space where she'd eaten.

"Tyler—"

"Do you want this haircut or not?"

Gunnar could see her trembling. She was really freaked out, and while part of him felt bad, the majority of him was frustrated. It was obvious they were attracted to each other, and the times they had kissed told Gunnar they would be explosive together, so why was she so damn shy and skittish about it? He wouldn't hurt her…

"You can't make a promise like that."

The words were soft, sad, and though Gunnar hadn't been aware he'd spoken out loud, Tyler's dejected response made him stand.

"You won't even let me try."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because—"

The bell to her shop sounded, and both looked up to see a tall black man wearing a sharp brown trench coat and matching fedora enter. He took off the hat and smiled in a way that made Gunnar want to stand closer to Tyler in a show of possession.

"Can I get a cut?"

Tyler's eyes went wide, and then they narrowed. "Can't you read? It's closin' time!"

He ducked his head in acknowledgment and his eyes slid to Gunnar. "Hello."

"Hi."

Both greetings were clipped, as if doing it more for the benefit of Tyler than any genuine motivation of propriety.

The man came closer, easily dismissing Gunnar and focusing solely on Tyler. "Come on. It won't take long. Besides, I have a hot date tonight and I want to look my best."

Tyler scoffed, her hand tightening around the damp paper towel. "Right…"

The man grinned, reaching out and dragging his knuckles against her cheek. "Ty. It's *you*, baby. I wanna take you out tonight. You're not busy, are you?"

Throughout this entire exchange, Gunnar's attention had been on Tyler, watching how she seemed to tense and draw inward the closer this other man came. She also didn't look him in the eye or even in his general direction, her eyes darting everywhere but where the man stood. It didn't take a genius to realize they had history beyond a barber and a client, and more to the point, an intense one. It also didn't help Gunnar wanted to punch the man when he called Tyler "baby."

He had no right.

"Tyler," Gunnar intoned softly.

Her brown eyes met his and Gunnar wanted to make the fear and mistrust he saw in them disappear. He held back, however, not wanting to make this anymore difficult or awkward for her. "How much for the cut?"

"What?"

"The haircut," Gunnar said. "How much? Fifteen?"

"Um..."

He held out a twenty and nodded. "Keep the change." She frowned and took it. Gunnar wanted to close his fingers around hers, but didn't.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Reluctantly, slowly, Gunnar grabbed his jacket and put it on, watching the man watch Tyler and Tyler ignore both of them. Whatever progress that had been made between them had all been unraveled tonight, he could feel it, and he knew this man would only make the regression worse.

With a final nod to Tyler, who had looked up upon the door's bell ringing, Gunnar left the shop, his mind whirring with solutions on how to fix the rip in their relationship.

"I didn't know white men came way out here for a cut."

"Coworker of Damon's," Tyler said absently, noting how the comment had mirrored hers to Gunnar when he'd first entered the shop. The contempt she'd felt for Gunnar, however, didn't compare to the contempt she felt now.

"Ty—"

"Why are you here?"

He blew out a breath. "It's gonna be like that?"

"Yes."

"Tyler—"

"I'd like for you to leave, please."

"I didn't even get a cut!"

"It's after closing—"

"That's never stopped you before."

"Things were different then."

He dropped his head and gave her a sheepish look. "No thanks to me, huh?"

Damn him! Even now, six years later, that look made her belly clench and tremble. From the first time she'd met Quincy Lucas, she'd had such a powerful reaction to him that she'd avoided him for weeks, and it hadn't helped he'd been her prefect assigned to her group of freshmen. It wasn't until he had *forced* her to contribute in one of the meetings they'd held that some of his mystification dissipated, and soon he'd become her closest confidante outside of Wendy.

Here he was, a senior and brilliant, trying to become the first in his family to graduate college and go to law school to boot, who thought about serious things and went out of his way to make her comfortable with him and the

school that had really touched Tyler. It also hadn't hurt he was tall, broad, and sexy, but since she'd firmly put him in the older brother/yeah right! category, she'd managed to remain unaffected by it.

That was, until he had kissed her.

It had happened her sophomore year, and he'd been walking her from the law school library where they had studied together. She'd been talking about how lucky she was to have gotten a dorm on campus, but he'd seemed distant throughout her entire one-sided conversation. Sensing this, Tyler had mumbled a goodbye and started for the door, when he'd grabbed her bicep, tugged her back to him gently, and kissed her softly. He'd pulled back to gauge her reaction, but she hadn't said anything, simply going into her building, up the stairs to her room, and then to her bed.

She had the distinct desire to do the very same now.

"Can I at least get the cut."

"Why are you even in Durham? Shouldn't you be in Raleigh? Apparently since they have the best everything—including and especially women."

"Tyler—"

"Get. Out."

Quincy moved closer instead. "It can't be this way forever, Tyler. We need to talk—"

"I thought you said everything you needed to say on the phone *six years ago*—!"

"Not everything...look, if you won't give me a cut, I understand, but can you at least meet me for dinner?"

"For what?"

"I want to talk to you."

"About?"

Quincy touched her chin softly, and she gasped softly. "Us."

She eased her chin out of his grip and looked at the counter space separating them. *Us?! This Negro had some nerve!* Six years later and he was acting as if he'd only been on a long vacation in the interim.

"You've been on my mind a lot recently," Quincy admitted. He didn't move closer, but by the way his eyes bored into her, closer proximity wasn't necessary. "I've missed you so much, Tyler. Can we meet? Talk? We can even go as friends if you'd like—"

"Make sure it's some hole-in-the-wall place so nobody sees you with me—"

"Tyler, stop. I've never been ashamed of you—"

"*Get. Out!*" She was so close to crying, and she wouldn't give Quincy the satisfaction. Why did he have to sound so damn sincere? She'd been there; she remembered the phone call, and the lack of communication in the years afterward. What did it matter he'd remembered her penchant for staying late and taking customers who would come a few minutes after closing because she couldn't bring herself to turn them away? What did it matter he spoke in the

voice he would use any time he was trying to convince her how wonderful and smart and capable she was? He was playing low and dirty and she didn't appreciate it at all.

Nor did she appreciate the fact he'd snuck up to her and his touch still made her feel what she'd felt when they had been together.

"I don't need a haircut," he confessed, his dark brown eyes darting over her face. "I just needed to see you again. Please? Have dinner with me…"

Tyler's breath became shallow, and as hard as she tried to look away, he held her captive. They were so close, all she would have to do was lean forward and brush her lips against his, wonder if the kiss would make her feel as she had in the past…as Gunnar had…

"No…" Tyler moaned, closing her eyes. *Damn Quincy!* He must have some sort of sensor when it came to her, for only now, when she was *really* interested in another man, did he come back to completely confuse her.

She was interested in Gunnar?

"Why me? Why *now*?" she asked mostly to herself.

"Would you believe it took me this long to drum up the courage?" Quincy asked on a chuckle.

"I don't know what to believe," Tyler murmured honestly. This whole evening was surreal to her. She just wanted to be alone now to process everything.

The backs of his fingers caressed her cheek again, and the flutters inside her intensified. "Here," he began, reaching into his breast pocket and pulling a business card. He scribbled numbers on the back before putting the card in her hand and closing his over it. "My contact information and my private cell phone. Call me. Anytime. I'm staying with some friends until Sunday, but Raleigh isn't a thousand miles away so…" He squeezed her hand and stepped even closer so they were only a breath apart. "Please, Tyler Marie. Dinner?"

"I'll think about it," her mouth said before she could stop it.

The smile he shone made him appear years younger and the man with whom she'd first fallen in love. He kissed her cheek lingeringly and bent his mouth to her ear. "Thank you, Ty," he whispered, and with a final graze of knuckles against her cheek, left the shop.

Tyler operated on automatic from the time she cleaned and locked up Soul Cuts to the moment she stepped foot in her home. She looked down at her hands to see how violently she trembled, and she sent a silent thankful prayer to God that she'd made it home safely. What in the world was going on? Not one, but *two* men, so different in appearance and demeanor, and yet…

She went into her room and changed, her stomach too in knots for her to eat. After slipping under the covers of her bed, she picked up the cordless phone and dialed.

"Hey, Ty—"

"He kissed me, and then *he* came in the shop and kissed me, and now I don't know what to do because he kissed me, but he came back, and now—I just—oh, Wendy, what should I do?"

"Uh...wha?"

Tyler laughed, realizing she'd bum-rushed her sister with the details. She took a deep breath and repeated everything slowly, making sure not to leave anything out so her sister could give her the appropriate advice. When Tyler finished talking, Wendy didn't speak immediately.

"You still there?" Tyler asked.

"Unresolved sexual tension."

"For?"

"Both, but it's more than sexual with Quincy."

"Yeah..." Tyler agreed slowly, unsure if it weren't more than sexual with Gunnar, either. She really enjoyed his company, though during the past few meetings she'd practically choked on the sexuality he emanated.

"He was wrong to come at you like that, and with Gunnar there too? I'm sure that was *fun*!"

"Why now? Why *now* after all this time? Quincy must need something; but I already gave him everything, most of all my heart, and he gave it back shattered. I don't know if I have anything more to give—"

"No, it's your turn to take," Wendy decreed. "Answers. I think you should meet him and demand them of him."

"But the feelings—"

"Baby girl, you never got any closure! And the fact he dropped that on you during daddy's funeral...too many emotions jockeying for space. You should at least hear what he has to say."

Tyler pursed her lips, not liking the idea at all, yet unable to deny she was very curious about what Quincy had to say. Maybe she should; she hadn't really been able to move on because she hadn't officially closed that chapter in her life, but she didn't want to revisit those pages, either. Something that had started so beautiful and wonderful had ended badly, and the ink still wasn't dry enough for her.

"I'll think about it," Tyler murmured, unable to give Wendy, Quincy, or herself a suitable answer.

"Don't rush it, girl. And if you think you're not ready to see him this weekend, then don't. Like he said, he only lives in Raleigh, not Tokyo!"

Tyler laughed quietly and bid her sister goodnight, more confused than ever.

She managed to avoid both Gunnar and Quincy until her training session with Gunnar at his home. She was more nervous this time than she'd been when he'd first come to pick her up. When he greeted her at the door, he stared at her for a few moments before murmuring a greeting and turning away from her.

It was a clear sign this session wouldn't go well.

Gunnar was short with her, impatient, almost as bad as he'd been when they had first met. Gunnar had quite a temper, and it didn't help Tyler's own emotions were raw. He didn't insult her, but he wasn't as gentle in his touches as he usually was, and he made it a point not to look into her eyes whenever he spoke to her.

The final straw was when Gunnar grabbed her wrist a little too roughly as he positioned it on the handles of his weight machine, and she yanked her hand away. "*What* is your problem?"

To his credit, he didn't play dumb, instead clenching his jaw and avoiding looking at her, again. That frustrated Tyler even more and she huffed. "Men."

"*Men*?! Women aren't all sunshine and roses, either!"

"Oh!"

Gunnar decided to invade her personal space by straddling the bench on which she sat, facing her. He was so close she could feel his breath on her lips and their noses almost touched. His gray eyes were tempestuous, yet still beautiful, and they drew her in.

"Who was he, Tyler?"

She blinked. "Who was who?"

"That guy from the shop. Who was he?"

Tyler dropped her eyes from his and shrugged. "An old friend."

Gunnar snorted, shaking his head and bringing his face closer to hers. "He's not old and he certainly wasn't looking at you like a friend should!"

That comment annoyed her, especially because he was right. "*You* don't look at me like a friend should, either, sometimes!"

"*That's* because I don't *want* to be your friend!"

Tyler jerked as if she'd been slapped, that eerie feeling of déjà vu overcoming her. "I see..."

"No," Gunnar said, grasping her chin with a tenderness she hadn't felt from him all day. "You don't see, and I can't understand why because it's as plain as day! I want to be more than that with you, and you want to be more than that with me; but for some reason you can't, and I know whatever that reason is, that guy from the shop has something to do with it."

Damn his perception! "Simple as that, huh?"

"Yes."

"Because it'll be so easy for us to be more than friends? What? Trying to see if the rumors are true about fat girls? Black girls? A little exoticism in your life before you go back to skinny white girls named Becky and Holly?"

Gunnar recoiled from her. "What's gotten into you?"

Tyler was shaking violently, her mouth moving before she could censor herself. "I'm not interested in being your little experiment, Gunnar Daniels. So you go find someone else to try to butter up, okay?"

Gunnar blinked at her, his face red and his eyes blazing with silver heat. "Fine."

Within her, Tyler felt the sob that was an exhalation away from a complete breakdown, so she held her breath as she gathered her belongings and left his house. It didn't matter she hadn't finished the session yet, all she knew was that she needed to leave so he wouldn't see her cry.

NINE

Tyler cursed her weakness, her confusion. She also wished Wendy would keep her mouth shut sometimes. Had Tyler needed to know Gunnar had gone on a date with an ex-girlfriend over the weekend? No, she had not. In fact, Tyler had had much fun imagining Gunnar was just as miserable as she'd been all weekend, especially since she was sure she'd gained twenty pounds inhaling two boxes of Girl Scout cookies while sitting on the couch watching the TCM channel.

She hadn't eaten the box Gunnar had given her, though. She couldn't bring herself to do that yet.

It wasn't any of Tyler's business who he dated, anyway. They weren't together, and she had no claim over him and vice versa. In fact, that was what Wendy had said Damon had said when he'd talked to Gunnar on the phone, but Wendy had apologized that she didn't know anymore because Damon had figured out Wendy was eavesdropping from the kitchen.

"'Call my cell', he said," Wendy grumbled with a look of indignation. She was sitting in the barber's chair as Tyler touched up her hair the Wednesday following the dreadful training session. "That Negro had Gunnar call his cell phone so I couldn't listen anymore! How rude!"

"Rude?"

"Yes! And *then*, he wouldn't tell me nothin', talkin' 'bout it was a 'private conversation'. *What*? I'm his *girlfriend* and *you're* my *sister*! I have a right to know what they were talking about!"

"What does me being your sister have to do with anything?" Tyler had asked absently, snipping at Wendy's hair.

"You know that boy was callin' Damon to talk about *you*. Don't be purposefully dense, Tyler!"

Tyler's nostrils flared, but she said nothing. There was no point, really. Gunnar had moved on from...whatever they had been. Friends. More than. The potential for more than.

Tyler didn't want to think about it anymore.

Tyler was grateful when Wendy moved the topic to random bits of newsroom gossip, and she was mildly interested in the fact the anchorwoman on the newscast was apparently pregnant by the weatherman...who was decidedly *not* her husband. How Wendy knew this, Tyler didn't particularly want to know, but Tyler did feel a little shame at the relief she gained from knowing people had a bit more issues in their lives than she did right then.

Wendy turned out to be her last customer of the day, and Tyler had insisted her sister go home...no need to baby-sit as she nursed her bruised ego or the hope Gunnar would walk through the door for a haircut...or to talk.

Of course, that never happened. What did, however, was Tyler, in the lowest point of her weakness, taking out the card she'd stuffed in her smock's pockets and dialed the number on the back of it.

She had a date with Quincy Lucas, the first in six years.

"I am an idiot," Tyler whispered to herself as she sprayed perfume on her neck. Her hair was free about her head, and she wore a strapless black blouse with matching black slacks, dressy but not too dressy. She wore a pearl necklace, a gift from her father some years back, to break up the monotony of her attire, and her lips and cheeks were a falu red. She looked good, and she knew it, but part of her wondered if her appearance were more for herself or to make sure Quincy knew what he'd been missing for all this time.

"Probably nothin'," Tyler muttered, scowling at her reflection. "Probably all happy with that high-yella, weave-wearin' heffa o' his..."

She'd try not to let her bitterness show too much throughout the dinner.

Quincy, however, seemed to be on a mission to make her know what she'd been missing herself. He approached her door two minutes before he said he would, and when she opened it, he presented her with a yellow rose, her favorite.

"You remembered," Tyler said, mildly surprised and unable to stop the tiny smile that formed on her face.

"As if I could ever forget you," he said in a tone that, had they been dating, would've made them late for their reservations. Instead, Tyler stuck the flower in the vase resting on the end table next to the door, grabbed her jacket, and left the house. He'd promised her good food, and she wouldn't turn that down, no matter how smarmy the company was turning out to be.

True to his word, they were dining in one of Durham's trendiest Italian restaurants. Tyler could barely pronounce the name, but the aroma had hit her nose before they'd even walked through the door, and Tyler eagerly anticipated her meal. Ever the gentleman, Quincy opened doors, pulled out chairs, and even ordered for her—something Tyler normally wouldn't let a man do for her.

But Quincy wasn't just any man, and the fact he'd remembered her tastes made her heart flutter against her wishes.

"I did all right, didn't I?" he asked a little smugly. The candlelight on the table brought out the rich tones of his dark skin, and Tyler gripped her glass. He'd always had soft skin, the kind that was perfect for nuzzling and kissing. He'd worn her favorite cologne of his as well—the one he'd worn on their very first date no less.

Gauntlet, thrown.

"Why did you want to see me?" Tyler asked instead. "Does your girlfriend know you're here with me?" A paralegal at the law firm who Tyler had met briefly at the one and only firm function Quincy had taken her. She'd been wary at the lustful look in the other woman's eyes whenever she had stared at Quincy, and Tyler had soon learned there was a very good reason as to why.

Quincy met her eyes full on. "Michelle and I broke up three years ago."

"Three years ago?"

"Yes. It didn't work out."

Tyler quirked an eyebrow and took a sip of her water. "So sorry to hear that."

"Liar."

Tyler shrugged. "I could've told you it wasn't going to work out, but I didn't want to come off as the jealous, betrayed, scorned ex-girlfriend..."

Quincy chuckled and nodded. "You're right. I probably wouldn't have believed you then."

"At least you admit it."

"There are a lot of things I need to admit," Quincy said, his eyes locked with hers. "So many things..."

Tyler sighed and sat back a little in her seat, smiling as the server poured sweet tea in her glass and put a basket of garlic bread and olive oil in the center of the table. This should all be water under the bridge, but the bridge Tyler had built between the break up and now was rickety and fragile. She had a feeling whatever Quincy was about to say would send that bridge and her tumbling into those murky waters of memories and heartbreak once more.

"Don't—"

"I've been very successful at the firm," he began, taking a piece of bread from the basket and pouring some olive oil on his plate. He broke off a piece of bread and spread it in the oil, staring at it briefly. "I moved up the ranks, so now I'm being considered for partner."

"Congratulations," Tyler said, genuinely proud of him. He'd always been sharp, shrewd, and had a head for the law. During long study sessions, Tyler had encouraged him whenever he'd felt burned out, telling him he would make an excellent lawyer, one who was fair, just, and competent at what he did. She felt a little smug she'd been proven right, even if she had to be collateral damage toward his success.

"All of my accomplishments don't really mean anything, however," he said, his focus completely on her, "at least, not as much as they should."

"Why not? This is what you worked for, all those nights in the library, all those heavy books you bought, all that studying and focus—"

"You were there with me, Tyler. You. None of these things mean anything now because I don't have you to share them with."

She gaped; she couldn't help it. Even when the server put their plates in front of them, Tyler barely noticed because she couldn't believe Quincy's audacity. *Now* he decided to say the words she'd longed to hear for six long years? *Now*, when she was starting to *really* move on to someone else?

"You've got to be joking," Tyler said after the immediate shock dissipated.

"I'm not."

"Well, even if you weren't, so what? What does this change?"

"I told you the break up was only temporary...until I could make my mark—"

"You thought I'd wait for you." It wasn't a question, but to hear her thoughts confirmed wasn't a good feeling. "You thought it would be all right for you to date other women while I stayed here, miserable, alone, twiddling my thumbs until you returned?"

Quincy frowned slightly. "Not exactly—"

"No. *Exactly*. You thought I'd be sitting at home waiting for you."

He reached across the table and held her hand, his grip firm and nice despite the fact she wished it weren't. "You want the truth?"

"That would be nice."

His thumb ran across her knuckles. "I thought it didn't matter if you were dating someone or not, because what we had was out of this world, Tyler. You were my first love, my boo, and what we had was so good it could never be duplicated. I came prepared to fight for you, Tyler. I'm not going to let you walk out of my life like I did before."

He had that determined look in his eyes that she'd found so sexy when they were together. Now, it just annoyed her. "I didn't walk out. You kicked me out and threw my heart on the curb with me."

His face fell slightly but he didn't let go of her hand. "I know. I was an ass and I let my ambition blind me."

"Right. So now that you're up for partner, you think it would be okay to drag me back out into the sun, huh?"

"Tyler—"

"I look the same from six years ago, Quincy. I'm still fat, still dark, still natural. Sill *me*. If I wasn't good for you before, how the hell would I be good for you now?"

"You're not fat—"

"I'm not skinny."

"You carry your weight well. In fact, looks like you've lost some to me."

"That's *so* much better!"

Quincy sighed. "I've always loved the way you look, Tyler."

"Until your boss said you needed someone more 'appropriate', right? Someone who looked like she took care of herself. 'Image is important', remember you said that to me…on the *phone*…as I prepared for my *father's funeral*?"

Quincy dropped his head and removed his hand from hers. "The timing, perhaps, was a little off."

"You think?"

"Don't you think we could move past this? I thought you'd be over it by now, but clearly I was wrong."

Tyler blinked slowly and moved her head to the side. "*Over* it?" she repeated, her voice no more than a whisper. Throughout all of this, they hadn't touched their food, and she wasn't particularly hungry now. "Negro, you 'bout five seconds away from me going into Angry Black Woman mode. Check yourself."

They stared at each other for a few beats, then Quincy glanced at her plate. "Are you going to eat?"

"Not hungry."

"Doggie bag?"

Against her wishes, Tyler grinned at the label. He might be a hotshot lawyer now, but he still had glimpses of the man she used to love. Perhaps that was why she was so angry and torn. He hadn't fully committed to being a jerk, and his flashes of sweetness always brought out those latent tender feelings she felt for him.

"Yeah. Wrap it up."

Thirty minutes later, they were back in her driveway, the ride from the restaurant just as quiet as the trip to it. She picked up the white paper bag that had her takeout, the contents still warm since neither had eaten dinner.

"Um, thanks," Tyler murmured, getting out the car. She'd wanted a clean getaway, but Quincy refused to grant it to her.

"Let me walk you to your door."

"I'm fine, Quincy."

"Please, Tyler."

Clearly she was a sucker for chivalry, for she nodded and let him fall into step with her. She reached the door and put the key into the lock, but his arms came around her body and his hands closed around hers.

"I'm sorry."

That soft tone, the tone he'd used when he'd broken up with her, dragged out the maelstrom of emotions she'd been feeling all night. She sniffled, and he turned her around to face him.

"I was a fool."

"First step is admitting it," she cracked, hurriedly wiping away a tear that fell down her cheek.

"I went about this all wrong."

"Second step."

"You haven't forgiven me."

"And for what would I forgive you?"

"Putting things on hold between us."

"*On hold*?" Tyler let out a bark of laughter. He still didn't get it. "No. That was just the icing on the proverbial cake. I'm mad you completely dismissed me, betrayed me, belittled me, *disregarded* me and the love I felt for you. As if I was incidental and expendable and *replaceable*. As if the love I felt for you, *the love we shared*, wasn't worth *shit*."

As she spoke, he'd backed away from her, the force of her anger and hurt hitting him fully. She hadn't even raised her voice, but she'd long passed the point of ranting and raving. This was just resignation now.

"I didn't go about it right," Quincy mumbled.

"How is there a right way to break someone's heart, Quincy?"

"I didn't mean to—"

"But you did," she said quietly. "My feelings weren't as important as your goals. The fact you let some man who deemed me not beautiful enough or slim enough or light enough or have enough 'good hair'...convince you that I would be a *liability* when I was the one who *helped your ass get that internship*. I don't care if he was your mentor, either! It's like you had selective amnesia, took all leave of your senses, and let that man's self-doubts about being black in a predominately white firm affect *our* relationship. You were supposed to stand up for me, but you didn't. *That's* what hurts the most, Quincy."

It felt good to say everything she'd wanted to say to him that fateful day on the phone, yet Tyler didn't get any joy as she watched his face crumble. No matter how hurt she was, she still couldn't hate him.

"How do I make this right?" Quincy asked, stepping closer to her. "Between us? How do I fix this?"

"I don't know," she said honestly, wishing the vulnerability she saw in his eyes didn't still affect her so much.

"I still care about you, Tyler. I still lo—"

She put her fingers to his mouth, knowing she wouldn't be able to handle hearing what he'd been about to say. "Don't. Please? I'd gone from reconciling the fact I'd never see you again to this emotional rollercoaster of an evening. I'm hanging on by a thread as it is. Please don't break it."

Quincy took the hand at his mouth in his, then turned it around so he kissed her knuckles. "Can we at least be friends?"

"I don't know," she said again. That was all she had in her to give him right then.

He nodded once more and pressed a longer kiss to her knuckles. "Take all the time you need, Tyler, but I'm not going to give up on you. Not like I did before."

"Goodbye, Quincy." It was little more than an exhalation of breath.

He leaned in as if about to kiss her, then stopped, dropped his head, and backed away, keeping her hand in his until he couldn't anymore. She stood outside and watched him get in his car and leave.

"Damn him," she murmured, finally letting the tears she'd held at bay fully break free as she entered her home. "Damn him to hell."

Gunnar nursed his drink as he tried to ignore Damon's penetrating stare. It was a Thursday night and the pub was full of people watching a basketball game. Gunnar didn't know which teams were playing or even if they were collegiate or professional. He didn't care, however, because he hadn't come to watch a game. He'd come to sulk.

Damn it. Why did Damon have to be in love with the sister of the woman he...

Damn it.

"You've been working that beer for the better part of an hour, Son."

Gunnar glared. "Oh, because you're so much older!"

"By four months!"

Gunnar snickered and finally took a long-awaited sip. Damon applauded him.

"You're so dramatic about everything," Gunnar said on a borderline whine.

"*Me*? You're the one crying in almost lukewarm beer! Over a girl who ain't even yours!"

Gunnar clenched his jaw, irritated by how right Damon was. Tyler Carver worked his nerves like no other, as was proven by the disastrous date he'd attended last weekend. Why had he called Kaci again? She hadn't changed in the weeks since they'd last gone out, and just as before, she was scouting potentials while with him. Clearly he'd just needed another reason to sulk, and calling Kaci was as perfect a one as he was going to get.

"Look, all I know is you betta be glad Wendy had to work late, or else this would've been a pity party of one!"

"You're free to leave," Gunnar muttered, taking another drag of his beer. There were four tall, empty glasses next to the one he held, all which used to hold beer. All that he'd consumed. "I ain't holdin' ya back!"

Damon gave a long-suffering sigh and shook his head, leaning back against the booth seat. "Naw, man. If anyone has an inkling of what you're going through, it'd be me."

Gunnar snorted. "Not just you..."

"What does that mean?"

Gunnar remembered the tall man who looked like he belonged on the cover of GQ instead of standing inside Tyler's little barbershop. He still saw the look of awareness and possession on the other man's face, and never had Gunnar wanted to punch someone so hard his face cracked. Gunnar wasn't a violent person by any means, but considering the way Tyler had avoided the man's eyes and the sense of ownership that had emanated from other man, Gunnar's need to fight and protect had kicked up a notch.

"What do you know about Tyler's past boyfriends?"

Damon's eyebrows shot up, as if that were the last thing he'd expected Gunnar to ask. Perhaps the alcohol had loosened his tongue, but Gunnar was through playing softball with Tyler. He needed to know things, anything, that would help him drop her guard. Those few times they had kissed had left him more breathless than anything he'd ever experienced. The best sex he'd had thus far paled in comparison to kissing Tyler. Since she was dodging him at every turn, though, he'd go to sources that wouldn't.

Damon was as good a start as any.

"How serious are you about her?" Damon asked.

"It's not just a fuck, if that's what you want to know."

Damon bristled at his language. Gunnar wasn't a curser in the usual sense, but when he got a buzz going, some of his manners fell by the wayside.

"Or jungle fever?"

"Damon—"

"And why do you care? Ain't you kicked her out your house that last session?"

Gunnar groaned and slumped against his seat dramatically. "Is that what she said?"

"No, but that's what Wendy said—"

"Wendy wasn't there!"

"She's going off what Tyler said—"

Gunnar blew out a breath. "There were some…words…"

Damon shook his head and took a sip of water. He was the designated driver for tonight, and he wasn't much of a drinker anyway. "Something about testing waters—"

"Tyler isn't the first black woman I've had sex with, Damon."

"It'll never be just about sex with Tyler, either, Gunnar," Damon said, still unwilling to budge.

"And I don't want it to be!" Gunnar said, slamming his glass on the table. Some beer sloshed over the sides despite the fact the glass was only a fourth full. "But it needs to be better than what it is now—this hot and cold shit. I can't take it anymore! And you know what else? I think that guy who came into her shop the other day has something to do with it too."

Damon sat up straighter. "What guy?"

Gunnar described him, unable to keep the scowl from his face. He also told Damon about the weird interaction they'd had. When he finished, Damon looked mutinous, and he swore worse than a sailor.

"Know the guy?" Gunnar asked sarcastically.

"No, but I know of him," Damon grumbled, his tone still dark. "He broke Tyler's heart. I know that nigga ain't—"

He broke off his speech when he noticed Gunnar had flushed and winced at his slur.

"Sorry, man," Damon apologized. "I try not to say the word normally, but damn it, if the shoe muhfuckin' fits—"

"Moving on..."

"Yeah. *Oooh*! That ni—*negro* betta be glad I ain't evah met him, or he'd catch a size fifteen right up the ass!"

Gunnar chuckled, but it was without humor. Funny how this mystery man had inspired similar reactions from them both, and neither of them knew him personally.

"So what happened...how did he break her heart—*why*? Only an idiot would do that!" Gunnar said, his words slightly garbled as he spoke and swallowed more beer at the same time.

"Perpetratin' Uncle fuckin' Tom!"

Gunnar glowered at Damon. "Story! Get on with it!"

Damon's jaw clenched, along with his fists atop the table, and he began telling Gunnar all he knew about Quincy Lucas. The more Gunnar heard, the more he wished he'd punched the pretty boy's face. It was obvious Tyler still felt something for the man, too, and Gunnar wondered why she would waste those feelings on someone who obviously didn't deserve them. Then he remembered how he'd treated her when they had met, and Gunnar began to understand Tyler's hesitancy to start anything with him. Gunnar would like to think of himself as someone who wasn't particularly shallow, and yet he'd treated Tyler with borderline contempt that first time. If Tyler was still nursing a broken heart over a man who had dumped her for her appearance, why should she open up herself to someone who had seemingly underscored how lacking her ex-boyfriend had thought her to be?

"Boy, did I fuck up."

Damon frowned at him. "What makes you say that?"

Gunnar shook his head, his beer warm and of no use to him anymore, so he slid the glass between his hands as if it were a puck on an air hockey table. "I insulted her that first time...I was so mean. I don't think she's fully forgiven me for it yet."

"You were pretty foul," Damon agreed, "but you've been making strides to show her you're sorry."

"And what if Quincy's come back to do the same? As you said, she really loved him. Tyler strikes me as the type of woman who loves hard and long."

"Yes..."

"I don't stand a chance."

"You want one?"

Again, Gunnar stared at his beer. The kisses he'd shared with Tyler had enlightened him to one thing: what he felt for her was more than lust. He knew lust; had recognized it, embraced it, numerous times. What he felt with Tyler went beyond that.

It shocked him too. He'd only been with her a handful of times, and outside of their mutual dinner, their conversations had been full of teasing and innuendo, but nothing more personally informative than that. Yet despite this, every time Gunnar left her, he would have the immediate need to see her again, as if he hadn't gotten his fill and needed seconds and thirds.

"You can't overanalyze it too much, Boss."

Gunnar snapped his eyes to Damon, who had an amused expression on his face.

"So says you."

"Since I've been in love longer than you have, I feel I have the right *to* say something."

"Longer than *I* have?"

Damon merely smirked.

Gunnar blew out a breath. It was time to go, to lay off the beer or anything with grapes or hops, for surely he had misheard what Damon had said...insinuated. He threw down two twenties, more than enough to pay for the drinks and leave a tip, and left the pub. Damon came out a few minutes later and squeezed Gunnar's shoulder.

"I had to wait for the receipt."

"Right."

"You know, it's okay to feel the way you feel."

"It's never okay to feel like an elephant is sitting on your chest!"

"An elephant, huh? I think mine was a rhinoceros with Wendy..."

That made Gunnar chuckle in spite of himself. Though he still wasn't ready to concede Damon's claim, Gunnar was a bit heartened Damon had felt similar during his time with Wendy. Even still, Gunnar and Tyler had different circumstances, chief among them was the fact her heart hadn't fully mended from Quincy's abuse of it...and the fact she was black and he wasn't.

As he'd told Damon, Gunnar had had relationships with all colors of women. True, dates with black women weren't as common as with white women, or even Asian women, but Gunnar let his attraction guide him more than society's mores. It had been easier in LA, too, the metropolitan city a veritable Neapolitan ice cream of flavors of women to chose, and with him being a model, the more exotic a woman was the more alluring she would be.

Apparently, Tyler was creamy chocolate with butterscotch and caramel swirls, and Gunnar licked his lips as if he could taste her upon them. Part of

him couldn't blame Quincy for trying to get back with Tyler. Perhaps the man wasn't a complete idiot, and had realized he'd made the atrocious mistake of letting her go the first time. That didn't mean Quincy had the right to get her back, however, and Gunnar wasn't going to stand by and let it happen, either.

"Ain't that the look of the devil on your face!"

Gunnar snapped to the present, Damon's car door already opened so he could get in and he waited for Gunnar to do the same. He hadn't even realized they'd found Damon's ride, and he shook his head and got inside.

He found himself nodding off during the short ride to his house, the Quiet Storm hour on the local R&B station helping to lull him as well. When Damon pulled into Gunnar's driveway, both men sat in the car for a few minutes with the engine still running.

"Look," Damon said quietly, all traces of teasing and ribbing gone. "I know I've been bustin' your chops since you and Tyler began, but I needed to make sure you would treat my girl right. It wasn't even because of you being white, although if I'm being honest, it didn't help matters. Looks have always been important to you—body image—maybe not as bad as it had been when you were in LA, but all the women you've dated since you've been here looked the same—skinny, busty, and pale. The only thing Tyler had in common with them was the busty part, and hers are natural!"

"How do you know?"

Damon gave him a "get real!" look, but Gunnar grinned. He knew they were natural, all right. Soft, supple, and a generous handful…

"I don't think I like that look, Gunnar. I'mma need you to fix your face."

Gunnar laughed drunkenly. "I can't reminisce?"

"Reminisce?!"

Gunnar opened the car door and stumbled out. "I think I should go before you hurt me."

"Why you think I'm gonna hurt you, man? I need a job! I got bills and a woman who can be a lil' uppity at times…"

"I'mma tell…"

Damon snorted and chuckled. "You a silly white boy when you drunk!"

"Tyler's not uppity…"

"No, she's not," Damon agreed, sobering again.

"She's not ugly."

"No."

Gunnar leaned against the car doorframe, his forehead pressed against the top and his arms flopped on the roof of the car. "I wanna be with her, Damon."

"So I see," Damon said with another chuckle. "And I think you'd be good for her."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You appreciate her. You don't take her for granted, and despite the fact she frustrates you like no other, you don't *want* another."

"No...damn. She got me good."

Damon nodded and tipped his chin towards Gunnar's house. "Go to bed, Son. Sleep off that beer. You'll be able to plot better with a clearer head."

"Plot." Damon made it sound like it was a strategic military strike!

"You need me to *carry* yo' ass?"

"Don't touch my ass," Gunnar mumbled, backing up and slamming the door. He knew Damon was laughing at him even if he couldn't hear it. Damon was so going to rub this night in his face on Monday.

Gunnar managed to make it into his house and his bedroom without any major problems, though he knew his big toe was going to hurt something fierce in the morning. Damn wall...who'd put it *right there*, anyway?

Gunnar plopped down face-first in his bed, the mattress giving underneath his weight in a way he could welcome better when sober. Everything felt heavy, and he could barely get off his jacket and toe off his shoes. He was too lazy to mess with his jeans and shirt just then; he would rest his eyes a bit before he finished undressing.

TEN

The sun's rays streaming through the window stirred him, and upon opening his eyes, Gunnar cursed fluently in Norwegian and burrowed his head under his pillows. He felt as if someone were taking a jackhammer to his head and his whole body felt stiff.

"Ugh," he groaned, the lack of moisture in his mouth making him feel he'd swallowed a bag full of cotton balls. He bent his legs, looking down at them when the movement wasn't as fluid as it usually was, and he swore again. He never did get up to change clothes.

Oh, well.

He gingerly got out of bed, squeezing his eyes shut against the blinding light and the shooting pain that came from his toe, and walked mummy-style to his bathroom. He didn't turn on the light, not needing a two-by-four to add to the jackhammer already hard at work, and he cracked an eye open and tried to find a bottle of aspirin from the light coming from his bedroom.

He was successful, popping almost twice the recommended dosage down his throat before bending his mouth toward the faucet and drinking water by cupping his hand underneath the spout. It wasn't his normal method of securing water, but it would take too much effort to go all the way downstairs for a glass.

He shucked off his jeans and took off his shirt as he made his way back to bed. Unfortunately for him, he was the type of person who could never go back to sleep once he became awake, especially with the sun shining as brightly as it was, so he was more lying there very still than actually getting any rest. He moaned and glanced at the clock, noticing it read ten to twelve.

Did he have something to do today?

The phone's ringing interrupted him flipping through his mental day planner, and he flopped his hand in the direction of the phone. He found the base, but there was no receiver, and he cursed again.

It was downstairs.

Groaning once more, he got up, uncaring he was parading around his house only in his boxers, and trudged down the stairs. The machine had picked up and it took him a minute to figure out who was leaving a message.

"And um...yeah...I just—I can't—" There was a sharp inhalation of breath. "I can't. Sorry."

The sound of the machine clicking off made realization explode inside him.

Tyler!

Gunnar frantically pressed buttons so he could play her message. She was calling to cancel their session—the thing on his agenda he'd been struggling to remember—but she was definitely sad. Even if he hadn't heard her sniffle, he would've been able to tell that. His heart clenched at the thought of her tears. What had happened? What was wrong?

His headache had only barely begun to subside, but it didn't matter. He hurriedly showered and dressed, then got in his Jeep and made the drive to Tyler's house. Gunnar hadn't given himself time to question what he was doing, or even if he had the right to do it, especially given how they had last parted. All he knew was that she needed someone, and damn it if he wouldn't be that someone for her.

She didn't answer the door on the first ring of her doorbell, and Gunnar blew out a small breath to quell the nervousness he felt before ringing the doorbell again. What would he say to her? Would she talk to him? He hadn't been so drunk as to not remember the conversation he'd held with Damon, or the fact Damon had highlighted many things about his feelings and relationship with Tyler. Though Gunnar wasn't ready to put a label on anything yet, the fact he'd dropped everything and ignored his massive hangover *clearly* meant there was more to this than he wanted to admit.

"Who is it?"

Her voice sounded raspy, as if she'd been crying hard, and he touched the door lightly as if his comfort could filter through it to her. "Gunnar."

"Gunnar?"

He smiled at the incredulity in her voice. "Yeah."

The door opened, and he stepped back so she could push away the screen door as well. Her eyes were red and her hair was tied back with a bandana. "Did you get my message?"

"Yes."

She frowned, then she sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes. "I *know* you ain't here to drag me off anyway!"

He chuckled and stepped forward. Tyler pulled back, letting go of the hold she had on the screen door so it bounced against his back as it tried to close again.

"Sorry…"

"It's all right," he said gently, reaching out to touch her chin. "But you aren't."

She inhaled and closed her eyes. "I'm fine."

"Why are you lying to me, Tyler?"

"Why do you care, Gunnar?"

The fingers on her chin moved to her cheek, and he fully palmed it. "We're friends, right? Surely one little disagreement doesn't null a friendship?"

Tyler let out a shaky breath and opened her eyes again, a tear falling down her cheek. Gunnar cooed under his breath and brushed the tear away. She closed her eyes and more tears fell, until she was crying full out. Without thinking, Gunnar pulled her into a hug. She really let go then, her arms coming tight around his waist. Gunnar closed his own eyes and kissed the top of her head. He'd never liked it when a woman cried, and he liked it even less when it was Tyler.

"What's wrong, *elskling*? Why do you cry?"

She shook her head, and Gunnar cupped the back of it as he bent his lips to her forehead. He walked forward slightly, then reached behind him with one arm to close the door. Tyler took that opportunity to break the embrace, and she walked backwards, wiping away her tears.

"Why did you come here?" Tyler asked, tugging at the hem of her T-shirt. Never before had she looked so vulnerable, and Gunnar's protective nature came to the fore.

"You needed me."

"You?"

"You called me."

"To cancel—"

"Tyler…"

She ducked her head. "I didn't mean to break down like that on the phone. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize, especially when you didn't do anything wrong," Gunnar said, stepping forward slightly. He looked to his right and saw a wilting yellow rose in a slender vase. He felt his jaw clench. He could only guess from whom it was…who was causing her to cry.

"He hurt you," he said monotonously.

Tyler gave him a confused look. "Who?"

"Quincy Lucas."

Tyler's eyes went dark and she shook her head. "No…"

"You're lying again," Gunnar said, going after her once she spun on her heel to flee the living room. She didn't very far as he grasped her forearm gently and

turned her to face him. She tried to hide her face, but he cupped her cheeks, brushing away more tears that fell from her eyes.

"Talk to me, Tyler."

"I can't," she said breathlessly, and Gunnar's heart clenched for her.

He led her a few steps to the couch and he sat first before bringing him into his lap. She was tense and rigid, but he didn't let that dissuade him from rubbing her back soothingly or kissing away each tear that streaked her cheek. Eventually, Tyler gave up all pretenses of being strong and unaffected, and rested her cheek on his shoulder. Gunnar cradled her, trying to inject as much comfort as he could all the while thinking of how perfect she felt in his arms. Her weight wasn't slight, but rather it felt substantial and precious at the same time. He was actually holding someone he could squeeze without having to worry about bruising or breaking something. He could hold her as tight as he wanted and knew she would take it and appreciate it. A woman...not a little girl.

"It's been so long," she murmured, her moist lips tickling the skin of his neck.

He shifted to hold her even closer. "So long?"

"Since I've been held like this. I forgot how much I've missed it."

It was a crime for her to have gone without affection for so long, and he cursed under his breath. "Any time you need me, *elskling*, I'll be here to hold you."

Her hand came up to rest above his heart. "Quincy said the same thing."

His eyes narrowed. The idiot. He hurt her so badly...did he even know? Gunnar guessed not, given the way he'd sauntered into the barbershop. Quincy had had one of the most extraordinary women Gunnar had ever known, and he'd given it up because she didn't look like a cover model for *Vogue*? As someone who had known and dated plenty of cover models, Gunnar knew firsthand that more often than not, they were severely overrated.

"*Rasshøl*," he muttered to her forehead.

"What?"

He chuckled slightly and kissed her temple. "Asshole."

"Who?"

"Quincy Lucas."

She snorted, nuzzling her nose against the column of his neck. "You don't know Quincy Lucas."

"I know he hurt you. Quite frankly, that's all I need to know."

"Gunnar..."

He heard the disapproval in her voice, but he wouldn't be swayed. He tilted his head back and grasped her chin gently. "He did. Damon told me. And if I needed further proof, here you are crying out your pretty brown eyes. He's not worth your tears, *kjære*."

"I'm not even crying for him," Tyler chortled, the sound abrasive to his ears for the lack of humor. "He…man…he wasn't the first, and he certainly wasn't the last."

"Tyler—"

"My first kiss was the result of a dare," Tyler interrupted. "No one even knows about that—not even Wendy—because I was so ashamed of my stupidity. And I'd had a crush on him too. Imagine that…someone actually liking Tonka Tyler—"

"Tonka Tyler?"

"Kids are a witty subgroup of the population," Tyler said dryly. "Tonka, because I was short and big like a Tonka truck. It didn't matter when I grew taller. You know how it is—you go to the same school with the same kids from kindergarten to graduation. You get used to things like that."

Gunnar's mouth dropped open in disbelief. "Baby—"

"He was supposed to kiss the ugliest girl in the grade, which would be me, of course, and he'd get…something, I don't even remember. Eighth grade was full of wonderful memories, especially since that one happened during the Homecoming dance…underneath the bleachers…at an appointed time so that everyone would be there to witness Tonka Tyler's humiliation."

"Tyler—"

"And then the next one was the biggest one with Quincy, but that didn't happen until, what, eight years later? But then afterwards, there was a time I designate as 'The Fetish Period'."

"'The Fetish Period'?"

"The time where I found an online dating service and signed up for it and proceeded to date and…more…with men who were, as I found out, 'chubby chasers'."

"Tyler—"

"Of course, the way they promoted the site was for men who appreciate a full woman, I think that was the actual slogan if I remember correctly, but it was little more than a fetish dating site. I, along with probably thousands of women, got conned real good for that."

"Ty—"

"But I can't pin it all on the site, can I? There's something to be said for when a man looks at you with lust…knowing that for at least a few hours, you are desirable and wanted…you're good enough for *somebody* for some time…"

Gunnar couldn't take listening to anymore, so he kissed her softly into silence. Tyler broke the kiss quickly though, shaking her head and trying to move from his lap.

"No…"

"Tyler, look at me."

"No."

Gunnar turned her face to his anyway, cursing the boy from eighth grade, Quincy Lucas, those later men, himself…society in general. What was wrong with people they couldn't just accept others for who they were? He'd also been caught up in the madness. Living in LA and being a model…it'd been hard not to treat image as king, and most people were so vapid or vindictive that all one *had* was looks. He'd been brainwashed and jaded into that thinking, and he'd almost missed out on knowing, to him, one of the most beautiful women he'd ever met.

"Tyler—"

"It's hard enough to be a black woman in the dating game," she started, as if she hadn't heard him, or if she had, she didn't want to hear what he had to say. "And then you're thick on top of it. So that's an automatic two strikes against you. I know I said I came to your gym to get healthy, but I would be lying if I didn't admit there was some aesthetic motivation going on too—"

"You're beautiful, Tyler," Gunnar blurted.

She snorted and nodded sarcastically. "Quincy said that too. Said he loved the way I looked. Yesterday. *Yesterday*. Took me to a fancy restaurant to butter me up…as if six fuckin' years hadn't passed—"

Gunnar kissed her again, *definitely* in no mood to hear about Quincy Lucas's attempts to right a very gross wrong.

When they broke the kiss, it seemed as if her eyes had gone even flatter. "Don't tell me you have a fat fetish too."

"I have a Tyler fetish," Gunnar said.

"Right…"

He framed her face with tender hands, his thumbs ghosting over the phantom tear tracks on her cheeks. "Okay, so fetish is *really* not the right word. Maybe addiction? Compulsion? Necessity? Desire? All the above?" He sighed and touched his forehead to hers. "When I heard you cry on my machine, all I thought about was you. Fuck my hangover or the fact I'd barely slept or the fact I hadn't eaten since five the night before…you needed me, and I needed to be there for you."

"I'd call to cancel," she whispered, though Gunnar knew it was more for her benefit than his.

"I don't want you to cancel on me," he said, drifting his nose along hers. "Never, ever that."

"And what about when those few hours are up?" Tyler said, pulling back and looking at him sadly. "When that desire fades…what then, Gunnar?"

He could tell her that he doubted his desire would ever fade, that other emotions would grow…that he could admit to feeling what Damon had said he felt.

But she wouldn't believe him anyway.

Tyler made to leave his lap and this time he let her. He sat up, his forearms resting on the tops of his thighs, and he watched her stare at him with her arms hugging her body.

"What would you like to eat?"

She left him sitting there, however, not waiting for him to answer.

Talk about verbal diarrhea at its finest! Tyler hit the heel of her hand against her forehead repeatedly as she put the frozen pizza in the oven. Maybe she could stay in here for the full thirty minutes...avoid the man who was sitting in her den setting up a "movie marathon" for them to watch as they ate their late lunch/early dinner.

When she'd called to cancel the session, the absolute last thing she'd expected was for Gunnar to come to see how she was. Because of the uneasy tenor in their relationship recently, she'd started to put Gunnar in the "former" list. The scarier thing about that, however, was his entry would've been the second one that would've had a big impact on her life. Of course, the first was the man who had started this "woe is me" funk in the first place.

She couldn't believe Damon had opened his big mouth and told Gunnar about Quincy! And knowing Damon, he probably exaggerated a whole bunch of things to make Quincy come off as Satan himself! Though to be fair, she'd felt he was when they had broken up; and if she were honest with herself, she wasn't quite sure if that opinion had changed overly much.

The date had been interesting and confusing and conflicting and nothing like the make-up fantasies she'd had. Resentment? yes. Wistfulness? definitely. Unmitigated joy? not so much. What was wrong with her that she couldn't revel in an ex-boyfriend's unhappiness? She'd been miserable for the better part of six years, and the knowledge he hadn't been happy either didn't have her screaming, "How you like *them* apples!" as she had assumed it would.

She still cared for Quincy, against her better judgment and sound logic. She couldn't brush him off as she had with all the other men she'd known, maybe because part of her believed what he said about having feelings for her. Perhaps it was wishful thinking on her part, but she'd needed to hear what they had shared wasn't as forgettable as he'd tried to think when they had ended. It seemed he'd believed their breakup was only temporary, but unfortunately for Quincy, her heart hadn't been able to wait.

Maybe her love for Quincy wasn't as strong as she thought it had been, after all.

"I hope you don't plan on hiding out in here."

Tyler jumped slightly and turned to the kitchen door. Gunnar filled up the space so completely. Though he didn't have Quincy's full height, he was not a

short man by any stretch, and the muscles he had more than made up for the lack of length.

It was awful to say there were distinct similarities between Quincy and Gunnar, the main of which was the fact that whenever they had touched her she would always feel like the only woman in the world to them. The difference was, Quincy had made her feel that way in the past, while Gunnar made her feel that way *now*.

She tried not to entertain thoughts of relationships, especially not with Gunnar Daniels. She saw even less of a chance of that future than with getting back with Quincy. If Quincy had had a problem dating her, how in the world would this white, gorgeous, personal trainer-gym owner not have a problem with her, either?

He approached her slowly, but she had unwittingly fit herself into a corner, and his eyes practically pinned her to the floor.

"Are you hiding from me?" he asked, though there was some amusement in his voice.

"Waiting for the pizza."

"Doesn't it take about thirty minutes for these things to cook?"

She didn't answer him.

He shrugged and stood next to her, his elbows resting against the counter and his legs crossed at his ankles. "Well then, I'll wait with you. Doesn't make sense to start the movie only to stop it because you need to get food."

She stared at the refrigerator while he stared at her, neither speaking much as the minutes ticked. It was disconcerting to feel his gaze on her, but not in an overly negative way. He began whistling, and she grinned. He was good at it.

"Is that a smile?"

Tyler pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, but her mouth's corners were upturned anyway.

"You can't hide it, *elskling*," Gunnar said, touching one corner of her smile. "You're smiling."

His finger went from the corner to the meaty center of her lip, and Tyler closed her eyes. Little zings emanated from the spot where he touched her, and she bit her tongue so she wouldn't drift it over his finger.

"Quincy Lucas *er dum*," he murmured, so softly she sensed he hadn't meant that comment to be audible.

"What did you say?"

He gave her a small smile and kissed her nose. "Quincy Lucas is a fool."

Unable to help herself, she set gentle hands at his waist. He smiled and moved his nose to rub against hers.

She'd missed the closeness and intimacy with another person...another man. She missed someone holding her as if she were the most precious thing in the world. She missed being someone's most precious thing. At first, she'd been her father's, though she rightfully shared that spot with Wendy. Then she'd

been Quincy's, until he'd found a more "precious" thing, being his job and ambition. God help her if she were to become Gunnar's precious thing...she didn't know if she would be able to handle it.

"The pizza smells good," Gunnar whispered against her temple. He'd brought her deep in the circle of his arms, and Tyler felt so warm and safe inside them. His muscles were hard and yielding at the same time, and it was all she could do not to burrow her cheek against his shoulder and chest.

"It's actually the store brand," Tyler confessed. "Healthier...I thought of you when I bought it."

"Hmm," Gunnar said with amusement. "What else do you buy while thinking of me?"

She would *not* dignify that with a response, but since he chuckled and kissed the top of her head, Tyler realized he hadn't been expecting one.

They remained standing that way, with Gunnar rubbing her back at times, until the pizza was done. She pulled it out while he took down dishes and filled glasses with water. They sat on the couch in front of the television once everything was settled. The first movie of the marathon was *The Matrix*.

Tyler smiled internally at the choice. It had been a long time since she'd seen it, and she was glad Gunnar had chosen action instead of something either sappy or serious. They ate their pizza in silence as they watched the movie, Gunnar getting up at one point to get napkins and telling her she didn't need to pause the movie. When they finished eating, they waited until the movie ended to clean the dishes together, Gunnar standing very close to her as he had before. She was just as nervous this time as she had been the last, but along with it, there was tension she knew only he could break.

Tyler mentally chastised herself. She knew she was in a vulnerable state, and she wouldn't put herself in a position to be used again. Not that she thought Gunnar was the type, but right now, at that moment, sexual comfort was the last thing she needed. Yes, it had been two years since her last sexual experience, and Gunnar had been the first man besides Quincy for whom she'd had real feelings, but she would be doing him and herself a disservice if she gave into the attraction she felt for him today.

Tomorrow, however, was fair game.

Damp hands closed over her shoulders and squeezed. "Come back..."

He'd said it as if he were an echo, causing Tyler to laugh and slap his forearm. "What's the next movie?"

Gunnar waggled his eyebrows and took her hand as they returned to the den. He sat her on the couch before going to her DVD player and putting in another movie. As soon as the previews came up she grinned broadly.

"Good choice, Mr. Daniels," she commended.

"Touché, Ms. Carver."

Coming to America would never be unfunny, and both were cracking up as if it had been the first time they had ever seen it. Tyler was dying at the fact

Gunnar could do the impressions to a tee, and soon they were both saying the lines in time with the actors on the screen. Even after the movie ended, they were still reciting dialogue.

"I needed that," Tyler said, wiping away a tear as she leaned back against the couch.

"That's partly why I chose it. To see your smile and hear your laugh."

Tyler's smile softened as she looked at the bookcase across from her. He was full of surprises. "I can't believe you knew all the words!"

"Are you kidding? The movie's a classic! You know how many times me and the guys would watch this instead of game footage? If we really got drunk enough, we'd even act them out!"

Tyler giggled and pressed a hand to her eyes. "What I wouldn't give to see that!"

Lips on her temple made her pull her hand away from her face in surprise. "Maybe you will, yet" he said with a wink. Gunnar stood and put another movie in the player, but she didn't ask what the film was. He'd been two for two so far, so she would wait to be pleasantly surprised.

She chuckled when she realized what the movie was. "You're determined to get me to laugh, aren't you?"

"Yup."

"You could just tickle me and—" Damn. She should've never told him that, especially since he'd raised an eyebrow and gave her an appraising, calculating look.

"Don't even try it!"

"I'm not. I'm watching *The Incredibles* right now."

Tyler continued to look at him skeptically for a few minutes, but when it seemed he would behave, she allowed herself to relax and watch the movie.

At some point, his arm had come around her shoulders, and she'd ended up reclining more against his chest than the back of the couch. Instead of feeling awkward as she would've been had she been with someone else, their position felt natural...right. Tyler was glad he'd chosen this lighter movie instead of a drama or a romance; it helped her latch onto the label of friendship she'd given them—even if her feelings were growing beyond friendly.

By the time the movie ended, Tyler was practically snuggled into him. It was a little after nine at night, and Tyler was surprised Gunnar had spent most of the day with her. She had very much enjoyed his company.

She sighed. "The last time I had watched a movie like this was seven years ago."

She felt the hand on her shoulder tense and he sighed as well. "Seems you were long overdue then, huh?"

"Very much so."

"Glad I could oblige."

She nodded. "Me too."

Silence reigned for a few minutes.

"I guess I should be going, huh?"

He really didn't have to sound so dejected when he said it, but she nodded again. "It's late, and you've fulfilled your babysitting duties for the weekend, Mr. Daniels."

"You're not a baby, Tyler," Gunnar said, and she could feel his gaze roam over her. "Definitely not."

Uncomfortably thrilled, Tyler stood away from the couch. "Damn. I was hoping to pass off all this extra weight as baby fat!"

His hands gripped her hips and turned her to face him. He scooted to the edge of the couch, his eyes totally locked on hers. As if in slow motion, his lips found her round belly and pressed a gentle kiss to it. Though she'd been exercising for a little over a month, her body had only begun making slight changes. The fact he was looking at her as if she were the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen made her breathless.

"This is a woman's body, Tyler," he murmured against her belly. "Never be ashamed of it."

It was certainly hard to be when he stared at her like that. Still looking at her, still with his hands on her hips, he stood, his body so close to hers she fancied she could feel his heart beating against her chest. His arms slid around her waist and she wrapped hers around his neck.

"You're brilliant for my ego," she murmured into his shoulder.

"I call 'em like I see 'em," he responded, pulling back to look at her. A corner of his mouth quirked and he pressed a quick kiss to her lips. "And I could look at you for hours and be perfectly happy."

Tyler pulled a face at that. "That sounds like something Damon would say!"

Gunnar laughed and nodded. "He did...guess it only works on one Carver woman, huh?"

"You mean to tell me Wendy *fell* for that?!"

Gunnar shrugged and tightened his arms imperceptibly. "They're in love with each other. I guess you could fall for anything when you're in love."

Tyler's cheerful mood dulled a little. "Yeah..."

"Hey," Gunnar whispered, touching her chin softly. "He was an idiot."

"And yet—"

"No, 'and yet'," Gunnar insisted. "Not all men are idiots, Tyler. And even if they were, not all men stay that way. After all, I saw the error in my ways."

Tyler pulled back and pressed her hands against his chest. He was so hard and solid, and it intimidated her. Gunnar held her hands to his chest and kissed her forehead.

"Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice..." she murmured.

"Exactly," Gunnar said, giving her a small smile. "Shame on Quincy. All of it belongs to him, anyway—"

"But I *loved* him, Gunnar...part of me always will..."

"Fine then, some shame on you—ouch!"

Tyler had slapped his bicep.

"Seriously," Gunnar said, chuckling a bit and shrugging. "He was the one who lost out on a good thing, not you. If he couldn't accept you and your love, then he didn't deserve either."

"Yeah—"

"And don't go thinking you're damaged goods or the store brand or whatever. You're not a poor man's anything, Tyler Carver. And if you need me to help prove that to you, I'll be more than happy to do so."

"Your community service for the year, huh?" Tyler said, trying to downplay the significance of that statement for her sanity.

Gunnar grinned and kissed her quickly. "At the very least, *elskling*, the very least."

ELEVEN

Tyler hadn't spoken to Quincy since their date, though on Monday he'd left her an e-mail. She hadn't responded to it, but she hadn't deleted it, either. He'd given her an update about his meeting with the partners and said he should expect to hear from them by the end of the week. He had also insisted what he'd told her wasn't a lie, and that he could wait for her answer because she was worth it, and he would be a fool to let a good thing pass him by again.

She genuinely wished him luck on his promotion, but that was about it.

Maybe she should delete the e-mail...

The first thing Gunnar did when he came into the shop for Wednesday's trim was kiss her. It was a quick peck, the type of kiss a man would give his woman after being with her for years, and Tyler blushed as she helped him out his jacket.

"I've missed you," he murmured against her temple as he hugged her.

"As if we haven't talked on the phone every night since Saturday!"

"Not the same," he insisted, squeezing her briefly before sitting in the barber's chair.

He was right about that, and Tyler was relieved she hadn't been the only one who had felt that way. His hair grew at an alarming rate, so since it had been almost three weeks since his last cut, there was actually something for her to do. She didn't trim too much, liking him with hair after seeing him without it, and he started talking about his day and what the gym had been going through for the past few weeks.

He had bought new equipment and hired another personal trainer. He was thinking about installing a sauna and spa, but he would have to buyout the empty space next to his gym, and he needed to make sure he had enough money to do it.

"I don't want to turn into those ritzy fitness centers," he said, "and price out the majority of my members, but I think it would be a good addition, no?"

"It could be. Maybe you should send out a questionnaire or something to get a feel for it," Tyler suggested.

"That's a good idea."

"And if you're worried about business, you should talk to Wendy about advertisement at the station. Your looks alone could bring the ladies flocking to GD Gym and Fitness!"

Gunnar blushed a little and snorted. "Superficial much?"

She snorted as well. "So says the man who made his living by hawking products solely based on his looks and little else!"

"That *was* good money…"

She chuckled as she finished trimming his hair. She began running her fingers through the fresh trim, and he damn near purred. She grinned, increasing the pressure. "You like that?"

"You're getting me hot and bothered, *kjære*."

Tyler giggled and kissed the top of his head. "I don't mean to, honest, I just…I love hair."

He spun the chair around and she stepped back to give him room. Immediately his arm came around her and he drew her to him, causing her to straddle his waist. "I wasn't complaining."

She nodded shortly, biting her lip and sinking her fingers into his hair again. Gunnar closed his eyes and enjoyed her massage, giving her the opportunity to watch him unguarded. Even though he was in his mid-thirties, Tyler thought he could still give the young models a run for their money. In fact, she bet if he wanted to go back to LA to model again he would have no problems finding jobs. He was simply gorgeous to her, and she couldn't believe he was attracted to her.

"Why not?"

Tyler blinked and stilled her hands. "'Why not' what?"

"Why can't you believe I find you attractive? I'll bet you're attractive to plenty of men and don't even know it."

Though a bit taken aback she'd spoken aloud, she turned the questioning back to him. "How many plus-size models did you know during your time out in LA?"

He looked a little contrite. "Admittedly, not many, but that doesn't mean there weren't any or that they weren't beautiful. That doesn't mean full women *aren't*…that you aren't."

"I know," Tyler said with a frown.

"You know, but you don't believe," Gunnar said.

"It pays to be slim," Tyler mused.

"Yes, and not the slim women. There's a whole industry out there to manipulate and take advantage of insecurities. There's no such thing as 'too slim',

and honestly, I think it does everyone a disservice. Men get it too. I've been told I had to lose weight and I did, and I used many unhealthy methods too. I swear, though, the more confident a woman is, regardless of size, the more attractive she'll always be."

Tyler nodded. "I know."

"I know you know," Gunnar said, sliding his fingers up and down her back. "It's still hard to believe though, isn't it?"

"At times."

He kissed her gently. "But you believe I'm here with you because I want to be, right?"

"I give you great haircuts," Tyler joked.

"That too!"

Tyler left the seat because her knees were starting to burn and she was beginning to get way too comfortable. Someone could walk in on them, and she didn't think she would be able to explain it away. He stared at her as she began cleaning up the shop, his gray eyes piercing as always.

"Do you like basketball?"

Tyler shrugged. "Why?"

"If I told you I had tickets to the Duke/UNC game, would you want to go with me?"

She was putting up the broom in the corner when the question came, and her eyes widened. Tyler spun to him in shock. "*What*?"

Gunnar grinned and nodded. "My sister got me tickets to the final Duke home game. Would you like to go?"

"How in the world did she get them?"

Gunnar shrugged. "I don't know. She probably knows a guy who knows a guy...early birthday present—"

"It's your *birthday*?"

He chuckled. "Not yet."

"When?"

"End of the month."

"Thirty-five?"

Gunnar shuddered. "That just sounds gross."

Tyler laughed. "You're old, Mr. Daniels!"

"And you're legal, so that's all that matters," Gunnar said with a wink.

"What does my legality have to do with anything?" Tyler asked with faux primness.

He shook his head and stalked towards her, pulling her slowly into his embrace once he got within arm's reach. "You're a smart woman, Ms. Carver. You know exactly with what it has to do."

Were they really having this discussion? Truly? Tyler shook her head in disbelief. They were friends...a little bit more than that...but were they that much more?

He kissed the furrow between her brows. "My attraction to you isn't purely aesthetic, Tyler."

So they *were*...

"We haven't even been on a date yet," she said, more to herself than to him.

"Hence me asking you to the basketball game for next week."

"So you can have sex with me?"

"I won't even dignify that with a response."

Sighing, Tyler backed away from him and crossed her arms at her chest. His expression belied his irritation, and she thought he looked sexy when he pouted. Of course, she would never tell him that.

"You want to date me?"

"In the beginning, yes."

Tyler peered at him. "And then in the middle?"

"I can't show my hand too early, *elskling*."

She wanted so badly to ask him what he was calling her, but she wanted to maintain the glorious mystery of it a little longer.

"I like you, Tyler. I think I've made that fact more than obvious on numerous occasions."

"I'm trying to figure out why."

"Sometimes I do, too, but I generally like to go with a good thing."

"I'm a good thing?"

"You're an excellent thing."

This was a decidedly ridiculous conversation, and given the way both had burst into laughter at the same time, they had both come to that conclusion simultaneously. Go with it. She should. She should stop hunting for the worst-case scenarios and trust her instincts. Of course, they had led her to Quincy; but as Gunnar had told her, that was his fault, not hers.

"What time is the game?"

"Does that mean you want to go?"

"No one in her right mind turns down Duke/UNC, no matter how she feels about basketball."

"I'll give you more details on Saturday."

Tyler huffed and rolled her eyes. "You're going to kill me on Saturday, aren't you?"

"Not when you owe me a date, no," Gunnar said with a sly grin. "Just mostly dead."

"Mostly dead!"

"*The Princess Bride*? I can't believe you didn't have that in your collection, by the way."

"I do! Just Damon and Wen still have it...and thanks for reminding me about that," Tyler said.

"I'll dock his pay ten cents for every day he doesn't return it to you," Gunnar said seriously.

"Ten *whole* cents. He's gonna feel that!"

"That's the difference between a bag of potato chips and the chocolate bar in the vending machine, and you *know* how much of his dietary intake comes from the vending machine!"

Tyler laughed, remembering a time when Damon had picked her up from work and seeing various cracker, candy bar, and potato chip packages strewn in the interior of his car. "Wendy hates it too."

"I keep threatening him to only stock the machines with granola bars…"

"Why don't you?"

"I have a soft spot for Milky Ways. And it actually does bring in decent outside revenue too."

"Talk about defeating the purpose!"

"We're all allowed a vice, aren't we?"

"Need I remind you about the atrocious meal plan you gave me?"

"Need I remind *you* I left ample space for you to partake in your Girl Scout cookies?"

Tyler arched an eyebrow at him as she walked past, feeling his eyes settle on her bottom. She was wearing worn jeans and a T-shirt, but he made her feel as if she were wearing something much sexier. She reached for her jacket.

"Heading out?"

"It's after closing, and you're my last customer."

"Have you eaten?"

"Actually, I'm going to meet Wendy for dinner."

Gunnar approached and helped her right the garment, then reached behind her to grab his. "Where you're going is so not in your meal plan, is it?"

"I refuse to self-incriminate."

Laughing, her pulled her close and gave her a sweet kiss. "You do know this affects how hard you work on Saturday."

"It'll be worth it."

He pulled back and nodded. "Of that, I am completely sure."

They walked out of her shop together, he waiting for her to lock up, and he took her hand in his as they walked to her truck. He kissed her softly one last time before whispering, "Later," against her lips.

Tyler was a giddy mess as she drove to Chicken Wings Palace, a neighborhood restaurant two streets from her home. She spotted Wendy immediately when she entered and Wendy pounced.

"You saw Gunnar."

Tyler's eyes widened at her sister's guess. "What?"

"Aside from the fact it's a Wednesday…that smile…it's been a long minute since you've smiled like that, girl!"

Tyler ducked her head shyly. "I can't help it."

"Nor should you! I was afraid, after you seeing Quincy…"

"He said he wanted to get back with me."

Wendy blinked at her before bursting into laughter. She drew several curious stares to their table and Tyler toed Wendy's shin so she would stop.

"That Negro has *lost his damn mind*!"

"Wendy!"

"Men have radar for that shit, don't they? Soon as you ready to move on, here they come, *swoopin*' back in talkin' 'bout, 'Baby, please! I ain't mean it! I love you! We can work it out!' No, Negro, we can't, so getsta steppin'!"

"That sounds like personal experience," Tyler chuckled, though disconcerted by how accurate Wendy had been in terms of Quincy's speech.

Her sister scowled. "Don't wanna even think about him…and neither should you think about Quincy! I hope you told him off."

"In a manner of speaking."

Wendy frowned. "You still love him."

"Part of me always will."

"He doesn't even deserve that much!"

Tyler shrugged. Whether he did or didn't was irrelevant. The fact was he'd been her first love, and for the majority of their time together, it had been good. Really good. Really, *really* good…maybe that was why she was so scared of starting things with Gunnar…she knew he would be just as good—possibly even better. Would she be able to handle it if he decided to "upgrade" her as well?

"Girl, you should just focus on your date before you go gallivanting into the future!" Tyler muttered to herself.

"What date?"

Tyler winced. She should've known Wendy would hear that.

"Uh…my date with Gunnar?"

"He finally asked you out?"

"*Finally*?!"

Wendy sniffed. "I was wondering if I was gonna hafta call the man! I think he wanted to ask you out since the Super Bowl party."

"We barely knew each other!"

"That's the point of dating, sweetheart, to get to know people better and have a free meal to boot!"

"And speaking of, who's paying?"

"You. I paid last time."

"Figures…"

They made their orders, and afterward Wendy demanded Tyler give her a detailed account of how Gunnar had asked her out and where they would be going on their date.

She sat back and blinked after Tyler finished. "The Duke/UNC game? He got it like *that*?"

"Actually, his sister does..." The server returned and placed their meals before them. After they said their thanks and grace, Wendy resumed their conversation.

"Hmm. And you don't really like basketball."

"It's Duke/UNC though."

"Who are you going to cheer for?"

"Duke. We're in Durham. If we were in Chapel Hill, I'd root for the Tarheels."

"That makes entirely too much sense, Tyler."

Tyler laughed at her sister's comment and pulled the meat from the bone of the chicken wing. "I know. Logic is *so* overrated, isn't it?"

Tyler, however, refused to acknowledge the irony of that statement when it came to matters of the heart.

☼

Tyler's enthusiasm for sports did not end with football.

Gunnar came to that conclusion after watching five quarters of intense basketball with the home team edging it out with an exciting three-point buzzer beater. His date for the night could cuss like a sailor when she became passionate, and that only made her sexier in his eyes.

It also made his jeans uncomfortable.

"That's gonna be all over ESPN tonight," Tyler said, settling in the seat as they drove down the road. Gunnar had had the foresight to park a good ways from the gymnasium, knowing it would be hell to get out after the game, and it also gave them a chance to ruminate on all that had happened as they walked—the yo-yo score, the plentiful fouls, the overtime, the language that bordered on obscene, Tyler's cheering. She definitely wasn't shy when it came to supporting her team, and she'd started many cheers and almost gotten kicked out the arena when she and a Tarheel fan started mouthing off at each other.

"I think you got some screen time too," Gunnar laughed.

Tyler blushed and hid her head in her shoulder. "That...jackass...he needs to learn to keep his mouth shut, especially when his team was getting spanked!"

She was shy now! Gunnar laughed and shook his head. There were so many layers to this woman, and he wanted to discover them all.

"You hungry?"

"Starved. I haven't eaten since lunch."

He frowned at her. "Why not? We could've stopped and gotten something after I picked you up..."

"I wasn't hungry, and the prices at the arena were ridiculous," Tyler muttered, shaking her head. She'd said the shop had been busy, surprisingly so for a Wednesday, and she'd barely had enough time to change before he came to

her house. Gunnar hadn't gone to get his hair cut, mainly because he'd been too busy choosing the right outfit. It was a basketball game, not a night at the opera, but he'd still had trouble finding something just right.

Turned out a long-sleeved white T-shirt and jeans was right enough, especially when Tyler had worn something similar—except her shirt was Duke blue.

Gunnar pulled into a twenty-four-hour Waffle House. "Is this okay?"

"You read my mind! Those waffles are callin' my name!"

They found a table towards the back, and Tyler ordered milk while Gunnar ordered orange juice. Tyler, it seemed, already knew what she wanted while he was having a hard time deciding.

"Get the double order," she said. "You know you want to."

He looked longingly at the listing and sighed. "It's so bad for you..."

"Which automatically means it's *so good*. Don't deny it. I'm getting it, and no, I'm not doing an extra mile on the treadmill, either!"

Gunnar chuckled. "You are defeating the purpose!"

"I did extra time on the weights last Saturday *and* an extra two miles!"

"Like you said—*last* Saturday!"

She arched an eyebrow at him. "I thought you said I was beautiful?"

He scowled at her. She didn't play fair at all. "Doing an extra mile on the treadmill won't make you less beautiful, *elskling*."

She seemed to soften at that, and she regarded him curiously. "What does that mean?

"What?"

"The non-English word you spoke!" she clarified, rolling her eyes.

He felt a blush stain his cheeks, and he let out a relieved breath when the server came with their drinks and took their order. Conceding to Tyler's point, he ordered the double waffle. What was a mile or two extra on the elliptical, anyway?

"So?" Tyler asked when the server left.

"What?" Gunnar asked, drumming an idle beat on the table.

"What does it mean?"

"What does what mean?"

She narrowed her eyes at him and almost stomped her foot. Gunnar tried desperately to keep a straight face. She was just so easy tease.

She decided not to talk to him, then, pretending the menu they had just perused had new, exciting information on it. Gunnar let her do this, glad he had a few moments to gaze and enjoy being with her. She'd said Quincy had taken her to a fancy restaurant for their date. Gunnar didn't think he'd made a mistake by taking her to the game, or even here for a late-night meal, but Quincy had been on to something with his choice of dining. Tyler deserved candlelight, soft music, and world-class food. She would love to visit Norway;

his parents and maternal family were there now. His aunt's lamb and cabbage stew was simply amazing...

"Darling," he said finally.

Tyler merely raised her eyebrows as she continued to "read" the menu.

"*Elskling* means darling."

A tiny smile appeared on her face, but she still didn't look at him. "You call me darling?"

"Yes."

"You call all your friends that?"

"You're the first woman I've called darling in years, who wasn't my sister, of course."

"So I'm like a sister to you, then?"

Gunnar wasn't annoyed by her playing coy, but he reached across the table and ran his thumb along her inner wrist. "Trust me, *elskling*, if you become a member of my family, it won't be as my sister...or aunt...grandmother..."

Tyler giggled. "Is your grandfather hot? You may have a run for your money if he is."

"Aside from the fact he's madly in love with my grandmother and has been for the past sixty years? I think I can take him," he replied with a wink, thinking of his maternal grandparents.

Tyler's eyes widened. "Sixty years! Oh...wow...that's wonderful, Gunnar."

Gunnar nodded and smiled, twisting their hands until his fingers locked with hers. "And my parents are approaching their fortieth."

Tears appeared in her eyes and he squeezed her hand. "Your family does marriage for keeps, huh?"

"Yes," Gunnar said, tilting his head. He wanted to ask about her parents, but he'd only heard about her father, and never her mother. Had she died? Left? He hoped it wasn't anything so awful as that.

The food arrived, and he separated their hands. Tyler blessed their food, and when they took the first bite of their waffles, both moaned in approval. They didn't speak for a few minutes, but when Tyler did, her voice was soft and wistful.

"Mama went back to Venezuela...to take care of her mother and grandmother, and because her mother-in-law flat out didn't like her."

Venezuela? "Your mother is from Venezuela?"

Tyler smiled. "Yes. Barlovento, actually. I have yet to make a visit, but I would like to someday. Wendy too."

Gunnar was surprised. He would've never guessed she was half-Latina. "Why did your grandmother not like her?"

"She wasn't American?" Tyler conjectured and shrugged. "Mama wasn't like 'other black people' and she spoke Spanish...Grandma thought she was 'uppity', and the *real* reason was because she wanted my father to marry her best friend's daughter. But he didn't."

"He married your mother," Gunnar said.

"He loved her so much, and my mother loved him, too, but...it was too much. When I left for college, she went back to Venezuela. She sends us letters, but it takes forever because she's from such a rural part of the country. She tries to call when she can."

"Did she come to your father's funeral?"

"No," Tyler said on a sigh. "And Wendy and I understood. She didn't want to deal with Grandma, because she would find *some* way to make Daddy's stroke her fault."

As before, his hand enveloped hers, and she squeezed it. "Can you speak Spanish?"

She laughed. "*No*! Mama refused to teach us, and I would get so frustrated! I know why, because when she came it was hard for her to adjust. A black woman who speaks Spanish and knows little English in the South? After she learned, she rarely spoke Spanish. She tried so hard to assimilate, but when she got mad as us or Daddy, she'd let the Spanish fly!"

"How did she end up in America?"

"A cousin came to America for school, and her mother, after receiving letters about how great life in the States was, decided to send my mother up with him. She never told us how she ended up in Durham, but the cousin came to the barbershop and Mama was with him. My daddy saw my mama and that was it."

Gunnar smiled. "That's pretty romantic too."

"Yeah. I miss them."

He understood, considering his parents were an ocean away. When his mother had decided to take a professorship back home in Norway, his father had closed down his psychiatry practice and moved with her. They were both happy, and they planned to visit Inge and her family later in the year.

Would they like Tyler? He hadn't brought home a girlfriend in years, not since high school when it had been required that his parents meet every girl he dated. Besides, there had been few women he'd ever wanted to introduce since then, but Tyler...

The pair finished their meal, and when the server came and asked if they wanted anything else, they both refused. Gunnar paid the bill, and soon they were back on the road to Tyler's house. Neither made an immediate move to get out the Jeep after pulling into her driveway. It was late, they had work in the morning, but Gunnar really didn't want to leave. No matter how much time he spent with her, it was never enough.

He stared at her, the streetlamp creating an ethereal glow around her. She took his breath away, looking so soft and begging for his touch. He tightened his hands on the steering wheel, knowing if he did touch her, he wouldn't want to stop.

She licked her lips. "I had fun tonight. Thank you."

"I did too. You're very passionate when it comes to sports."

She ducked her head again. "So embarrassing…"

"Why? You should never be embarrassed about that. Passion is good."

Tyler let out a nervous chuckle and unbuckled her seatbelt. He followed suit and walked her to her door. He watched silently as she looked for her keys

"It's only a matter of time, anyway," he murmured softly.

"What is?"

He wanted to touch her so badly, but refrained for his own sanity. "Us."

Gunnar stood close to her as she unlocked her door, and he could see and feel her tremble. Too weak to stop himself, he wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed the nape of her neck. Her body became very still and a long sigh left her.

"Gunnar…"

He kissed her neck again, and she leaned into him briefly before pushing open the door and all but running inside her house. She stood behind the door and poked her head around the edge, using it as a buffer.

Not deterred, he stepped closer to her, but did not cross the threshold. "Tyler."

He wanted to kiss her, but he knew that would be a mistake. It would start with kissing and end up as something neither was ready for that night, despite the fact it had been simmering almost from the moment they had met. Sighing, he shoved his hands into his jacket and stepped back.

Her hand gripped the door's edge and she leaned her temple against it, sighing. "Gunnar…"

The desire and uncertainty in her voice was evident, and he nodded in acknowledgment of it. He stepped back further to remove himself from temptation. He had enough respect for her to wait; he would not ruin this night because of his libido.

"I'll see you Saturday, *elskling*. We both have double orders of waffles to work off, after all."

She sucked her teeth. "I'm not doing an extra mile!" Tyler called as he went back to his Jeep.

He waved at her, hopped into his vehicle, and started for his own home.

TWELVE

"How was the date?"

Gunnar's smile at the question was instant, and so was the friendly, yet forceful punch to his shoulder. "Ouch!"

"All that muscle you got in that arm?!" Damon asked incredulously. "Man..."

Gunnar chuckled and rotated his arm, internally conceding it was more surprise at the punch than the actual force that had made him exclaim. "Tyler loves her sports."

"Does she?!" Damon asked as if he were shocked and underwhelmed at the same time. "What ever made you think *that*?"

"Ha, ha," Gunnar said, going into his file cabinet to put up the invoices he'd just finished. She'd been on his mind nonstop since their date, and now, as they were packing up the office to go home, there was less than twenty-four hours before he would see her again for their training session.

He smiled in anticipation.

"Sprung!"

Gunnar shrugged, not bothering to deny it. "So are you."

"Yeah, man!"

"You asked Wendy to marry you, yet?"

Damon's face fell slightly. "No, man. She's been working late all week. That ring is burnin' a hole through my pockets farreal. It's gonna happen sooner than later, though."

"If she says no?"

Damon shrugged this time. "It'll hurt like a bitch, but I'll just ask her again. I know she loves me. It's not even about that. It's about her career, but I'm not trying to stop her or anything. If she wants to move to a bigger news market, then we move. I love her. I can be a personal trainer anywhere..."

Gunnar nodded. "That's noble of you."

"You say noble, I say selfish! I don't want Wendy with anyone other than me!"

Gunnar smiled, but was quickly seized with the realization he felt the exact same way about Tyler. Unwilling to think too hard about that, however, he invited Damon to the pub, promising this time he wouldn't get piss-ass drunk.

"Good…you're a heavy man to drag!"

"You didn't drag me the last time!" Gunnar corrected on a laugh.

They locked up the office, waving at Valerie as they left. She was about to teach her own class—yoga. At first, Gunnar had been hesitant about letting a woman stay for the late hours the gym was open, but after Valerie had challenged him to a one-on-one defense session, he realized any potential intruders had much more to worry about than Valerie did! For a woman so deceptively slight, she could definitely do some damage!

Gunnar and Damon had much fun at the pub this time, even after seeing Kaci with her latest boy toy of the hour. She'd had the audacity to flirt with both when her date wasn't looking, but Gunnar ignored her and Damon had fun making her look like an idiot without her knowledge.

When Kaci sauntered back to her date, Gunnar let out the guffaw that had been struggling free since Damon had started.

"Awful!" he said, after he'd calmed down.

Damon scowled mildly. "You're the one who's hit it, before—multiple times, I may add—so don't be castin' stones. Catch a boulder in the face!"

Gunnar sighed and shook his head. Damon was right, after all, but Gunnar had vowed not to get involved with any more women like that. Then again, he'd sworn off Kaci weeks ago, and yet…

"Weak," he muttered.

"You need a strong woman to help build you up," Damon said sagely, taking a sip of Dr. Pepper.

Gunnar smiled as he looked at his lemonade. "Working on it…"

The next morning, Gunnar went on his customary run throughout the neighborhood, the cool morning perfect for his workout. He felt antsy and he knew exactly why. Tyler would be coming for her session at noon, and he would get uninterrupted time with her. The tone of their relationship had changed after their date, their conversations on the phone longer and more meaningful. In fact, the night before, after he'd left Damon and the pub, he'd called Tyler just to hear her voice. It had been rough from sleep, though he hadn't called so late, and he'd teased her about going to bed so early.

"Can't a sista take a nap?" she had muttered, but her breathless chuckle had told him she'd taken his teasing in stride.

It was only supposed to be a quick call, but they didn't hang up until well after midnight. She'd told him about her day, her clients, the fact her mother had been on her mind. Their dinner at Waffle House had been the first time in

a long time she'd spoken of her mother to anyone, including Wendy, and Tyler realized just how much she missed her. Tyler's frankness had compelled Gunnar to talk about the loneliness he'd felt being away from his sister and his parents. It didn't matter he was thirty-four years old; family was still important, and to not to be able to see it as often as he would like did take a toll on him.

"But if it wasn't for you, Damon, and Wendy, I'd be even worse," he'd confessed on a whisper.

"Surrogate family," Tyler had said. "An older brother and two baby sisters!"

"Hmm, I don't know about that…I shouldn't want to kiss my sister breathless every time I see her, should I?"

Her breath had caught and she didn't answer immediately. "No…"

"Or want to touch her in places that cause her to tremble, or make those sexy little sounds in her throat, or make her eyes go dark with need and passion?"

She had sighed and whimpered. "Gunnar…"

He'd known he probably should have stopped, but he couldn't, addicted to the tone in her voice, full of desire. "And I definitely, *definitely*, shouldn't get as hard as a rock when she sighs my name like that, should I?"

"Please…"

Her breathing had been heavy on the phone, and it had been all he could do not to reach into his pants and relieve the pressure inside of them. He'd been playing a dangerous game, one that would have better results if she'd been there with him. Nevertheless, he'd had to continue…

"Please what, Tyler?" Gunnar had asked, his voice low.

"You…"

"I what?"

"I gotta go," she had whispered.

A full minute had passed until she had told him goodnight, and another minute had passed before he told her the same. Neither had wanted to end the call, but eventually she had, leaving Gunnar with the phone to his ear as he'd thought of all manners of unpleasant things to will away his erection.

"Jesus," he muttered, slowing to a stop in front of his house. His shorts were too damn tight, again. How was he going to function with her in his house, so close to him? Her scent would drive him crazy, and he didn't know if he would be able to behave. Thank goodness she wouldn't need so much help using his equipment, or else he would be giving her a completely new method of "working out."

"Not helping," he murmured to his traitorous mind as he walked into his home. He went upstairs and showered, unable to resist working out his climax, the evidence of it spraying the tiles beside the soap dish. He pretended he didn't hear Tyler's name echoing amid the shower's spray, and ignored the fact he hadn't come so hard in years.

"Fuck," he gasped, leaning on his arm that rested against the shower walls. "Damn."

He was in so much trouble.

To keep his mind distracted, he made a large breakfast of wheat pancakes and bacon with orange juice, then thoroughly cleaned the exercise equipment. By the time he was done, he was sweating almost as hard as he had while on his run.

And then the doorbell rang.

His hand tightened around the rag he held in reaction, and his heartbeat accelerated. He checked his watch. She was on time.

He went to his kitchen to put up his cleaning products and washed his hands in the sink before opening the front door.

"Hi," Tyler said softly, giving him a small smile and biting her lip.

Gunnar gripped the knob so he wouldn't pull her to him and kiss her silly. "Hi."

Instead of sweats, she was wearing yoga pants and loose top that fell down one shoulder to expose the wide black strap of her sports bra and a smooth dark brown shoulder.

He wanted to press his lips against it.

Her smile widened. "Are you going to let me in, or did you cancel?"

He arched an eyebrow, not liking the knowing tone in her voice. He opened the door wider and leaned against it. "You wore that to tease me, didn't you?"

She frowned. "Tease you?"

"That shoulder," Gunnar clarified, his eyes flicking to it before returning to those chocolate brown eyes of hers. "Show a little skin; make me not work you so hard."

She glanced at her shoulder, then rolled her eyes. "Honestly, I didn't have any more sweats. I've been lazy and haven't done laundry. Can't very well work out in jeans and a turtleneck!"

Gunnar merely shrugged, not wanting to mention how not adverse he was to her in anything that showed off her delectable bum.

He finally let her inside, and she led them to the home gym. They stretched, he keeping as much distance from her as possible, and got her set up on the treadmill for her warm-up run. He watched her, amazed by how much improvement she'd made over the past two months, already noticing the definition in her calves and her relaxed stride as she ran. She'd put on her earphones and stared at the wall as she mouthed the lyrics, not paying attention to him at all. Gunnar had begun setting out the weights they would be using, but then he'd stopped in favor of watching her instead.

He wanted her.

Gunnar sat on the bench with his head in his hands. Things had been going so well between them; and while they had gone on a date, the last thing he

wanted to do was mess things up before they began. Sex too soon in a relationship could spell disaster, and he wanted to do this right with her.

"Are you okay?"

He felt her gentle hands slide through his hair and he moaned before jerking away from her. The hurt that flashed in her eyes tore him apart, and he sighed, cupping her face gently.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, closing his eyes as his thumbs drifted along her damp skin.

"What's wrong?"

"I shouldn't touch you."

She stepped back and nodded, the hurt sinking deeper into her eyes. "Then don't."

When she would've gone around him, he circled his arm around her waist and brought her flush against him. He ran his nose against that bare shoulder of hers before pressing a kiss to it.

"I can't."

"Can't what?"

"Not touch you."

She leaned into him and he bit back a groan. Too weak to fight the urge, he pressed a kiss to the crook of her neck and inhaled. She smelled so good and he became aroused, so he gently pushed her forward.

"Come on," he said, walking around her to the weights. He grabbed the five-pound ones and handed them to her. "We have Waffle House to burn, remember?"

Tyler looked at him oddly, but she took the weights anyway. He was infinitely grateful she didn't comment on his behavior just now. If there was anything Gunnar had always prided himself, it was acting professional while on the job. Even when he'd been in LA, and there was all manner of temptation, he'd made sure he made his gigs and behaved as his parents had raised him while he was at work. He'd saved playtime for afterwards, and he would continue to do so.

No matter how tantalizing the woman before him actually was.

They went through the exercises staring at one another, though Tyler's confusion was apparent on her face. Gunnar decided to stand next to her instead, and he felt her tension ease a little. It helped him focus as well, the view of her in his peripheral not nearly as distracting as watching her head on. With the tension dissipating, the rest of the session went by smoothly.

At least until they started the cool down.

Gunnar was mesmerized by the complete look of relaxation on her face and the perspiration beading her temples. She'd done very well today, keeping her focus as he should have done as well. After that brief slip he'd made, she'd reverted completely to workout mode, not letting herself be distracted by anything—including him. He couldn't help but be a little bothered by that. Did

he not affect her the same way she affected him? He couldn't believe that, not after the phone call they had had last night. Just thinking about it gave him a hard-on, but she could switch her emotions on and off as if they were nothing!

Yet, wasn't he the one who had told her he couldn't touch her, who had forced the air of professionalism into this session? Why was he upset and complaining about getting exactly what he had wanted?

No, he thought to himself as Tyler stood and wiped her face with a towel. *Not what I want at all.*

She was packing up her bag and would head to the showers, then leave. He didn't want her to leave. There was so much that needed to be said, so much he needed to explain...

"Tyler?"

"Yeah?"

She didn't turn around to look at him, and he thought that wouldn't do at all. He took one last sip from his water bottle before setting it on the ground and standing.

"Tyler."

Tyler sucked her teeth, unable to find the last clean bra she *knew* she'd packed before leaving her house. It made no sense to take a shower only to put on a sweaty, stinky bra again! She could always just go home and *Febreze* her truck, but that would make her irritated. She'd packed up all this stuff for nothing...

"*Elskling*."

That made her pause, and her hands tightened on the handles of her bag. She closed her eyes and silently counted to three before she turned to him. He was standing so close, his gray eyes so intense. Self-consciousness rammed into Tyler, and she put a hand to her messy hair and looked down in shame. Between the way he'd looked at her when she'd first arrived, to that brief, thrilling and weird interlude during the session, and now, Tyler felt as if she couldn't breathe. He was playing yo-yo with her emotions, and she didn't appreciate it one bit. If he couldn't touch her, why did he look at her the way he did? take her out on dates? kiss her the way he did? speak to her on the phone as he had last night?

She let out a shaky breath as she remembered what he'd said to her. He didn't think of her as a sister. He was attracted to her, told her about the things he wanted to do with her. Tyler didn't know if the confession was so he could get his thoughts out of his system so he wouldn't give in to them, but all he'd served to do was make her yearn, and Tyler hated yearning.

Well, it was going to stop right now. Tyler was getting off this seesaw of lust. Attraction wasn't enough, and though she enjoyed spending time with

Gunnar, she had to remain strong and not succumb. She was going to tell him things should remain strictly platonic between them. She was going to—

He was kissing her, and none too gently, either. He grasped the back of her head and brought her lips to fuse with his, his tongue lancing inside her mouth and against her cheeks as if to get every one of the flavors she possessed. Tyler moaned and sagged against the wall, tearing her mouth away to gulp in much-needed air. Gunnar moved his mouth to her neck, kissing and nipping at her as his hands moved down her body to her behind. With one quick movement, he hoisted her up the wall and pressed his body against hers to keep her there.

She felt his hardness against her rapidly dampening center and she sighed. He felt impossibly large and hot, and she locked her legs around his waist to keep her steady and to bring him closer. Gunnar growled, his hands moving from her behind to underneath her top; and when his bare palms fit themselves over her bare breasts and nipples, both of them groaned.

Tyler panted as he began squeezing, closing her eyes to his gaze. He bit her chin and thrummed her nipples with his thumbs, bucking against her in a perverted imitation of what could happen if neither one of them gained control of their senses. She'd never been so brazen, not even with Quincy, so the fact Gunnar had her pressed against the wall with his crotch against hers and his hands on her breasts was a little disconcerting.

Disconcertment gave way to shame as Gunnar lifted her top and bared her chest to him. Hot tears filled her eyes as he gazed upon her naked torso. Her stomach wasn't toned or flat and her breasts weren't high and perky as she knew he was used to seeing, and she waited for the moment he pulled down her shirt, set her back onto her feet, and sent her on her merry way.

He did none of those things.

Instead, Gunnar whispered something she couldn't understand before skimming his lips along the underside of her breasts. Her nipples tightened into painful points in anticipation, and when she looked down at him, his eyes locked with hers as he stuck out his tongue and touched the tip to a distended, dark-brown peak.

Tyler looked heavenward, her fingers digging into his scalp as he finally took the entire nipple into his mouth. The warm, wet sensation made her quake violently, and he suckled her so hard it was as if there were a tether between her breasts and her crotch. He kneaded her other breast gently until he turned his attention to it, and the cool air hitting her saturated nipple was just as arousing as the damp heat of his mouth.

The hand that didn't hold up her breast for him to suckle slid down her stomach, its fingers tracing along her belly button before going beneath her pants and panties to her wet folds. His fingers grazed her nubbin and she bucked and gasped, her eyes rolling into the back of her head. Gunnar moaned against her nipple before letting it go with a kiss. He nuzzled the valley between her breasts briefly, then raised his head to kiss her.

She was vaguely aware of him lifting her arms and cloth going over her head. When she shivered, it was then she realized she was completely topless; and in a move many minutes too late, Tyler began to cover herself. Gunnar grunted and shook his head, grasping her wrists so her hands would find the hem of his tank and pull it off his body.

It was so cliché, but he really did look like a Greek god...or a Norse god in his case. He was all definition and muscle, and she glided her hands over his hard, beautiful planes. Gunnar pressed kiss after gentle kiss along her neck and collarbone before pulling her hands away and linking their fingers together. He pressed fully against her, her breasts mashed by his hard chest, and both sighed at the feeling.

It was exquisite.

Gunnar remained close to her as he sank down to his knees, his lips pressing tiny kisses along her body during the journey. She felt little zings of pleasure from wherever his mouth made contact, and she whimpered when she felt his breath on her navel.

Tyler couldn't help but watch as he grasped the elastic of her yoga pants and panties, her breath completely nonexistent when he tugged them down her legs. He grasped her ankles gently and pulled her feet from her socks and clothing, then threw them behind them somewhere unheeded.

She was completely naked before him now.

Tyler closed her eyes. Unlike the other instances she'd had where she didn't really care if the man liked her body, she *wanted* Gunnar to like hers. It was still a work in progress, but losing ten pounds didn't make her ready to expose her body to anyone, let alone her personal trainer...the very same who was drifting his hands up her inner thighs with his mouth following the trail.

Tyler bit her lip and clutched his head when she felt his nose graze her pubic hair. His breath at her core was turning her into a faucet, and the light touches of his fingertips made her shake badly.

She came at the first stroke of his broad tongue, but Gunnar kept going. He drank in her climax, keeping her thighs spread and kissing her folds almost obscenely. Tyler didn't think she would ever stop, and she felt she would draw blood if she dug her nails into his scalp even more, despite the fact they were blunt.

Tyler let out a long groan when her release subsided and jerked when Gunnar pressed tiny kisses along her swollen nether lips. She was always sensitive after coming; and after that one, she knew she wouldn't be able to handle the air circulating in the room, never mind his ministrations!

She leaned against the wall, her hand covering her face as she tried to get her bearings. So much for staying strong! All he'd had to do was kiss her and now she was standing there naked and coming down from one of the most glorious climaxes she'd had in ages. Suddenly, Gunnar took her hand from her face and kissed her palm, swirling his tongue in the center of it. Tyler sobbed

softly at his care, then let out a low moan when he took her hand and placed it on his hard member.

He was now naked as well.

He wasn't as long as Quincy, but definitely long enough, and, damn, he was thick. Tyler began stroking him, her eyes glazed as she looked into his. They were heavy and completely focused on her, and she took the initiative by kissing him thoroughly. Gunnar's hand joined hers as they made him ever harder, and her nether lips wept with her essence.

After a few moments of stroking and kissing, his other hand cupped her face while the hand that had covered hers lifted her thigh to wrap around his hip. He brought that hand back to where she still grasped his hardness, and he guided it to her slick heat.

He broke the kiss and looked deeply into her eyes.

Do you want this?

Please...

He entered her hard, stretching her so completely she was sure she would split into two. She let out a choked gasp, her eyes wide as she looked into his. He closed his briefly and dropped his forehead to hers, resting it there a beat before kissing her lips gently.

He started thrusting slow, as if wanting to feel every cling of her muscles as he pushed forward and retreated. She felt her channel flower and sting a little, it having been so long since something so large was inside of her. He kissed her every time he entered her, sometimes on her lips, sometimes on her cheeks, once on her nose and once on the space between her brows. The pace he'd set was unrushed, deliberate, almost reverent. This wasn't sex they were having; this was something else, something she hadn't the guts to name.

The kisses she felt upon her eyelids compelled her to lift them. She hadn't even been aware she'd closed her eyes. His hands were still at her cheek and thigh, and he started thrusting faster. His jaw clenched and his mouth settled to a thin line, and those gray eyes were ever piercing and unguarded upon hers. His breath was harsh as he exhaled through his nostrils, and a flush crept up his cheeks.

He was close.

So was she.

Tyler wrapped her arms around his neck, sinking her hands into his hair. She rubbed her nose against his cheekbones and pressed her body into his, wanting to feel every bit of his skin against hers as they reached the pinnacle. Gunnar's fingers tightened around her thigh, digging into the fat and muscle of it, and Tyler hugged him tighter. His thrusts were becoming erratic and the squishy sounds of their union clashed with their harsh breathing. She nuzzled his cheek and neck and he bit the crook of hers.

Her name was a shout as he came, and she let out an undecipherable wail, signaling her completion milliseconds afterwards.

Both stood there silently, unmoving, as their bodies trembled in the aftermath; yet when Tyler felt goo ooze down her thighs, she froze.

Gunnar wasn't wearing a condom.

She gasped and pulled back, but Gunnar didn't let her go very far. She wanted to curse herself and cry. She was *never* this irresponsible when it came to sex—not even with Quincy! It would be her luck she would get pregnant, and while she didn't think Gunnar was so free with his body as to bed women indiscriminately, she didn't know how clean he actually was, either.

He father had taught her better than this!

"Look at me," Gunnar murmured, his hands gentle as they framed her face. Tyler couldn't, and dropped her eyes, willing the tears that had filled them not to spill over.

"*Min kjære*," he whispered against her lips. "*Nei gråt*, *ja*?" His thumbs brushed away renegade tears. "Don't cry."

She sniffled and nodded, but his tender tone only made her cry harder.

"Baby, why are you crying?"

She shook her head, her throat too tight to tell him why. When she tried to back away again, he followed her, pressing her against the wall. He remained inside her, though he was soft now, and seemingly had no intention of pulling out.

"Tyler," Gunnar said softly. "I'm right here, okay? I'm not going anywhere."

"Gunnar—"

He kissed her, stilling her words. He slid his free hand into her hair and broke the kiss slowly. He shook his head, making sure she looked him in the eye.

"I will not leave you, *elskling*. I'm not leaving you."

He pressed his hips against hers, leaving her no doubt he understood the seriousness of the situation as well. She gave into the tears she'd been doing a poor job of hiding, burying her face into his neck. She was overwhelmed by emotions, yet the most powerful one was the one that scared her the most, and it wasn't fear. She hadn't felt this way since Quincy, but what she was feeling now seemed different, more awesome in its scope and depth.

"Oh, God," she murmured against Gunnar's neck.

He finally slipped out of her, and the emptiness that overcame her at the move astounded Tyler. Gunnar dropped his arms from around her and she backed away from him, looking around the room for her clothes. She bent down to pick up her shirt and bra, but he touched her shoulder.

"Leave it," he said, not even bothering to look at her garments.

"I need to take a shower," Tyler said with a frown.

Gunnar's smile was downright erotic, and her body reacted accordingly. "I know."

He grasped her hand and began walking backwards, his eyes trailing over her body like a caress. She knew he could see her arousal despite her dark skin,

and from the way his length began to twitch, it was apparent he was raring for a second go as well.

Tyler blushed and ducked her head, her eyes skipping to her usual shower, but when Gunnar tightened his hand around hers and led her up the stairs, she couldn't stop a tiny grin of her own.

She guessed she wouldn't need that clean bra for a while, after all.

THIRTEEN

"*Mmm...baby*...that feels so *good*..."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Tyler moaned, biting her lip at how he was making her feel. "God, those hands..."

His chuckle was low and husky, and he applied more pressure.

She hissed.

"Liked that?" he whispered in her ear, biting the lobe of it.

"*Gunnar*..."

"Now you're getting a taste of how you make me feel," he said deeply, kissing her shoulder.

"I make you feel like this?"

"Every single time."

"Hmm. I should charge you extra!"

Gunnar laughed and smacked her bare bum gently. "Turn around, wench."

Tyler's laugh joined his, and she did as instructed, leaning her head back into the shower's spray so Gunnar could rinse out the shampoo. The water and suds slid down her body, only heightening the sensual experience of sharing the shower with Gunnar. They had behaved the entire time, taking the opportunity to explore each other's bodies as they washed. To her surprise, Gunnar had expressed his desire to wash her hair, and though she knew it would be a tangled, frizzy, nappy mess afterwards, she decided to indulge him. Besides, he'd already seen her naked; there was nowhere to go but up in her eyes.

He pulled her head up gently and kissed her, making her smile against his lips. "All clean?" she asked.

He nodded and kissed her again, wrapping his arms fully around her. "All clean, *elskling*."

She snuggled into his wet, warm, chest. The water soothed her, and with Gunnar holding her so close, Tyler didn't know when the last time she'd felt so completely relaxed.

Gunnar's hand drifted along her bare back, and she felt him kiss the top of her head. "I had no idea your hair was this long."

It brushed between her shoulder blades when wet. "I don't straighten it very often. It's a pain, for one, and for two, I like my hair natural."

"And it's all yours?"

"All mine."

"Hair that's all yours…what a concept!" Gunnar teased.

Tyler giggled into his shoulder and hugged him tighter. "Not all black women wear weaves or wigs!"

"Not even a black thing," Gunnar said, popping her bum again. "Every woman I knew in LA had extensions. One girl I was dating…hers came out during…um…'vigorous exercise'…"

Tyler rolled her eyes, not even wondering what this "vigorous exercise" entailed. "I'll bet!"

"Bad form to talk about one woman while naked in another's presence, huh?" Gunnar conceded, leaning back to cup her cheek. His gray eyes were bright with amusement and a little contrition. "I'm sorry."

"The past is the past," Tyler said, stepping out his embrace and out of the shower. She heard Gunnar turn off the water behind her, and just as she reached for the towel, he snatched it away and wrapped it around her. "Thank you."

"Tyler?"

"Yes?"

"What are you thinking?"

She bit her lip, debating whether to answer truthfully, untruthfully, or not at all. She chose the third option and started to leave, but he held fast to her, and she could feel his nude body press against her through the terrycloth of the towel.

"*Elskling*."

"I messed up," Tyler said with a frown, staring at the black bathroom mat on his floor. Her earlier rash actions rushed to the fore again, and she stared down at her belly. At that very moment, she could be carrying a child, Gunnar's child. They'd only been on one date, and now they might be forever linked. Then again, he could still move on, leaving her holding the squalling bag. She could become an anecdote of his past, like the woman with the hair extensions was.

That didn't make her feel too good.

Gunnar sighed deeply, but he tightened his arms around her. "You regret us making love?"

Why did he have to put it that way? And yet, she couldn't deny how exhilarating it had been braced against the wall of his home gym and having him pound into her over and over again. It had been thrilling, all of it. But better to call it what it was, though. "Fucking against a wall—"

"No, Tyler," Gunnar said, dipping his mouth to her ear. "I'm not going to let you do this."

"Tell the truth?"

"Tell your version of it so you won't have to deal with your feelings...*our* feelings..."

She tried to flee, but this time he lifted her off her feet and carried her into his bedroom. She yelped, shocked at the ease with which he'd lifted her, and the intense look he held in his eyes as he stared at her. He placed her gently on the bed, the towel still firmly tucked around her.

He shook his head. "No, *kjære*. That won't do at all."

Staring into her eyes all the while, Gunnar pulled the towel away from her, leaving her as naked as he was. She hadn't even felt this exposed in the shower, and his eyes took their time looking at her body.

Just as she moved to cover herself, Gunnar stopped her, holding her wrists in his hands and pinning her eyes with his.

"A woman's body," he said softly, brushing his lips against her nose. "All woman. I love it."

"You do?"

"Ah, *kjære*, why do you sound so skeptical? I've said so before—"

"I was fully clothed then. I look better clothed. It hides things—"

"You don't have to hide from me, honey," Gunnar said, kissing her lips lightly. "I don't want you to hide from me. Ever."

This discussion was really a day late and a dollar short, but that didn't stop Tyler from turning over to hide from him anyway. All that served to do, as she realized belatedly, was give him an unobstructed view of her generous behind, and she sucked her teeth.

"Lord..."

Gunnar's strong hands slid up her back, then down to her buttocks and the backs of her thighs. Her body trembled from his touch, and when he added pressure, she moaned.

"Yes?"

"What are you doing?"

He chuckled lightly. "Giving you a massage. I don't think I'm doing it wrong..."

He wasn't, and Tyler decided to loosen up and enjoy his ministrations. This was ten times better than the brief experience she'd had of a Gunnar massage in her barbershop that one time, and the fact both were nude only enhanced the experience. He was hard, his length brushing against the outside

of her thighs and backside as he moved his hands up her back, and she felt her body turn to jelly with relaxation and arousal.

"How many women have gotten the Gunnar special?" Tyler asked drowsily.

He laughed, working on her shoulders now. "'The Gunnar special', huh?"

"Hmm," she intoned incoherently. She was starting to fall asleep, and the last thing she wanted was him hearing her snore!

"I gave my sister some," he admitted.

Tyler laughed. "Did you?"

"I needed to practice! And Inge is notorious and brutal with her honesty. She started coming to me whenever she needed one; gave me ten dollars for an hour."

"How much is this costing me?"

His lips kissed the nape of her neck. "How much is it worth?"

Tyler sighed and stretched, feeling his lips move down the column of her spinal cord. His hands slid along her sides before moving beneath her and cupping her breasts. She felt him slip between her legs as he moved back up her body, and she opened her legs wider instinctively.

"It's worth this much?" Gunnar asked with an amused tone.

"Don't tease me," Tyler begged.

He moved his hand between her legs and played with her, dancing along the puffy, moist nether lips. Tyler undulated her hips in time with his caresses, and she vaguely heard a drawer opening and closing. She was so close to her climax she completely missed the sound of a foil package being torn open, and just as she was about to fall over the edge, he entered her smoothly.

"Fuck."

"Love," Gunnar corrected, draping his body completely over hers and kissing her cheek.

Her body shook through her climax and his thrusts, his moans accelerating her arousal again. Her hands stretched over her head and he linked their fingers together, his hips pumping against her behind and his shaft stretching her woman's channel so wonderfully. Gunnar buried his head in the crook or her neck and made slow love to her, whispering in Norwegian, his breath hot and tantalizing against her skin.

"Baby," Tyler whined.

"*Kjære*," Gunnar whispered, kissing her clavicle.

"*Oh*..."

He pulled back and slipped out of her, causing her to mew in protest, but he turned her so she rested on her back. His eyes locked with hers, he reentered her body, both of them moaning low at the reunion.

"I love how you feel surrounding me," Gunnar said lowly.

"I love you inside me," Tyler admitted, unable to do nothing but be truthful as he looked at her so intensely, thrust into her so deeply.

Chest met chest as Gunnar framed her face in his hands, dropping kiss after gentle kiss along the planes of her face. Tyler held him close, wrapping her legs around his waist and keeping him in a vice. Soon, Gunnar began twisting his hips, not withdrawing at all, and Tyler's eyes rolled to the back of her head.

"You love this," Gunnar panted, nipping her bottom lip.

"Yes..."

"You *love* this," he repeated, thrusting harder than he had in a while.

"Yes!"

"I love this," he said, slowing back down and rocking his hips. He kissed her forehead. "I love everything about this, Tyler."

"Gunnar..."

He kissed her, his mouth and eyes open as he mated his tongue with hers. Tyler caressed the angles of his face, the muscles in his arms, neck, and shoulders, and sighed when he pressed his lips over the space where her heart beat.

Suddenly he flipped them over again, this time with him on his back and her on top, and he gave her a wicked smile.

"Ride me."

Tyler nearly came from his command, her arms nearly too weak to support herself. She braced them on his sweat-slicked chest and closed her eyes, lifting her body off his length slowly before sinking back down even slower.

"Damn."

"Yeah," she agreed, and repeated the motion a little faster.

She soon found a slow and steady rhythm, her eyes still closed as she tried to focus to prolong the pleasure. She felt his eyes on her, then his hands as they cupped her breasts. She squeezed his member with her internal muscles when his thumbs thrummed her nipples, followed by his tongue and mouth.

"I'm so close, *kjære*."

"Come for me, baby," Tyler murmured.

"God, Tyler."

"I want you to come," she repeated, kissing the tip of his nose. "Come with me, honey."

"Tyler..."

"Feel me squeeze you," Tyler said against his cheek before nipping at it.

His hips were furious now, and her breath came in and out in spurts. As before, Gunnar linked their fingers together and kissed the back of her hands before letting out a guttural yell with one final, hard thrust. Tyler's release came a second after his, and her body collapsed atop his, relishing in another mind-numbing climax.

Gunnar cuddled her close, his mouth skimming her hairline. Tyler drifted her fingers along his collarbone and sternum, her eyes stinging as she was painfully close to tears again. She'd never felt so connected with someone in all her life, and that scared her. What did a person do after experiencing such intense emotions?

"Sleepy," Gunnar mumbled, bringing her closer.

She nodded, grazing her nose against the pulse point in his neck. Sleep. That actually sounded like an excellent idea.

It was a quarter to nine when Gunnar woke up; and when he felt the warm, nude body snuggled atop his, he smiled.

So it hadn't *been a dream...*

Clearly not, for the reality had been a million times better, gone thousands of miles higher than he'd ever imagined. Tyler's hair was a tangled afro about her head and he chuckled silently, pushing down the mass of hair only to have it fluff back up slowly.

She muttered something incoherently and pressed closer to him.

It was when she shifted did he realize he was still inside her, and he felt himself stir. This was madness! He really needed to let the poor woman rest! If he had his way, they would have plenty more opportunities to make love—no need to cram them all in one night!

As much as he was loath to leave her, Gunnar eased out her body and the bed anyway, successful in not disturbing her. He cupped her cheek and nuzzled her nose briefly before grabbing clean boxer shorts from a drawer and padding downstairs.

They needed to eat, and he hummed a nameless tune as he figured out what to prepare. Though it was late, he was ravenous, and guessed Tyler would be as well.

How completely right did she look in his bed just a moment ago?

Smiling to himself, he pulled out some food and began cooking, hoping she wouldn't be adverse to the menu. It was by pure luck he'd gone grocery shopping recently, or else most of the food would have been stocked in the freezer and unfit for use tonight. Besides, it had been a while since he'd cooked, genuinely, if he didn't count this morning; and he had it on good authority, namely his mother, sister, and aunts, that he wasn't all that bad at it.

It was about an hour later before dinner was done, and he set the food, glasses of water, and utensils on a tray and carried it carefully up the stairs to his bedroom. Once he reached the door, he stood there for a moment, breathless at the sight of Tyler in his bed. The covers had worked their way down her body, leaving her bare back completely exposed, and her arms were wound tight around his pillow. She shifted her legs and moaned, the covers lowering even more to show him the beginning curve of her bum, and Gunnar hummed low in his throat in approval.

He saw Tyler open her eyes with a frown, looking around the room disoriented.

Gunnar smiled. "Hello, Sleeping Beauty."

Tyler gasped and twisted to him, frowning and moaning once more. Both heard the loud growl of her stomach, and Gunnar laughed outright while Tyler whined and hid her face in a pillow.

"So embarrassing!" she said, her voice muffled by the pillow.

"I think it's adorable, actually," Gunnar admitted, walking to the bed. He moved some things off the nightstand and put the tray upon it before sliding into bed behind Tyler. He ran a gentle hand along her back. "How are you feeling, baby?"

"Stiff, sore, and hungry," she muttered, pulling her face from the pillow. The back of her head was to him.

Gunnar grinned and kissed her shoulder. "I have food."

"I know. It smells good, actually. Did you fix it yourself?"

"I can cook," he said smugly.

"Get outta town," Tyler said, snuggling into the pillow. Gunnar bent over her so he could see her face. Her eyes were closed, but a tiny smile graced her lips.

"You look perfect in my bed," he whispered in her ear.

"You're sweet talkin' me."

Gunnar laughed lowly and kissed the center of her back. "I'm also telling you the truth. Sweet talking and truth telling aren't always mutually exclusive, *kjære*."

"Oh. Learn somethin' new every day."

Gunnar laughed again and turned her to her back. Her eyes were soft and unguarded as she looked at him, and he was once again rendered breathless. She was so beautiful to him, and the emotions she saw in her eyes made the anxiousness in his heart disappear.

Their lips connected briefly, and his hand caressed her from her neck, down her right breast, and to her hip.

"Ready to eat, baby?"

Her eyes flicked to the food and she smiled. "What have we got?"

He helped her recline against the headboard on the bed and placed the tray in her lap. "Baked chicken, wild rice, green beans, and to top it off, a wheat roll."

She closed her eyes and inhaled. "Baby, this smells wonderful!" She was about to pick up the fork, but Gunnar moved it away from her. "Gunnar!"

He smirked at her and began cutting up the chicken. The suspicious look never left her eyes, even as he presented a forkful of chicken to her.

"Open," Gunnar said silkily.

"I *know* you ain't—!"

"You're stiff and sore, right?" Gunnar reminded her.

"My *arms* are fine!"

He couldn't have stopped his smug smile if he had tried. "I gave you a rigorous workout, didn't I, Ms. Carver?"

Tyler was unsuccessful in keeping the grin from her face. "Give me the fork, Mr. Daniels!"

"Open your mouth, Tyler," he coaxed, bringing the fork closer to her lips. With a roll of her eyes, Tyler complied, and he gently slid the food between her lips. The look of pleasure that overcame Tyler's face as she chewed made another smug smile appear on his.

"Good?" Gunnar asked knowingly.

"Bastard," Tyler muttered without venom, and reached for the fork again.

"Oh, *no*. Name calling gets you fed more."

"Gunnar!"

"Open up, baby! You're my baby; I have to feed you," Gunnar said, scooping up rice this time.

She did absently, as if her mind was still too busy dissecting his last comment to tell her mouth not to give into his whims.

"A few hours ago you said I was your woman," Tyler said after she swallowed.

"Again, the two aren't always mutually exclusive."

She tilted her head to the side. "You'd want children?"

Gunnar nodded, this time feeding her green beans. Tyler dropped all pretenses of being annoyed and accepted the food automatically. "I love kids."

He didn't miss Tyler absently move her hands to her stomach, and he gripped the tray and the fork to keep him from doing the same. It was entirely possible he would have one of his own in the next nine months, and instead of the dread that had usually come whenever a partner had given him the scare, though to be fair, that hadn't ever been often...twice wasn't often, was it?...he felt anticipation at the prospect with Tyler. Besides, he would be thirty-five, soon. It was time for him to start settling down anyway.

"What about you, *kjære*? You want babies?"

Tyler took a sip of water and stared at the tray. "I've thought about them, of course."

"And?"

Her eyes darted to his briefly. "I've wondered." She broke off a piece of bread and ate it, sighing as she did so.

Gunnar felt his eyes narrow. Of course she'd wondered, and he knew with whom she'd wondered having them. Quincy Lucas.

Gunnar cupped her cheek and made her look into his eyes. "Had you and Quincy ever talked about it?"

She gave a half-hearted shrug. "Future plans had been discussed, yes."

Gunnar licked his lips, unsure if he should ask the question he was about to ask anyway. "Marriage?"

She nodded, eating another piece of bread. He saw her face begin to crumple and he sighed, cupping her other cheek.

"*Elskling*, look at me," he commanded gently. She did as told, her eyes so sad, and his heart broke. This was further proof the idiot hadn't deserved Tyler. "If we created a child today, would you regret it?"

"It is what it is—"

"No, Tyler," Gunnar said, brushing his thumbs against her cheek. "Would you regret it?"

"Would you?"

"No."

Her eyes widened at that, apparently not expecting the firmness and finality with which he'd spoken. "Oh."

"I regret nothing about what's happened between us," Gunnar said sincerely, and finally dropped one of his hands from her cheek to her abdomen. "Or the consequences."

"I might not be pregnant," Tyler whispered.

"Is it wrong that part of me actually hopes you are?"

"Gunnar!"

He gave her a lopsided shrug and smiled. "What can I say? It's a testament to a man's virility and whatnot."

Tyler rolled her eyes but chuckled. "At least I'm in a position to support it now—"

"*We* are," Gunnar corrected. "We."

"We?"

"It's half me, after all. This baby would be half American, a quarter Norwegian, and a quarter Venezuelan."

"The United Nations in one baby," she giggled, staring at her belly.

"And as beautiful as her mother," Gunnar said softly, sliding his fingers over her cheeks.

She bit her lip. "I might not be pregnant."

Gunnar needed the second reminder, because he was getting ahead of himself. He was already thinking of rooms to convert; how to convince Tyler to move in with him; wedding rings...Clearing his throat, he put more food on the fork and fed her once more, occasionally stealing a few bites for himself. When they finished eating, Gunnar took the tray back downstairs and shut down everything before returning to his room. Tyler was seated on the side, the abandoned towel from earlier back around her.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

She didn't look at him. "Home."

He inhaled and exhaled slowly. "Why?"

Tyler tightened the towel around her and shrugged. "Um, is there a reason why I shouldn't?"

"Yes."

"Which is?"

"I want you to stay."

Tyler's shoulder slumped and her hands clutched the bedspread underneath her fingers. He had no idea what was going on in that head of hers, but he guessed it included a healthy amount of over-analysis. Gunnar went to his bed and climbed behind Tyler, enveloping her with his arms and legs. She leaned against him, her eyes closed, and Gunnar kissed her shoulder.

"Stay, *kjære*. Please."

She turned her head so her forehead rested against his pulse point, and her finger traced a nipple. There wasn't anything sexual in her touch, and he recognized it; it was the need to be connected to someone on that tactile level. His fingers returned the favor, trailing lightly from her shoulder to wrist and back again. Gunnar didn't ever think he'd tire of being around Tyler. Holding Tyler. Loving Tyler.

"Can I at least get a nightshirt or something?"

"What's wrong with your birthday suit?" Gunnar asked cheekily.

"Are you serious?"

"I sleep nude most nights," Gunnar admitted.

"You do not!"

"Or damn near close in my boxers."

"Most nights? Really?"

"Habit from LA. It was always so hot in my apartment so I quit bothering with clothes."

"I'm sure that's the *only* reason," Tyler challenged.

He smiled and kissed her temple. "You sound jealous, *elskling*."

"Do I? I apologize."

Gunnar laughed and tilted her chin up so he could kiss her lips. "Don't. It's damn sexy to know you're so possessive of me."

"Man's virility?"

"Not exactly," he said, playing with her hair. Still holding her close, he moved them under the covers, lying nose to nose with her as they caressed each other gently.

"What is it exactly, then?" Tyler asked once they were settled.

He shrugged. "What do you want it to be?"

She shrugged.

"Tyler?"

"Yes?"

"Are we friends?"

Her hand moved down to his pectoral muscles before finding its way over his beating heart. "I don't think so." She seemed unsure by the declaration, however.

"What if I said I didn't want us to be friends," Gunnar said, holding his hand over the one she'd placed on his heart.

"What would you like us to be?"

"More than that."

"You mean…"

"I want you to feel you have the right to feel possessive over me, just as I want you to know I feel possessive over you."

"You do?"

"Damn straight I do."

Tyler laughed, clearly surprised. "Good Lord, why?"

"Because," Gunnar said, lifting her hand and kissing her wrist. "You're my woman."

"I am."

"Yes. I decided a few weeks back actually."

"You *did*?"

"Yes. When that *rasshøl* walked into your shop like he owned everything in it, including you."

"Gunnar—"

"I'm serious," Gunnar confessed. "I wanted to snap his smarmy neck, and I didn't even know who he was. Now that I do, I wish I had."

She giggled and hid her face in his neck. "Oh, Gunnar!"

He pulled her closer, feeling her towel loosen from his efforts. He pulled it completely away from her body, preferring to feel her unhindered anyway. "I was protective and possessive of you before I even had the right to be. I would apologize if I felt sorry for it, but I don't."

Tyler sighed and wrapped an arm around his waist, inserting a leg between his. "It's all right."

"Good," Gunnar said, feeling his body beginning to react to her nearness yet again. "Especially since it's official now."

"What's official?"

"That I have the right to be protective and possessive over you."

"Ah."

"We should celebrate," Gunnar said, rolling her onto her back and lying atop her.

Tyler grinned, spreading her legs to fit his hips into their cradle. "Really? Any thoughts on how we should?"

His grin matched hers, and he proceeded to show her exactly what he was thinking.

FOURTEEN

"You're still here?"

Gunnar's head jerked up to see Valerie standing in the doorframe, her look curious, yet knowing at the same time.

"I'll call you when I get home, *elskling*," Gunnar said lowly into the phone, and smiled when he got his reply. "Until tonight."

He placed the receiver into its base gently, staring at the phone until a feminine throat cleared, garnering his attention again. His smile widened.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Young?"

Valerie sat down in the chair in front of his desk and smirked. "Tell me her name, for starters."

"Her name?"

"Yes. I know it's not Kaci, because every time you were on the phone with her, we could all hear the, er, 'discussion' on the gym floor!"

Gunnar blushed and shook his head, not wanting to be reminded of that incredibly unwise dating decision. "No, it's not Kaci."

"So..."

"So, what?"

"Her name, babe! What is it? Though it's not unusual for you to stay at work late, it is unusual for you to be smiling on the phone like you were."

"Like I was?"

Valerie shrugged. "Like a man in love."

Gunnar nodded and his grin widened. "Tyler."

"Tyler?"

"Her name is Tyler."

"Tyler...Tyler...*that* Tyler?!"

"What do you mean, 'that Tyler'?"

"Damon's Tyler!"

"She's not *Damon's* anything—"

"Oh, you know what I mean!" Valerie insisted, slapping the desk with her towel for emphasis. "Wow! Talk about a small world, huh?"

"What do you know about Tyler?"

The redhead shrugged, reclining in the chair. Her dark blue Lycra suit was soaked with sweat, though she had on a jacket because it was chilly in the gym when one wasn't working out. "I know she was a shy thing when I met her. Cute, but shy."

"You were checking her out?"

Valerie gave him a mild glare. "Like you don't check out every girl *you* meet. Besides, I've been pretty on with my straight-dar. She's a gay woman's dream, except, she's not gay."

"Bummer."

"Don't patronize," Valerie said, narrowing her eyes. "Anyway. I'm surprised. I didn't think she was your type, either."

"Why?" Gunnar asked, unable to keep the slight edge out of his voice.

"Because she's nice and normal," Valerie said, slapping the desk with her towel again. "C'mon, Gunnar! You have a black man and a gay woman in your employment; if you're going to be prejudiced about anything, it wouldn't be about silly things like that!"

"So her size—"

"What about her size? Like I said, a gay woman's dream. A lot of woman to hold, lots of curves...she's damn sexy. And the best part, she doesn't even know it. That's the ultimate in sexy, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"You do realize if she was bi, I'd be giving you a run for your money—boss or no," Valerie said with a wink.

"I'm well aware," Gunnar said on a laugh.

"Good. Don't fuck this up, hear?" Valerie warned, standing. "She really is a nice, sweet woman, and I only needed one meeting to realize that."

Gunnar nodded. "Thanks for the advice, Val."

"That is why you hired me, though you don't utilize my common sense nearly as much as you should," Valerie teased.

He laughed as she left his office, shaking his head and packing up his belongings. Valerie hadn't said anything he didn't know, but Gunnar was glad he heard it again anyway. Between Damon, Wendy, and now Valerie, he had many checks on his relationship with Tyler, and he appreciated them all. It'd been two weeks since that fateful session, and they were deep in the honeymoon period. Just hearing the beginnings of her name made a smile form on his face, and he stole many spare moments to leave her short messages on her voicemail telling her how much he missed her and how often he thought of her.

He was just about to go home when his phone rang again. Smiling, he set down his bag and answered.

"*Elskling*?"

"*Hallo, bror; synsk, ja*?"

"Inge!" Gunnar said, pleasantly surprised to hear her voice. "And no, I'm not psychic!"

"Oh? What's her name?"

Gunnar laughed. "What is this, 'Get-Into-Gunnar's-Business' Day?"

Inge laughed as well. "You may be the older brother, but I still have the right to look after you!" There was suddenly crying and arguing in the background. "Greta, please return the dolly to your sister. I'm trying to talk to Uncle Gun—" A sigh. "Singe wants to talk to you."

There was a few seconds of rustling. "Hi, Uncle Gunnar!" his oldest niece's sweet voice filtered through the phone.

"Hello, *søt* Singe," Gunnar greeted with a chuckle. "Are you sharing your toys with your sister like I taught you to do?"

"But *Uncle Gunnar*," the little girl whined, and Gunnar imagined her pale cheeks rosy with consternation and golden ringlets swaying vigorously as she shook her head. "She's been playing with it *all day* and it's *mine*!"

It was another thirty minutes before he calmed his niece down, and after a few words with his youngest niece Greta, Inge was back on the phone. "I have to come visit soon," Gunnar said, his heart aching to see his family again.

"I can ship them UPS. Wouldn't a pair of nieces be much better than a pair of basketball tickets for your birthday?"

Gunnar laughed. "That's awful, Inge!"

"So says the bachelor with no children!"

Gunnar's mind immediately went to Tyler and their first time together. There wouldn't be any news for two more weeks, but it was entirely possible he could be a father himself now.

"You're very quiet, *bror*."

"*Unnskylde*."

"What's her name?" Inge asked again, ignoring his apology. Gunnar smiled to himself, knowing Inge wouldn't have forgotten her earlier question. Before he could answer, another yell was heard in the background, followed by the deep voice of Igne's husband Roger chastising the children.

"Just when you were about to dish," Inge muttered, and Gunnar laughed.

"Don't worry, *elskling*. I'll tell you soon, okay?" he promised, thankful for the reprieve his nieces had unwittingly given him.

"You better! Or I'll tell *mor*, and you *know* how she gets!"

"That's dirty, *søster*," Gunnar accused, thinking of the grilling his mother would surely give him if she found out about Tyler from anyone *but* him.

"*Jeg er glad i deg*," Inge said on a laugh, blowing him a kiss.

"*Samme*," Gunnar replied and hung up the phone.

The brief conversation on the phone filled Gunnar with the need to see someone else dear to him, even if it was just to say goodnight. When he pulled into her driveway, there was another car there, one he didn't recognize. He kept his cool, though his immediate thought was it was Quincy trying to sniff around something that no longer belonged to him. Tyler had told him the man had been in regular contact with her since visiting her shop a month ago, and while it annoyed Gunnar greatly, he reminded himself Tyler was with *him* now. And if Gunnar had his way, she wouldn't be leaving, either.

Gunnar rang the doorbell and shoved his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. There was a hum of voices before the door opened, and his shoulders sagged in relief.

"Wendy," he said with a chuckle.

Wendy's look was knowing as she leaned against the doorframe. "Mm*hmm*..."

"Who is it, Wen?"

"Your man," Wendy said, her eyebrow arching as she looked at him. His grin had widened at Wendy's announcement. It sounded good, sounded *right*.

"My who?"

Wendy rolled her eyes and looked over her shoulder. "Gunnar, girl!"

Tyler appeared behind Wendy's shoulder, and the smile she gave him was shy. "Hi..."

"I wanted to see you," Gunnar said unapologetically, not caring Wendy was watching them avidly.

"Why?"

"*Jeg tenker på deg hele tiden, elskling.*"

"What?"

He grinned and lowered his voice, bending his head closer to them. "I can't stop thinking about you, baby."

Tyler ducked her head, and Wendy rolled her eyes again before stepping from the door and pushing Tyler towards him. Gunnar stepped inside the house and pulled Tyler into his arms, kissing the top of her head gently.

"I *just* got off the phone with you," Tyler murmured, but her arms went around his waist anyway.

"Not the same," Gunnar said quietly, closing his eyes as he breathed in her scent and let her arms take him to that place of complete serenity. He opened his eyes to see Wendy still watching them, and he smiled.

"Nice to see you, Wendy."

Wendy nodded. "You, too, Gunnar. How have things been?"

He looked down at the top of Tyler's head and smiled. "Wonderful."

"I hear you have a birthday coming up—"

"Wen!"

Gunnar smiled at Tyler's admonishing tone to her sister and he kissed Tyler's forehead. "Don't worry. I'll let you surprise me—"

"Who said I'm doin' anything for *you*?"

Gunnar merely tightened his arm around her and gave her a skeptical look. "You aren't?"

"Gunnar..."

"It's the big three-five after all."

"Ew!"

"That's what *I* said!" Gunnar said to Wendy's sound of disgust.

"You two are ridiculous!"

"So says the woman who has seven years before she worries about it!"

"Because five is *so* much closer—"

"Ladies," Gunnar said, chuckling a bit. "Two days, here. I've got you both beat!"

"And I'm not birthday gift enough for you?" Tyler said with a faux pout.

Gunnar cupped Tyler's face and gave her a sweet kiss to the lips. "You're all the birthday gift a man could ever want or need, *kjære*."

A throat cleared. "I need to go home," Wendy muttered, picking up her purse from the couch that was next to them. "Y'all make me wanna find Damon and give him some good lovin'..."

"Just as long as you don't make him late for work tomorrow morning," Gunnar teased, smiling down into Tyler's blushing face.

"Touché," Wendy said, eyeing the pair. She kissed Tyler's cheek and squeezed Gunnar's forearm. "Don't have *too* much fun you two!"

They remained standing there long after Wendy's car pulled out the driveway, his fingers sliding through her hair and her breath warm and wonderful against his chest.

"You told her about us," Gunnar said after a few moments.

Tyler snorted and burrowed her face further into his neck. "She figured it out."

"How so?"

"When I came home from that session...she was here waiting for me, concerned because I hadn't answered the phone. And then she just guessed from there."

He smiled and brought her even closer. "I loved you damn good, didn't I?"

"Your ego is showing, Mr. Daniels," Tyler muttered.

"Damn straight it is," Gunnar said, pulling back to stroke the sides of her face. "How can it not when I have you as my woman?"

Her brown eyes closed at his question, and her sigh was soft. "Your woman..."

"Yes," Gunnar said, dropping a kiss to her nose. "And I'm your man."

Her eyes opened. "I can't believe it."

"Why not?"

She shrugged and gave him a lopsided grin, smoothing her hands along his shoulders and collarbone. "If someone would've told me we would be together like this after our first meeting..."

He picked up one of her hands and kissed the pads of her fingertips. "Sometimes first impressions are overrated, don't you think?"

She merely smiled and hugged him again. "I missed you, too, Gunnar."

That was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to him. He kissed her temple and squeezed her. This woman had rocked his world and set it right, a world that had been off-kilter for so long he'd gotten used to it. His LA years had been doozies, full of experiences he could barely confess to a priest, and it took one painful, heart-wrenching experience to tell him enough was enough. Something had told him coming back to North Carolina was the first step in getting things back on track, and he thanked goodness for his patience, or else he would've missed out on the best thing that had ever happened to him.

"Are you staying?" she whispered after a few moments of silence.

"We both have work in the morning, *kjære*," Gunnar whispered.

"I know."

He pulled back and framed her face, brushing away tendrils of her hair from her temples and forehead. "Would you like me to stay?"

Tyler bit her lip and touched his chin with gentle fingertips. "We don't have to do anything, Gunnar..."

"And while I love making love with you, *kjære*," Gunnar began, dipping down his chin to nip at her fingers. "I get just as much pleasure from holding you too."

Her face brightened. "You don't mind?"

"Baby," Gunnar said frowning. "I love being with you. It's my favorite pastime, actually."

She giggled and tweaked his chin. "Silly!"

"It's true!" Gunnar said, nipping at her fingers again. "I count down the minutes at work for when I can see you next."

"You do?"

"I do..."

The smile Tyler gave him robbed all the breath from his body because of its beauty. It was scary and thrilling how quickly this woman had become so important to him, so central. Then again, his father had said when you meet that right person, you knew it instantly; it just took some people a long time to admit it and be comfortable in that knowledge. Gunnar Daniels, two days shy of his thirty-fifth birthday, didn't want to waste any more time than necessary, but he wouldn't rush Tyler, either. He was a patient man.

Gunnar was glaring at her, though the heat in his eyes had little to do with anger or the reflection of the candles that flickered from the cake the servers had just put in front of him. A ridiculous birthday song blared through the dining area, drowning out the televisions and other conversations throughout the pub. When the servers screamed "THIRTY-FIVE!", there was a loud cheer and applause, Wendy and Valerie doing very impressive whistles with the two fingers in the mouth. Gunnar let a slow smile form on his face and he kissed Tyler's cheek.

"You will pay for this," he promised.

"With interest, I hope," Tyler purred back.

Gunnar took a finger and swiped off a large glob of chocolate mousse before presenting it to her. Tyler took the finger in her mouth and swirled her tongue around it almost indecently, oblivious to the catcalls the rest of their party shouted at them, solely focused on the heady look in those gray eyes.

"A whole lot of interest," Gunnar agreed, taking the finger from her mouth and putting it in his before wagging his eyebrows briefly and starting to cut the cake.

Laughing silently, Tyler helped him pass out slices of cake, glad Gunnar had been such a good sport about it. She'd asked for Damon's help for what to do to celebrate Gunnar's birthday, and he'd suggested the pub. Tyler had agreed it should be a small thing, but Damon knew how much he abhorred the restaurant birthday celebrations, so, of course, Gunnar had to have one as well.

"So mean!" Tyler had said, noticing the evil gleam in Damon's eye.

"And yet, you're gonna do it, aren't you?" Damon said, seeing the matching gleam in hers.

So here it was on a Friday, with Gunnar, Tyler, Damon, Wendy, Valerie, and the new employee Victor sharing in the celebration of Gunnar's birthday. Everyone had much fun telling whatever stories he or she knew about Gunnar, or his or her own experiences with birthdays, recent and not so recent. Damon's birthday had been during the holiday season, which meant much drinking and slurred, off-key singing of Christmas carols. Gunnar had laughed as Wendy had regaled them all with the story of a drunken Damon hollering at the top of his lungs atop the roof as he pretended he was Santa Claus.

"I was acting out the scene! I *swear* Santa came that year—y'all can't tell me *nothin*'!" Damon said in his defense.

Wendy sucked her teeth. "I thought he was gonna fall and break his neck—!"

"I almost did," Damon admitted, and he pointed his fork to Gunnar. "You missed one hell of a party, Son!"

"I was in Norway visiting family," Gunnar said apologetically, nuzzling his nose against Tyler's temple. "To think I could've met you much earlier and under…livelier circumstances too!" he whispered for her ears alone.

Tyler had been thinking the same thing, and had squeezed his thigh underneath the table in agreement.

After everyone had her fill, Gunnar opened his presents. Damon and Wendy gave him an mp3 carrier for when he would go jogging since he hadn't had one. Valerie and Victor gifted him with a new book by an up and coming fitness guru who had new weight-lifting techniques they thought he would like. And Tyler gave him a box of Milky Ways from Sam's Club and a gift certificate to Soul Cuts—ten free haircuts.

"A woman after my own heart," he'd murmured right before expressing his gratitude with a kiss.

"That's lazy!" Damon had accused good-naturedly.

"It's sentimental," Wendy disagreed, hooking her arm through Damon's and leaning her head against his shoulder.

"I couldn't get away with a gift like that," Damon grumbled.

"No, but I'm not Gunnar, and you're not Tyler. What works for them may not work for us..."

"At least Gunnar will save some money—damn, it, woman! That hurt!"

Tyler laughed as Damon rubbed his side where her sister had pinched him, and Wendy rolled her eyes dramatically.

"There's something to be said for *some* body fat, dearest," Wendy said, not the least bit apologetic.

"Perish the thought!" Valerie said. "Body fat on *Damon Wilkes*? The world would surely come to an end!"

"Shut up, woman!" Damon said, scowling at them both.

Gunnar laughed and brought Tyler closer, running his lips against her temple. "This was a great party. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome," she replied, squeezing his thigh again. She wouldn't admit she was growing slightly uncomfortable with the topic. Out of all the people at the table, she was the least in shape, and she suddenly felt conspicuous. It was silly to feel that way, and she knew it, but she couldn't help but feel lacking at a table full of people who would look very much at home on a magazine cover or catwalk.

"I'm going to go to the bathroom," Gunnar whispered, having no idea of the thoughts whirring through her head. She gave a nod and smiled when he kissed her temple before sliding out the booth.

"You're good for him."

The pronouncement had come from Valerie, who was grinning at her broadly. Tyler smiled back and blushed. "I try to be."

"Try," Wendy scoffed. "My sister is far too modest for her own good. Any man would be lucky to have her."

"You're no piece of chopped liver, either, baby," Damon said, nipping at Wendy's cheekbone. Wendy giggled and turned her head to give her boyfriend a quick kiss to the lips.

"Sickening," Valerie muttered, and Tyler laughed. "I'm surrounded by happy couples. Someone shoot me!"

"Agreed!" Victor said good-naturedly. Though Tyler had just met him, she thought him a cool person.

"Whatever!" Damon exclaimed. "Just 'cause your girl had to go out of town this week, don't be all bitter and shit!"

Valerie's girlfriend worked for a marketing firm, which made her travel through the Carolinas and Virginia with some frequency.

Valerie pouted. "You're making me miss her though."

"And *you*," Damon said, pointing to Victor, "just about every girl in here is checkin' you out, so I don't wanna hear it!"

Victor shrugged, neither confirming nor denying Damon's allegation, though he did flash a smile to a pretty blonde standing at the bar.

"I'm used to them by now," Tyler said. "But I empathize completely."

"And now *you* can't talk, because you have your own man now!" Wendy declared.

Tyler blushed and looked at her hands. It was odd to be taken, yet she couldn't help the flush she felt at the realization or the butterflies of happiness that took over her belly whenever she thought of him. Gunnar had the ability to make her feel like the only woman in the world, the only woman who had ever been deemed beautiful and perfect. She was bowled over by the fact it hadn't taken her long to fall completely in love with him, and she'd had the desperate need to get in touch with her mother to ask for advice. She would know about speedy love stories, since she'd been a part of one.

"Oh, no, she *di'n't*!"

"Damn..."

Wendy's and Damon's simultaneous exclamations made her look up to see what the fuss was about. What she hadn't been prepared to see was a buxom, curly-haired brunette with her hand in Gunnar's hair and her mouth fused with his. Nor had she been prepared to see Gunnar's hand cup the woman's face in return. Tyler felt as if all the wind had been knocked out of her, and that malignant thought of *Not again!* traipsed through her mind.

"Tyler—"

Tyler didn't look anyone, simply grabbed her purse and jacket as she blinked furiously to stave off her tears. "Could you take me home, please?"

"Tyler..."

Her back went rigid as Gunnar's voice reached her ears. She ignored him. "Damon and Wendy, please?"

"Tyler, let me explain—"

She held up a hand to make him stop talking. She didn't think she could handle listening to what he had to say, not when the image of him in a heated lip-lock was firmly branded into her brain.

"We have to talk," Gunnar said firmly. She still couldn't look at him. "She means nothing to me."

"I need to go home," Tyler repeated. Maybe after she had a few hours to herself she could be more sane and rational about what she'd just seen, but right now, all she knew was someone else had dared to put her hands on him, and it appeared he had enjoyed it.

"I'll take you home."

"It's your party—"

"Do not fight me on this, Tyler. I'll take you home, but we have to talk, and we *will* talk." His tone was firm.

Tyler clenched her jaw before she flashed a smile to the others. She kissed Wendy and Damon on the cheek and shook Valerie's and Victor's hand before walking out of the restaurant, knowing Gunnar was following. She refused to speak to him, but did say her thanks when he opened the door for her.

The drive was silent and tense. Tyler didn't look at him, though she felt his glances whenever they stopped at red lights. In her mind's eye, all she could see was Gunnar kissing that woman, his hand cupping her face, which was the very expression of lust. Tyler's heart constricted painfully. She didn't think he'd been cheating on her while they had been together, but she'd thought she and Quincy were going to be together forever; and just as she'd begun to entertain the same thoughts about her and Gunnar, this had happened.

She sat straighter when they reached her street, but instead of getting in the left lane to turn, Gunnar remained in the current lane.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

It was his turn to give the silent treatment, his jaw clenched and his hands tightening on the steering wheel.

"Gunnar—"

The engine revved as he put his foot on the gas, the red light turning green and Gunnar going straight. Tyler pursed her lips, now knowing they were going to his house instead. Rolling her eyes, Tyler looked out the window again, irritated that she wouldn't be able to sulk and bemoan her existence in the privacy of her own home.

"I thought you were taking me home."

"I am," Gunnar said, and fell back to silence.

Tyler couldn't help her heart from fluttering at that. She didn't ask him to explain further, though, and her eyes stung with tears. She was so confused, hurt. She didn't know what to think or how to feel anymore.

Gunnar pulled into his driveway and turned off the Jeep. Both of them sat there, neither making a move.

"Ty—"

That did have her reaching for her seatbelt, and she got out the vehicle. She heard Gunnar disembark and slam the door behind her.

"Where are you going?"

Tyler had just reached his mailbox and was about to go left down the street, towards his neighborhood's entrance. "Home!"

"Tyler Marie Carver!"

No this brawny Norwegian did not—*!* "*Excuse you*!"

"No, Tyler," Gunnar said, his eyes flint-like in the streetlight as he approached her. She'd backed up slightly, but his hand was quick as he yanked her to him. Her traitorous body responded by molding itself to him. She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing and not crying, especially when he cupped her face.

Just as he had that woman's.

"Please..."

She didn't know what she was asking. Maybe reassurance she was blowing things out of proportion, maybe for him to make this breakup as painless as possible. At least he would do it to her face instead of over the phone, right?

"It meant nothing to me, Tyler. Do you believe that?"

Deep down she did, or else she wouldn't have let him take her to his house. Still, the wound was too fresh, and she would need time to patch it up.

"I'm tired, Gunnar," she murmured.

He nodded, his thumb light as it drifted over her cheek. "All right."

He grasped her elbow and they walked to his door, Gunnar unlocking the door without releasing her, as if afraid she'd go tearing for the street again. He led her upstairs, but instead of taking her to his bedroom, he went into a guest room down the hall from it. Tyler stood there as he left briefly and returned with fresh linens, and watched as he re-made the bed. He left again and returned with some bedclothes for her to wear, placing them on the foot of the bed. Her eyes began to sting again, and she touched by his care and willingness to give her space. Just before he went to his own room for the night, he approached her, shoving his hands in his jeans pockets instead of touching her like she knew he wanted, knew she wanted.

"Have a good rest, Tyler. Hopefully tomorrow you'll be willing to talk and listen to my side of things."

She didn't say anything, and he waited a beat before sighing and leaving the room, closing the door softly behind him.

Only then did she allow herself to sink on the floor and sob.

FIFTEEN

Tyler woke up the next morning with a headache and dry eyes. She had, at some point, made it to the bed, but she was so cold despite the fact it was nearing April in North Carolina. Knowing Gunnar was just down the hall added to her chill, and she slapped her forehead repeatedly.

What an idiot!

Why did she have to indulge her melodramatic side last night? The dinner had been going so well, and all it had taken was one kiss from some floozy for her to have it in her head Gunnar was turning her in for the sex kitten! Yes, the kiss had looked intimate, but the early morning had brought with it clarity, common sense, and a swift kick to her behind. She needed to *stop* looking for cracks in the veneers, or worse, putting them in, for it would only leave her miserable and alone. And if she really wanted to be honest with herself, and she should, it had less to do with Gunnar and the kiss and more about her and the fear that eventually he *would* find someone else and give that someone a kiss that *would* mean something. She was waiting for the proverbial shoe to drop; her experience with Quincy, despite the fact she no longer had any real romantic feelings for him, had left her so shaken and gun-shy that she couldn't help but be on her guard, couldn't completely surrender her heart to a man who seemed willing to protect it.

Pursing her lips, Tyler got out of bed, hiking up the shorts she wore as they were a little loose on her, and shoving up the sleeves of the too-big sweatshirt only for them to fall back over her hands again. She found her bra and slipped it on, feeling a little weird to go flopping around Gunnar's house despite the fact they had been intimate. She didn't even bother to run a self-conscious hand through her unruly hair, her only mission to find Gunnar and apologize for overreaction.

She went to his room, the carpet soft underneath her sock-covered feet, and knocked on his door.

"Gunnar?"

There was no answer and she knocked again. "Gunnar?"

Silence.

Biting her lip, Tyler opened the door to see his bed unmade but empty. She listened for sounds of him in his bathroom, but nothing caught her attention. Her face falling a little, Tyler went downstairs, but didn't see him anywhere. She peeked out one of the windows in the living room and saw his Jeep was there, so she figured he had to be somewhere. Her last stop was the home gym, but as before, it was empty.

"Where is he?" Tyler asked herself, sitting on the treadmill's conveyor belt. Why didn't he leave her a note or something? She felt restless, wanting to see him, to talk to him, to beg for his forgiveness. Maybe he'd done some thinking too. Maybe this discussion...

"No," Tyler said, standing and looking around the room. She needed to distract herself, and since it was a Saturday...

A tiny part of her thought it was a bad idea to do this, but she got on the treadmill and turned it on anyway. She started easy, merely walking, but soon she picked up the pace. At first she winced at the impact of hitting the belt without her sneakers to cushion it, but soon she ignored the pain and started to go even faster. She was mindless as she ran, her mind wondering what she would say to Gunnar once she saw him, wondering what he would say to her, wondering who that woman was who had the audacity to kiss him. She thought about what had made her act so irrationally and why she still hadn't fully gotten over the hurt she'd harbored for the past six years. She thought about her mother and her father, and was afraid of ending up like them—in love, but not able to be together. Internal forces were sometimes worse than external ones, after all, and if she couldn't break though hers, she could lose Gunnar forever. She ran and ran, not caring that spots were starting to form in her vision or that her mouth was overly dry. She ran until her calves burned, a stitch formed in her side, and her heart beat frantically into her chest. She ran until she couldn't anymore, and when she finally turned off the treadmill, she collapsed onto the belt and sobbed.

She'd become one of those women on trash television, on soap operas, the ones who saw first, spouted off at the mouth, and asked questions later. She and her clients at the shop would berate these women for jumping to conclusions, and here she was, doing the same thing. At least she hadn't created a scene, but she hadn't let Gunnar explain.

Was it too late?

She hated Quincy. She hated herself more. Her scabbed heart hadn't fully healed yet because she kept picking at it, and wasn't willing to let anyone else

heal it for her. She was willing now, however, so very willing, but it wasn't fair to Gunnar. He deserved someone whole, not patched together like she was.

"I'm sorry," she croaked into the silent room. She rested against the bar of the treadmill, raising her knees to her chest and resting her forehead atop them. "I'm so sorry…"

She would do better, she vowed to herself. She would be a better girlfriend, the kind he deserved. Someone who was beautiful and put together and confident. She would work on all of those things. She would cast off the doubt Quincy had planted inside of her and others had nurtured until she fed it to herself. She would—

"Tyler!"

His voice sounded frantic, but she could barely call to him. She felt lightheaded and her throat was so very raw. She began rocking and whispering, "I'm here…I'm here…I'm sorry…"

"Tyler!"

The panic and relief she heard made another round of tears stream down her cheeks. Suddenly, she was in his arms, his lap, and was being rocked as he whispered in soft tones, vacillating between English and Norwegian. Tyler clutched at his sweaty tank.

"I'm sorry," she whispered again. "I'll do better. I love you. I'm sorry—"

"Shh," Gunnar said, holding her so tight she could barely breathe. He wiped the sweat from her hairline and the tears from her cheeks. "Shh…"

"I swear, Gunnar. I'll be good for you. I'll do better—"

"Shut up, Tyler," Gunnar said firmly, setting her on the treadmill before standing. He helped her to a standing position, and to her horror, her legs started to give out.

"I'm—"

He kissed her mouth hard. "Shut up."

To her shock, he lifted her in his arms and carried her all the way up to his bedroom. He smelled of perspiration and mountains as usual, and it calmed her. He laid her gently on the bed before climbing in next to her, his fingers tender on her chin as he forced her to look into his eyes.

"Now," he said after a few moments, his voice hushed and caring. "Are we ready to talk?"

She nodded, sniffling as more tears slipped from her eyes. Gunnar used his thumb to brush them away.

"Mind if I go first?"

She shook her head.

"The woman last night…her name is Kaci. I had been dating her before we met. In fact, that first time you came to the gym, I was supposed to have a date with her; but Kaci had changed plans so many times I'd become irritated, and I took it out on you."

Tyler frowned, her dislike for the nameless woman who now had a name growing ever more.

"I'd broken it off that very night, too, because I couldn't deal with the drama…and because I'd met someone else who had irritated me just as much, but her irritation wasn't as bothersome as Kaci's."

Gunnar winked at her, and she ducked her eyes briefly. His thumbs still stroked her cheek, though few tears fell now. His voice and touch calmed her immensely.

"Turns out, I would grow to really like this new woman…*really* like her. Like her more than I had liked anyone in a while, actually. Then, a few weeks into our acquaintance, some man came into her barbershop. I didn't know who he was, but I felt an immediate dislike for him, especially since the woman who had been so sassy and confident during our previous meetings suddenly turned inward and timid when he walked inside. I didn't like the change he'd caused in her, and I had wanted to throw him out to get the first woman back. Then we had an argument, the woman and I, and for a few weeks, we didn't see each other. In my missing her and loneliness, I called Kaci again, which turned out to be an even bigger mistake than the first time I had dated her.

"But what really sealed the deal for me was when I came over the new woman's house because I heard the pain in her voice over the answering machine, the pain caused by the man who had entered her barbershop weeks ago, the man who had sucked up all her liveliness and spirit. Turns out I wasn't the only one who had turned to an old flame for comfort; but whereas I was only annoyed, this woman had been hurt. Old wounds had been opened, and she needed help closing them. I knew I could do that for her, if only she'd let me."

"Gun—"

He shook his head, pressing his thumb on her lips. He didn't speak immediately, merely drifted the digit over her mouth, the corners of it, her chin. Tyler snuggled into his touch, and Gunnar let out a low breath.

"I was falling in love with this woman. Completely and totally in love, and to my surprise and mild consternation, she couldn't see it. In fact, she refused to see it. She also refused to own up to the fact she was falling in love with me as well."

The tears that had stopped started again, and her shoulders shook with her sobs.

"When we finally made that step to the next level, I had been ecstatic. We were finally the couple we should've been weeks ago, and I had thought there would be smooth sailing. Of course, I'd forgotten all about the ghosts that hovered around us, although I had thought mine had gone away for good. But she hadn't, and she'd kissed me, as if trying to reclaim me, but to no avail."

"G—"

Another firm press of his thumb to her lips. "My love saw, *min kjære*, and the look of utter heartbreak in her eyes caused my own heart to break. I was also angry Kaci had kissed me, and angrier I hadn't reacted quickly enough to get her to stop.

"My heart broke even further when my woman had refused to talk to me; but I reminded myself that she hadn't broken up with me, so I had to give her time. It was so hard to have her sleep down the hall when she should've been in my arms. And this morning, I checked in on her, gave her a sweet kiss to her forehead, before going off on my run. Her sigh and whisper of my name had given me hope, so while I ran, I thought of the speech I would tell her, to reassure her she had nothing to fear from me."

She buried her face in the pillow, her shame increasing. He'd checked in on her and hadn't even realized it. In her slumber, her heart had been completely honest, and the knowledge stunned and scared her further.

"Tyler," Gunnar whispered, his mouth brushing against her temple. "When I came in and didn't see you, I panicked. I was scared you'd left. I was all ready to call Damon and Wendy even. Then I came down to the gym and saw you sobbing on the treadmill, saw all the sweat and the fact the treadmill was on...you could've hurt yourself! You didn't have any water, you probably didn't even stretch!"

"Gunnar..."

"But then you were babbling, telling me you loved me...*min kjære*, the happiness I felt faded to sadness because you sounded so desperate, almost begging me to love you back. You never have to beg for my love, darling. I give it freely and completely."

"Oh..."

"I am not Quincy Lucas, Tyler," Gunnar said firmly, cupping her face with soft hands so she would look into his eyes. His face was blurry from her tears, but she met his gaze as best she could. "Stop thinking I would *ever* treat you as callously as he did. I know a beautiful thing when I see it, and I'll be damned if I lose it...lose *you*."

Tyler couldn't breathe, so surprised by what he'd just told her. She couldn't help it. She had to have confirmation. "Really?"

His smile was almost amused, and he pressed his nose against hers. "Really, *min kjære. Jeg elsker deg*, Tyler. I love you completely."

"But I still haven't reached your goal yet; I have all this weight to lose! Oh, Gunnar, how would it look if you had a fat slob on your arm when you're a former model and a gym owner! I need to get right so—"

"What did I just say?" Gunnar said, his eyes growing a little cold. He shook her head gently. "Who am I, Tyler?"

She frowned. "Gunnar."

"Gunnar. Not Quincy. Not the boy from eighth grade. Not all the other idiots you've met. I may not be the smartest man on the planet, but I'm not the

stupidest, either, certainly not stupid enough to let you go, or have people say things that aren't true about you, *especially* you, Tyler."

Tyler's eyes fluttered closed, more tears slipping out, but she shifted closer to him. She didn't want to hear any more. She just wanted him. "Hold me, Gunnar?" she asked on a breath. "Please?"

"You never have to ask, *min kjære*," Gunnar whispered in response, bringing her so close air couldn't separate them. "Never."

☼

Tyler had fallen asleep, her exhaustion and emotional weight forcing her to slumber, but Gunnar couldn't. He alternated between staring at her and kissing her forehead and cheeks, his hands unhurried as they caressed her body. Finding Tyler at the treadmill scared him more than he realized, and her doubt even more. She never even mentioned Kaci when she talked to him, putting all the blame on herself. His Tyler, his *elskling*...though he wasn't Quincy, she still was Tyler; and even if she did lose all the weight and then some, none of the issues she was dealing with would really go away.

"How can I convince you, *min kjære*?" he asked quietly into the room. If she stopped doing their sessions, he wouldn't be upset in the least. He couldn't watch her destroy herself for some unattainable, cosmetic goal. Gunnar didn't think she would ever become society-accepted slim; that just wasn't in her build. Tyler was a strong woman; there was nothing wrong with her curves and strength, either.

Unwittingly, his mind drifted back to his time to LA...to the last two years of it. He'd fallen in love with Aurora, a fellow model, and a phenom. Newly arrived from Brazil, she was an exotic mix of European, African, and Native ancestry with curves that seemed to go on forever, yet a slight frame that made her every fashion designer's and magazine editor's wet dream. When he'd met her for a gig, it had been lust at first sight. They had been fully clothed too—Oscar de la Renta formalwear for a *Vogue* spread. Seeing the chemistry emanating between the two, her agent and his had booked them for as many gigs together as possible. She'd been a young girl, so her vulnerability had also spoken to him, and he'd done his best to help her navigate the unforgiving waters of modeling. They also had fallen in love and were rarely ever apart. Soon, they had been tabloid fodder, and her star rose ever faster. She'd become an international sensation, and in effect, she'd left him behind. He hadn't been jealous, more concerned, for everyone knew female models were the ones with the memorable names. But the fact she was such a sweet girl in such a ruthless industry had made him wary.

And with good reason.

The more popular Aurora had become, the more pressures came her way, especially about her weight. She was never slim enough, never toned enough,

never fit enough. She'd become an exercise addict, and along with that, a drug addict. From weight-loss pills to cocaine to ecstasy, Aurora had tried anything that would help her lose weight and keep it lost. Gunnar had done some drugs recreationally; but when Aurora had begun taking them as if they were water, he'd stopped and tried to get her to stop too.

She hadn't listened.

It was on a fateful, abnormally cold day in January when, after Aurora had refused to return any of his phone calls, did he go to her condo in Santa Monica to check in on her. He'd come into her condo, yelling her name, but it was her soft moan from her bathroom in her bedroom that had had Gunnar's heart clenching and dread cloaking his body.

There had been a pool of blood coming from her head, and her eyes were glazed. There had been a needle stuck grotesquely in the bend of her arm, a bottle of weight-loss pills opened and empty with the oblong pills spilled from it, and her shower was still running—nothing but a skimpy towel covered her frame. Gunnar had made a shaky call to 911, and cradled Aurora, crying and promising her the ambulance would come soon.

It had, but by then it had been too late.

He'd blown off his gigs and went to Norway to regroup, his mother babying him for the first time in years. He'd needed it, too, knowing had he not had the anchor his mother provided, he could've done something very destructive to himself or someone else. It had been his father who'd suggested opening a gym, too, considering the way Aurora had died. Gunnar could teach people how to lose weight safely and effectively.

He couldn't honestly say what had possessed him to move back to North Carolina, especially since all of his family had moved away from it, but he did know he couldn't go back to LA...not right then. Now, as he held Tyler in his arms and kissed her forehead once more, he realized the universe had had something bigger in mind for him before he'd even known.

"You're beautiful just the way you are, *elskling*," he murmured against her skin. "Please believe me..."

With one last kiss to her head, Gunnar slipped out of bed and went downstairs, trying to find something to prepare for dinner. He decided on baked salmon with penne pasta in a light pesto sauce and Italian bread he'd purchased on a whim. He also put a pot on the stove to boil water so he could make homemade sweet iced tea for Tyler. He'd just finished seasoning the fish when his phone rang, and he answered it quickly so not to disturb Tyler.

"Hello?"

"*Bror*, when can you come to LA?"

"I'm fine, thanks for asking," Gunnar teased. He turned off the eye underneath the boiling water and poured sugar and tea bags into it. He would let it sit for a few minutes so it could steep.

Inge huffed. "Hello, Gunnar, how are you this fine Saturday? Used to being thirty-five yet?"

Gunnar grinned a little but sighed, his mind thinking over the past twenty-four hours, especially the last couple. "I thought about Aurora today."

Inge sucked in a breath. "Good Lord, Gunnar, why? What happened? It's not her anniversary yet, is it? I thought she died in September."

"She did, but she came to mind because of..."

"Yes?" Inge prodded, when Gunnar didn't speak up for a few seconds."

Gunnar preheated the oven before going to sit at the kitchen table. "Remember the last time you called? You asked for a name. Well, it's Tyler..."

He told his sister everything, though he gave abridged versions for some parts of the story. When Gunnar finished, Inge intoned lowly into the phone.

"I have to meet my future sister-in-law."

"Inge!"

"Gunnar, it's pretty much a done deal," she said matter-of-factly. "And the reason I called you in the first place was so you could come to the anniversary party we're throwing for the agency. Last weekend in August. Bring her. I'd like to meet her."

Gunnar shook his head. Inge could be downright bossy when she wanted to be. "And what if she says no?"

"Then let her talk to me. I'm very good at the art of persuasion."

"*Det er utpressing*," Gunnar muttered.

"Persuasion...black mail...is there a difference?" Inge asked sweetly.

"With you, not really..."

"Glad you've come to terms with that fact," Inge said, then switched gears, "has she ever thought of modeling? The plus-size market is booming, and the more 'real' the woman looks, the better..."

"Tyler is definitely not a model," Gunnar said. "She's painfully shy.

"She could pose with you—oh! Speaking *of*, a new client of mine was flipping through old portfolios, and he has a concept you would be *perfect* for—"

"Inge..."

"I know you 'quit'," Inge said, and he could imagine her putting "quit" in air quotes, "but the hot, buff, Nordic look is back in, though to be fair, it's never really been *out*—"

"No."

She sighed. "Fine, I'll drop it for now, but we'll talk about it when you get here. It's still in the planning stages. He didn't foresee a launch time before October anyway." Only his sister could turn a personal call into business and vice-versa.

"The answer will stay the same."

"Remember my skills at persuasion."

"Blackmail."

"Semantics. Okay, I gotta go, we'll chat later, and I want to talk to Tyler also! She sounds amazing, Gunnar. I'm very happy for you, and I'm sure *mor* and *pappa* will feel the same. Tell them before they hear it from me!"

"Yes, *søster*. I love you."

"*Samme*," she replied, then disconnected.

He spent the next thirty minutes preparing the dinner, the salmon baking while he cooked the pasta and prepped the bread to go into the oven right before they were ready to eat. He then put the steeped tea into a pitcher and put the pitcher in the freezer to accelerate the cooling. His sister liked Tyler, perhaps for the simple fact he liked her, but since it was rare for him to tell his family about a woman he was dating unless he was serious about her, Inge knew just how significant Tyler would be to his life. And the LA trip…he didn't know if he wanted to put her in that environment, honestly. The people there could be very shallow and brutal when they wanted to be, but Inge and Roger's agency was among the most fair and compassionate in the business, which was why it had done so well.

When Tyler woke up, it was close to five in the afternoon. She shuffled into the kitchen with a shy expression, and Gunnar stood up straight, pulling away from the refrigerator. They stood there staring at each other for a moment before Gunnar closed the refrigerator door and approached her. He cupped her face, and she gave him a small smile that he returned.

"Hungry?" he asked softly.

She nodded, moving closer to him and nipping at his bottom lip. "Yes."

He groaned softly, wrapping his arms tight around her and kissing her lips gently. "I love you, Tyler."

She tucked her face into his neck. "It's so nice to hear you say that."

"I'll always say it and mean it, *elskling*," Gunnar vowed, sliding his fingers into her hair. "Don't doubt me or us, okay?"

"I'm sorry…"

He shushed her apology with a kiss to her temple. "No more apologies. Come, let me feed you."

Tyler pulled back and smoothed her hands down his torso. Gunnar sucked in a breath at the awe and reverence in her eyes, and couldn't muffle his groan when her mouth latched onto a nipple through his shirt.

"Tyler…"

"You're so damn beautiful, Gunnar," she whispered, his body jumping at the contact from her soft lips as she spoke. "I can't believe you're with me."

"There's no place I'd rather be, *kjære*," he returned, pulling up her face so his mouth could cover hers. He would've been content to kiss her and more had it not been for the smell of finished salmon penetrating his lust-filled senses. He pulled back reluctantly and tapped his index finger against her nose before seeing to their meal.

Tyler assisted by setting the table, and he smiled when her face brightened when he told her he had tea in the freezer.

"You made me tea," she gasped, pulling out the chilled pitcher and hugging it. "*Mmm*, I really love you now!"

Gunnar chuckled, covering the salmon in foil to keep it warm as he toasted the Italian bread. He leaned against the counter next to the stove and watched Tyler pour the drinks. Damn it all, but she belonged here, in his house, in his life. His eyes drifted to her flat tummy, a little sad at the knowledge she wasn't with child, having found out the news a few days ago, but he knew they both weren't *really* ready for one. Suddenly, he was glad for Inge's invite. He wanted Inge to meet Tyler, wanted Tyler to meet his family. He knew hers and adored Wendy and Damon; he wanted Tyler to get to know the people who helped shape him to become the person he was now.

"You okay, babe?"

Gunnar blinked, and saw Tyler's concerned gaze as she put the pitcher into the refrigerator. He went to her and kissed her cheek.

"My sister invited us to LA."

"*Us*?"

"Yes. I told her about you. She likes you and wants to meet you. It's an anniversary party for her talent agency."

Tyler took a deep breath and frowned. "LA...I don't know, babe..."

"You don't have to give an answer now," Gunnar said, squeezing her a little. "Just think about it, okay? It's the first weekend in August."

She nodded, and he kissed her temple before patting her behind and telling her to sit so they could eat.

He fixed both their plates and set them down on the placemats Tyler had set on the table. They held hands as Tyler said the blessing, and then started to enjoy Gunnar's culinary efforts. Gunnar kept up a steady stream of conversation, telling Tyler stories about Inge and their childhood in an effort to warm her to the idea of meeting her. She seemed to enjoy his tales, and he was glad to see the light back in her eyes and the smile on her face.

Inge was right. It definitely was a done deal. Now all he had to do was convince Tyler of the same.

SIXTEEN

"Dinner at our house. Six sharp. Tell Tyler since I know she's with you, seeing as when we called the house and the cell all we got were recordings..."

Gunnar bristled at Damon's knowing tone, looking behind him where Tyler was still sleeping, tangled in his sheets. It was seven in the morning, and the only reason why Gunnar wasn't upset by Damon's early call was because he was about to get ready for his run anyway. "You think you know everything," he muttered.

"Tell me I'm wrong," Damon challenged. Gunnar remained quiet, cursing silently. "That's what I thought. So everything worked out, then? No dramatic episodes? Things breaking? Curses hurled? Black eyes?"

"*Black eyes*?"

"Former girlfriend. Never date a boxer," Damon said, and Gunnar heard the shudder in his voice. "Anyway. Come. It's chill, but maybe you should take Tyler home for a change of clothes, yeah?"

"I hate you."

"Liar. And if you did, would suck for you, wouldn't it?"

"Why's that?"

"Six sharp," Damon repeated, then told him bye before hanging up. Gunnar flipped his cell phone closed and set it on the nightstand, then turned and pressed a kiss on Tyler's bare shoulder blade. Her skin was so soft and smooth, and he couldn't help running his cheek against it. Tyler shifted slightly, but hugged the pillow and settled back into slumber. Gunnar wondered what was wrong with him for leaving her nude and tempting in his bed. They'd made slow love until well into the night, both of them needing the affirmation after their first test as a couple. He was very glad Tyler had been willing to listen, and he learned he needed to give her some space during the beginning stages of her anger or frustration. He planned to make those instances very rare.

He planted one last light kiss to the nape of her neck before putting on his running gear and heading out for his jog.

It was already a little too warm for comfort, so he cut his jog a half-mile short. When he came back into his home, he saw Tyler in the kitchen, wearing his T-shirt and her panties as she prepared breakfast. The sight made him hungry, all right, just not for anything on the stove or in the oven.

She must have felt his presence, for she turned to him and gave him a large smile. "Good morning!"

"Definitely better than yesterday's."

She blushed and ducked her head. "I behaved like a jealous idiot yesterday, Gunnar. I'm so ashamed of myself…"

"I can't blame you," Gunnar said, giving her a lackadaisical shrug while approaching her. "If I had seen Quincy planting one on you, even with me knowing you didn't love him anymore, he would've had broken limbs and I would've been in jail."

"Gunnar!"

He wrapped his arms around her and nipped her shoulder. "It's truth, Tyler, and you know that's all I'll ever tell you, *kjære*."

She tilted her head up and gave him a quick kiss. "Better be."

He chuckled and kissed her again. "What's for breakfast?"

"Cheese grits, bacon, scrambled eggs with cheese, and buttermilk biscuits from scratch."

"So much for that diet, huh?" he teased, pressing his hands into her tummy.

"Hush your mouth! This is my 'last hurrah' breakfast that you will partake with me," Tyler said. "And go wash. You smell like a five-mile run!"

"Actually only four and a half. It's already hot outside." He nipped the curve of her ear, then frowned as the beginning of her statement finally seeped into his brain. "And what do you mean, 'last hurrah'?"

"I'm going to start working harder to get in shape so I can be ready by August."

"What?"

"Your sister's party? If I'm gonna go, I'm not goin' a hot mess—"

"You *aren't* a hot mess—!"

"Compared to people in California I am!"

"Tyler," he said with warning, squeezing her again. "Don't. You're doing fine. You've already lost ten pounds. If you lose too much too quickly, it can be dangerous—"

"But people do it in Hollywood all the time—"

"No, Tyler," Gunnar said, his tone firm and final. "We're not changing a thing. You're going to do this the right way or you're going to find yourself another trainer."

She shrunk away from him after the declaration, and he cupped her cheek in his hand. "Tyler, I'm sorry if I sound harsh, but I mean it. It's the safe way or

no way. You're perfect just the way you are, though I know for health reasons you may have to lose a few more pounds, but aesthetically, you definitely have nothing to worry about in that department, okay?"

She didn't answer him right away, stirring the grits and checking the biscuits. He held her tighter, trying to infuse his love and his truth into his embrace. "I love you, Tyler, everything about you. Everything about you is gorgeous and wonderful. I'm proud of you, proud you're my woman and proud to be your man, okay, *kjære*?"

She nodded and kissed him. "Go wash."

He laughed and kissed her once more before doing her bidding. When he returned the aroma of a bona fide Southern breakfast filled his nostrils, and Tyler was just putting a basketful of fluffy, golden brown biscuits in the center of the kitchen table.

"Baby, you know you're going to have to marry me now," Gunnar said, mostly serious.

Tyler's eyes went wide before she laughed and shook her head. "What for, Mr. Health-nut? It's not like you're gonna eat this on the regular anyway!"

"But four times a month," Gunnar whined, coming up behind her and nibbling at her neck and shoulder. He'd matched her attire and only wore pajama pants and a tank. It would be a chill day today.

"Gunnar, stop! I am *not* for breakfast!"

"Don't make me challenge that statement, Tyler," he murmured, moving his hands to cup her breasts and thrum his thumbs against her nipples. They hardened instantly and she moaned. Gunnar thought she had the world's most perfect breasts; and the more he caressed them, the more he wanted to feast on them instead of the wonderful breakfast Tyler had made.

"Boy! For real, now! The food's gettin' cold."

"I disagree," Gunnar said, moving his hand underneath her panties and finding the hot, wet core of her. "Nothin' cold about this, Tyler."

She groaned and gripped the chair. "Gunnar..."

Gunnar moved behind her and reached over her shoulder with his free hand to grab a biscuit. He bit into it. "So good, baby," he said with his mouth full, even as he shoved her panties down her legs. "Here, have some."

He placed the biscuit to her mouth and she took a bite. She moaned, but Gunnar knew it was more because he'd slipped two fingers inside of her than from the buttermilk deliciousness of the bread.

"Gunn..." she sighed, rocking her hips against his fingers.

Gunnar finished the biscuit and pushed down his pajama bottoms, brushing the head of his length against her swollen nether lips. "Want more?" he asked, teasing her.

"Yes," she said, and he was about to enter her victoriously before he spied her grabbing another biscuit from the basket. Gunnar laughed, hiding his face into Tyler's back and feeling her own body shake with her muffled giggles.

They were still laughing when Gunnar pulled out his fingers surged his manhood inside her anyway, and Tyler's laughter gave way to a guttural moan.

"Fuck, Gunnar," she gasped, the partially eaten biscuit falling back onto the plate when her hand opened wide from surprise and pleasure.

"Good, isn't it?" Gunnar asked confidently, picking up the biscuit and placing a strip of bacon on it from the paper-toweled saucer next to the biscuit basket. He'd been stroking slowly in and out of her the entire time, his essence-slicked fingers dragging up her shirt so he could see and tweak her bare nipples. "You make the best breakfast, *elskling*."

"Gunnar!"

After he finished that biscuit, Gunnar brought Tyler up and flush against him. He pulled back the seat and sat in it, not breaking their intimate contact. Tyler groaned at the new sensation, and Gunnar bit her shoulder.

"Eat, baby," Gunnar said, "so your food won't get cold."

"*Mmm*..." Her eyes were closed and her skin was damp. She reached behind his head and gripped the back of the chair while the other braced against the edge of the table as she worked her hips to get the maximum stroke out of him.

Gunnar grinned, holding her hips and lifting her up and down on his member. He bent his head and latched onto the chocolate peak of her left breast, and she whimpered again. He began thrusting faster, and her nipple fell out his mouth, but he just nipped and licked at the curve of her breast, moving until he reached underneath her arm.

"Gunnar...baby..." she began to pant.

"Are you close for me, *kjære*?"

"Yes!" Gunnar brought her back against him so he could kiss her. One hand continued to lift her while the other inserted itself between her legs and danced over the slick bundle of nerves above where they were joined.

"Come for me," Gunnar whispered against her lips. "Come for me, baby."

She looked deep into his eyes and gave him a sweet smile. "You come for me too."

He bucked into her hard, causing her breasts to jiggle, and he erupted inside her at the same time she drenched his lap. They both sagged heavily in the chair, kissing each other lazily. Gunnar's hands moved along her torso, cupping her breasts, her belly, her center.

"Well," Gunnar said, nibbling Tyler's upper lip briefly. "I certainly enjoyed my breakfast."

Tyler laughed heartily and gave him a large hug, her joy enveloping him.

After another quick shower (in separate bathrooms so Gunnar wouldn't get "seconds"), the pair came back downstairs and ate the breakfast Tyler cooked. Gunnar told her Damon wanted them to meet for dinner at their house at six, and Tyler smiled a slow smile.

"What's that for, *elskling*?" Gunnar asked, becoming suspicious.

"They have an announcement to make."

Gunnar frowned. "How do you know that?"

"Something a sister knows, Gunnar," Tyler said, biting off a piece of bacon. "She's either pregnant, engaged, or both."

Gunnar's eyes softened as they gazed upon her, remembering the events from an hour earlier. "Do you think we're pregnant this time?"

Tyler started at the question. "What?"

"I didn't use protection this last time…I didn't even use protection last night…"

"Gunnar!"

"What?" he said with a shrug. "I'd apologize if I were sorry, but I'm not. I want you to have my baby, Tyler."

"Gunnar!" she said again, this time standing and clearing the table. "*Now*?"

"Not *right* now," Gunnar said cheekily. "I can wait nine months—"

"But what if we aren't *together* in nine months—"

"You plan on going somewhere?" Gunnar asked, his tone deceptively light.

"*No*! But Gunnar, be reasonable, okay? We just started dating; we just went through this…incident. Take a step back and think about what you're saying—"

"I know what I'm saying," Gunnar said, standing and gathering more dishes with him. He set them in the sink and took the ones Tyler had already rinsed and put them in the dishwasher. "I'm saying I see a future with you, Tyler Marie Carver, and I want everything that entails."

She gaped at him, the dish hanging limply in her hands underneath the faucet. "I don't even know your middle name!"

A corner of his mouth quirked. "Sven."

"Quit being cute," Tyler said, rolling her eyes.

"Sorry, *elskling*," Gunnar said, coming behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist. "Physically impossible to do that. My parents made gorgeous children, after all."

She laughed, sucking her teeth when he rinsed a plate above the one she had under the faucet. "Arrogant!"

"Why shouldn't I be? Especially when I know I'm going to continue that esteemed tradition with my own kids." He set the dish he'd rinsed in the dishwasher, then pressed his hands against her middle. "We will have the most beautiful children, *kjære*."

She didn't respond, and Gunnar was okay with that. It would take her some time to get used to the fact this was a permanent arrangement. So they worked silently as they finished cleaning the kitchen, then they snuggled on the couch in the living room as Gunnar showed her some of high school and college yearbooks until it was time to take her home so she could change for the dinner with Damon and Wendy.

The meal had been wonderful. They'd had pasta fettuccini alfredo with baked chicken, asparagus, and garlic bread. Wendy kept shooting Tyler knowing glances that she couldn't ignore or deny, and Damon looked like he was a little boy awaiting dessert.

"Someone say something," Gunnar said, clearly as anxious and impatient as his male counterpart.

"You've been using protection?" Wendy asked, raising an eyebrow at Tyler.

"Oh, *no*!" Tyler said. "What's that got to do with anything?!"

Wendy's shrug was lazy, but there was a gleam in her eyes. "Oh, I don't know. Just if you haven't, there's a strong possibility we could give birth to cousins around the same time…"

It took a minute for Wendy's words to sink in, and the moment it happened, Tyler screeched and ran around the table to hug her sister. "I knew it!"

Damon laughed and shook his head. "Right, you did!"

"I did!" Tyler said, still squeezing her sister and lifting up Wendy's left hand to inspect the ring, "tell them, Gunnar!"

"She did," Gunnar affirmed, standing and approaching Damon to slap a hand on his shoulder. "She said y'all were either engaged, pregnant or both."

"It's the both," Wendy said happily, and the sisters shrieked and hugged more. After everyone had calmed down, the party moved into the living room where Wendy told the story. Damon had come in during her Saturday 11 o'clock news program, just as it was ending. He'd entered the control room, though Wendy hadn't noticed because she'd been completely focused on her job. When the newscast ended, Wendy had turned to see Damon on one knee and holding out a black-velvet box where an emerald-cut diamond solitaire lay in wait. Damon hadn't even had a chance to ask the question when Wendy had started blubbering and nodding, "yes!" as the rest of the control room had cheered and congratulated them.

"Man, I have you to thank, too, Gunnar," Damon said, holding Wendy close as they shared the easy chair. "Your stupidity made me realize I was just as stupid for keeping Wendy as a 'free agent' for so long—"

"Glad I could help," Gunnar said sarcastically as he rolled his eyes. He and Tyler were sitting side by side on the couch with her snuggled against him. She grinned and patted his knee. Gunnar smiled in response and nuzzled her temple.

"And the pregnancy?" Tyler asked, leaning into Gunnar's affection.

"I'd taken a home pregnancy test this morning—"

"Several," Damon interrupted with a scoff.

Wendy pinched his side, earning a yelp from her new fiancée. "And all of them came back positive. I'd wanted to talk to you about it earlier, Tyler, but things had been…you know…"

"It's all right," Tyler said sincerely, and she laughed with joy. "I can't believe I'm going to be an aunt soon!"

"I can't, either!"

"Are you going to tell Mama?"

Wendy nodded. "I'm mailing her a letter and a calling card with it. I wish she was here…"

Tyler nodded and reached across to grab her sister's hand. "She would if she could. She'll be happy for you, Wen."

"And you, Tyler. Glad you two worked through things. Damon had told me who she was and had to keep me from snatchin' that lil' heffa's weave out! Skank-ass ho!"

Gunnar's chuckled was cut short as Wendy whirled in on him. "What *you* laughin' at?! You was pullin' back *far too slow* for my likin', Mr. Daniels!"

"Mine too," Tyler muttered.

Gunnar reached over and clasped his hand over the sisters' hands. "Trust me, Wendy. Kaci Mondale is a non-issue. It will never happen again, and if it does, I give you full rights to snatch her weave out or whatever else you wish, okay?"

Wendy sniffed but nodded. "And don't make me have to tell you again!"

Gunnar kissed Tyler's shoulder before pulling back, and the couples chatted a bit before Damon asked Gunnar to speak with him in the kitchen. When the sisters were left alone, Wendy came to sit next to her sister and Tyler put a hand on her still-flat tummy.

"When you due, Mama?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm thinking maybe November or December."

Tyler cupped Wendy's face and they rested their heads against each other. "I'm so, so happy for you, Wendy. Truly…I'm *so* happy for you!"

"Ty…" Wendy said, becoming teary-eyed, and she hugged her sister tightly. Tyler laughed a little and returned the hug just as fiercely, and they stayed that way for a long time. When they pulled apart, Tyler wiped away some of the tears Wendy had shed.

"You'll be the godmother, right? And the maid-of-honor?"

"Of course! I've only got one older sister!" Tyler said with a smile.

Wendy returned it and took Tyler's hands in hers. "You won't be far behind, Tyler."

"Far behind what?"

"Gunnar."

"Gunnar what?"

"What's Norwegian for 'brother'?"

Tyler gasped and ducked her head, trying to hide the blush she knew was staining her cheeks. Wendy's question brought back what Gunnar had said earlier about them starting a family. Tyler thought it was entirely too soon to

be thinking and discussing it, but she couldn't help her own thrill of anticipation when Gunnar had said he wanted a child with her.

It had been the second time he'd done so.

"You don't think it's too soon?"

"No," Wendy said, cupping her sister's face. "No. Any man who looks at you the way Gunnar does or how Damon looks at me or how Daddy looked at Mama…never too soon, Baby Girl. And Gunnar's at that age where he's starting to think of settling down. I know, because Damon's not much older and he was more excited than I was about this pregnancy."

"Really?" Tyler asked. She hadn't been expecting that, considering Wendy had always wanted children.

"I'm just hitting my stride professionally, you know? Having a baby means cutting back hours, scaling back duties…things have to be put on hold. I'm keeping this baby because it's a blessing from God and Damon wants it so much, but last night me, God, Daddy…even Mommy…we had a four-way conversation."

"And?"

Wendy shrugged and grinned a little. "We'll make it work, Damon and I. I want this baby, don't get me wrong. So what I'll have to postpone some things? I'm still young, and you know Damon wouldn't mind being a stay-at-home father…his lazy ass…"

"Who's lazy?" Damon asked, leaning over the couch to kiss Wendy's cheek. "I know y'all ain't talkin' 'bout me!"

"Then you know about a whole lot o' nothin'!" Wendy teased, giggling when Damon moved his mouth to her neck. Gunnar crouched down behind the couch and kissed Tyler's cheek lightly.

"You two were behaving?" Gunnar asked, brushing his knuckle against the swell of her cheek.

"As if we know how to do anything else!"

Gunnar's gray eyes darkened and he nibbled on her lobe. "You know how to make a mean breakfast…"

And just like that, Tyler wanted to kill him and push him up against the wall just to show him how "mean" she could be.

Tyler and Gunnar visited for another hour before he took her home. They sat in the car and made out for another fifteen minutes before Tyler bade him goodnight.

"I have to walk you to the door," Gunnar insisted against the column of her neck.

"You're not coming in…"

"But that's the best place to *come*, Tyler…"

She slapped his shoulder with a surprised laugh. "*You* need to *behave*!"

His gray eyes were alight with mischief and longing. He grasped her chin and kissed her softly. "That'll be us one day, right?"

"What will?"

"Damon and Wendy."

Tyler replied by kissing him again, harder, and infusing all the vows she dared not speak into it. Gunnar pulled back with a slow nod and smile.

"As long as you promise," he said with a wink, and then got out of his Jeep.

He behaved during the short walk to her door, and gave her the sweetest of kisses in goodnight.

About a week after the dinner, Tyler was in Soul Cuts closing up when the phone rang. She sucked her teeth. She was tired and wanted to take a shower and go to bed. She hadn't seen Gunnar in a few days, though admittedly that was more her fault than his. She'd been over at Wendy and Damon's house helping her sister go over plans for the wedding and preparing meals for her to eat since Damon was all but hopeless in the kitchen. Wendy hadn't begun scaling back yet because she was still able to work. She hadn't even told her bosses yet, but both Damon and Tyler were firm in making her promise to tell her superiors soon.

She set the broom in the corner before going over to her station and picking up the cordless.

"This is Soul Cuts; how may I help you?"

"¿*Hija*?"

Tyler sucked in a breath and tears immediately sprang into her eyes. She sat in the chair, trembling a little. "Mommy?"

Her mother's husky voice wafted through the receiver to her ear. "¿*Hola*, *mijita. Cómo estás*?"

"Mommy..."

"Oh, *corazón*, don't cry," Carmen Colón Carver cooed to her daughter. "¿*Por qué lloras*?"

"I've missed you, Mommy," Tyler whispered. She didn't care she was almost twenty-nine years old; she might have been a daddy's girl, but her mother always had a special place in her heart as well, even if she was on a different continent now.

"I just spoke with your sister," Carmen said, her voice even more heavily accented since her time in her home country. Tyler had always loved listening to her mother speak, and had always asked her mother to sing Spanish lullabies, uncaring she didn't really understand what was being said. "*Me dan un* 'calling card'...that's what you call it?"

"Yes," Tyler chuckled.

"Five hundred minutes. That's a long time. ¡*Habla por siempre*!"

"Yes!" Tyler laughed. "Mommy, Wendy's having a baby. She'll have much to talk about," Tyler said with a smile.

"I know," Carmen said on a chuckle. "¡*Yo voy a ser una abuela*! ¿*Y tu novio*, *hijita*? ¿*Cómo es...Gunnar*?"

"Gunnar! Wendy told you?" Tyler groaned. "She has a big mouth!"

Carmen laughed. "¿*Wendy siempre tenía una boca grande*, *no*?"

Tyler laughed as well. "Yes, Mommy!"

"You were my quiet one. *Tímida*. ¿*Aún*, *hijita*? Shy?"

"A little, Mama," Tyler confessed.

"¿*Por qué mijita*? *No necesitas estar tímida*. ¡*Tú eres bonita y maravillosa*!"

There was nothing in the world like a mother's encouragement, and Tyler smiled. "*Gracias*, Mommy."

"*Sí*, *de nada*, *mijita*," Carmen said. "Now, *dímelo*. *Tu novio*. ¡*Necesito saber*!"

So for the next hour, Tyler told her mother about Gunnar Daniels. And because this was her mother, Tyler left nothing out—not even about her one-time date with Quincy or Gunnar kissing another woman on his birthday. She even talked about Gunnar's desire for her to meet his sister all the way in Los Angeles."

"¿*Vas*?"

"Ma'am?"

"Are you going?"

Tyler breathed deeply. "Mommy, I don't know. I still have work to do, and I want him to be proud of me."

"¿*Por qué no sería orgulloso de tí*, *chica*?" Carmen asked, confusion and chastisement in her tone. "¡*Él tiene buen suerte*! ¡*Él tiene tú*!"

"*Te amo*, Mommy," Tyler said sincerely.

"*Te amo mucho*, *mijita*," Carmen returned. "*Ten fe*, *chica*."

Have faith. "Yes, ma'am," Tyler said. "But I still need to get myself right before I go meet his folks."

"You're right just as you are, *mijita*," Carmen said. "*Yo sé que tu hermana es muy delgada como yo*, *pero tú*, *mijita*, *no hay nada mala de tí*. ¡*Tú eres perfecta*!"

"I'm not perfect, Mommy," Tyler said.

"No, but you are for *tu novio*, Gunnar," Carmen said. "*Mijita*, don't be like me. *Ten fe de tí*. *Confia del amor*. I didn't do that with your father. *Deseo que yo había confiado en tu padre*. *Mi amor*..."

"He loved you until his last day, Mommy," Tyler said quietly.

"And I'll love him until mine," Carmen returned, just as soft. "Don't be like me. Trust your young man, okay? Trust yourself."

"Yes, Mommy." She checked the clock and winced. It was late, she was exhausted, and she needed to stop by the pharmacy to pick up some items, but she didn't want to stop talking to her mother. "Will you be able to come visit soon? The wedding?"

"At least then, *mijita*. *Abuela no siente bien*, *tú sabes*.

"Give her my love."

"*Sí*. *Yo voy darlo*."

"I love you," Tyler said again.

"*Tú eres mi corazón*, *mijita*. *Mi vida*. *Tú y tu hermana*."

They blew kisses into the phone before ending the call. Her mother's words, even the Spanish ones...though admittedly, Tyler heard them much better than she could speak them, remained in her brain as she pulled into the neighborhood pharmacy. She picked up a red plastic basket and went into the feminine products aisle, and grabbed the necessary items. On the way to the cash register, Tyler went into the vitamin aisle, stopping in front of big, expensive bottles.

"Lose weight fast." She'd seen the product on television. Closing her eyes, she quickly dumped the bottle into her basket and then hurried to the register before she could change her mind.

SEVENTEEN

Though she hadn't told Gunnar yet, Tyler had personally resolved herself to go see his sister in LA. That meant she picked up the pace in terms of her sessions. When she'd told Gunnar she wanted a more intense workout, he'd looked at her through narrowed eyes, and asked her why.

"Plateau. You said it yourself."

His eyes still had remained shrewd, but her argument was sound, and he relented. Gunnar hadn't been easy on her, either, confiscating her remaining Girl Scout cookies and other sweets and would let her have them as a reward. Of course she had pouted, but she knew she would have to sacrifice some things in order to get the results she wanted.

But the Girl Scout cookies...that had hurt a little bit.

It also helped she had, quite unwittingly, started spending time at Gunnar's house more often than not on the weekends. It had happened so seamlessly that it wasn't until Gunnar had given her his good morning kiss before going on his run one weekend did Tyler realize she was not in her house or her bed. She did go home every Sunday, but each weekend she found herself pulling into Gunnar's driveway after work.

She even had a drawer now.

Though Tyler wasn't ready to go on a run, she did do a few miles on the treadmill while Gunnar did his weight training. Most of the time they were quiet and independent, but sometimes Gunnar would come up behind her and fix her form whenever she would get slack, which was rare; or when he was randy, which wasn't quite so rare.

They would go grocery shopping, Gunnar giving her pointers about how to shop and which foods are healthier and richer in necessary nutrients than others. She hadn't realized how into public displays of affection Gunnar was, and it was only after he'd made her giggle quite loudly in the cereal aisle did

she tear the list in half and ordered him on the opposite side of Food Lion so she could calm down and he could behave. He'd given her a heady look, letting her know he would be making her do something more than giggle later on that night.

She also continued taking the pills that would suppress her appetite and increase her metabolic rate, or so the product said. Luckily, she only had to take one with a meal, so she usually took it with her breakfast. She also bought an electronic scale. The downside with that was she checked her weight compulsively.

Then again, it was nice to see those electronic numbers get smaller and smaller.

Her clients were starting to notice. On her recent appointment, Loretta had made such a fuss about how "slim and sexy" Tyler was getting, saying immediately there must be a man in her life.

"That's the only reason a woman would really lose weight—a man," Loretta had declared.

"Not personally?"

"No. Why? If there were no men, women would be all fat and happy!"

They had laughed, which petered out when Loretta's man Jason walked inside holding a napping Will. The transformation on Loretta's face said it all. It had been soft and full of love, and Tyler had pretended she had to get something from the back so they could have a private moment. After an interval, Tyler had walked back out to see Jason drop a sweet kiss to Loretta's forehead.

"Tryna get some tonight, aren't you?" Loretta had teased.

"No, baby, I'm tryna *give you some* tonight," Jason had said with a wink, then bent his head to kiss her lips. "You look beautiful. Tyler, you do excellent work!"

Tyler had been jerked out of her musings at Jason's voice, and she'd given him a brilliant smile. "Thank you. You 'bout up for a cut, aren't you?"

"Yeah. I really like the fade you did last time," Jason had said, brushing a cinnamon-colored hand against his hair. "And the ladies love it too—"

"Okay, LL Cool J," Loretta had said, rolling her eyes.

"And you know this," Jason had replied, giving Loretta one last kiss, then bringing down their sleeping son so Loretta could bestow one on his cheek. "I'll see you at home, baby. Tyler, have a good one!"

"You too. Y'all drive safe," Tyler had said, going back behind Loretta as they both watched father and son leave. Tyler had thought about Wendy's impending motherhood, and then she touched her own belly as Gunnar flitted through her mind. He would make such a loving, wonderful father. The fact he seemingly wanted a family with her thrilled as much as it terrified.

"When you gon' have a daughter so we can be in-laws?" Loretta had asked after a moment, and the women had laughed again.

"Well, you'll probably have to settle for Wen, because she's the one about to have a baby."

Tyler had been glad she'd already put down her shears, or else Loretta's scream could've had her missing an ear, it had shocked so. After Loretta had gotten herself under control, the women had made preliminary wedding plans for Will and the hypothetical girl Wendy might be having.

Family and the future seemed to have overtaken Tyler's thoughts completely.

Tyler increased her efforts to get herself as healthy as possible, and that included changing her diet even more. Aside from the cookies, she cut out everything white—no white rice, no sugar, no mashed potatoes (especially not with the gravy), no breads or biscuits (she wept a little at that), no pasta. Many times during the day she snacked, usually on frozen grapes or peaches, and for dinner she had the diet frozen meals from the store. Thirty minutes in the oven, or five in the microwave if she was particularly hungry, and she had a healthy, well-balanced meal. And they really weren't all that bad, either. Besides, her supplements helped stave off any cravings she might have between meals.

For about two months she kept up this regimen, and she'd been greeted with positive comments everywhere she went. Even Wendy and Damon had kind words to say about her transforming body, but the one person who she thought would be the most happy for her was the one who seemed to not notice it at all. Of course, Tyler knew this wasn't true, but Gunnar's eyes seemed to bore into her, as if she were a puzzle he was trying to solve. There was nothing to solve, really. She was eating better and exercising more; so what she was taking pills to give her an extra boost? They were perfectly safe, all natural ingredients. They worked!

Then why won't you tell him you're taking them?

That question seemed to be on loop in her mind, and she cursed her conscience. Was she ashamed of taking them? Perhaps a little. What had started as a means to lose weight to help with her back problems, which *were* much better, had suddenly morphed into something entirely different. In fact, she was only using the pills as supplements and not as meal replacements. She would've felt worse if all she was eating were those shakes for breakfast and lunch with a "sensible dinner." Tyler liked food too much to substitute her meals with a drink, so that was why she was taking the pills. Besides, as soon as she reached her goal, she would stop. No harm, no foul, right?

Then tell him about the pills!

She didn't want to, because she knew in her heart he would make her stop. She couldn't afford to stop, not right now. His sister's party was a little over two months away; she wasn't about to stall progress right now! Besides, the weight would kill her faster than any pill would!

You know you should tell him about the pills!

Tyler glared at her reflection in the mirror. It didn't help she was at his house on a Saturday morning, Gunnar already out on his run. She was about to take the pill before going down to prepare breakfast—nothing big, multi-grain pancakes and turkey sausage—but if she took it before the meal, she wouldn't be tempted to have seconds or even thirds.

Tell hi—!

"After LA," she promised herself, and was about to pop the pill in her mouth when she heard her phone buzz. It had just stopped buzzing by the time she reached it, and she saw it was a text from Damon. Silly man. He wanted to know if Wendy's favorite flavor of ice cream was Moose Tracks or Rocky Road. She told him it was the first in a reply text, then threw her phone down and headed down stairs to prepare breakfast.

When Gunnar came inside, he immediately snuck up behind her and buried his sweaty face in the crook of her neck. Tyler whined, though she wasn't too bothered by it, and Gunnar squeezed her hips with his hands, telling her he couldn't wait for breakfast. All Tyler did was point to the stairs, which told him he *really* needed to wash. Gunnar nipped at her skin before doing her silent bidding. She stared after him for a moment, wondering how they had gotten so seamless in their relationship; how comfortable and effortless everything seemed to be between them.

It made her wary.

The last time she'd gotten so comfortable with someone was Quincy, and everyone knew how well that had turned out. But as she'd reminded herself countless times, Gunnar was not Quincy, and she wasn't that old Tyler anymore. She was proactive in improving herself; she wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

Speaking of...

Quincy's e-mails hadn't stopped, though they weren't very personal. They were either "Jokes of the Day" "Inspirational Quotes of the Day" or news about an old mutual friend they had. It was clear it was the wedding season, for there was an engagement party for two of their mutual friends in a few weeks and Quincy had asked if she was going to go. Tyler hadn't responded because she honestly didn't know. Luckily, the party was in town, but she hadn't kept in touch with these people since college; and if they had wanted her to come, they would've asked her...or at least would've known not to ask Quincy on her behalf because they'd been broken up for years.

"Whatever," Tyler muttered to herself, taking a completed pancake from the griddle and eyed the remaining batter. There was enough for about three more, but she wondered if she'd made too much anyway. She'd already halved the recipe, but eight pancakes seemed a bit much, especially if she was trying to lose weight—

Tyler jumped as an incriminating white bottle was slammed in front of the bowl full of batter. Her heart beat wildly in her chest—partly from being

startled, but mostly because of the stormy gray eyes that suddenly filled her vision.

Gunnar was livid.

"What is this?"

Gunnar's voice was low and even, and it sent unpleasant shivers up her spine. Tyler swallowed and turned off the eye on the stove. She was glad she'd decided to put the turkey sausage in the oven, and they still had a while to go.

Tyler kept her eyes fixed on the bottle however, and she swallowed again. "They suppress my appetite—"

"Tyler—"

"Gunnar," Tyler interrupted, tightening her hand on the spatula's handle she'd yet to set down. "It's perfectly safe—"

"None of this shit is safe!" he said, his tone unchanged, though the anger behind his words had increased exponentially. "How long have you been taking them?"

Tyler refused to shy away from him, and she looked into his eyes again. Yes, there was anger, but there was something else in them that made her heart clench even more. Fear. "Not long," she assured him, hoping that would assuage his concerns.

"Stop taking them," Gunnar growled.

"But they're helping me—"

"Stop. Taking. Them."

Tyler's defenses went up. Who was he to dictate to her—she was a grown woman! "Don't tell me what to do! You're not my father!"

"And you think your father would approve of you killing yourself by taking these?"

Tyler glared at him and turned off the oven, uncaring the sausage might not be done, but she didn't want to burn down Gunnar's house because she was too busy arguing to pay attention to the food—no matter how irritated he was making her. "I'm killing myself *now* by being fat—!"

"You're not fat," Gunnar said quickly, so quickly Tyler knew it to be an automatic response.

"Too fat to be your girlfriend!"

Gunnar gaped at her, then let out a harsh breath and rolled his eyes. "According to whom?"

Tyler flared her nostrils but didn't respond, glancing at the pills. Before she could grab them, however, Gunnar snatched them out of reach and poured them down the sink, and then flipped on the garbage disposal for the final effect.

"Gunnar!"

"I don't want to see this shit in my house again," Gunnar said, throwing the now-empty bottle away in the trashcan that sat under the sink.

Tyler could feel the beginnings of an attitude rise within her, so she bit her lip and counted from five to one. "Are you going to pay me back for the rest of the bottle?"

His laughter made her want to slap him. "*You* should pay *me* for saving your life!"

"It's not dangerous! Clinical studies show—"

"What, you went and did a commercial for them while I was out on my run?"

Tyler jerked as if he'd slapped her. He could be incredibly nasty when he was upset, and he had a horrible habit of taking it out on her. Despite the fact this time she was the real cause of his anger, there was no reason for him to be so rude.

To prevent herself from saying something she would regret, Tyler silently walked around him and headed for the stairs.

"Where are you going?"

Tyler didn't answer him, but groaned under her breath when she heard his footsteps behind her. Before she got good into the bedroom, Gunnar grabbed her and pushed her against the wall as gently as he could despite the tense feelings between them.

"Let me go, Gunnar."

His gray eyes bored into hers, and his fingers dug into her skin, not enough to cause her pain, but enough for her to know he wasn't going anywhere as long as he could help it.

"Why were you taking them?"

"They're *supplements*—"

"Murderers!"

"Do I look dead to you?"

"But you could be! You think I could take it if I lost you? I—" He dropped his forehead against hers, his body sagging into hers. Tyler automatically wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Promise me you won't take anymore okay? Those things are addictive."

"They work! I've lost so much weight—"

"Tyler..."

"I'm still exercising and eating right and doing everything I'm supposed to, so why can't I have a little boost?"

"It's not healthy, Tyler. I'm not backing down."

"Only until your sister's party—"

"No."

"Gunnar—"

"Stop taking them! I mean it, Tyler! I'm not budging on this. You continue to take them, then you do so without me here to watch you."

She took a deep breath. "But your sist—"

"Will love you whether you weigh one hundred pounds or one thousand. Stop worrying about it. You're perfect for me. No one can ever say otherwise without making himself a liar."

Gunnar's assurances should've set her mind at ease, but Quincy had said similar things, and yet look at how that had turned out. Tyler didn't say anything to Gunnar, merely hugging him closer. She knew what she was doing. She would stop taking the pills, but she would find other ways to help her get the weight off. Gunnar would appreciate her efforts eventually.

Unfortunate indeed when trust broke down in a relationship, and the trust between Gunnar and Tyler teetered on the edge. Gunnar always eyed how much food she ate, insisting she eat more, eat more meat, eat more carbs, eat more, period. Rabbits ate more than Tyler seemed to, and though he hadn't seen another pill for the past two weeks, Gunnar still thought she was becoming far too slim too fast. He actually preferred her generous curves to the more svelte frame she was hell-bent on getting. If he heard "BMI" or "scale" one more time, he was going to scream.

It had gotten to the point Gunnar had blacked out all the nutritional facts on most of the food she ate in his house, and, with the help of Wendy, was able to get into Tyler's house while she was at the barbershop and do the same there. He even brought the Girl Scout cookies out of hiding, hoping her love for them hadn't waned on this "lose weight" kick she was on.

"I don't think I appreciate the fact you got me worried about my sister like this," Wendy said, completely serious though she had her tone in a joking manner.

"Then you talk to your sister; she won't listen to me," Gunnar muttered. They were sitting at the table in Tyler's kitchen, Wendy looking around the space of her childhood and smiling at a picture that Tyler had done when she was nine, not the least bit surprised it was still on the refrigerator door.

"Well, you came at her wrong," Wendy said with a shrug. "No matter how right you are, you have to come at a person with respect. You treated her as a child, so she shut down on you."

Gunnar bristled, remembering Tyler's question to her about being her father. Then he remembered his response about how her father would react if he knew about Tyler and the pills.

"I was out of line."

"You love her; nothing out of line about that," Wendy said with a small smile.

"I don't want to lose her," Gunnar said quietly. "Honestly, I was more afraid than angry. I told her those things are addictive, but she didn't believe me."

Wendy gave him a sympathetic look. "Sounds like you're speaking from personal experience."

"I am," Gunnar said, running an agitated hand through his hair.

"Does she know?"

"No. I was so upset, so worried. I don't want to talk about it."

"Secrets?"

Gunnar looked sharply at Wendy, and then his shoulders sagged. "Painful memories."

"Though I will say what you said was exactly what I would've said, you should know by now that once Ty gets a goal in her head, there's very little anyone can say or do to derail her from it. Unfortunately, your excuses aren't good enough, not when they go against clinical studies and the results she sees on the infomercials, and you, my dear, aren't a doctor. So, be honest with her. Yes, she wasn't honest with you from jump, but she didn't deny it, either."

"Kind of hard when I have the evidence in her face," Gunnar mumbled, then his mouth quirked. "I guess it's a Carver thing to be swayed by clinical studies."

"I guess our experience with Dad..."

Gunnar winced, but didn't have the heart to say their father had died anyway.

"Tyler likes to exercise all her options before she throws in the proverbial towel," Wendy said with an understanding smile. It was as if her mind had gone down the same path his had.

"There's no towel to throw, proverbial or otherwise," Gunnar said. "Why doesn't she believe me when I say she's perfect?"

"Because you can leave."

"That makes no sense!"

"Why doesn't it? You're not beholden to her, you're just a guy. Guys like their women to be perfect, or else she can be turned in for an upgrade. It's happened before, and she's trying to do everything she can so it doesn't happen again."

"But I'm not Quincy!"

"Doesn't matter. She's still Tyler."

He'd come to that conclusion earlier, but to hear Wendy reinforce let some of the air out of his sails of righteousness. "How can I break through to her?"

"Support her."

"I am!"

"By destroying some probably very expensive pills and giving her ultimatums?"

Gunnar glared at Wendy. "Are you on her side?"

"I'm understanding her side, which is something I don't think you've really set out to do. Gunnar, I don't know if you know this, but you're a damn fine

man. A damn fine man who people expect to have a damn fine woman on his arm—"

"I *have* a 'damn fine woman' on my arm—!"

"Be realistic," Wendy said, though her eyes warmed at his description of his sister. "This might seem like a merry-go-round to us, but for Tyler, it's a vicious cycle in which she'd been trapped for the majority of her life. It amazes even me that someone so capable, competent, talented, and lovely in my eyes can't see her worth. But my voice is small, not insignificant, but small compared to all the messages and images she sees around her."

"But—"

"And when *you* had been one of those mouthpieces for those messages, Tyler's basically waiting for you to wake up and realize who you're with. Like Quincy did."

Gunnar opened his mouth to say he wasn't Quincy, then snapped it shut. It actually didn't matter *who* he was. He could be Bob or Steve or Frank, but he was still a man, and a man had hurt Tyler. She was equating hurt with his sex, and why shouldn't she? Outside of her father, what man had ever truly shown her unconditional love? Quincy certainly hadn't, and though Gunnar loved her unconditionally, to be sure, his ultimatum didn't help to underscore that. Besides, the way they had met...first impressions, apparently, were never forgotten. She was afraid he'd go back to that point, and what other place other than LA would he be the most susceptible to do that?

"I love your sister," Gunnar said.

"I know you do," Wendy assured him, reaching out to pat his hand.

"Does she know that?"

Wendy sighed and patted his hand again. "She's scared."

"I'm not exactly the world's most courageous man when it comes to this, either."

"She thinks you have less to lose."

He scoffed in disbelief. "She thinks wrong. She's everything to me! I'd been in love before, not going to deny it, but..."

"She feels the same way," Wendy revealed. "She barely survived Quincy. She's terrified of not surviving you."

"She doesn't have to worry about it," Gunnar promised. "I'm not going to leave her because she does something I don't like."

"No, just give her ultimatums of 'my way or the highway'," Wendy said with an arched eyebrow.

Gunnar sunk in his seat. That was exactly what he'd implied by saying he wouldn't stick around. But Tyler wasn't the only one with a vulnerable heart. She didn't know how much it had taken for him to let her in completely, or that he was now getting painful reminders that he could only love someone, not command her to do what he wanted her to do, even if he had her best interests in mind.

"This is so hard," Gunnar bemoaned, resting his forehead on the kitchen table.

"It is, but if it was easy, I don't think we'd appreciate it half has much."

Gunnar grumbled incoherently. This was all Quincy's fault. If he hadn't been such a *rasshøl* to Tyler, she wouldn't have these self-esteem problems.

And she wouldn't be yours right now.

That thought unsettled him even more.

They heard the front door open, and Gunnar popped up to go into the living area. Tyler stumbled to a stop and frowned at him while Gunnar eyed the meal-replacement shake in her hand.

"Tyler..."

"It's not the pills," she snapped. "What are you doin—?" She looked at the kitchen suspiciously. "Gunnar Sven Daniels! If you blacked out my food..."

The urge to yank the shake out of her hand overwhelmed him, but he felt Wendy's presence behind him and he just clenched his teeth before taking a deep breath.

"Gun—"

"I love you, Tyler."

The shock that registered on Tyler's face would have been comical if the situation wasn't so grave. Her mind was still processing the declaration when he approached her and kissed her cheek. "Unconditionally."

He left her house before she could respond, hopping into his Jeep and driving to his gym so he could lose himself in spreadsheets and receipts. He didn't get very lost, however, for his mind continued to replay the scene at her house.

The brilliant hope and utter despair that had filled her eyes at his parting words shook Gunnar deeply. He knew she'd been hurt and even knew she was over Quincy, at least in the romantic sense. In her sense as a woman, however, Quincy still held the reins of that, and it was about time the man relinquished them and gave them back to her. Gunnar wanted to help Tyler break this cycle, and to do that meant he had to go to the person who started it.

Rasshøl!

Gritting his teeth slightly, Gunnar pulled up a search engine and typed in all the information he knew about Quincy Lucas in order to glean more. It didn't take him long to find things, especially since it seemed Mr. Lucas was very active in the community. Mentoring. That had Tyler's imprint all over it.

Gunnar decided to send Quincy an e-mail requesting that they meet. Preferably in a public place so he could prolong Quincy's life. He'd be no good to Tyler in prison.

After the message was sent, Gunnar took over for one of Victor's cycling classes, and went home later than he'd anticipated. He was lonely, puttering around his home and missing his Tyler. He called her and was mildly relieved he got her voicemail.

"I love you, Tyler. I miss you," he said softly into the recording, then hung up before the second beep.

He climbed into bed with his laptop to do a last check of his messages, and he saw one that made him scowl and smirk simultaneously.

I'll be in town next Thursday and will stay until Sunday for a conference. We can meet at Jessie's, *not far from Tyler's barbershop—two doors down. Late lunch, early dinner, around five, if you can be free.*
Q. Lucas.

Gunnar snorted to himself. Of course he could be free. He *was* the boss.

EIGHTEEN

Jessie's was the soul food restaurant Tyler had mentioned to Gunnar when he'd first gone to her barbershop. He knew why the other man had chosen it—Quincy thought it would intimidate him because he would be one of the few white faces in the black establishment.

No dice.

Gunnar ordered a sweet tea and took a chunk of cornbread the server had placed in the center of the table after he'd taken their orders. Quincy merely sat back in his chair and looked at him with an indistinguishable expression.

"So...you're dating Ty now."

Gunnar swallowed the bite of cornbread he'd been chewing and nodded. "We're in a relationship."

Quincy nodded as well, his eyes narrowing slightly. "You're a bit paler than I imagined."

Gunnar shrugged. "I'm surprised you imagined her with anyone, given you seemed to think she'd wait for you."

Quincy smiled a little. "She spoke about me?"

"She sobbed about you," Gunnar said flatly, effectively wiping the grin from the other man's face. Both men gave the server insincere smiles as he placed their drinks on the table. "From the looks of things, however, seems to me she wasted her tears," Gunnar finished once the server left again.

Quincy scowled at him. "You don't know me."

"I know you're an asshole," Gunnar said, his expression bland as he took a sip of his tea. He licked his lips and hummed his approval. "That's all I need to know."

Quincy's jaw clenched, but he took a sip of his lemonade in lieu of saying anything. It was clear the man wanted to deck Gunnar, but he had to keep up

appearances and his suit in pristine fashion. Nevertheless, Gunnar knew they wouldn't leave this restaurant as close friends.

"Of course Tyler would tell you that—"

"Tyler didn't have to tell me a damn thing," Gunnar said, his eyes growing mutinous. "In fact, she tried not to. I had to pry it out of her. I wasn't even dating her at this point. She told me about the date you two had; she told me how you treated her when you two broke up. What kind of 'man' would make a woman feel so utterly unworthy to bolster his own value? That is the worst kind of coward."

"And here you are, ready and willing to be her white knight…literally."

"I'm ready and willing to be so much more than that," Gunnar said, his eyes and tone making his meaning clear.

Quincy regarded his lunch mate silently, cocking his head as if the tiny change in perspective would give him insight into the man himself. "You have even more to lose than I do."

"And that's why you don't have her now," Gunnar said. "All you can see are the sacrifices and none of the gains."

"I had to get myself right—"

"And you couldn't do that with Tyler?" Gunnar asked dispassionately. He shook his head and his mouth twisted to a disgusted expression. "She was too good for you."

"I know she was," Quincy said, his voice contrite for the first time since they started the conversation. The server returned with their meal—both had order the fried chicken platter. Gunnar grinned when he realized this was the same meal Tyler had eaten when he'd chastised her about "clogged arteries." Considering the food tasted so fantastically, Gunnar could understand why she would risk it.

"Ty ever fry you chicken?" Quincy asked, his eyes rolling into the back of his head at the first bite into his chicken thigh.

"No."

"Heaven on a plate," Quincy determined. "That girl can throw down in the kitchen!"

Gunnar allowed a small grin, thinking about that spectacular breakfast they'd had after his birthday, and he scooped up a forkful of black-eyed peas. The amount fat and calories in front of him would be well worth the extra miles he'd run this week. "And what did you cook for her?"

Quincy blinked at him with a confused expression. "Cook? I don't cook."

"I baked her some chicken with some wild rice and green beans," Gunnar said, putting some collard greens on his fork next. "Right after we made love for the second time. She seemed to like it." He smiled softly at the memory as he ate the forkful of food.

Quincy lips formed a thin line and his jaw clenched again, his hands tightening around his glass of lemonade so hard Gunnar thought he might break it. "Why are you telling me this?"

Gunnar finished chewing the collards, then broke of another piece of cornbread, and finally had another swallow of tea before answering him. "Just...making conversation."

"I had her first."

"And I'll have her forever."

Quincy's expression grew even darker. "You think you're better than me."

"I know I am."

"You know wrong."

Gunnar's eyes turned to flint and his mouth into a hard line. "I know that when God gives me a blessing, it would behoove me to be thankful and hold on tight to it instead of treating it as something replaceable and worthless—"

"I *never*—"

"You made Tyler worth less than a job," Gunnar said, his eyes narrowing and his appetite almost gone. "You chose a law firm over her love. *You* did that. Now you regret it, and you have no one to blame but yourself."

Quincy stared at him for a long time, and Gunnar stared right back. He watched so many emotions play across Quincy's dark face as Quincy's mind processed what he'd just heard. When Quincy focused his eyes back to Gunnar's, there was resignation in there.

"I didn't think," he admitted.

"Clearly."

"I was so sure she would wait."

"Obviously."

"I didn't think anyone else would want her."

"Stupidly."

Quincy glared at him. "I'm surprised a man like you would even bother with her."

There was spite in his tone, but Gunnar mused it was more directed at Quincy himself than anyone else. Also, others had said something similar, so there was a genuine surprise despite the fact they both wanted Tyler and only one of them would have her.

The one being Gunnar.

"The greater wonderment is Tyler choosing me," Gunnar said humbly.

The malice left Quincy's face and he became crestfallen. "Truer words, man."

Somehow, they'd stumbled onto a tentative truce. In a way, they were both the luckiest men on the planet; they'd somehow managed secure Tyler's love, to be blessed enough to bask in it. But one of them hadn't been able to withstand the brightness of it, and he'd thrown it away. Gunnar was going to buy the most top-of-the-line shades so he could withstand Tyler's shine. There was

no way he would let a third man experience it unless he was related to her in some way.

"You know the moment you slip up, I'll be right there to swoop in," Quincy said.

Gunnar grinned. "Gonna keep me righteous, are you?"

Quincy shrugged. "I'm not going to sabotage your relationship with her, if that's what you mean."

Gunnar gave a tiny snort. "Like you could."

They finished eating silently. Gunnar looked at Quincy during various points and tried to figure out what would possess him to put a job over Tyler's love; what had been in Quincy that had made Tyler think he deserved even a fraction of it. But mostly, Gunnar wanted to finish eating so he could stop by Soul Cuts and hold Tyler in his arms.

Quincy held up his lemonade glass and stared at it. "What makes a body…?" He shook his head and rolled his eyes, setting the glass back down. Gunnar's chewing slowed as he watched Quincy ball up his paper napkin and set it in a plate still full of food. "She loves you?"

Gunnar remained expressionless despite his irritation at Quincy's disbelief. "She says she does."

"Means that she does," Quincy said, his lips quirking into a wry grin. "Rarely does she say or do anything she doesn't mean."

"Even if it hurts her in the end," Gunnar muttered, thinking of some of the more extreme measures Tyler had been employing to lose weight.

"You mean like loving me?" Quincy asked, his tone dropping a few degrees.

Gunnar shook his head and let out a puff of air that could've been called laughter. "Loving me."

"You've hurt her?" Quincy's voice had gotten even chillier than before.

"*You* did," Gunnar corrected, the coldness of his voice matching Quincy's. "You still matter, even if she loves me."

Quincy's eyes widened, then they followed the server's movements as he took away his plate. Gunnar's sweet tea was topped off, and once again they were granted privacy in the full restaurant.

"Talk to her," Gunnar said, unable to believe the words had come out of his mouth. But he knew nothing he could tell Tyler would heal that part Quincy had shattered. And if this man *really* loved Tyler the way he claimed, Gunnar thought it was the least Quincy could do.

"I tried—"

"On *her* terms, not yours," Gunnar clarified.

Quincy arched an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"She's not coming back to you," Gunnar said slowly, as if Quincy was hard of hearing and slow on the uptake. "She's not in love with you anymore, but she's still hurt by you. You owe her a healing."

"What is this New-Age bullshit?" Quincy scoffed, smoothing down his tie nonchalantly.

Gunnar's lips formed a tight line and he bent forward, slate eyes pinning down Quincy's fudge irises. "*You* are bullshit. The hurt you caused Tyler is not. And as much as I want to, I can't fix it for her—"

"And you think I can?"

Gunnar sat back slowly, his rage seeping away and fear taking its place. Quincy might not be able to. Gunnar hadn't been successful thus far, and Lord knew he loved her so much he'd marry her today if she'd let him—

"Shit."

"What?"

Gunnar ignored Quincy. Marriage. He'd spoken of it before with Tyler, of babies. He hadn't realized how deep and immediate that desire actually was. That he could love this strong, too-scared-of-her-own-strength woman so much that he'd come to the very person who had broken her for help in mending her.

"Tyler will be my wife one day," Gunnar told Quincy matter-of-factly. "The mother of my children."

Quincy's jaw clenched and he looked at the water rings the glass of his lemonade had left on the table. "She should've been mine."

"No, she shouldn't have," Gunnar said confidently and he smiled. "And Tyler knows it too."

"What?"

"Had you not left her, she would've married you and had babies with you, knowing all the while she and they never *belonged* to you!"

Quincy's eyes narrowed. "You better watch your mouth—"

"Why?" Gunnar asked, feeling giddy as his revelation overwhelmed him. "You know it's true!"

Quincy's eyes shot to the ceiling. "And if they belong to *you*, why doesn't she think she's good enough for you?"

Gunnar glared. "You cannot possibly be that naïve."

Quincy dropped his head and his shoulders sagged. He wasn't.

Gunnar stopped their server who was passing by their table and asked for the check. Neither man spoke as they waited for the bill. When it arrived, Gunnar took the leather fold and paid. Quincy didn't offer to do so, but Gunnar wasn't offended; he'd requested the lunch. However, Quincy did leave a generous tip.

"I'll talk to her," Quincy said as they put up their wallets. "On her own terms."

"Thank you," Gunnar said absently, concentrating on signing the receipt the server had brought to him to sign.

"I still love her."

Gunnar looked up, closing the leather fold over the signed receipt and pushing it away so the server could get it at his leisure. "Never said you couldn't, or shouldn't," Gunnar said honestly. "You aren't a threat to me."

"Hmm."

"You're a threat to Tyler," Gunnar said, "and as her man, it is my job to diffuse that threat."

"By having me talk to her?"

"Yes," Gunnar said, smiling a little at Quincy's skeptic tone. "You're still the Quincy of six years ago—the man who broke her heart and pissed all over it. Tyler isn't ever going to give herself fully to me because she sees herself as no good, as she perceives *you* saw her."

Quincy shifted in his chair as if Gunnar's words were physical blows. "And she told you all of that?"

"I love her," Gunnar reminded him, standing. "She didn't have to."

A loud round of laughter broke the tension between the two men. Gunnar glanced at a table of older black women who were having a lively meal. He returned his attention to a still-sitting Quincy, whose expression was contemplative.

"I never meant to break her."

"You did," Gunnar said, very confident of that fact. "You wanted to break her heart as she'd broken yours."

"She loved me!"

"And she's too good for you," Gunnar hissed, careful not to bring any undo attention to them as he walked to Quincy's side of the table. "You said it yourself, remember? She loved you too much, too good. You didn't know how to handle it, so you broke her down so that you could. *Fix it*," Gunnar commanded, "so I can love her as she's meant to be loved; so she can love me as fully as she wants to love me."

"Well that sounds mighty selfish!"

"Nothing selfish about wishing for someone to reach her fullest potential," Gunnar said, his smile sad as pity for Quincy filled him. "That was all she ever wanted for you, man. Too bad you couldn't wish the same for her."

With that, Gunnar left *Jessie's* and went immediately to Soul Cuts, the need to see Tyler more necessary than his next heartbeat. He didn't spot anyone inside as he passed by the window to her door, but all of the lights were on. Gunnar's heart rate increased, and his hand trembled as it grasped the door handle.

"Tyler?" Gunnar called as he stepped inside the shop. An eerie pall settled over him, and Gunnar took a deep breath to calm himself.

"Tyler, *elskling*, please answer me," he coaxed, his voice louder and he walked to the storeroom. The door chimed. Gunnar looked over his shoulder to see Quincy entering. The other man froze immediately.

"Tyler?" Quincy called, also sensing something wrong. Gunnar went quickly into the storeroom. At first he didn't see anyone, which freaked him out, but not as much as the sight that greeted him when his eyes dropped to the floor.

Four brown fingers peeked out from a pile of bins, magazines, and cloth. Gunnar opened his mouth to shout, but nothing louder than a squeak sounded.

"Gunnar?" Quincy asked, his voice flirting with alarm.

Air whooshed from Gunnar's lungs. His knees buckled, sending his large body crashing next to those fingers. Flashes of wet tile and terrycloth burst behind his eyes.

"Oh, please God, *not again*!"

Her entire body felt as if two-ton weights were on it. She wanted to open her eyes, but couldn't find the energy to do so. She knew immediately she was somewhere foreign; the air was too sterile and still to be her home or the barbershop, and she opened her mouth to ask where she was, but only a gasp came out instead.

"Easy...easy, Ty."

Her brows quirked. Quincy? What was he doing here? Where was *here*?

Tender fingers brushed her hairline and she instinctively turned into them. No matter how many years had passed, Tyler would always remember his touch. It was so lovely, calming, arousing. Nice.

"Quin?"

"Yeah." Quincy chuckled. "How are you feeling?"

"What are you doin' here?"

A corner of his mouth fell from the smile he'd been wearing. "I had a conference, but I think it's safe to say I'm not gonna be goin' now."

"Why?" Quincy eyed her as if she'd sprouted fur and tusks. "Me?"

"How are you feeling?" he asked again instead.

Tyler decided to go for honesty. "Can't move."

"You've got a cocktail of drugs in your system so you can sleep," Quincy explained.

"Sleep?"

"Yes, Ty," he affirmed. "The very thing you haven't been getting in weeks apparently."

Tyler managed to open one eye and she pinned it on Quincy. "You lecturin' me?"

"No," Quincy said. "Don't need to, not with you laid up like this!"

Tyler closed her eye and grimaced. "Why I gotta feel like I went head-to-head with a Mack truck and lost?"

"Sleep plus nutrients."

"Nutrients?"

"Why haven't you been eating properly, Tyler?"

Tyler would've jerked her head away from his touch if she had the energy, but instead, she had to settle for rolling it slowly away. "Askin' me that."

"It's a valid question," Quincy said, his voice growing hard. He took her hand in his. Tyler let him; it would've been too tiring to fight him on it. "Why are you making yourself sick?"

"I'm not."

"You're not eating; you're not sleeping. Are you depressed?"

"Depressed!" Tyler exclaimed with a snort. "I'm not depressed."

"Anxiety, then?" Quincy pressed gently. He enveloped her IV-injected hand with both of his tenderly. "I don't know how it could be that, though. You have a successful business, a family who loves you, and a man who thinks you are his very breath. It's a nice set up if you ask me."

"A man?" Tyler asked, her head lolling to the side away from Quincy.

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"I don't know when you and Gunnar started, but I'm assuming it was after that time I first came back to Soul Cuts."

Her memory was mush. Only snatches of recognition came to the fore, but suddenly gray eyes filled her mind and she squeezed Quincy's hand instinctively.

"How is he?" Tyler asked on a whispered.

The pat on her hand was conciliatory and trite. "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't?"

Quincy shrugged. "Exactly what I said."

"Does he love me?"

Quincy stared at their hands as if weighing his words. "He says he does."

She looked back at him. "But?"

"I haven't seen him since the ambulance came to get you," Quincy revealed, his fudge eyes hardening as they looked upon her. "I called the ambulance, and he just walked out the shop as if in a daze. Wendy's been trying to contact him, but no answer."

Tyler's eyebrows furrowed. "I don't understand."

"Nobody does. Wendy looks ready to set fire to the joint, though. Want me to go get her?"

"Please."

Quincy nodded, kissing the back of her hand before doing the bidding.

Tyler stared at the ceiling. Gunnar...Gunnar, man with gray eyes? A man who loved her? What was Quincy doing here? Hadn't they broken up? Hadn't he ended things? Tyler closed her eyes tightly. Nothing made sense, least of all why she was in the hospital because of lack of sleep and food. If anything, she made sure she ate; she loved food too much to go without!

"Tyler!"

Tyler turned to see her sister entering, her face panicked and so unlike the cool, sassy expression she usually wore. Tyler twiddled her fingers and Wendy grasped them readily, her smile shaky even as tears shimmered in her eyes.

"Sis?"

"Don't you ever scare me like that again!"

"I'm sorry," Tyler said immediately, but sincerely.

"Sorry! You should be!" Wendy's eyes flashed. "I thought you were eating! You *promised* me—no more meal replacement drinks! No more skipping—"

"Meal replacement?" Tyler said, a scowl immediately forming on her face. "You mean those nasty-ass shakes they're always hawking on daytime television?"

Wendy's eyes pierced her. "Yes, those same 'nasty-ass' shakes! You had them for *every meal*! And then you'd take those pills—!"

"What pills?"

Wendy's raving stopped and she gave her sister a concerned look. "You got amnesia?"

"Amnesia?"

"You deaf too?"

Tyler rolled her eyes at that. "Clearly I'm not if I can hold this conversation with you!"

Wendy arched an eyebrow and pursed her lips. "Hmm, haven't lost command of that tongue, I see."

"You'd love me less for it," Tyler murmured with a genuine grin.

Wendy's face fell and she sniffled. "Oh, God, Ty, don't ever scare me like that again!" she repeated, bending forward to kiss Tyler's forehead. "I need you...I need you..."

It was scaring Tyler to hear her older sister talk like she was, and she squeezed Wendy's hand. "What's wrong?"

"I need you," Wendy reiterated.

"What about Damon? Something happen between—?"

"You mean other than us getting married and having a baby? No, nothing much," Wendy said wryly.

"Married? A baby!"

Wendy pulled back with a half-smile on her face. "You don't remember that, either?"

Tyler's eyes flit to her sister's abdomen. She didn't see anything that would indicate pregnancy, but her sister wouldn't lie about something like that. Tyler closed her eyes, suddenly sad and wistful. To have someone love her like that...

"Gunnar?"

"Humph, don't talk to me 'bout that man! I got Damon runnin' 'round Raleigh and Durham tryna find that Norwegian!"

"Norwegian? He white?"

Wendy just stared at her for a moment, then, "Go back to sleep, Tyler."

She pouted. "I'm not sleepy!"

"If you can't remember the man you love, you are beyond exhausted. Go back to sleep. I'll check in on you later."

Tyler frowned, watching Wendy leave the room. She huffed out a breath and lay on her back, staring at the stark white ceiling in confusion. She was in love with someone who loved her back. Why couldn't she remember it? She remembered Quincy and how good they had been before he broke her heart; and yet he was here when the man she loved now, and the man everyone said loved her back, wasn't. Was this happening all over again? Was she not enough for this man, either? And to learn he was white, too, didn't help matters. Maybe she'd just been a fling, but they had convinced just about everyone she could become more. She heard the door open again, but she didn't turn to see who it was.

"I told her you wouldn't be sleeping."

Quincy again. Tyler moved her shoulders in an imitation of a shrug. "I said I wasn't sleepy."

"Okay," Quincy said. She saw him sit by her bed out the corner of her eye. "Want to talk instead?"

"About what?"

"About how much of a jerk I am," he said on a laugh far from humorous. "About how wonderful you are."

Tyler's heart squeezed in her chest and she heard the ECG machine make two rapid beeps. Quincy patted the back of her hand.

"Don't go having a heart attack on me."

"I'll do my best."

She locked eyes with him. He was still gorgeous to her, but none of the other feelings came behind that thought. There was no longer a surge of love for him, more like a steady drizzle of emotion. It was tamer, gentler, almost similar to what she felt for Damon, yet not really.

"I don't love you anymore," she said absently, as if working out a puzzle. Quincy couldn't quite hide his wince and Tyler winced as well. "I'm sorry it came out like that."

"Don't apologize," he said, curling his fingers around her hand softly. "I understand."

"Okay."

"I still love you, though."

"You broke up with me."

"Because I knew I wasn't the one for you."

Tyler looked at him skeptically. "You did?"

"I didn't deserve you, Tyler," Quincy said on a sigh. "It was very clear to me when you loved me so much and I still was willing to put the law firm above you. You treated me well, loved me well...everything I could've ever wanted."

"Just fat and nappy," Tyler said, the bitterness in her voice surprising her almost as much as the thought had. She tensed and would've pulled her hand away had Quincy not tightened his fingers around it.

"That was the excuse I gave you, yes," Quincy said, sounding none too proud of himself. "And while it's true the law firm did say something similar to that, I doubt they meant to break us up."

"Oh, really?" Tyler asked sarcastically.

"That comment gave me an out, a way to save face instead of waiting for the day when someone better came along…Gunnar…"

"I wouldn't cheat on you," Tyler said, "Something you can't say."

Again, Quincy winced, but Tyler wouldn't apologize for that comment or the way she said it. "You're right," Quincy said finally. "You would've married me, had babies for me, done everything for me and with me. I would've loved you so much, but I wouldn't have been the one for you."

"How in the world did you determine that?"

"We never really fought."

"And that's a bad thing?"

Quincy chuckled and Tyler's mouth formed a tiny grin. She loved his smile, his laugh. "We didn't have that extra passion, Tyler."

"So not only was I fat and nappy, I was bad in bed also?"

Quincy glared at her. "No, baby girl, never that," he said, his voice dropping low and sultry. "No…"

A thrill went through her body. Regardless if they were no longer a couple or that she didn't love him romantically, it still meant a lot to hear she didn't suck in the sack. "Okay."

"Don't you worry about that," Quincy said, his smile wistful. "Among the best I've ever had."

"And that's a large number?"

"No, Tyler," Quincy said, his expression turning serious. "I haven't met anyone better, actually."

Tyler squirmed underneath his look. "I'm sorry?"

Quincy smiled again. "There really is no response to that, is there?"

"No…"

His smile softened. "Why did you do this to yourself, Tyler? The pills, the not eating. Wendy told me a little."

"She told you?"

Quincy nodded. "I was freaked out, Tyler. I never want to see you like that again."

"Did I pass out?"

"Yes, and all that stuff fell on top of you. You could've been hurt worse than you are!"

"I'm sorry."

"All because of what I said," Quincy said, bowing his head. "How I treated you."

"I have to take responsibility for whatever it is I did."

"I broke your spirit—"

"No."

"I did," Quincy insisted. "Gunnar pointed it out to me. You tried to tell me, but I wasn't listening. That first meeting, when I thought I could just swoop back in and reclaim you. I thought I'd be that man for you now, now that I was about to be partner and I had my money right, but *we* aren't right, not like this, anyway."

"You're not the one laid up in the hospital."

"But I put you here."

"No."

She didn't like him talking like this, even if there had been a point when she would've loved to hear these words out of his mouth. They were hollow, and she wouldn't put this apparent downward spiral on anyone but herself.

"I know better than this," Tyler said.

"Love makes us stupid."

"Love?"

"You did this for Gunnar, who ain't even here," Quincy said, his voice growing so cold that Tyler actually shivered.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. No one still knows, but you'd think after he chewed me out his ass would be white on rice with you!"

Tyler shrugged, going for a nonchalance she didn't feel. "Maybe he didn't love me as much as he said he did."

Quincy pursed his lips and flared his nostrils. "He's not me, Tyler."

"I never said he was."

"But you think every man is me, don't you?"

Tyler said nothing.

"Don't...don't be like me, Tyler," Quincy said quietly, bringing both hands to grasp hers. "Don't push him away."

"I'm not."

"Let that man love you," Quincy continued, as if she hadn't even spoken. "You deserve someone to love you with everything, and you deserve to love a man with everything who will appreciate it."

"Don't you love me?"

"I don't deserve you."

"And he does? This Gunnar who isn't even here?" Funny how everyone claimed he loved her so much, yet the man who shattered her heart was the one who was right here with her.

"I'm not even gonna pretend to know what's going on in Gunnar's head, but if I saw my woman lying that still and looking like she wasn't breathing, I'd need a few moments to myself too."

NINETEEN

Almost three weeks had passed without any Gunnar sightings. Damon was running the gym in his absence, and the only contact anyone had had from him was via voicemail from an unlisted phone number. Tyler forced herself not to think about it, though. He'd left her; that was the only explanation. The other shoe had finally dropped.

Tyler instead focused on getting well. Wendy had moved in with Tyler, much to Tyler's consternation, but Wendy wouldn't listen to her sister's protests. Damon would come over for a few hours every night to spend time with them, but no one would talk about Gunnar—at least not with her.

It had taken her a few days after her accident for her memory to fully return, and with it, heartache. She hadn't stayed in the hospital long, but Gunnar hadn't visited—she'd asked the nurses and Wendy if he'd come when she'd been sleeping, but all of them had said no. That hadn't stopped her from peeking out of the window of Soul Cuts every Wednesday hoping to see his light-brown head and piercing gray eyes on the other side. Even Quincy had shown his face multiple times, and he was actually becoming someone Tyler could call a friend. It would've been easy to bad-mouth Gunnar, too, but he never did. Tyler had asked why.

"Because he loves you," Quincy had replied simply. He was in her chair—his newly designated cut days were Fridays.

"He should be here if he did."

Quincy had shaken his head. "People react to adversity differently. You soldier on. Some of us need time to deal."

It wasn't an explicit reference to him breaking up with her during her father's funeral, but Tyler knew that was what Quincy meant.

"Gunnar never seemed the type to tuck tail and run," Tyler had said mournfully.

"Adversity brings out all sides, some commendable, some not."

Tyler had grinned slightly. "And when did you become so wise, Mr. Lucas?"

"I observe people for a living," Quincy said, and he gave her a pointed look, "even before I got paid to do it."

Returning to the present from that memory, Tyler shook her head and rolled her eyes as she tightened up Quincy's conservative cut. He was here on a Thursday since tomorrow was Independence Day and the shop was closed. His hair was close to his head, sharp, so different from the small afro he'd worn during college. She dragged a towel over his head to dislodge the loose hairs from his head, and Quincy moaned.

Tyler quirked an eyebrow. "None of that."

"Feels good, Ty. You know I like your massages."

Tyler snorted. She'd given Quincy many while he studied for his LSATs. And many times, those massages led to him studying something else, like anatomy—particularly hers.

"Maybe I should stop—"

"No ma'am," Quincy said, pushing his head further into her hands. "I've had a rough week and I need to unwind!"

Feeling bold and naughty, Tyler slid her hands from his head to wrap her arms around his neck and bent her cheek to his. "I don't provide that kind of service."

Quincy turned his head and kissed her cheek slowly. "You used to," he murmured, his voice low and rumbling.

Her body quivered, yearning for the affection she'd gone so long without. Caught up in whatever spell had been woven between them, Tyler turned her head and touched her mouth to his. Quincy's answering groan had her opening her mouth to deepen the kiss, but the stroke of his tongue on hers, as well as the chiming bells from her opening front door, brought her back to reality.

She jerked away from Quincy. She saw need and passion in his eyes, but her eyes filled with tears. It wasn't enough. It wasn't right. He wasn't Gunnar. Tyler bent her head and Quincy's tender fingers brushed away her tears.

"And now we both know," he said quietly. "Without a doubt."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry," Quincy said, though Tyler knew instinctively he didn't mean the kiss. "I wish I could fix this for you, Ty."

"You can't," Tyler said, averting her eyes from him as she stood straighter and took off the cape and towel from around his neck.

"I can't, either, but maybe I can help, *mija*."

The towel and cape slipped from Tyler's nerveless fingers. Her body began trembling, and the tears that had started fell earnestly now.

"Mama..."

Tyler heard footfalls on the tile floor, and suddenly she was wrapped in thin maternal arms. Tyler sobbed and buried her face deep in her mother's neck. The fact she was taller than her mother by a good few inches didn't matter to Tyler. Her mommy's embrace was perfection.

To say Tyler was surprised her mother was here in the States would've been an understatement. Wendy had been acting weird for the past week, but Tyler had chalked it up to pregnancy hormones. No, it seemed her older sister had wanted to make their mother's visit a wonderful secret until the last possible moment, and it worked.

"*Mija*," Carmen whispered, stroking her daughter's hair. "*Mi corazón*..."

Another set of arms came around her, and Tyler recognized them as Wendy's. The three women cried together, only to break briefly when Quincy touched Tyler's shoulder.

"I left the money on your station," he said quietly, nodding to Carmen and Wendy respectfully, but he smiled at Carmen. "Now I see where they get their beauty from, ma'am."

Carmen blushed prettily, looking much younger than her sixty years. "Thank you, young man."

"Quincy," he supplied.

Carmen's eyes widened slightly, and she arched an eyebrow to her youngest daughter. "Quincy?"

He coughed, his turn to blush, but he nodded to them again. "I'll be going now. See you later, Ty."

Tyler nodded, avoiding contact with her mother's eyes. She felt as if she'd been caught doing something naughty.

"Hmm," Wendy intoned.

Tyler bumped her bum gently into Wendy, mindful of her growing niece or nephew. "Don't go there—"

"You did—!"

"*Hijas*," Carmen said, her tone brooking no argument. Immediately, the grown daughters snapped their mouths shut. "Not the time, nor the place."

Tyler looked behind her to Wendy, and they shared a grin. It really had been too long since they'd been chastised. They had missed it.

Tyler followed them to her house, where Carmen was staying with them. Apparently Wendy had picked Carmen up from the airport and had come immediately to Soul Cuts, for when Carmen got out of Wendy's car, she'd just stood in the drive and stared at the structure with trembling hands at her mouth and watery eyes.

"Oh, *Dios*," she'd murmured. Her daughters held her and allowed Carmen her moment to grieve. She hadn't been on the property in a decade.

"You've taken good care of it, *hija*," Carmen whispered to Tyler and patted her face. Tyler appreciated her mother's praise.

They made *pabellón criollo*, except they had to use black-eyed peas instead of black beans and salmon instead of shredded beef for the dish. And since a Southern house was nothing without a canister full of white rice, and Tyler had gotten over her no-white-food kick, they weren't lacking in that particular part of the traditional Venezuelan meal. Both Carmen and Tyler told Wendy to sit and they would prepare the meal, much to Wendy's consternation.

"I'm just pregnant!" she'd said even as she set the table.

"*Sabemos*, *hija*," Carmen had said absently as she prepared the fish. "*¡Pero no puedes cocinar*!"

Tyler snickered at her sister's scowl. "Mama! I can too cook!" Carmen arched an eyebrow at her eldest child. "Maybe not *well*..."

"You never wanted to learn," Carmen muttered and put the prepared salmon in the oven. "Always too busy flitting here and there, too nosy, busybody—"

"I make a living off that nosiness now, Mama," Wendy mumbled.

"*Yo sé*, *mi vida*," Carmen said and smiled warmly. "I am proud of you."

All three women sat at the table. Carmen held Wendy's hand atop the table and smoothed down Tyler's hair with her other hand. Tyler rested her head on her mother's shoulder, feeling more at peace and centered than she had in weeks. The only thing that would've made this even more perfect was if their father's deep baritone voice hummed a tune he'd composed on the spot as he poked around the stove for sneak peeks to their meal.

"Your grandmother passed away last week," Carmen said quietly. Both daughters hugged their mother tight. The loss wasn't as keen as it should've been, and Tyler mourned that fact almost as much as her grandmother's passing.

"Why didn't you tell me, Mama?" Wendy asked, placing her forehead against her mother's temple.

"What could you do about it?" Carmen asked, squeezing Wendy's hand tighter. "We buried her behind the hut, next to *abuelita*. They are happy and without pain now."

"Does that mean you are staying here?" Tyler asked, hoping the answer was yes. Carmen was a citizen, having gained that status before either Wendy or Tyler were even born. Her father had married their mother mere months after they'd first met, days after she'd turned eighteen. The fact they'd both been young, her father barely in his twenties, and she speaking little Spanish hadn't deterred them at all. Their loved trumped all the trials they had to endure.

And to think Tyler had thought she'd found a love like that with Gunnar.

"Tyler?" Carmen whispered, her gentle finger brushing away a tear. "*No lloras*, *mija*."

"*Lo siento*, Mama," Tyler responded automatically, smiling at Carmen's smile at her daughter's use of her native language.

"It'll get better, *mi corazón*," Carmen promised.

"And you've got us," Wendy said, reaching around their mother to rub Tyler's back.

"It just wasn't meant to be," Tyler said with a faux nonchalant shrug.

Wendy pinched her, making Tyler jump and clamp her mouth shut before she used an expletive. Carmen glared first at Wendy, then at Tyler.

"*Ten fe*, *mi corazón*," Carmen said, her glare softening to a gaze of compassion.

Tyler didn't say anything, glad the smells from the oven were becoming strong enough for her to check on dinner. She heard her mother and sister speaking quietly behind her while she opened up the oven and monitored the salmon. It still had a few minutes to go. She closed the oven door and checked on the rice and black-eyed peas, which also needed more time. Instead of going back to the table, however, she just stood there. First Quincy, now her mother telling her to have faith, and neither really knew Gunnar. Had she been so bad off that she'd scared him away? But what did he really owe her? They were in a relationship, yes, but they weren't married. No vows had been exchanged, at least not verbally, and apparently not reciprocally, either.

A light hand on her shoulder startled Tyler, and she gave her sister a shaky smile. "Hey."

"Give him some time," Wendy murmured.

"He left just like Quincy did," Tyler said, the fear of her heart finally coming through her voice.

"Gunnar isn't Quincy," Wendy reminded her.

"No, because Quincy is here now, and Gunnar isn't," Tyler muttered, hanging her head more as her eyes began to sting.

"And is that why you're kissing Quincy? Because he's here when the man you love isn't? Substitute?" Wendy asked, her voice growing hard.

Tyler jerked away from Wendy as if she'd been smacked. "No!"

"That was a heavy kiss we walked in on," Wendy said, lowering her voice but not backing down. Tyler glanced over her shoulder to see her mother not sitting there. She looked back at Wendy with a question in her eyes.

"Bathroom."

"It wasn't like that," Tyler said, referring to Wendy's initial comment.

"Then what was it like?"

Tyler heaved a deep sigh and shook her head, fiddling with the dishtowel on the handle of the oven door. "I don't know."

"You don't?"

"It changed nothing," Tyler said instead. "And confirmed everything."

"And what's that?" Wendy asked quietly.

"He has my heart," Tyler whispered. "And apparently, I don't have his."

Wendy was about to say something, but their mother returned. Tyler took a deep breath and put a large smile on her face. "I think we're ready to eat, Mama. Are you hungry?"

"¡*Sí*! ¡*Tengo mucho hambre*!"

The sisters laughed, letting their mother's infectious spirit drive away the melancholy that had entered the kitchen. Now was not the time to be sad or to think about the people who have left. Their mother had returned, and for Tyler, that was definitely a reason to celebrate.

☼

Gunnar closed his eyes and took a large breath. His hands gripped the handles of the bags he held, feeling the muscles in his arms and fingers tense from the pressure he exerted. Another hand, much smaller and daintier covered his, and immediately he calmed.

"*Løsne på*," his mother said softly.

"It's hard, Mother," Gunnar murmured looking at the shorter woman who had given him the majority of her features, "I'm too nervous to relax." But he kissed her temple to thank her for her effort to calm him.

"Does your woman know we're here?" his father asked from behind him, his arms also laden with items. Gunnar had gotten his height, build, and demeanor from him.

"No, only Damon," Gunnar said, and this time he blew out a large breath.

"Press the doorbell, *Sønn*," Tekla Daniels commanded gently. Gunnar frowned when he heard his father snicker behind them.

"Euan," Tekla chastised.

"Yes, mum," Euan muttered, but Gunnar could still hear the laughter in his father's voice.

Gunnar pressed the doorbell. His heart increased at a pace that alarmed him, and when the door opened to reveal Damon, it only beat faster.

"Boss," Damon said, a half smile gracing his features. Gunnar tried to return it, but he was unsuccessful. "They're not here yet," Damon offered, and his heartbeat relaxed its frenetic pace a little.

"Damon, my parents Euan and Tekla Daniels," Gunnar said, using his head to point to his parents.

"Welcome!" Damon said, backing up so they could enter. Instead, Tekla approached and kissed Damon's cheek, a feat she could only accomplish by standing on the balls of her feet.

"All right, now!" Damon teased, eyeing Euan with faux concern. "I'm an engaged man…"

"And about to have a baby," Tekla added, she patted Damon's cheek. "Can't wait to meet the mother-to-be."

"Gunnar told y'all all that?"

"Eventually," Euan said, shifting his bags to one hand so he could shake Damon's. "Sometimes our boy isn't very forthcoming."

Gunnar rolled his eyes but said nothing.

The Daniels followed Damon through the house to the backyard where there was already a barbecue set up. There were picnic tables, foldout tables and chairs, and two food stations. Gunnar had no idea how many people were coming, but he imagined there would be many.

"Just set that over there," Damon said, pointing to the grill. It wasn't fired up yet, but that was mainly because Gunnar had provided the meat.

"What should I do?" Tekla asked, looking around the area. Gunnar thought she found it pleasing.

"*Løsne på*," Gunnar said, giving his mother a cheeky grin. Tekla shook her head but grinned back.

"What does that mean?" Damon asked.

"Relax," Euan said. "Except Tekla doesn't really know how to do that."

"*Pussig*? No..."

Gunnar bit back a laugh, but couldn't fully because of Damon's flabbergasted face. "Did your mother just say pus—?"

"She says my father isn't funny," Gunnar explained quickly, slapping an understanding hand to Damon's back and laughing a little more.

"I actually take great offense," Euan said with a frown, crossing his arms across his broad chest.

"It doesn't change the fact you aren't!" Tekla exclaimed, not the least bit apologetic, but she did kiss her husband's pouting lips.

"Lawd...and I thought *my* family was a trip!" Damon muttered.

Gunnar and Damon took their posts by the grill. Damon's family had entered a few minutes after Gunnar's had, so Mrs. Wilkes and Tekla, true to her husband's claim, helped set up the rest of the food that wouldn't be barbecued and Mr. Wilkes and Euan bonded over the current baseball season. Gunnar and Damon had exchanged few words outside of the meat. Gunnar had prepped and seasoned it last night, too antsy to sleep even though he'd spent the majority of the day on flights from Trondheim to Oslo to London to Raleigh. He was nervous to come home, nervous to see *her*. Tyler. Three weeks of not speaking to her had been horrible, but every time he thought to pick up the phone, he didn't think he'd be able to do anything but weep.

He hadn't been enough to prevent Aurora from inadvertently killing herself, and to see Tyler in a similar state had made him feel like a failure again. To know he'd potentially fallen short to someone who completely and totally owned him petrified Gunnar. He didn't go to Norway immediately after Tyler's accident, but when Damon had left a message on his voicemail telling him Tyler had come to and her prognosis was excellent, Gunnar had bought the first plane ticket to Trondheim to see his parents.

At first, Tekla and Euan had given their son space, knowing something really awful had to have happened to bring him to Norway for an indefinitely long vacation. However, Tekla wasn't the type of mother to let her son mope too long. She'd done that once after Aurora's demise, and she would never indulge him like that again.

"All right," Tekla had said, coming into her son's room right at dawn and sitting on the edge of his bed. "Tell us about Tyler, and don't leave anything out."

Gunnar had been too sleepy to ask how his mother knew who Tyler was, but upon hindsight, he figured his sister had said something before he could.

He hadn't answered right away, either. His eyes had stared to the ceiling without seeing it, the vision of Tyler lying lifeless on the floor at the fore of his mind.

"*En gang til*, *mor*," Gunnar whispered, and when his mother put a comforting hand to his foot and squeezed, it brought forth the tears that had been just under the surface for days. "*En gang til*..."

Gunnar had recounted everything—from the moment Tyler had walked into his life to the moment he'd walked out her shop days earlier. At some point during the story, his father had entered the bedroom, and his parents had sat side by side on the bed watching their son cry harder than they'd ever seen. Tekla had moved from the end of the bed and crawled next to him, bringing him into her arms. Gunnar hadn't cared he was a thirty-five-year-old man; that embrace had done much to soothe him.

"I thought I was able to help her," Gunnar had muttered, wiping his eyes, too sad and heartbroken to be ashamed of his blubbering. "I love her so much, *mor*, why can't she love herself as much as I do?"

"It is not an immediate process, *snuppe*," Tekla had said, "but you demonizing yourself over your inability to help her really *doesn't* help her. You have to believe strongly in your love."

"I do!" Gunnar had insisted, glaring at his mother mildly. "I loved Aurora too."

"But Aurora didn't love herself, Son," Euan had said, piping up for the first time. "And from what it sounds like, Tyler is the same way."

"No—"

"She loves you more than she loves herself," Tekla had said, explaining her husband's comment. "All of her worth is tied up in you, and that's not helpful, either."

Gunnar had thought back to his conversations with Tyler, and even with Damon, Wendy, and Quincy. Tyler was a natural giver. Her strength lay in her generosity, and her desire to please and put people at ease many times put her in a position to be hurt. She was unused to being the center of someone's world, and would do everything in her power to tweak the relationship so the

other person would be the center of hers. And everyone in her life had allowed her to do it.

Gunnar had liked it. He'd relished in it. In fact, he could even admit to himself part of his speech to Quincy had less to do with Tyler and her healing than him and his need to remain the center of Tyler's romantic universe. He'd wanted to be the sole sun to her orbiting planet, and she'd almost killed herself for it. For Aurora, it had been modeling; for Tyler, it had been him.

"And that's why you kept your Norwegian butt away all this time?" Damon asked, grilling steaks on the grill while Gunnar handled hot dogs and hamburgers.

Gunnar hadn't even realized he'd started opening up to Damon. Something about standing in front of the grill had apparently loosened his tongue. Nevertheless, he rolled his neck and answered his second-in-command truthfully. "Yes."

Damon sucked his teeth. "Man, if my mama wasn't three feet away, I'd poke you with this fork right in yo' ass!"

"And I'd deserve it."

"Ya damn skippy you would! Tyler's been mopin' around here for weeks thinkin' you don't love her! And remember, I told you I'd fuck you up if you fucked her up."

"I remember."

"So give me one good reason why I shouldn't—after my parents leave, of course," Damon said, checking behind him to make sure their mothers didn't overhear their conversation.

"I love her," Gunnar said.

"Sure got a funny way of showing it."

Gunnar tensed and his eyes narrowed at the burger he'd been flipping. He tried to fix his face to a neutral expression, but it slipped to annoyance when he faced the owner of the voice. "Lucas."

"Daniels," Quincy replied, looking just as pleased to see him as Gunnar was. "I brought the liquor," Quincy said to Damon.

"Cool, the cooler's by the stereo," Damon said, pointing with the fork in the proper direction and turning back to tend to his food. Gunnar and Quincy had a mini standoff before Quincy walked away. Gunnar clenched his jaw and scowled at the hot dogs.

"Don't even go lookin' like that," Damon said. "He's a decent guy."

"He hurt Tyler."

"So did you," Damon reminded him, his voice suddenly icy. "But Q's been here helping her through it while you licked your wounds in Norway. Cut the guy some slack."

Talk about living in a shattered glass house. Gunnar was no better than Quincy.

Speaking of, he returned to the grill and stood beside Gunnar, watching the two men barbecue to perfection.

"Stomach's grumblin'," Quincy murmured.

"Hey," Damon said, his basting brush reaching across Gunnar toward Quincy. "No droolin' on mah grill."

Quincy snorted and rolled his eyes, but presented a can of beer. "Want."

"Godsend, man," Damon said, accepting the offering. He popped it open and took a swig. "Yeah, man, yeah."

Something cool touched Gunnar's bicep, and he looked down to see another can of beer. He met eyes with Quincy, and saw nothing but sincerity. It made him relieved and uncomfortable at the same time. "Thanks."

Quincy nodded but said nothing right away. He opened his own beer can and took a sip. "Welcome back."

Immediately Gunnar's guard went up, but he hid it by opening his beer and taking a large gulp. "Good to be back."

Quincy nodded again. "Enjoy your trip?"

Gunnar took his spatula and took the finished burgers and hot dogs off the grill and onto the aluminum-lined shelf in front of him. "It was necessary."

"Was it also necessary not to contact Tyler at all?"

Gunnar didn't appreciate the accusation in his tone, even if it was warranted. He felt Damon's hand on his forearm and the tension in his body eased somewhat.

Quincy raised an eyebrow, not the least bit threatened by Gunnar, which Gunnar thought was a mistake. "You keep claiming you're better than I am, and so far you've not proven that very well."

"Q," Damon said warningly.

Quincy shrugged. "She might not love me anymore, Damon, but I'm not gonna let no one hurt her, *especially* the man she loves."

Gunnar immediately backed away from the grill, not wanting to ruin the meat or ram his fist into Quincy's face. The worst part was Quincy's point was valid, but Gunnar didn't like being on the receiving end of the "Treat Tyler Right" talk, and definitely not when he deserved it.

"Oh, my *God*! Is that my baby?!"

Gunnar turned around to see a glowing Wendy walk in carrying a casserole dish. Mrs. Wilkes went to her and took the dish out of her hands, giving it to her husband who had approached and kissed Wendy's cheek. Damon passed Gunnar and waited patiently behind his mother so he could hold his fiancée, while Gunnar waited not quite as patiently to see his woman.

Hopefully, Tyler still considered herself his woman.

Quincy made his way to the glass door, drawing up Gunnar's guard. He saw brown arms come around Quincy's waist, and Gunnar's heart plummeted into his stomach.

"What? No hug?"

Wendy was coming toward him, Damon staring at her with a look of such devotion. Gunnar gave her a genuine grin and granted her request.

"Hello," Gunnar said quietly.

"I should hurt you," Wendy muttered into his chest.

"I do deserve it."

"But I'll save those honors for Tyler," Wendy said, pulling back and scowling at him. "No phone call?"

"No excuse," Gunnar admitted, bowing his head.

"At least you know that, some of my regard for you has returned, but only a little bit, about the size of an ant."

"Ouch."

"That's how Tyler's been feeling since you dropped off the face of the earth in Norway!"

Gunnar glanced to the side to see his mother giving a look of agreement to Wendy's words.

There was nothing he could say to Wendy, at least in this setting, that was appropriate, but in the end, he didn't owe answers to her. He owed them to Tyler.

But it was hard to say anything when the sight of her hair free about her head and shoulders wearing a deep red halter and a denim skirt made him breathless. And when she pinned those eyes on him, all he wanted to do was get on his knees before her and beg for forgiveness.

How could he have stayed away from her for so long?

TWENTY

Did it bother Gunnar that Tyler's arm tightened around Quincy's waist when they finally made eye contact? Absolutely, but he knew he didn't have the right to get angry. They'd had a history long before he'd entered her life; and given the past few weeks, their relationship had clearly reformed.

But into what?

Gunnar saw his mother approaching in his peripheral vision, and he managed to tear his eyes away from Tyler to greet her.

"Is that she?" Tekla asked, looking right at Tyler. Gunnar nodded. "She is stunning."

"Breathtaking," Gunnar said.

"Introduce me to my future daughter-in-law," Tekla demanded, hooking her arm through her son's and looking at him with a twinkling eye.

Gunnar grinned and kissed her mother's cheek. "*Jeg er glad i deg*."

"I know," Tekla said, and guided her son to Tyler. "Hello, Tyler? I'm Tekla, Gunnar's mother."

Tyler's eyes widened and she stepped back a little. Gunnar frowned, wondering why she appeared so frightened, but when she turned around and held out her hand, he saw a woman who looked like an older version of Wendy grasp it.

"Oh," Gunnar murmured.

"Irony of ironies," Tyler said with a small smile. "Gunnar, Mrs. Daniels, I'd like for you to meet *my* mother Carmen Colón Carver."

"*Hola*," Mrs. Carver said with a timid smile and she nodded her head. "Hello."

"*Hola*," Tekla returned. "*¿Cómo está usted*?"

"*Estoy muy bien*, *¿Y usted*?"

"*Estoy perfecta*, *muchas gracias*."

"*De nada. ¿Es él su hijo*?"

"*Sí, mi niño mayor*," Tekla said with pride.

Mrs. Carver nodded again. "May I speak with him privately?" She spoke this in English this time.

"Only if I may speak with your lovely daughter," Tekla replied.

"Of course."

Gunnar and Tyler gave each other wary looks before their mothers pushed them in the opposite direction. Gunnar wanted to touch Tyler when she passed him, but he didn't. Tyler didn't make eye contact with him, but he knew she felt his eyes on her.

"*Hijo*, *por favor*," Mrs. Carver said quietly. Gunnar breathed slowly but smiled, and held out his arm for her to take. "*Muchas gracias*."

"*De nada*," Gunnar replied, his Spanish no where near as fluid as his mother's, but Mrs. Carver seemed to appreciate his effort considering the smile she gave him. They went into the dining room. Since the majority of the food was outside and they were away from the main area of traffic, they were afforded privacy. Gunnar held out her seat at the head of the rectangular table and she thanked him again, and Gunnar sat perpendicular to her. When he was settled, Mrs. Carver held out her hand on the table and he put his inside it. Mrs. Carver closed her fingers around his hand and squeezed.

Painfully.

"*Usted duele a mi hija*," Mrs. Carver said, her voice still quiet, but there was an undercurrent of fury as well.

"¡*Lo siento*!" Gunnar gasped, amazed such a tiny woman could exert such pressure. Mrs. Carver looked at him carefully, and Gunnar prayed the sincerity in his eyes outweigh the pain he knew was there as well.

"*Yo le creo*," Mrs. Carver said and relaxed her grip. Her other hand smoothed the back of his. "¿*Por qué*?"

"I didn't want to go through it again," Gunnar said quietly.

"¿*Qué*?"

"I didn't want to watch her die."

Carmen's eyes widened. "¿*Se muere*?"

Though Gunnar suspected Mrs. Carver knew the story, she didn't know his interpretation of it. So, once again, he spilled out his heart to a mother, Tyler's mother this time, and took her maternal compassion like a sponge took water. Sometimes his voice broke, other times it got stronger—especially when he spoke of his love for Tyler. When he grew quiet, very quiet, was when he recalled how utterly lifeless Tyler looked sprawled on the ground, and he stopped talking altogether when he heard Mrs. Carver sniffle and press her nose to the back of his hand.

"*Hijo*," she murmured. "*Hijo*."

Gunnar scooted his chair around and embraced Mrs. Carver fully. She mourned what could've been; what almost was. Gunnar understood that, and it had taken him three weeks before he could rejoice in what actually was—Tyler, alive, and hopefully much better.

"*Usted adora a mi hija*," Mrs. Carver said, and Gunnar knew it wasn't a question.

"*Tyler es mi corazón y mi vida, mi amor*," Gunnar whispered into Mrs. Carver's ear.

"*Yo le creo*," Mrs. Carver said again after some seconds had passed, and she squeezed Gunnar tightly. "*Pero, mi hija...*"

"I've messed up—"

"Yes," Mrs. Carver said, her tone firm but forgiving. "So did I, with her father, their father."

Gunnar knew the story. "I'm sorry."

"No matter how much two people love each other, they can still hurt each other," Mrs. Carver said sadly. "I didn't get a chance to fix it with my husband, even if we both knew until his dying breath how much we loved each other."

Gunnar held her hands in his and squeezed gently. "Do you think she'd let me."

"She still has to fix herself first," Mrs. Carver warned. "Are you willing to take her broken?"

"I'm willing to do anything I have to do," Gunnar said assuredly. "At the very least, I can love her."

"At the most," Mrs. Carver corrected, and cupped his strong jaw in her hand. "Through everything."

Gunnar closed his eyes and kissed the palm of Mrs. Carver's hand. When he broke the kiss and opened his eyes, he saw Tyler standing behind her mother, her eyes bloodshot and her bottom lip between her teeth. Gunnar stood, his eyes fixed on her form, his hands pulsing with the need to touch her.

"Are you hungry, Carmen?" Tekla asked, coming into the dining room as well.

"*Sí*," Mrs. Carver said and Tyler helped her mother stand. Mrs. Carver grasped her daughter's cheeks and pulled her head down so she could kiss her forehead. Tyler let out a small sob.

"*Te amo, mi corazón*," Mrs. Carver whispered.

"I love you too," Tyler said just as softly. Gunnar saw his mother squeeze Tyler's shoulder, and Tyler gave her a small smile. Tekla grasped Mrs. Carver's elbow gently and they walked slowly back to the party. Tyler watched their progress while Gunnar watched her.

"*Du ser flott ut*."

She turned to him, frowning. "What?"

He swallowed and gripped the chair in front of him. "You look beautiful."

Tyler glanced down at herself and smoothed out her clothes. She took a deep breath. "Thank you."

Gunnar nodded. "*Du er min engel*."

Her head snapped up to look at him, and her cheeks turned red. "Gunnar..."

"You are," he said, speaking now in English. "My angel. *Jeg synes du er fantastisk*."

"Gunnar, I can barely grasp Spanish and my mother speaks it!"

"You'll learn Norwegian quickly," he said, smiling a little bit.

"I will?"

"Yes," Gunnar said, moving from behind the chair and approaching her slowly. "I'll teach you. I know my mother must've started, Inge—"

"Gunnar—"

"*Jeg er her for deg*," he said, stopping when he was directly in front of her. His hands tingled, knowing they were so close to the chocolate satin of her skin. "I am here for you. We all are."

"You left me," Tyler said, the resignation in her voice piercing him more than her anger could. "You didn't call, didn't check up on me...you just *left*!"

He couldn't contain himself. He cupped her cheeks in his hands and touched their foreheads together. She didn't pull away, but she didn't lean into him, either.

"*Jeg elsker deg*," he whispered. "I love you."

"You left me."

"I couldn't, I—" He kissed her forehead hard. Tyler braced herself against his chest, but Gunnar moved his hands from her face to wrap his arms around her. He held her close and kissed the top of her head. "Aurora."

"Why didn't you tell me about her?" Tyler asked. "I shouldn't have had to hear that from your mother."

"It hurt too much."

"But you told Wendy? And apparently Damon. But not me?"

"I wasn't going to snap at them," Gunnar admitted.

"But you would've snapped at me?"

"Yes." Gunnar felt fear and rage rise inside of him and he held her tighter to tamp it down. "I would've...I would've said the most awful things to you."

"And that's why you left and didn't talk to me."

"Yes."

Gunnar didn't know how long they stood there quietly, him holding her, but some of the tension in his body eased upon that confession. While it was true he didn't want to relive the pain of watching someone he loved die, in his heart, Gunnar had known Tyler would be okay, and with that knowledge, he would've let her have the full brunt of his anger. He would've also given her the anger that belonged to Aurora, but it wasn't Tyler's to have, so he decided to leave until he had full control of himself. Even still, he wanted to give Tyler a rather large piece of his mind.

Her arms moved from his chest to wrap around his waist. His body relaxed even more when she squeezed him.

"I would've deserved it," she mumbled into his chest.

"Not all of it." He closed his eyes and inhaled her smell. "Peppermint?"

"I sucked on one before we got here," she said, pulling back to look into his eyes. "I missed you, Gunnar."

"*Jeg ha savnet du*," he replied, unsure if she would allow him to kiss her, but wanting to so very much.

"I'm sorry I scared you," she said, and he could hear the tears in her voice.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you," Gunnar said, clenching his jaw so his own tears wouldn't fall. Gentle thumbs grazed her cheekbones.

"I'm eating now," she told him. "White foods even."

Gunnar smiled. "Are you?"

"Yes. Just the other day I went to *Jessie's* and got the two-piece chicken platter."

Gunnar laughed, touching his nose to hers. "Trying to clog those arteries again?"

"Don't judge me," Tyler muttered, rubbing their noses together.

"I'll love you instead," Gunnar promised, holding her so close he felt her heart beat against his chest. Their rhythms seemed to synchronize and he smiled.

"I'd like that."

"And I'll love you even when you can't love yourself," he whispered. Their mouths brushed as he spoke.

"I'll do my best to love myself," Tyler promised.

"And I'll make sure to remind you to love yourself as much as I love you," Gunnar said, giving in and pressing a chaste kiss to her lips.

"And I promise your love won't be in vain," Tyler breathed, returning the kiss, but harder.

Gunnar moaned and slipped his tongue between her teeth. She tasted delicious, and he felt his body primed to love her as he hadn't done in far too long. His hands slid down to her bottom and squeezed the generous globes with fervor.

"Yeah, I don't blame you, man."

Tyler squealed and broke the kiss. "Boy!"

Gunnar chuckled, not so bothered that Quincy had interrupted their kiss. "It's so squeezable."

"And she likes it too," Quincy said, winking at Tyler. "Don't let her tell you different."

"I'm about *five seconds from*—"

"Kissing me again," Gunnar said, nibbling her bottom lip. "Or one, give or take four seconds..."

Tyler kissed him back enthusiastically, and Gunnar heard Quincy mutter something about keeping their plates warm before he completely surrendered to the woman he held in his arms.

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Pigs in a blanket—it had been a good minute since Tyler had had some, and she was close to eating more than her fair share. But it seemed others were too busy schmoozing and being beautiful to care about the glorious nibbles that were out for the guests to snack on.

"You like them?"

Surprised, Tyler swallowed the bite she'd been chewing before it was ready to be. She looked down at the young girl standing next to her wearing a short-sleeved floral print princess-cut dress. There was a light blue ribbon holding her blonde hair in a ponytail, and she was looking at Tyler with blue eyes so large she foresaw the child's father sitting on a porch and polishing guns in the future.

"I like them very much," Tyler said, and she plucked one from her plate. "Do you want one?"

The little girl smiled, broadcasting the fact she'd lost an upper tooth and a bottom one. "Thank you," she said and took Tyler's offering. "You're gonna be my aunt."

Tyler was glad she wasn't eating, or else she definitely would've choked. "Excuse me?"

"That's what Mommy said." The girl nodded. "She said you were gonna marry Uncle Gunnar and—"

"*Singe!*"

The little girl blushed, but she hid her giggles behind tiny hands. "I wasn't supposed ta tell?"

Inge approached them wearing a sharp and alluring long-sleeved black jersey dress with an overly large red belt, shaking her head and putting a maternal hand atop her daughter's head.

"It doesn't matter if you were or weren't, since you already did, *kjæreste*."

"I'm sorry," Singe said contritely to Tyler. "Are you upset?" She bit into the pig in the blanket Tyler had given her.

Tyler smiled "No, I'm not."

Singe sagged with relief. "Okay! I'm gonna tell Uncle Gunnar you're not mad he wants to marry you!"

"Singe!" Inge cried, but the little girl was already weaving through the crowds to find her beloved uncle who was talking to his brother-in-law and his parents who had also attended their daughter's celebration. After the barbecue at Damon and Wendy's, Gunnar's parents had flown out to LA where

they were staying with their daughter and her family until after the agency's anniversary party.

"Are you *sure* I can't send her FedEx to Durham? She eats like a bird, I promise," Inge sighed.

"And by bird, you mean—"

"Pterodactyl," Inge muttered, "and by that, I mean she could eat one by herself!" The women laughed and Inge took another pig in the blanket from Tyler's plate. "I guess the correct phrasing was Singe *eats* birds and likes them too!"

"I'm a chicken fan myself," Tyler said. "And thus I have fulfilled my quota for affirming stereotypes today."

Ingle giggled again and reached for another pig. "No, Tyler, no stereotypes for you."

"No?"

"No," Inge insisted and arched an eyebrow. "Are you *sure* you don't want to model? Ever?"

"Can you imagine!"

"I can!" Inge said, her eyes sparkling with a pitch. "And with Gunnar too? You two would be the new Iman and David Bowie!"

"Except Gunnar would be Iman!"

Inge arched an eyebrow again. "None of that! Gunnar would still be David, and we all know it!"

It made Tyler feel light and shyly pleased to hear Inge speak so highly of her. As someone who had significant pull in the entertainment business, Inge's pronouncements were rarely ignored and often heeded. If Inge thought Tyler had a chance at modeling, then Tyler did. However, Tyler still didn't think she was ready for that particular spotlight.

In the two months since Gunnar's return to the States, their relationship had strengthened in a way that surprised and bolstered Tyler. There had been setbacks, especially when, upon starting her tweaked workout regimen, she'd gained weight. Gunnar refused to let her feel discouraged, though.

"I'd miss these curves if they completely went away, you know," Gunnar had said as he wrapped his arms behind her as she stood on his electronic scale. The number increased, and they had laughed. Gunnar decided they would just try to maintain her current weight, which was lower than when she'd met Gunnar, but not as low as when she'd been on her extreme diet and taking those pills.

Tyler's chiropractor had given her a passing grade at her last appointment, telling her to keep up the good work. Wendy and Valerie helped Tyler update her wardrobe to find clothes that were flattering instead of frumpy. And Carmen made sure Tyler ate at least three full meals a day and had put fruit snacks in the refrigerator at Soul Cuts just in case Tyler got hungry between them.

Baby preparations also had kept Tyler active and in high spirits. Wendy was getting huge, something that shocked everyone considering she'd been tiny even into her fifth month; but it had seemed when month six had arrived, the baby had grown exponentially.

"That's my boy," Damon would say proudly, especially after the obstetrician had confirmed it was indeed a boy, "the linebacker—"

"No, sir!" Wendy had said, scowling at her fiancée and rubbing her belly wearily. "The way this boy kicks? Look out, John Kasay!"

Tyler knew they were glad they'd gotten the wedding out of the way—even if it had been a surprise one for all the guests involved. Turned out the barbecue was actually a cover for the wedding. Everyone had been eating and having a good time when suddenly Damon had appeared wearing a white linen button-down shirt and cream khaki pants followed by Wendy wearing a white strapless tunic and cream capris. There had been a white tulip tucked in her ear and a bouquet of white roses in her hands.

Everyone's mouth had dropped open.

"Oops," Damon had said with his customary snicker. "My bad. Did we forget to tell y'all we were gettin' married today?"

Damon's mother had hit him with an empty paper towel roll repeatedly, sobbing with anger and happiness that her baby had tricked her.

"At least the boy invited us, damn!" Damon's father had said, and everyone had laughed, conceding his point.

Wendy had gotten Tyler a small bouquet of red roses and she stood up with Wendy while Damon had pinned a red tulip to Gunnar's blue button-down shirt to designate him as the best man. The ceremony had been quick, and by the time Damon and Wendy had shared their first kiss, there were very few dry eyes in the backyard.

Wendy hadn't thrown the bouquet after the wedding. In fact, she'd had the audacity to walk to Tyler and put it in her hands.

"Wendy!" Tyler had exclaimed, blushing and mortified. "You can't do this!"

"It's my wedding! I can do what I want!" Wendy had replied. "And if it makes you feel any better, Gunnar's gonna get my garter, so what you say about that?"

"I say you betta be lucky you preggers," Tyler had said through gritted teeth.

Wendy had given her a wide mockery of a smile and patted her belly. "Blessed and highly favored!"

Gunnar had straight showed out when it had been time to put the garter on her. At first, he'd started properly by using his hands, but once the garment had gotten over her knee, he'd used his nose to slide it up as far as it could go on her thigh, which had been about mid-way. With each nudge of his nose, he'd also nipped and kissed her skin, making her jump and her panties grow damper with each contact.

"I hate you," she'd muttered amid the laughter, squeals, and catcalls of their audience.

"Then I think I like your definition of hate," Gunnar had said, ending her sweet torture with a wink and standing. "Time to dance, *kjære*."

"Dance?" Tyler asked, pulled from her memories. She and Inge had lapsed into a comfortable silence as they watched the partygoers, but now Inge was pointing into the crowd.

"Yes, right over there," Tekla said, who had just joined her and Inge. Tyler's eyes followed Tekla's finger to see Singe standing on top of Gunnar's feet as they danced to music that, until then, had just been background. The revelers had parted ways to provide a makeshift dance floor for them, but the pair was too focused on making sure Singe maintained her balance to notice. Tyler fell even more in love with Gunnar at the sight. A man who adored children—could he get any better?

"I'm glad I didn't tell her you'd be giving her a cousin too," Inge said under her breath. "*That* would've been awkward!"

"Inge!"

Inge laughed, not bothered by Tyler's or her mother's chastisement. "I'm gonna love having you and Wendy in this family!"

Tyler blushed at that comment but said nothing, especially when Tekla's smirk said she agreed with her daughter's statement. The song transitioned to another, but now Singe was in her uncle's arms blinking slowly. Roger, a tall brunet with kind eyes and demeanor, came and relieved Gunnar of his daughter. Euan had brought up the rear, the slumbering pixie-faced brunette Greta curled around her grandfather. After Gunnar had transferred Singe to Roger, the men looked at the women in their lives, and all three smiled in a way that made her, Inge, and Tekla catch their breaths.

"Oh!" Tyler gasped.

"He's gettin' some tonight!" Inge declared. Tyler felt as if she'd spoken for all three of them.

An hour later, Tyler and Gunnar were on the beach below Roger and Inge's home. Though there was no moon tonight, the lights from the other beachfront houses provided enough illumination for their stroll. They walked quietly hand in hand, though Gunnar held both of their shoes in his free hand. Tyler hadn't felt this at peace in a long time, and she treasured the sensation. As they walked back to Inge and Roger's house, Tyler rested her cheek against Gunnar's bicep and smiled when he kissed the top of her head. No words had been exchanged during the entire walk, but she'd felt as close to Gunnar as she'd ever had during their entire relationship.

Eventually they returned to where they had started, but now there were flameless lanterns, a plaid blanket, a bowl of strawberries, and a chilling wine bottle with two wine glasses on either side of the ice bucket in which the bottle sat.

"Wow," Tyler mumbled, squeezing Gunnar's hand as she lifted her head from his shoulder and stood straighter.

"Do you like it?" Gunnar asked, kissing a shoulder the slim straps of her mulberry knee-length empire dress exposed.

"It's gorgeous, Gunnar," Tyler admitted, and her body felt flush with romance and excitement. Gunnar sat down first, then held out a hand to help settle her between his legs. The ocean waves gently crashed along the shore, and the sea-salt air mingled nicely with the sweet, fruity scent of the strawberries and Gunnar's natural mountain aroma. Tyler felt so relaxed that she almost fell asleep a few times, but Gunnar would squeeze her hip to bring her back to alertness.

"Can't sleep yet," he whispered.

Tyler pouted and burrowed into him. "Why not?" He was too comfortable to ward off slumber.

He chuckled. "You haven't said yes yet."

Tyler frowned. "Huh?"

Instead of answering, Gunnar held a strawberry to her mouth. "Open."

Tyler did, and when he placed the pointed end of the strawberry to her mouth, she bit down. Her teeth closed around something hard, and she gasped in surprised.

"What the—!" Strawberries didn't have pits!

"Let me check that out for you," Gunnar said softly. His large fingers pulled away strawberry flesh to reveal a platinum-band ring with gold topaz gems leading up to a large golden pearl center.

"It's not my birthday," Tyler muttered, knowing good and well Gunnar knew that, but refusing to assume there was another reason he held a ring in his hand.

"No, it's not," Gunnar agreed, laughter in his voice. "I do believe it is not November twenty-fifth."

"No..."

"However," Gunnar said, dropping his voice and taking her left hand in his. "I wouldn't mind the late-August day to commemorate something else?"

"What?" She sounded strangled, she knew, but she couldn't take in a proper breath.

"The day you agreed to marry me."

Tyler turned her face into his neck. She didn't cry, too overwhelmed with emotion to do so. She breathed him in deep, infused her lungs and insides with his presence and spirit. Gunnar held her close, murmuring softly in Norwegian, words she instinctively knew were assurances.

"*Du er min sol, måne og stjerner*," he whispered against her temple. "*Du fyller mitt hjerte med glede*." Gunnar pulled back to kiss her forehead, and she fell into his gray eyes that were so intense and full of love. "*Jeg elsker deg*, Tyler. *Vil du gifte deg med meg*?"

She could no longer hear the ocean. She no longer saw the lanterns, the ring, the house behind them, the sky. All she saw were Gunnar and his eyes, eyes that had pierced her and claimed her really from the moment they had locked on her. Though they hadn't started off on the greatest of feet, they'd righted themselves, falling first into friendship, and then into something deeper. Even through their trials, trials that would've decimated other relationships, they had managed to find their way back to each other and bond stronger than ever.

"Tyler? *Vær så snill*? *Vil du gifte deg med meg*?"

Her ears and brain might not have been able to decipher all the words, but her heart had no trouble understanding them. She cupped his cheek and kissed him sweetly, breaking apart briefly to utter one word she'd called up from the bottom of her heart.

"Yes."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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