

Marie
Rochelle



BENEATH THE
Surface

Red Rose Publishing

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By

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Dedication:

To Wanda:

My Dear Friend, it has been a year and I still miss you. I wish you were here.

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Chapter One

The baseball flew over Rynne Slater's head as she tried to jump up and catch it with her mitt. A second later she heard the sound of glass breaking at the house several feet behind her. "Jalen, didn't I tell you not to throw the ball so hard," she scolded her young nephew.

"Sorry, Aunt Rynne," he mumbled, walking over to her.

"I brought us out here to this field so that wouldn't happen. Now we have to go over and apologize," She pointed at the house behind them. Grabbing her nine-year-old nephew's hand, she tugged him behind her toward the SUV parked on the grass.

"No, I don't want to go over there," Jalen shouted, jerking his hand from hers.

"Jalen Slater, what in the world is wrong with you?" Rynne asked, reaching for her nephew's arm again.

"I said no," he yelled, moving further back from her. "Do you know who lives in that house? The scary man," he whispered.

"Honey, I don't have a clue what you are talking about. Are you saying you're scared of the man inside of that house?" She asked glancing over her shoulder back at the run-down house.

Like most nine-year-old boys, Jalen didn't want to come off like he was afraid of anything. "I'm not scared of him. I just don't want to go over there with you. Can't you go and get it?"

"Wonderful, if you aren't afraid we can go get the ball and I'll tell him we will pay for the window." Walking in the direction of the SUV Rynne was halfway there before she realized Jalen wasn't behind her.

"I'm still not going anywhere near his house," Jalen told her.

"Fine. I'll go and you can stay in the car because I can't waste anymore time arguing about this, Jalen."

Rynne moaned wondering what had gotten into Jalen. He usually didn't act like this around her.

"Will you please come on?" Rynne shouted back at her young nephew. "I know your dad is wondering where we're at."

Climbing into the car, she waited for Jalen to get in and fasten his seatbelt.

"I still think we need to go back home and forget all about the ball. I know dad will buy me another one," Jalen stated, staring over at her.

"No, I want you to learn how to admit when you're wrong about something." Rynne pulled out onto the dirt road and headed towards the house.

"Well, you're going to be the one talking to the scary guy, not me," Jalen told her, folding his arms over his small chest.

Pulling off the grass onto the street, Rynne chose to ignore her overly intelligent nephew. Driving the short distance to the house, she noticed at one time that the house could have been stunning with its porch that stretched around the front. A flower garden used to beautify the front at one time, but now, strewn about were dead plants and trash. Jalen had a right to be afraid of this place.

“Stay in the car and I’ll see if anyone is home.”

Easing out of the car, Rynne walked up the front steps, rung the doorbell and waited for an answer. Standing there, she got a better chance to survey the area and realized it would be most homeowner’s dreams with the trees and one time lush grass. *Why would anyone allow such a beautiful piece of land to waste away like this?* Wanting to make sure no one was home she pressed the doorbell one last time and waited for an answer.

* * *

Pierce McMahon stood on the other side of the door looking through the peephole at the attractive African American woman on the other side. He noticed how the red T-shirt and white shorts showed off her long legs. Tossing the baseball up in the air he knew this was what she had come after. He had been watching her and the young boy playing baseball on his property debating if he should scare them off. After most people caught a look at him up close, the words he spoke didn’t matter. He hadn’t seen a woman as pretty as she was in a very long time.

Living this far from town, most people didn't come for a visit except his over protective older sister. Hearing the doorbell ring for a third time Pierce realized she wasn't about to leave without the ball. Pulling the hood to camouflage as much of his face as possible, he yanked open the door, "Yeah, can I help you?" He growled at the woman.

When woman turned around and he got lost in a pair of rich brown eyes that reminded him of Hershey's chocolate. He knew he would never again in his life meet a better looking woman than the one on his porch. Feeling self-conscious, he yanked his hood further over his face.

"Hi! My name is Rynne Slater and that's my nephew Jalen."

She said pointing to the boy who was trying to hide in the car.

"I just came over to say we're sorry for breaking your window."

She smiled at him and he felt a tingling in the pit of his stomach.

"Also, can I get our ball back?" Rynne asked, pointing to the ball in his hand.

Pierce stepped out a few more inches on the porch to get a better smell of Rynne's perfume. It truly had been such a long time since a woman had been that close to him and he wanted to burn this one into his memory.

"It broke my window," his voice rumbled.

"I know and I want to pay for all the damages," she offered with a small smile.

“There’s no need for that,” he said, shoving the ball at her. “It will just match the other holes in the windows.”

Reaching for the ball Rynne’s hand accidentally brushed his and the heat that shot through his body shocked him that Pierce snatched his hand back and went back in the house, slamming the door in her face.

* * *

Standing on the porch, Rynne stared at the closed door finding it hard to leave. She didn’t know why but for some odd reason she felt an electric shot when he touched her hand, but it could have been her mind playing tricks. Or maybe it was due to the lack of food and too much sun, she thought as she hurried off the porch and got inside her car.

“What did he say?”

Jalen asked, once they were back on the road heading toward his house.

Rynne didn’t answer her nephew’s question for a while because she couldn’t get her mind off the pair of sapphire eyes that had glared at her from underneath the black hood. Why was he covering up his face? Ever since she could remember, she had always been curious about the unknown and the guy from the house stirred her interest.

“He didn’t want me to pay for the window,” she answered, turning into the SUV into her brother’s driveway. Rynne wasn’t surprised that Bryon was still in the garage working on his car.

“Hey dad, Aunt Rynne talked to the scary man.” Jalen yelled, getting out of the car as he ran into the house.

Her brother placed the rag on the top of his car and glanced at her over the hood of his new BMW.

“Sis, what’s he talking about?”

Rynne walked into the garage and repeated the day’s events to her older brother.

“It wasn’t a big thing as Jalen’s making it out to be. We were playing ball a little ways out of town in a field. The ball ended up breaking some guy’s window and I got it back from him. No big problem,” she muttered, looking at her brother.

“Listen, I don’t want you around Pierce McMahon again. He has a lot of problems and no one in the community likes him.” Byron picked up the rag off the car.

“Why? What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

“Have you seen him up close?” Bryon asked, tossing the rag into a bucket by the car.

What was wrong with his face? “No, I didn’t see him because he was wearing a hooded jacket”. *Plus, I was too caught up in his sexy cerulean eyes to look anywhere else on his face.*

“Consider yourself lucky; because once you do you will never be the same again,” Byron muttered.

“BYRON,” Rynne yelled at her brother. “Why are you being so mean?”

“You’re just here for the summer, so don’t take on another cause, okay?”

Byron walked over to her and kissed her on the cheek, “Let’s go inside because I’m pretty sure dinner is almost done.”

She followed her brother into the house but couldn’t get her mind off the man from this afternoon. She wasn’t trying to help another lost cause. She didn’t even know him that well to care about him, but Rynne did wonder what was wrong with Pierce’s face. Pierce, she liked the name, it fit the way his mesmerizing eyes stared at her.

* * *

Tapping his fingers against his bare chest as he laid in the bed, Pierce could still feel the warmth of her on them. If he had been the man he used to be he would have flirted with her and asked her out on a date. Race never mattered to him because he loved dating beautiful women and that woman from this morning was exquisite. He could never get her now with the way he looked.

Reaching up he ran a forefinger down the long scar from his temple to his dimpled chin and a matching one graced the other side of his face. He was lucky he found some hooded shirt able to cover them up better now, but if he moved the wrong way a person could still see them. People didn't like looking him straight in the eye anymore.

He had resorted having his food delivered because the scars frightened people on the street. How could he have been so dumb to think that maybe this town wouldn't mind his scars? Everywhere he went, Pierce McMahon was known as the 'Scary Man', 'Scars' or any other cruel name the neighborhood children gave to him. He didn't really fault them, but the adults knew better.

Jalen Slater didn't think he knew who he was, but he did. He was the first child to point and label him "Scary Man." Pierce remembered talking to Byron Slater about Jalen's comment and the man had said, "Why don't you go live in the woods where you belong?"

And he had lived out here for the past five years. Was the lady today Byron's wife? God, why was he thinking about her so much? It wasn't like he would ever see her again. Rolling over to his side, Pierce closed his eyes for a tormented night's sleep.

* * *

Eight o'clock in the morning a week later, a loud banging noise by the side of his window woke him up. Pulling on his sweat pants and hooded sweatshirt Pierce opened the front door. Walking around the side of the house wearing socks and no shoes, he noticed a parked truck and several men removing his broken window.

"What in the hell are you doing?" he roared.

The men turned to look at him.

"Miss Slater told us we needed to replace all the windows as soon as possible," a tall blond answered.

"I don't have the money for this," Pierce replied.

"Don't worry about it, sir, we've already been paid," the blond replied again.

He wanted to say more, but he didn't know what to say, so he turned, stormed back to the house slamming the front door. The crew stayed out there until around two o'clock in the afternoon replacing all the broken windows and their window planes. Only twice they had to come inside the house.

Around two-thirty, the doorbell rang again. Getting up off the couch he yanked the door open ready to tell his sister to go home, but got the shock of his life. Rynne was standing on the other side looking breathtaking in jeans and a black T-shirt. Was she trying to torment him with that killer body of hers?

"Hi, I just stopped by to make sure the windows got replaced," Rynne said, staring up at him.

Shoving his hands into his sweat pants Pierce stared down at her. He towered over her with his larger frame. Before he got the scars Miss Slater was definitely the kind of woman he would have asked out on a date, but not anymore.

“Can I come in?” She asked.

“No,” he mumbled, slamming the door in her face.

“If you don’t let me in now I’ll just come back tomorrow,” she yelled at the closed door. Rynne waited for five minutes, but he didn’t return.

“Fine, I’ll see you tomorrow, Mr. McMahon,” she yelled before leaving.

Standing with his back against the door Pierce listened to her car drive off, “No, you won’t,” he whispered in the big empty house.

* * *

“Are you crazy?” Tia Douglas snapped at her best friend sitting across from her at the local Taco Bell.

Rynne pushed the taco salad around on her plate. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, yes you do, girlfriend. Why are you out there in the wilderness trying to draw that man back out into the public? Do you know how happy everyone was when he moved out there by himself?”

“Tia, you can’t force a person to seclude himself like that, it’s wrong.”

“See, you aren’t here all the time. When he first moved here nobody would do anything but stare at his face. He’s probably happier out there by himself, too. Who wants people staring and pointing at you all the time?” She took a big bite into her Taco.

Rynne shoved the food away; hearing those opinions coming from her best friend’s mouth made her lose what little appetite she had.

“Tia, I’ll see you later,” Rynne said getting up from the table.

“Uh...mmm... why are you leaving? I thought we were going to spend the day together?”

“No, I forgot I had to do something,” she admitted, throwing her uneaten food away. Tia eyed her skeptically.

“Don’t do something you’ll regret later, Rynne.”

Waving over her shoulder as she walked away memories of how Pierce’s eyes raked her body stayed with her. He looked so haunted both times; he talked to her, no, barked out orders. Shaking off the feeling, Rynne headed back to Pierce’s house because she couldn’t stay away.

* * *

Pierce was sitting outside on the porch when Rynne drove up this time; if he had seen her coming he would have went into the house. He had spent the better

part of the day trying to forget her unique scent and here she was back to torment him.

“Good morning,” she said, stepping out of the car carrying a white bag. The smell of donuts passed his nose causing his mouth to water. It had been such a long time since someone brought him anything.

“Why won’t you leave me alone? Are you a stalker or just crazy?”

Feminine laughter echoed across the field.

“No, I’m neither. I wanted to make up for destroying your window.” Slowly, she moved up the steps until she was standing beside him. “Can I stay this time?”

Pierce rubbed his jaw thinking about how her curiosity about him wouldn’t last much long. Adjusting the hood he pointed to the chair away from him.

“You can sit there.”

Grinning, Rynne handed him the donuts. “Thanks for letting me stay.” Crossing her legs, sorrel eyes stared at the part of his face not covered by his hood.

“Aren’t you hot under that?” she asked, pointing to the hood.

* * *

Pierce finished off the last of the donut, wiping his fingers on the napkin and tossed it back into the donut bag?

“Miss Slater, I don’t know what game you’re playing, but I’m going inside the house and I don’t want you to come back again. I’m tired of being this town’s joke.”

Standing up, he opened the door and was about to slam it behind him when a hand stopped him.

“I wanted to be your friend; however, if you don’t want me to then I’ll leave you alone.”

Turning, Rynne walked to the first step and about to step down when his voice stopped her.

“It has been such a long time since I had a friend.”

“Well, you have a friend now, Mr. McMahon, and once I’m your friend it’s very hard to get rid of me,” Rynne said as she turned around to face him.

“Good, I want more donuts tomorrow,” he said, a half smile forming on his face.

Looking at her longer than he should have Pierce finally closed the door.

Chapter Two

Humming, she threw her keys down on the table in her hotel room. Byron had asked several times why she didn't want to stay with him and Jalen. Staying with her opinionated brother wasn't a part of her plans. Working eighteen-hour days had begun to take a toll on her body, so when Byron invited her for a visit she had said yes instantly. Kicking off her shoes, Rynne relaxed on the huge, comfortable bed and let her mind drift toward the mysterious Pierce McMahon.

Today, she noticed how guarded he acted about her visit. He kept saying he wanted to be left alone; however, her being there seemed to make him happy. Millions of questions were running through her mind and when she wanted answers, nothing stood in her way of getting them. Before it was all over, Pierce might have more friends than he ever thought possible. Drawing people out of their shells was something she was good at. Deep down, Rynne knew there was more she wanted from him. And she would make it happen.

* * * *

The next morning, Pierce was up at his usual time drinking a cup of coffee when the doorbell rang. Glancing at his watch he noticed it was only seven thirty which meant it was his sister Sally coming to give him her monthly lecture about being a hermit.

“I’m coming, stop ringing the damn doorbell,” he growled, opening the door.

He was stunned to see Rynne on the other side.

“Good, you’re a morning person, too,” she said, walking into his house carrying a bag of Krispy Krème donuts.

Sapphire eyes narrowed at her, “What are you doing here this early?”

“I wanted to keep you guessing,” Rynne said as she trotted past him. Moving a little bit to the left, he watched as Rynne place her bag on the kitchen table.

“If you don’t close the door something from the outside will come inside.”

Looking from the door to her, Pierce closed it a little more, but not completely. He still didn’t know what Rynne was up to.

“What if I’m a rapist?”

“I don’t think you’ll hurt me,” she honestly responded coming back into the room up to him. “If I had thought you were a threat I wouldn’t have came back and said I wanted us to be friends,” she muttered, touching his sleeve.

Pierce jerked his arm away from her.

“First rule, you should know as my friend, I never remove this hood while another person is around me. Second rule is never touch me out of pity. I know the urge to pity me is high, but don’t. Do you understand?” he asked, looking down at her.

Raising up her hands, Rynne moved away from him.

“Hey, that’s fine with me,” she muttered.

Nodding, he eased around her knockout body, to see what tasty donuts she brought to accompany his coffee. He was hungry and wanted something good to eat. He was trying to push how Rynne’s touch arousal him by thinking about food instead.

* * *

Sitting down in the seat across from Pierce, Rynne noticed how large his hands were and how his muscles flexed as he reached for a Glazed donut.

“Where are you from and why are you hiding out here in the wilderness?”

Chewing the last of the chocolate donut, he washed it down with his remaining coffee.

“I’m out here because your brother didn’t want me in town with anyone else,” he accused.

“Bryon is an idiot and you shouldn’t have listened to him. I want to apologize again for the way they treated you. My brother is the adult and knows better than to encourage Jalen’s behavior. So, are you going to allow that to hurt our blooming friendship?” Rynne questioned.

* * *

Pushing his chair back, he started to clear the table and thought about how lonely he was. What would it really hurt if he allowed himself to enjoy the time Rynne wanted to be around him? Studying her Pierce enjoyed how her perfect brown skin looked. Everything about her had a confidence; Rynne was a woman who got what she wanted. It did feel good having another person to talk with.

“Can I take your silence as a no?” Rynne asked.

“I wouldn’t mind if you came by for a visit once in a while,” he stated.

“I think you made a good decision and we can learn more about each other,” Rynne answered, beaming.

“I didn’t agree to any soul searching with you,” Pierce said, facing her from his position by the sink.

“Once we grow closer you won’t be able to resist me,” she explained, with a sexy wink.

His grip clenched on the counter behind him because it had been years since an attractive woman had talked to him or even been this close. *Stop it now. She doesn’t want anything else from you besides friendship.* Hell, he wasn’t still too sure why she even wanted that from him.

“Do you wear the hood even when you’re alone?” Rynne asked, reaching for his hood.

“I don’t have a reason to. I know what my face looks like.” Pierce replied moving his head away.

As Rynne was about to ask another question, her cell phone rang.

“Hello... no, I’m fine, why are you asking? I’m so sorry; I was with a friend,”

Rynne answered, winking at him again, “and I forgot all about the time.”

Ending the call she shoved the phone back into her purse and stood up.

“I’m glad we decided to try the friend thing. I’ll see you later.”

Breaking into a smile Rynne looked at him one last time and went out the front door.

Pierce stood at the kitchen window watching her drive off, “Did you really think someone as fascinating as Rynne wouldn’t have a boyfriend,” he mumbled.

* * *

“Why do you persist to do things that will bring shame to our family?” Byron yelled at his sister.

“Calm down before you fall down, big brother,” Rynne said, sitting in the chair.

Walking over to her Byron took the seat across from her.

“I don’t know how you knew I was even at his house.”

Was he keeping a watch on her?

“Chadwick was driving past and saw your car.”

“Are you having me followed?” She yelled, jumping from the seat.

Holding her slender wrist Byron shoved Rynne back in the chair.

“Hell, no, I wasn’t. Chad was honestly passing by and saw the car. Can’t you find someone better to befriend while you’re on vacation?” he muttered.

“Why should I?” She spat, tired of her brother always trying to run her life. “I like Pierce.”

Byron opened his mouth to speak, but Rynne cut him off with a wave of her hand.

“You can’t tell me who my friends can and can’t be.”

Byron rubbed his bald head knowing the reason for his early hair loss was sitting right in front of him.

“Don’t you remember the time you loved helping people?”

Looking into eyes two shades darker than his, he nodded, “But can’t you understand I don’t want you to get hurt?”

“You’ve always looked out for me, but you don’t have to now. We’re only friends: besides, I’m twenty-eight years old and I don’t need a babysitter.”

Rynne said, but she didn’t feel the words. She knew she wanted to be more than friends with Pierce, yet she wasn’t quite sure how far she wanted it to go.

Byron moved the conversation to the topic he called her about.

* * *

Pushing back his hair, Pierce rubbed his throbbing leg knowing it made him feel less of a man and nothing could be done without more money.

However, he wasn’t about to take any more handouts from his sister. Sally had come by yesterday an hour after Rynne had left.

He knew the two wouldn’t get along. Sally carried the same racist views as his parents; being white made you perfect. If a person was of another nationality, they weren’t even worth the time of day.

His sister had always protected him since she was five years older than him. Sally had just celebrated her fortieth birthday by divorcing her third husband. For reasons unknown to him she couldn't stay married longer than five years. Problems seemed to appear in the sixth year of her marriage and by the seventh year, Sally was divorced.

He had actually liked Luke the few times he had met the man. Luke was able to look him straight in the eyes without his hood and not flinch. Luke shouldn't have married his temperamental sister because once you got on her bad side nothing you did would get you back on the good side. He knew Sally would disown him if she got wind of Rynne stepping foot in his house. It was a good thing Sally lived out of town and drove in once a week for the two-hour drive.

Sitting up on the side of the bed he massaged his leg thinking about how good Rynne looked inside his house. She didn't seem scared of him in the least. What was he going to do about Rynne anyway?

Rynne wasn't the type to have him as a friend or an enemy. And he knew for a fact her brother and Chadwick would warn her against coming here again. Pierce knew he had seen the last of Rynne Slater. Rolling into bed, he fell asleep with Rynne out of his mind.

Two weeks later, Pierce stood in the middle of his living room pissed at himself that he was upset Rynne hadn't come back like she promised him. She hadn't come around since the phone call in his kitchen. He ran his fingers through his thick hair, cursing himself a thousand times over. Once again he had become the joke of the community. Did they constantly have to single him out? They had forced him out here and they still wanted to torture him. Rynne had been sent out here as a joke to torment him and like the fool he was he ate up the attention.

Shoving his hands in his back pockets, Pierce headed toward the front door to sit outside on the porch. Just as his hand was about to touch the doorknob, a knock came followed by, "Pierce, are you home?"

It was Rynne. He jumped back from the door, startled to hear her voice.

"Let me in, Pierce," she coaxed.

Looking out the peephole, he saw her long hair pulled back in a bun showing off her long neck. He also liked the long denim dress hugging her perfect body.

"Haven't you missed me?"

* * *

Waiting for Pierce to unlock the door, Rynne noticed again how bad the house looked outside. How could anyone feel good about themselves living

this away? Making her way around the side of the house, Rynne loved how the home was built. He could do so much with this house if he took the time and effort.

“I didn’t think you would be back,” he said, behind her.

Rynne looked over her shoulder to find Pierce wearing a short-sleeved hooded shirt. Shaking her head Rynne walked up to him, “Why are you wearing that?” she said, gesturing toward his head.

“Where have you been the last two weeks?”

Falling down in a chair Rynne grinned at him, “So you did miss me?”

* * *

Pierce looked at Rynne wondering about her age. *What if she’s younger than me?* She didn’t act real mature especially at times like this.

“How old are you?” he asked, moving to stand in front of her.

“Why?”

“Tell me,” he demanded.

“I turned twenty-eight the end of last month,” she confessed.

He reached out and ran a finger down her smooth flawless cheek whispering, “You look so much younger.”

“Is that a problem?”

He ran his thumb from her cheek easing it closer to her tempting mouth. “No, it isn’t a problem,” he answered. “I was just thinking about how young you act sometimes.” His thumb rubbed gently over her full bottom lip.

“I missed you,” he admitted.

Rynne touched his hand removing it from her mouth. “Don’t do that,” she whispered.

Shaking off his hurt Pierce moved away from her. “So, what brings you back to scary man’s house,” he asked.

“Stop that this instant. I don’t want to hear those words coming from your mouth,” Rynne snapped “There isn’t anything wrong with you.”

“Right, then why don’t you want me to touch you?”

“I never said you couldn’t touch me,” Rynne replied.

“Yes, you did or have you forgotten what happened only a few seconds ago?”

Standing up Rynne walked over to Pierce, “You misunderstood what I said. I didn’t want you to stop touching me because I found you disgusting.

I asked you to stop because I wanted you to kiss me,” she admitted, turning her face away.

“Oh, you wanted something to take back to your friends. Would you get extra points for kissing the scarred man?”

She moved back from the hate coming from Pierce's voice, "I'm not like that," she said.

"Yes you are," Pierce argued, still feeling the hurt of her rejection.

"Well, I guess we can't try to become friends anymore." Rynne walked to her vehicle. Opening the trunk, she gathered three large bags bringing them back to the porch.

"Consider these a goodbye gift, Mr. McMahon," she said. Spinning around she walked down the steps, started her car and drove off.

* * *

Pierce turned in time to see Rynne disappear in the distance and felt like the bastard that he was.

The colorful bags drew his curiosity. Grabbing them by the handles he took them inside the house and closed the door. Sitting down on the couch he pulled out the first dark blue hooded sleeveless shirt. Searching through the rest of the bags, he found eleven more along with matching pants all in his size. Rynne had been gone doing this for him and the dumb ass that he was just kicked her out of his life. *How am I ever going to ask for forgiveness if she doesn't come back?*

A loud knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. The only person it could be was Jeremy bringing his groceries for the month. Unlocking it he

flung it open to an angry Rynne, “Sorry to bother you again, but I forgot the rest of your presents,” she said, shoving the shoe boxes into his chest.

Chapter Three

Thinking quickly, Pierce tossed the bags on the floor and yanked a hurt Rynne into his arms, covering her pouty mouth with his. She put up a struggle at first then melted her body into his. Rynne wrapped her arms around his neck deepening the already powerful kiss. Holding her head in his large palms Pierce thrust his tongue inside Rynne's delicious mouth. He felt his body responding to her nearness and was shocked by it. It's been a long time since he had kissed a woman. Reality started to set in and he grasped her shoulders, distancing himself from her.

"Rynne, we can't do this."

"I'm a grown woman and I know what I just did," Rynne muttered.

"I kissed a man I found attractive."

Moving away, Pierce reached behind Rynne and slammed the door shut, pausing to turn the lock. He moved back and stared down at the alluring woman in front of him.

"Rynne, I need to take the blame for what just happened. I shouldn't have manhandled you like that. It was wrong and I'm so sorry. You didn't have to say I was attractive because we both know I keep my face covered for a reason."

So was his face covered during the kiss? Did she get a glimpse of his scars? He tried to push the kiss to the back of his mind and he was so thankful that his hood stayed on during their brief kiss.

“Did you think I kissed you because I didn’t have anything else better to do?” she demanded, angry with him.

“We haven’t known each other long enough to be friends.”

He brushed past her sweet body. *Damn it to hell, why did her figure have to be so perfect.*

“So, what do I have to do for us to become better friends?” Rynne asked, sitting down on his couch.

“I thought we were past all the suspicion before I left last time. Did something happen during those two weeks that made you doubt my honesty?”

All the standing was making his knee start to throb, so the limp wasn’t far behind and he didn’t want Rynne to see him as a cripple, too.

“No, nothing happened,” he exclaimed.

Slowly he made his way to the chair and sat down. Resting his head on the back, Pierce closed his eyes hoping Rynne wouldn’t give him another round of questions.

“Pierce, friends talk to each other, so please tell me what’s wrong and why you’ve changed toward me.”

His eyes snapped opened, staring directly at her.

“Do you know how much my sister would have a fit if she found you here? She doesn’t think whites and blacks should mix for any reason. Sally is a very nasty person and I was trying to protect you from her.”

Getting up off the couch, Rynne went over and sat down on the chair’s arm beside him. Pierce turned his face to hide the scars. He wasn’t sure if she hadn’t already noted them, but he didn’t want her staring at them while she talked to him.

“How about you let me take care of myself when it comes to your sister?” Rynne asked.

Pierce tried to push down the warmth he got when she was around him. He experienced feelings he thought were buried deep inside him since the accident. Rynne honestly saw him and nothing else. Reaching out he slid a finger down her neck.

“Do you know how beautiful you are,” he muttered. “A woman like you could have her pick of men, but you’re wasting your time here with me.”

Rynne captured his finger in her hand.

“Looks aren’t important to me, Pierce. How about we just don’t worry about anything and just have fun.”

He turned her hand over linking their fingers, noticing the difference between his white one and her brown one, loving the difference.

“Miss Slater, you’ve a deal,” Pierce agreed.

Rynne stayed as long as she could with him, but explained she had to leave because her brother was having a party later that night. He had warned her to be there or else. The second Rynne walked out the front door his house became the prison he hated and wanted to escape from.

* * *

Twisting her long hair into a knot on top of her head, she finished getting dressed for her brother’s overly expensive party. She shut the door to her bedroom and slowly headed in the direction of the noise. Things were so different now since his wife Ally had divorced him and left town six months ago. She had fallen in love with her boss from work and talked him into leaving his wife and family also. The last time Jalen had heard from his mom she was in Vermont.

Walking down the staircase she took in everything her brother always wanted since childhood; a huge house with lots of things to brag about to his friends. Byron had always wanted the most attention when they were children. There wasn’t a time when he didn’t act silly or tell a joke, making the entire

family laugh. It ended up working out for him because he had a starring role in a four night miniseries on television. People had a hard time believing the television star had a sister who didn't want to be in the spotlight.

From an early age, she always got comments about her long black hair and flawless brown skin, but it didn't matter to her how she looked in the least. She had always wanted to help other people who weren't born as lucky as her.

She never liked being around fake people, it gave her a headache to make small talk about unimportant things. She preferred working on a new cosmetic cream or lotion for people with scars or bad burn victims. Pierce would be stunned if he knew who she really was. He wouldn't want her in ten feet of him and that's why she kept a low profile.

Most of her fame came from her products not her face, which was a good thing. Grabbing a drink from the bar Byron had set up in the living room. *How long could she stand it before she eased to Pierce's house?*

"Hey sexy, have you been hiding from me," a slurred voice said behind her.

Without turning Rynne knew who it was.

"Hello, Chadwick," she whispered, taking a sip of her drink.

Chadwick Russell slid into her line of vision, "Are you too good to look at a normal man and talk to him?" he taunted.

“What is that suppose to mean?” she asked, heatedly.

“Everyone in town knows how you’ve been spending time with the freak that lives in the woods,” he answered, touching her bare shoulder.

Twirling her body away from him, Rynne said, “Don’t touch me, Chadwick, remember we had this discussion last year at the Christmas party. You’re Byron’s friend, not mine.”

“Princess Rynne thinks she has a new study in the freak McMahon, don’t you? Are you hiding some miracle crème on that tight body of yours?” he asked, raking his bloodshot eyes over her dress.

“How would Pierce feel if he knew you only befriended him as a position as a new lab mouse,” Chadwick taunted.

He didn’t have time to move before her clear soda hit him squarely in the face.

“Shut up and don’t talk about things you know nothing about,” Rynne hissed, placing the glass on the table behind her then stormed from the room.

* * *

Flicking through the television stations, Pierce wondered how Rynne was doing at her brother’s party. He couldn’t get their kiss out of his mind and he

hated to admit it, but he wanted more from her full lips. No other woman made him laugh or feel the things she did. Rynne was as unique as her name.

He turned off the television and picked up a magazine lying beside his chair. He looked through it for about five minutes, but it didn't hold his attention either. *Why was he so restless tonight?* He knew the answer: he wanted to hear from Rynne.

Pierce was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't hear the car drive up until the doorbell rang. Looking at the clock, he noticed it was almost eleven o'clock at night. He jumped out of the chair and rushed to the door hoping it was Rynne. She had never come to his house this late at night. It was probably someone lost looking for directions. Pulling the hood further down his face, Pierce opened the door.

"I'm going to strangle my brother," Rynne hissed, brushing past him in her long strapless red evening gown.

He couldn't do anything but stare at the vision pacing in his living room. He had thought Rynne good-looking before; now she was downright stunning.

"Rynne, what are you doing here so late?"

He shut the door and stood beside her, enjoying how the dress stretched across Rynne's chest. It showed off the fullness of her breasts.

“If I had stayed in that house a moment longer I would be an only child,” she hissed with a wave of her hand.

“What did Byron do this time?”

Pierce asked trying to keep his attention on what Rynne was saying and not the way her breasts kept jiggling under her dress.

“He is still trying to fix me up with Chadwick Russell,” she spat, flinging her arms up in the air.

He watched her closely wanting to see her reaction to his next question.

“Do you want to date Chadwick?”

Fury shot from her eyes “Aren’t you listening to me?” she yelled.

“You are bad as my brother. Why can’t men simply stop and listen what’s being said?”

Chuckling, Pierce tried to stop her pacing by touching her arm; however, Rynne wasn’t having any of it and shook off his hand. He didn’t know why her answer pleased him so much.

“Pierce, are you even paying attention to a word I’m saying?” Rynne asked, narrowing her eyes on his face.

“I heard every word those beautiful lips have spoken since you walked in.”

“Do you agree with Byron? Should I give Chadwick another chance?” she asked, standing in front of him.

Hell no! “It isn’t my place to say,” Pierce responded, reaching out to touch a piece of hair that had come loose from her bun.

“No, I could never date Chadwick. Just the sight of him makes my skin crawl.”

“Why don’t you have anyone in your life right now?” he inquired, brushing his fingers over Rynne’s collarbone.

He loved how smooth her skin was, but he couldn’t get carried away touching her. He immediately dropped his hand.

“I don’t know, maybe I haven’t met the right person yet.” Rynne stood in front of him, folding her arms around her waist.

“Pierce, you need to give me some good advice.”

He brushed his thumbs across her cheeks. The more he saw of her toffee skin the more he had to feel it.

“What do you want to ask me?”

“Should I not take what Chad does so seriously and give him a better chance?” Rynne asked, testing Pierce to see what he would say.

A frown creased his forehead.

“Why would you say something stupid like that?” Pierce questioned removing his hands from Rynne’s tempting body.

None of the Victoria Secret models had a thing on her.

“Well, I have been told I’m not the easiest person to get to know,” she answered with a shrug.

“Only a man who isn’t confident with who he is would be threatened by you.”

“It does take a man with a pretty high self-esteem to deal with me. I’ve a very opinionated woman and men from my past have dumped me because of it. Did you think I was one of those types to take what a man had to say and not give my view point?”

A blush touched Pierce’s tanned face. “Well, I thought you might act all tough, but was really looking for approval like the females I knew. They always said they didn’t need a man and could do things on their own, in reality they were waiting for Prince Charming to sweep them off their feet.”

The light went out of Rynne’s eyes as the last of his words left his mouth.

“You are bad as Byron. He has the same negative point of view about women, too. He’s always saying I need to settle down and get a husband soon, because I’m getting too set in my ways of being independent.”

Pierce watched Rynne kick off her three-inch heels and pace around his living room making toes tracks in his less than clean carpet. He wondered was this how she dealt with stress in her life.

“See, the man I want to fall in love with will love me for who I am not how many times I agree with him. Why can’t I be the woman with the good man behind her? Do you know why my brother did when I asked him that question?” Heated dark eyes shot to the left drilling into his.

“No, what did he do?” Pierce questioned, totally captivated by the beauty in front of him.

“Laughed at me,” she snorted, with a roll of her eyes upward. “He thinks he knows so much, but I know the reason his wife left him involved his way of thinking. Have you ever been married?” Rynne asked, pausing long enough to stare up into his eyes.

“No, I’ve never had a wife or fiancée,” Pierce answered, taking a seat in his favorite recliner.

“Let me ask you another question.” She moved to sit on the edge of his chair. “Would you want me to sit at home and have babies without a career?”

He couldn’t think with her sitting this close to his overwrought body. Didn’t she know what her presence was doing to him? God, this friendship with her was going to be the death of him. A man could only take so much

temptation and he was nearing his breaking point. He needed to get rid of her and fast, only deep down he didn't want to.

"No, I would stay behind you or any woman in the path she wanted. I think a partnership is equal. The man shouldn't have more power than the woman and vice versa."

"See, why can't my brother have this open-minded thinking as you do." Rynne touched Pierce's rock hard chest. "I think I need to head back to town," she said, standing up quickly.

A pang of hurt settled in Pierce's chest at the thought of Rynne leaving so soon.

"I hope I was some help to you," he said as he walked her to the front door.

A light scent of strawberries tickled his nose as she went past his body out into the night. With the moonlight shining behind her, Rynne looked like a vision standing before him.

"You were a bigger help than you would ever know. I'm glad I found someone else to talk to about my brother. My friend Tia has such a huge crush on him she thinks he can't do any wrong."

"Are you referring to Tia Tucker, the young lady who works at the gas station?"

“Yes,” Rynne answered.

“She was another one who told me to stay away from people when I used to live in town,” he said, not breaking eye contact with her.

“I hate to keep apologizing for all my idiot friends and family, but I’m sorry again for what she said.”

“How are you so different from everyone else? Why aren’t you terrified of seeing my face?” he questioned angrily.

Throwing her hands up the air Rynne blew out a deep breathe, “I’m not anyone else, but Rynne Slater and I like who I am very much. Are you saying you don’t like what you see and hear?” she whispered, moving to stand in front of him.

His hand tightened on the door so not to haul her enticing body into his arms again. Starting for the top of her raven head his eyes slowly slid down her body taking in every ounce of her sensuality. Noting how the red of the dress brought out the silkiness of her warm skin. He took in the snug cut of the material, how it left nothing to a man’s imagination. It was cut perfectly for the shape of her figure. Just looking at her would allow him to have all the dreams he wanted to at night without her being beside him.

Slowly a smile turned up the corners of his full firm mouth.

“Yes, I very much like what I see standing in front of me, Miss Slater, and the sexiness with the hint of power in your voice tempts me more than you could ever dream. However, I can’t tell you how much it does because we are only friends,” he answered, with a quick chuckle.

Laying a hand on her bare chest, Rynne giggling at him as she walked the down the steps to her car, “It seems like Mr. McMahon can have a sense of humor when he wants to,” she shouted back as she climbed into the car.

“When will I see you again?” he asked, hating to hear the want in his deep voice.

“It will be a surprise,” she yelled out the window as she sped off down the gravel road.

Cursing, Pierce shut the door hoping his dreams wouldn’t be filled with her laughing eyes and contagious smile, “I don’t need this in my life,” he muttered, Pierce knew he was lying to himself. He wanted Rynne in his life but he was scared of being hurt. .

* * * *

Securing the door, Pierce pulled the hooded shirt over his head on the way to the bathroom. Switching on the lights, he stood in the bathroom staring at his reflection. The scars down both sides of his cheeks were still as ugly now as they were five years ago. *How could he think about having a relationship*

with Rynne? God, she didn't realize the stares and whispers people gave him when he didn't cover his face. Sometimes they would say their nasty remarks loud enough so he could hear them.

Rynne was too beautiful to have a disfigured man as her boyfriend.

Did she not think he couldn't see how her eyes searched his face for answers?

Pierce knew she had heard about the scars from her brother, maybe Chadwick or any other person in town. Like any normal person, Rynne's curiosity had to be high. Looking down at the rest of his body Pierce was happy with it, which made the scars so much worse in his eyes.

Also, his limp only came when he did exercise his leg properly by running or working out at least three times a week. *You are an idiot to deny yourself the company of an exquisite woman.*

"Did the attack hurt your mind also?" Scratching his head, he stared at his reflection a few more minutes then turned off the lights, deciding to call it an early night.

* * *

Lips kissing his face woke him up from a deep sleep. Pierce opened his eyes and found Rynne standing by the side of the bed wearing the dress from earlier.

"How did you get in here?" he whispered.

She laid a hand to her lips signaling him to be quiet. Reaching behind her, she unzipped the dress; it fell to her feet in a pool of red satin revealing matching panties and no bra. Pierce rose up from his bed in shock. Rynne's body was fantastic with its slim waist and full hips. She was his dream woman come true.

Rynne pushed him back down on the bed as she laid her chest against him. Starting with the tip of the scar, her slim fingers worked their way down until she stopped at his chin.

"These won't bother me, Pierce, but you have to trust me," she whispered, kissing the first scar lightly.

He closed his eyes at the tenderness. She was the first woman to ever kiss his scars and it almost made him cry. Moving over to the other side, Rynne repeated the act.

Grabbing her by waist he flipped her over on his bed, "Don't do that? Aren't you repulsed by them?"

Rynne shook her head, "I'm not bothered at all because they're a part of you, Pierce."

Sliding his fingers into her thick hair, Pierce closed his eyes to kiss Rynne with all the passion he felt, but ended up kissing air.

"It couldn't have been a dream," he whispered, slowly opening his eyes.

Looking around the room he noticed it was night outside and if he guessed it was around two o'clock in the morning.

“Damn, it has been such a long time since I woke up in this condition.”
Throwing back the covers, Pierce took his muscular body to the bathroom for a cold shower.

Chapter Four

Three days later, after finishing off the last of his dinner, Pierce sat back in the chair and gazed out the kitchen window noticing how bright the stars glittered in the sky. He was getting lonelier by the minute.

He had gotten used to being out here by himself without anyone to communicate with, but since Rynne had come into his life a little over four weeks ago he loved having someone here now. At one time he thought he had found happiness with the woman of his dreams, Amber Fairfield, an up-and-coming swimsuit model who couldn't spend a minute without her executive boyfriend. What an amazing couple they had made, with her long auburn hair, and huge gray eyes.

She complimented his coal black hair and sapphire eyes perfectly. Everywhere they went heads turned and people would point and stare at them. He was the envy of all the guys at the workplace. So many of the other guys had fought for her attention, but he had captured it with his killer smile.

Thinking back he should have known that something was wrong because Amber really didn't like spending a moment without him. He'd never forgotten the incident in the park. It was like it had happened yesterday in his

mind. He could still hear the birds chirping in the trees. Closing his eyes he got lost in his past and the horrible memory that made him the man he was today.

* * *

“I don’t know why I can’t go to the business meeting with you,” Amber whined, sitting across from him at the chess table in the park.

“Baby, the meeting is going to last for hours and you’ll be bored to death. How about afterwards I find a way to make it up to you?” he suggested, touching the back of Amber’s hand.

Jerking her hand away she placed it in her lap.

“No, how do I know you won’t be flirting with some woman who’s there? I see how other women look at you when we go down the street. I don’t like it at all,” she hissed.

“They should know you are with me and keep their eyes off of you.”

“Amber, I don’t see anyone but you when we’re together,” Pierce insisted.

“Why do I have to keep telling you this over and over, honey. You’re the only woman for me. Haven’t I proposed to you several times and you keep telling me it isn’t the right time?”

Amber leaned in and kissed him on the lips, “Pierce, I’m up for the cover of Sports Illustrated, right now, I can’t even think about getting married. Can’t

you understand this has been my dream for years now? I'm already twenty-one and I had to fight several other younger girls for the spot."

Pierce smiled lovingly at Amber knowing how much the cover truly meant to her self-esteem and future.

"Sorry, you're right about this one; however, can't you show me the same consideration and not want to tag along on my dull business dinner tonight?"

Amber leaned back in her chair and glowered at him.

"Okay, darling, I won't ask again about coming along tonight. I'll call one of my girlfriends and see if they want to do something."

Pierce stood up from the bench with a grin, "Thanks, I'll call you after the meeting is over."

He kissed Amber on the cheek then hurried to his car so he wouldn't be late for his meeting.

* * * *

Later that night Amber sat in her black Mercedes watching Pierce with an attractive blond seated at the restaurant window laughing and smiling. She could barely contain her anger. If he thought he was going to have sex with that whore and come back to her... Well, he was so wrong. She knew she had to pay him back and it had to be with something he would never forget.

Starting the car, she drove to the apartment they shared and waited for him.

* * *

An hour later Pierce came home surprised to find Amber sitting on the couch with her hands behind her back looking pissed.

“What’s wrong, honey,” he asked, tossing his car keys on the counter.

“Did you have fun tonight with your dinner guest?” She spat at him.

“Was she good in bed? I didn’t know you favored blondes over brunettes, darling.”

Livid, he moved the short distance across the room and stood in front of Amber.

“You followed me to the restaurant,” he accused. *God, he was getting tired of her jealousy.*

“What else was I supposed to do?” Amber flung the question at him.

“Sit here and wait for you to come back to me after leaving her bed? I bet you still smell like her perfume,” she spat, standing up holding something behind her back.

Pierce didn’t want to be angry, but he was. He didn’t like being spied on by anyone.

“You had no right to follow me, Amber. Maybe this relationship isn’t what I thought it was,” he said turning from her.

As Pierce walked toward the door Amber jumped up from the couch and hit him in the back of the leg with a wrench, breaking his kneecap. Screaming in agony, he collapsed to the floor.

Amber raced back over to the couch to take a knife from underneath the couch seat. Coming back over to him, she crawled on top of him and craved two long cuts down the sides of his face.

Shaking off the pain, he shoved Amber off his body and crawled to the door scared this might be his last on earth.

“Please, Amber, don’t kill me,” he begged as he inched his way slowly toward the door. Pierce knew that he wasn’t acting like a tough masculine man at the moment, but Amber was out of her mind and his main thought right now was living to see another day.

“I don’t deserve to die for something that I didn’t do.”

Laughing hysterically, Amber tossed the knife to the side of him, “You don’t have anywhere to go, Pierce, because I just messed up your handsome face.”

Her voice cackled. “I made sure no other woman will want you.”

Squatting down on the floor Amber wrapped her hand in his hair and pulled his face up to hers as blood poured down his face. He flinched at the vacant stare in her eyes. He knew now that Amber had gone off the deep end.

“Amber, why don’t you leave and let me call the police. I promise I won’t say you did it.” He lied.

“Do you think I’ll have a career after everyone finds out what I’ve done to you?” she questioned. “No, I’ll get sent to prison for a very long time and I can’t let that happen to me. I’m too pretty for jail.”

Running back over to the couch, Amber pulled out a gun from behind the pillow and shot herself in the head. A week later he had woke up in the hospital with his sister at his side. She told him the bad news about his face. The image of Amber lying in a pool of blood still as vivid and terrifying as that fateful day.

* * * *

Opening his eyes, Pierce brought himself back from the gruesome memory and the pain he still felt for what happened to Amber. Maybe if he had noticed her signs earlier none of it would’ve happened.

“I should have recognized how emotionally needy and unstable she was.”

“ I wonder who let her down as a child to make her like that.”

He was scarred for the rest of his life, because he didn't see the signs to get Amber the help she truly needed. He ran a finger down the left scar and recalled how the doctors told him how sorry they were about the less than perfect stitch job done, but they weren't plastic surgeons and did the best they could.

Pouring himself another whiskey, Pierce shut his heart against the vacant feeling he knew would always be there in his life. God, if he could go back and change this he would never have dated Amber at all.

What man doesn't want to be the center of his woman's universe? It made him feel powerful and important. He knew he had allowed his ego to get in the way of good sense when it came to Amber. The first time she showed signs of being crazy was at his sister's birthday party. She had a fit when he danced with a woman he had known since grade school.

She had honestly been old enough to be his mother, but Amber had walked up to the woman and said things to her that made him ashamed to be her date, and that night he had broken it off with her. That split had lasted about two days until she had made a visit to his work place and seduced him right in the conference room while he was working on a report for the next day. Luckily, the office was empty and they were on the sixth floor. He had hoped her possessiveness would wear off, yet in the days to come it gotten

worse until the horrible night she attacked him in their apartment since Amber had just moved in the week before.

For three months he had lived with his sister and her husband, but that got old and he finally found a place of his own. His job had kept calling saying how much they wanted him back, so he went back only to leave a week later. All the stares got to him in the end no matter how much the other employees tried to make him feel welcome, it just wasn't happening.

Customers wouldn't be able to maintain eye contact long with him, so it made it hard to communicate with them. Packing up and leaving his hometown had been the hardest thing to do in his adult life, yet he did it hoping for something better in a new town.

Moving to this town had made his life a nightmare from day one when people stopped shopping to look at him. It was hard going from being really attractive to a deformed man in the matter of seconds. Amber knew what she was doing when she cut his face. All she ever talked about was how much she loved his handsome face.

He wasn't about to let another gorgeous woman in his life again. Not that he thought Rynne would attack him like Amber did. She was capable of something so much worse capturing the heart he has kept buried deep all these years. As much as he loved her bubbly personality and outstanding sense

of humor mingled with the darn honest streak in her, Rynne would only stay his friend.

Then a thought occurred to him, *what if Rynne honestly only wanted to be his friend and he was sitting here worrying about nothing?*

Chapter Five

Bracing his shoulder on the tree, Pierce watched Rynne knock on his front door for a third time while she waited for him to answer it. He could tell she had been there a while because she was tapping her foot impatiently. Moving quietly, he moved away from the tree and toward the steps wanting to surprise her.

His foot hit the second step the same time Rynne started mumbling her breath how she didn't have time to play games with him today. He swallowed down a laugh while she dug in her purse for something. He knew he should say something but he was enjoying how good Rynne looked in denim shorts and a tank top that tied in the back. He guessed it would only take one good tug for the shirt to come undone for him. Pulling out a sheet of paper and pen she wrote him a note and then stuck it on his door.

"Can't you wait for a man to get to the door, Rynne," he asked, startling her.

Spinning around Rynne tossed the notepad and pen back in her purse, then said, "I thought you were hiding from me."

“No, I wasn’t as you can tell. I was running,” he said, going past her to tear the note off the door.

“I see you’re wearing one of the outfits I bought for you,” Rynne muttered, touching the back of his shirt.

“You look very handsome in blue.”

Unlocking the door he moved to the side, so Rynne moved past him allowing him a sniff of her perfume. It brought back all the memories why he enjoyed being with a woman so much.

“What brings you back to my house?” he asked closing the door.

“Can’t friends visit each other,” she asked, bringing back the first time Rynne uttered those same words to him. He liked them then and he still did.

“Sure,” he answered, staring at how the fabric of the short cupped her perfect butt. He was so envious of those pair of shorts right now.

Rynne sat down in his favorite chair and placed her huge purse beside it.

“I’m glad you think that or my feelings might get hurt. I never know what kind of moody you’re in.”

Pierce let Rynne’s silly comment fly right over his head. He looked forward to seeing her everyday and he shouldn’t because he believed Rynne wasn’t going to let him touch her in that way.

“Why do you carry such a huge purse?”

Pierce asked, crossing the room. He noticed the thing the last time Rynne came to visit him with donuts. He sat on the table in front of her.

“I don’t see how you can drag that mini suitcase around all day.”

Leaning forward he ran his finger down the side of her arm.

“I really don’t know,” she answered, reaching out to touch his hand.

“I always loved big bags since I was in college and it just stay with me.”

Pierce opened his palm so Rynne could place hers on the inside.

“Do you know how much I missed you while you were gone? I thought about you way more than I should have. What have you done to me?”

Rynne slid closer to the end of the chair.

“I made you like having a friend around. Everyone wants to need someone as a friend, or lover.”

At the thought of Rynne being his lover Pierce felt his heart beat faster.

“Are we ever going to be lovers,” he whispered.

Tracing his palm, Rynne looked deep into his eyes.

“I don’t know. I can’t sleep with you if you keep hiding behind this hood. Sometimes if you turn a certain way I can see parts of your face, but I want to see all of you.”

She removed her hand from his and placed it in her lap.

“I’m not asking for a whole lot here, Pierce; mostly everyone in town has seen your face, but me...why won’t you allow me to see it?”

“Everyone in town isn’t you, sweetheart; I don’t want to see pity on your face.”

Pierce answered, terrified that Rynne would reject him once she saw the real him. A glimpse of his face here and there wasn’t like seeing the whole thing.

Rynne’s brows pulled down into an affronted frown across her forehead.

“I have never pitied anyone in my whole life and I can promise when I look at you I’ll only see Pierce.”

He wished he could believe her. He wanted to believe her.

“You say that now because you haven’t seen the scared flesh I call my face and you won’t if I have anything to do about it.”

He replied as he stood up and headed to the kitchen for some water.

“Do you want anything to drink?”

He waited but Rynne didn’t answer him which he found really strange.

“Rynne, did you hear me.”

He went back into the other room and found it empty. Rynne had taken her purse and left without a word to him.

* * *

Slamming the door shut to her hotel room, Rynne picked up the phone and called Mason Roberts, her partner and best friend of the past seven years.

“Didn’t I tell you not to call for another two weeks,” he scolded her.

“I know,” she answered, falling on the bed.

“I just wanted to know how things were coming along with the new cream.”

“Well, we’re having one little problem,” Mason admitted.

Springing up off the bed, she yelled, “Please tell me it’s something you can fix?”

“I don’t know if I can or not,” Mason mumbled.

“I keep trying to make it go away yet it keeps coming back.”

No! Something couldn’t be wrong with the cream this close to the deadline.

“Tell me what the problem exactly is and maybe I can help you with it,” she said, reaching for a pen and paper on the nightstand.

Mason’s silence on the other end ate at her. It must be a colossal problem if he was trying to figure out a way to tell her. She knew she shouldn’t have taken this vacation; her doctor told her she needed the rest, but she was such a work alcoholic that taking time off was foreign to her.

“Mason, you better tell me now or I’m on the first plane back there,” she warned.

“Fine,” he spat.

“I can’t make my workaholic boss stay away on vacation, without her calling every other day bothering me on my lunch break. Is there some kind of cream out there she can use to make her relax more?”

Lowering his voice he whispered into the phone.

“What I think she honestly needs is a wild night of sex with a hot guy.”

“MASON,” Rynne barked into the phone.

“Sorry, but do you know how long it has been since you had some sex, Rynne?”

Rynne was astounded that Mason was asking her this. He shouldn’t want to know about her personal life like this.

“I have sex.” She muttered, wrapping the phone cord around her hand.

“Didn’t I have a boyfriend?”

Mason’s gut-wrenching laughter pissed her off.

“Wasn’t he back around the time Byron moved out there with that ex-wife of his? If I’m not mistaken that was six years ago.”

“It hasn’t been six years,” she hissed through clenched teeth.

Sitting in the middle of the bed Rynne put Mason on speaker so she could braid her hair.

“You’re always hounding me about finding a man. When are you going to get remarried? I know women love a brother that has jade eyes and perfect complexion.”

Mason sighed.

“It is kind of lonely without you here in the lab, plus Mr. Jackson is on my case when the product will be ready.”

Rynne picked up a rubber band off the nightstand and wrapped it around the end of her hair. Mr. Jackson knew she was the one in control over the release date and not Mason. He had been hounding them to release the product early for weeks. She couldn’t let that overconfident ass ruin her work.

“Hey, are you still there,” Mason asked.

“I’m coming back home,” she answered.

“Rynne, don’t I have everything under control with Jackson. You know that your doctor said you didn’t need any more stress.”

“Mason, it has taken me three long years to make the scar cream perfect and Jackson isn’t going to ruin it for me.”

Jumping off the bed, Rynne continued, “I’m the only one who can handle him.”

“Don’t you dare come back here,” Mason warned.

“I don’t know if I can handle the pressure of being away while you do the finishing touches to my baby,” she pouted, sitting back down on the king size bed in the expensive hotel.

“Rynne, you know the doctor sent you on vacation to relax from all the long hours you’ve been putting in over these last months. Do I have to hang up and call Byron on you?”

Rynne’s eyes got round at the thought of her brother trying to help her enjoy the vacation she so deserved. All he would want her to do is give Chadwick another change to piss her off.

“No, I promise I will stay here and find something fun to do.”

“Does something fun involve you finding a boyfriend?”

“Stop trying to push me into finding someone I’m happy with my life at the moment.” Rynne lied.

“Liar,” he muttered, hanging up the phone quickly.

* * *

Mason was right. She was so isolated at this point in her life. The thing she had wanted to achieve the most was ready to be put on the market for victims of crime or scars from surgery. So, why didn’t it fill the void inside her? *Was she*

really the type of woman she fought so hard not to be? Did a man need to be in her life to make her feel whole? No, it wasn't any man. The only man who could fill the emptiness was Pierce McMahon and the sad thing was he didn't even want her. But he's already hinted by touching her lightly.

Here she was visiting him and buying presents for a guy who didn't trust her enough to show the scars on his face. He didn't know how the words hurt her. Why should she waste anymore time with a man who had said numerous times he didn't want her around. Then there was Chadwick who had wanted her for such a long time, but the thought of having his hands on her body sickened her.

Chadwick was such a player in every sense of the word. He only wanted to get in good with her to please Byron. Byron was a hot item right now with him getting a part in a four-part mini-series filming here in Houston and the rest in Canada. She even had a small role in the picture playing Chadwick's younger sister. It was going to start filming in a week.

The dummy that she was Rynne had thought about turning down the job offer because she wanted to spend that extra time getting to know Pierce better. Now, it didn't matter since the truth was out in the open. He wasn't going to allow her any closer than she already was.

Helping people had always been a part of her personality. Being about to relate easily to people and make friends made her who she was. Understanding a person's pain was an attribute she drew from to work harder on the creams and lotions over the last several years.

It was taking so much out of her the doctor warned she was headed for a panic breakdown if a vacation wasn't planned for the immediate future. Taking a vacation right at the critical part of the final touches hadn't been in her plans. So what if Mason was just as talented as she? This was her baby. It was killing her not to be there.

Feeling drained from overdoing it had just become part of the job until she passed out at work in front of Mason.

It was so hard to be tactful and leave when he said those words back at the house.

From an early age she had worked hard to please her parents by being helpful and understanding because she knew they cherished Byron more than her. It was a very hard lesson to learn at the age of eight. Her parents showed her attention in their own way, but when Byron had something to say or do they left her without a word, running to see what their favorite child wanted. Even when she studied and graduated high school early they missed it to see a college play Byron was in.

Damn, she still hated being emotional over the past. Rynne Slater wasn't the needy parents' approval child any more. It didn't matter if they hadn't wanted to see her before they both died within six months of each other. Of course, the last person they had wanted to look at would be Byron, the perfect child in their eyes.

Sighing as she slid off the relaxing bed and changing into her running clothes, it was the perfect time to work off all the extra energy in her body. Locking the door, Rynne ran out into the night hoping to clear the mess she called her head.

Chapter Six

Driving around late at night had become a second love for Pierce because he could go without the hood on and not have people staring at his face. It gave him such peace that no one else could imagine. He was still worried about what happened this afternoon with Rynne. She left without even saying goodbye to him. Turning at the next corner he wondered had he ruined the possibility of her ever coming back to his house.

Whenever he had a hard day seeing Rynne always added the spark he needed. But he loved more than her pretty face; he also got pleasure from the way she listened to him.

It was like every word that came from his mouth was important and meant something. She didn't agree with him to pacify his ego. If he was wrong, hell, Rynne would tell him right out then and there. Conversations were more in depth with her than any other women from his past who agreed with his every point of view.

None of them ever argued or expressed a difference of opinion. His past girlfriends were like trained pets at his disposal. Rynne was so refreshing. There wasn't a problem she wasn't willing to tackle.

Rynne had gone on to tell him that if he didn't want to appreciate the appearance of his home then he needed to sell it to someone who would. God, what an outspoken woman she was. Now he had lost all of that because of a few careless words.

Stopping at a red light, his eyes picked up on a young woman jogging in the distance.

Leaning over the wheel he made out Rynne's shapely body in white shorts and a yellow t-shirt.

"What in the hell is she doing," he growled, turning at the corner.

"Doesn't she know how late it is? Wait until I get my hands on that gorgeous body of hers, I'll shake some sense into that willful head."

Driving past her, Pierce parked his car and got out.

* * *

Rynne's heart started to pound in her chest when the car stopped a few feet in front under a burnt out streetlight. A large impressive man got out. All of her self-defense classes came back in a rush and if he tried to act crazy his ass would get hurt. Preparing her mind and body for an attack she jogged past the figure as his hand shot out and grasped her elbow.

"Tell me why you're out here running at twelve thirty at night".

Screaming, she kicked at his legs trying to get loose then with her free hand she slapped hard against the side of his head.

“Let go of me, you bastard,” Rynne yelled, pulling at her other arm without stopping the blows to his head.

“Shit, stop hitting me,” he snapped, capturing her flying hand and tugging it behind her back.

Kicking him harder Rynne was about to start screaming again when Pierce’s voice broke through her panic.

“Rynne, please stop,” he said, making her calm down enough to look into his face.

Falling on his chest she gasped, “My God, you terrified me.” Rynne gasped against his chest.

Releasing her wrists Pierce wrapped his arms around her sweat-soaked T-shirt and pressed her to his hardness. He enjoyed the sweet and feminine smell of this woman and she was starting to mean more to him than she should. Pierce secretly wondered did Rynne remember what he said to her back at his house before she left.

“I’ve to go.”

She muttered, struggling to get out of his grasp.

“Where are you going?” he asked, staring down at her.

“Mr. McMahon, I don’t need you to watch over me. I’m quite capable of making it back to the hotel without your help.”

She freed herself and ran down the middle of the street hoping he wouldn’t follow.

Standing there Pierce watched as Rynne’s long legs carried her further away from him. Shaking his head at the spunk of the woman he took off after her, eating up the distance between them.

Rynne was about to round the corner when she felt Pierce’s hand wrap around her elbow. She tried to jerk off his touch, but he tripped over her shoe’s heel throwing them down on the grass. She landed on her back as Pierce fell on her chest knocking the wind out of her. Before she could move Pierce pulled her arms over her head and pinned her body below his. The intimate contact made her nipples harder and a pool of heat rushed between her legs.

She tried twisting her body around hoping to dislodge Pierce’s body from hers, but it only caused his body to slide between her legs even more.

“Get off me,” she screamed in his face.

“Stop struggling and let me help you up,” Pierce uttered.

“I don’t need you or anyone else. I can take care of myself,” She snapped, jerking at her wrists.

“Did something happen after you ran out of my house?” Pierce questioned.

The moisture from the grass was soaking the back of the shirt she was wearing, “Can you please get off me, I’m getting wet,” she asked.

Pierce closed the gap between their faces.

“If you let me I can make you wetter than you already are,” he whispered, nibbling at the corner of her mouth. Shocked by his words Rynne felt her body responding to him and it didn’t go unnoticed by Pierce either who brushed his chest over her hard nipples.

“Stop this,” she hissed, moving her lips away from his.

“We can’t stay on the ground like this. Someone is bound to call the cops on us.”

Pierce loved having Rynne under him but he knew she was right. Standing up first he gently pulled Rynne to her feet, “Are you finished with your run, so I can take you back to the hotel?”

Looking at him Rynne opened her mouth, but words wouldn’t come out. She was so intent of getting away from Pierce that she just now realized he wasn’t wearing his hood. The scars on his face ran from his temple down to the slight dimple in his chin. They weren’t as bad as he made her imagine. She had seen worse cut on patients doctors brought to her. Yes, his were deep with

bad stitch marks, but the cream she discovered might be able to fade the worst of it. Pierce was as beautiful as she thought he would be.

Reaching out she traced one of them, “You shouldn’t have kept these hidden from me.”

Pierce flinched at the touch of her finger on his face.

“No, you can’t look at me.”

He snapped jerking up his hood quickly. Hurt Rynne had seen his disfigurement Pierce ran back to his car and drove off leaving her standing in the middle of the street.

“Run all you want Pierce, but you will be mine,” Rynne yelled as Pierce drove off leaving her standing in the grass.

As Rynne jogged back to the hotel she planned how she was going to capture Pierce’s trust along with his heart.

* * *

“I’m sorry for the way I acted.” A voice apologized the next day.

“Why should I believe you?” Rynne asked the person in front of her.

She had wanted some time alone. How in the world did this person always know where to find her? She always came to this ice cream shop when she wanted some time to herself to think and cheat on her diet.

“You know how I always speak first and regret later, come on, forgive me.”

“I still think I’m not the one you need to apologize to,” Rynne said.

Tossing the bag down on the table, Tia fell into the booth as her mouth fell open at Rynne’s comment.

“You can’t be serious? How can I say I’m sorry for something that is the truth? He does look like a freak.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say and I thought better of you, Tia.”

Her eyes narrowed and hardened at the woman across from her. She was ashamed to call Tia her friend now.

She continued ignoring the hurt in her friend’s eyes.

“Pierce was hurt by someone or an accident to make him the way he is.”

Reaching across the table she laid her hand over her friend’s, “Look at me, I’m just a tad lighter than you and it takes a lot to make my hair look like this, but if wanted to I could be natural and love it.”

Rynne stated. “Tia, you’re beautiful no matter what you look like. Remember a person’s character is so much more important than how they look.”

Wiping at the last of the tears Tia nodded. “

Rynne, you really like Pierce, don’t you?”

Moving her hand she placed it under the table in her lap, “I think I could like him so much more if he stopped hiding behind those damn hoods of his.”

Looking around to make sure no one was listening she whispered, “He’s an extraordinary kisser.”

“You kissed him!” Tia yelled, and then covered her mouth quickly as customers in the building turned to stare at them.

“Shut up,” Rynne hissed, hitting her hard in the arm. “If I wanted the world to know I would have announced it myself.”

“Sorry,” Tia mumbled. “I have to admit I do find one thing attractive about him,” she confessed in a soft whisper.

“What?”

“Those baby blue eyes of his, damn a sister could get drawn into those bad boys.”

“Calm down and remember your lust for my dumb ass brother.”

Rynne teased, laughing at her friend.

Flashing a smile Tia held up her hands in surrender, “Don’t get all possessive. I don’t want Pierce at all, but if you do I can say you’re going to have a hell of a fight.”

“Why would I have a fight on my hands?” Rynne asked.

She already knew Pierce was attracted to her and after a few kisses he wouldn't put up much of a fight.

Stunned by Rynne's innocence Tia shook her head, "Do you think Byron or Chadwick will let you become involved with him? Hasn't your brother been pushing Chadwick at you for years now?"

Shrugging her shoulders Rynne let Tia's comment roll off her back without a second thought.

"Byron may think he has control over who I date but he's dead wrong. I'm very capable of choosing a man for myself. I have never said a word about the females he has dated and I deserve the same respect."

When she finished Rynne noticed the look of despair on Tia's face, "Now what's wrong with you?"

"How can someone who is so brilliant be so stupid?" Tia sighed.

"Don't call me names," Rynne said, her voice trembling with anger. "You know how I hate that."

"Hopefully the name calling will knock some sense into that stubborn head of yours, girlfriend. Rynne, are you sure you don't want to use the cream on Pierce and that's the only reason you're so fascinated with him?"

Offended, Rynne stood from the table, "Have you been talking to Chadwick? That's the same insulting comment he made to me."

She paused and gathered her thoughts. When she spoke again there was an edge to her voice.

“No, I don’t like Pierce for that reason. Sure, after finally getting a glimpse of his face the need to help him is greater, but I genuinely have feelings for him, too.”

Tia rose from the table and gave her a quick hug.

“I hope you know what you’re in for.”

“I have never been a quitter and I’m not about to start now,” Rynne answered, returning the hug.

“When does Byron leave for Canada?” Tia asked.

“Tomorrow night. Jalen is spending that time with his mother’s parents and I’m going to move into the house.”

She answered heading out of the building with Tia next to her.

“I need to call Mason and tell him I’m staying longer than I first planned.”

“You know that Pierce isn’t ready for you,” Tia teased her.

She shoved her friend in the arm.

“I’m not that bad,” she groaned. *Was she?*

“Rynne, when you fall for a guy it’s always so fast and hard then it ends badly.”

“Pierce is my friend and that’s it,” Rynne muttered. “We aren’t going to let it go any further than that. I’m glad you’re concerned about me, but there isn’t any need to be.”

“Well, I’ll just wait and see about that.” Tia exclaimed.

“Are you sure that I can’t change your mind about the cast party?”

Rynne asked walking the rest of the way to her parked car. She stopped by the passenger door and looked at Tia.

“No, I would love to go but I have to work. I’m saving up money for a new car and this overtime will help out a lot,” Tia replied.

“Are you going to see Pierce before the party?”

“No, Byron wants me there so I can get to know everyone before we start filming the first scene tomorrow. Plus, I think Pierce is still upset I saw his face last night so I’m trying to give him time to get over that.”

Once she got into her room, Rynne called Mason to let him know she wasn’t coming back as planned. He sounded pleased she was staying. After getting off the phone with him Rynne found the dress she wanted to wear. A long, black silk creation that was off one shoulder; a diamond pin held up the material on the other side. A side slit was on the right side showing off a nice amount of leg. The dress would make any woman feel sexy. Rynne had never felt more appealing.

Pierce would love seeing her in this revealing outfit, but he wouldn't because he ran from her which was a sign he still wasn't ready to open up. The look was completed when she pinned her hair at the nape of her neck, making the elegance of the dress even more pronounced. Walking around the large room she waited for the car that Bryon told her would come and pick her up. It was something the director wanted to do to impress the cast. Ten minutes later the phone in her room rang to let her know the car was downstairs waiting for her.

"Let me have fun," Rynne prayed as she picked up her matching purse off the bed and hurried out the door.

Chapter Seven

“How in the hell did I allow her to see my face?”

Pierce snapped in his destroyed living room the next night. He had torn it apart in a fit of anger. Now he was slowly placing everything back in the correct spot. It wasn't sinking in that Rynne hadn't run from him in fear or disgust; he was the one who had run from her. How will he ever get Rynne if he kept shoving her away every time she came within twenty feet of him?

“I promise if she knocks on my door I won't shove her away again. I'll let her see my face as much as she wants to.”

A knock at the door made him drop the pillow he was holding. Flinging it open he was disappointed to see his sister Sally standing on the other side. Great...just what he needed, a visit from a woman who permanently had a dark cloud hanging over her head. He knew his disappointment was clearly visible on his face.

“Hello, Sally,” he muttered, opening the door wider so his sister could enter.

“What are you doing here this late? I thought you went to bed at six o’clock. It’s ten thirty so it’s really a late night for you.”

He prayed she wouldn’t stay too long.

“Who were you expecting, the woman of your dreams?” Sally said, standing in front of him with a bag of groceries.

“Yes, I was,” he answered honestly, “and now she may not come with your car parked out front.”

“Have you been drinking again?” Sally asked, standing in the chaos of his living room.

“If I had it wouldn’t be any of your business,” he snapped, pissed that it was Sally inside his house instead of Rynne.

“Alright, what has gotten you so upset,” His sister questioned with a hint of annoyance in her voice.

“The last time I was here you had a smile plastered on your face. Plus, you couldn’t stop talking about the plans you had to fix up this house. Now I come and it looks like a bar fight happened.”

She took a long look around his house before spinning on her heel and heading in the direction of the kitchen.

Pierce watched as Sally walked into his spacious kitchen and started to put items away in the cabinets. She wasn’t the reason he was in a bad mood.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you like that. I just had a bad night,” he admitted, sitting down at the table opening a package of grapes Sally set on the table in front of him.

“You know, you don’t have to keep buying me food. I do have enough money from work to keep me from starving.”

Sally placed several cans of tuna on the table then reached into the paper sack for more food.

“I still feel bad about what happened to you. If it hadn’t been for me you would never have met Amber,” she sighed, shoving the Cheerios in the back of the shelf.

After all these years hearing Amber’s name still gave him chills, but he wouldn’t tell his sister that.

“Can you not talk about her?” he suggested, moving back to the table with grapes in hand.

“It’s a part of my past I really want to bury deep and never uncover again.”

Sally joined him at the table and touched his hand.

“I’ll leave you alone when you get back out there and find a girlfriend.”

Pierce knew Sally would pass out if he introduced Rynne as the woman he wanted to date. She loved him, but not that much. He decided to question her about the kind of woman she wanted him to start over with.

* * * *

Crossing her legs, Sally rested her back against the seat and studied him like she was trying to read his mind.

“Well, she has to be understanding, kind, caring and very loving to even be considered as a mate for my handsome brother,” she stated.

“Also, she can’t be an embarrassment to us.”

His left cheek started to jerk as the tone of Sally’s voice indicated he knew what was coming next.

“What do you mean by that?”

Rynne wasn’t one of them to him. She was just his Rynne.

“I know you would never think about dating one of them, but maybe I should say something, just in case.”

Her sister continued totally ignorant to the thoughts going on his mind.

“I just think people like them should stay with their own kind, that’s all,” she muttered, swinging her foot.

It didn't matter what Sally said anyway. He wanted Rynne and he would go after her. If Sally got upset by it then he would break ties with her like he did years ago with their parents.

"So, if I fell in love with a black woman you wouldn't come around me anymore?" he exclaimed angrily.

Pierce stopped talking as the words left his mouth. Was he in love with Rynne? Had the sparkled smile crumbled the wall around his iron heart?

Yes...he was in love with Rynne Slater. He didn't want to think about any other woman but her in his life or bed.

Shooting straight up in the chair Sally eyes almost burst out her head,

"Please tell me you haven't done something dumb."

Pierce didn't want to bring Rynne into the conversation. He didn't want to express his new founded feeling to anyone but her first.

"No, I'm just asking."

Relief filled his sister's eyes as she fell back into the chair, "Don't ever do anything like that to me again, Pierce."

She laughed. "I forgot how much you liked joking around."

* * *

Sadness filled Pierce's heart as he sat and listened to his sister as she rambled on about the new man in her life while he couldn't speak about the

woman in his life. Sally wouldn't allow Rynne any peace if she found out about them.

Closing his eyes, he could still feel the softness of her hands on his face tracing his scars. Why did he run off like that? Rynne was the first woman to touch his face in five years and she didn't scream or gasp in fear. There wasn't a repulsive look anywhere on her face. He needed to talk to her.

"Sally, you have to leave. I'm late for my run." Pierce lied.

He got up from the table and pulled her out of her chair then walked her to the door. Pierce gently shoved his sister on the porch.

"I'll see you in a couple of weeks," he replied, quickly shutting the door in Sally's bewildered face.

* * * *

Sally couldn't believe her brother just tossed her out of his house after she drove four hours to spend time with him. Pierce was acting stranger than usual and she wanted to find out what it was. She was beginning to wonder if he had a woman in his life. She wouldn't let Pierce keep something from her. She was his big sister and it was her job to protect him. Jumping into her car she began to think of a way to find out Pierce's secret.

Chapter Eight

After the third hotel hung up on him, Pierce was getting disillusioned that he was never going to find the hotel Rynne was staying at. Why couldn't they answer his question? How could he not have asked her which hotel she was staying at? It was such a simple question. *Rynne, what hotel are you staying at while you're here visiting your brother?*

He needed to know which one and soon. He started to dial the next hotel when he heard a car driving up. Tossing the telephone book on the couch, Pierce walked to the window and looked outside. His face spilt into a wide grin when he saw Rynne sitting in her car.

He was so happy to see her, it meant she wasn't mad at him, but his pleasure didn't last long as Rynne started to back up out of his driveway.

"No, you can't go," he screamed. Racing to the door, he yanked it open and ran down the steps.

"Rynne, stop, I need to talk to you."

* * * *

Rynne was looking back over her shoulder trying to hurry up and leave Pierce's house before he saw her. Tia was right, she needed to stop throwing

herself at men. Every time she did it ended badly with her being the one hurt. A loud banging on the window made her jump. Swinging her head over to the left she saw Pierce standing there looking at her.

Placing the car in park she rolled down the window.

“Damn it, you scared the hell out of me,” Rynne snapped.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack at my young age?”

“Were you going to leave without even letting me know you were here?”

Pierce asked.

“Yes, I was trying to leave so you wouldn’t see me,” she admitted, staring at him.

Sticking his head into the car Pierce kissed her fully on the mouth then moved back.

“Get out of that car and come in the house,” he said, stepping back from the car.

“I want to talk to you about something.”

Taking the key out of the ignition Rynne opened the car door and got out. She stood in front of Pierce, a bit worried the way he was acting.

“Are you okay,” she asked, searching his face.

Moving back from her he reached up and pushed the hood away from his face.

“I want you to see me for what I am.”

Rynne felt the pleasure of Pierce’s act throughout her body. Slowly moving toward him she laid her hands on his face. Sliding one finger from his temple Rynne touched what had caused this gorgeous man so much pain. The cuts were deep with bad stitch marks left on each side of the scars. He must have been bleeding badly for the medical team not to have taken more time with the closing.

Titling his head down she noticed how striking his bone features must have been before this happened to him. Standing a breath away from his chest Rynne kissed the first scar from top to bottom then moved to the right side giving that scar the same treatment.

“You’re one very handsome man, Pierce McMahon.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

Grabbing his face between her smaller hands Rynne cupped Pierce’s face in her palms.

“Look at me.”

Opening his eyes Pierce glanced down at her, “I never say anything I don’t mean. Pierce, you’re a very attractive man and I’m very happy you decided to share this with me.”

“You’re the first woman I’ve trusted enough in five years to show my marks to,” he admitted, brushing his finger over her cheek.

“Don’t make me regret doing it,” he whispered, before capturing her mouth with his.

Moaning, Rynne wrapped her arms around Pierce’s neck and thrust her tongue into his waiting mouth. Opening her mouth wide she lured his tongue back into her mouth for a little sucking action. Her fingers tugged at the long hair touching his collar, drawing a growl from the back of his throat.

Tearing her mouth away from Pierce she nibbled his jaw inch by inch easing up to his sensitive earlobe. Sliding the tender flesh between her front teeth, she nipped on it until his grip clenched on her waist. The taste of him was driving her crazy. Taking one of his hands from her waist, Rynne placed it underneath her swollen breasts, “Touch me,” she pleaded with him.

She tried to kiss him harder, but Pierce shook his head.

“No, I can’t,” he choked out.

Holding her by the waist Pierce shoved her away from his aroused body. Blinking she could only gawk at him, “No, what do you mean?” she muttered, moving back a little.

Sliding buttons through holes on her shirt Rynne opened it revealing firm high breasts inside a barely-there sheer white bra.

“Are you saying these aren’t good enough for you?”

Pierce’s mouth went dry at the sight of Rynne’s breasts out in the daylight. They were magnificent mounds of perfection thrusting out at him. His large hand reached out and quickly tore the front of the bra so he could see her nipples better.

They were a darker brown color, large and pointing at him, screaming for attention. Yanking her back to him, Pierce took a breast into his hungry mouth, sucking greedily at the delicious delicacy.

“That feels so good,” Rynne screamed, throwing her head back as Pierce’s hand moved to stroke the inside of her thighs.

Taking his mouth away from her breast Pierce stared into her eyes as his fingers brushed her damp underwear.

“Baby, I want you to purr for me. Can you do that for me, darling?” he drawled, pulling the opposite breast into his mouth.

Dropping her head to his broad shoulder, Rynne murmured, “I don’t know if I can do anything but enjoy how you’re making my body feel, but I’ll try my best.”

“That’s all I ask,” Pierce replied.

Using two fingers, he tore the underwear from her body tossing them to the ground beside them. Without giving her a chance to recover, he slid two long fingers deep inside her wet body.

Kissing her breast softly he whispered, "Remember my promise to make you wetter, baby?" he asked, licking a hard nipple.

A soft moan from Rynne answered his question.

"Well, I'm about to keep it to you," he informed her.

Taking the fingers halfway out he waited until Rynne started to whimper before thrusting them right back in. Recapturing her breast Pierce worked at her body trying to make her more attracted to him than she already was.

"Pierce, I can't stand much more," Rynne moaned by his ear.

"Yes, you can," he encouraged, brushing his thumb against her nipples.

Just as she was about to let go Pierce suddenly removed his fingers from her body. Bending down quickly he snatched up her lacy white underwear by his feet then picked her up and carried her back to the house. He kicked open the front door, he closed it with his heel. Carrying her to the bathroom he stood her up and started to close the door when Rynne stopped him.

"What's your problem?" she hissed her shirt open showing off her heaving breasts.

Pierce's fingers touched her nipple before he pinched each one lovingly causing her eyes to close in pleasure.

"I heard someone coming up the gravel road."

Pierce feared that I might be his sister coming for one of her surprise visits. Now was the time or place for her to start in on Rynne. He had to make sure it wasn't her and if it was find a way to get rid of her. Snatching his hand back he continued.

"Stay here until I make them leave."

He shut the door and left Rynne standing half-naked in the bathroom alone.

Chapter Nine

Shutting the bathroom door quickly Pierce rushed back to the living room to answer the front door. Just as he was about to open the door he realized Rynne's underwear was still in his hand. Shoving them into his jeans he cracked open the door and found Jeremy standing there with his groceries. He was the only person in town beside Rynne that wasn't scared of his scars.

"What's up, Mr. McMahon?" the teenage boy asked trying to brush past him to come inside the house.

Placing his hand on the doorframe he blocked Jeremy from coming inside his house. He knew Jeremy had to have noticed the car in his driveway, but he didn't need to know who was in his house.

"I think I may have the flu, so I don't want you to come in. Just set the food by the door and keep the change."

Jeremy placed the bags on the porch then looked back up at him.

"Are you sure, Mr. McMahon, it's almost twenty dollars?"

"Yeah, keep the money and come back at the same time next week for a new list,"

Pierce told him, shutting the door. He waited until he heard Jeremy drive off before going back to the bathroom.

“Baby, I’m sorry about that,” he said, opening the bathroom door and found a very subdued Rynne fixing her clothes.

Leaving the door ajar he went and placed his arms around her slim waist then kissed the back of her exposed neck.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” He noticed how her body stiffened in his arms.

Twisting her body away Rynne moved around him walking into the hallway.

“Don’t be mad at me for hiding you in the bathroom,” Pierce said, looking at Rynne’s posture. She was pissed.

“I’m not upset or mad at you,” she said, smoothing the wrinkles in her clothing.

Narrowing his eyes Pierce knew she was lying to him, “Yes, you are, I can tell from your body language,” he said.

“Shouldn’t you bring the food inside the house?” she asked, avoiding his observation.

“I heard you talking to Jeremy when I was in the bathroom fixing my clothes.”

Going around her he got the groceries off the porch and brought them back into the house.

“Do you want to stay for lunch?” Pierce asked hopefully, heading to the kitchen with the food. He knew the romantic mood from earlier was over as he placed the items on the table.

“Depends on what you’re fixing,” Rynne asked, following him into the other room.

His arm snaked out and wrapped around Rynne’s body pulling her closer to him.

“I’ll fix whatever you want if I can get you to smile at me,” he uttered. “I’m sorry that I upset you. I only hid you in the bathroom because I didn’t want any gossip that you couldn’t handle.”

“Pierce, I’m not upset with you.”

“Prove it then, give me a smile and one of your amazing kisses, so I can be a happy man again.”

Using one finger, he tilted Rynne’s face up to his, “I’m waiting,” he whispered.

Raising her face, Rynne kissed him softly on the lips. “You can’t always charm your way out of a disagreement with me.”

“Charming a good-looking woman is what I do best,” he said, patting Rynne’s butt as he moved away.

“Who said I was yours to charm?” she grinned.

“You became mine the moment I saw you playing baseball with your nephew in my yard,” Pierce replied, taking the rest of the food out of the bags.

“It just took me a while to realize it. Do you want to help me with lunch?”

“How can you expect me to help you with lunch when you have worn me out with all your touching and kissing?” Rynne asked.

“I’m not used to all that excitement in the middle of the week.”

“Then I’ll just kill you on the weekends.”

Laughing, Rynne finished helping Pierce place the remaining food away in the kitchen, but in the back of her mind, she was worried about Byron and Chadwick. They wouldn’t like how close her and Pierce were becoming.

* * *

“Sit down and have a drink and tell me you have a plan to stop this.” Byron said, pointing to a can of beer sitting on the patio table.

“I think my sister has lost her mind.”

Chadwick picked up the cold can of beer, opening it and taking a long sip.

“Rynne is your sister and you need to make her stop hanging around that freak. He isn’t going to steal her away from me. I’ve waited too long to have her.”

“Rynne doesn’t want you,” he informed Chadwick, who glared at him over his can of beer.

“Do you know where Rynne is right now?” Chadwick asked.

Making a slight gesture with his right hand Byron shrugged his shoulder and said, “I bet you’re going to tell me.”

Chadwick slammed his can of beer down on the table.

“Rynne is with Piece and you don’t give a damn,” he accused.

“What if she starts to believe that she’s in love with that freak? Do you want to be looking into that face at family gatherings?”

“Hell, I care a whole lot, but Rynne has a mind of her own. If I keep telling her no she’ll do it anyway.” Bryon sighed.

His sister inherited her strong will from their father, God rest his soul. He never understood why Rynne wasn’t close to their parents. Even after their deaths, she seldom brought them up in a conversation. It was almost like she wished she had a different set of parents.

“Are you saying you aren’t going to stop this shit?”

Chadwick roared, standing up so fast his knee hit the table knocking over his empty can of beer.

“Chadwick, you’re way too obsessed with Rynne’s life,” Byron said, concerned about his friend’s reaction to the amount of time she spent around Pierce.

He was beginning to think Rynne might be in more danger from Chadwick than Pierce, but he wasn’t ready to voice his opinion. Instead, he would just keep an eye on things and see where they lead.

“Of course, I’m still not happy about the amount of time Rynne spends around Pierce, but I sure it’s not serious.”

Chadwick’s eyes narrowed on his face, “Are you sure about this?” he asked, sitting back down at the outdoor table.

“Positive, has she ever dated anyone like Pierce in the past?” Byron asked.

“Can’t say that she has,” Chadwick murmured, reaching for another can of beer.

“Good, finish your beer, and we’ll go inside and watch the basketball game. Jalen is next door playing with Kent, so we’ll have the snacks all to ourselves. I don’t understand how a boy can eat so much, but never gain any weight.”

Bryon listened at his friend laughed at his comment about his son, but his mind was on Rynne at Pierce's house. He hoped she wasn't doing anything she shouldn't.

* * *

Reaching across the table Rynne stole another breadstick from the basket for the lasagna Pierce fixed for lunch. She was feeling a little self-conscious sitting at the table without any underwear. Pierce's gaze kept dropping from her eyes to her breasts and it was driving her crazy.

"You've beautiful breasts," Pierce whispered across the table.

A breadstick dropped from her hand, hitting the plate with a loud thump. Glancing at him quickly the smothering flame she saw in his eyes startled her.

"Thank you," she said, wiping her mouth with a napkin.

Pushing his chair back a little Pierce held out his hand.

"Come here, Rynne," he called softly.

Her body ached for his touch.

"What do you want?"

"I want to touch your pretty breasts," his silky voice muttered.

Looking down she noticed how Pierce's erection pressed against his shorts.

“Maybe this isn’t a good idea,” she answered.

Wrapping his hand around her wrist Pierce lifted her up and placed her on the table in front of him.

“I think it’s the best idea I had since this morning.”

Reaching out he undid the buttons on her short-sleeved white shirt and pushed it off her shoulders pitching it to the floor.

“Damn, you’re so perfect. I’ve never been with a woman who had breasts this size.”

His large hand cupped one mound brushing it with his thumb.

Biting her lip, Rynne closed her eyes against the sensation. Opening his mouth wide Pierce drew her throbbing nipple inside and sucked hard, the action shot through her entire body.

“Pierce, you can’t do this,” she moaned, knocking the dishes to the floor as she fell back on the table and Pierce followed her down.

“Darling, you’re so damn beautiful,” he hissed, licking at her nipples.

Squirming on the table she tried to get up, but he wouldn’t let her.

“Please, let me enjoy looking at you some more,” he begged, placing a kiss on her stomach.

His fingers stroked the inside of her thigh and his mouth nibbled at her breasts some more.

“I want to touch your body, too,” she confessed.

Standing up Pierce stared at her a little too long, sliding off the table she snatched her shirt up off the floor. Shoving her arms into it she buttoned it and mumbled under her breath about how stupid she was.

Storming back into the living room to the front door, she flung it opened then glared back over her shoulder at Pierce.

“I’m tired of playing these hot and cold games with you all the time. I really don’t have time for it. I won’t be back until I’m sure you have made up your mind to trust me. I just hope another man hasn’t won me over by then.”

She threatened as she went out the door and slamming it in Pierce’s shocked face.

“Rynne, hold on one damn minute,” Pierce yelled running to the door.

“You can’t leave me with a threat like that hanging in the air.”

He made it to the door in time to see the back of Rynne’s car as it sped down the gravel road.

“Shit,” he roared shutting the door with force.

Chapter Ten

Rynne wasn't in her hotel room a good five minutes when someone knocked at her door. She peeked through the peephole and moaned under her breath. She didn't have time or energy for this. Unlocking the door she moved back to let him in, "Byron, why are you here this late?"

Her brother walked in as if he owned the place.

"I wanted to make sure you'd be ready to film your scenes tomorrow."

A sound of impatience came from her mouth, "Yes, I'll be ready."

He knew once she gave her word she kept it. So, she wondered why he was really here. Was he checking up on her to make sure she wasn't at Pierce's house? Hell, after what happened she wasn't too sure she wanted to go back there.

"Good, I'll send a car for you."

Byron said, walking around her room like he was searching for something or perhaps someone.

"That wouldn't be necessary, because I'm going to drive myself."

Rynne sighed tired of how bad her day was turning out.

"How's Pierce doing?" he asked, matter-of-factly.

She opened her mouth to tell her brother to stay out of her business, but he cut her off with a wave of his well-manicured hand and a slight shake of his head. She hated when he did that to her as kids and it still pissed her off now.

“Don’t lie, I know where you’ve been half the day,” Bryon exclaimed, eyeing her like he knew what she had been doing at Pierce’s house.

“Just make sure you’re using condoms.”

Her brother wasn’t able to move off the bed in time before she raced across the room and slapped him across his clean shaven face. She wouldn’t let him talk to her like that. She didn’t care who in the hell he was.

“Get the hell out of my room, you bastard,” Rynne screamed.

Rubbing his cheek Bryon got up from the bed and strolled over to the door. He opened it and tossed her a nasty little sneer before he went out slamming it behind him.

Angry tears settled in her eyes, but didn’t fall.

“God, I hate men,” she said, choking back tears.

Needing a release from the horrible day she just experienced she decided to order a bottle of wine from room service and take a quick bath before it came. Anytime she got this stressed about her life a hot bath always helped.

The wine came as Rynne was tying her robe around her waist. After she tipped the bellboy, she lay down on the bed in her robe and took a long soothing drink.

“Damn you, Pierce McMahon,” she cursed.

“I don’t need your ass either. Why was I trying to make a play for you anyway?”

A part of her knew that Pierce was probably tired of her leaving every time things tired to intimate between them. She wasn’t dumb. She knew without a doubt that Pierce was ready to make love. There had been so many opportunities in the past couple of weeks for them to end up in bed that she had lost count. But she just couldn’t jump into bed with him because the sexual tension was there.

It had been years since she had been with a man and she wasn’t quite ready yet. Pierce was already getting to her in ways her past boyfriends hadn’t. If she made love before she was mentally ready and Pierce broke her heart, she didn’t know if she’ll be able to come back from it.

She was running scared and she knew it, but how she could she tell Pierce? Maybe the best thing to do was to push him away for either of them got hurt.

Deciding Pierce needed to know how she felt Rynne had to dial the number twice before she got the right one.

“Hello,” Pierce’s velvet voice answered, making her hot and angry in the same instant.

“I want you to know I don’t need your ass anymore,” she slurred into the phone.

“Rynne....cuteness, are you drunk?” Pierce asked.

“Don’t try to sweet talk me, McMahon.” She hiccupped.

“I know you only wanted to use me like everyone else. I have felt unloved my whole life. I shouldn’t have thought you would be any different,” she spat, taking another sip of her drink.

“I know how to end my pain,” she confessed in a low voice.

“Rynne, don’t you dare harm yourself,” Pierce screamed into the phone.
“Do you hear me?”

“Don’t worry, it won’t hurt at all.”

Rynne giggled hanging up the phone on a screaming Pierce.

* * * *

The phone ringing off the hook woke Rynne out of her drunken sleep the next morning, “Yes,” she croaked softly.

“Rynne, why aren’t you here at the set?” Byron’s voice shouted in her ear.

Moving the receiver back a few inches she stared at it like it was a foreign object.

“I overslept,” she informed him very quietly, bringing it back to her ear praying her brother wouldn’t yell again.

“Little sister, your butt needs to be down her in the next forty-five minutes or my job is over,” he hissed, hanging up.

Kicking off the sheet she ordered a pot of coffee and rushed to the bathroom holding her head as a wave of dizziness hit.

“God, I swear I’ll never drink again if you let me live through today.”

Warm water from the shower helped to clear her head a bit. Three cups of hot black coffee finished the job. Throwing extra clothes into a black bag Rynne checked out of the hotel and ran to the car hoping to save her brother’s job. She pulled up at the set thirty minutes later. Chadwick and Byron were waiting for her.

“I need to take you to the trailer, so you can change clothes,” he snapped, dragging her away.

Rynne was inside the trailer she shared with her brother changing clothes for the next scene when Chadwick walked in on her. She was stunned he had enough nerve to come in here with so many people out there on the set.

“Get out of here!” She screamed looking around for something to cover up with.

“Damn, you have one hot body there.”

Chadwick muttered, licking his lips.

“Why don’t you share it with a real man instead of Scars?”

Jerking her shirt off the chest behind her she pressed it to her chest and started screaming at the top of her lungs. Chadwick stepped back from her, his eyes wide with fear. She wasn’t going to stop until someone came inside the trailer and saw him in here with her.

“Rynne, stop screaming. I’m not going to hurt you,” Chadwick snapped.

“I only wanted to talk to you.”

Running into the trailer Bryon started at her half-dressed body then back over to Chadwick.

“What in the hell is going on?”

He yelled looking at Chadwick then back over to her.

“Nothing happened,” Chadwick uttered.

“He came in on me while I was getting dressed,” she cut in shoving her arms into her shirt and wrapping it around her waist.

“I want him out of here or I’m leaving without taping my scene.

Byron grabbed Chadwick by the upper arm dragging him away from her but not before she heard him whisper, “Man, do you have a death wish?”

* * *

Byron dragged Chadwick away until he was a good twenty feet from his sister’s trailer. He didn’t understand why his friend would even set foot in Rynne’s trailer when he knew how she felt about him.

“Why in the hell did you do that? You know my sister is still pissed off what you said at the party.”

“Didn’t you tell me to go and talk to her,” Chadwick snapped.

“Yeah, I meant later on tonight after both of you had finished taping your scenes.”

He ran his hand across the back of his mouth.

“Do you know what would have happened if the director found you in there? You would be packing your bags right now.”

“I know,” Chadwick mumbled. “I just can’t believe your sister would want Pierce over me. I have so much more going on than he does.”

“Chadwick, you have been my friend for the last six years, so you should know Rynne by now. Never force an issue with her or she’ll do the exact opposite. She has always been headstrong like that. Right now, Rynne sees something interesting in Pierce so let her, but in the end I’ll make sure my sister ends up with you,”

Byron promised.

“Now, go to the set while I’ll cool things off with Rynne.”

“Thanks man,” Chadwick said, slapping him on the back before taking off in the direction of the last scene he had to tape.

* * *

Wiping the sweat from his brow Byron knocked on the trailer door and hoped his sister didn’t throw something at his head. He forgot sometimes how stubborn she could be. He didn’t feel like dodging any flying objects today.

“Byron, that better be you,” Rynne yelled from the inside.

“Yeah, it’s me, can I come in?”

“I guess so,” Rynne murmured.

Peeking in he made sure she wasn’t holding any sharp items.

“Hey, are you alright?” “I’ll be a whole lot better if Chadwick leaves me the hell alone,” she responded.

“How can you be friends with such an asshole? I know how much you want us together, but I can’t stand him, Byron.”

He sat down on the couch by the window and stared up at her. “Sis, you aren’t used to a strong black man trying to lead you. Chadwick is the perfect man to tame down that outspoken temper of yours.”

“You have lost what little common sense you have left, Byron Slater. I’m an adult and I don’t need to be tamed for any reason. I like the way I am and so does another person,” Rynne replied with passion.

Leaning back Byron rested his fingers on his flat stomach. “Are you talking about Pierce McMahon?”

“What if I am?”

“God, Rynne, you’re too gorgeous to even be in the same room with a guy like him.”

He saw the sadness that came into his sister’s eyes at his harsh comment.

“Pierce is just like everyone else. He doesn’t need to be ashamed of a few scars on his face. I enjoy being around him and I’m not going to deny myself that pleasure. I can tell you I like Pierce more than I ever will Chadwick.”

Byron jumped up from the couch in a fit of anger.

“You can’t fall for that man, I won’t allow it. You need to give Chadwick a chance. How can you embarrass me like this? I’m finally achieving all the dreams I had since I was eight years old starring in my own television show. It doesn’t matter if it’s only a four day miniseries. I’m the star. How would it look for the star’s sister dating a freak?”

“People aren’t biased as you, Byron. Who I date or become friends with isn’t any of your business. I think Pierce is a nice guy and I want to learn more about him, what is so wrong with that?”

He struggled to control his temper. Their tempers were a trait they both inherited from their parents, yet Rynne could control hers a little better than he could.

“It’s wrong because he isn’t worth your time, sis. He’s a nobody that blew into town.”

He had to make Rynne understand that McMahon wasn’t good for her.

“Pierce didn’t have any friends five years ago and he doesn’t have any now. Leave the guy alone and give Chadwick all the attention you have been wasting on Pierce.”

“Big brother, you’re wrong about one thing, Pierce does have a friend in me. I won’t stop hanging around him because you don’t think he’s good enough,” Rynne exclaimed, folding her arms over her breast.

“Oh, one more thing,” she said “if you are done giving me your big brother advice lecture I’m needed on the set.”

Standing up he walked over to Rynne.

“Don’t let him bring you down. I can’t handle any bad press right now.”

Then he walked out the door.

* * *

It took three days for Rynne to get the scene the way the director wanted it and she was about to quit the whole project when the director finally yelled ‘Cut.’ She grabbed her stuff then made her way toward her dressing room. She needed to get out of these clothes and leave.

“I can tell you can’t wait to get back to your research project,” a voice taunted behind her as she walked back to her trailer exhausted.

“I’ve to say you found the perfect volunteer. Wait a minute,” Chadwick snickered, snapping his fingers, “and Pierce still doesn’t know you’re going to make him your guinea pig.”

“Chadwick,” Rynne warned in a low voice. “Don’t go there with me. I’m not using anyone and I want you to stop implying that. It’s a very nasty thing to say. What makes you think you know the real reason I’m around Pierce?”

She drilled spinning around to glare at the pest that always seemed to be around her.

“He’s such a better man than you are. You don’t know how to let anything go.”

Without saying another word, Rynne went to her car and was placing her bags on the inside when Chadwick’s voice set her on edge again.

“I’m going to Canada with Byron to do some more scenes, so have all the free time you want to with Pierce,” he spat as she got into the car and slammed the door.

Two minutes later she was on the road heading to the airport.

Chapter Eleven

After purchasing a ticket for a quick trip home, Rynne board the plane and wiped all thoughts of Pierce and the other two bothersome men from her mind. This trip was exactly what she needed to think about her future and who she wanted in it. Closing her eyes, Rynne went straight to sleep and didn't wake until the flight attendant woke her up hours later.

Once outside the airport, she hailed a cab and went straight to her office.

When she finally made it there, she stopped and peeked through the lab's window. She smiled when she saw Mason bent over a tray inspecting a jar of cream. Pushing the door open she walked in.

"Hello, Mason."

Mason stiffened at the sound of her voice then placed the container gently back on the tray.

"I thought you were staying longer, so why are you here?"

Rynne walked further into the room as the door swung closed behind her.

“I had to come home to clear my head then I’m going back to Houston. But did you really think I wouldn’t check in on my baby?” she asked, her face breaking into a wide, open smile.

Mason could never stay mad at her and they both knew it.

“The cream is almost done. It only needs a few finishing touches.”

“Is there anything I can do?” she inquired, wandering around the lab picking up different creams and jars.

Mason walked up to her with a grin of amusement on his tanned face.

“Can I trust you to leave and enjoy the rest of your time off if I give you a small thing to do?”

Rynne grinned mischievously.

“I promise I’ll leave and you won’t hear from me the remainder of my vacation.”

“I shouldn’t give you anything to do, but you look so depressed.”

Mason sighed as he left her and went over to his desk. He picked up a large brown envelope and waved it in her direction.

“Here are the designs for the cream jars,” he said, holding it out to her.

“Oh my god,” she screamed as she raced across the room and snatched the envelope from her assistant’s hand.

“I can’t believe they’re finally here.” She hurried across the room and took a seat behind her desk.

Searching through the entire stack Rynne finally decided on the last one because she fell in love with the white background with gold lettering.

“I think I like this one the best,” she said, holding it up for Mason’s inspection.

“I liked that one, too,” he said as she laid it back on her desk.

“I’ll take it later and give it to the printer to test it on some sample jars.”

Resting his hip on the lab table, Mason crossed his arms across his chest and watched her for a while before he asked his question.

“Okay, Rynne, what’s wrong with you?”

Biting her lip she looked away from him, “There isn’t anything wrong with me.”

“Don’t lie to me,” his voice warned. “We’ve been friends too long for that.”

Rynne didn’t want Mason to know about Pierce in fear he might think the same thing as her brother and Chadwick.

“I guess I got a little homesick.”

Mason eyed her with suspicion, “Are you sure that was it?”

“You worry about me way too much,” Rynne said, leaning back in her seat glad to be back here even if it was only for a short period of time.

“I need to leave so I can pack and be ready for the last flight.”

Getting up from her seat Rynne gave Mason a tight hug and left before he could ask her any more questions that she might have to lie to him about.

* * *

Taking small steps around the huge space that was her living room, selling the house had crossed her mind time and time again. It was way too big for a single person like herself. Flinging her tired body down on the black sofa, Rynne closed her eyes debating on what she should do.

* * *

Tia was walking down the street enjoying her milkshake when a hand reached out pulling her behind a building. She didn't have time to scream before she locked eyes with Pierce McMahon. *Shit, why was he bothering her*, she thought.

“Have you seen Rynne?” Pierce asked her.

Shoving him hard against his chest, Tia put a good amount of space between them.

“Boy, have you lost your damn mind? You can't be pulling a black woman off a public sidewalk like that or you'll get your ass hurt.”

Pierce eyed her liked he wasn't paying attention to her rant.

"Tia, have you heard from Rynne?"

Taking a long sip of her drink Tia debated on whether or not to answer, but he seemed so worried about her.

"Yeah, I spoke with her before she left town."

"Rynne's gone?" He fell back against the brick building.

Moving a little closer she looked up into his Pierce's face or what she could see of it from the hood.

"Rynne left town two days ago, she didn't mention it to you. I thought the two of you were so close now."

"We were getting really close until I ruined it," he answered, brushing past her.

He really has feelings for Rynne.

Against her better judgment she yelled at Pierce's broad back, "Pierce, hold on a second."

Without turning Pierce stayed in the same spot while she searched through her purse and found a pen and paper. She quickly scrawled down Byron's address and phone number and ran over to him. She waved the paper under his nose.

“She’s coming back tonight and will be staying at Byron’s until he comes back from filming his movie. Jalen won’t be at the house either because he’s away with his grandparents.”

Holding out the paper she waited for him take it. Pierce spun around, snatched the paper from her and then left without another word.

“You’re welcome,” she yelled at him.

* * *

Holding the pink piece of paper to his chest Pierce finally relaxed the tension in his body as he sat down in his favorite chair back at his house. For the last two days he had been searching for Rynne only to find out she wasn’t even in town. Strong firm lips puckered in annoyance.

“How dare she have me losing sleep over her.”

Doesn’t she know you can’t treat a person in love that way?

Stunned by his thoughts, Pierce jumped up out of the chair to wander restlessly around the room.

“Shit, how did I allow myself to fall in love.”

If she hadn’t intruded on his privacy weeks ago, these damn unwanted emotions wouldn’t be in his body. Now, he loved being able to stand back and view things without blinders on, but the second Rynne stepped into the room

all that changed. The only thing on his mind then was getting her body pressed to his,

“Damn it,” he growled.

“I won’t let her do this to me. Maybe I should let Rynne stay furious at me.”

Pierce knew he wouldn’t let that happen; she was too important to him now.

Finding his keys, he locked up his house and headed for Rynne at Bryon’s.

Chapter Twelve

Taking one more lap in the pool Rynne finally pulled her exhausted body from the heated water. For once, she loved that her brother enjoyed showing off; this pool was amazing. Pushing her hair back, Rynne pulled on a long white T-shirt over her wet white two-piece bikini. Barefoot, she walked into the kitchen looking for something to eat and found some leftover Chinese food in the back. She tossed it on the counter.

A loud banging at the front door made her stop midway with a fork full of food.

“God, can’t I at least eat in peace,” she groaned, shoving the fork back into the container and back on the counter. Storming to the front door, she looked out the peephole, but couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Rynne, I know you’re back from your trip because Tia told me, open this door,” Pierce demanded.

Her heart was pounding in her chest at the sight of Pierce on the other side, but she wouldn’t let him know that. Leaning her back on the door Rynne plastered a bored look on her face then yanked the door open.

“What do you want?”

Shoving past her, Pierce stormed into her brother's luxurious home then reached above her head and slammed the door shut at the same time pressing his body into hers. His gaze traveled over her face and searched her eyes before his mouth covered hers hungrily.

Rynne tried to shove him away, but Pierce wrapped her arms around his neck instead. Enjoying the kiss Rynne moaned deeply, sucking on Pierce's tongue and loving the feel of it in her mouth. Latching onto the hem of her T-shirt, Pierce slid it up her body tossing to the side.

"I never get tired looking at your stunning body."

One finger unhooked the top easing it down her arm, watching it land by her feet. Reclaiming her mouth, he crushed her body back to his, working his hands down her body. Pierce unsnapped the bikini bottom leaving Rynne naked in his arms. Swinging her gently into his arms he stared down into her face.

"Babe, you need to tell me where your bedroom is before I make love to you in the kitchen."

Inside Pierce arms, Rynne lifted a finger and pointed to the very end of the hallway. Kissing her lightly, he made his way quickly to her bedroom and walked through the opened door. Placing her gently in the middle of the bed, he went back and locked the door. Standing by the door, he pulled his shirt

over his head while his eyes roamed her naked body. Feeling exposed Rynne covered her body with a blanket at the foot of the bed.

“Don’t do that,” he whispered, walking back and taking the blanket from her.

“I want to look at you.”

Tenderly, he laid her back down on the bed as his lips touched her hard nipple with passion, yet there was a hint of possessiveness.

“That feels so good,” she moaned by his ear.

“Did you know you’re the first woman I’ve made love to since the attack?”

He confessed, waiting for her reaction.

Rynne ran her hands down the sides of his face.

“I feel very proud to know that,” she whispered, kissing his mouth lovingly.

His hand slid down to stroke her inner thigh. Rynne jumped at his touch. Smirking against her mouth Pierce placed his hands down on her taut stomach pressing her back to the bed.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take it slow,” he mumbled, sliding two fingers inside her then eased them back out with a slow rhythm.

Shutting her eyes, she fell into the lure of his learning what her body wanted.

Spreading her legs wider he increased the tempo coaching the purring sounds that were coming from the back of her throat. It had been such a long time since a man had touched her like this that Rynne was about to explode.

“God, I don’t know much longer I can hold on.” She moaned, twisting her body around the sheets.

“Pierce, I need you so bad right now.”

Standing up, Pierce removed his pants, reached into his pocket and then tossed several packets down on the nightstand. Tearing one open, he slid one on fast and recovered her slick body with his. Her breasts tingled against his hairy chest causing her to suck in a breath and him to growl deep in his chest.

“Damn, baby, you feel so good.”

Outlining the tips of her breasts with his fingers, Pierce slid between her thighs and took her in one powerful thrust, making her nails scratch his back in pleasure. Together they found the pace their bodies enjoyed; the gratification of making love was explosive causing Rynne to scream in ecstasy. Pierce’s groans of pleasure followed hers.

Rynne knew she had waited six years to make love again for a reason and he was lying on top of her. But she doubted he felt the same way about her.

Pierce McMahon was a loner and probably would stay that way the rest of his life. This probably wasn't more than just a summer fling for him, a way to test if he was still a man. Could she get any dumber? Moving her head to the side a tear slid down her cheek.

"Baby, are you okay?"

Pierce asked, separating their bodies and tossing the condom into the trashcan beside the bed.

"I couldn't be better," she answered with her head still turned away from him.

"You don't sound happy."

Pierce leaned over her body trying to look into her face, but she wouldn't let him.

With a hand on her smooth bare shoulder, he flipped Rynne over.

"What's wrong? I know it's been a while since I was with a woman but was I that bad?"

"I can't believe we finally came together."

She waved her hand over their uncovered naked bodies still damp with sweat.

"I thought you hated me when I left and now here we are in bed naked," she said

Pulling his large body up, Pierce rested his back on the headboard and lifted Rynne, placing her above his hips.

“I wanted to drag you to my bed the first day I saw you playing with your nephew outside my window,” he confessed, caressing her back with his hands.

The massage made some of the tension leave her body but not all of it.

“You’re such an extraordinary woman with a centerfold body, I can’t help but want to stare, touch, and sample it,” he growled, changing his position Pierce pulled her nipple into his mouth and started to suck..

Rynne watched Pierce devour her breast with his eyes closed for a several minutes until they popped open and he was staring back at her. He continued to suck her breast while he raised his other hand and pinched her other nipple. Pierce loved her body until her body dripped with need to have him again. He slowly let go of her breast and slid his fingers down her stomach stroking any piece of her his fingers could reach.

“How did it feel watching me do that?” Pierce asked as his hand reached around her to cup her ass.

“It made it sexier,” she said softly, trying to avoid eye contact.

“Rynne, you aren’t a virgin, but how many sexual partners have you had beside me?” Pierce asked, forcing her to look him in the eye.

“Well,” she paused, breaking the intense eye contact with him, “I’ve only slept with one other guy and it was six years ago.”

Pierce tugged Rynne’s face to his baffled one, “Is there a reason you haven’t had sex in six years?”

She couldn’t admit she was working on the scar cream and never had time to date. Pierce would think she was using him and leave hurt.

“I was busy working and nobody was really coming on to me,” she mumbled, squirming in his tight hold.

“I find that very hard to believe.”

His eyes raked her body with a lustful gleam. “Rynne, are you keeping a secret from me?”

“No, I had just started at the job I have now and it took a lot of my time.”

Rynne lied.

“Sometimes I have to work sixteen hours a day, and most men don’t want to stick around for the hassle.”

* * *

Relaxing his hold a little Pierce felt very possessive of Rynne now. She was his now; no other man would ever make love to her. He laid her back

down on the rumbled bed, one hand down her taut stomach while his free hand searched for pleasure points.

Pierce made sure his touch was light and painfully teasing so it would send shock waves through her already aroused body. He kissed her whispering his love for each part of her body. Outlining the tips of her breasts, which were his favorite part of her body with his fingers, he wanted her twisting beneath him. Waves of ecstasy shot through his nerve ending at the first taste of the wet covering his body on his moist tongue.

Lifting Rynne halfway up off the bed his hands explored the soft lines of her back, her waist, her hips, more in love with the smoothness of her skin. Instinctively, her body arched toward him needing what he was giving her.

Taking small nips from the side of her neck, Pierce lay back on the bed covering his body with Rynne. Before things could go any further he grabbed a condom off the nightstand and showed Rynne how to put it on him. After the necessities was taken care of he laid on his back and slid Rynne over his throbbing erection teaching her what movements he enjoyed and which ones would bring her the most pleasure. With this position, they were able to take the time to explore, to arouse, and to gratify each other. Their bodies were in exquisite harmony with one another causing Rynne to soar higher until the peak of delight was reached.

Falling to his chest, his groans of pleasure followed her release moments later. Rynne lay panting on his body exhausted from his lovemaking; slowly he separated their bodies and got rid of the condom then tucked her close to his contented body. Reaching on the floor he picked up a sheet to cover their sweaty bodies. He could tell by Rynne's breathing she was already asleep.

Kissing the top of her head Pierce said in a low voice, "I love you, Rynne."

Chapter Thirteen

“I haven’t seen you in almost a week. Where have you been hiding or do I need to ask?”

An inquisitive female voice inquired behind Rynne as two female customers walked past.

Rynne placed the lotion back on the shelf turning to look at Tia standing behind her with two bags of clothes.

“I’ve been staying close to home,” she replied, looking at her friend with an innocent expression.

“The question is how long has Pierce been keeping you in bed?”

Tia giggled, setting her bags beside her on the floor.

Looking around to make sure no one heard Tia’s comment, Rynne pulled her to the back of the lotion aisle.

“Shh...I don’t want everyone to know my personal business,” she scolded.

“Anyway, what gives you the idea I’m sleeping with him?”

Tia’s eyes traveled from the top of her friend’s head down to her three-inch heels, “You have a glow to you, plus you were smiling to yourself when I

walked up. All the signs of a woman getting laid every night,” she answered smugly.

Rynne’s mouth opened, but she couldn’t deny any of what Tia was accusing her of. If Tia could see that she was sleeping with Pierce then there was no way someone else wouldn’t notice the signs. What was she going to do when Bryon and Chadwick came back into town?

“Girlfriend, if you can get some while you’re here I don’t blame you.”

Nervously, Rynne ran her hands through her hair.

Tia placed her hands on her hips and gave Rynne the stare, “You know Byron is going to stop this the second his plane lands in Texas.”

“I haven’t listened to his crap for years,” Rynne snapped.

“Oh, it’s going to be more than crap he’s going to give you and you know it, Rynne.”

A shadow of annoyance crossed Rynne’s face.

“Tia, you’re supposed to be my best friend, not my brother’s. Won’t you stand up for my relationship with Pierce?”

Tia shook her head sadly at her friend’s innocence.

“Honey, it doesn’t matter if I stand up for you or not. Once Pierce finds out what your career is, he’s going to be angry that he won’t speak to you again,” she stated.

“I vote for you to tell him about your job before Byron or Chadwick does. Shouldn’t it come from you instead of them, because they will put an evil turn to it? Pierce does seem like he’s falling in love with you and once a man’s in love and his trust in you is broken it’s hard to get back. I know this from experience.”

Rynne looked her friend in the face and lied, “Don’t worry. I’ve told Pierce what I do for a living and he didn’t have a problem with it.”

Stunned, Tia took a step back.

“Wow, that’s wonderful. At least, you don’t have to worry about your secret coming out later. Do you think he’ll use some of the cream on his own scars?”

There was a long, brittle silence before Rynne answered.

“Umm...we haven’t discussed that yet.”

“Well, I need to get these home,” Tia said, going back over to her bags.

“I’ll talk to you later and we can pick a time to have dinner later on in the week.”

Rynne felt horrible for lying to Tia about Pierce’s knowing about her job; however, it was too late to take it back now.

“Call me and we can set up a date and time.”

Waving goodbye, Tia walked out of Bath and Body Works leaving her standing in the middle of Lotions, worried about Pierce finding out about her career before she told him. She had a very bad feeling something was going to happen.

* * *

It was amazing what a broom and mop could do to a dirty house, Pierce thought as he wiped the sweat from his brow looking around his clean house. He had liked the way the furniture was arranged in his house, so it stayed as it was. It looked better now with the new paint on the walls.

He figured the reason Rynne didn't want to stay here was the shabby conditions of his home. They had been making love at her brother's house for a week now and he didn't like leaving early in the morning so the neighbors wouldn't see him.

Sally had brought some new items from the living room two months ago, but he shoved them to the back of the closet with everything else she had given him. Maybe he could get everything out and organize them before Rynne came back.

Hell, he didn't know when Rynne would be back, but he wanted the inside to look better. She hadn't been answering her cell phone all day and that made him a little concerned about where she was. *She wouldn't have left again*

without telling him, he thought in the back of his mind. No, they had something special now and it wasn't about to be broken.

Picking up the wood polish, he started to wipe away all the dust covering the wood through the house. With all the windows open he cleaned his place for the woman he loved more each time he saw her. A car driving up drew his attention, tossing the rag on the table. He looked out the window and saw his sister getting out of her car. "Hey, come on in," he yelled through the open window.

* * * *

Pushing her sunglasses on the top of her head, Sally stood in the opened doorway of her brother's house shocked by the transformation, "Is there a reason you're cleaning your house?"

"Yeah, I thought it was time for a change," he answered over the loud radio.

Walking over the radio she turned it off and let her eyes follow her brother around the room as he cleaned off a bookshelf.

"Pierce, is there a new woman in your life?"

Looking over at her Pierce tried to keep the smile off his face but couldn't.

“I do have someone I’m dating,” he admitted.

Sally’s grinned covered her whole face.

“I’m so pleased for you; when do I get to meet this mystery woman?”

Pierce tossed his rag down on the table and started to strengthen items on the shelf. She knew instantly that something was up with her baby brother and wanted to know what it was.

“Are you going to answer me?”

“Rynne works a lot, so I don’t know when the best time will be to get the two of you in the same room,” he answered quickly.

She noticed how Pierce wouldn’t make eye contact with her which was a telltale sign he was keeping a secret from her.

“Why can’t I meet Rynne? What’s wrong with her?”

“Sally, you would really love Rynne once you got to meet her,” he replied, looking at her.

“I’m sure I will, but why are you acting like this? I can tell you’re keeping something from me about Rynne?” She questioned, then a light came on.

“Is Rynne black?”

“Yes,” Pierce replied.

“How long have you been seeing this Rynne person?” she asked through tight lips.

Sally wanted to know how Pierce hooked up with his new ‘girlfriend’ but she didn’t want to come across too pissed off. Pierce became a totally different man toward her when he fell for a woman. He wouldn’t speak to her for days if she badmouthed any of the women in his life. She had to take this slow and easily if she was going to get Rynne out of Pierce’s world.

“We’ve been dating for a little over a month now. She’s here on vacation.”

Her brother answered with a smile that brightened his face.

A little light of hope came into Sally’s eyes.

“Rynne doesn’t live here?”

“No. She’s here visiting her brother and nephew for a few weeks.”

“How much longer will she be here?” she questioned.

“Not sure.”

“Well, it’s nice you found a new friend for a little while,” she said with a forced smile to her pinched lips.

Pierce left the shelf and came over to stand in front of her.

“You don’t understand... Rynne is more than just my friend, I’m in love with her and I’m thinking about asking her to move in with me.”

Sally’s eyes sparked with anger.

“The hell you will. Pierce, don’t ruin your life like this with a woman like her? Is it because she’s seen the scars and didn’t flinch? Don’t you know that you can find a white woman who will love you for them, too?”

Moving back from her Pierce shook his head sadly.

“Sally, you’re never going to find love if you keep living with all that hate. Rynne is who I want to be with not because she’s black. I love her because of who she is and how she makes me feel.”

Sally eased back toward the door livid that Rynne had already stolen her brother away from her.

“Please don’t tell me you’ve slept with her already.”

Pierce’s blue eyes blazed stared into hers without blinking.

“I don’t think that’s any of your business, Sally.”

Sneering, Sally snapped her response back at her brother, “There isn’t one thing beautiful about a black person especially a black woman.”

“If you feel the need to spat out your hate, I think you need to leave my house and not come back until you can deal with me being with Rynne,” Pierce yelled, and then pointed to the front door.

Spinning on her heels Sally walked out the door as Rynne was pulling up beside her car.

“Is that her?”

Sally questioned loudly dashing out the door with Pierce at her heels.

“Yes it is and don’t you dare do anything to her,” Pierce screamed after her.

Running down the steps Sally jerked open the car door and pulled her brother’s girlfriend out of the front seat.

“I want you to stay away from Pierce, you whore,” she yelled right in Rynne’s stunned face.

“He’s already had one crazy bitch in his life. I won’t let him get hooked up with you for anything in the world.”

Shaking off her own shock, Rynne shoved her out of her face.

“Who in the hell are you?”

“I’m Pierce’s older sister and I’m warning you to stay away from him. I won’t tell you a second time.”

She was about to say more until Pierce grabbed her by the upper arm and jerked her away from Rynne.

“Leave right now, Sally,” he hissed, dragging her back to her car.

Releasing her arm Pierce stood there while she got in the car.

“Don’t forget what I said to you that will be the only warning you’ll get.”

Sally warned, slamming the door, then left in a cloud of dust.

* * *

Pierce turned and walked forward stopping inches from Rynne's body. She stared up at him and he openly studied her for a reaction at the way his sister treated her. He would kill Sally if she had done anything to ruin what he found with Rynne.

"Are you okay?"

Rynne smiled at him, but it held a touch of sadness.

"I think I just met someone worse than my brother."

"Why aren't you more upset?" he questioned.

Sighing, Rynne moved around his body going toward his house.

"Getting upset over your sister's comments won't change her opinion of me. She isn't going to accept me so why let it ruin my day?"

Halfway to his house, Rynne paused staring at his open windows and door.

"Pierce, why is your house open like that?"

She continued toward the steps, but he stopped her with a hand on her elbow.

"Wait, I don't want you to go inside yet."

He wanted to surprise with his redecorating.

She paused to look at his face no longer covered by the hood.

"Is there a reason why I can't?"

Rynne fought to control her swirling emotions because she didn't want Pierce to think she was a clingy female.

“Pierce, I just realized I'm late for a dinner date with Tia, I'll call you later.”

Once again the fear set in of her not living up to the image Pierce had of her. Rynne quickly shook off his hold and rushed back to her vehicle.

Chapter Fourteen

The way Pierce didn't try to prevent her from leaving gnawed away at Rynne's confidence horribly. *How could she fall for him so fast?* Pierce McMahon was still almost a stranger to her. Now he was also her lover of almost two weeks, damn wouldn't she ever learn from her past mistakes? Hell, it would almost still be a month until Byron got back from Canada. *Why didn't she stay at home when she had the chance?* Rynne knew a losing battle when she saw one. Too many people were against them being together. First, her brother, Chadwick and now Pierce's sister Sally was all up in her business. *How was a sister supposed to stay sane with the nutcases always in her face?*

In her heart she had always been afraid of falling for Pierce harder than she had any other guy from her past. That's way she always found an excuse to leave Pierce's house. All of this was so new to her and she wasn't handling it well at all. How was he ever going to see the real her, if she never stayed around long enough for him to? He was only the second guy she had slept with at twenty-eight. The way he made love proved her had a lot of lovers before his accident, which meant her inexperience hadn't pleased him and he was ready to move one. Rynne was very confident when it came to everything

else but her abilities as a lover. Pierce just proved her suspicions correct.

Rynne Slater wasn't a good lover in bed.

Driving into her brother's driveway, she noticed all the lights off inside the house and she was positive they were on when she left. "Hell, after the way my day has gone I'm not sure I even know my own name," she uttered, getting out of the car.

Making her way to the front door, Rynne opened it going inside the house. Locking it behind her, she tossed her purse on the stand by the door and went toward the kitchen. However uneasiness settled in the pit of her stomach like there wasn't something right about her brother's house. Feeling she needed to leave, Rynne turned as a figure jumped out from behind the stair case. Screaming she ran toward the front door, but the man grabbed her hair snapping her head back.

Burning pain shot through her head, "Where's your brother?"

The man asked shoving her back to the dark living room. Panic like she'd never known before welled in her throat.

"Answer me," he yelled by her ear.

"Byron isn't here," Rynne gasped terrified.

The only sounds in the room were their heaving breathing. Moving to face her, the man was dressed in all black from head to toe. Only a pair of eyes stared back at her from two holes in his ski mask.

“Aren’t you pretty,” he whispered staring at her.

“Too bad, I’m not interested in anything but finding your brother,” the intruder said reaching to run a finger down her jaw.

“When will he be back?” he asked gripping her face painfully.

Mumbling, she tried to answer him, but couldn’t, so he let go of her jaw.

“Tell me,” he screamed. Rynne gasped panting in terror at the thought of this man kidnapping her or even worse killing her.

“I don’t know.”

His hand flew out hitting her across the cheek and mouth, “Don’t lie to me,” he hissed hitting her again, causing her to scream out in pain.

“If you’re to lie I’ll have to get answers another way.”

Pulling out a gun he pointed it at her chest.

“Okay, Miss Slater, when will your brother be home? Bryon is so damn smug that didn’t have a clue I’ve been watching him for weeks. He needs to learn how to treat people better and I’m going to be the person who shows him how.”

How in the hell did he know her name? Who in was this guy? What kind of trouble was Byron is? All the questions raced through her mind as she gasped, realizing a shiver of panic, if she didn't tell the truth he was going to kill her.

"Byron will be back at the end of the month," she said eyes on the gun pointing at her chest.

"Very good," he said moving to hold the gun in one hand, the man reached out to place his other hand one of her breasts squeezing it painfully. Rynne began to shake as the fearful images built in her mind of this man attacking her.

"Please don't hurt me," she pleaded with him.

Looking into her face he gave her a sickening smile.

"I don't have any interest in hurting you, Miss Slater," he informed her moving back from her.

Sliding the gun back into his pants wrapped his hand around her arm. Dragged her over to a chair in the living room he shoved her down into it.

"I'm going to tie you up, so you won't call the police."

Picking up rope from the couch he tied up her hands and legs, "I'll call to let someone know you're like this and remember to tell Byron I'll be back for what he owes me," he was about to leave and then he stopped and looked back at her.

“Oh, I forgot to cover your mouth,” pulling a black rag from his pocket he covered her mouth with it.

Tears rolled down her cheeks thinking about being left like this until someone showed up shattered her. Without looking back the intruder opened the sliding door running out into the quiet black night. As soon as he was out of sight Rynne struggled with the ropes for over two hours cutting into her wrists finally exhaustion settled in and she passed out.

* * *

The phone ringing around twelve o'clock at night work Pierce from a deep sleep,

“Speak,” he mumbled into the phone.

“You need to go help your girlfriend,” the man said.

Fully awake now Pierce sat up in the bed turning on the light, “Who in the hell are you?” he yelled into the phone.

“That doesn't matter Rynne needs your help,” the man answered.

“I tied her up at her brother's house. She has been that way close to three hours now. The reason I called you is because I know her brother hates the two of you together. Everyone in town knows it and he's going to be pissed that you were the one who saved her and not him.”

The man slammed down the phone and the sound rung in Pierce's ear.

No, Rynne couldn't be hurt. She was at his house early looking stunning at usual.

He would know if something was wrong with her, wouldn't he?

Jumping out of bed Pierce threw some clothes on and rushed out the door to Bryon's house. He arrived at the house in less than twenty minutes. Trying the front door Pierce found it locked, so he went around checking the sliding glass door. He saw the door was wide open walking into the house he spotted Rynne in the far corner slumped down with her arms and legs tied to a chair. His heart stopped in the middle of his chest as thought he of Rynne never being in his life took a hold of him.

"Rynne," he shouted running over to her still body.

"Please God let her be alive."

Untying her he laid Rynne's body down on the sofa and checked for a pulse. He found a steady one she wasn't dead only passed out. Tapping her face a few times with his hand Rynne finally came and she screamed when she saw him looming over her body.

"Rynne, honey it's me," he said touching her softly.

Crying she wrapped her arms around his neck, "How did you know I was here tied up?"

Pierce removed Rynne's arms from around his neck and noticed the blood on her wrists. He was too preoccupied earlier to even spot what bad shape they were in.

"You need to see a doctor."

He started examining the small but deep cuts on her delicate wrists. He could kill whoever did this to his woman. Rynne was too sweet for some bastard to treat her like this.

"No, I don't," she said shaking her head. Rynne brushed his hands off her body and sat up on the edge of the couch.

"I only want to take a shower and forget this even happened."

"Yes, you do," he insisted picking her up in his arms heading toward the sliding door and for his truck parked crooked in the driveway.

"Pierce, please put me down," Rynne said wiggling in his arms.

"Stop worrying about me. I'm fine really."

"I'll start worrying about you as soon as a doctor gives you the okay."

He exclaimed placing her inside his car, Pierce got in on his side and sped out of the driveway for the hospital.

* * *

The hospital staff was very helpful with Rynne after they stopped staring at his face. The cuts on her wrists weren't deep enough for stitches, but the doctor gave her medicine for the pain telling them how often the bandages needed to be changed. Pierce worried about Rynne's silence all while she was in the emergency room.

What if something more happened that she wasn't saying? He didn't want to bring it up in front of the hospital staff, so he would wait until they got back to his house. It didn't matter the house wasn't finished yet he wanted Rynne with him.

"Are you ready to leave?" he asked, tenderly touching her cheek.

"You're going to pack some of your clothes and stay with me until Bryon gets back."

"Yes," she replied, moving his hand from her face.

Pierce knew something was wrong and he needed to get to the bottom of it. Ten minutes later, sitting in the car inside the hospital parking lot, Rynne turned to him and said, "I don't want to go back to your house. I'm going to pack and stay with Tia."

"The hell you are," Pierce growled, swinging his head over to glare at her.

"I wouldn't let you stay with anyone but me."

Did she think she was going to be out of his sight after what happened to her?

“You’re going to stay with me, Rynne Slater, and I don’t want to argue about it. I’m still pissed you don’t want to call the police.”

Rynne swung her head away from him and touched the bandage around her left wrist.

“Don’t pick at it or it won’t heal correctly.”

Pulling out of the parking lot he wondered why Rynne didn’t want to stay with him. Had he done something to upset her, surely she still wasn’t mad about yesterday at his house? He didn’t want her to come in because the house was going to be a surprise, after she had left he had gotten a lot more done, and it looked damn good.

The silence coming from Rynne was driving him crazy. Why didn’t she want to talk? He loved the sound of her voice.

“Rynne, do you need to tell me anything else about the attack tonight. Did he do something to you that you aren’t being honest about?”

* * *

Soulful brown eyes combed Pierce’s strong face, not seeing the scars as everyone else did, but the man she was falling in love with. Pierce had grown to mean too much to her in a short period of time. The concern

etched on his face was real, but it steamed from him not being there to protect her. It wasn't out of love. In all the time they had been with each other the word love had never been spoken. Pierce's lovemaking abilities were earth-shattering, but without love it meant nothing.

Rynne craved more in her life than he was ready to give her. She wanted someone to grow old with, share dreams about the future, hopes and disappointments with or when she needed a shoulder to cry on there would be one available. The attack tonight brought a whole new perspective to her.

"No, nothing else happened," Rynne finally commented.

* * *

This night wasn't going as Pierce wanted it at all; hell yesterday was atrocious and now it was spilling over. Rynne should have been safe with him wrapped in his arms tonight not being tormented by a sick freak. A boyfriend is there to protect the most precious person in his life-his girlfriend.

Slamming his hand on the wheel he cursed, "Hell, I should have been there to protect you, baby. Can you forgive me?" he asked as he pulled the car up to his house.

Rynne focused her attention on his house, so she could avoid answering his question. She could feel his eyes staring a hole into the side of her face.

“Please talk to me,” he muttered.

“You can’t keep this in much longer. I’m here for you now, share your fears with me,” he said, reaching across the seat to give her a little shake to get her attention.

“You don’t want to hear what I have to say,” she uttered, making full eye contact with him.

Pierce stared her, baffled by the hurt coming from her, “I don’t follow you.”

He faltered in the silence that engulfed them inside the black Blazer.

“Are you upset about something different than the attack at your brother’s house?”

“Why didn’t you want me inside your house earlier?”

Rynne asked.

He exhaled a long sigh of relief, opening the door he got out going around to get Rynne.

“Sweetheart, I thought it was something enormous you were livid about,” he said walking to the front door with her.

“Don’t you think saying I can’t come in your house isn’t worth getting furious over?” Rynne exclaimed.

Pulling her into his arms, Pierce kissed Rynne’s pouting lips.

“Close your eyes.”

“Why,” she asked, arching an eyebrow as she leaned back in his embrace.

“It’s a surprise,” he breathed by her ear.

Covering her eyes with his hand Pierce unlocked the door. He guided an unsuspecting Rynne into the room.

Kicking the door shut he said, “Okay, let me help you find a good spot.”

Moving her around, he stood Rynne in the middle of the newly rearranged room.

“Surprise, baby,” he whispered, removing his hand.

A soft gasp escaped Rynne when she focused on the newly-cleaned room. Pierce’s house looked unbelievable with the freshly painted walls along with new items that had been placed on bookshelves. The thick covering of dust no longer coated the gorgeous red wood tables throughout his huge place. Flowers were on the table in a new vase. She couldn’t dull the sparkle that came into her eyes as she stared at him over her shoulder.

“Is this why you didn’t want me in here yesterday?”

He smoothed her hair away from her shoulders.

“Yes, I wanted you to feel comfortable in my house as you do in Byron’s. I had grown accustomed to living as I was, but a woman like you needed more than I was offering.”

Pierce placed his hands in the middle of Rynne’s back and made her face him.

“So, I set my mind to change my living arrangements. Do you like the changes?” he asked, looking into her face.

He watched for some sign of happiness or pleasure from her, but she stepped away from him and wandered around his house.

* * *

Strolling through the clutter-free house, Rynne took in the clean smell of the environment around her. All the dust bunnies were gone from the furniture and the corners of the huge living space. She was enthralled by what she saw; pictures were hung on the once bare walls. The couch which sat toward the corner by the huge screen television no longer had crumbs covering it or on the floor. Pierce’s favorite chair that sat to the left of the sofa looked brand new from the cleaning he had given it.

New rugs were on the hard wood floors adding a cozy feel to the masculine bachelor pad. Rynne was impressed Pierce had done so much work

in the place that it could have doubled as a trashcan the first time she had set foot in here. She continued on to the kitchen, switching on the lights; the room was illuminated beautifully. A dark blue tablecloth was thrown across the table with plaid checkered napkins enhancing the small space. Reaching out Rynne ran her hands across the marble counter top that she never got the chance to see in the past, because items were always covering it.

The whole presence of the place screamed a difference to her; Pierce had done a wonderful job at redoing his home. Taking time to accomplish this showed a little more of him to her, the part he kept more hidden. Running a manicured hand over the table Rynne remembered what happened the last time they were in here.

“What grade do I get?” he asked, kissing her neck.

“I think you deserve an A+,” she replied, smiling over her shoulder.

He wrapped his arms around her midriff.

“I’m glad I get to hold you in my arms tonight.”

Rynne’s eyes closed hoping Pierce was going to say something else, but the words never came. A knot rose in her throat as she removed herself from his embrace, “I’m fine, you shouldn’t worry about me.”

Pierce’s sharp eyes followed her back into the living room assessing her mood.

“Come on, let’s go to bed. I know you’re tired.” Pierce headed toward his bedroom thinking she was behind him. The fact she hadn’t followed him became obvious when he turned to find her still standing in the position he left her.

“Rynne, did you hear me?” he asked.

“I’m not sleeping in the same bed with you,” she mumbled, sitting down.

“I think it would be best if I slept on the couch.”

“Can you tell me why I can’t have you in my bed tonight?”

Unconsciously her brow furrowed as she said the words that had been in her head all night.

“I want to be more than a sexual fulfillment for your needs,” Rynne informed Pierce.

“I think it would just be best if we cut all ties, now with each other.”

He stiffened at her comment.

“Fulfilling sexual need...is that what you think about our making love?”

Pierce’s long strides ate up the distance between them in mere seconds. He stood over her looking down at her intensely.

“I love being close to you because you open up so much. When I hold you in my arms I forget about everyone else, but the woman I love.”

Pierce stopped and inhaled a deep breath.

“Honey, I didn’t want to make love. I wanted to keep you close to me, because I failed tonight,” he muttered, the sound of failure resonating in his voice.

He caught her gently by the shoulders and pulled her up from the seat drawing her into his warmth.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know my feelings for you,” he questioned kissing the top of her head.

“You were in my face from the second I met you. I couldn’t yell or shout loud enough for you to back off,” he joked, hugging her even closer to his body.

Chapter Fifteen

Rynne was too chocked up to utter a word. Pierce was telling her he was in love with her. She didn't want to miss a word of this. Smiling against his chest she kept quiet and continued to listen. Besides discovering the formula for the skin cream this had to be the other most important and exhilarating moment in her life.

"I kept hoping each day you would come back and you did," he admitted honestly.

"This love between us is beyond anything I have ever felt." Pierce kissed Rynne drawing the part of her he cherished the most into him, praying it would end the longing he always felt until she barged into his shell of a life.

His tongue traced the softness of her lips, the kiss sent the pit of her stomach into a summersault, and truly it was like an outer body experience for her. Pierce wanted to show her there was more between them than just amazing sex.

"I love you, Rynne Slater," his last words were smothered on her lips.

Lifting glassy desire-filled eyes, Rynne searched his face, “I care about you, too, Pierce.”

Thrown by her choice of words, Pierce leaned back from her, “What did you say?”

* * *

Rynne picked at the bandages on her wrist and Pierce removed her hand, “Don’t do that.”

She knew she was unable to give herself completely to a man after all the bad relationships from her past. The guys only stayed for so long after they found out how many long hours she worked, plus what a bad lover she was. The double combination was way too much for them to handle. The poor soul in front of her has been without a woman for so long that he didn’t or couldn’t understand her mistakes. It would be right to set him up for a disaster. He deserved someone as equally sexual as he was.

“Rynne, do you not love me?” Pierce asked, holding her smaller hands trapped between his larger callused ones.

“I care deeply for you, Pierce, but you can’t be in love with a woman like me,” she murmured, slipping her hands away from his.

“What in the world are you talking about?”

Rynne tried to pull her hands away again, but he wasn't letting go.

"Share with me," he begged.

She knew if she waited much longer, she would lose her nerve, so the words poured from her mouth.

"I'm not a good lover. When it comes to making love I always get a failing grade," she choked out.

"Did the man hit you on the head? Do you have a head injury?"

Pierce asked as he led her over to his chair. Sitting down, he tugged her on his lap.

"Rynne, I've already told you how much I enjoy when we make love, so what are you talking about?"

Rynne dropped her pain-stricken eyes down to Pierce's confused ones.

"You don't know the difference because it has been years since you had any."

His voice chuckled at her choice of words.

"I'll never understand how the female mind works," he said with a shake of his head.

"In one breath you're complaining about how I can't wait to get you into my bed and then in the next you're worried you aren't keeping me satisfied."

Reclining back, Pierce's laughter carried on. His reaction angered Rynne, causing her to jump from his lap. Storming over to the door, she flung it open and made her way down the steps to the gravel driveway. Stalking past Pierce's car, she kept walking toward the streetlight at the end of the street blocking out his yelling behind her.

She was about half way past the first streetlight when a strong grip grabbed her upper arm.

"Rynne, where in the hell do you think you're going?" Pierce roared twisting her around.

"Back to Byron's so I can get my things and back home," she hissed. "I don't have time for you to make fun of my inability," she snapped.

She tried to pull his fingers from around her arm, but Pierce had a death grip and wasn't about to release her.

After two more hard pulls, Rynne's arm eventually came free and she perpetuated her path down the desert road. Her whole posture was that of an angry black woman who didn't want to be bothered. Being fed up didn't begin to describe how she was feeling.

"Sweetheart, wait," Pierce yelled again running after her.

Finally when Pierce caught up with her, he circled his arms around her waist wrapping her up in a bear hug.

“You have to stop running out on me all the time or my feelings are going to get hurt,” he joked in her ear.

Rynne struggled against Pierce and tried to get loose. This wasn’t a time for him to be kidding with her.

“Why are you always joking around with me? Don’t you know how to have a serious conversation?” she asked.

“A man jokes with the woman he loves because he feels comfortable and loved. Furthermore, I don’t want to hear anymore about how you don’t or can’t satisfy me in bed,” he scolded lightly.

“I’ve a very healthy sexual appetite, I need it at least three times a day, maybe more, if you’re wearing one of those cute outfits of yours,” he grunted, bending down to nibble at her neck.

Walking slowly, he backed her up against a nearby tree.

“Do you know that you’re the only woman who has kept up with me in the bedroom?” he asked, staring down at her.

“You have been the starring role in my dreams for months now,” he confessed, easing her earlobe into his mouth.

Long fingers worked at the buttons on her shirt.

“Do you feel the need in my body?”

Pierce asked, sliding between Rynne’s warm thighs.

Moaning, Pierce whispered hot words in her delicate ear trying to draw Rynne out of her shell.

“I love how your body knows mine when it’s beneath me. My cock gets harder and thicker.”

He inhaled deeply like he was trying to memorize her scent.

“You’re perfect for me in every sense of the word.”

Gasping, Rynne held on to his shoulders, “Do you know what I think the problem was?”

Rynne shook her head no waiting for him to finish.

“You were too much for your last boyfriend, so instead of allowing himself to feel inferior, he pushed the blame at you.”

Pierce hoped that his words were making Rynne feel better. He had to make her see that all of self-doubt and fear was uncalled for. Rynne placed her smooth hands on top of his, lifting his eyes from her heaving breasts he found her eyes with his, “Thank you,” she said, pressing her open lips to his.

“How about we go back home?” he asked, fixing her shirt.

“Sounds good to me,” she agreed, linking her arms through his as Pierce escorted her back to his house.

* * *

Later that night while Rynne slept in Pierce's arms, a black fog pulled her deep into a tormented nightmare. The figure dressed in black kept shoving her down in the chair, tying her arms and legs. The rope would get tighter and all her pleading wouldn't make him stop. He only laughed at her, taunting her with all the punishments he would do to her if Byron didn't give him what he wanted.

"You better not lie to me," the intruder screamed in her face, yanking at her hair, snapping her neck back.

Every time she opened her mouth in the nightmare no words came out, but he kept punching her in the face. Thrashing around on the bed, Rynne fought the imaginary demon trying to pull her down to hell, "NO, DON'T!" she screamed flinging her arms out from her body.

A pair of hands held her firmly down to the bed, "Please don't hurt me," she cried with tears pouring down her silky cheeks.

"Baby, wake up," Pierce yelled at Rynne trying to shake her awake.

Rynne shoved at the chest covering her body.

"Pierce, please help me," she screamed, caught up in the hellish nightmare.

* * *

“Honey, please wake up,” Pierce begged shaking her gently. He kept trying to pull Rynne from the dream, but he couldn’t.

“I need you Pierce, why won’t you help me,” Rynne screamed in her sleep.

Tearing the covers along with the sheet tossing them to the floor, Pierce lifted Rynne up and off the bed into his arms.

“Sweetheart, follow the sound of my voice, can you hear me,” he asked.

“Fight him,” he yelled.

“Come back to me.”

Rynne still struggled in the depths of the drowning dream. He was so lost. Rynne wasn’t responding to him and it was scaring the hell out of him.

“God, please let her wake up,” he pleaded one last time holding her struggling body to his sweaty one.

Slowly, Rynne opened her eyes looking around the dark room, “Pierce,” her hoarse voice choked out.

She shoved at his chest trying to break the tight hold.

“Rynne,” he said, holding her away from him.

“Damn, baby, are you okay?” he asked brushing her damp hair away from her sweaty face.

“I think so,” she answered trying to regain her bearings as her usual strong voice cracked.

“Wait here,” he said leaving her in the tumbled bed.

A few minutes later he came back with a glass of water that he encouraged her to take a long sip.

“Do you remember the nightmare?” his soothing voice probed further.

Nodding she said, “I was trying to fight off the attacker, but no matter how hard I tried he kept hitting me in the face,” she cried.

“Shh.” he said soothing her.

“He’s not here.”

Her worried eyes darted around the room.

“I couldn’t get away from him,” she spoke in a weak and tremulous whisper.

“He’s gone now, honey, and I promise you he won’t place his dirty hands on you again,” he growled deep in his throat.

Rolling out of bed, Rynne stood in front of his bedroom window. “You can’t promise me that. The only way he wouldn’t be a threat to me again is for me to return home,” she answered, her voice a little stronger.

“I’m a fighter and I’m not happy he made me weak.”

Pierce tripped over the sheet that got tossed on the floor during their lovemaking as he ran to her, “You aren’t leaving me,” he muttered, spinning her around to face him.

“I can’t think about not touching or kissing you. We love each other, even though you haven’t spoken the words to me yet,” he said, running his hand through her hair, kissing Rynne on the forehead.

“I can’t let you go,” he admitted under his breath.

“Let’s go back to bed; the nightmare just frightened you. The guy isn’t coming back because he wouldn’t think about setting one foot in my house,” his masculine voice stated proudly.

* * *

Walking away from Pierce, Rynne rubbed her arms through the pajama top that Pierce insisted she wear.

“There’s no way I can stay here with you until my brother comes back,” she mumbled, lost in her own personal thoughts.

The longer I stay here with you the quicker you may find out my secret or I’ll have another run in with that crazy sister of yours.

No, her mind thought the best option would be to leave and go back home.

“I need the freedom and space Byron’s space give me,” Rynne lied, knowing the moment she left the house she would be on a plane back home.

She only had to make it out of his house and away from him and those killer bedroom eyes he was staring at her with.

“Plus, there are things I need to take care of,” she finished.

Done talking to him, she crawled back into the bed covering her body with the sheet.

* * *

Pierce placed his hands on his hips and stood by the end of the bed trying to figure out did Rynne really believe any of the nonsense she threw his way. If her mouth wasn’t so beautiful when she spoke, he would have stopped the talking ten minutes ago. She wasn’t going anywhere in the morning except on a morning jog with him. Did she think he was dumb?

Her sexy butt would be on the first plane back home, which by the way, he still didn’t know where she lived. They needed to talk more about their personal lives with each other. Honestly, he hardly knew anything about the woman he loved. Sometimes he felt like she was holding a major secret back from him.

Massaging the back of his neck, Pierce allowed so many “what ifs” to run through his mind it almost gave him a headache. Rynne could be so tiring at times with her preconceived thoughts and opinions about how he felt for her. Hell, he wanted to scream to the world how much she meant to him. Moving to the bed, he tossed the sheet back on the floor, sliding back into the bed beside Rynne he ran a finger down her goose bumps.

“If you want to stay warm, use my body,” he invited as she flipped over to stare at him.

Reaching out he traced her lips with his fingertips, “You’re so beautiful on the outside as well on the inside,” he praised.

Dropping his fingers from her mouth he pulled Rynne up into a sitting position, his eyes drilled her trying to find out why she wasn’t acting the way he was used to. Something had changed within the last twenty-four hours and he couldn’t rest until he found out what it was.

“Baby, what are you keeping from me?”

* * *

Scooting back from him, Rynne decided lying to him was the best option, “I’m not hiding anything from you, but getting attacked tonight has left me shaken. It was a frightful experience,” she confessed holding her tears at bay.

“He was so strong and I couldn’t fight him off,” she shuddered. “Pierce, he kept touching me and I didn’t think he would stop,” Rynne whispered, dropping her head ashamed of her lingering fear.

“Don’t you dare let him win,” Pierce growled, grabbing her chin focusing her head up.

“You are the strongest woman I know and I forbid you to let that bastard take that from you,” he exclaimed harshly.

She breathed in shallow, quick gasps at the outburst from Pierce. Her usual spunk slowly started to come back. A fire burned in the pit of her stomach; fear wasn’t a part of her vocabulary.

Remembering who she was caused her tense nerves to relax immediately, “Pierce, you’re right, baby,” she agreed kissing him on the mouth.

“I can’t let some lowlife like him have me live in fear of my life. I love every moment I get up in the morning and I’m not about to stop,” she told him, pushing him back down on the bed.

Kissing him, she said, “How about we don’t let this new bed go to waste?”

Chapter Sixteen

“Let’s go for a swim,” Pierce yelling back at Rynne as he ran past her to the small lake several yards from his house.

Arriving there before her, he took off his shirt, tossing it to the ground, Pierce started working on the short when Rynne stopped beside him breathing hard from the long run, but she loved how it made her feel. Sweat clung to her brown skin causing the thin T-shirt to outline her breasts. He always loved how her body looked after a run.

His arm snaked out yanking her to his sweaty chest, “Do you never look anything but gorgeous?” he asked nibbling at her damp skin.

Squirming in his arms, Rynne tried to get away from him. She never understood why he loved her all sweaty, but he loved kissing her the most after their daily runs.

“Pierce, come on I’m all disgusting; at least let me take a quick swim, then you can kiss me all you want,” she promised.

Sliding his hands under her shirt, he worked at unsnapping her bra, “Rynne, you know I find you so sexy all sweaty and slippery,” he muttered throwing her shirt and bra on the grass.

Moving his mouth down her neck, Pierce worked his way down until he pulled a hard pointed nipple into his hot moist mouth. Closing her eyes Rynne, slid her fingers into his hair moaning pressing her body against his. His large hands gripped her waist tighter as his mouth feed on her breasts going back from side to side until she was going wild in his arms.

Lying her down on the grass, he unbuttoned her shorts easing them down her smooth legs tossing them to the side in the same area as the rest of her clothes. When Rynne lay naked on the ground, Pierce stood above her to look down at the gift he had been given. She was the most beautiful creation he has ever looked at and she wanted him to be the man who loved her. His heart swelled as he realized how much he did love Rynne Slater, it would kill him to lose her.

Things happened so fast with them and now it was like she was always meant to be in his life. Pierce grabbed the wrapper from his shorts then took them off and tossed them to the ground. Taking off his shirt, he laid on top of Rynne to kiss her tasty mouth. Sliding his tongue past her lips, he licked the sides of her mouth enjoying the last of her. Small hands played with the hair at the base of his neck driving him crazy minute by minute, he really wanted this to go on forever, but he couldn't want anymore.

Finding the wrapper he tore it open sliding it on, he eased Rynne legs apart and slid between them.

“Baby, open you eyes and look at me,” he whispered by her ear.

Dark brown eyes eased, open making eye contact with him, Pierce slowly slid inside Rynne, but not all the way.

“Do you love me?” he asked, pulling out when she didn’t answer instantly.

Rynne tried to raise her hips, but he wouldn’t let her do it.

“Come on, I know you want me, but I want more than that,” he growled, sliding all the way in only to pull back out when Rynne raised her hips.

“Stop teasing me like this,” she hissed making a grab for his thighs, but Pierce slid back inside and covered her body with his.

He nibbled at her neck, but his body wasn’t making love to hers. Pierce knew Rynne loved him, but he wanted to hear the words come from her lips. Squirming underneath his hard body, she tried to think of ways to make him move inside her, yet he was determined not to until he heard the words.

“Baby, please stop teasing me like this,” she begged. “Do you want me to beg you?” she whispered.

Gasping her chin in his hand, Pierce looked into her eyes.

“Sweetheart, I’ll never make you beg for anything,” he replied feeling pain at her words.

However, he needed to know he wasn’t the only one feeling love in this relationship, the words he wanted to hear were staring back at him in her eyes, she only need to say them. Pierce hoped it would be soon, because the tight hot feel of her was driving him crazy.

* * *

It wouldn’t be a lie, Rynne thought. She did love Pierce so much, but once the words were spoken they could never be taken back and he would have a piece of her forever. Once she went back home, she didn’t know if she could come back to him. There was too much of a risk of him finding out about her and the work she had done, but the future was still three weeks away and this moment was for her.

Slowly, he eased out of her and thrust back in.

“Rynne, are you going to tell me what I need to hear?” he asked between another powerful thrust.

“You can’t want me to stop what I’m doing. I know you loved it as much as I do,” he growled.

Scratching his back, with her hand Rynne closed her eyes lost in the loving making of Pierce, but the second she felt her body about to fly he stopped. Rynne's eyes flew open in shock.

Pierce was posed above her jaw clenched from the strain of not giving into the urge to move inside her.

"Tell me," he hissed with his powerful jaw tight.

Sweat covered both of their bodies and birds were singing in the background, Rynne knew she loved this man more than anything in her whole life.

"Pierce McMahon, I love you more than I have any other man in my whole life," Rynne said softly.

Growling his happiness, Pierce slid out of her body and thrust back in to the hilt, making them both scream out in pleasure.

* * *

An hour later they climbed out of the pond walking over to pick up their clothes to get dressed, Pierce was happier than he has ever been and Rynne was troubled more than any woman should be. He finally got the words from her lips he wanted to hear, yet instead of making her feel alive, Rynne felt dead on the inside.

Love shouldn't be this powerful or addicted. Your life shouldn't be wrapped around another person's feelings so intensely that your pain is their pain as well. The pain Pierce was going to experience was going to kill her in the future.

They had three weeks left with each other, so Rynne wanted to make the best of it. Byron and Chadwick were due back at the end of next week, and their threats were still in the back of mind. Having one of them against her was bad, but when they teamed up together the situation got so much worse for the man to her left.

Pierce didn't have a clue of how much money she was worth or the fame that came with her. Sure there were other scar removal creams on the market, yet hers healed scars faster and left only a faint line. She knew Pierce's face could heal almost back to normal if he ever used her cream. The only problem was if he used the cream, her secret would be out.

Damn everyone for planting the idea in her head that her not telling Pierce about it was keeping a secret. Secrets were things people had to hide and Rynne knew she didn't have anything to keep from Pierce, yet this one thing couldn't be found out.

"What has your pretty head in such deep thought," Pierce asked brushing his mouth on the back of her neck.

“I could hear you mumbling as I got dressed,” he informed her as he moved to stand in front of her.

“Second thoughts about saying those words to me,” he asked with a smile, but she could see the concern in his eyes.

“Baby, I love you,” she told him again to make him believe it.

He didn’t have to make her be on the brink of an orgasm to whisper the words to him.

Pierce’s face relaxed into a smile, “Then what has you so upset?”

Rynne started off in the direction of his house with him beside her,

“Byron and Chadwick are coming back next week.”

Pierce stopped and touched her arm, “Are you telling me once they get back you’re not coming by anymore?” he snapped angry.

“I won’t let them take you from me,” he roared. “Those two forced me out here by myself, but if they try to take you too I’ll hurt them,” he swore.

A sudden thin chill hung on the edge of his words, “You don’t mean that,” she asked cautiously.

Blue eyes flashed with revenge, “Don’t let them test me, Rynne, or they won’t like the outcome,” he said matter of fact.

“I’m not a piece of property the three of you get to fight over,” she informed him.

“I do have a mind of my own and I can come and go as I please.”

Pierce snatched her to him so quickly that she flinched, “You’re mine,” he said close to her face.

“Another man namely Chadwick better not let the thought of you enter his mind or I’ll have to remove it for him. Rynne, don’t make me harm your brother’s friend, because I will if I have to,” he asked releasing her.

She reacted angrily to the challenge in his words, “How dare you place a claim on me like I’m a piece of luggage to be picked up at the airport?”

She hissed.

“I can do any damn thing I want with whoever I want. Chadwick isn’t the only man interested in me,” she taunted.

“When I get back home I may go out with several of them who has been asking for a while,” Rynne yelled brushing past him running back to the house.

“The hell you will,” Pierce bellowed after her.

Once she got to the house, Rynne slammed the door, breathing hard. She wasn’t in the mood to argue with Pierce about any of this. He couldn’t place any strings on her, not when they had already admitted to lovingly each other. Strings weren’t a part of any commitment she wanted with him.

The door was thrown open, causing it to slam hard against the wall. A picture slid to the floor and broke from the power of Pierce's anger. Taking a step back, Rynne held up her hands.

"Pierce, you can't get upset with me. I never said I was going to stay after my vacation was over," she said backing up until she hit a wall.

His face was a glowering mask of rage.

"We aren't talking about you leaving yet, but we'll get to that soon enough," he said slamming the door shut, advancing toward her.

"I want to know whom in the hell are you planning to sleep with who isn't me?" he shouted coming to stand in front of her.

"I know you wouldn't dare sleep with Chadwick after what I promised to do.

"So, who else is left on your list? Have I not done a good job enough keeping your body weak with passion?" he questioned, pressing his body to hers.

"Do you need it more than I'm giving it to you," he breathed by her ear.

"Tell me what you want and I'll do it, but don't you ever threaten me with another man," Pierce said touching her.

“I don’t take well to threats and I know you don’t want me to harm an innocent man for lusting after what’s mine, do you?” he questioned, sliding his hand between her legs.

Rynne bit her lip as his fingers brushed her. “Pierce, I wasn’t doing that,” she said trying to concentrate on her words instead of his hand.

“I just wanted to let you know what was worrying me.”

Pierce eased his fingers away from her body to place them on either side of her head.

“Rynne, you know how much I care about you and the vision of another man in your body makes me see red,” he admitted dropping his forehead to her shoulder.

“You have to stay with me and not go back to work,” he said so low that she almost missed the words.

“My work is very important to me and I have to go back in three weeks whether I want to or not. Everyone is expecting me back to help out with the project,” she told him.

“What project?” he asked raising his head.

Rynne cursed her mouth for letting too much out.

“Oh, I have been helping out at work with this big campaign and my boss needs me back in three weeks,” she lied avoiding eye contact with him.

What would he do if Pierce found out she was the boss and the employees were waiting for her to come back? Last minute things still have to be done before the creams could be shipped out on time.

All the correct paperwork needed to be signed by her and checked one last time for perfection and then the world would have *Vanish-Away*, the perfect scar removal cream. She had been working on *Vanish-Away* for the last five years of her life and nothing could go wrong with it now. Her life had revolved around working on the cream until now.

Pierce body was leaned into hers with such love and understanding he would listen to the truth now if she wanted to tell him.

“Are you still angry with me?”

Rynne asked kissing the side of his neck. Wrapping his arms around her waist, Pierce swung her into his arms and carried over to his recliner.

“No, I’m not upset with you anymore,” he said falling back into the plush seat.

“But do you really only have three weeks left to spend with me,” he asked sounding a little lost.

“Baby, I’m so sorry, but the first of next month I won’t be here anymore,”

Rynne replied, kissing him on the mouth. His large hands gripped her waist while deepening the wet kiss.

“Isn’t there anything I can do to make you want to stay longer?”

Rynne ran her fingers through Pierce’s cool black hair, “Honey, I didn’t say I didn’t want to stay longer with you, but I can’t do it when I have people counting on me to be back on a certain day.”

Chapter Seventeen

Pierce didn't want to hear how soon his time would be up with Rynne, it brought an unbelievable pain to his heart. There had to be something he could go to keep her from going back home. All he had to do was come up with the perfect idea to make her stay here with him. Rynne didn't need to know what he was thinking or he knew she could try to talk him out of it. Thinking about others always came first with her. Pierce could describe her as a work alcoholic, which was why she got sent on this vacation and into his unexciting existence.

His mouth spread into a thin-lipped smile at the thought of not finding a way to her with him. Sure, she had told him now that she loved him, but it wasn't enough to stop her from returning back home. He had sworn to himself not to fall for another woman like this, but Rynne's personality filled him with such a hope at their future.

He moved back from Rynne to gaze into her face, "Would you stay here with me, if you didn't have a job to return to?" he said.

Rynne paused because she didn't want to hurt Pierce; however, he wanted an honest answer and would get one.

“I could never live in the same town as my brother. The only reason I came here in the first place was my doctor called him as my next of kin. Bryon and I can only get along for a very short period of time,” Rynne replied gesturing with her hands.

“He isn’t the best brother in the world; and we can’t be in the same place together for too long or it ends up in a disaster.”

“Baby, I wasn’t asking you about your brother.”

Pierce laughed, kissing her on the neck.

“I asked you about me. Could my love be enough to keep you here?” One corner of his mouth pulled into a slight smile awaiting her response. A muscle quivered at his jaw because he knew from her expression he wasn’t going to like the answer

Rynne managed a small, tentative smile.

“Pierce, I couldn’t give up everything I worked for to move here.”

Feeling Pierce’s supple muscle tense beneath her, Rynne got up from the recliner to stand motionless with her back to him in the middle of the room. Rynne swallowed hard and squared her shoulders preparing herself for Pierce’s anger.

Pierce got up from the couch; he reached out, swinging her around to face him.

“Well, I guess I have to find a way to make you want to stay, don’t I,” he said without any anger in his rich voice.

“You aren’t upset,” she asked faintly.

Drawing a step nearer to her, Pierce said, “Baby, the only thing you had in your life the last few years has been your job. I can understand you not wanting to leave it for a man you just met. No matter how sexy you find him,” Pierce teased her.

“You’re right I do find you so sexy, Mr. McMahon,” Rynne teased back, hugging him to her.

* * *

“Are you ready to handle the problems we’re going to have when we get back to Texas,” Chadwick asked Bryon as the last screens for the movie were begun wrapped up.

Chadwick knew Rynne hadn’t stayed away for Pierce when they had been gone. She was one woman who didn’t know how to listen. Well, when he got a hold of her he would teach her a little respect.

After he wiped the memory of Pierce from her mind, it annoyed him that she didn’t want a fine brother like him, but a freak like Pierce. Had she been working too long around people like him that she couldn’t pick out a good looking man when she saw one in front of her? For the past two years he

had pressured Bryon to fix him up with Rynne, but Bryon always found a way out of it. Saying she didn't like for him to get involved in her personal life.

Byron also went on the mention that they weren't as close as a brother and sister should be. Because their parents seemed to favor him more as a child than they did her, Bryon thought that Rynne had never gotten over it.

Chadwick thought it might be her snobby attitude. Women like her really did need to be brought down a peg or two.

He knew Pierce was allowing Rynne to have her way, because it wasn't everyday a guy who looked like Pierce got a woman like her. Well, Rynne wouldn't get an ounce of lead when he got a hold of her. Just the thought of Rynne brought a creepy smirk to his handsome dark-brown face.

* * *

Byron sat in the trailer and watched Chadwick thinking about his sister wondering was it really a good idea that he told his best friend about his single sister. Rynne was his baby sister and he was responsible for protecting her not throwing her to the wolves; and the biggest wolf was sitting next to him.

Chadwick had been his friend for years, however he didn't know to treat a woman and Rynne may not believe him, but after spending all this time with Chadwick he didn't want him around her.

“Chad, maybe you need to leave Rynne alone, if she’s happy with Pierce let her stay with him.”

Hard eyes stared at his face, “Are you saying that you’re happy your sister is with that man now?”

“Yes, I’m if that makes my sister happy.”

Laughing a deep laugh, Chad hit Byron with force on the leg, “Stop acting, man, you almost had me believing you,” he said ending in a chuckle.

Byron moved his body away from Chad, who didn’t know how not to touch him. He had told him on several occasions not to, but Chadwick being Chadwick didn’t know how to listen.

“I’m trying not to think of Pierce as a freak man, yet the man who my sister is involved at the moment.”

“How do I know this isn’t a phase she going through just to test me out,” Chadwick questioned leaning back in the chair crossing his legs.

“I haven’t been the best brother to her in the past and that has to change sometime,” he admitted under his breath as more to himself than Chadwick.

“I can’t understand where all this is coming from,” Chad asked confused by the change in his attitude.

“When we came to Canada, we both were on the same page about Pierce and wanting him to stay far away from Rynne. Now we are about ready to go back home and you’re having a change of heart.”

Sliding to the edge of the seat, Chadwick folded his hands between his legs to shift closer to him.

“Is there a sneak attack you’re going to do? You know I can keep a secret or better yet help you out with any plan you have in mind,” he said with nastiness to his rich voice.

He was starting to see what Rynne saw in Chadwick. A very controlling, mean, and vengeful man that wanted what he saw no matter who he had to hurt to get it. Sure, he could still be friends with him, because Chadwick was his closet friend, but he would end his obsession with his sister.

“No, I don’t have any kind of plot or scheme planned for Pierce. I’m trying to be the better person and give the guy a chance. What if he’s the one Rynne has been waiting for?” he questioned.

Chapter Eighteen

Tia was sitting in Byron's driveway waiting for Rynne to arrive. She didn't have a clue Rynne had been attacked three days ago until her friend told her. Rynne was tougher than her because wouldn't have come back to this house. But Rynne said that she wasn't going to let that intruder have power over her like that. Of course Rynne decided to wait until Pierce was visiting his sister for a couple of days trying to make her accept their relationship.

Rynne confessed Pierce had told her to stay at his house while he was gone, but the second he drove off, Rynne had called her. Pierce must have known her friend didn't take well to orders. That was one reason her and Byron were always getting into fights.

He was controlling like an older brother usually is and Rynne didn't like it, so she always did the opposite of what he told her. It might be the reason behind her dating Pierce in the first place. She liked Pierce a little better than she had in the past. However, she did wonder how involved Rynne's emotions were with Pierce. He had a lot of wonderful qualities about him, but was he the man for her best friend?

It seemed like he had such baggage with the scars and his bad relationship in the past. Pierce came off as detached from the world around him. Would he fight for Rynne when he found out about her career? Or be so reserved as not to make a spectacle of himself?

Shaking her head Tia worried Rynne might in trouble for a lot of heartbreak and not even know it, but she pushed all the thoughts out of her mind when Rynne pulled up and got out of her car.

“Hey, girl, why did you want to come back here and when did you get your car?”

Tia asked as she got of her car to hug Rynne.

* * *

Rynne ended the hug with Tia and took a seat back.

“I convinced Pierce last night that I need a way to get around while he was gone, so he gave in and brought me here to get it.”

“Pierce would have a fit if he knew you were here like this.”

Tia commented as she watched Rynne pulled Bryon’s house key from her purse and headed for the house.

“I can’t allow Pierce to keep me out of my brother’s house or that creep would have won. Besides, I need to get things ready for Byron and my nephew when they get back home.”

Rynne finished as she open the door. She let Tia walked in before her then shut the door and locked it behind her.

“You’re brother sure is a neat freak.”

Tia said following her to the back bedroom through the spotless and well-organized house.

Going over to a window, Rynne opened it to let fresh air into the room. “Byron was like this when we were kid,” she commented laughing a little at Tia, who tossed an item on the floor the moment she got into her house.

It stayed there until she missed it or someone picked it up for her. Tia wasn’t the most organized woman in the world, but she loved her nevertheless.

“Don’t act like you aren’t the same way,” Tia said opening her closet.

Her friend was always searching through it for a shirt or skirt to borrow.

“What are you looking for in my closet,” Rynne asked, moving around the room looking for stuff to take back to Pierce’s.

He only let her grab a few things the night he brought her back after the attack.

“Tia, stop shopping in my closet and help me.” Rynne uttered.

“That’s the reason I called you over here. I would have done it by myself, but if Pierce had found out, I would never hear the last of it.”

She noticed how tumbled the bed was from the last time that she and Pierce had made love. She quickly tossed the dirty sheets off the bed and went to grab new ones from the closet by the bathroom door. Memories of her making love with Pierce for the very first time in this bed raced in her mind as she started to make up the bed. He was the best lover she had ever had and she was going to miss being with him when she left.

Damn, if there was only a way for her to stay with him without him finding out about the cream, but it wasn’t possible. The second she got back her and Mason was schedule to do a press conference about the miracle cream along with several news shows. It was going to hurt her to end it with Pierce, yet it had to be done.

“What has that look on your face?”

Tia asked grabbing the edge of the sheet as she pulled it over to her side of the bed.

Blinking Rynne focused her attention on Tia, “I was thinking about how I have to leave Pierce without him knowing about my research,” she admitted with a sigh.

“Do you think it will really matter to him all that much?”

Tia questioned fixing the covers while she grabbed the pillows out the chair by the bed.

“Yes, he has so much pride,” Rynne muttered.

“Pierce will think I was using him as an experiment for my product.”

Tia didn’t believe that.

“Why would he think that you have never even talked to him about the cream?”

She said tossing the pillow Rynne threw to her on the bed.

A guilty look passed over Rynne’s face at her friend’s comment.

“Please tell me you haven’t said something to him about fixing the scars with a cream,” she pleaded with her.

Glancing quickly away, Rynne picked up another pillow bringing it back to the bed. She arranged the pillows the way she knew Byron liked them,

“It may have came up in a conversation or two,” she whispered, not looking at Tia’s face.

“What did he say?”

Tia asked rushing around the bed to confront her.

“I don’t think he paid much attention to me, because he said all the specialists said there wasn’t a thing that could be done for his scars. Do you want to know how much I wanted to tell him how wrong they were?”

She exclaimed with a fire to her brown eyes.

Excited she grabbed Tia by the shoulders, “It has been on my lips so many times to let him know about the cream. It would work wonders on him, but I can’t,” Rynne cried moving away from Tia.

“Have you thought he may find out with you telling him?”

Tia questioned.

“Byron and Chadwick hate your relationship with Pierce and one of them will be more than happy to tell him the truth. They want to keep the two of you apart.

“Girl, you know I’ve given that a lot of thought,” Rynne confessed, leaving the bedroom with Tia following her listening.

“But I’m hoping since I’m leaving in less than a month I can get them to keep their mouths shut,” Rynne said walking into another room.

She stopped as her eyes connected with the rope and chair in the middle of her room; it was almost too much for her to handle remembering being tied up and defenseless against the attacker. Tia moved her to the side.

“Why don’t you go work in the kitchen and I can take care of this?” she whispered shoving her out of the room.

Nodding Rynne left so Tia could take care of the room without her being there moving into a different room. She sat at the breakfast bar and rested her head on the table, trying to calm down her nerves at seeing the room again. She thought she would be able to handle it but it was still a fresh wound with her mind and body. However, she would harp on it or that guy would win. Brushing her hair back from her shoulders, she brushed the memory to the back of her mind and left thought of Pierce flirter in.

She did wonder how Pierce’s trip was going with his sister. She had tried talking him out of going to see Sally, because in the end, their relationship would it be over and she didn’t see any use in dragging his sister into it.

Sally hated her, so why couldn’t Pierce understand that and let it go?

Chapter Nineteen

“Will you please listen to me?” Pierce growled at his older sister as he swung her back around to face him.

“No, I won’t hear you praise that woman to me,” Sally hissed, her eyes filled with hatred.

“How can you even touch a person like that,” she questioned with a shiver to her body.

“Mom and Dad would die if they knew what you were doing,” she yelled at him.

“They aren’t the ones I want to accept Rynne, you are,” he pleaded with his only sibling.

She gave him a hostile glare.

“Why is my acceptance of her so important to you?”

Sally questioned.

“Don’t you know she has a place in life and it isn’t with you? Rynne needs to be with man that isn’t you.”

His sister shouted at him.

“Rynne is mine and if another man thinks about taking her from me I’ll hurt him,”

Pierce curt voice lashed out.

Fear set in Sally’s slim body at her brother’s words, “Please tell me you aren’t in love with that creature,” she pleaded.

Slowly he stalked over to Sally until she could feel his breath on her face,

“Sally, I love you because you’re my sister, but if you ever say that again about the woman I love I’ll disown you,” he said very slowly enforcing his point.

Stepping back Sally looked at him threatening her for a woman she didn’t deserve him.

“You would end our relationship for her,” she asked aghast.

“Yes, I would,” he admitted moving back an inch or two.

“Sally, Rynne is part of my life now, with or without you. Wouldn’t it be best if you got to know her first without judging her because her skin is darker than ours?”

Her eyes still conveyed the fury still within her body.

“Why can’t you just get from her what you want and then drop her,” she questioned harshly.

“Use her for what?” his deep voice asked.

Folding her arms under her breasts, Sally said.

“I know it has been a while since you had sex and a woman like Rynne is always hot for it,” she pointed out.

“So, get all the release you can from her body and toss her away after you’re finished. See, that’s what they are made for,” Sally exclaimed.

“After you get all that pent-up energy out, you can go back to a woman you would be proud to have on your arm.”

Pierce’s jaw was stiff from keeping it shut. Sally’s words were cruel for anyone, but to hear her speak them about Rynne angered him to no end. She didn’t know a thing about the woman he wanted in his life.

“Rynne isn’t with me so I can use her body as a sexual toy,” he growled.

“I want her with me because I love her more than I have any other woman from my past. All the qualities I was looking for in other women I found in her and if you can’t wish me luck than I don’t need you. I can place you on the same list as Mom and Dad,” he threatened.

Sally seethed with mounting rage, yet she tried her best to keep it from showing in her voice.

“Have you even given thought to dating someone else?”

“Whom would I want to date besides Rynne?”

He asked, dumbfounded by his sister’s question.

“What about Marcia Melton?”

His brow wrinkled at the name from his past, he hadn't thought about her in years.

“Are you talking about the same Marcia I dated all those years ago? I haven't thought about her in years,” he confessed with a laugh.

“But you remember who she is,” Sally stated.

“Yeah, I went out with her before I met Amber” he uttered remembering the petite brunette with the huge cobalt eyes.

“Well, you know that we still keep in touch with each other,” Sally told him with a grin.

He didn't like the way this conversation was heading and he was going to stop it.

“No, I don't want you to say another word,” he said pointing a finger at Sally.

“Just listen to what I have to say.” Sally insisted grabbing him by the arm tugging him over to a chair.

She pushed in down and took the seat next to him.

“Marcia is still a nice-looking woman who closer to your age, and very well-known by a lot of people here in town.”

She smiled at him like he cared about Marcia's status.

“It doesn’t matter to her that you have the scars on your face now. She still wants you, Pierce.”

“How does she know how my face looks?” he asked, his brilliant blue eyes looking at his sister.

Squirming under his direct stare she replied, “I might have shown her a picture of you.”

Pierce jumped up from the seat, but Sally shoved him back down.

“Why in the hell would you do something like that? She doesn’t know a thing about me now? We haven’t seen each other in years and I don’t want to see her,” he mumbled getting up out of the seat.

Sally didn’t like how stubborn Pierce was being with her he didn’t use to be this way. When she asked him to do something, he usually did it.

“Can’t you even have dinner with her while you here?”

The anger Pierce felt hardened his attractive features.

“Don’t push me, Sally, because you won’t like what happens. I came here to make you understand how I felt about Rynne. I don’t need you meddling in my life.”

He glowered at her and turned away hurt his sister wasn’t even trying to be on his side. What was worst Sally hadn’t paid attention to one word he has spoken since he walked in her house.

Sally knew she had to do something to fix the situation or Pierce would walk out of the door and not come back to see her. He had done it with their parents and she wasn't far from it. Reaching out she placed her hand in the middle of his back.

"How about you stay for dinner with me and when Marcia comes over tonight, so you can tell her you aren't interested in her."

Pierce whirled to stare at her, quick anger rising in his eyes.

"What kind of game are you playing, Sally?"

"I'm not playing any games with you Pierce, I had already invited Marcia over for dinner anyway and I would like for you to stay too. You're still planning to spend the weekend here with me, aren't you?"

He wanted to say no, because this wasn't going as he planned; yet, he didn't want to disappoint his sister.

"Yeah, I'll stay," he told her almost against his will.

Wrapping her arms his neck, Sally gave him a huge hug, "Thank you so much for doing this for me. Next time I'll it will be my turn to do a favor for you," she told him kissing his cheek.

"Go and wash your hands while I get the table set for dinner. Marcia should be here any minute now."

Pierce left the room hoping Rynne wouldn't be upset about this dinner once he told her about it when he got back home. She had been so lost lately and he needed to think of a way to cheer her up. He had missed her smile so much in the last couple of days. There wasn't much time left of her vacation and he still needed to come up with a way to make her stay with him. While he was in the bathroom washing his hands the doorbell rung, he heard Sally go and answer it.

Please let this night go back fast He thought as he dried his hands and refolded the towel laying it on the bathroom counter. Staying hidden as long as he could Pierce finally made his way back into the other room. Sally and Marcia were talking in hushed tones until they spotted him standing in the doorway.

"Pierce, it so wonderful to see you," Marcia said, walking over to kiss him lightly on the mouth.

Moving back slightly, he looked at her, but didn't say a word about the kiss.

"How are you doing?" he asked trying to make conversation with his sister's dinner guest.

From the corner of his eyes, Pierce noticed Sally leaving the room, so they two of them could talk privately. He was glad for the space, because he wanted Marcia to know where they stood with each other.

“We should talk about some things first,” he said looking into her blue eyes.

They were two or three shades lighter than his very dark blue ones.

“Sally has already filled me in on this girlfriend of you,” Marcia said with a wave of her hand.

“You know how much I love to compete for the grand prize,” she whispered, touching his chest and arching an eyebrow.

Removing her hand from his body, Pierce said, “You can’t compete for a prize that isn’t your to win,” he informed her.

“Rynne is my girlfriend’s name and I think you should respect her by using her name,” he suggested.

One perfectly arched eyebrow raised a fraction higher, “Well, I hope Rynne knows what kind of man she has in you,” Marcia murmured.

“Rynne knows that I’m the one who’s happy to be with her,” he said in her defense.

“I have to say you’re more assertive now than you been in the past. Does it come from dating a black woman?” she questioned.

Pierce chuckled nastily, “I guess a man does become more passionate when he has a fiery woman around him instead of a cold fish,”

He threw back at her, hoping Marcia got the hint.

Her face paled with anger at his cruel words, “The only thing I would worry about is how many other men is your girlfriend making feel the same thing.”

She taunted back at him before going to find Sally, who was outside working at the grill.

He wanted to lash back at her, but he wasn’t going to waste his breath. The only reason he wasn’t leaving was he promised to stay for Sally and he would, but it knew he was in for a long night.

Chapter Twenty

Byron knew Rynne was going to be stunned that he was home early, but he wanted to be there when Jalen got back home from his visit with his grandparents. It took a lot for him to let his son visit his mother's parents after what she did to them. However, they were his family and had nothing to do with her decision to leave them. Jalen loved his grandparents dearly and enjoyed the time he spent with them during his summer break.

Going to the airport parking lot, Byron found his car and went home. He needed time alone with his sister, so they could talk. He was very happy that Chadwick decided to stay in Canada for the cast farewell party. His buddy loved attention and anytime he could get it, Chadwick would take it.

He was sorry it took him so long to realize how despicable he was to Rynne. She had told him, but he just thought Rynne was being her old self not wanting to give a brother a chance at her. Yet, the dressing room event shocked some sense into him.

Would Chadwick of attacked or hurt his sister if she didn't scream as quickly as she had? He wanted to punch in him the face days later as he

laughed about how upset Rynne got over nothing on the set, yet it couldn't with the director and crew counting on him.

He wanted a very long career in acting, but his sister's feelings did matter to him. He would do anything to protect her from harm and the most harmful person to her now was Chadwick not Pierce McMahon as he first thought. Byron only hoped that he hadn't ruined his sibling bond with his sister. Rynne could be very set in her ways when it came to certain things.

* * * *

"How are things going?"

Rynne asked Mason resting her back on the island inside Byron's kitchen. She was still a little upset that her doctor sent her away for this important time in her life. She should be there for the final preparations of her cream.

"Are all the creams packaged and ready to go on time?"

Mason laughed on the other end of the phone at the questions she was asking him. She knew she was acting like a proud mother, but she couldn't help it.

"Yes, we are slowing getting everything together, so when you come back all that needs to be done is for you to sign off on all of it," Mason responded.

“I have an extra cream left I was doing some test on, do you want me to send it to your brother’s? You can see how the labeling and everything looks one last time,” he suggested.

Why did Mason even ask her that question when he knew what the answer was already going to be?

“Are you crazy? Of course, send it to me,” she muttered, feeling a bottomless peace and extremely satisfaction for the project she had spend five years of her life working on.

“Don’t worry about giving me the address. I can get it out of your address book on your desk,”

Mason told her.

“I’ll drop it off at the post office on my way to lunch. “So what’s new and exciting with you?” he asked.

“Are you still dating that guy you talked about when you were here?”

Rynne’s smile spread across her face, “I don’t remember mentioning any new guy in my life, Mason.”

“Come on, I tell you about all my horrible dates,” he hedged.

“Sorry Beth didn’t work out,” she said hurt for her friend.

“Don’t worry about it,” he answered.

“Beth was a fun girl, but I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life with her. Anyway, I have my sights set on a new woman.”

She couldn’t help but laugh at her co-worker.

“Let me guess; does she work at the post office?”

Rynne knew Mason eyes just narrowed at her on the other end of the phone.

“Stop giving me that look or your forehead will get lines in them,” she scolded sweetly.

“Well, if it does happen I can use your cream to make them vanish,” Mason teased back.

“But how did you know she worked at the post office?”

“How long have we been working together?” she asked him.

“Close to four years.”

“Out of those six years, how many times have you gone to the post office on your lunch break?” Rynne questioned.

Alright, I see you point,” he admitted.

“Rynne, I need to go and I’ll talk to you later on in the week.

They ended the phone call at the same time Rynne heard the key turn in the door, Rynne froze in place scared to move thinking it was the man coming

back to get her. As the momentarily fear was wearing off, she started searching for a weapon as her brother came back the kitchen.

“Rynne are you here?” he yelled dropping his bags on the floor.

“Over here,” she answered moving away from the knife drawer.

“What are you doing back home two days early?”

“I wanted to be home when Jalen got back.” Bryon replied.

“Plus I wanted to talk to you.”

As casually as she could manage, she asked, “What do you want to talk about Byron?”

With a very firm voice he said, “Pierce and Chadwick.”

She lifted her chin, meeting his gaze straight on, “I don’t want to discuss them with you. We had this fight the day you left and I can’t believe you’re coming back home with this.”

Byron reached out to touch her, but she brushed his hands away.

“No, I said I don’t want to hear anything you have to say.”

She threw back her head and placed her hands on her hips, daring him to argue with her.

“Do you know how much you remind me of Mom, giving me the eye like that?” he questioned.

Rynne stopped giving her brother the look. Byron seldom brought up their parent to her because she wasn't close to them. Her mom had tried to be more loving toward her near the end of her illness, yet it didn't work and her father never even attempted that with her.

"Sorry, I didn't want to make you feel bad," Byron apologized.

Rynne shrugged off the sad feeling.

"Why are you so interested in talking about Pierce and Chadwick?" she asked.

Byron has always been straightforward so he just spoke the words on his mind, "I was wrong about Chadwick. I don't think he's the best man for you. I'll be willing to accept Pierce as your boyfriend if you're still dating him."

Shock flew through her at her brother's words. Taking a quick breath of utter astonishment Rynne words rushed from her parted lips.

"I know you aren't turning on Chadwick? This is some kind of joke or bet, isn't it?" she insisted coming out of her light daze.

Rynne was irritated at her brother for trying to make a fool of her like this.

"Byron, I thought we were trying to build a stronger bond with each other that's the only reason I came here on my vacation. But you must not

want the same thing I do,” she said, shaking her head sadly. Rynne was truly hurt by his admit at conning her. Why was he acting with her?”

“Chadwick had no business walking into your trailer the way he did scaring you. Over the short period of time I spent with him in Canada filming the movie I got to see the guy you’re always telling me about. Sis, I didn’t like the man I saw and I let him know it.”

Byron shoved the sleeves of his shirt up past his elbows.

“I don’t think he believes I would end our long time friendship for you, but I would. Can’t you see that I’m trying to be the brother you always wanted in your life? Will you give me a chance to treat you better? I want to start by wiping the slate clean.”

Rynne was puzzled by his abrupt change in mood. Byron wasn’t one to let his mind change once it was made up about a person. He was the kind of guy who either liked or hated you on sight. Her mind swirled with doubts. What if this was a trick cooked up by her brother and Chadwick to hurt her or, even worse, Pierce?

Her brother was an actor and making a person believe him is what he got paid to do. Her guard has always up when it came to Chadwick, because she never trusted him. Byron was a different story. He was her family. Surely, he wouldn’t be using her for his own purposes?

Yet, the man who attacked her did say something about Byron owning him. A wave of apprehension swept through her quick and fast making it harder for her to decide.

“Byron, you have never been there for me in my life, why should I believe you now?” she questioned him.

His expression darkened with an unreadable emotion, that at first Rynne could read then she realized it was regret.

“Rynne, I shouldn’t have let Mom and Dad treat you like that. In addition, the first time you told me about Chadwick I should have taken your word, but I didn’t.”

Byron stopped talking, hesitating, measuring Rynne for a moment trying to see were his words sinking in.

“I promise you I’m serious about standing behind in no matter what it is,” he promised with such passion Rynne wanted to trust him. But a nagging thought in the back of her mind refused to be stilled.

“Are you saying you won’t tell Pierce about the cream like you have threatened to do in the past?” she asked.

Chapter Twenty One

Byron chose his words very carefully before speaking to his sister.

“Rynne, you can trust me to protect your career with everything I have in me, but I don’t see what the problem is,” he admitted.

“So what Pierce has scars and you have developed a cream to help people like him. You were working on this long before he entered your life.”

“Pierce wouldn’t believe I was honestly interested in him for the longest time because of the way I look,” she said, pointing at her body.

“It didn’t help that you and Chadwick were the ones who had chased him out there all by himself. How do you think he reacted when I told him who I was?”

“I don’t know.”

“He practically tossed me out of his house,” she told him, waving her hands in anger.

“Pierce was a very hard man to win over and now that I have I can’t let him find out about the cream.”

“Don’t you think your deceit will hurt Pierce more than finding out about your job?”

“What deceit are you talking about?” Rynne asked, looking confused.

“Making him think you’re going to continue this romance with him after you leave.”

Bryon commented.

“He’s likely to be more hurt by you breaking up with him than finding out about your lotion.”

“Pierce knows that I’ll be leaving at the end of the month,” she informed her brother.

Folding his arms, Byron shook his head sadly at his sister.

“You can lie to yourself, but it won’t work with me. Rynne, you aren’t planning on having a long distance relationship with Pierce, because you don’t want him to ever find out.”

“How do you know that? I might just do that,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Okay, what if Pierce travels back home to see you and people notice the scars. They’ll ask him why didn’t his girlfriend use her miracle cream on him, and your love life will go downhill from there,” he told her.

“Stop with all this right now,” Rynne yelled at him.

“I never told him that we were in a committed relationship with one another.”

Byron knew he had hit a nerve because Rynne seldom yelled unless she was royally pissed off.

“Sorry if what I said upset you, but you know it’s the truth.”

“Can you please leave me alone? I need time to think.” Rynne mumbled, walking away from him.

Holding up his hands, Byron left the room so he could unpack his bags..

* * *

Listening to Marcia and his sister talk made Pierce realize how much he missed Rynne and their conversations. She never said anything just to hear herself talk; every word that came from her gorgeous mouth was useful. There was never any useless conversation between the two of them in his mind. She was so perfect and secure in herself that Rynne never had to brag or put others down to make herself feel better.

Looking back and forth between the two women sitting in front of him, Pierce knew this trip turned out to be a bad idea. He wanted to come and make Sally understand how he felt about Rynne, because she was going to be a part of their family, but she hadn’t listened to a word he said. Instead, Sally tried to hook him up with an ex.

“Pierce, don’t you want to join in the conversation?”

Marci asked, smiling at him from across the table.

“No, I think I want to sit here and listen to you and my sister talk about me like I’m not in the room,” he responded sarcastically.

Marcia blinked at him then broke out into laughter.

“I forgot what a wild sense of humor you had,” she said, wiping a tear from her eyes.

Sally’s eyes narrowed on him.

“Yeah, Pierce has always been a joker, haven’t you? Little brother,” Sally muttered softly.

Turning his head slightly, Pierce responded, “Well, when you grew up in the household I did you learned how to joke about things early. Because if you didn’t all the rules and regulations would drive you insane.”

Slamming her palms down on the table, Sally stood up and glared at her brother, “Mom and Dad always said you weren’t truly a part of the family and I see what they mean now. You would rather defend her than stick with your blood. What kind of man are you?” she questioned harshly.

Pierce slowly rose from his seat, “I think I’m the kind of man who has a mind of his own and didn’t allow our parents to brainwash me at a young age. I know how to have my own opinions,”

He snapped showing the passion he used to in the boardroom before he quit his job.

Sally fell back down in her chair shaking by his comment.

“I haven’t heard you talk like that in years.”

“If you keep badmouthing my girlfriend you will hear more of it,” he promised.

“Hey you two calm down,” Marcia encouraged.

“Why don’t we all calm down and relax? Don’t allow a stranger to come between the two of you. There isn’t anything stronger than the love between a brother and sister.”

Stretching his arm across the back of his seat Pierce said, “Marcia, Sally’s love comes with a price,” he muttered, “a price that I’m not willing to pay.”

Sally’s voice rung out, “I don’t want you to pay any price for my love, Pierce. However, how can I sit by and allow you to go down this road? I love you and only want you to be happy,” her voice stammered.

Reaching across the table, his hand came down over hers.

“Can’t you see how happy Rynne makes me?” he asked.

Sally closed her hand over his.

“I know Marcia can make you happier,” she answered, totally ignoring his question.

Sliding his hand from underneath his sister’s, Pierce leaned back in his chair; in a controlled voice he said, “How about we stop talking about Rynne?”

Nodding, Sally agreed by saying, “I like the sound of that. We can talk about more important things. Like are you going to visit mom and dad with me tomorrow? It has been years since you were in their home.”

Pierce knew Sally had been trying to reconnect him for years to the family he had been trying to deny. How could he embrace a family that hated Rynne for the color of her skin and nothing else?

“No, I can’t see them and you know it,” he replied. “I don’t mind relaxing here until you get back.”

* * *

Rynne stopped telling her brother about the attack when she heard his quick intake of breath.

“Do you know who the attacker was?” he asked, engulfing her in his arms.

“No, he was dressed all in black,” she said, shuddering as she relived the event in her mind.

“I don’t know of anyone who would want to hurt me,” he commented.

“I’m not that famous yet to have any crazed fans.”

“He acted like you would know what it was about,” Rynne said, pushing her body away from her brothers.

“I need to call the police and let them know about the break-in.”

“I don’t want to get interrogated by them.” Rynne shuddered. “I only want to forget I ran into that jerk.”

“Rynne, I love you very much and I’m going to support any decisions you make after this, but I’m going to let the police know what happened here.”

Byron was still upset he wasn’t there to help Rynne, but he could do it in this way.

Kissing her forehead Byron hugged her back to his body and Rynne was barely able to control her gasp of surprise. Was Byron actually on her side for once? She didn’t want to get her hopes up only to be disappointed later. He was good at pretending to be on her side then only turn on her.

“How can I believe you, Byron?” she asked, moving out of his arms and going to stand by his bedroom window.

“For so many years I’ve wanted an older brother I could count on. A brother, who would stand up for me against mom and dad,” she whispered, brushing away moisture by her eye.

He never knew how much their parent’s indifference hurt her. Byron always remembered when he was a little boy how their parents acknowledged his dreams and adored him every chance they got.

“Sis, I’m sorry for what happened in the past,” Byron said standing behind her noticing the way she stood motionless by the window.

Rynne swiveled quickly, turning back to face Byron, “Hey, you can’t help that you were Mom and Dad’s favorite. I stopped blaming you a long time ago,” she admitted with a shrug of her shoulder.

“I wished for love for such a long time and now I have it with Pierce,” Rynne told him.

“I love him so much my heart aches from it.”

* * *

“Thanks for coming for a visit,” Sally told Pierce, hugging him goodbye by his truck.

She loved her brother and hated to see him leave a day early. The visit didn’t go as she had wanted. Pierce and Marcia weren’t any closer to romance than they were all those years ago. Hell, what went wrong?

Tapping her on the nose Pierce drew her attention back to him.

“Stop plotting against Rynne,” he told her.

“She’s the woman I’m going to be with.”

As her brother got into the car, she touched him, “Can’t you stay and at least try to talk with mom and dad?” she asked.

“They’re making a special trip here just to see you after I told them you were here.”

“No, I’m sorry I can’t.”

Patting her hand once, Pierce moved her to side and got into his car, driving off without answering her.

“Pierce, I won’t let you ruin your life with her,” Sally yelled after him.

Chapter Twenty Two

Rynne was enjoying her time with her brother and nephew until she realized it was almost time for Chadwick to come over. Jalen had come back home yesterday and she hated to leave, but she didn't want to be bothered with Chadwick.

Jalen stopped working on his puzzle and asked her.

"Why don't you like Chad, Aunt Rynne? You always leave when he comes over."

Kids are so perceptive.

Rynne ran her hand over her nephew's new haircut blown away by how much he looked like her brother. He was so fond of Chadwick because he always brought him baseball cards over to add to his growing collection. She hated trying to keep a happy face when that jerk was around.

"Son, your Aunt Rynne just wants us to have guy time together," Bryon said, saving her from answering her nephew's question.

"You know, like a guy's night out," he said with a wink.

"Oh, I guess we can't have that with her here," Jalen said, in his best adult voice.

“I’m glad you understand,” Rynne replied, rubbing her nephew’s head one last time. Waving bye to her brother, she rushed out the front door hoping to miss Chadwick altogether, however she wasn’t so lucky. He was pulling up as she shut the front door.

“Where are you sneaking off to?” Chadwick asked, slamming his car door.

Sliding her purse on her shoulder, Rynne’s lids slipped down over her eyes to give Chadwick a hateful look.

“I’m a grown woman and I’m not sneaking out anywhere,” she spat, shoving past him.

Chadwick didn’t like the brush off Rynne gave him. His hand shot out and gripped her arm in a tight hold causing her to wince in pain.

“Don’t ever dismiss me like that again or you’ll regret it, Rynne,” he growled in her ear.

Rynne tugged at her arm, but he wouldn’t let go. It only made his grip tighter.

“I know where you’re going and I find it disgusting. You’re giving it up to that deformed man, but I can’t even get a decent hello from you. What would he say if he knew the real reason you were coming around him. Do you think I need to tell him?”

The thought of Pierce finding out tore at her insides, however, she wouldn't let Chadwick scare her with his threats. Rynne seethed with mounting rage.

"Don't you dare threaten me, Chadwick. Now, let go of my arm," she hissed through her clenched teeth.

"What are you going to do if I don't?" he taunted, pressing his fingers into her tender flesh.

Rynne placed her hand lightly on top of his.

"Well, Chadwick sweetheart, I can do this," she said, digging nails deep into his flesh.

Cursing, Chadwick shoved her forcefully away from his body and she stumbled until she caught her balance.

Chadwick looked as though he was about to say something but backed away when he spotted her brother, waiting for him.

"I'll catch you later," he yelled at her back.

She walked toward her vehicle blocking out the voice behind her. It had been three days since she had seen Pierce and she was missing him like crazy.

As she was heading toward his house, Rynne noticed Jeremy driving past her. It was past time Pierce got rid of him and started going back out into

the public. He didn't need to hide away anymore, because he had her now.

There was no way she would allow anyone to bother him.

Pierce had so many wonderful qualities, but no one would know about them if he stayed hidden away in his house. It was past time the people here saw past the scars to the man beneath them. Shutting off the car in his driveway, Rynne vowed to make that happen as she got out and hurried up the steps. She knocked once on the door and waited for Pierce.

* * *

The door was flung open by Pierce, who was standing there in a pair of jeans and a denim shirt looking more handsome than any man should.

"Hi, baby, I missed you," Rynne said, smiling up at him.

Bracing his shoulder against the door frame, Pierce looked down at her. She hoped she looked sexy in her long denim dress with her hair brushed down on her shoulders.

"Do I know you?" he asked, his voice already deep with unleashed passion.

"Well, I thought I was your girlfriend," she teased, deciding to play along.

"I don't think so," he said, with a shake of his dark head.

Easing closer, Rynne slid her arms around his neck, “How can I prove that I am?”

Lifting the corner of his mouth in a slight smile he responded with, “Maybe a kiss would help me remember you.”

Rynne’s whole being seemed to be filled with waiting, inch by inch she watched his mouth get closer to hers until she finally got what she wanted most. Pierce moved his mouth over hers gently, devouring its softness. She kissed him with a hunger that she had never shown with another man.

Capturing her by the arms, Pierce pulled her into the house. He held her to his body with one hand while closing the door with his free one.

Pressing her back to the door, Pierce moved his mouth from her lips to travel kisses down her neck, drawing her tender flesh in his waiting mouth. Moaning, Rynne ran her fingers through his thick, rich black hair. His large hands took her face and held it gently nibbling at her already moist mouth.

“You taste so good,” he whispered on her mouth.

Pressing her body to his Rynne deepened the kiss, which made her crave his body. Cupping her butt in his hands, Pierce wrapped Rynne’s long legs around his waist.

“Damn, I’ve missed you,” he admitted, by the side of her mouth.

Looking into his eyes she said, “I’ve missed you too, baby, but can we stop talking. I want to be with you,” she moaned, dropping her purse on the floor.

Grunting, he swept her, weightless, into his arms, moving toward the bedroom. Tossing her on the bed, Pierce unbuttoned his shirt tossing it to the floor. Rynne raised up on her elbows to look at his chiseled body, glad it was all hers to love and adore.

Licking her lips seductively, Rynne saw how his stance emphasized the force of his thighs and the sliminess of his hips. Dropping her eyes lower, she couldn’t help seeing how much he wanted her, but it was more than that. His tenderness towards her made her feel like the most desirable woman in the world. Pierce always made sure she got her pleasure first before taking his.

Moving to the bed, Pierce rested a knee on the edge using his hands to slide her soft dress up past her hips.

“Do you know how much I wanted to come home early, so I could be with you?” he whispered, resting his warm, bare chest against her clothed one.

His fingers brushed the inside of her thighs, slowly driving her crazy.

Closing her eyes, her head fell back on the mattress.

“How much did you miss me?” he questioned, as he started to work on the buttons to her dress.

One by one, they popped open until she lay beneath him in her underwear. She sucked in a deep breath as Pierce placed kisses on her breasts straining to break free of her bra.

He worked on the front clasp until her breasts were exposed. Opening his mouth, he pulled one hard nipple inside loving it only the way he could. Purring in the back of her throat, she pressed closer to him totally lost in the sensations he was causing in her body. After he finished with one Pierce moved to the other one while his hands removed her underwear tossing them to the floor.

“You didn’t answer me,” he murmured, nibbling at her smooth stomach.

“I thought about you everyday, and at night my dreams were filled with you,” she whispered as she opened her eyes.

“Good, that’s what I wanted to hear,” he admitted, standing up quickly to remove his pants.

Gently, he laid his body back on her damp body rocking back and forth between her legs so she could feel how much he wanted her.

Lifting her up off the bed with one hand, Pierce finished removing the dress flinging it across the room to lay by the bedroom door. With her in his

arms, his hands moved gently down the length of her back enjoying the smoothness of her rich brown skin.

The stroking of his fingers sent pleasant jolts through her making Rynne moan more. Pressing her to his chest Pierce let his fingers caress the planes of her back while his mouth nibbled at the side of her tempting neck, leaving little love bites. Laying her back on the bed his body imprisoned her in a web of growing arousal and they both knew it was time to end the ache simmering between them.

Easing her legs further apart, Pierce slid into her little by little until he couldn't fit anymore. Groaning Rynne bit his shoulder making his tempo thrust for thrust until the both of them exploded with pleasure. Sliding his arms around her body, Pierce kissed the back of her shoulder.

"Sweetheart, I love being with you like this," he told her, while his fingers tickled her stomach.

Laughing, Rynne twisted round in his arms so they would be face to face, "I enjoy this, too, Pierce," she said, touching the five o'clock shadow of his beard.

She loved how it gave him an even manlier look. It was going to be gut-wrenching to leave him when the time came. Pierce didn't believe she was

leaving, but he was so wrong. She had to go back home and finish her work.
No matter how much the thought of being without Pierce killed her..

* * *

Pierce noticed the second the faraway look came into Rynne's eyes as he held her and he hated that look.

"Honey, what are you thinking about?" he asked, taking one finger and massaging the frown in her usual smooth forehead, moving it down to trace her mouth.

"Nothing for you to worry about," she told him removing his finger, snuggling next to his chest.

Pierce didn't like the shadows behind her eyes. Rynne wasn't telling something him. But if she didn't want to talk, he wasn't going to force her.

Flipping her over Pierce kissed her neck, "Since you don't want to talk, what are we going to do with our free time?"

He asked his hands moving to pull her arms above her head.

The sudden movement caused the bruise under Rynne's arm to hurt. Wincing in pain, Rynne pulled her arms out of Pierce's hold. She rolled over to the side of her bed and sat up rubbing her arm.

"Baby, did I hurt you?"

His voice asked concerned. Sometimes he forgot how strong he was; Rynne was so feminine and soft. He would hate if he had been too rough earlier.

Touching her arm, Rynne said, “No, I’m fine.”

She whispered trying to slip out of the bed to get dressed, but he touched her shoulder so she couldn’t.

“Are you hiding something from me?” he questioned.

Turning her back to face him his sharp eyes zeroed on the arm Rynne was trying to keep hidden from him. Cupping her chin, he searched her face,

“What’s wrong with you arm?”

Rynne eyes kept darting away from his.

“Nothing, you worry too much.”

A growl erupted from deep in his throat, “Don’t lie to me,” he said.

“I couldn’t take it if you lied to me,” he told her.

Rynne studied him for a few minutes before she held her arm out for him to look at.

“Promise me you won’t get upset.”

Pierce gently turned Rynne’s wrists wanted. The dark bruise still showed on her darker skin and it set his blood to a boil. Reaching out his finger touched the mark on her mahogany skin.

“Who grabbed you this hard to leave this on you! Don’t think about not telling me, because there are only two choices,” he snapped.

“I know as much as you don’t get along with your brother, he wouldn’t do this to you. That means Chadwick put his hands on you,” Pierce roared as he jumped up from the bed.

Snatching, his pants off the floor, Pierce shoved his legs into them. Once he had them on he found his shirt and buttoned it with lightning speed.

“I’m going to hurt him for touching you in the first place,” he yelled going toward the front of the house for his keys.

Rynne couldn’t let him go and confront Chadwick. If he did Chadwick would tell him about her job and the cream. He had a very good way of making a lie look like the truth. There was no way in hell she was going to chance it. Wrapping the sheet around her naked body, Rynne raced after Pierce.

“Pierce, wait,” she said blocking the living room door.

“You can’t go after him.”

Pierce stood there with his truck keys dangling from his fingers.

“Why in the hell not?” he demanded.

“He put a mark on your body and I’m going to put a couple on him.”

“Move out of my way,” he said, shoving her gently to the side to storm out the door.

“Pierce, if you go and do this I won’t be here when you get back,” Rynne screamed after him from the doorway.

However, he ignored Rynne’s and kept walking because Chadwick had to be taught a lesson and he just the man to do it. He couldn’t standby and let him get away with this. Rynne was his and he wasn’t going to let anyone abuse her. He got into his car and drove off with only one destination in mind.

* * *

Hurt by Pierce blowing her off, Rynne slammed the front door and stormed back to the bedroom. She got dressed as fast as she could. She wasn’t going to take being treated like this from Pierce. She loved the hell out of him, but he had to learn that violence solved nothing. Making a quick stop to the bathroom, she paused in the mirror to fix her hair when Pierce’s reflection appeared behind her.

“Hey, I came back.”

Pierce uttered trying to break the thick tension in the small room.

Snatching her comb and purse off the counter, she brushed past Pierce without answering him. She didn’t want to hear any of his excuses.

“You weren’t serious about leaving me were you,” he asked taking in her every move.

“I got halfway to town and came back.”

Still she didn't say a word to him as she looked around the bedroom for anymore of her personal items. Not seeing any Rynne left and made her way into the living room, she spotting a book she pitched it into her oversized purse on the floor. All the while she felt Pierce behind her like a tall, protective shadow.

"Come on, baby I was trying to defend you," Pierce fired off hoping to drag at least something from her, but she kept her mouth shut.

Squatting down, she searched through Pierce's magazine rack for any of her other shopping guides, but didn't see any, so she stood up. Picking up her purse, Rynne walked around Pierce's body, trying not to break now. Without warning, his hand closed over her right shoulder.

"Please don't leave me like this," he begged.

"I shouldn't have acted so enraged, but the thought of Chadwick's hands on you drove me over the edge. Rynne Slater, I love you and if you go out that door, a piece of me will leave with you."

Twirling around, Rynne ran her hand over the stubble covering Pierce's jaw.

"I don't want to be angry at you."

Moving his head, Pierce kissed the palm of her hand, "Is this your way of saying you aren't mad anymore?"

Dropping her hand, Rynne gazed into his eyes, “Only if you promise not to storm out here again like I’m a piece of property that Chadwick abused.”

“See, that’s what you don’t understand,” Pierce said touching her again.

“You’re more important to me than anything in the whole world. I won’t allow anyone to harm you.”

Snuggling even closer she kissed Pierce below the ear, “Thanks for caring, but Chadwick is a joke and I don’t give him any extra attention.”

“However, I think Byron is getting tired of him too.”

Pierce shook his head in utter disbelief, “You can’t be telling me the truth,” he said taking her over to the couch.

“Yes, I am,” Rynne said taking a seat next to him.

“Byron is changing and I’m going to tell you how much.”

Taking a deep breath, she told Pierce the rest.

“He wanted me to invite you over for dinner tomorrow night.”

Chapter Twenty Three

Pierce's left eyebrow raised a fraction at Rynne words, "Are you sure you want me to have dinner with your family?"

He knew that Bryon may be trying to become more loving toward Rynne, but his coming to dinner might be too much too soon. Furthermore, there was no way in hell he could ever invite Rynne to dinner with his sister, let alone his parents. It would never happen and he needed to let her know that.

"Of course I'm sure," she said looking at him puzzled.

"You're in my life now and should be a part of our dinner plans. Unless you don't want to," she whispered, drawing away from him.

"Sweetheart, you don't give a guy a chance to finish his sentence do you?"

Pierce asked with a deep chuckle.

"I would love to have dinner with you and I can deal with Byron being there," he teased, kissing her on the lips.

A small smile of pleasure touched her lips, "You'll have fun, I promise." she said returning the kiss.

"I'm sure I will baby," Pierce said looking down into her upturned face.

“I better go, so I can get things ready,” Rynne told him, snatching up her purse rushing out the door.

Relaxing on the couch, Pierce let the love he felt for Rynne sliding through his veins. She really did care about him or she wouldn’t invite him to dinner. Hearing his phone ringing beside him on the table, he leaned over and answered it.

“Hello?”

“Dinner is at six o’clock,” Rynne said, “you better not be late or you’ll answer to me.”

“Okay, I’ll be there,” Pierce laughed at Rynne’s empty threat.

He loved how she teased him all the time and made him smile. It was a feeling that he has missed over the years.

“Good, I’ll see you then,” Rynne uttered then hung up.

Pressing the end button Pierce placed the cordless phone back down on the table. He hoped everything went flawless for Rynne. Because if Byron’s smug attitude about him hurt Rynne, then her brother was going to answer to him.

* * *

“Please do this for me,” Rynne begged her best friend.

“No, I won’t do it,” Tia replied shaking her head.

“How many things have I done for you in the past?”

She knew Tia couldn't count how many times she had done something for her.

“See, you can't even answer me,” Rynne pointed out, waving a finger under her nose.

“How can you tell me no now?”

“I'll do it,” Tia snapped.

“God, I can't believe I'll go out with creepy Chadwick to save your special dinner,” she moaned, rolling her eyes.

“Thanks again,” Rynne said rushing towards the door.

She had things to do before the dinner party tomorrow.

“I'll be sure to tell you how things went,” Tia yelled at her as she left the clothing store.

* * *

Byron's brow drew downward in a frown at Rynne's plan.

“I don't think that's a good idea, Sis. What if Chadwick decides to make a surprise visit?” he asked, worried.

Feeling very smug Rynne flashed her brother a huge smile, “I've already taken care of that.”

Bracing his forearms on his knees, Byron move forward, “Rynne, what did you do?”

“Tia’s going out with him tomorrow night right around the same time,” she confessed with a wink.

Laughing Byron fell back on the bleachers, “I forgot something about you.”

“What did you forget?

“I forgot how crafty you can be,” he said praising her.

“I’m surprised you got Tia to go along with this. Tia is so selfish. I’m shocked she agreed to help you.”

“Yeah, I guess she had a giving moment today,” Rynne commented.

“Rynne, I called the police today and they came over to dust for fingerprints,” Bryon tossed out changing the conversation.

Rynne whispered. “Did they find any?”

“No, they came up empty, but I’m having a security camera installed tomorrow.”

“Do you think that is necessary?” She inquired.

“I don’t want you attacked again or someone to come in on Jalen,” Byron replied as his hand clenched on the seat.

“Does Jalen know what happened to me?” Rynne asked.

She wanted her nephew to know, but she didn't want him living in fear inside his own house.

"I had to tell him in case the same person goes after him."

Swatting the bugs off her arms, Rynne tried to block out the frightful memories of that night.

"You did the right thing."

She told her brother at last.

"Jalen is a very intelligent boy. He needs to know what's going on."

"I'm glad you agree, but it still was hard to tell him," Byron admitted.

He waited a few minutes and then tossed out his next question.

"Does Pierce really want to come for tonight? I can't believe he agreed after the bad history that is between us."

"Please don't back out now not after giving me that brotherly speech."

"Pierce already thinks he'll feel unwelcome and I don't want any bad vibes when he comes."

"Hey, what about I take Jalen out to dinner and you can have the house to yourself?" Bryon suggested, hopefully.

Rynne gave her head a shake. "The purpose of this dinner is for all of us to get to know each other better," she complained.

“Pierce has me in his life while I’m here and I want my family to get to know him.”

“Are you sure he wants to know me?” Byron asked with skepticism.

“I was the one who started the community watch to get him tossed out of the neighborhood.

“See, this is the reason for the dinner tonight. You can apologize for doing that and set a good example for Jalen.”

“You’re right,” Bryon admitted with a sigh. “Pierce should get to know us since he’s so important to you now.”

Rynne started to tell him something else, but Jalen ran up and stopped it.

“Did you see me hit the ball, Aunt Rynne, for the home run?” he asked with excitement in his young voice.

“Yes, I did, Jalen, and I’m so proud of you,” Rynne said praising her nephew.

“Dad, the team is going out for pizza tonight and wanted to know if I can go. Can I?”

Byron’s deep voice grew ever deeper with disapproval, “Son, you know Rynne has company coming over for dinner tonight and wants us both there.”

Jalen fell down on the bench, “I don’t want to see scar face,” he whined.

“Jalen Mitchell Slater, do you want to be grounded for saying that?”

Byron threatened.

“You say it all time when you with Chadwick.”

“I know I do and it’s wrong, so when Pierce comes over tonight I’m going to apologize.”

“Dad, you never apologize for anything,” Jalen uttered

“Well...I’m going to start tonight with Pierce,” Bryon answered.

“What I did was wrong and I’m going to tell him that. You should learn a valuable lesson from this.”

“Do I have to be there?” he asked one last time, still trying to get out of it.

Rynne didn’t want her nephew to be at the dinner when he really didn’t want to. She understood that Jalen wanted to be with his team mates. As she was about to tell him, Byron’s voice cut her off, “Jalen, how can you be so selfish?”

“Your aunt has always been there for you. From your karate class to paying for your baseball camp last year when I thought it was way too expensive.”

Jalen dragged his eyes away from his father and looked over at her.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Rynne, I want to be at the dinner tonight and I promise to be nice”

Hugging him tightly, Rynne said, “Thank you so much Jalen, this means so much to me.”

Like most nine-year-olds, Jalen didn’t want his friends to see him getting a hug in public.

“Come on, Aunt Rynne, stop hugging me,” he said.

“Sis, I think Jalen is at the age he doesn’t like hugs anymore,” Bryon chuckled.

Flashing him a smile Rynne let Jalen move away her.

“Byron, why don’t we leave? I still need to do a lot for the dinner tonight.”

“Sounds good to me,” Bryon said.

He waited for Rynne and Jalen to get off the bleachers and walked behind them. He hoped tonight went the way Rynne wanted, because his sister did deserve some happiness in her life.

Chapter Twenty Four

Pierce didn't know how long he had been sitting outside in his truck watching Rynne inside the house laughing with her family. Why should he go inside there when the only person who really wanted him there was Rynne?

Damn, he didn't want to feel the emotions he did for her. He lost count of how many times he picked up the phone to call her and cancel. Rynne didn't understand what a gigantic step this was for him.

He hated to fail at anything and tonight Pierce had a haunting feeling this dinner was going to fail, shattering Rynne's tender heart. Placing his head on the wheel, Pierce sat in the car trying not to second-guess himself, but it wasn't doing any good.

* * * *

"Aunt Rynne," Jalen said standing, looking out the kitchen window.

"Yes, Jalen," Rynne answered sliding the pot roast with potatoes and carrots back in the oven.

"Isn't that Mr. McMahon out there in his truck?" he asked, pointing out the kitchen window.

Coming across the room, Rynne wiped her hands on her towel over her shoulders and looked over her nephew's head. She saw Pierce hiding out in his vehicle.

"Yes, baby, it is," she said taking her off apron and towel then tossing them on the table.

"Go and tell your dad dinner is almost ready."

"Okay," Jalen said and then raced out of the room.

Rynne checked her reflection in the mirror by the door and then headed outside. She wondered why Pierce was still out here instead of being inside with her.

Opening the passenger door she slid in and shut it behind her.

"Okay, are you hiding out in here because you think my cooking is that bad?" she teased him.

* * *

Moving his head Pierce looked at Rynne from the corner of his eyes, blown away by how gorgeous she looked tonight. Somehow she had taken her shoulder length hair and twisted it up at the back of her nape, leaving her long neck exposed tempting him. A strapless black dress molded her heavenly body making his hands want to explore every curve and hidden place.

In the past, he had always been very independent, not placing much emphasis on being in a relationship because he was never single very long. But after the accident he had withdrawn into himself then, Rynne changed all that by barging into his life. A committed relationship with one person he loved didn't seem so bad after all. The imaginary noose he always placed with the happily ever after wasn't as tight.

"Baby, is something wrong?" .

Rynne asked concern in her voice.

She moved an inch or two across the leather seat, "I'll understand if you don't want to come in."

He sat up in the seat his eyes searching Rynne's amazing face.

"You won't mind if I went back home without going inside for dinner?" he asked, doubtful.

"Pierce, I don't want to force you into doing something you aren't ready for."

Rynne told him in a sincere voice, but he could see the hurt simmering her big brown eyes.

"A commitment is about each person giving equally," she told him.

"Let me go back in and tell the boys and I'll meet up with you tomorrow."

Rynne said, kissing him on his freshly shaved cheek and then quickly got out of the car. She went back inside without even looking back at him.

“You’re a world class asshole,’ Pierce muttered to himself.

“Rynne got her brother to acquiesce to this dinner and you can’t even go inside.”

Glancing back at the large bay window, he saw Rynne looking at her reflection in a large mirror and brush a tear from her eye before going back into the kitchen with her family. That one movement with the flick of her wrist caused his heart to clench. He never wanted to be the cause of her beautiful eyes having tears. Shaking off any insecurity he may had harbored about tonight. Pierce got out of the truck and made his way to the front door. He pushed the doorbell and waited for an answer.

* * * *

Rynne was about to tell Bryon and Jalen that Pierce had cancelled when the doorbell rung.

“Let me answer that.”

She hurried back into the living room and opened the front door.

“What are you doing here?”

She gasped, shocked at finding Pierce standing on the other side.

“Is that dinner invitation still open?”

“Are you ready for this?” Rynne asked placing her hand in the middle of Pierce’s wide chest.

Raising her chin with one finger his voice whispered, “I’ll do anything for my girlfriend.”

Rynne felt a warm glow flowing through her at his words.

“Am I really your girlfriend?” she asked, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Pierce cupped her butt in his large palms.

“Yes, you are and don’t forget it.”

He informed her, capturing her mouth for a long passionate kiss.

“Dad, I don’t think we’re ever going to get to eat if Aunt Rynne doesn’t stop kissing him,” Jalen said from the hallway, breaking into their private moment.

She tried breaking away from the kiss, but Pierce held her a few seconds longer. After a few second, he finally, he let her move back.

“How about we go and eat?” he muttered close to her moist, swollen lips.

“You don’t play fair,” she moaned.

“I can’t concentrate on being a good hostess after a sizzling kiss like that.”

Winking at her, Pierce moved her further into the room and closed the door with a firm snap.

“How about you introduce me to this you man?”

He suggested wrapping an arm around her waist.

Rynne was surprised to find that Jalen hadn’t moved from the hallway.

“Pierce, this is my nephew Jalen Slater. Jalen, meet my boyfriend, Pierce McMahon.”

She felt Pierce’s hand tightened around her waist at her announcement.

Jalen gave Pierce a long look.

“Hello, Mr. McMahon,” he muttered and then walked back into the kitchen.

Bending down Pierce whispered in her ear, “I like the word boyfriend coming from those delectable lips of yours.”

Easing out of his hold Rynne moved a little in front of him, “Be a good boy and I might say it to you again when you’re alone,” she teased, spinning away feeling Pierce’s eyes on her all the way into the kitchen.

The need to get him alone flared up in her body, but she banked it down. There was no way she could let Pierce walk into the kitchen with a raging hard-on and meet her brother.

* * *

Both men had been staring at each other for a while trying to determine which one was the stronger of the two. Pierce was more heavily muscled with a thicker upper body. However, Byron who had a shorter build to his frame like a boxer. Five minutes had gone by without either of them saying a word to each other. Rynne was tired of the testosterone raging in front of her.

They were ruining her dinner. Neither one was setting a good example for Jalen who hadn't taken his eyes off them. She knew he was waiting for one of them to throw the first punch, but she wasn't going to let it happen.

"Either the both of you sit down or I'm going to leave," she threatened.

They both still didn't move from the middle of the room. Pierce and Byron acted like she hadn't said a word. She was fed up with the two of them being like this.

"Fine, I'm outta of here. I dealt with this kind of nonsense long enough. I'm done trying with the two of you. Maybe without me around one of you will get some common sense and act right."

She brushed past Pierce and out the kitchen door.

"Baby, where are you going?"

Pierce yelled, sprinting outside after her.

“Why should I tell you anything?”

Rynne snapped, storming for her car.

“I’m trying my damnest to make our relationship work. However you and Byron would rather have a stare-down than sit and eat at the table.”

“I’m sorry. Come on back inside and I’ll be good.”

Pierce was trying to comfort her, yet Rynne didn’t want it.

His words came a little too late, “Don’t patronize me. I’m going for a drive and don’t follow me.” she said facing him.

His blue eyes pierced the distance between them, “You aren’t going driving out alone. I won’t allow you to leave.”

Pierce folded his arms across his broad chest like he expected her to listen to him.

Slowly, Rynne let out a deep breath. She couldn’t believe what was happening.

“You won’t allow me?”

“Yeah, you’re mine and I’m saying you can’t go anywhere.”

Smug with his comment and thinking she would listen, Pierce flashed an arrogant grin.

“Let’s go back in and I’ll deal with your brother. You never know we might have a lot in common.”

“Who in the hell do you think you are?”

She sputtered.

“I’ve told you before I’m not a piece of property you own. That’s the same attitude Chadwick has and that’s why I don’t date him. I hope you aren’t turning into him, because if you are then you can go to hell.”

Rushing over to her, Pierce growled, “I’m not Chadwick, so don’t ever compare me to him. I only want to look out for you and you will do what as I say. Or I’ll drag that cute ass of yours back to my house and keep you under lock and key.”

Pierce pulled his car keys out of his pocket like he would go through with his threat.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Rynne whispered, aghast, taking a step back.

“Don’t test me, Rynne,” Pierce warned her showing her a side she has never seen.

“Okay, I’ll go back inside.”

Walking up to him, she slid her hand inside his that held the truck keys.

“I’m glad you saw things my way.”

Pierce muttered as they walked back to Byron’s door. But as he was about to step up she yanked the car keys out of his hand and hurled them into the high thick shrubs around the house.

“Don’t ever talk to me like that again. I don’t like it.” Stalking away, she got into her car and sped off.

Chapter Twenty Five

“Damn, damn, damn.”

Pierce cursed trying to find his keys in the thick bushes as he heard Rynne’s car sped away from the curb.

“When I get my hands on her I’m going to shake some sense into her.”

“I knew you were in trouble when you told her she belonged to you.”

“Rynne has never liked that,”

Bryon told him coming outside.

Pierce shot Rynne’s cocky brother a look over his shoulder.

“Could you stop giving me advice and help me find my car keys?” he muttered as some of the anger left out of his body.

He had to admit he did act a little crazy with Rynne a second ago.

“Sure, I’ll help you find them,” Byron said bending over to help him search.

“Then I want you to come inside so we can talk about my sister over dinner. What do you say?”

Seeing the keys wedged between two bushes, Pierce picked them up and shoved them into his pocket.

“Alright, but if Rynne isn’t back in twenty minutes I’m going looking for her. Aren’t you worried about her?”

“After the way she tricked you, are you still worried she can’t take care of herself, given the right opportunity?” Byron asked.

“I guess not.”

Pierce didn’t want to be worried about Rynne, but he was.

“Hey, don’t worry I know Rynne. She’ll be back after she calms down. I think she had been brewing up for a fight and unfortunately you were the one who pushed at the wrong moment. Let’s go in and eat. My sister makes a mouth-watering pot roast,” Byron said, walking through the front door leaving him to follow.

“Pot roast is my favorite meal,” he confessed feeling even more ashamed that Rynne had fixed his favorite meal and wasn’t here to share it.

* * *

Pierce took a seat across from Jalen, who tossed his video game down on the table the second he looked at him. He saw a lot of Rynne in the young boy across from her. It made him wonder what his kids would look like with her. He never wanted kids before until Rynne.

“Boy, didn’t I tell you not to play that game at the dinner table?”

Byron asked As Rynne's brother sat across from him.

"Yeah, but I was hungry so I had to do something until you guys came back inside."

"Where's Aunt Rynne?"

"Oh, she went for a quick drive," Pierce answered.

"Yeah, but we can start without her." Byron interjected reaching for his plate.

A couple of minutes later, the delicious smell of meat and potatoes drifted toward Pierce's nose as Byron placed his plate back. Guilt ate at him as he looked at the beautiful job Rynne had done for him tonight. She loved him and he always found a way to push her away. She was a strong woman until he opened his mouth and shoved his foot inside.

"Did you do something to my aunt?" Jalen asked him.

"We had an argument and then your aunt wanted some time alone," Pierce replied honestly.

"Well, I guess I should get this out of the way," Byron said, making him look away from Jalen over to him.

"Get what out of the way?"

He was trying to play dumb, but he knew damn well what Byron was about to do.

“I should have never forced you out of the neighborhood. It was wrong and I apologize. I want us to try to become friends because you’re dating my sister now,” Byron said, trying to explain what he did to him.

“How much of it was your idea and how much was Chadwick’s?”

“Forty percent was mine,” Byron admitted.

“So, that makes sixty percent Chadwick’s, just like I thought,” Pierce said.

He wanted to bury the past with Rynne’s brother because he really cared about her.

“Thank you for the apology.”

He extended his hand across the table and waited for Bryon to take it.

Bryon shook it quickly and then let it go.

“Is there anything you want to ask me?” Pierce asked.

“I was the scary neighbor until I started dating your sister. I know you must have questions for me to answer.”

“How did you get those ugly scars on your face?” Jalen jumped in, pointing at his face.

There wasn’t nothing like the directness of a child, Pierce thought.

“Jalen, it isn’t nice to point and you know I’ve told you that several times,” Bryon scolded.

“I don’t think that was very nice thing to ask Mr. McMahon.”

“But, Dad, he asked did we have any questions,” Jalen replied looking at his father then back over at him for help.

“He’s right. I did ask for any questions.” Pierce gave Jalen his full attention.

“I was attacked a long time ago. I’ve Hypertrophic scars because they’re a little raised, red, and thick.”

He pointed to the one scar on the left side of his face.

“Have you thought about having them surgically fixed or using a cream to make them fade,” Byron asked.

Pierce stuck a tender piece of meat in his mouth chewing it thoroughly then swallowed before he answered.

“Why bother with it now, because it wouldn’t do any good. When I first needed it done I was in too much self-pity now I’ve waited too long for any kind of treatment to work.”

“Do they hurt?” Jalen asked, pushing his empty plate away.

“Yes, they hurt a lot when it first happened, now I can touch them and not feel any pain or tenderness.

“My Aunt Rynne likes you, doesn’t she?” Jalen asked, picking up his game as he left the table.

“Jalen, I hope you Aunt Rynne loves me as much as I love her.” Pierce replied.

“I think we need to talk,” Bryon told him as soon as Jalen was out of the room.

Pierce didn’t know what Byron was going to say, but whatever it was he wasn’t going to leave Rynne. She was in his blood and heart.

“I’m not breaking up with Rynne, so don’t even ask.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to. You’re the best thing that has happened to my sister in a long time. I hate saying that, but it’s the truth. Rynne is a different woman since you came into her life.

“Thanks,” Pierce, uttered shock.

“But I feel it’s the other way around. Rynne brought me back from a life of loneliness. “

“My sister is a very confident woman at time and then sometimes she can’t handle the pressure. Have you ever noticed when things get too much for her that she runs away?”

“It’s hard to miss. I’ve lost count at how many times she had left me at my house. Why does she do that?”

“That’s my sister’s way of dealing with her problems. Now, she wasn’t always like that. When she was a little girl she would stay and fight until she couldn’t, but my parent’s indifferences broke her of that.”

Pierce frowned.

“I’m not following you.”

“Alright, I’ll try to make it simple. My parents weren’t the nicest people in the world when it came to Rynne. They never really showed her the love and attention they showed me. And that slowly started to play on her self-confidence. Rynne is a brilliant woman when it comes to her job, but she’s horrible at dealing with one on one relationships.”

“I find that hard to believe. She wouldn’t take no for an answer when I first told her to stay away.”

“Yeah, that’s because she was in control of the situation, but when the coin flips. It’s hard for Rynne to adjust.”

“She scared of getting hurt,” Pierce uttered.

“Doesn’t she know by now I’ll never hurt her? God, I love her with everything in me.”

“You better find a way to prove it or Rynne will bolt.” Byron informed him.

* * * *

Pulling into the deserted parking lot, Rynne cursed Pierce until she couldn't anymore. The moonlight highlighted the park bench, showing a couple huddled together looking so in love. The man ran his hand down the woman's cheek before kissing her. Pierce would do the same thing before he kissed her. Like the touch of her enhanced the passion of their kiss. Things had moved why too fast with them.

Why did she let him slide into her heart? At first she was just trying to help out a lonely and isolated man, but the more time she spent around him the more Pierce started to mean to her.

Mason kept telling her to find a man and the man she finally settled on had more problems than any other guy from her past. She had to push her problems to the back to help him come out of his problem hell. A hell he placed himself in for such a long time. Reaching up she took her hair out of the twist she decided to wear for Pierce. She knew how much Pierce loved taking her hair down and she had wanted to do something special for him.

She loved Pierce and she wanted to come clean about her job, but a part of her was nervous. Pierce was strong-willed man and he wouldn't like accepting help from her. Yet, tests in the lab were one thing, but Pierce was a bad scar victim. She knew her scar cream would work miracles for him.

The big question was how did she tell him the truth without losing him at the same time? Pierce had a way of surrounding her senses, making her say or do things that in any other situation would never enter her mind.

However, one thing she could never do was leave the lab. Working in the lab with Mason brought such a joy to her life. Pierce wouldn't understand how using her hands brought her a sense of belonging. Something her parents never gave her as a child. Yet, it also gave her a pleasure that didn't involve intimacy with another person. The euphoria was from finding a way to help or heal people who had given up hope.

Rynne was happy in her thoughts until she felt like someone was watching her. Looking through the windshield, she spotted a man sitting on the bench where the couple had been only moments earlier staring straight at her. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

Starting the car, she drove out of the parking lot, praying the man wasn't following her. Her heart pounded in her chest for the entire twenty minutes it took her to get back to Byron's house. A rush of air left her body when she saw Pierce's truck was still inside the driveway. Stumbling out of the car, she rushed through the front door into the kitchen.

"I'm so glad you're still here."

"Rynne, what's wrong?" Both men asked in unison.

Chapter Twenty Six

She rushed into Pierce's arms. "The man who attacked me was at the park watching me," she whispered, shaking.

"What? How do you know it was the same guy?" Byron asked as Pierce tightened his hold on her shivering body.

"I felt it," Rynne said looking at her brother who was squatting down in front of her.

"Baby, you need more than a feeling." Pierce said above her head.

"He had the same build as the guy," she stated moving away to look up at him.

"I was sitting in my car thinking about you and I got a strange feeling I was being watched, so I looked up and he was sitting there on the bench."

Rynne pushed down the memory how his eyes never moved away from her face.

"You know the one right at the edge of the parking lot?"

"Yeah, I know the one," Byron said.

"If the guy wants me badly enough to torment you, we're going to have a huge problem."

“Rynne, can you describe what he looked like?” Pierce asked, pulling her back to his body.

Nodding Rynne started to describe him.

“He has a medium build with long dark brown hair. He has a tattoo on his right arm of a cross and a skull. I noticed the tattoo the night he tied me up.”

“Does he know that you saw this tattoo?” She heard the fear in Pierce’s voice.

“No, I glanced down when he was tying my legs on the chair. It kind of peeked out from underneath his shirt when he moved his arm.”

Pierce lifted her from his chest.

“He didn’t touch you or anything, did he?”

Large hands roamed her body looking for any signs of bruises.

“Stop, baby, I’m fine,” Rynne told Pierce grabbing his hands.

“I know I should have followed you instead of staying here.”

Pierce brushed her hair away from her face and glazed down into her eyes.

“You’re spending the night at my house and I don’t want any arguments from you,” he said, laying a callused finger on her mouth.

Removing his finger, Rynne wrapped her arms around his neck happy to be back with him.

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Rynne, stay right here. I have to go and get something,” Bryon said leaving the room.

He came back a second later holding a frame in his hand.

“Is this the guy you saw?” Byron asked holding a picture out to her.

Looking down at the picture, she saw the same deranged eyes looking back at her with a half smile.

“Yes, that’s him,” she gasped clutching Pierce’s dress shirt

“Who is that bastard?” Pierce asked nodding toward the picture while rubbing Rynne’s back.

“His name is Ridley Kyle and he use to be Jalen’s math tutor until I caught him stealing money from me. I fired him the same day Rynne arrived.”

“I remember him now,” she said moving away from Pierce.

“He held the front door open from me because I had a present for Jalen’s party.

“Well, at least we know who the guy is now,” Pierces said kissing her on the forehead.

"I'm going to call the police station and have someone come over here tomorrow." Bryon exclaimed.

"You can give them your statement."

"Rynne is staying with me tonight because I don't feel like she's safe here with you." Pierce commented beside her.

"We'll come back here around about nine o'clock tomorrow and let her give a statement. Or I can drive her to the police department."

"Do you really think I still need to stay with you?" Rynne inquired.

"We know who the guy is now."

"Yes, I do." Pierce answered.

"I think it would be best if only Jalen was here with his father. It would be easier for Bryon to keep his attention focused on his son if he knew you were safe with me."

"I agree with him," Bryon cut in stopping her from answering Pierce.

Rynne knew when she was outnumbered.

"Fine, let me go pack some clothes and tell Jalen good-bye and then I'll be back."

She left the room to the sound of Pierce and her brother talking behind her. She didn't have to guess what they were talking about either.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later Rynne walked back into the room carrying an overnight bag over her shoulder along with her purse. She noticed how Bryon and Pierce were sitting on the couch drinking coffee together. She was so proud of her brother for his new attitude and the way he was trying to mend their broken relationship. If he would take that leap forward, then she could tell Pierce about her cream.

“Pierce, I’m ready.” she said dropping her bag down on the floor.

“Well let’s hit the room,” he said getting up from the couch.

“Bryon, it was nice talking to you.”

Pierce told her brother as he picked up her bag off the floor.

“Yeah, tonight turned out better than I thought it would too,” Byron admitted as he escorted them to the door.

Pierce escorted her to his truck parked in the driveway and then went around to the other side tossing her bag in the back as he got inside. She waved goodbye to her brother as Pierce started the car and backed out. Bryon returned her wave and then went back into the house.

“Thank you for not fighting me about this,” Pierce said once they were on the way to his house.

“I wouldn’t have been able to sleep if you weren’t with me.”

“I wanted to be with you; that’s why I said yes.” Rynne answered smoothing out her dress with her hands.

Okay, she could do this. All she had to do was open her mouth and let the words flow out. Pierce would be mad at first, but he would understand and let her use her cream on him.

“Baby, I want to talk to you about something,” she started out.

“What is it?”

“I want to tell you about my job and what I do,” she uttered.

“Let’s not talk about this now. I don’t have that much time with you left and the last thing I want to hear about is your job.”

Rynne twisted around in her seat until she was facing Pierce. He couldn’t cut her off with letting her tell him.

“No, you need to listen to me. This is really important.”

“Rynne, do you love me?” Pierce tossed at out of the blue.

Surprised by the comment she leaned back in her seat, “You know that I do. How could you ask me a question like that?”

“Then let’s not discuss your work. I know that you have a good job and I’m happy for you, but I don’t want to hear about it,” Pierce murmured turning his truck onto his street.

“Can I ask why not?”

“Because it’s the one thing that you love more than me in your life,”

Pierce responded as he pulled his vehicle into his driveway.

She was taken back by the almost jealousy she heard in Pierce’s voice, but she couldn’t let that stop her. He needed to know and now was the time to tell him.

“I’m sorry you don’t want to hear about my job, but I need to tell you and now is the best time.”

“Rynne...I don’t want to hear....” Pierce tried to answer, but got cut off by a loud voice coming from the side of his truck.

* * *

“You’re finally home,” Sally’s voice said as she came out of the darkness towards his truck with Marcia beside her.

Groaning loudly, Pierce folded his arms on the wheel and dropped his head on them. Shit, he didn’t need this tonight. Rynne was trying to tell him about a job that was going to snatch her away from him and now his sister showed up with her sidekick.

“What are you doing here?” he asked lifting as his head up from the wheel as Rynne looked around him over at his sister.

Sally placed her hands on her slender hips and shook her head she said, “Is that any way to greet your sister and her guest?”

Marcia eyes raked over his body inside the truck.

“You look very handsome tonight, Pierce.”

Marcia flirted with him like Rynne wasn’t even beside him.

“Sally, your timing is wrong.”

It wouldn’t be good if Sally and Marcia started in on Rynne after the night she had and all his energy was on keeping her safe even if it meant against his sister.

“Why is the timing wrong because she’s in the truck with you?”

Sally asked, waving a finger in Rynne’s direction.

“Don’t you dare talk about me like I’m not here,” Rynne shouted around his body.

“Baby, please don’t argue with my sister,” he uttered.

Rynne gave him a look that could melt butter before she got out of the truck and stormed toward his house.

Great, now he had some explaining to do later to Rynne, he thought as he watched his girlfriend take a seat inside the swing on the porch.

“The both of you need to leave because this isn’t the best time for you to be here.”

He didn't want Sally to bother Rynne with Marcia here with her. Marcia was a carbon copy of his sister. She didn't now how to have a rational thought of her own.

"Is she really that *important* that you would toss me away for her?" Sally questioned.

He waved Sally away from the truck's door and slid out closing it behind him.

"Yes, if you make me chose between the two of you, I would pick Rynne." Pierce answered without a second thought.

"I'm in love with her and want to start a family with that loving woman waiting for me on my porch. She's all the family I'll ever need."

"Pierce, stop this before you get hurt," she begged him.

"Rynne only wanted a summer fling while she was here and you were it." "Do you think someone who looks like her would really fall for a guy like you?"

Pierce tried not to let his sister's careless words hurt him, but they did.

"Sally, don't say another word about Rynne or I'll do something I'll regret." His deep voice begged, still full of love for his only sibling.

"I'm happy with Rynne and I don't want anyone else."

“Pierce, weren’t you happy when you were with me?” Marcia’s seductively soft voice asked, making him remember that she was even there.

“We would spend hours together, most of it in bed because we couldn’t keep our hands off each other? We use to be so hot together.” She whispered, touching him on the chest when Sally moved to the side.

Pierce eyes flared at a Marcia’s touch.

He did remember the days and nights they could barely crawl out of the bed because he was hot and successful then. The smell of money made any gold-digger dip with desire.

However, desire mixed with the love he had for Rynne was much more powerful

Brushing her clingy hand off his white shirt, he said in a sad voice, “Marcia, don’t humiliate yourself for my sister’s plan. Nothing the two of you cook up could make me break up with Rynne.”

He looked over at his sister, who was now standing quietly at the side noticing how her eyes had a burning, faraway look in them. They only got like that when her plans didn’t work. Sally hated failure more than weakness.

“Come on, let’s go,” she yelled, pulling Marcia toward the car hidden at the side by some trees.

“I’m telling you this now, so you know I’ll be there for you when this happens. Rynne Slater is going to rip your heart out of your chest. I was only trying to help you escape before you your heart got involved, but I wasn’t fast enough.”

She stared at him long and hard before getting into the car with Marcia and leaving in a cloud of dust.

Pierce snatched Rynne’s bag from the back of his truck and made his way to his house as the headache started to set in. He loved Rynne, but he right now the only thing he wanted to do was take a shower and fall into bed. His sister’s visit had taken a lot out of him he hated that she was like that, but there wasn’t a damn thing he could do.

“Pierce, we still need to talk,” Rynne said the second his foot touched the first step.

“Honey, can this please wait until tomorrow?” He groaned.

“My head is killing me and the only things I want to do are shower and go to bed.”

Rynne looked at him and nodded.

“Alright, but we have to talk about this first thing in the morning.”

“Sure,” he answered unlocking the door going inside the house.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Pacing around the bedroom, Rynne thought about different ways to tell Pierce the truth. She couldn't wait until tomorrow or she would lose her nerve. It had to be tonight. She had almost gotten the confession out earlier, but his sister ran up on them ruining everything.

Wait...

Could that have been a sign that she wasn't supposed to tell him? Maybe she should listen to it and leave well enough alone. Pierce was in love with her and she was heads over the heels in love with him. *No!* She had to stop procrastinating and tell Pierce the second he walked out of that bathroom. Her job wouldn't hurt what they had. It would only make it better and give her a chance to help Pierce get back into the world.

"What has put that frown on your pretty face?" Pierce asked, coming back into the room with only a towel wrapped around his

Rynne's eyes ran from the top of his head down to his bare feet. She had fallen in love with the man coming toward her and he didn't have a clue about the real her. The love was so powerful that she couldn't keep lying.

“Pierce, can we please finish what we were discussing outside before your sister bothered us?”

“Can’t it wait until tomorrow?” Pierce asked, whipping off his towel and tossing it in a chair beside the bed.

“Why don’t you get into bed?” he suggested eyeing her wearing his pajama top.

He threw back the covers and crawled into the bed naked, not before she got a nice look at his toned ass.

“Do you promise we can discuss this first thing in the morning?”

Rynne questioned moving the short distance to climb into the bed next to Pierce’s semi-damp body.

“I promise.”

His fingers unbuttoned his top down to her navel and his hand eased inside to cup her breast.

“I thought you were too tired for anything but a shower and sleep.”

Rynne moaned as his fingers played with her nipple.

“Seeing you in my shirt gave me my second wind,” he answered brushing his erection against her hip.

“Don’t you want to play a little before we go to bed?”

Pierce asked has his hand crept down her stomach to the wet warmth between her thighs.

“What kind of game do you have in mind?”

She uttered moving her hips on the bed to get Pierce’s fingers to go deeper inside of her.

“How about ABC’s?” he suggested, removing his hand from her body.

Frowning, Rynne stole a look of a Pierce and noticed the wicked grin on his face, “ABC’s? Isn’t that a game that preschoolers learn before they go off to kindergarten?”

“Not the way I play it,” he growled, raking his eyes down her body as his fingers undid the rest of the buttons.

“Sit up.” He ordered. “I want to take this off of you.”

She sat up and helped Pierce take her clothes under she was naked as she was. The cooler air in the room made her nipples even harder. Licking his fingertip, Pierce ran it across the tip making it throb even more for his mouth.

“Are you going to tease me all night or explain this game to me?”

“Impatient, are we?” Pierce inquired pressed her back down on the bed.

“Yes, I am.”

She answered watching Pierce sat up beside her and how his erection pointed out from his body begging her to stroke it. Rynne wrapped her hand around Pierce's warm length and gave it a good squeeze.

"Looks and feels like someone else is impatient as I am."

"God, baby, if you keep that up I won't be able to tell you about the game."

He murmured removing her hand from his tightly coiled body.

"This better be good because I was really enjoying what I was doing."

"So, was I, baby, but this is so much better I promise." Pierce said brushing his hands over her breast.

"The rules of the ABC's game are. I take each letter in from the alphabetic and find it on your body. Then I either get to kiss it or stroke it with my tongue. The choice is mine and you can't touch me while I do it. When I think have had enough I'll end it."

"You can't be serious," Rynne whispered, her eyes wide with desire.

"When it comes to a chance to enjoy this body of yours for as long as I won't I'll ever lie to you," Pierce whispered down, at her rubbing his hands together.

"Are you ready to begin, Miss Rynne Slater?"

"I'm ready."

“Good,” Pierce grinned. “Let’s start with ‘A.’ “

* * *

Two hours later, Rynne tossed the covers off her body and eased out of bed away from a sleeping Pierce. Her body was still tingling from the four orgasms that he gave her with that ABC game of his. She never knew that such a simple childhood learning tool could turn into something so sexy and fun.

Slipping into the next room, she found her purse on the floor and dug through it for her cell phone. She had to call Mason and make sure he still sent that sample cream to her. She wanted to show Pierce the finished project and maybe, with a little convincing, he would let her use it on him.

Rynne didn’t know how long she had been waiting for Mason to answer when a pair of muscular arms wrapped around her waist and tugged her back to a hard chest. She quickly punched the end button and tossed her phone on the couch.

“I didn’t know that you were behind me,” she whispered. “How long have you been there?”

“Not that long,” Pierce confessed, trailing his hands over her naked body.

“I was in the bathroom for a little while.”

“Oh,” she muttered, getting lost in the feel of Pierce’s hand on her body.

She loved how quickly his strokes brought her skin alive.

“Are you sore?” Pierce asked as his thumb slipped into her body.

“I was trying my best to be careful, but toward the end I lost control.”

“I am, a little. I don’t think we have gone at it that many times in one night.”

Rynne confessed as Pierce removed his hands from her body.

“I thought you might be so I have something to take care of that problem.”

“What have you done?”

She asked, swiveling slowly getting excited about the surprise that he had for her. She loved surprises.

“Come with me,” he said, pulling her up from room.

Giggling, Rynne let Pierce pull her to the bedroom and was surprised when he went around the bed to the bathroom. Pushing open the door, he ushered her inside, closing it firmly behind them.

“Oh, Pierce, this is so beautiful.”

Twirling, she kissed him fully on the mouth and then stepped back. “But why?”

Sliding her in front of the tub filled with bubbles and the vanilla-scented candles lit around the huge room, he said, “I felt bad about losing

control with you and getting too rough in the end, so I wanted to say I was sorry.”

Looking around the bathroom with the lit candles and the sunken tub overflowing with bubbles, Rynne felt this more than made up for it.

“Honey, I had forgotten all about you losing control after that last orgasm hit me.”

“I hadn’t forgotten about how I treated you,” his voice broke with huskiness.

“I hurt you,” he said, hoarsely glazing down into her eyes with love.

Brushing her hair off her face, he ran his thumb slowly down her jaw until it touched the side of her lips.

Lifting her body into his arms, Pierce walked the short distance to the tub and gently placed her in.

“Are you going to join me?” Rynne asked while the bubbles floated around her breasts.

”No, baby, tonight is for you,” he said bending down to rest his elbows on the tub’s edge.

Taking her hand out of the water, Rynne ran it through his thick hair,

“You better be careful or I’ll get use to all this pampering.”

“You deserve everything you’re getting, baby,” he told her standing up.

“Relax,”

Pierce pointed a finger at her and then he left her alone with her bath.

After soaking in the bath for what like seemed an hour, Pierce came back in. Lifting her out of the chilly water, he wrapped her up in a huge white fluffy robe then carried her back into the bedroom. He dried every inch of her body with the towel.

“You don’t have to do this,” she whispered as Pierce tucked her into bed and slid in behind her.

“Shh...let me do this for you,” he uttered slipping his long fingers into her thick hair.

“You deserve the VIP treatment tonight.”

Rynne let her body relax as Pierce slowly massaged her head and she lurked her into a peaceful sleep on his chest.

Chapter Twenty Eight

“How did it feel using your best friend like that?” Chadwick questioned.

This was the first time in two days she had been back in this part of town since she got interviewed by the police about her attack. Pierce wanted her to stay out there with him until she left, but she told him no. This morning it had been so hard to leave a half-sleep, naked and aroused man in bed. Pierce always loved having morning sex, because he said it always was the best and she was beginning to agree with him.

Drawing her attention back to Chadwick, Rynne tried her best not to roll her eyes at him, but it didn't work.

“Why are you bothering me again?” She asked sliding the pump back. Why hadn't she gotten gas yesterday? Now she was stuck her with Chadwick.

“Don't get nasty with me. I'm not bothering you and you know it. I only want you to answer my question.”

“Yes, you are,” Rynne said again trying to get around Chadwick's taller body.

“I’m only asking you a question.” He uttered as he continued to block her way.

“Fine, I don’t what you’re talking about.”

“You better not stand there and lie to my face, Rynne.” Chadwick took a step towards her, but she didn’t move.

He wasn’t fool enough to try something out in a public place.

He definitely liked abusing people behind closed doors, or at least acting tougher than he truly was. Chadwick was a lot of show. He liked making individuals think he was more important than he was. She had always thought of him as a leech. Chadwick knew how to hold on to the hottest person until nothing was left. Then he would let go and move on to the next big thing.

“What am I lying about?” she asked, digging gas money out of her purse.

“How much did you offer Tia to say yes to my date, so you could have Pierce over at Byron’s for dinner?”

Rynne’s eyes flew up to Chadwick’s and the surprise was clear in their brown depths. She was floored. Surely, Tia didn’t betray their friendship. *How in the hell did Chadwick find out about Pierce?*

“Oh, you aren’t going to deny it?” Chadwick taunted running his finger down her bare arm.

The feel of his touch made her stomach turn over.

“No, I’m not going to lie. Yes, Pierce had dinner with my family,” she answered her voice very crisp and clear because she wanted Chadwick to hear every word.

“Pierce is my boyfriend and I want my family to get to know him better.”

Chadwick’s face filled with contempt as he watched her.

“What went wrong?” He taunted.

“Did Mommy and Daddy not giving you enough attention as a child that you had to find it with McMahon?”

“You know you were never good enough in their eyes. They loved Byron since the second he came into this world. However, you were like the bad door prize they couldn’t give away for free. It’s a good thing they are dead. Because if they weren’t, the sight of you with Pierce would kill them.”

“STOP IT!” Rynne yelled, tears filling her eyes.

“Why should I?” He sneered moving right up in her face.

“Rynne, you may think Pierce wants you now. But after he finds out how worthless you really are he’ll be done with you, too.”

Chadwick leaned forward and lowered his voice so only she could hear.

“Remember good sex with an attractive woman will only last a while for him, but finding out how inadequate you really are will last in his mind forever.”

“Even a man like Pierce wants a woman that’s worth something and Rynne, baby, that isn’t you.”

Pushing his body away from hers; Chadwick got back in his parked car and drove off. Leaving a shaken Rynne standing there angry, hurt, and doubting herself, going inside the gas station, she quickly paid for the gas and left.

* * *

Changing her mind about going directly back to Pierce’s house, Rynne went for a drive, not really knowing where she was heading until she pulled up in front of her childhood home. It was the same as she remembered it—a showplace. Very stunning on the outside for passersby to see and praise thinking it would be warm and loving on the inside, but that was where the trick lay. Instead, the inside had been cold and distant, a place where she knew Byron was so much more important than her.

Looking out her car window, she saw several children playing in the yard while a woman worked in her flowerbed. A man was cutting the hedges down to a nice even level at the other side of the yard. She didn’t have a

memory of being outside with her parents like that. Most of the time when they went outside, Byron was the one they wanted out there with them while she stayed inside.

The only memory she ever had of been outside in the spacious yard was for her eight birthday party. Her parents decided to throw her a party because the little girl three houses down the street had a crush on Byron and he promised to watch over her if he could invite that girl over. Her parents had spent more of the time talking to Byron and his date instead of her.

She had gotten a new bike. Rynne smiled at the memory of the pink Huffy bicycle with the pink and white basket. It had taken her months to learn how to ride that bike without her training wheels but she did. Whenever she wanted to get away from hearing her parents praise Bryon; she would get that bike out and take it for a ride in the park across the street.

One time she had been gone for over two hours without her parents ever coming to check on her once. The only reason they knew how long she had been gone was a neighbor went over to the house and told them. After that they would only let her ride it up and down the sidewalk in front of the house.

Brushing a tear away from her eye, Rynne took one last look at the family living in her old house. As she was about to drive away her cell phone rang and she dug it out of her purse.

“Hello?” She stole one last look at the family as they went into the house.

“Hey, that doesn’t sound like the voice of a woman who is about become a star,” Mason joked.

“Hey, Mason. Is there something wrong? Did something happen to hold up the shipment of the cream?”

“No, I wasn’t able to ship the cream the other day, because of a problem at work, so they went out yesterday.”

“I don’t want to come off as rude, but why are you calling?”

“Boy, what’s going on there? Did you have a fight with your boyfriend?”

“No, it’s not that.” Rynne answered.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you. Please tell me why you called.”

“Well I got a call yesterday to do an interview for **Medical World** magazine and if I agree, the article will be featured in next month’s issue,” Mason bragged.

“Mason, I’m so happy for you. I know that has been a dream of yours for a while,” Rynne uttered excited.

“I have wanted this for a while,” he confessed. “So, you don’t mind if I mention you in the article as my mentor?”

Laughing she replied, “Can I be your mentor if I’m younger than you?”

“I don’t think age has anything to do with it, but I really would to talk about you,” Mason exclaimed.

She was very touched by the fact that Mason called her and asked instead of just talking about her in the article. How could she tell him no?

“Yes, it would be okay if you mentioned me.”

“Great!” Mason answered.

“I need to go and call the magazine back. I won’t go overboard with all the praise.”

He promised before disconnecting the call.

Flipping her phone back down, Rynne started her car and pulled away from the curb, and thought it was about time she got back to Pierce before he started worrying about her.

Chapter Twenty Nine

“What do you mean that you aren’t coming?” Sally shrieked in his face.

“You been coming to my house for you birthday for the past four years. I can’t believe you are turning me down.”

“Is Rynne welcome at the party?” Pierce asked tossing down the magazine on the table as the sound of Mary J. Blige’s *Family Affair* played in the playground.

Rynne had left the CD in his CD player and he decided to listen to it. He had to admit that he was enjoying it a lot.

“I knew it.” He growled standing up.

“I’m not going down this road with you.”

“Can’t you spend some time with her before and after the party?” His sister voice chimed in getting higher like it did when she wasn’t getting her way.

“No.”

“Pierce, I’ve something good planned for your party.” Sally pouted.

“I know you won’t let me have gone through all of that for nothing.”

Pierce didn't have to guess what trouble Sally planned for his party. It was the same thing she tried every year.

"I don't want to see our parents and there's no way in hell I want to spend my birthday with Marcia hanging all over me."

"Marcia is a good woman. She has already purchased your present and everything. It wouldn't be very nice if you didn't show up."

Pierce paced around the room fixing objects here and there so he wouldn't blow up at his sister, but she had to stop with the matchmaking between him and Marcia. He didn't want the shell of a woman and his sister had to get that through her head.

"I'm not coming to the party and that's the end of it."

Pierce brushed past his sister and went outside on the porch with Sally at his heels.

"You should leave before Rynne gets back. I don't want the two of you getting into a fight over this."

"You know what to do so a fight won't happen," his sister answered, sitting down in the porch swing.

"I'm only asking for an hour or two of your time."

"I'm not going to do it. This is the first time in years I've had a girlfriend on my birthday and I'm not going to ruin it,"

Pierce exclaimed, leaning his back on the porch railing.

“You can come give me my present now and let it go.”

“I can’t give your present to you.”

“Why can’t you?” Pierce answered. “What’s the hold up?”

“I haven’t bought it yet.” Sally answered.

“Why don’t you come and sit by your big sister, there’s plenty of room.”

Moving away from the railing, he sat beside his sister preparing himself for anything that Sally might have to say. He loved his sister despite her views, but he wasn’t going to change his mind about the party.

“Give me your best shot, Sally Jane McMahon, but you aren’t forcing me to change my mind.”

Sally shot him a withering glance before she brushed her hair off her shoulders.

“You make me sound like a bitch, Pierce.”

“You aren’t a bitch, but you have a bitchy attitude when it comes to Rynne. Just give Rynne a chance without seeing her through those tinted glasses you wear. You’ll see what a giving woman she is.”

“Do you really think I only dislike Rynne because she’s black?”

“Yes,” he answered quickly.

“You haven’t talked to her enough to hate her for any other reason.”

“How do you know that I don’t dislike her color or the shape of her eyes instead?” Sally tossed back.

He ran a hand down his face to keep from snapping at his sister’s flippant manner. Sally knew the reason she didn’t like Rynne and it wasn’t for any of those reason she mentioned. The sound of a car pulling up in his driveway took his attention away from Sally. Pierce couldn’t stop the smile that covered his face the second he spotted Rynne in her car.

“Don’t you say a word,” he cautioned as Rynne opened her car door and got out.

“I’m not going to chase your woman away with my bitchy ways,” Sally hissed standing up.

“You better not,” Pierce uttered getting up.

“Hi, baby,” he said the second Rynne walked onto the porch.

“Hi, Pierce,” Rynne whispered looking at him then back over to Sally.

He noticed how Rynne hovered on the top step instead of running into his arms the way the she usually did.

“Don’t I get a kiss and a hug?” he asked holding open his arms.

Rynne came over to his and gave him a quick hug and a chaste kiss on the cheek. He hated how it lacked her usual passion, but he understood her hesitancy to act out her feelings in front of his sister. Rynne tried to ease away

from him, but he wrapped his arm around her waist and held her to him. He wasn't going to let his sister intimidate the woman he loved.

"Sally, you remember Rynne, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Aren't you going to say more than that to her?" he growled.

"No," Sally uttered tossing him a defiant look.

"I have to leave, but I do hope you change your mind about coming to your birthday party on Thursday."

His sister added as a jab before she scurried off his porch and left.

"Why didn't you tell me that your birthday was Thursday?"

Rynne asked, staring up at him. "You know that you can go to the party at your sister's without me and I won't get upset."

Pierce's heart swelled with love at the way Rynne thought about him instead of her own needs. He had no intention of leaving her behind on his birthday. They would spend that day together just like they should.

"I only want to spend the day with the woman I love," he murmured, kissing Rynne on the side of forehead.

"Well, I guess that I'm going to have to make it a very special day for you, won't I?" Rynne asked wrapping her arms around his neck.

"My day will already be special. You don't have to do anything extra."

“Why is your day already so special?”

“I have you in my life and heart, so that’s all I need.” Pierce exclaimed, kissing Rynne on her soft mouth.

“How about we go inside and watch some television? I think there’s a good action flick coming on.”

“I would love to curl up on the couch with you, Mr. McMahon,” Rynne whispered as he turned and leaded her into the house.

Chapter Thirty

Rynne closed the lid on the box for the second time in the span of twenty minutes. She prayed that Pierce came back from his run soon or her surprise wouldn't be a surprise much longer. It had taken a better part of the morning to pick out this birthday present for Pierce and she hoped that he loved it. It was something that would keep him really busy after she left next week to go back home.

Pierce had avoided talking about her going home since last month, but now was the time to talk about it. She couldn't go home with a lie between her and the man that she loved. After Pierce opened his present she was going to force him to sit down and hear her out. He may be pissed and call her every name under the sun, but she wasn't going to let him toss her out of his life.

Yes, it was a horrible that she never told him about her job until now, but they were just getting to know each other and back then it didn't matter. This was the future and she would spend it with the man she loved more than her job. Last night while she was wrapped in Pierce's arm she realized something. Her job and all the fame in the world wouldn't matter if her man wasn't there to share it.

“Where in the hell is the birthday boy?”

Rynne whispered in the empty room, fixing the bow on the box.

“Right here behind you,” Pierce uttered, kissing the back of her neck.

“I didn’t hear you come in,” she said surprised.

“I made sure the door didn’t bang behind me.”

Pierce answered, tossing the handful of mail down on the table in front of her.

“What’s in the box?”

He asked, tapping the lid with his finger as he sat down next to her on the sofa.

“Your birthday present,” she grinned, removing her hands from the lid, hoping it would stay down.

Pierce’s blue eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

“You didn’t have to get me a present.”

He grinned pulling the box in front of him.

“It’s heavy. How did you get this into the house by yourself?”

“Should I take it back?” Rynne teased reaching for the box.

“Don’t you dare,” he uttered tapping her hands, “It’s mine and I want to open it.”

“Go right ahead. When I saw it in the window I knew that it would find a wonderful home here with you.”

Rynne said scooting to the edge of the seat.

“I don’t want to miss the look on your face when you see what’s inside.”

“Baby, you know what ever it is I’ll love it as all much as I love you.”

Pierce promised, kissing Rynne on the mouth then he gave his attention back to his present. Lifting off the lid, Pierce’s mouth fell open at what was sitting on the inside staring up at him.

“Do you like him?”

A Golden Retriever puppy stared back up at him with huge brown eyes and a plastic toy bone was next to him in the box. Lifting out the puppy, he placed it in his lap and glanced over at Rynne.

“You got me a puppy?”

“Yes, I thought you might like the have someone to go on your morning runs with you.” Rynne answered, rubbing the puppy’s head.

“Do you like him?” Rynne asked again as the puppy started to lick her hand.

Pierce’s mouth twitched in amusement as she snatched her hand away and wiped it on his couch.

“I love him. I’ve wanted a dog for a while, but never thought had the time to go and buy one.”

He ruffled the puppy behind his ear and placed him on the floor, so he could get a look at his new home. It didn’t escape Pierce’s notice how well-groomed and happy the puppy was.

“Is he a pure breed?”

“Yes, I have his puppy registration certificate in my purse. The man I bought Spike from said you would have to send that off to transfer ownership. I also have his food and bed in my car.”

“Spike,” Pierce laughed. “My puppy’s name is Spike?”

“Yeah, but you can change it if you want to,” Rynne answered, and then she gasped as Spike ran from his bed carrying one of her new shoes in his mouth.

“No, Spike you can’t play with that.” Rynne screamed, jumping up from the sofa as she ran over to his new pet and tried to get her shoe back.

“I think he found a toy he’d rather have than the fake bone.”

Pierce laughed as Rynne pulled her shoe from the puppy’s mouth.

“Watch it or I won’t take him for a walk while you look through your mail,” Rynne threatened as she came back over to him.

“But after I come back we need to talk about something that’s really important.”

“It sounds serious.”

He uttered, snatching his mail off the table.

“Do I really want to hear about this?”

Rynne paused by the edge of the sofa and gave Pierce a haunted look.

“You might not like what I have to say, but I hope after it’s over things will still be the same.”

She sent up a silent prayer that Pierce’s love was strong enough to overlook her lie.

“You aren’t going to let me talk you out of it this time, are you?”

“No, so be ready when I come back from walking Spike.”

Rynne called Spike and went out the door with Pierce staring after her.

* * *

Pierce was still in shock at Rynne had gotten him a puppy for his birthday. How did she know that he had wanted a dog for months? She was more in tune with him than he first thought. Now all he had to do was stop her from telling him that she was leaving when she back from walking Spike.

Rynne had brought so much into his life this past several weeks and he wasn’t ready to give it up, not now, not ever. She was the only person who

understood him without him saying a word. She was all the woman he would ever need in his life.

Pierce glanced down at the mail in his hand with a confused look. He had forgotten that he had even picked it up. Rynne usually did that to him. He quickly searched through the stack deciding out what he wanted to keep and what he would toss in the trash. The last piece of mail caught his attention.

He had forgotten that he had renewed his subscription to this magazine. Pierce didn't know why he even wasted his money on this piece of trash because it was the same old thing all the time. But he had a little bit of stock in the company so they always sent him the first issue before it hit the stands.

Placing the other mail down on the table, he was about to toss the medical magazine in the trash when big red printed at the left hand side caught his attention. *Vanish-Away*, the new miracle scar removal cream of the future.

"Yeah, right," he mumbled opening the magazine.

"What crack pot is trying to steal unsuspecting people's money now?"

Pierce flipped to the contents page and found the page number for the article.

Resting his back against the couch, he stared at the dark-haired man sitting in a chair inside a laboratory wearing the standard white coat and smirked.

“It’s the same old thing time after time. Hell, I read all of them before I might as well read this one, too.”

MW: Mr. Roberts, thank you for doing this interview. **Medical World** knows what a busy man you are.

MR: Not a problem and please call me Mason.

MW: Very well, Mason. How does it feel to be the most talked-about guy at there at the moment along with you partner?

MR: I’m not here for the praise and I didn’t help create *Vanish-Away* to get rich or famous. My partner and I want to help find a way to help people recover and or remove bad scars from their body.

MW: Do you think that *Vanish-Away* is that product?

MR: I don’t only know it. I believe with all my heart that it is. My partner shares the same sentiment as I do.

MW: You keep talking about your partner in making this cream a reality, but you haven’t mentioned this person by name. Is there a reason for that? Does this man or woman want to remain ominous? Doesn’t he or she want to share in the same lime light as you do?

MR: No, my partner is really the one who came up with the whole concept of *Vanish-away* and I came in toward the end to help with the final stages of the project. Rynne Slater is the best chemist in the world. She has won several awards for her research.

Pierce's hand started to tremble as he read the name again in the health magazine. No, this had to be a different Rynne than his baby. His Rynne wouldn't keep something this big away from him. Shaking off the odd feeling, he went back to reading the article.

MW: Why isn't Ms. Slater here with you now?

MR: She's always on personal business, but she'll be back in the next couple of days to sign off on the final paper work. If noting else, Rynne Slater is a just as excited about this cream as I am.

MW: Are you referring to the actor Byron Slater's younger sister?

MR: Yes, I am, but I don't see what that has to do with anything.

* * *

His anger became a scalding fury as he hurled the magazine across the room. Pierce was so incensed that he couldn't even think about finishing that article now. Rynne had been playing him as a fool for weeks.

The second she saw his face she decided he would be the perfect guinea pig for her miracle cream. But she couldn't come right out and asked him. No, she had to flirt with him and seduce him first to gain his trust and love.

Not one thing from their first meeting had been a chance happening. Rynne had planned it. Didn't Sally keep telling him that Rynne wasn't to be trusted? She told him that over and over and he turned on her for a woman he only known for weeks.

Getting up from his seat, Pierce couldn't wait until Rynne came back, because he was going to tell her what he thought of her. After that he was going to toss her out on her gorgeous ass.

Chapter Thirty One

Pierce lost track of how long that he paced back and forth around his house until sound of the front door opening and closing caught his attention. He stopped and watched Rynne take the leash off Spike then toss it on the couch.

“Hey honey, what’s wrong?” she asked coming to him.

Rynne tried to kiss him on the mouth but he turned his head away. He wouldn’t let her mouth touch his until she told him the truth. Was that miracle cream the thing she had been trying to tell him about the last couple of days?

Did she want him to be the test dummy for her *Vanish-Away* and his face is what will jump-start her career in the beauty product world? Hell, he wasn’t going to let her use him like that.

“We need to talk.”

Pierce uttered moving Rynne away from his body.

“I need to ask you something and I want the complete truth from you.”

He was trying his best to be calm and not call her a liar to her face.

“What do you want to talk about?” Rynne asked, watching him as he moved around the room.

“Did something happen while I was gone?”

Too hyped to sit still he continued to pace around the area as he tried to figure out how he wanted to approach this with her. This was his Rynne. The woman he loved more than anything else. So, it was hard for him to believe that she would keep something like this from him.

“I want to talk about your job. You’ve been trying for days to tell me what you do and I have been cutting you off I’m ready to listen now tell me about what you do.”

Nervously, Rynne’s tongue came out to moisten her lips and he wondered did she need them wet so she could lie to him.

“What exactly do you want to know about it?”

“What kind of job got so stressful out that your doctor sent you on vacation?”

“The kind of job that turns into sixteen hours days if I’m not careful,” Rynne answered yet avoided his question at the same time.

He wasn’t going to let her do that to him. She was going to say the words he wanted to hear. It didn’t matter to him if it took all night long.

Rynne was going to admit that the whole time they spent together was a lie.

“Don’t you have anyone that can shoulder some of that burden for you, maybe like a partner?”

“Sometimes I do have a partner and sometimes I don’t.” Rynne replied giving him a curious look.

“Why does it matter if I have help or not?”

“I just wanted to know how many sixteen hour days Mason Roberts worked,” he tossed out there then waited.

“Mason...does his share too,” Rynne started out then stopped. He saw the panic set in her eyes as his words hit home.

“How did you find out about me?” she whispered in a low voice.

Moving across the room, Pierce snatched up the magazine off the floor. He flung it across the room at Rynne and watched it land at her feet.

“I have stock in **Medical World** magazine and the editor always sends me the first issue before it hits newspaper.” Pierce uttered, feeling his anger coming back.

“That’s quite a good interview that your partner Mason Roberts gave in there. He speaks very highly of you. I’m surprised that the two of you aren’t an item. He has the same blue eyes and dark hair I have.”

Rynne picked up the magazine off the floor and laid it on the table in front of her.

“Pierce, please listen to me. I can explain all of this,” she begged as she rushed toward the room toward him, but he moved his body away from her.

“Don’t say a word to me,” he bit off.

“No, I’m not going to let you do this to us,” Rynne snapped rushing over to grab his arm.

“You kept cutting me off every time I wanted to tell you about *Vanish-Away*.” She pointed out.

“But now that you know, I want you to listen to me it can help with you scars. I swear that it can.”

Pierce jerked his arms away and his blue eyes became flat and unreadable as he glared down at Rynne.

“You want me to be your lab mouse for the miracle cream that you invented? How can you ask me to do that? Was the cream the real reason you started pursuing me? Did Byron and Chadwick come up with this?”

“No, the cream wasn’t the reason I started dating you. I saw an intriguing man who caught my interest and I wanted to get to know him better,” Rynne corrected.

“Shouldn’t you say the scarred man that you wanted to use as before and after photo in an infomercial?”

Rynne shook her head causing her ponytail to bounce between her shoulder blades.

“Baby, that isn’t true.”

“Are you telling me not once during our relationship the thought of showing me the cream didn’t enter your mind?” Pierce questioned.

“Can you honestly stand there and tell me that?”

She looked at him with surprise, and then quickly glanced away as a guilty expression covered her face.

“I can’t tell you that or I’ll be lying to you. The thought of offering you my cream did cross my mind more than once.”

Stalking over to the table in front by a window, Pierce snatched up his car keys and stormed out the door. He didn’t stop for Rynne when she started screaming his name as she ran out the door behind him.

Getting into his truck he slammed the door shut then leaned out the window, “I want you and your stuff gone when I get back. The sight of you turns my stomach and I hope that I never have to see your face again.”

“No, Pierce, wait,” Rynne screamed at him as he switched gears and sped out on the gravel road.

With his attention focused on Rynne through his rearview mirror, Pierce never saw the other vehicle coming down the road the second before it

crashed into him. The force from the impact caused the black Pathfinder flipped over four times before throwing Pierce's unconscious body from the car.

* * *

"NO!" Rynne screamed as she ran across the grass to the smoking truck and an out cold Pierce lying a few feet from it.

"He has to be okay," she cried as she ran her hands over his body.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Slater," Jeremy apologized falling down beside her on the ground, "I didn't see him pulling out of the driveway until it was too late."

"Don't sit there like an idiot. Call 911 and get an ambulance out here as soon as possible. He's not dead. I feel a pulse but it's faint."

She pressed two fingers on the side of Pierce's neck.

"Okay, my phone is in my car,"

Jeremy said as he got up and rushed back to his slightly dented car parked in the middle of the road.

"Pierce, you aren't going to leave me. I don't care how much you hate me right now. You fight for your life because it's worth it." Rynne stressed, brushing Pierce's hair away from his forehead. Her fingers started to shake at how clammy and cool his skin felt.

"I love you, Pierce, and you will fight for your life."

“Miss Slater, the ambulance and police both are on their way,” Jeremy informed her falling back down on the grass.

Digging into his back pocket, he handed her a rag.

“Here use this to wipe some of the blood off his face.”

Opening her free hand Jeremy pressed the material into her palm, “He’s going to be okay. Mr. McMahon is a strong man and he’s going to be just fine.”

Rynne couldn’t hold back the tears as they started to pour down her face. She slowly wiped the blood away from Pierce’s forehead and cheek. What if he didn’t come out of this? People died on the way to the hospital practically each and every day for far less than this.

In the span of four minutes her entire world had crashed down around her. The man she was in love with was now lying at her feet fighting for his life and it was all her fault. If Pierce died she wouldn’t be able to look herself in the mirror ever again without seeing this accident over and over.

“Please don’t cry. I know that Mr. McMahon wouldn’t want you to give up on him,” Jeremy said touching her on the shoulder.

“He would want you to stay strong for him.”

‘You’re right,’ she agreed, tossing the rag to the ground as she heard the police and ambulance coming in the distance.

The sound of cars down slamming and people yelling at her as they came across the grass push any of her self-pity out of her mind. She needed to stay focused to help Pierce and that what she would do. She stepped to the side as the medical attendants worked on Pierce. From her peripheral vision on her way to the ambulance she notice two police officers talking to Jeremy, she told them earlier that she would give them a statement at the hospital.

She climbed into the back of the vehicle and laid her hand on top of Pierce's cool one.

"You might hate hearing my voice right now, but you're going to have to deal with it."

* * *

Rynne had lost count how many different doctors she had talked to over the last hour, but none of them seemed to be able to give her the answers that she wanted to hear. There was no way that Pierce was in still unconscious. He was just trying to piss her off even further by not waking up.

He wouldn't do this to her. Pierce couldn't leave her like this; she just had to go in that room and sent things straight with him. After he learned who the boss was, he would open those beautiful blue eyes of his and tell her to get out of his face.

"You did this to my brother," a loud voice snarled behind her.

“Sally, I didn’t do this to Pierce; it was an accident.” Rynne commented, turning to face her nemesis.

“No, I told him time and time again that loving you would end badly for him, but he didn’t listen to me,” Sally snapped.

“You’re nothing but a poison that needed to be bled out of his system.”

“Sally, I don’t care how much you don’t like me, but we aren’t going to get into this inside a hospital,” Rynne said, not backing down from Pierce’s nasty sister.

“Pierce needs only positive thinking and that’s what he’s going to get from me.”

“The only positive thing you can do for my brother is get out of his life,”

Sally hissed before she moved to the other end of the hallway.

Rynne didn’t have time to listen to Sally spit her venom. Pierce needed her help in more ways than one, but she didn’t know how to approach the doctors with her idea. They would have to make it seem like it came from them because Sally would never go for it any other way. Crossing her fingers that her plan would work, she dug her cell phone out of her back pocket.

Chapter Thirty Two

“Are you sure this *Vanish-Away* cream can really help my brother?”

Sally questioned the plastic surgeon standing in front of her. For the past twenty minutes the man had been trying to sell this new miracle cream to her, but she did want to go down this same road again with Pierce. He was happy with the way his face was now and this cream could ruin that for him. She hadn't heard about this stuff until now.

“Yes it will remove about ninety-five percentage of the damage to his face,” the surgeon replied, holding the clipboard to his chest.

“I also think, along with the minor surgery that I want to do, that Pierce's face will be back to the way he remembered.”

“Are there any side effects I should know about?” Sally questioned.

“Yes, the first couple of weeks there might be a little redness or itch, but that will pass once the skin gets used to the treatments.”

“How long will my brother have to use this *Vanish-Away*?”

She knew Pierce wasn't a patient man and wouldn't stick with the cream if it took it a while to work.

“I’m going to be honest with you,” the surgeon replied, “old as Pierce’s scars are, he might have to use it for at least six months.”

“Six months?” Sally murmured. “I don’t know if I can promise he’ll use it that long and I don’t live close enough to apply it three times a day for him.”

“Not a problem. When he gets out of the hospital someone from the company will come by and show him how to do it.”

“How much will this cost my brother? He has money but I don’t want him wasting it on something that might not work for him.”

Laughing, the surgeon removed the clipboard from his chest and started to flip through some papers, “It won’t cost him a dime. The company will pay for all of his supplies.”

“Why?” Sally questioned.

“An employee at the company heard about what happened to your brother and wanted to help him out.”

Sally thought about what this would mean for Pierce if this worked out. He could go back out there in the workplace and gain the respect back that he deserved. He wouldn’t be looked at as the man with the disfigurement. Her baby brother could once again be the success he was all those years ago and new ventures in his life meant less time with Rynne.

“Fine, I’ll sign the papers.” She took the clipboard that the surgeon handed her and scribbled her name at the bottom of the documents.

“Does it matter that he’s still unconscious and didn’t make the judgment for himself?”

“No, you’re his next of kin and everything should be just fine,” the surgeon told her before he walked away.

“Pierce, whatever happens I hope that you know I did this for you.” Sally said in the deserted hallway.

She was still upset that Marcia was out of town and wouldn’t make it in until the end of the week.

“It doesn’t matter; after all this is over, Rynne Slater won’t be the person sharing her life with my brother.”

* * *

“Here you go. I had a hard sell with her, but she finally gave in and signed the papers.”

“Thanks so much, Calvin,” Rynne said taking the clipboard from the plastic surgeon.

“I knew that if I approached her with this she would have turned her back on me and screamed no from the roof top.”

“Sally was just as you described her,” Calvin replied.

“Pierce McMahon must be pretty special for you to go through all this trouble to fly me in to do this surgery for him.”

“You saw his face. With your expert hands and my *Vanish-Away* cream he’ll be back to the man he used to be,” Rynne answered.

“I feel like his accident was my fault and I want to help him.”

“Don’t give me that speech. You’re in love with him. Do you know how your face lights up when you say his name?” Calvin teased her.

“Yes I do love him,” she confessed.

“However, I do think he’s a perfect candidate for *Vanish-Away*.”

“I can’t disagree with you. Pierce has the perfect bone structure to have wonderful results from the cream and surgery,” Calvin uttered, smiling down at her.

“I better go get ready for you so I can fix your boyfriend.”

“Go on and leave me alone,” Rynne laughed, shoving Calvin in the back as he walked away from her.

“You better make sure each stitch is perfect, so his face won’t end up back the way it is.”

Calvin waved back at her before his shoulders disappeared around the corner.

* * *

Why does my skin feel so tight? Pierce thought as he tried to touch his cheek with the fingers before it got slapped away. He never woke up in the morning in this much pain before. What was wrong with him?

“Don’t touch your face or you’ll mess up the work the plastic surgeon did on you.”

Plastic surgeon? “Sally, is that you?” Pierce hoarse voice croaked as he opened his eyes and spotted his sister sitting in a chair next to his bed.

“Where am I? What happened to me? Why did I need a plastic surgeon?”

He asked before the panic set in.

“Is there something wrong with my face? Do I have more scars?”

“No, your face should be fixed and after you start using the *Vanish-Away* cream most of your scars should fade,” a voice he had fallen in love with answered from the doorway.

Pierce slowly turned his head and found Rynne standing there wearing a short black skirt with a short sleeved v-neck t-shirt showing off the body he used to love so much.

“What are you doing here?”

Rynne smiled at him and came further into the room.

“I came to check on you. I wanted to see if you had woken up yet.”

Pierce tried to shake some of the extra cobwebs from his head.

“As you can see, I’m awake and I haven’t forgotten what our fight was about. If you think I’m going to use one drop of that cream you created then you’re out of your mind.”

He barked at Rynne while he fought down the need to beg her to stay.

“Now get out of my room.”

“I don’t think you have a choice about the cream. Your sister signed the hospital papers along with a six-month contract from my company,” Rynne replied.

“You’re obligated to use the *Vanish-Away* cream for six months unless you have a bad reaction to it.”

“Are the two of you saying Rynne is the person who made the *Vanish-Away* cream?” Sally questioned, finally butting into the conversation.

“Shut up, Sally. I don’t need you to fight my battles for me,” Pierce barked.

“I can sue you for this,” he snapped.

“My sister was under a lot of stress when she signed those papers.”

He hated that he kept getting small whiffs of Rynne’s perfume as the air conditioning circulated around the room.

“But you won’t do that because a part of you wants to see if the cream will work for you,” Rynne countered as she stood over him in the bed.

“Pierce, this cream will help you; all you have to do is give it a chance.”

He allowed his eyes to wander over Rynne’s perfect body before he tossed her out of his life for good. He couldn’t have a woman in his life who couldn’t love him for the man he was.

“Get out of my face and don’t come back to my room,” Pierce uttered as he tried to sit up in the bed.

“Don’t, baby, you’re still too weak to do that.” Rynne murmured as she tried to help him.

“Didn’t I just tell you to get out of my face?”

He barked, watching her take a step back from the bed.

“Sally was right about you. You aren’t worth a thing. If I need help I’ll get it from Sally or, better yet, Marcia. She’s the kind of woman I really need in my life.”

Raw hurt shone in Rynne’s eyes. As she stepped completely back from the side of his bed, he almost reached out to stop her before he caught himself.

“You don’t mean that,” she blurted out, in a hurt voice.

“The hell I don’t. I want you out of this room and my life,” Pierce said in the coldest voice he could muster.

Squaring her shoulders, Rynne looked at him, "I'll leave, but this isn't over between us. I still need to talk to you and I will. By the way, Spike is at my brother's house. You can come and get him when you get released from the hospital."

With that said, Rynne spun away from his bed and was gone in a blink of an eye.

"I hoped she believed that little display you put on because I sure in the hell didn't," Sally complained. "You're still in love with her, aren't you?"

Dragging his eyes away from the empty doorway, Pierce glowered into his sister's eyes, "My feelings for Rynne don't matter now that she's out of my life for good. She's gone so why aren't you celebrating?"

"Why should I be happy about a lie?" Sally mumbled.

"You're going to end up back with her, as much as I hate it.

"Don't place a bet on that logic, big sister, because you'll lose your money," Pierce answered as he tried to convince himself that he was no longer in love with Rynne.

"I can prove it to you."

"How?" Sally asked skeptically.

“Tell Marcia that I want to see her at my house when I’m well enough to have visitors. I’m thinking about starting back up where we left off all those years ago.”

* * *

Three days later Pierce sat on the edge of his hospital bed and listened to the nurse tell him about the *Vanish-Away* cream. He couldn’t believe someone was going to actually come by and show him how to apply the stuff to his scars. How hard could it be?

“Do I really need some stranger coming to my house twice a month to check on my face?”

“Yes, sir. Miss Slater wants progress note taken along with a few photos,” the nurse replied, handing him his release papers.

Pierce’s heart skipped a beat at the sound of Rynne’s name. She hadn’t been back to see since he tossed her out of his room.

“Do you know if Rynne...I mean, Miss Slater, is going to be the one who does the visits?”

He wanted to see Rynne again so badly, but his pride wouldn’t let him call her brother’s house. The stitches on his face started to itch; he brought his hand up to scratch them but the nurse brushed it away.

“You can’t do that. The doctor doesn’t want you touching your face with your fingers unless you’ve washed them first. Let’s include some instructions in with your release papers. Furthermore, I don’t know if Miss Slater will be the one coming to your home.”

The nurse smiled at him then strolled out the door. A second later Sally and Marcia came through it.

“Are you ready to break out of this jail?” Marcia asked, winking at him.

She had been coming to the hospital since the day he told Sally he was interested in her again.

“Of course he is.” Sally grinned, picking up his garment bag out of the chair.

“Pierce is ready to go home and work on starting his life over without Rynne Slater in it.”

“How about I get home first and learn the ins and outs of this cream before you start planning my future?”

He sighed, getting up from the bed. “I declined a wheelchair, so we can leave right now.”

Sally pranced out of the room first with Marcia right behind her like always. He shook his head at the pair as he followed them into the hallway. As he was about to go out of the sliding doors, Rynne came out of a room at the

left side of him and it came as no surprise to see her there. He knew she wouldn't let him leave without taking another peek at him.

Yet, he couldn't let her know how much her sudden appearance made his heart swell with love for her. Pierce hurried up and caught up with Marcia before she went out the door; he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and kissed the side of her neck.

"Did I tell you how beautiful you look today in that yellow dress? It really brings out your tan." He said it loud enough for Rynne to hear.

"I have always loved a good tan on a woman."

"No, you didn't, but thanks," Marcia purred in her usual sultry voice.

"You know how much I love getting compliments from you."

"Good, because you can expect more from where that came from," he uttered, stealing a glance over his shoulder at Rynne.

She still stood in the same spot with a haunted look on her face before she went back in the room behind her.

At that one moment Pierce almost forgot about his pain and ran after Rynne, but he didn't do it. His wounds were still a little too fresh to forgive her and he wasn't talking about the ones on his face.

Chapter Thirty Three

“Marcia, you really don’t have to stay the night with me,” Pierce insisted, trying to get his sister’s chatty friend out his house.

All the reasons that he broke up with her were coming back to him. She didn’t know how to take a hint if it hit her over the head.

“No, I want to. It’s not a problem at all. I don’t have anyone waiting for me back at home,” Marcia replied.

“Are you sure there isn’t someone who will miss you?” *Please let her think of someone.*

“Nope, I’m yours for the entire night and most of the morning,” she murmured.

“Is there anything fun you can think for us to do?”

The sides of his face were throbbing and he didn’t have time to play games with Marcia tonight. He only wanted to toss back two pain killers and hit the bed. He had to get up early to be ready for the person about *Vanish-Away*. Deep down he knew that he wanted it to be Rynne, but he ruined any chances of that with his comment today.

“The only fun thing I’m going to do is go to sleep,” he replied, heading toward his bedroom.

“There are pillows and blankets in that side closet off to the left of the kitchen.”

“Do you have something that I can sleep in?” Marcia called after him.

Going into his bedroom, Pierce opened one of his drawers and pulled out the first thing that caught his attention.

“Here, you can sleep in this,” he said, tossing the top to Marcia, who was standing in his bedroom doorway.

She caught it and held it to her chest.

“Thanks,” she said, then eased away from his door.

“Dream about me,” Marcia whispered as she backed out of his room.

Pierce sauntered over to the door and shut it behind Marcia.

I’m going to be dreaming about a woman tonight, but it won’t be you.

Tugging his shirt over his head, he tossed it on the floor before he went into the bathroom. He had to take a shower to get the hospital smell off of his body.

* * *

Making up the couch, Marcia quickly stripped out of her clothes and buttoned up the top that Pierce gave her to sleep in. This was a small step in

the direction she wanted to go. Today wasn't ending the way she hoped, with her wrapped in Pierce's arms in his bed, but there was still plenty of time for that. Crawling between the sheets, she flicked off the light by the couch, surrounding the room in darkness. The light coming through the window hit the diamond ring on her right hand.

Pulling the ring off her right hand, she slid it onto her finger ring and stared at it, she wanted Pierce for herself. It was going to take work to erase Rynne from his mind, but she could do it with Sally's help.

Pierce McMahon was the kind of man that a woman didn't let escape two times in her life. She was dumb enough to let him go a first time, however this second time around he wasn't going anywhere without her. Running the back of her hands across her eyes, Marcia twisted and turned until she found a comfortable spot on the couch, then she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Sitting outside Pierce house inside her car, Rynne stared at the place that had brought her so much pleasure. She never thought when she came out here on medical leave to visit her brother that she would fall in love. But she did, and with a wonderful man and she wasn't about to lose him Pierce.

Taking a breath, she grabbed the camera and bag of creams off the front seat and got out of the car. She didn't like how her stomach was twisted in

knots at the thought of Pierce tossing her off his property. But she knew he still loved her and wouldn't do that. It didn't matter that he left arm-in-arm with Marcia yesterday from the hospital. He only did that to make her jealous and it worked. He really had some making up to do for that one.

Rynne walked up the steps, smoothed her top down over her hips and stomach, and then rang the doorbell. She slid the bag on her shoulder and held the camera in her hand while she waited for Pierce to answer the door. Hearing the door unlock from the other side, she placed a smile on her face and said, "Pierce, I know you didn't expect to see me but we need to talk."

"Damn right, I sure in the hell didn't want to see you this early in the morning," Marcia moaned, running her fingers through tumbled hair.

Taking a step back, she couldn't hold in the gasp that escaped from her lips. She couldn't believe that Marcia was standing at Pierce's door wearing the same pajama top that she used to. No, her heart cried, Pierce wouldn't do this to her. There had to be some kind of mistake.

"Is Pierce here? I need to speak to him?" Rynne asked, blinking back sudden tears.

"He's in the shower. What can I do for you, Miss Slater?" Marcia uttered.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” Rynne exclaimed, trying not to feel the pain of another woman wearing the top she always thought of as hers. “I’ll just wait for Pierce to get out.”

“Whatever you need to say to my fiancée you can tell me.”

“Fiancée,” she gasped as the words washed over her body.

Marcia was telling her the truth. Pierce wouldn’t propose to her. He hated how Sally was constantly tossing Marcia in his face.

“You’re lying. Pierce wouldn’t have proposed to you over me.”

“If that is true, then why am I wearing this ring and you aren’t?” Marcia taunted, shoving the ring under Rynne’s nose.

Her breath caught in her lungs as the square-cut diamond shone in her face, Rynne jerked her eyes back up to Marcia’s smug expression left her speechless. Pierce hated her so much that he rather be married to this spiteful woman than her. She was too stunned to cry. All she wanted to do was get out of her before Pierce showed his face. As she was about to turn away, the sound of Pierce’s voice stopped her.

“Marcia, who are you talking to this early at the door?” Pierce questioned coming to stand beside Marcia only wearing a towel around his lean waist.

“It’s only me,” Rynne answered, glancing up into Pierce’s blue eyes. “I came to show you how to use the cream, but Marcia showed me something else instead.”

“What did Marcia show you?”

Pierce questioned as he crossed his arms over his muscular chest.

“The engagement ring that you gave her,” she stated, pointing down to Marcia hand that was at her side. Rynne was so upset that she missed Pierce’s quick intake of breath as he glared down at Marcia.

Taking the bag off her shoulder, she shoved it and the camera against Pierce’s chest, then took a step back.

“I think I need to leave. All instructions you need are inside the bag and if you need to contact someone there a phone number on the inside of the pamphlet.”

She spun around and rushed down the steps to her car.

“Shit, Rynne, wait one damn minute and let me explain.”

Pierce yelled after her but she kept going. She was too strong a woman to let him see the tears in her eyes. Getting into her car, she pulled out of the driveway onto the road hoping to leave Pierce and Marcia in her past.

Chapter Thirty Four

Pierce still found it hard to believe that two months had passed since Marcia told Rynne that horrible lie causing her to disappear from his life. He still remembered the shocked look on Marcia's face as he tossed her out of his house wearing only his pajama top. He had gathered up the rest of her belongings and flung them out the door after her. He let her know under no circumstances was she to show her face on his doorstep again.

Several times he had tried calling the number on the pamphlet Rynne told him about, but he could never get her on the phone. She was always either in meetings or out of the office. If he hadn't threatened to sue over the way he was being treated, Rynne probably wouldn't be coming to his house today.

Somehow she had found a way to set up for several different doctors to come and remove the stitches from his face, then show him how to use the cream. But it wasn't the same as having Rynne doing it.

Pierce grinned as the smell of garlic bread baking in the oven drifted from the kitchen into the living room. He was going to surprise Rynne with the first meal he cooked for her.

She wasn't going to leave this house until she forgave him for being such an asshole to her. He should have never jumped down her throat the way he did. She tried on numerous occasions to tell him about her job, but he cut her off because he was only thinking about his feelings, not hers.

Moving over to a mirror by the door, he checked his reflection. Most of his new scars were starting to fade a little. All the tiny marks around his scars that he hated were almost gone. He couldn't believe that his girlfriend made something as wonderful as *Vanish-Away* and he criticized her for it.

Pierce laughed at the fact he still thought of Rynne as his when she probably hated him now, but he could fix that. After dinner tonight, he would show her how much she meant to him and not in a sexual way.

The sound of tires crunching over rocks took his attention away from staring at his changing face. Rynne better be prepared because he wasn't letting her leave until she knew how much he loved her and always would. He didn't want to seem overzealous so he waited until he heard a knock on the door before he opened it.

"I'm so glad that you could make it," he smiled, and then frowned as his eyes connected with a pair of blue eyes a shade lighter than his own. .

"You aren't Rynne."

“No, I’m not,” Mason laughed holding the camera case against his chest, “and from the sparks shooting from your eyes, you were expecting me to be.”

“Why are you here instead of Rynne?” Pierce growled.

“I requested her and I was told that she would be the one who came.”

Mason cocked his head to the side and gave him a crooked smile, “She decided at the last minute not to come and sent me instead. It was something about not wanting to run into your fiancée.”

“Damn it, I’m not engaged to Marcia and if she had come I would have told her that,” he sighed exasperated.

“Can I come in?” Mason asked.

“No, you can’t come in,” Pierce uttered coming out on the porch, closing the door behind him.

He didn’t want Mason to see the romantic setup he had inside for Rynne.

“I want you to leave and call Rynne. Tell her I really need to see her. She won’t take my call if it shows up on her caller ID.”

“It’s going to be hard to see her after this week,” Mason told him.

Pierce frowned at Mason’s comment.

“Why? What’s going on after this week?”

Narrowing his eyes, Mason glared at him with such hostility that he almost took a step back from the older man.

“Why should I tell you any more about Rynne after the way you treated her? Rynne is a sweetheart and doesn’t deserve to have a bastard like you in her life. Do you know before she left that she had to pick out the guy who attacked her in a line-up?”

Pierce felt his heart tighten in the middle of his chest, “No, I didn’t even know they had caught the guy.”

“Yeah, she said they caught him the same day you got released from the hospital. Rynne had come to the hospital to ask you to go with her, but you already had your hands full with Marcia.”

“Hell, that’s why she looked at me like that when I was talking to Marcia,” he muttered under his breath.

“How did she look at you?”

Pierce shook his head. “It doesn’t matter now. Is the guy locked up?”

“Yes, he’ll be gone for a while,” Mason answered.

“You still haven’t given me a reason why I should trust you with Rynne’s schedule.”

Mason was protecting Rynne like she was part of his family instead of his partner and if he wasn't so disappointed with the way he treated her, he would be jealous as hell.

"I'm in love with her and I want her back. I was a fool to let her go in the first place. She used to trust me the way she trusts you now. I'm begging you. Please help me get Rynne back."

Mason sighed then rubbed his hand across the back of his neck, "She's leaving the day after tomorrow for a twenty-city campaign for *Vanish-Away*."

"Is she up to that? Didn't her doctor tell her that she needed more rest and less work?" Pierce uttered, concerned. He didn't want Rynne getting sick because of the way he treated her.

"Rynne isn't listening to him or me. *Vanish-Away* has become the most important thing in her life. I think she only probably gets five hours of sleep at night, maybe less."

"I can't let her do this to herself."

Pierce uttered, reaching for the doorknob behind him.

"I need to see her and explain that I want her in my life."

"You really love Rynne, don't you?" Mason asked, studying him.

"You have known Rynne a lot longer than I. What man wouldn't fall head over heels in love with her after being in her company for five minutes?"

He couldn't waste anymore time standing her talking to Mason. H needed to go inside and find a way to get Rynne.

"I believe that you do love Rynne. I know for a fact that she's still in love with you. Go inside and throw a bag together. I'll take you back on the company jet."

Pierce couldn't believe his good luck. He sensed that Mason hadn't gotten over the way he treated Rynne, but he was willingly to push his feeling aside to help him get her back. He wasn't going to take this miracle likely.

"Give me some time to pack some clothes and call Rynne's brother about Spike."

He rushed back into his house to take care of everything before Mason could change his mind.

Chapter Thirty Five

Rynne dropped her head down on her desk on top of the thick stack of paper work that still needed to be filed away. She couldn't concentrate on her job anymore. All she kept seeing in her mind over and over again was that ring on Marcia's finger. The pain of that moment cut deep. Marcia was everything that Pierce said that he hated, yet she had gotten a ring over her.

Sitting up, she brushed her hair away from her face and pulled it back into a ponytail. It had to be out of the way while she confirmed these dates and times. She was thinking about taking another vacation. She had about twenty more vacation days left and a trip to a nice sunny beach away from all of her problems sounded wonderful.

Mason just asked her last week for some additional duties. She wouldn't mind taking a step back. *Vanish-Away* sales were better than she could ever imagined them to be and two departments just ordered a hundred more cases from the manufacturer. Most people would be excited by all the money that was pouring into their banking account, but her happiness came from her cream helping people.

A small part of her did wonder how Pierce's face was healing, but she refused to look at any of the pictures anyone tried to show her. Pierce McMahon was now Mason's responsibility and not hers. Any kind of progress that Pierce made was for Mason to keep up with.

It was going to take her a long time to put Pierce in a safe place in her heart, but she could do it with work and this trip she had in the works. Pierce had taught her how to go after things that she wanted and she wasn't going to forget that. In addition, she wanted to believe she encouraged Pierce to live more and not worry about another person's opinions of his outer appearance.

Opening up her notepad, Rynne placed the thoughts of Pierce in the same place that she always did and started to work on all the dates and times for her conferences. For the next hour, she got totally involved in her work until a knock came at her door and Mason walked in.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but we have a problem in the conference room," he stated.

"What kind of problem is it?" she asked, closing her notebook.

"There's an irate customer in the conference room and he's threatening to sue us because he swears nowhere in the pamphlet does it point out *Vanish-Away* might cause itching."

Why did these things always happen to her?

She took a deep, calming breath and tried to relax.

“Was there a reason he couldn’t talk to you?” she asked, standing up.

“Yes, he said I wasn’t the creator of the cream,” Mason uttered.

“Wonderful,” Rynne moaned.

“Does he seem dangerous? Do I need to alert security?”

“No, he didn’t come across as crazy when I spoke with him. He only wanted to talk with you for a few minutes.”

“Okay, I only have ten minutes to spare then I have to come back and go over my report one last time before I leave tomorrow.”

Rynne stalked from the room, missing how Mason’s face split into a wide grin.

* * *

Wiping her hands down the front of her white shirt, Rynne tried to relax her nerves, she couldn’t afford someone to place a lawsuit against her before the promotional trip. All the test clients hadn’t complained about any problems with *Vanish-Away*. So, why did this man want to cause problems about something that was in the pamphlet? She sent up a silent prayer, then opened the door and went inside.

Closing the door, she looked around the room until she spotted the man standing at a table looking at some of the magazine spread across it. Why did the set of his shoulders and the scent of his cologne seem so familiar to her?

For a split second she would have guessed that Pierce was in the room with her, but that was crazy. He was with Marcia planning their wedding. This man just reminded her of Pierce because he had a similar body type.

“Sir, I’m Rynne Slater. My partner informed you had a problem finding some information in the pamphlet about *Vanish-Away*?”

“Did he also tell you that I couldn’t find a way in there to apologize for being a bastard to you?” Pierce asked as he tossed the magazine back down and faced her.

She only half listened to Pierce to she struggled to comprehend that this wasn’t a dream and he was really only a few feet in front of her. She hated to admit how much seeing him here made her want to run into his arms.

“What do you want?”

“You,” Pierce answered as he approached her slowly at the other end of the room.

“I want you back in my life more than anything else in this world.”

“No, you have Marcia and I’m not about to play seconds in anyone’s marriage,” she hissed, upset that Pierce thought she would.

“Why don’t you leave and go back to her. I know your sister is probably dancing around the room with glee that I’m out of your life.”

Rynne turned to leave only to find herself suddenly being spun back around into a hard, warm chest.

“Rynne, I can’t lose you. You came into my life at a time I thought I wouldn’t have anyone who loved me for me, but you did,” Pierce whispered kissing the side of her neck.

“I’m not with Marcia and I haven’t been with any other woman since I found out your name. Marcia set that up and I’m sorry I didn’t come out earlier to protect you from her poison.”

“How do I know you aren’t lying to me?”

She leaned lightly into him, tilting her face toward Pierce’s. She didn’t see the fading scars, but the man she was in love with.

“Have I ever lied to you?” Pierce asked, rubbing her back through her shirt.

“No,” she replied.

Pierce had always been honest with her even when she didn’t want to hear it.

“I’m in love with you, Rynne Slater. I want to marry you and watch you grow big with our child,” he breathed, staring into her eyes.

“I always wondered was I sent into isolation for a reason. The day I opened my front door and found you there, I knew I had been. Baby, I love only you. Will marry me?”

Joy bubbled in Rynne’s body and spread across her features, “Yes, I will marry you and I think I can even do the baby thing for you too.”

Pierce’s hands tightened on her waist. “Are you trying to tell me something?”

“Maybe I am. Maybe I not,” Rynne grinned before pulling her baby’s father and future husband’s head down for a long slow kiss.

THE END

More about Marie Rochelle:

Marie Rochelle is a bestselling author of interracial romances featuring black women and white men. Marie first started writing IR books about two years ago and it has been nonstop for her ever since. Her first best selling IR romance was entitled Taken by Storm. In addition, Marie has a very successful series called The Men of CCD and right now she's working on the much awaited third book in the series: Tempting Turner. Marie has enjoyed writing from a very young age and is happy she decided to turn her career toward the IR market; a market that she had enjoyed for years herself. She has always dreamt of being a writer and now is truly happy to see her dreams becoming a reality.

To find out more about her visit her web site: www.freewebs.com/irwriter

Books out or coming soon:

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