Chapter 3

Lauren rushed from her car into the diner. She'd spent a ridiculously long time getting dressed that morning, debating over what top to wear, what bottoms, what underwear. Underwear! Of all the absurdities, she had been concerned over what underwear to put on for breakfast with this man. She had finally decided on a matching set of white silk, with touches of lace. She'd chosen a bright green summer weight sweater and a black pleated skirt that ended just below her knees, completing the outfit with lace-topped white thigh-highs and a pair of strappy black sandals.

“Nice shoes,” Tyler said when she slid into the booth across from him. The sizzling look in his blue eyes told her he liked more than just her shoes.

She smiled, fighting down the blush she could feel starting. “Thank you. I'm so sorry I'm late. I must have slept through my alarm this morning.”

He grinned and passed her a menu. “It's no problem. Twenty minutes isn't that late after all.”

She looked up from her menu in surprise, and he winked at her. She smiled, then laughed. “If you say so. Thank you for waiting, I was afraid you would think I stood you up.”

The waitress showed up to take their order. Lauren had an omelet with toast and coffee, and Tyler had pancakes with sausage and lots of syrups, scrambled eggs, and a chocolate milk shake. They lingered over breakfast, talking and laughing. Tyler did most of the talking, and Lauren didn't mind. She shared some, but was far more interested in listening to him tell animated stories about growing up in New England, about the misadventures he and his fraternity brothers had in college, about the job he'd had in New York City after college.

“What made you leave New York for Charlotte?” Lauren asked, stirring sugar into a fresh cup of coffee. “That seems like a pretty drastic change.”

“Yeah,” he answered, leaning back against the booth. “It was. But, Ethan's mother got sick, and he had to come home to take care of her, so we all just tagged along.”

Lauren set down her coffee and gave a long, appraising look to the man in front of her. “That's really something of you. There's not many people that would just uproot their lives like that for somebody else.”

Tyler shrugged. “What else could we do? He's our boy. Even Sloane pulled every string he could to get stationed at Fort Bragg. Anyway, it's not like things didn't work out. I ended up stumbling on an opportunity I never would have considered had I stayed back East. And eventually I met this stunning little red-head who looks better in a skirt than any girl I ever saw back home.”

Lauren felt the color rise to her cheeks and concentrated on stirring her coffee. “What was this opportunity you stumbled on, anyway?”

“Oh, just something. If I tell you what I do, you'll find out where we're going tomorrow night, and that would ruin the surprise.” He grinned at her, his eyes twinkling playfully.

Lauren rolled her eyes, and caught sight of the clock above the register. “Oh no! Emma's going to kill me!” she cried, gathering up her purse and grabbing for the check. Tyler snatched it out of her hand.

“I'll take care of this. But why is Emma going to kill you?” He pulled a credit card out of his wallet and heading toward the cashier.

“It's almost nine-thirty, and we open at eight!” Lauren lamented, following him to the door. “Thank you for breakfast.”

“It was my pleasure, but where do I pick you up tomorrow evening?” Tyler asked, handing credit card and bill to the cashier.

Lauren waved one hand airily, pushing open the door with the other. “Just give me the address and I'll meet you there.”

“Oh, you're a sly one,” Tyler answered. “Not gonna work. I'll pick you up like it's a proper date.”

He winked at her, and she sighed. She couldn't help but smile as she shook her head in defeat. “All right, you win this round,” she told him, and gave him her address. “I'll see you tomorrow night.”

“Six o'clock sharp,” he answered, grinning as he signed the credit card slip.

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Lauren rushed into the shop, spouting apologies and excuses, and Emma just laughed. “Are you kidding?” Emma demanded when Lauren finally finished. “You should have just stayed. It's not like I can't handle a morning alone in here.”

“I know you can,” Lauren sighed. “I just – oh, Emma, he's so wonderful. I don't want him to think I'm the kind of girl who just blows off her responsibilities for a guy.”

Emma laughed again. “Well, I am that kind of girl, so I say we close up shop and get a jump on dress shopping. You can tell me all about Mr. Wonderful.”

And Lauren did. She gushed about him all afternoon, retelling all her favorite stories. “I hope he doesn't think I'm being purposefully secretive,” she said, smoothing down the skirt of a long black gown. “I don't even think I got around to telling him my last name.”

Emma raised an eyebrow. “So Mr. Wonderful did nothing but talk about himself? I don't like that one. Try this.” She passed a pale blue dress to Lauren.

“I don't like it either,” Lauren answered, unzipping the dress as she headed back into the changing room. “And it wasn't like that. He was fascinated with everything I had to say, too. We talked about college a bunch, but he just had so many great stories to tell. I laughed so hard I thought I was going to die, and I just kept asking for more. Oh no, Emma. This one won't do at all. It's way too low cut.”

“I doubt it, let me see.” Emma pulled open the dressing room door and surveyed her friend. “No, you're right. I'll go see if I can find something else. We may have tapped this store out, though.”

In the end, they settled on a gold dress with a sweetheart neckline and thin straps that criss-crossed across the plunging back, and a skirt that fell to the floor in scalloped tiers of lace.

“I'll make dinner tonight,” Emma offered when they got back to their apartment. Lauren laughed, but agreed. Emma's idea of making dinner was calling for take-out after looking up the number herself.

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Tyler dumped the bag of pretzels into a bowl and set it on the bar separating Mordechai's kitchen from his dining area. Saturday night was Poker Night, and it had been since his Junior year in college. They had started just the five of them, Tyler, Ethan, Mordechai, Hunter, and Jeremiah, after Mordechai started a fist fight at a costume party that Halloween. The fraternity forbade him from going to anymore parties that semester, and by the time the spring semester started, they were all enjoying Poker Night too much to stop just for booze and babes. Sloan joined them by accident the following year, hiding from a very drunk young woman who wanted to show the freshman everything the college had to offer. It was Poker Night that convinced Sloan to pledge to the fraternity.

“You're grinning like a possum over there,” Mordechai observed, setting out six coasters on the felt topped poker table. They always set six places, even when, like now with Sloan deployed overseas, someone couldn't make it. “What's up?”

“Got a date tomorrow,” Tyler answered, popping open two beers and setting one at the empty place.

The other four men exchanged looks. “Rachel doesn't put that look on your face, man,” Hunter declared. “Never has, I doubt she ever will.”

Tyler shook his head. “She walked out again on Thursday. I found the best flower shop in Charlotte yesterday, though. Maybe the best one in the world.”

“So you're dating, what, a peony now?” Jeremiah raised an eyebrow beneath his green visor. He'd picked it up on a Spring Break trip to Vegas and had deemed it a “real dealer's hat”. None of the other men ever wore it, but Jeremiah insisted on donning it whenever he was dealer. “I'm all for expanding one's horizons and all, but that's going a bit too far.”

“Not the flowers, you idiot,” Tyler answered, flicking a bottle top at Jeremiah. “The girl in the flower shop.”

“I've been saying it for years,” Ethan said, folding his hands behind his head and leaning back in his chair. “Your Yankee girls got nothin' on my Southern beauties.” He planted his hands on the table then and leaned forward, his soft gray eyes boring into Tyler. “You're really done with Rachel this time, though? Really really?”

Tyler nodded. “Really really.”

Ethan leaned back and the phone rang. Mordechai hit the speakerphone button, the jumble of numbers on the caller ID meant it could only be one person.

“How's it hanging?” Sloan's voice crackled from across the ocean.

“Tyler's got a date,” Hunter announced.

Sloan laughed. “Tyler always has a date, how is this news?”

“It's not with Rachel,” Mordechai informed him. “He's met up with some little chica from a flower shop downtown.”

“So what's your little peony's name?” Jeremiah asked, dealing out the cards.

“Lauren,” Tyler answered, reaching for his cards. He stopped, a puzzled look on his face.

“What?” Jeremiah said. “Mordechai's the one that stacks the deck, not me. Bets.”

“I never got her last name,” Tyler said. He covered his face with both hands and leaned back.

Sloan's laugh filled the room once more. “Don't worry about it. I never get their last names, and most of the time they don't get my first.”

“We're not all International Men of Mystery,” Hunter chuckled, tossing a nickel into the pot. “Tyler's the kind of guy who likes to fool himself into thinking he has a long term relationship.”

“Well I probably don't have a shot at one now,” Tyler lamented, picking up his cards and adding his own nickel. “She probably thinks I'm some self-obsessed frat boy.”

“Wait, you're not?” Mordechai threw his cards onto the table and stood up. “Man, I'm outta here then. I don't want to hang around with people with substance.”

“Cute,” Jeremiah laughed, placing his bet. “Sit down and stop trying to cheat.”

“Cheat? Me?” Mordechai feigned innocence. “Anybody else want a beer?”

“Seriously, though,” Ethan said, throwing his nickel in. “What's the problem? How much time did you spend in that flower shop that she could think that about you?”

“It wasn't the flower shop,” Tyler answered. “We had breakfast this morning, and I spent most of it just talking about me.”

Mordechai stopped halfway back to the table and stared at him. “Even Sloan's not that dumb. Somebody toss a nickel in for me.”

“Nope,” came the response. “I always let them do the babbling. Keeps up my image as the strong, silent type.”

Tyler chuckled. “She just kept asking questions, and I kept answering. I've always had a weakness for pleated skirts.”

“Me too,” Jeremiah sighed, laying out the flop.

“I kept telling stories, and she kept laughing,” Tyler went on, surveying his two cards. “I would have done cartwheels around the diner just to keep her laughing.”

“You've got it bad, man,” Ethan shook his head, adding another nickel.

Tyler nodded, taking a swig of his beer.

“I fold,” Mordechai declared, leaning on the bar. “This flower girl of yours must really be something.”

“You tell Rachel you're really through yet?” Hunter asked. He dropped a nickel, and another nickel into the pot. “Raise you.”

“Hold on!” Sloan crackled through the phone lines. “You haven't broken up with Rachel yet? That's low even for me.”

“Not quite,” Tyler answered, sliding two nickels, and another two forward. “Raise. She walked out on Thursday. I haven't called her to confirm we're broken up, but she did say she never wanted to see me again.”

“Getting mighty rich,” Jeremiah said, his eyes flashing between his cards and the flop. “I'll call. She never wants to see you again about every other week, though.”

“You sure she knows you guys are through?” Ethan asked, sliding his cards toward the middle. “I fold. She can be a little, well -”

“Crazy?” Mordechai offered, helping himself to pretzels.

“Psycho?” Sloan put in.

“She is likely to go off the deep end when she finds out,” Hunter agreed, putting two more nickels into the pot. “Call.”

Tyler shrugged as Jeremiah dealt the turn. “What can she do, honestly? She might rant a bit, but she wouldn't have walked out if she didn't already have her eye on somebody else.”

“So you might have, what, a week's reprieve before she calls you up again?” Hunter asked, contributing his two nickels to the fresh round of betting.

“Sounds about right to me,” Ethan said.

“I'll tell her I won't take her back. Raise,” Tyler answered, adding four more nickels to the growing pot. “I think you guys are blowing this out of proportion.”

“She won't be happy,” Jeremiah warned, calling Tyler's bet.

“Won't be happy? She'll flip,” Sloan predicted. “She's been playing you like this for over two years, Tyler. She's not going to just go quietly into the night.”

“You've got a fight on your hands come next Friday. Fold,” Hunter set his cards on the table.

“You give Lauren your number yet?” Jeremiah asked, turning the river onto the table.

“Not yet,” Tyler answered, opening with four nickels. “But I have hers.”

“Good you let her get at least that much in over breakfast,” Mordechai chuckled, bringing the pretzels back to the table with him.

“Raise you,” Jeremiah said, sliding six of his own nickels into the pot.

“I'd change my number on Monday if I were you,” Ethan put in, helping himself to a handful of pretzels.

“I hardly think that's necessary. Raise you,” Tyler chuckled, tossing four more nickels in. “Besides, even if I changed every number, she still knows where I live and where the stables are.”

“All right! I fold!” Jeremiah exclaimed. “What cards can you possibly have?”

“Huh?” Tyler asked, and looked at the cards on the table for the first time. “Oh. Nothing I guess. Just the king and queen of hearts in the hole.” He laid his cards face up on the table and swept the pile of nickels toward him.

Sloan's laughter poured out of the phone, and Jeremiah threw his hands up in disgust.

“Well, lover boy, it looks like Luck is lady,” Ethan chuckled as he gathered the cards and started to shuffle.

Sometime during that first hand the shadows that haunted Ethan's eyes lifted, and Tyler couldn't help but smile when he noticed. Making a few hours a week for Ethan to relax, to forget, to be happy was, after all, the reason he'd come to Charlotte in the first place.

The conversation turned to other things. Sloan had to go back on duty, but the rest of them played until well after midnight. Tyler went home exhausted, and at the same time as giddy as he'd ever been before a date in high school.