Chapter 4

Tyler rang the doorbell, and it took a conscious effort not to fidget while he waited for the door to open. It was Emma that got the door, and invited Tyler in with a smile.

“She's just finishing up, she'll be out any minute,” Emma promised. “We made you a boutonieer. Would you like a drink?”

“No, thank you,” Tyler answered, afraid he'd spill it and look like a fool. “I didn't realize you two were roommates as well.”

Emma nodded. “Yeah. Since college. The shop makes enough money we could get separate places, but why bother?” She pulled open the refrigerator and took out a small clear plastic container. “We're used to each other enough we don't get in each others way or irritate each other. At least, not too much.” She grinned as she popped open the container and carefully removed the flowers inside. “Come here, I'll pin it on you.”

Tyler grinned back. “Thank you.” His eyes wandered toward the back of the tidy apartment. “Do you think she'll be much longer?”

Emma laughed as she pinned the tiny arrangement of sweet pea and morning glory to his jacket. “No, I don't. I can go hurry her along if you're that nervous.”

“Am I that transparent?” Tyler grinned.

“Yes,” Emma answered. “Go sit down, I'll see what she's up to.”

Tyler did as he was bidden as Emma disappeared down the hallway. She came back a minute later and handed off a small gold purse and a shawl to Tyler. “She'll be right out.”

True to Emma's word, Lauren appeared in the hallway less than a minute later. Tyler didn't think he had ever seen a more beautiful creature. Her hair was swept up, loose strands cascading in ringlets around her face. She wasn't wearing a corsage, but had woven flowers to match his boutenieer into her hair. The neckline was tantalizingly low, not immodest, but low enough to accentuate the mound of her breasts. Her skin shimmered as she moved toward him, the hem of her gown sweeping across the floor. He stood and held up her shawl to wrap around her. His hands lingered on her shoulders, and he caressed her arms under the pretense of smoothing the shawl.

“You look perfect,” he said quietly, breathing in the sweet, fresh smell of her.

She smiled, and he saw the color rise to her cheeks. He wanted to gather her into his arms and crush his lips against hers, to discover if she tasted as sweet as she smelled. He wanted to run his hands down more than her arms, feel the soft weight of her breast in his hand.

Instead, he smiled back, and offered her his arm.

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Lauren didn't realize how long the ride was, and had payed no attention at all to where they were going. She was too busy covertly watching Tyler. He looked stunning in the tailored tuxedo. More than once she noticed him looking at her, too. They talked mostly about the flower shop, and the plans Lauren and Emma had for it. It wasn't until Tyler announced they were almost there that Lauren noticed things outside the car.

She was shocked when she recognized where they were. “What are we doing here?”

“This is it,” Tyler answered, turning off the road and into the parking lot of the horse park. “This is what I do for a living. I'm the proud owner of Maple Hill Stables. We breed and train horses for steeplechase.”

“I can't go in there,” Lauren answered, her eyes wide in terror. She barely what Tyler had said. She hadn't been here, to the track, in four years. The onslaught of memories and emotions left her feeling cold. She wanted to rail at Tyler for tricking her into coming here, she wanted to demand he take her home this instant, she wanted to laugh at herself for not telling Tyler she used to run these races. She opened her mouth to say something, anything, that would make him take her home, but nothing came out.

Then he was holding her hand, and raising it to his lips, and she was looking into those brilliant blue eyes, watching them watch her for the signs of delight he had been expecting.

“Don't be shy. I know you like racing, I caught you watching it the other morning, remember?” He slid out of the car, moved around to her side and opened the door for her. “Come on, I can't promise it'll be fun exactly, but there will be dancing.”

He held out his hand, and after a bracing moment, Lauren took it. Tonight was just going to be full of surprises. They made it inside, she left her shawl at the coat check, and they headed into the expansive ballroom. The room was crowded with people. Chairs and small tables were set up aroudn the edges, and waiters wove their way through the people with drinks and hors d'eavours. In a raised alcove at the far end, a small string band was setting up. Within a few minutes, Lauren noticed the buzz of the conversation change, could sense people turning to look at her, and fought to keep from running back out the door.

“Let me see if I can find Joe,” Tyler said, scanning the crowd, seemingly oblivious to the stir their entrance was causing. “He's my stable manager. I never would have made it if I hadn't found him. He was actually working at Maple Hill when I bought them out, but he was just a stable hand. The stable manager they had was just awful, though. I mean, I wouldn't have been any better. At least the guy knew more about horses than I do. There's Joe!” Tyler led Lauren through the room.

They reached the lanky man, and Tyler put his arm around Lauren's waist. She looked up, and couldn't help but smile. “Lauren, this is my stable manager -”

“Joe Langdon,” Lauren finished for him.

“Well I'll be,” Joe said, reaching out and collecting Lauren into a bone-crushing hug. “Lauren Macon. You're the last person I expected to see here. I heard a whisper, but I thought for sure someone was pulling a prank.”

He released Lauren and chucked her lightly on the chin. “How've you been, kiddo?”

Tyler looked back and forth between the two, puzzled. As their conversation continued, things slowly began to fall into place in his head. Macon. She was the daughter of John Macon, the man he was hoping would train his horse. That was why she had been so sure of Anybody's Guess winning on Friday. It didn't explain why she had been so reluctant to come in, however. That had him stumped.

“I guess you don't really need me to show you around, huh?” Tyler said when Joe moved off to greet someone else.

She dropped her eyes and gave a sheepish little shrug. “I guess not too much. I don't know everybody here, it's been a long time since I've been a part of this scene.”

He gently tilted her chin up and smiled down at her. “No problem,” he said, and was rewarded with a smile. She was beautiful. The way her smile spread across her lush mouth and warmed those green-gold eyes sent a surge of heat through him. He wanted to touch her lips, find out if they were as soft and sweet as they looked. Instead he grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter and offered one to Lauren. “I've always hated introductions, anyway.”

She sipped the champagne, glad the sparkle was still in his eyes, and thrilled that for just a moment, when he'd lifted her face to meet his eyes, she had been almost sure he would kiss her.

It didn't take long for word to spread, and old friends to start pushing their way through the crowds to find Lauren. Between that, the champagne, and the whirlwind of people that she didn't know and Tyler introduced her to, she was feeling flushed and overwhelmed by the time the microphone crackled to life.

A stately woman in a sweeping black dress, her gray hair pulled into an elegant bun tapped the microphone with one long finger. “Ladies and gentleman, your attention please.” She flashed a smile. “I'm sure we all know why we're here. The proceeds from the tickets that you bought to get here are going to the Quarterhorse Rescue Foundation, to buy and rehabilitate abused quarterhorses. The Foundation would like to extend it's sincerest thank you to each and every one of you. If you would like to make an additional donation, each of the tables along the walls has a basket with cards and pencils. If you didn't bring your checkbook with you tonight, don't worry, just put your name and address down, and we will send you a gentle reminder letter.” She smiled, the crowd chuckled. “Now, please, everyone enjoy the evening. Thank you once again, from the Quarterhorse Rescue Foundation, and from the horses you have helped saved by being here tonight.” She stepped off the stage, and the violin played the first sweet notes of a waltz.

“Dance with me,” Tyler said, staring down into Lauren's eyes. She nodded, and relinquished the champagne flute to him. He set their glasses on a nearby table, then swept her into his arms, and onto the dance floor.

Lauren was concious of the closeness of their bodies, the dark, masculine scent of him. Of the warmth radiating from him, and the answering warmth spreading through her as they twirled through the music. Her one hand was intertwined with his, sharing an intimacy the rest of her body longed for. She could feel the beat of his heart beneath her other hand, and the tingling heat on the small of her back where he held her. They danced, and stared into each other's eyes. As long as there was music, Lauren determined to stay like this, in this private world she shared only with Tyler.

She couldn't have said if she was moving closer to him, if he was pulling her closer, or if it was some combination of the two, but they nearly brushed against each other now as they moved. His eyes, those brilliant blue eyes that sparkled like the depths of the ocean watched her with a desire she was sure her own eyes mirrored. And then he kissed her.

It was slow and sweet and tender. Lauren closed her eyes and surrendered to the sensations his lips sent coursing through her body. The waves of pleasure that each gentle carress of his tongue conjured left her legs feeling weak. She slid her hand up his chest and to the back of his head, holding him to her. She felt his arm tighten around her waist, and press her body against his.

Lauren didn't know how long that kiss lasted, and didn't much care. She would have been content to spend the rest of the night like that, exploring and being explored. Finally, they pulled apart, and Tyler ran his thumb gently along her bottom lip.

“I've smeared your lipstick,” he whispered, the hint of a smile playing on his mouth.

“I should go fix it, then,” she answered, not moving.

“Don't fix it. Just wipe it off,” he said. “I don't want to have to lose you every few minutes just for make-up.”

Lauren laughed. “All right. I'll just wipe it off.” She moved toward the bathrooms, and Tyler held onto her hand for as long he could.

In the bathrooms, Lauren leaned on the counter and stared at herself in the mirror. She was flushed, and her lipstick made her look like a clown. She took a moment to catch her breath, calm the fireworks that were still exploding in her head, then wet a paper towel and set to work cleaning it off.

She had just finished, and was about to turn to leave when the door opened and another woman came in.

“You're Lauren, right?” she said, smiling and extending her hand. “Tyler said you came in here to freshen up, I thought I'd come and meet you without all those people around.”

Lauren smiled back and took the other woman's hand. “Hi,” Lauren answered, a little confused.

“It's so nice to meet you. Tyler's been telling me about you. It's so great that you think you can your father to work with his horse.”

“What? I'm sorry, who are you?” Lauren asked, her confusion deepening. What did her father have to do with any of this.

“Oh, silly me. I'm Rachel, Tyler's girlfriend.”

“Oh,” Lauren answered. “Of course.” Rachel was darkly beautiful, with coloring that spoke of Mediterranean heritage, and moved with a polished grace.

“I'm sorry I couldn't meet you earlier, I had a business dinner that kept me.”

Lauren nodded. She felt suddenly awkward and out of place. “If you'll just excuse me,” Lauren gestured to the stalls.

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” Rachel said. “Go ahead, how rude of me. We can talk more later.” She flashed a brilliant smile and retreated back to the party.

The door swung shut, and Lauren grabbed the edge of the sink to keep from collapsing. His girlfriend. He had said nothing about a girlfriend. They had had breakfast together yesterday, had talked the entire way here, had danced, had kissed, and the entire time he had a girlfriend. And he had known who she was the whole time. Or at least, he must have found out after he bought the flowers Friday morning. Of course he did. He must have told Joe where he'd gotten them, and Joe had mentioned it was her shop. Tyler had planned to seduce her to get her father to train some horse of his. She stared down at her hands, and their white-knuckled grip on reality. But . . . why? Why go through all the trouble of seducing her, of kissing her, when he knew his girlfriend would be here tonight? She shook her head. Something wasn't right here. There must be some mistake. If she just went out and talked to him, this would all be cleared up.

Lauren straightened up, squared her shoulders, and met her own eyes in the mirror. She still felt hurt and confused, but there was a glimmer of confidence now that she could clear things up with the man who had given her that mind-numbing kiss.

She pulled open the bathroom door and scanned the room for Tyler. There he was, standing right where she had left him. And there was that woman, Rachel, her arms wrapped around his neck and her lips locked on his. Tyler was holding Rachel by the arms, and the memory of earlier that evening, when he had wrapped Lauren's shawl around her, his hands lingering on her the same way they now lingered on Rachel assaulted Lauren. She felt as though she had been punched in the stomach. There was no mistake. Rachel was his girlfriend, and his only interest in Lauren had been as a stepping stone to her father.

Blinking hard to keep from crying, Lauren slipped along the wall and outside. She fumbled in the parking lot to pull her cell phone out of her purse, and called a cab. It seemed like an eternity that she stood shivering in the parking lot, waiting for the cab to arrive. Finally, the bright yellow car pulled into the parking lot, and she tumbled gratefully into the back.

They had only been on the road a few minutes when the call came over the dispatch for another pick-up at the track. The cabbie made an amused little sound, half snort half chuckle. “I guess you aren't the only one that wanted to leave early.”

Lauren only nodded in the dark. Her head was reeling, her eyes were stinging, and her heart was aching. She hoped Emma hadn't decided to wait up for her.

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Tyler stood where Lauren had left him, watching the sway of her hips as she walked to the bathroom, and contemplating the kiss they had just shared. She was soft and sweet and passionate. Everything he could ever ever want wrapped up in one luscious package. He let his mind explore all the possibilities the night had to offer.

“Tyler, darling, there you are,” came a familiar voice beside him. “I've been looking for you.”

His eyes focused and he turned to look at the woman beside him. “Rachel. What are you doing here? You hate these things.”

She gave a little laugh and put her hand on his chest, he brushed it away. She stuck out her lower lip in the pout he had found so arousing in college. Now it just seemed overdone and annoying. “But I've always come to them with you, I don't know why you didn't call me Friday about this. I had to buy my own ticket, you know.”

“I didn't call you because you broke up with me. Again.”

“Broke up with you? Whatever makes you think I did that?”

Tyler sighed. “You told me we were through, and deleted your number out of my phone before you threw it at me.”

She giggled and sidled up to him. “Oh, darling, you know how emotional I can be.”

Tyler took a step back and shook his head. “No, Rachel. I'm done with this. I'm tired of all the games. I've been putting up with this nonsense for too long as it is.”

Her dark eyes flashed. “You can't just desert me, Tyler. Not after you dragged me down here, hundreds of miles from my family and friends.”

“No more guilt,” Tyler shook his head again. “We've been here two years. You know more people in Charlotte than I do, and no-one is forcing you to stay. If you want to move back East, nothing is holding you here.”

“You're holding me here,” she answered, her eyes glazing with unshed tears. “Tyler, darling, I love you. I want to spend my life with you. Don't just turn me away, please.”

“You don't love me. You find me convenient. You drop me when you find something new, and when that looses its shine, you come back and scoop me up again, like nothing has changed. I admit, I'm guilty of doing the same to you, because calling you up was easier than looking for something new. But I'm done now, I'm tired of feeling second-hand.”

“You know why you take me back, every time, and will keep on taking me back,” Rachel's eyes and voice smoldered with anger. She was losing this fight, the fight she had never lost before “No-one can get you going like I can, Tyler. No-one ever has, and no-one ever will.” She wrapped her arms around his neck suddenly, and pulled his mouth down to meet hers, invading him with her tongue. Tyler grabbed her by the arms and pushed her away.

“Enough, Rachel. Enough. Maybe we had something, years ago, but we don't anymore. Sex and anger are not the foundation for a relationship,” he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “You're pretty and talented. Even in the last two years, there's been no shortage of men in your life. I should have ended this when we graduated. You're right, though, I could count on you for one thing, so I never did. I'm fixing that now, though.”

“So all I've ever been to you was a convenient lay?” she hissed.

Tyler thought for a while before he answered. “No. There was a time when we got along. We shared interests and ideas. We honestly enjoyed each others company. We had some fun, Rachel, and there are times with you I won't forget. We haven't had that in years, though. I've moved on, it's time you did the same.”

Her face was a mask of anger. “Fine. Fine, we're done. You can keep your disgusting animals and your repulsive friends. I'll remind you of this conversation when you call me in a week.” Rachel turned on her heel and stormed out of the building. He saw her pull out her cell phone and wondered idly if she was calling a cab, or a man.

Tyler shook his head and looked around for Lauren. She couldn't still be in the bathroom. How long did it take to wipe off lipstick? He searched the crowd for her. Maybe she ran into another old friend. She seemed to have a lot of them. He didn't see Lauren, but he did see Joe, and made his way over to him.

“You're still here?” Joe asked when he noticed Tyler. “I thought you two left.”

“Left? Why would you think that?”

“I saw Lauren heading for the door. I tried to make it over to say goodbye to her, but I got distracted,” Joe shrugged. “Figured it wasn't too big a deal. You two seem to have hit it off, so I figure she'll be around.” He flashed a conspiritorial smile at Tyler.

“She left? Why would she leave?” Tyler's eyes flashed around the room again. Joe had to be mistaken.

“You didn't know?” Joe started to look worried when Tyler shook his head. “Maybe this was just too much for her after all,” Joe said.

“What was just too much for her?” Tyler asked, confusion and frustration mounting.

“All this. Being back here again, after everything that happened. Just give her the night to pull herself together, and call her in the morning to check on her,” Joe suggested.

“What do you mean everything that happened?” Tyler demanded, but Joe had already spotted someone else and disappeared into the crowded room.

Tyler covered his face in frustration, and reminded himself to breathe. He couldn't imagine why she would run out, he thought they had been having a wonderful time together. He had no idea what Joe was talking about, but he said she had just left. Maybe he could catch her before the cab showed up.

Tyler pushed his way through the crowd and ran out into the parking lot. He made it out in time to watch the yellow cab turn onto the road, see the figure in the back turn to look back at the building, and then turn to face front again.

She must have seen him. He careened through the parking lot and ripped open the door to his Jeep. He fished his cell phone out of the glove compartment and dialed Lauren's number. He watched the retreating tail lights and listened to the phone ringing in his ear. It went to voice mail, and he hung up and dialed again. Again it went to he voice mail, and again Tyler hit the redial. Why wouldn't she pick up? Tyler was about to dial Lauren's number for the fourth time when he remembered what Joe had said. Give her tonight to collect herself, and call her tomorrow. He set his phone down on the seat, his eyes still on the dwindling tail lights. He glanced back at the light spilling out of the doorway, and thought briefly about going back inside. Instead, he climbed into his car and headed home.