



Wild Child Publishing



BEAT THE

ABBI GLINES

Breathe

by
Abbi Glines

Wild Child Publishing.com
Culver City, California

Breathe

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Dedications

To my mother, Becky, who has been reading my “manuscripts” since I was nine years old and encouraging me every step of the way.

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Prologue

Life has always been a struggle for me. From what I could tell, it wasn't daisies for everyone else either. I never let go of the fantasy that one day I wouldn't feel so alone and isolated from the rest of the normal world. My dream is what kept me going many nights when I fought the desire to just disappear. It would be easier if I'd never been born. I'm positive my mother sees things the same way. I know what you're thinking and, no, she never said those words, but my entrance into the world dramatically changed the course of her life. She'd been a beauty queen in the small Arkansas town where she'd grown up. Everyone said she would make it big someday, somehow, maybe her beauty and charm would have opened those doors, if she hadn't met the man who helped give me life. The fact is she ran off to become a star and fell in love with a very married man who didn't acknowledge me or help her for fear of tarnishing his social standing in the big city of Nashville, Tennessee.

A one-room shack in the hills of Tennessee is where we spent the first part of my life. Until the day my mother up and decided life would be easier in Alabama. On the southern coast, she could find work, and the sunshine would be good for us, or so she said. I knew she needed an escape, or maybe just a place to start over. If any one person could be a magnet for losers, my mom fit the profile, and unfortunately, she was about to bring another child into the unstable life she managed to lead, where she greatly relied on a kid--me--to handle things. If only she had let me make her decisions for her in the dating world, like she did with the rest of her life. But, alas, we were headed to southern Alabama where the sun is supposed to shine bright and wash away all our worries...yeah, right.

Chapter One

“Mom, are you going to work today?” I rolled my eyes at my very pregnant mother who lay sprawled out on her bed in her panties and bra. Pregnancy made Jessica an even bigger drama queen than before having unsafe sex with another loser.

She moaned and covered her head with a pillow. “I feel awful, Sadie. You just go on without me.”

I’d seen this coming a mile away before school even let out. The last day of school landed yesterday, but instead of being able to go out and be a normal teenager, Jessica expected me to make the money. It was almost as if she’d planned on me working in her place all along.

“Mom, I can’t just go to your work place and take your position. They won’t be okay with your seventeen-year-old daughter doing your job.”

She pulled the pillow from her face and tossed me a sulk she’d perfected years ago. “Sadie, I cannot continue cleaning house with my stomach the size of a beach ball. I’m so hot and tired. I need you to help me. You always figure stuff out.”

I walked over to the window unit and turned it off. “If you would stop running the air at continuous sixty-eight degrees, we might be able to get by on less money. Do you have any idea how much it costs to run a window unit all day long?” I knew she didn’t know, nor did she care, but I still asked.

She grimaced and sat up. “Do you have any idea how hot I am with all this extra weight?” she shot back at me.

It took all my restraint to keep from reminding her she hadn’t used a condom. I bought them for her and made sure her purse always contained several. I even reminded her before she went out on dates.

Remembering who the adult was in our relationship could be difficult at times. Most of the time it seemed to me our roles were reversed, being the adult however did not mean she made smart decisions because Jessica simply did not know how to be responsible.

“I know you are hot, but we can’t spend every dime we make on the air conditioner,” I reminded her.

She sighed and flopped back down on the bed. “Whatever,” she grumbled.

I walked over to her purse and opened it up. “All right, I am going to go to your job today, by myself, and I hope they allow me inside the gate. If this doesn’t work, don’t say I didn’t warn you. All I am qualified for is minimum wage jobs, which won’t pay our bills. If you would come with me, you would have a better chance of landing this position.” I knew as I spoke the words, I’d already been tuned out. She’d worked for two months and managed to keep the job.

“Sadie, you and I both know you can handle it by yourself.”

I sighed in defeat and left her there. She would go back to sleep as soon as I left. I wanted to be mad at her, but seeing her so big made me pity her instead. She wasn’t the best mom in the world, but she did belong to me. After I got my clothes on, I walked past her room and peeked through the door. She softly snored with the window unit once again cranked to sixty-eight degrees. I thought about turning it off, but changed my mind. The apartment already felt warm, and the day would only get hotter.

I stepped outside and got on my bike. It took me thirty minutes to get to the bridge. The bridge would take me into the exclusive island connected to Sea Breeze, Alabama. The island wasn't where the locals lived, but where the wealthy came for the summer, which employed full staffs. Jessica managed to snag a job as a domestic servant at one of the houses making twelve dollars an hour. I prayed I would be able to take over her position without a hitch.

I found the address on her employee card I'd retrieved from her purse. My chances on getting the job were slim.

The further I peddled onto the island, the larger and more extravagant the houses became. The address to my mother's place of employment landed three more houses down. She would, of course, have to work at the most extravagant house on the block, not to mention the very last one before the beach itself. I pulled up to a large ornate iron gate and handed Jessica's ID card to the guy working admittance. He frowned and gazed down at me. I handed him my driver's license

"I'm Jessica's daughter. She is sick, and I am supposed to work for her today."

He continued to frown while he picked up a phone and called someone. That wasn't a good thing considering no one here knew I was coming in her place. Two large men appeared and walked up to me. Both sported dark sunglasses and reminded me of players who should be wearing football uniforms on NFL teams instead of being dressed in black suits.

"Miss White, can we see your bag please," one of them said rather than asked, while the other one took it off my shoulder.

I swallowed and fought the urge to shudder. They were intimidating, big, and didn't appear to trust me. I wondered if I seemed dangerous to them, all five feet six inches of me. I glanced down at my skimpy white shorts and purple tank top and wondered if they considered the fact it would be impossible to hide weapons in this outfit. I thought it somewhat strange the two big guys were reluctant to let me in. Even if I happened to be a threat, I do believe any one of them could have taken me blindfolded with their hands tied behind their back. The image popped into my mind and made me want to laugh. I bit my bottom lip and waited to see if dangerous little me would be allowed entrance into the bigger than life iron gates.

"You're free to go, Miss White. Please take the servants entrance to the left of the stone wall and report to the kitchen where you will be instructed how to proceed."

Who were these people who needed two men the size of Goliath to guard their entrances? I got back on my bike and rode into the now open gates. Once I made it around the corner of lush palm trees and tropical gardens, I saw the house. It reminded me of houses on the Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. I would've never guessed houses like this even existed in Alabama. I'd been to Nashville once and seen houses similar in size, but nothing quite this spectacular.

I composed myself, pushed my bike around the corner trying to not stop, and stare at the massive size of everything. I leaned my bike against a wall out of sight. The doorway for the servants was designed to impress. At least twelve feet tall, a beautifully engraved letter S adorned it. Not just tall, the door was really heavy, causing me to use all my strength to pull it open. I peeked inside the large entry hall and stepped into a small area with three different arched doorways to choose from ahead of me. Since I'd never been here before, I didn't know where the kitchen might be located. I walked up to the first door on the right and looked through the opening. It appeared to be a large gathering room but nothing fancy and no kitchen appliances, so I moved on to door number two, peeked inside, and found

a large round table with people sitting around it. A large older lady stood in front of a stove unlike anything I'd ever seen in a house. It was something you'd find in a restaurant.

This had to be the place. I stepped inside the arched opening.

The lady standing noticed me and frowned. "Can I help you?" she asked in a sharp authoritative tone even though she kind of reminded me of Aunt Bea from the Andy Griffith show.

I smiled, and the heat rose, threatening to spike out the top of my head as I watched all the people in the room turn to face me. I hated attention and did whatever I could to draw little to myself. Even though it seemed to be getting harder the older I got. Anything which encouraged people to speak, I wanted to avoid the possibility if I could. It's not that I'm a recluse; it's just the fact I have a lot of responsibility. I figured out early in life friendships would never work for me. I'm too busy taking care of my mom. So, I perfected the art of being uninteresting.

"Um, uh, yes, I was told to report to the kitchen for further instructions." I quietly cleared my throat and waited.

I didn't like the once over the lady shot me, but since I was here, I had no choice but to stay.

"I know I sure didn't hire you. Who told you to come here?"

I hated all those eyes on me and wished Jessica hadn't been so stubborn. I needed her here, at least for today. Why did she always do these things to me?

"I am Sadie White, Jessica White's daughter. She...uh...wasn't well today so I am here to work for her. I'm...uh...supposed to be working with her this summer."

I wished I didn't sound so nervous, but the people stared. The lady up front frowned much like the way Aunt Bea looked when someone made her angry. It was tempting to turn and run.

"Jessica didn't ask about you helping her this summer, and I don't hire kids. It ain't a good idea with the family comin' down for the summer. Maybe during the fall when they leave, we can give you a try."

My nervousness from being the center of attention immediately disappeared, and I panicked at the thought of my mom losing this income we so desperately needed. If she found out I couldn't work for her, she would quit. I pulled my grown up voice out of the closet and decided I needed to show the lady I could do the job better than anyone else.

"I can understand your concern. However, if you would give me a chance, I can and will show you I am an asset. I will never be late to work and will always complete the jobs assigned to me. Please, just a chance."

The lady glanced down at someone at the table as if to get an opinion. She moved her eyes back up at me, and I could see I broke through her resolve. "Ok, Sadie White, your chance starts now. I'll gonna team you up with Fran here who has been working at this home as long as I have. She'll instruct you and report back to me. I will have you an answer at the end of the day. Here is your trial, Miss White, I suggest you don't blow it."

I nodded and smiled over at the now standing Fran.

"Follow me," the tall, skinny redhead who appeared to be at least sixty-five years old said before she turned and left the room.

I did as instructed and didn't make eye contact with any of the others in the room. I had a job

save.

Fran walked me down a hallway and past several doors. We stopped, opened one, and stepped inside. The room contained shelves of books from the floor to the ceiling. Large, dark brown leather chairs were scattered around the room. None faced each other or looked to be used for any type of visiting or socializing. The room was clearly set up to be a library. A place where someone could come, find a book, and lose themselves in one of the large cushy chairs.

Fran swung her arm out in front of her gesturing to the room with a bit of flair. It surprised me coming from the older lady. "This is Mrs. Stone's favorite spot. It's been closed off all year. You will dust the books and shelves, clean the leather with the special cleaner, and Windex the windows. Vacuum the drapes, clean, and wax the hard woods. This room must shine. Mrs. Stone likes things perfect for her sanctuary. I will come get you at lunchtime, and we will dine in the kitchen."

She walked to the door, and I heard her thank someone. She stepped back inside pulling a cart full of cleaning supplies. "This will have everything you need. Be careful with all framed artwork and pieces of art. I warn you everything in this house is very valuable and must be treated with utmost care. Now, I expect you to work hard and not waste any time with foolishness." The tight-faced Mrs. Fran left the room.

I circled around, taking in the extravagance of my surroundings. The room wasn't really big; it just seemed full. I could clean this. I hadn't been asked to do anything impossible. I went for the dusting supplies and headed for the ladder connected to the bookshelves. I might as well start at the top, since dust falls.

I managed to get everything dusted and the windows cleaned before Fran returned to get me for lunch. I needed a break and some food. Her frowning face was a welcome sight. She moved her gaze around the room and nodded before leading me back down the same path I'd taken this morning in silence. The smell of fresh baked bread hit me as we rounded the corner and stepped into the large, bright kitchen. Ms. Mary stood over the stove pointing to a younger lady who wore her hair in a bun covered with a hair net just like Ms. Mary.

"Smells good, Henrietta. I believe you've got it. We will test this batch out on the help today, and if everyone likes it, you can take over the bread baking for the family's meals." Ms. Mary turned wiping her hands on her apron "Ah, here is our new employee now. How are things going?"

Ms. Fran nodded and said, "Fine."

Either this lady didn't smile much or she just didn't like me.

"Sit, sit, we have much to get done before the family arrives."

I sat down after Fran did, and Ms. Mary sat trays of food in front of us. I must be doing something right since Fran directed her words in my direction. "All the help eat at this table. We all come at different shifts for lunch. You may choose what you want to eat."

I nodded and reached for the tray of sandwiches and took one. I took some fresh fruit from the platter.

"The drinks are over there on the bar. You may go choose what's there or fix something for yourself."

I went over and poured some lemonade. I ate in silence while I listened to Ms. Mary direct the lady she called Henrietta. They seemed to be making bread for tonight's meal. Neither Fran nor

made any attempt at conversation.

After we were done, I followed Fran to the sink where we rinsed our plates and loaded them in the large dishwasher ourselves. Just as silent, we returned to the library. I was a little less nervous now and more interested in my surroundings. I noticed the portraits as we walked down the hallway. They were portraits of two very cute little boys. The further I walked, the older they seemed to get. Toward the large opening we would cross going to the library, an oddly familiar face smiled down at me from a life size painting. A face I'd seen many times on television and in magazines. Just last night during dinner, he had been on television. Jessica watched Entertainment Daily during our meal. Teen rock and heartthrob Jax Stone was one of their favorite topics. Last night he'd been on the arm of a girl rumored to be in his new music video. Fran stopped behind me. I turned to her, and she seemed focused on the portrait.

“This is his summer home. He will be arriving with his parents and brother any day. Can you handle this?”

I simply nodded, unable to form words from the shock of seeing Jax Stone's face on the wall.

Fran moved again, and I followed her into the library “He's the reason teenagers are not hired. This is a private escape for him. When he was younger, his parents insisted he take a break each summer and spend time with them away from the bright lights of Hollywood. Now he's older and still comes here for the summer. He leaves now and then to go to different events, but for the most part this is his getaway. He brings his family with him since they don't see each other much during the year. If you can't handle it, you will be fired immediately. His privacy is of utmost importance. It's why this is such a high paying job.”

I straightened and grabbed the bucket I'd been using. “I can handle anything. This job is more important to me than a teenage rock star.”

Fran nodded, but from her frown, I could see she didn't believe me.

I focused more energy into my work. At the end of a long day, I listened while the quiet frowning Fran reported to Ms. Mary. She believed I would be a good worker and I should be given a chance. I thanked her and Ms. Mary. I should be able to save enough money for the fall when my mother would have the baby, not work, and I would be back in school. I could do this.

Yes, Jax Stone was famous, and his incredible steel blue eyes made my heart flutter. I made myself admit that much. However, it wasn't just because he happened to be one of the most beautiful creations known to man. Everyone knew beauty ran only skin deep. I assumed the shallowness leaking out his veins would be so revolting I wouldn't care if I cleaned his house and passed him in the hallway. Besides, guys were a species I knew nothing about. I never took time to talk to one even when they did their best to talk to me. I've always had bigger problems in life, like making sure we ate and my mother remembered to pay our bills.

When I think of all the money I'd wasted on the condoms I shoved in her hands and purses before she went out with the countless men who flocked to her, I really had a hard time not getting angry with her. Even in thrift store clothing, she looked gorgeous. One of her many disgusting men told me he inherited the cursed looks. From her blond curly hair to her clear blue eyes and heavy black lashes, somehow managed to get it all. However, I lacked the one thing I knew would save me from certain disaster, I actually appeared rather dull. Something my mother loved to remind me of, yet instead of being upset by it, I held onto it for dear life. What she thought would be a downfall to my character,

liked to think of as my lifeline. I didn't want to be like her. If having a dull personality kept me from following in her footsteps, then I would embrace it.

The apartment we lived in for almost five hundred a month sat underneath a huge, old house. I walked in to find she wasn't inside. With only four rooms, Jessica couldn't have gotten far.

"Mom?" I got no answer.

The sun was setting so I stepped out onto what Jessica referred to as a patio. If you asked me, it was really more like a small piece of slab. She stood out in the yard with her increasing stomach on full view for all to see, in a bikini I'd bought at a thrift store a few weeks ago. She turned and smiled. The sick façade from this morning no longer appeared on her face. Instead, she seemed to be glowing.

"Sadie, how did it go? Did ol' Ms. Mary give you a hard time? If she did, I sure hope you were nice. We need this job, and you can be so rude and unsociable."

I listened to her blabber on about my lack of social skills and waited until she finished before I spoke. "I got the job for the summer if I want it."

Jessica sighed dramatically in relief. "Wonderful, I really need to rest these next few months. The baby is taking so much from me. You just don't understand how hard it is to be pregnant."

I wanted to remind her I'd tried to keep her from getting pregnant by sacrificing food money to buy her some stupid condoms, which didn't help at all! However, I nodded and walked inside with her.

"I'm starving, Sadie. Is there anything you can fix up real fast? I am eating for two these days."

I'd already planned what we would eat for dinner before I got home. I knew Mom was helpless in the kitchen. I somehow survived the first eight years of my life on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Somewhere around the time I turned eight, I realized my mother needed help, and I began growing up quicker than normal children. The more I offered to take on, the more she gave me. By the time I turned eleven, I did it all.

With the noodles boiling and the meat sauce simmering, I went to my room. I slipped out of my work clothes and into a pair of cut off thrift store jeans, which happen to be the core of my wardrobe and a tee shirt. My wardrobe was simple.

The pan in the kitchen with the noodles in it whistled letting me know the food needed to be checked. Jessica wasn't going to get up and check things out anytime soon. I hurried back into the small kitchen, took out a spaghetti noodle on a fork, and slung it at the wall behind the stove. It stuck. It was ready.

"Really, Sadie, why you toss noodles on the wall is beyond me. Where did you get such an insane idea?"

I flipped my gaze up and over at Jessica. She kicked back on the faded pastel couch, which came with the apartment, in my bikini.

"I saw it on the television once when I was younger. It has stuck with me ever since. Besides, it works."

"It's disgusting is what it is," Jessica mumbled from her spot on the couch.

She couldn't boil water if she wanted to, but I decided to bite my tongue and finish with dinner.

"It's ready, Mom," I said as I scooped a pile of spaghetti onto a plate, knowing she would ask me

to bring her one.

“Bring me a plate, will ya, honey.”

I smirked. I was a step ahead of her. She rarely got up these days unless she absolutely had to. She slipped a fork and spoon onto the plate and took it to her. She didn't even sit up. Instead, she placed it on the shelf of a belly she'd developed and ate. I placed a glass of sweet iced tea down beside her and went back to fix my own. I'd worked up an appetite today. I needed food.

Chapter Two

I didn't have to be searched, and I was even given a card to show at the gate when I arrived from here on out. Things went much smoother. Fran even smiled at me once. After lunch, Ms. Mary sent me to the third floor, which housed most of the bedrooms. It was easy to forget whose house I cleaned. I had no friends to tell about the job. Not thinking about the fact I stood in the rooms where the hottest teen star in the world would be sleeping all summer wasn't really so big of a deal. I stepped into his bedroom and spun around. This wasn't a typical teenage boy's room. It seemed so comfortable and struck me as odd.

One wall displayed bats and balls signed with different signatures while some just looked well used. Jerseys he must have worn during childhood hung on the walls proudly. I could easily picture the little boy I'd seen in the pictures yesterday wearing these and playing city ball just like an ordinary kid. I went for a closer inspection and found pictures under each one of the teams he'd played on. In the earliest ones, I struggled to figure out which little boy was the now famous rock star. After he appeared to be ten or eleven, I identified him easily. The jerseys and pictures were in year order from about kindergarten until age thirteen, and then they stopped. It would have been about a year or so before I remembered hearing his name the first time on the radio. He seemed to lead a normal life until the time a record label discovered him.

The wall space above his bed set the room apart from an ordinary teenage boy's room. Guitars of every shape, size, and color hung on the walls. Many were autographed; some sparkled with newness. One appeared to have real gold on it, which wouldn't be surprising at all if it did. I got on my toes and examined it more closely. It said *Fender* on it. I continued examining the signatures on the most expensive guitars. I ran my finger over the name Jon Bon Jovi and smiled. Apparently, even rock stars have idols. In the center of them all hung a small, worn guitar. The fact it hung in the center of the collection made it obvious this must have been the first and most loved.

I peeked back at the door to make sure no one stood outside, and then went to stand under the small guitar I imagined had started it all. I wasn't a crazy fan but seeing something responsible for spurring a dream seemed almost holy in a way.

My cleaning cart sat untouched in the doorway, and I knew I needed to get busy. I didn't want to learn new, personal things about him. I wanted him to stay shallow and untouchable in my eyes. Knowing he once was a cute, little boy with dark brown curls and a smile that would one day cause a frenzy made him seem more real and not so godlike. I needed to keep my interest in him to

minimum. I quickly went about the room dusting and sweeping, and then I mopped the expensive hardwoods. I decided I'd better get through with this room quickly before I came across anything else that'd have me picturing him as the little boy in the photos. I focused my thoughts on my future and blocked out all thoughts of Jax Stone.

"Sadie, are you finished yet? The family has arrived, and we need to exit to the servant quarters," Fran said from the doorway.

I placed my cleaning supplies back on the cart and headed toward the door where a very nervous Fran stood. "Sure, just finished up."

Fran nodded and headed toward the back elevator in which house staff traveled from floor to floor without being seen by the family. Fran hurried inside as it opened, and I started to follow when a bottle of glass cleaner fell off the cart. I reached for a small rag and picked the bottle up from the floor. I wiped up the spill the best I could.

"Hurry, please," Fran called in an anxious tone from inside the elevator. The family must be here. I headed upstairs.

I stood up, and a tingling sensation raced through the hairs on my neck. Startled, I turned and saw him standing there watching me. It wasn't the cute little curly-headed boy but instead the famous rock star. I froze unsure of what to do since my presence being acknowledged this soon wasn't something Ms. Mary wanted. A smile broke across his ridiculously sexy face, heat burned through my cheeks, and I glanced away and pushed the cart into the elevator.

He didn't appear to be angry that a teenage girl worked in his home. His smile seemed more amused. Fran frowned when I glanced at her, but she said nothing. I put my cart away and went to report to the kitchen since I no longer worked upstairs. Ms. Mary stood with her hands on her hips waiting on our arrival. A silent conversation seemed to take place between Fran and Ms. Mary. After Ms. Mary nodded, she reached for something on the table and handed me folded black clothing.

"Everyone wears uniforms while the family is in residence. Also, you won't be cleaning the house anymore, but you will help me in the kitchen and help Mr. Greg in the gardens. However, tonight I need you to serve supper. Mrs. Stone has requested all servers seen by family and guests are attractive in appearance. William, the young man I hired to assist Marcus in serving the family, called in sick about ten minutes ago, and you are all I got. You've proved to be a hard worker, and you seem to be serious about this job. Your age concerns me since the master of the house is around your age and an idol in most girls' eyes. My gut tells me that means little to you. I hope you continue to show such maturity."

I didn't really know what to say after that mouthful from her, so I only nodded.

"Good. Now, you're to wear this every day. I'll have two more made in your size, and they are to be left here each night to be washed and pressed. Make sure you continue to enter at the same location and immediately change in the laundry room. Now, I need you to help me begin preparing for the evenin' meal before you put these on. You gotta be tidy and clean when you serve."

For the next two hours, I chopped, sliced, stirred, and stuffed all types of meats and vegetables. By the time Ms. Mary told me to get changed and tidy up my hair, exhaustion already filled my body. I changed into the black skirt, which hit right above my knees, and the white button up shirt with a round collar. I put on a black apron over my shirt and skirt. Pulling my hair loose, I piled the curls up high on my head. I washed my face and hands and sighed at the face mirrored back at me. Ms.

mother's face landed me a job as server tonight, but my reserved personality gained me Ms. Mary trust. Where my mother's eyes sparkled with mischief, mine stayed serious and guarded.

Jax Stone's smile in person dazzled me as much as it did on the millions of pictures I'd seen in magazines and on posters. However, it didn't mean I would be silly enough to be attracted to him like the rest of the world. With a deep breath, I opened the door and went back to the kitchen where Mrs. Stone and Mary stood waiting.

"Okay, now, remember, you set this in front of Master Jax at the exact moment Marcus here," she waved to a tall young guy I'd not met yet, "places Mrs. Stone's in front of her. They will be the only two at the table tonight. Mr. Stone and Jason will be arriving tomorrow. So tonight, you two will be the only two serving."

"Make sure you stand back quietly behind Master Jax while he eats and follow Marcus's lead. He'll help you with anythin' you aren't sure about."

I turned my full gaze on Marcus who seemed to be only a few years older than I was, probably college age. His sandy blond hair and smiling green eyes immediately relaxed me.

He held out his tanned hand and grinned. "Marcus Hardy."

I slipped my hand into his, and he shook it. "Sadie White."

He nodded, still grinning, and reached for his tray, "I saw your brave performance yesterday and you secured your job here. It amazed me how your eyes went from nervous to determined in less than a second." He picked up the tray in front of him, and I smiled and lifted the tray set before me.

"You will follow me...since I will be serving Mrs. Stone's food." He gave me a wink before turning and heading for the entrance to the dining room.

The large room wasn't new to me. I'd scrubbed the floors in there that morning. Marcus took his place behind Mrs. Stone, who sat with her back to the entrance. The natural alarm in my body alerted me as I walked around to stand behind Jax, who sat at the head of the table. I looked to Marcus to guide me. He nodded, and we set the salads down at the exact same time. I stepped back. Marcus nodded his head for me to stand beside him, so I did.

"I still don't see why Dad is making Jason go to the interview at Yale if he doesn't want to go there." Jax's voice sounded so smooth it seemed almost unreal.

I felt as if I'd walked into a movie, and I stood watching the scene before me.

"Your brother doesn't know what is best for him. He has the brains to be more than just Jax Stone's younger brother. He can make a name for himself if he will just focus on it instead of spending so much time fiddling with the stock market. His head for numbers is being wasted."

Jax's eyes gazed up at me and seemed to smile before directing them back down at his mother. "You both are going to push him away. You're right, he is smart and doesn't need you to think for him."

Mrs. Stone let out a short, hard laugh. "And you wouldn't be where you are today if I hadn't pushed you so hard. All you wanted to do was play baseball with your buddies and play in a silly garage band with absolutely no talent other than yourself."

Jax sighed, took a drink of his ice water, and turned to his mother. "Enough, Mom, don't start talking bad about the only real friends I ever had."

Mrs. Stone leaned back, and Marcus touched my hand to draw my attention back to him and the reason we were in here. We stepped forward and, at the same time, removed the salad plates from the front of the Stones.

“May we get you something other than water to drink with your meal?” Marcus asked with a charming southern drawl.

I found eyes once again watching me. I fought the urge to allow my eyes to shift back in Jax’s direction and to those eyes.

Mrs. Stone sighed. “I suppose one glass of Merlot won’t hurt me.” She glanced over at her son and straightened her napkin in her lap as if trying to decide. “Bring me a glass of the best Merlot you have in the cellar.”

Jax leaned back, and I could see he still watched me. So, I took a calming breath and looked at him.

“If I could have a glass of Ms. Mary’s sweet iced tea please.”

I nodded and kept myself from returning his smile.

“Yes, sir,” Marcus replied. He stepped back and waved his hand so I would lead the way back to the kitchen.

I exited the large dining room and immediately took a deep breath. I hadn’t realized how nerve-racking this would be. As soon as we entered the kitchen, Marcus smiled at me.

“What? Did I screw up?”

Marcus shook his head, and a blond lock of hair fell into his eyes. “No, you were great. Now let me get the crab bisque out there before Ms. Mary has a fit.” He turned toward the housekeeper. “Ms. Mary, we need Merlot from the cellar.”

Ms. Mary handed him the already opened bottle along with a glass. “I already figured as much and here’s Jax’s sweet tea.”

“I’ll deal with the drinks,” Marcus said.

I was too grateful to ask why. I just nodded and followed him back down the hall toward the dining room. Right before we reentered, Marcus glanced back at me. “Ignore his watching you. You’re a treat to the eyes. I can’t blame him, but if you want to keep this job, try to become invisible.” He winked then opened the door.

My goal in life was to become invisible. I thought I’d been attempting to do just that. Apparently I needed to try harder.

“I intend to get in a lot of time just relaxing on the beach. I like the private beach access we have here and the thought of being able to chill on the beach with no one wanting to speak to me, meet me, or get me to sign an autograph is what I’ve been craving all year. I need a break. I know Gregory hates the idea of my being unavailable for three months, but I need this for my sanity.” Jax glanced up at me as I sat the bowl of bisque in front of him. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“I want you to have a break too. Gregory thinks a little time in front of your fans this summer would be great PR. Maybe you could do a beach concert, or just do a few movie premiers.”

Jax shook his head. “No way, Mom. I refuse to make my presence here known. I chose Alabama

because it is not a highly populated area. Better yet, this little island here is private. I will consider a few movie premiers but nothing else. No concerts.”

Mrs. Stone shrugged her shoulders. “Well, I told Gregory I would try, and I did. He can deal with you. You’re an adult. I’m not going to pressure you anymore.”

Jax continued to eat, and I stood beside Marcus staring out the window and back at Jax’s bowl waiting for the moment when I would need to remove it. I glanced up at Marcus, and he met my eye with a smile. He was all business, and I could tell he wanted me to do well here. I’d made a friend. Marcus lightly touched my arm and stepped forward. I immediately followed, and we removed the bowls.

“More sweet tea, sir?”

Jax glanced at me and flicked his gaze toward Marcus. “Yes, please.”

Mrs. Stone’s glass of wine was missing a sip at most. Marcus once again stepped back and allowed me to lead the way out. We did the same routine as before.

Once in the kitchen, we picked up the tray already prepared with the most rich, exotic foods I had ever seen.

“Wow, they sure eat a bunch.”

“Mrs. Stone has only tasted her food so far, and my guess is she will barely touch this as well.”

“He eats all of his.”

“Yep, but then he’s a growing boy.”

I laughed at Marcus’s imitation of Ms. Mary, picked up the tray, and followed him back down the now familiar hall. Once inside, I placed the food in front of Jax again, and Marcus handled the sweet tea for me.

Jax and his mother ate in silence this time. Occasionally, I sensed him watching me, and a brief touch from Marcus’s hand no doubt reminding me I needed to appear invisible. I never acknowledged the curious steel blue eyes. Mother and son exchanged a few casual words, but for the most part, they ate in silence. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, I inspected Jax to see if he’d finished, and our eyes met.

I tried to tear my gaze away, but his eyes held a hint of laughter. I stared down at my feet, and Marcus squeezed my arm. It startled me. I looked up at him, and he nodded for us to take their plates. We cleared the places in front of them at the same time, and I walked toward the door already on routine.

“I won’t be having dessert,” Mrs. Stone said to Marcus. “I hate to leave you to eat alone, but I am exhausted. I’ll be in my room if you need me.”

Jax stood as his mother left the table. Once she exited, he sat back down. “I would love dessert if he assured us...or he assured me.

Marcus nodded. “Yes, sir,” he said in his businesslike tone, and we left.

Once back in the kitchen, Marcus sat down his tray. “Okay, this is sticky. You’re supposed to take him his plate, and since his mother has left, I have no reason to return. I could go in your place, which would be the best idea, but I am afraid it will anger him. He has noticed you, which I knew.”

would be pretty unavoidable, but I'd hoped since he is famous, he wouldn't pay attention to another pretty face." Marcus sighed and leaned his hip against the table and crossed his long legs. "I am leaving this up to you."

"Me?"

"What do you want to do, Sadie? It isn't about your job; it is about mine. If you don't go back, you could lose mine for taking your spot. I think he has already picked up on my protecting you. If you go or not, your job is secure...for now."

I sighed and reached for the tray holding the dessert. I wouldn't jeopardize someone else's job to help myself out. "I'll do it."

Without another word, I headed back down the hall all by myself.

Once I entered, steel blue eyes met mine and he smiled. "Ah, so he did let you come alone. I wondered if I would be seeing him instead."

I didn't want to smile at his comment but I did. I sat his dessert down in front of him and took my place.

"Do you speak?" he asked.

"Yes." Marcus had spoken for me all night.

"We don't normally have young female employees. How did you get through Mary?"

"I am mature for my age."

He only nodded and took a bite of some sort of chocolate cake with more chocolate oozing out of the inside. After he chewed and swallowed, he looked back at me. I turned to stare out the window at the waves crashing against the shore.

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen." I hoped my simple reply would end his interrogation.

"How did you know I lived here?"

His question caught me off guard and I met his gaze. "It is hard to miss the photos of you as dust and mop."

He frowned. "You applied for this job not knowing I lived here?"

I realized he assumed a fan squeezed through the cracks of his security and he wanted to know how I did it.

"My mother has been cleaning here for two months. However, her pregnancy has progressed and she sent me in her place. I proved my worth, and Ms. Mary kept me. My being here has nothing to do with you, sir, but has everything to do with the fact I want to eat and pay the rent." I knew I sounded annoyed, but I was annoyed, and I couldn't help it.

He nodded and stood up. "I am sorry. When I saw you, and you were young and well...attractive, I thought the only reason someone like you would be working here would be to get close to me. I deal with females quite a bit, and my assuming you were working here to get near me wasn't fair. Please forgive me."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I felt this job slipping out of my hands, but I would not cry.

understand,” I managed to get out.

A boyish smile tugged at his lips, and he nodded his head toward the door. “I guess I should have figured you were taken by the possessiveness of the other server tonight. I stared at you more than I should have, but I kept waiting for you to ask for my autograph or slip your number to me on a napkin.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

He shrugged. “Those things are a way of life for me. I just expect it.”

I smiled back at him this time. He wasn’t as bad as I’d made him out to be.

He wasn’t about to fire me.

“I am here to do my job, sir, and nothing more.”

“Do me a favor and don’t call me ‘sir.’ I am just two years older than you.”

I took the plate, careful not to touch his hands, and stepped back. “Okay,” I replied, hoping I could leave.

“So, is he your boyfriend?”

He caught me off guard with his question, and I halted in my tracks.

“Who? Marcus?”

A crooked grin appeared on his face. He was hard not to stare at. “If Marcus is the guy who seemed quite determined to make sure you made no mistakes tonight, then yes.”

“No, he is...he is a friend.” It was strange saying those words. I’d never called anyone a friend in my life.

Jax smiled and leaned down to whisper close to my ear. “I hope someday soon you will consider me a friend as well. I don’t have very many of those.”

My face grew hot, and my skin tingled at his nearness. His warm breath on my skin made it hard to form words. I swallowed hard, trying to focus on his comment and not swooning at his feet like some crazy lunatic. “I only have one,” I blurted out like an idiot.

Jax frowned. “I find that hard to believe”

I shrugged. “I don’t have time for friends.”

Jax stepped forward, opened the door for me, and smiled. “Well, I hope we can find some time in your busy schedule because I happen to be in need of a friend myself.... Someone who doesn’t care who I am.... Someone who doesn’t laugh at my jokes when they’re not funny. If I’m not mistaken, you could care less about the fact I am on the cover of Rolling Stone magazine this month, and on the bedroom walls of every teenage girl in America.”

His comment seemed to ease my momentary lapse of common sense from his nearness, and I shook my head. “Not every teenage girl in America. You have never been on my walls. So, I guess you’re right, I don’t care.” I walked away, leaving him standing behind me.

Chapter Three

Marcus waited on me in the kitchen, drinking sweet tea and talking to Ms. Mary. He stood when he saw me. “Well, how did it go?”

“He thought I was a fan who slid through the cracks and wanted to know how I did it. I informed him I had replaced my mother because of her pregnancy, I wasn’t a fan, and I didn’t realize this house belonged to him when I took the job.”

Marcus frowned. “How did he take your explanation?”

“I don’t think there will be any problem now he knows I am not a crazy fan about to slip him my number on a dinner napkin. I doubt he notices my existence from now on.”

Marcus raised his eyebrows as if he didn’t believe me.

Ms. Mary walked forward and took the tray from my hands. “Good, I knew you were going to work out just fine. Now, go change out of your uniform and head on home. You won’t be expected here until seven in the morning.”

I hurried to the laundry room to change. Once I changed back into my own clothing, I headed for the door. Ms. Mary hummed while she cleaned, and Marcus stood leaning against the door waiting.

“It’s late, did you drive or walk?” he asked when I got to the door.

“I rode my bike.”

He opened the door, and we walked out into the night together. “Let me put it in the bed of my truck and take you home.” He genuinely seemed worried about me.

“Okay, thank you.”

* * * *

Once we were both in the truck, I relaxed and leaned back on his worn leather seats. “So, how long have you worked at the Stone Mansion?”

He looked over at me. “I just started last summer. I only work summers here. I’m a local, but I am currently attending the University of Alabama. This is a summer job for me.”

“It’s obviously just a summer job for me too. I will begin my senior year this fall. We just moved here from Tennessee.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes, and I watched out the window as families walked down the sidewalks still in their beach clothing. I’d never seen the beach before we moved here. I couldn’t help but be fascinated catching glimpses of the waves crashing on the sandy shore.

“You seem so much older than a senior in high school. In fact, you’re more mature than most girls I go to school with.”

I smiled to myself. *If he only knew.* But tonight wasn’t the night to unload my life on someone who just might turn out to be a real friend. “I know. I have always been an old woman in a kid’s body. It drives my mother crazy.”

“I wouldn’t call you an old woman, just more mature than the average seventeen year old girl.”

The normal teenage girls laughed and flirted on the side of the streets. Summer romance wasn’t

something I understood, but apparently it was a very big thing around here. The girls here referred to the tourists as the summer boys. I didn't really get it or understand it, but then again I wasn't normal.

Marcus turned to me. "Did I hurt your feelings? I didn't mean to if I did. It was a compliment really. I get tired of the silliness and shallowness of girls. You're like a breath of fresh air."

I turned my head back in his direction and smiled. He really was a nice guy. I wished my insides got all warm and tingly when he stared at me, but apparently my body only reserved that response for teen rock stars, and the thought I might be shallow made me feel sick inside.

"Thank you, I have never been complimented on my strange personality before."

He frowned and shook his head. "I wouldn't call you strange...more refreshingly unique."

I laughed at his attempt to make it sound better. "Thanks. Refreshingly unique sounds much more appealing. Turn right at the next light, and it's two houses down on the left."

We remained silent the rest of the way to the apartment.

"Pull over to the side. We are not allowed to use the owner's drive. They own the house. We rent the small apartment below."

Marcus pulled up at the door.

"Thank you again for bringing me home."

He opened his door, jumped out, and got my bike from the bed of his truck.

I watched as he got it down and leaned it against the side of the house by the door.

"Anytime, if you leave the same time I do, I can always give you a lift."

I thanked him again.

He shuffled his feet and glanced up at me. "Since you're new here, and we are working together this summer, why don't I take you out one night after work, or on Sunday during the day when we are both off? I can show you what's fun around here and introduce you to some people. You know, just a few friends."

It sounded like fun, but I was a little surprised about the Sunday comment. "Sunday?" I asked.

He frowned. "You didn't know we are all off on Sundays, even Ms. Mary."

I shook my head. "No, I didn't know. But, yes, I would love to go enjoy this area with someone who knows where to go."

He grinned and ran his hand through his blond hair. "Great. I'll make plans this week and let you know what we are doing."

We said our goodbyes, and I watched him get back into his truck. I waved and turned to go face Jessica and her doubtless twenty questions as to what took me so long.

The apartment was silent and dark. I peeked into Jessica's room and found her asleep on top of the covers with the window unit cranking nonstop. I grabbed a quilt and covered her up before going back to my room and getting ready for my shower. She'd gone to sleep early. No twenty questions and no having to cook dinner. I smiled and headed toward the bathroom. I needed to be clean and needed sleep. Today I managed to get past my biggest hurdle. Tomorrow should be easier. No more encounters with Jax. Having a friend would make things even more enjoyable.

The next week fell into a routine. I arrived at work and went straight to the kitchen with Mr. Mary. She talked much more than Fran, and her stories were entertaining. She told me all about her two daughters and seven grandchildren. One daughter lived in Michigan with five daughters of her own. The other daughter lived in Georgia, and she had a girl age nine and one little boy who was loved immensely by a family full of girls. Her life raising her daughters made me realize just how dysfunctional my life with Jessica would sound. I imagined my life being as full and normal as Mr. Mary's. I knew I could one day make a life just as full of family and love as she seemed to have. I often daydreamed of a life like the one she told me about.

My first afternoons with Mr. Greg began a little tense since he wasn't real fond of having a teenage girl helping him, but after a day of not having to get on his arthritic knees he seemed to appreciate my being there. After my fourth day, Mr. Greg and I sat and played chess out in the gazebo when our workdays ended. He beat me each time, but I picked up on it and promised him my skills would improve, and one day I would beat him. I saw Marcus in the evenings when we all sat around the table and enjoyed a bowl of soup and salad. Ms. Mary always sent a plate of food home for Jessica and I suspected she sent it for my sake. Somehow without my telling her, she seemed to understand how my life at home functioned. After Marcus got off work, he always drove me and my bike home. Ms. Mary hired another server Marcus suggested. He was working out well, and things seemed to run smooth with the staff and family. Sunday morning arrived before I knew it.

I lay in bed, covering my face from the bright sunlight streaming in the windows. It was good I did not have to jump up and get ready. I enjoyed my job, but I also enjoyed sleeping late. I yawned and stretched. Today, I would be going out with a friend. I was more excited than the normal person would be, but I couldn't help it. I sat up and rubbed my face, trying to wake up enough to go eat breakfast. The house was still really quiet in the house, but Jessica normally slept till eleven every day. I went to the kitchen and fixed myself a bowl of Peanut Butter Crunch, and then went to sit on the piece of slatwood outside our back door. The sun glistened off the water, and it warmed me as I enjoyed my bowl of cereal. Today felt like my first real day of summer. Today, I would be able to go do something a seventeen year old would do.

"What are you eating?" Jessica asked as she walked out the door, or more like waddled out the door.

"Peanut Butter Crunch cereal," I replied and took another bite.

She sank down in the lawn chair beside me and sighed. "Do you love me?"

I rolled my eyes, knowing what words would be next. "Yes," I replied and took another bite.

"Then will you have pity on me and my enormous stomach, and go fix me a bowl when you're done?"

This was an old game. She thought it cute to ask if I loved her before she asked me to go get her something. I ate the rest of my cereal and drank all my milk before I stood up.

"Going to get your cereal," I said as I walked back in the door.

"Thanks, honey," she replied not opening her eyes.

I fixed her a large bowl, so I wouldn't have to fix her a second one, and took it to her. I needed to tell her about Marcus before he got here. I gave her the bowl, and she sat back up from her recliner.

position in a chair that did not recline and took the bowl from me.

“Thanks a bunch,” she said, smiling.

I sat back down. “I have made a friend at work, and he is coming to get me today to show me around and hang out.”

Jessica put the spoon full of cereal back down. “A boy! You?”

“He isn’t a boy I am dating. He is just a friend. He is from around here and wants to hang out today.”

She smiled and took a bite of cereal. She’d barely swallowed when she said, “I can’t believe you talked to someone enough to make a friend. Or is he a recluse too?”

I stood up, not in the mood for my mom’s teasing. She loved to remind me how I lacked social skills.

I started back inside, and she laughed. “I’m just teasing, Sadie. Don’t get so upset. I’m glad you’ve got a friend. Just don’t forget about me and stay gone all day. It gets lonely around here.”

I hated it when she laid on a guilt trip. “You have a car. Go somewhere and do something.”

She gave a melodramatic sigh. “I do need to go get a pedicure, since I can’t see my toes anymore.”

I shook my head. “No, something where no money is required. Like go for a walk down to the beach.”

She rolled her eyes this time, and I went inside. I made a beeline for the stashed money I’d saved for bills and hid it somewhere else. I didn’t need to come home and find she’d spent all our money. After the cash was secured, I went to get ready for my day with Marcus. I needed to wash my hair and coat myself with sun block. The sun here could be brutal. But first, I needed to find a swimsuit and something to wear. I checked the time. I had thirty minutes until he would arrive to pick me up. I needed to be ready so Jessica didn’t answer the door and find some way to embarrass me.

“Good morning,” Marcus said when I opened the door.

“Good morning to you too! Hold on just a sec and I’ll grab my purse.” I turned, went back into the living room, and picked up the purse I’d left on the coffee table.

“I’m gone. Get out and go do something,” I said to my mom before I walked back to the door.

“What, you’re not bringing him in?” She was still dressed in her black nightgown, which stretched over her stomach.

“No, Mom, not with you dressed in your nightgown.”

She laughed, and I rushed back to the door.

“You ready to see this place from a local’s eyes?” he asked grinning.

I nodded, excited. “Yes, I am.”

He opened the truck door for me, and I climbed in. He ran around, jumped in, and slid on a pair of dark sunglasses. “Do you eat raw oysters?”

“No way!”

He grinned. “I should have guessed: you’re a Tennessee girl. But it’s all right, they are also grilling burgers, corn on the cob, and ribs.”

“I love burgers, corn, and ribs.”

“Ah, good. Well, we're going to a friend's house. They're grilling out today, with raw oysters on the half shell as the appetizers.”

I grimaced at the thought of raw squishy slimy blobs on a shell people were actually going to pop in their mouth.

He laughed at my face. “I guess when you grow up around here, it doesn't seem so bad.”

I didn't respond because I wasn't sure how anyone could get use to eating slime.

“Rock has been my best friend since elementary school. You'll like the bunch over at his house. We're going to grill out, and then go water skiing. They have a boat and we're going to go launch it at the marina. Ever been water skiing?”

“I'm afraid not, but I would love to try.” It seemed to be the thing to say because a huge grin broke out on his face

“I can teach you. You'll be skiing before the day's over.”

We pulled up to a single story house on stilts, like most of the houses around here. It wasn't fancy, and it appeared to have survived a few hurricanes. The siding had been patched up quite a few times.

Marcus met me as I got out of the truck and slid a pair of sunglasses on my face. “You're gonna need these. Without them, the sun will give you a headache.”

“Do you carry around women's sunglasses on a regular basis?” I asked teasingly.

He laughed. “No, I have a sister.”

I didn't know anything about his family. I liked knowing something about him other than the obvious.

“Please tell me you put on sun block. Even the best tanners get burnt in this sun.”

“Yes, I'm slathered up.”

“Come this way,” he said, pulling me behind him through some really tall grass, which grew out of the sand. A simple rectangular in-ground pool stood in the center of the yard, surrounded by guys in swim trunks and girls in bikinis. They were slinging back slime from a shell, and I reminded myself not to grimace when they talked to me and ate those things. Marcus squeezed my hand and pulled me into the party.

“Marcus, it's about time you got here. All the shells are almost empty,” called a guy with long brown dreadlocks.

Marcus smiled down at me and whispered, “I won't eat any in front of you, I promise.”

I shook my head. “No, really, it's fine.”

He laughed and pulled me over to the group of guys standing with the dreadlock guy. Several people called out to Marcus, and he waved and nodded. My stomach churned with nervousness when I realized the majority of the people here were staring at me.

“Hey, guys, this is Sadie, Sadie this is Rock,” a rather large muscular guy with a shaved head said. “Preston,” what I considered a beach bum, with long blond hair and dark tanned skin, “and Dwayne”

the dreadlock guy, who also happened to have several tattoos and piercings. "We've been friends since second grade."

Dwayne flicked the dreadlocks out of his eyes and grinned. "Ever since Rock beat the shit out of Preston and ol' Marcus here jumped in to take up for him, who then started getting pummeled by Rock, until I jumped in, and about that time we all got suspended from school." The four of them laughed at the memory, and I tried to picture them all as little boys fighting.

"Our parents were all so proud. They had elementary school delinquents." Dwayne grinned and flipped back an oyster.

"Dwayne will reminisce all day if you let him. Don't act like you enjoy his stories. He won't stop," Marcus said, smiling.

The friendship between these four made me feel warm inside. It wasn't something I could relate to.

"So, Sadie, how did ugly butt Marcus here find a beautiful blind girl," Rock asked as he flipped a burger.

I glanced at Marcus to see him smiling at me. "We work together. He came to my rescue on my second day there, and my eye sight is 20/20."

One of them let out a low whistle, and another laughed wickedly.

"Marcus is a regular ol' knight in shining armor, I tell ya," Dwayne said with a flick of his dreadlocks. Marcus shoved him playfully, and Dwayne burst into laughter.

"I'm going to take her to meet other people, if you three can't behave."

"What did I do?"

Marcus sent him a mock glare before turning to me. "Are you thirsty?"

Dwayne reached into a cooler behind him and held out a soda. I took it, thanked him, and listened to the four of them talk about a beach volleyball game going on next weekend between them and their rival team. They would ask me questions or bring me into the conversation occasionally, but mostly they just planned and strategized. I had no idea beach volleyball was such a serious sport.

A blond in a hot pink bikini, which barely covered the important stuff, walked up behind Rock and wrapped her arms around his waist, and kissed his neck.

"Sadie, this is Trisha, Rock's fiancée, and Trisha, this is Sadie, a friend of mine."

Trisha smiled at me and ran her hand over Rock's head. "If you get bored with this bunch of conversation, you are welcome to come lay out with me and the girls."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Are you bored? Want to go in for a swim and cool off?"

I wasn't really sure I wanted to take off my sundress in front of all these people. My hand down red bikini wasn't nearly as skimpy as the ones the other girls were wearing, and I didn't fill out like they did either. I thought of my long skinny legs in comparison to the curvy large-chested girls lying out and wanted to keep my clothes on. However, I also wanted to make friends and not let Marcus down, so I needed to lay out or swim. Since swimming kept me covered most of the time, I decided it would be the best option. "Swimming sounds good."

He grinned and pulled his tee shirt off to reveal a very tanned and muscular chest. I swallowed hard and wished I didn't have to do this but I knew I would have to sooner or later. So I slipped the sundress off and laid it beside Marcus shirt. I didn't want to make eye contact with anyone and wished I could just go jump in the water without having to actually walk calmly over to it and get in.

A low whistle from behind startled me and I heard an "ouch." I turned to see Marcus glaring at Dwayne and Preston.

"Sorry, Sadie, these two have no manners." He took my hand again. He always held my hand casually. It'd never bothered me before, but being half naked made it uncomfortable.

"Come on. Let's go swim." He grinned at me and didn't even pay attention to my body.

It relieved and embarrassed me at the same time. I didn't want Marcus to like me as anything more than a friend, but I also didn't want to be so boyish in my bathing suit he didn't notice me at all. I decided to stop thinking about everything so hard, and I followed him into the water via the stairs. We joined in on a game of basketball with a floating goal in the middle of the pool. I stunk at it, but no one other than Marcus and a guy name Rick seemed to be any good, so I didn't worry too much.

After racing Marcus the length of the pool and winning one out of three times, we got out to get something to eat. I walked over to my sundress about the time Marcus came up behind me and wrapped a towel around me. "Thank you."

He smiled. Our friendship was working out nicely, and it made me smile a little brighter. Maybe my personality wasn't as bad as Jessica said.

Marcus leaned down and whispered into my ear, "Burger, ribs, or both?"

I thought of the mess ribs make and all the people in the small backyard. "Burger," I whispered back.

He nodded and made his way to the grill. He got me a burger and a slab of ribs for himself.

We walked over to a table set up with stuff to put on the burger, and I added a little ketchup and cheese. Marcus grabbed us both a drink, and we headed over to an unoccupied shaded area. We sat down and ate in silence for a few minutes. I watched him go through at least fifteen napkins and laughed when he reached for more and all the

clean ones were gone.

"You think my mess is funny, huh?"

I shrugged and let out another laugh I couldn't hold back. I reached under my plate and handed him my napkin.

"Thanks." He took the napkin and cleaned himself up. "Are you having fun?" he asked after I cleaned the barbecue off his face.

"Yes, I am. I feel like the youngest one here, but I am having fun."

Marcus nodded. "You are the youngest one here. I forget my old crowd has all aged just like me."

"No, I have really enjoyed myself."

Preston, whose attention seemed to be focused our way, shook his head.

"I'm afraid my friend over there likes you. You're going to have to just ignore him."

I frowned. "He likes me! With all these older, more attractive women around?"

Marcus cut his eyes back at me and studied my face a minute, and he smiled. "You really believe that, don't you?"

"Believe what?"

"You believe the other girls here are better than you."

I laughed and shrugged. "I'm not blind, Marcus."

Marcus raised his eyebrows. "Either you are blind, or you don't have a mirror at home. Keep doing stuff as sweet as blushing, and you're going to have Preston singing love ballads outside your window."

I laughed and shook my head. "I seriously hope not."

Marcus looked at Preston. "He really likes legs, and you happen to be attached to the best pair I've seen in a really long time. But I think you hooked him when you batted your baby blue eyes at him and smiled."

I frowned. "I don't recall batting my eyes at anyone, and my legs are just long and skinny."

Marcus smiled. "I hope you always stay this way. Sweet and innocent. But I want to be the one to enlighten you. Your legs are sexy as hell, and your eyelashes are so thick and long that when you blink it looks like you're batting them, and it is very attractive."

I wasn't sure I believed him but I smiled anyway. "You're a nice guy. Thanks for trying to make me feel better."

"Is that what I'm doing?" he asked with a teasing grin.

I smiled. "I think so."

He laughed and shook his head. "Sure, whatever you say, Sadie."

Chapter Four

On Wednesday night, Marcus came to find me in the garden. "Hey, Sadie, the Stone family is dining at a friend's house tonight, so I'm heading out early. How much longer until you get off?"

I glanced over at Mr. Greg who seemed to be really suffering from his arthritis today and I knew I couldn't leave early. It wouldn't hurt me to ride my bike home this evening. "You go on ahead. I have some work left here. Besides, I want to stop off at the grocery and pick up a few things on my way home."

Marcus frowned at me as if he were trying to decide something. Finally, he said, "I really don't like the idea of you riding home after dark, and then trying to ride a bike with bags of groceries."

I started to argue with him and assure him everything would be just fine, but his gaze left mine and landed on something behind me.

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