

# Chapter One

“You’re dumping me?”

I couldn’t believe it—not that it was completely out of the blue—but I hadn’t even had a chance to order dessert.

“Listen, Sage, I just don’t think it’s working out,” Brandon said. “I mean I like you, I really do, but it just doesn’t seem as though you have time for a relationship—”

The buzzing of my cell phone cut him off. I didn’t have to look to know who it was. Fighting my instinct to pick it up, I said, “I have plenty of time for a relationship!”

“Sage, we’ve been dating for three months and we’ve yet to have a dinner that wasn’t interrupted by your cell.”

“That is not true,” I protested, frantically trying to remember a time when I’d had *any* meal without my phone ringing. My phone buzzed again, and I swear my eye twitched with the need to answer it.

But Brandon was shaking his head, a resigned look on his face. “I’m sorry. I really am.” He took some money out of his wallet and placed it on the table.

More insistent buzzing, as if the person on the other end knew I was there and not picking up. I clenched my hands into fists in my lap.

“Brandon,” I tried again as he stood. He nodded toward my phone.

“Sage, you may not want to admit it, but you’re already in a committed relationship. And he doesn’t share.”

I stared in dismay at Brandon’s retreating back as he left the restaurant. The phone buzzed. Glaring at it, I reached out and snatched it up, knowing it could only be one person.

“What?” I snapped, allowing the hovering waiter to remove my plate. I grabbed the wine bottle and emptied the rest into my glass.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. “Excuse me?”

I held in a sigh and rubbed my forehead. I felt a headache coming on. “I’m sorry, I thought it was someone else,” I lied, modulating my voice into the usual pleasant tone I used for work. “What can I do for you, sir?”

*Sir* was Parker Anderson, and Parker Anderson was my boss.

“I need the margin projections on the Layne acquisition. Where are they?”

“Lyle brought them by this afternoon,” I said. “I put them on your desk.”

“I’m looking and I don’t see them.”

“They’re underneath the stack of quarterlies that I printed off this morning,” I guessed.

There was a shuffling of paper. “Okay. Found it. Thanks.” He ended the call.

“You’re welcome,” I muttered, tossing down my phone. Parker never apologized for calling me after official work hours. I thought it was because he worked so much. He never considered any hour as being free from work, for either himself or those who worked for him. Usually, I didn’t mind because...well, it was complicated.

The wind had picked up and I pulled my wrap tighter around my bare arms as I gazed out at Lake Michigan. Brandon had picked one of the nicest restaurants in Chicago to break up with me, a place with outdoor seating and a great view. I guessed that was something.

I watched as the last bit of twilight faded into evening and sipped my wine. Brandon had already paid for it so no sense letting it go to waste. We'd met on Valentine's Day of all things and over the next three months I'd become more and more convinced that maybe he could be Mr. Right.

Apparently, I was Ms. Wrong.

On that depressing thought, I got drunk. Well at least I *think* I got drunk. I was vaguely aware of the valet calling me a cab and me stumbling into my apartment. I may or may not have taken a bubble bath—a weird predilection that came out when I was very drunk, no matter the time of night—since I had little memory of anything up to my head hitting the pillow. Some might say I passed out, but I'm a lady and ladies don't *pass out*. I just...slept very deeply.

The alarm woke me at the usual time and I groaned, slamming my hand on the button to silence it. My head ached from too much wine and I stood too long in the shower. By the time I was rummaging through my closet trying to find the match to the shoes I wanted to wear, I was already going to be late.

"Damn it!" I yelled in frustration, then heard my mom in my head.

*Ladies don't use vulgar language.*

"Ladies probably never have to take the bus to work either," I grouched to no one.

The bus was just closing its doors when I ran up, out of breath and carrying my shoes. I rapped on the door and the driver opened it for me.

"Running late today?" he asked with a grin.

I was too out of breath to reply so I just smiled. He was a nice guy and knew all the regulars on this route.

Work was just under five miles away and I was one of the first off the bus, shoes now on my feet. It was a cool spring morning and probably too early in the season for the peep-toe sunny yellow heels, but I'd worn them anyway. I'd added a matching yellow scarf around my neck to go with the navy skirt and white blouse I wore. The yellow added a touch of whimsy to the otherwise staid clothes. I didn't mind. It was expected attire for the assistant to the Director of Investment Analytics at KLP Capital, which was *the* investment bank in Chicago.

Robin worked the morning shift at Starbucks and had my standing order ready when I walked in.

"Thank you!" I said, blowing an air kiss in her direction as I grabbed the two cups and paper bag. A second later I was out the door and scurrying across the street. The wind whipped at my hair, but I always kept it pulled back tight. My hair was dark, thick, and long, and I never wore it down to work. A French braid tucked up into a bun kept it from getting in my way.

Used to juggling coffee, Parker's breakfast, and my purse, I showed my pass to Security, who let me by to the elevators. Thirty-five floors later, I stepped out.

It was still early enough for me to get things set the way Parker liked. I hurried to drop off my purse and coffee before getting a plate and silverware from the kitchen. After placing the scone on the plate and setting the coffee in precisely the right spot, I hurried back to my desk to listen to his voice mails, taking notes as I scrolled through them. Finally setting down the telephone, I let out a sigh. All set for Parker's arrival in—I looked at my watch—three minutes.

At eight o'clock on the dot, Parker Anderson stepped off the elevators and headed my way.

It was secretly my favorite part of the day.

Parker Anderson wore five-thousand dollar suits and walked like he owned half the city. There was no one he couldn't intimidate, and he knew it. Some called him arrogant; he said it was confidence.

This morning he'd worn his usual kind of power suit, this one a dark gray pinstripe with a light gray shirt and what I recognized as a Burberry tie. His dark hair was long on top, parted on the side, and lay in a smooth wave back off his high forehead. It made a nice contrast to the clear blue of his eyes. His face was perfect symmetry, an oval with a straight nose that conjured adjectives like *aristocratic*. A strong jaw and chin were the perfect complement, while his lips—his lips were in the sweet spot between too-thin and too-feminine, not that I spent much time staring at his lips. At least, I tried not to stare. He was thirty-five, incredibly handsome, successful, wealthy—and as unobtainable as the moon.

But that didn't mean I couldn't enjoy the view.

“Good morning, Sage,” he said, the deep baritone of his voice as smooth as a shot of twenty-year-old scotch. He took the stack of messages I handed him and glanced through them. This was our morning routine, too.

“Good morning,” I replied with a smile. I caught a whiff of his cologne mixed with his aftershave. I'd become so accustomed to the slightly spicy scent that I didn't think I'd ever be able to smell it and not think of Parker.

Usually he'd give me a polite smile, then disappear into his office, but today he hesitated.

“I, um, I didn't get you at a bad time last night, did I?” he asked, still looking through his messages.

My eyes widened. He had never asked me that before and there had been plenty of times that were “bad.” I was gonna have to mark this one down on my calendar.

I was so surprised, I blurted out the truth. “I’d just gotten dumped.”

Parker looked up at that. If my candor had shocked him, I couldn’t tell. His blue eyes were steady on mine for a long moment in which I may have stopped breathing. He rarely ever focused that intently on me and I found myself wishing for the umpteenth time that Parker were a less attractive man. It would make concentrating at work a helluva lot easier.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said at last.

My smile was as fake as the name-brand purse I’d bought off a street vendor on Michigan Avenue.

“It’s fine,” I said quickly with a nervous wave of my hand as I tried to figure out what to say. It wasn’t like Parker and I often chatted about our personal lives. “He was bad in bed anyway.”

Oh. My. God. Had I just said that? To *my boss*?

I gasped in dismay, both my hands flying to cover my mouth. Talk about too much information.

His lips twitched slightly and I swear his eyes crinkled at the corners, as though he were holding back a full blown grin. He cleared his throat.

“Yes, well, um, that’s...too bad. Guess you’re better off then.” With another fleeting smile, he headed into his office, the glass door swinging closed behind him.

If he couldn’t see me through the glass wall, I would have put my head down on my desk and moaned in sheer mortification. I’d mentioned sex to my boss. And that I’d been having *bad* sex. Maybe he thought it was me? What if he thought I was bad in bed?

“It doesn’t matter!” I hissed to myself, grabbing my coffee and taking a steadying swig as though it was bourbon rather than a nonfat-grande-caramel-no-foam-latte (add whip). Who cared if Parker thought I was bad in bed? It wasn’t like I’d ever get the opportunity to—

Nope. Not going there. I was not a secretary-with-the-hots-for-her-boss cliché. Any woman with eyes could appreciate the many wonderful attributes of Parker Anderson. I was just...normal.

Right.

It was business as usual after that and I made myself put aside my embarrassment and stop thinking inappropriate thoughts. Parker was as normal as ever as I transcribed from his voice memo recorder, edited a Power Point presentation he was giving in New York next week, coordinated the quarterly performance reviews, and all the usual things that made the day fly by. Mondays were busy so Parker always ate lunch at his desk. At noon, I ran out to get his usual from the restaurant four blocks down. He had their Monday special of Tuscan-style salmon with rosemary orzo.

I had a hot dog from a street vendor that I scarfed down while hurrying back from the restaurant. I always ate it plain because one time I’d dropped mustard on my blouse, which had sent me into a panicked tizzy and resulted in thirty minutes in the bathroom trying to unsuccessfully scrub it out. I’d tried to hide the stain, but Parker had seen when I’d had to take him some files.

“Problems at lunch?” he’d inquired with a pointed look at my stained blouse.

I hadn’t eaten mustard, or anything else, on my hotdog since.

Parker was still in a meeting when I set the tray on his desk, arranging the plate and cutlery just so. The mouthwatering aroma of the salmon filled the air, making my stomach growl even after my hot dog.

I was just finishing folding the napkin into a bird of paradise when the door to Parker's office swung open. Surprised, I glanced up...and promptly forgot all about the napkin fold.

Holy shit.

Bradley Cooper all buff and badass in *The A-Team* immediately sprang to mind.

He was over six feet tall, his broad shoulders encased in a white T-shirt and leather jacket, with the outline of dog tags underneath the thin fabric stretched across his chest. Chestnut hair that had a hint of curl in it was slicked back from his face and begged for a woman's fingers to run through it. His jaw was grizzled with two days of whiskers while his eyes were obscured behind mirrored sunglasses.

The man slipped the sunglasses off and I swear my knees went weak. His eyes were a bright blue, the corners showing fine lines from either smiling or squinting. I chose to think it was from smiling because with looks like his, why would he *not* smile?

"Where's your boss, sweetheart?" he asked, hooking his sunglasses on the front of his shirt. He glanced curiously around the office.

I realized I was gaping and closed my mouth with a snap. The "sweetheart" set my teeth on edge. I wasn't his sweetheart—at least, not without dinner first.

My smile was like saccharine. "Who's asking, *sugar pie*?"

His eyebrows shot up and his gaze whipped around to mine. Then he gave a low chuckle and took a few steps toward me until he stood right in front of the desk. He held up a badge.

"Detective Ryker, CPD."

Now it was my turn to be taken aback. The police? Here to see Parker?

“Oh, um, are you sure you’re looking for Parker Anderson?” I asked.

The detective snorted in derision as he pocketed his ID. I glimpsed a gun and holster. “Oh yeah. I’m sure. Where is he?”

“He’s in a meeting,” I said, hurrying to finish folding the napkin. “He’ll be back any minute for his lunch.”

Detective Ryker glanced at the tray as I carefully set the bird of paradise napkin to the side. I frowned, nervously chewing my lip. If Parker didn’t hurry, the salmon would be cold and I’d have to nuke it in the microwave. And if this cop was here to talk to him, chances were that might take a while so he wouldn’t get the chance to eat until later. Maybe I should take the tray to the kitchen for now?

My thoughts were interrupted by the detective.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Shocked, I glanced around to see what he was talking about, then I realized he was referring to the lunch, or me, or maybe both.

“What?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

But the detective just shook his head. I was starting to get a bad feeling about this.

“Listen,” I said, rounding the desk to approach him. “Why don’t you come with me for a few minutes? I can get you a cup of coffee or some tea perhaps, while you wait.” Yeah, because this guy looked like he’d cool his heels in the lobby sipping hot tea, but whatever. I used the tone I always adopted when placating an irate or obstinate—usually at the same time—Parker, adding a soft smile. It nearly always worked on him.

However, it seemed the cop was a tougher nut to crack.

“Nice try, but I think I’ll wait.” Turning, he settled himself onto the black leather sofa in the corner.

I stared in dismay. He seemed wholly at ease, one ankle resting on the opposite knee while his arms were spread wide on the back of the couch. It was obvious he wasn’t going anywhere until he was darn good and ready.

Parker was going to kill me.

“Please wait in the lobby,” I urged, starting to panic. “It’s really nice. There’s a television, and magazines...”

He just looked at me.

I went for blunt honesty. “He’ll get mad at me,” I blurted. “Please wait in the lobby.”

Honestly, I didn’t know if Parker would be upset or not, though I did know he’d prefer some warning before finding a police officer waiting in his office. I’d rather err on the side of caution because nothing was as devastating as when Parker was angry with me.

“He’ll get mad at you?” Detective Ryker asked in disbelief, his eyebrows climbing. “What a fucking prick,” he added under his breath.

I winced at the name-calling and wondered what in the world the police thought Parker had done for this guy to say such things about a man he’d never met.

I didn’t know if the detective would’ve done what I asked or not because that’s when Parker walked through the door. If he was surprised to see a strange man sitting in his office, he didn’t show it.

“Ryker,” he said, barely glancing at the man as he passed me and rounded his desk. “Isn’t there a murder to investigate or somebody you should be arresting?” His voice was cold. To

anyone who didn't know him as well as I did, he appeared unfazed, but I could see the tension in his body.

"Aw, you've kept tabs. I'm touched," Ryker sneered.

Parker didn't even glance up from his plate. He spoke around a bite of salmon. "Don't flatter yourself. Only a cop could get in this building armed, and only homicide gets away with dressing like shit."

I'd never heard Parker speak to someone like that. Ruthless and cutting? Yes. But deliberately insulting cops usually wasn't high on his To Do list.

"I'd rather dress like shit than treat people like shit. You make your secretary serve you lunch without even a thank you? Color me surprised to see you're still a narcissistic dick."

My face grew so hot my ears burned as Parker's eyes flicked my way, as though he were just now noticing me in the room.

"Was there something else, Sage?" he asked stiffly.

"O-of course not, sir," I stammered, hurriedly retreating. "Excuse me." I couldn't get out of there quick enough.

My desk was a haven after the tension in Parker's office and I eyed them covertly, pretending to work, though likely neither would have noticed even if I'd pressed my nose to the glass.

Parker seemed to be barely paying attention to Ryker, though I'd seen him do that before and it was always a fake out. Nothing slipped by him.

For his part, Ryker had abandoned his earlier relaxed pose and was now bent forward, his elbows braced on his knees as he talked.

Neither of them smiled.

They knew each other, and apparently hated each other—or at least Ryker hated Parker. “Narcissistic dick” and “fucking prick” usually weren’t terms reserved for a good buddy. It was an engrossing mystery and I did nothing but speculate, my imagination running rampant for the ten minutes Ryker was there.

Finally, he stood and walked to the door. He didn’t appear to say good-bye and Parker was seemingly already absorbed in a file before Ryker even left his office.

I expected him to head straight for the elevators, but he caught sight of me watching him. A look I couldn’t read flashed across his face and he changed direction, stopping in front of the raised counter that served as two walls of my “cubicle.”

“So…Sage, was it?” he asked.

I eyed him suspiciously, tapping the nameplate that sat on the counter rather than answering him.

“Sage Reese,” he read. “Executive Administrative Assistant.”

“You can read,” I said, raising an eyebrow. “I was worried you’d have trouble with the big words.” If Ryker didn’t like Parker, and it seemed pretty clear he didn’t, chances were I wasn’t going to like him either.

He grinned at me despite my sass and he had an honest-to-God dimple in his cheek. His teeth were perfectly straight and white, and his smile drastically altered the hard expression on his face to one of sexy mischief. I momentarily lost my train of thought.

Ryker leaned down like he was going to tell me a secret. The aroma of leather and something musky drifted in the air and I caught myself taking a deep whiff of it.

“I know what you’re doing after work,” he said.

I looked at him in confusion. “What?”

“You’re having dinner with me.”

This was the absolute last thing I expected him to say. I gaped at him.

Ryker reached toward me and my breath caught. His fingers brushed the fabric of the scarf tied around my throat. I was frozen in place, my eyes wide as I looked up at him, and my pulse racing. I felt the softest touch of the back of his knuckles against my jaw, then he was reaching past me to snag a couple of peanut M&Ms from the little candy dish on my desk for when I absolutely had to have a bite of chocolate. Tossing them in his mouth, he grinned again, the knowing look in his eyes telling me he knew exactly how he was affecting me.

“Pick you up at six,” he said with a wink, and then he was gone, striding toward the elevators, his jeans and leather jacket utterly out of place in the sea of suits and business attire. But you would have thought he was a model wearing the latest from Armani by the way he walked.

When he got to the elevator, it dinged as though it already knew he was coming. He’d slid his sunglasses back on and he turned before he stepped inside. I was still staring at him and he caught me at it, another knowing grin spreading across his face before he disappeared from my view.

“Wow. Who was that?”

I turned around to see Megan, my friend and fellow secretary. She worked for a group of analysts who reported to Parker.

Sliding her glasses up her nose, she turned to me. “Seriously. Please tell me he was interviewing and starts work tomorrow.”

I laughed. Megan was an incongruous package. She was tiny, barely five feet tall, with curly blonde hair and a heart-shaped face—a stereotypical sweet, shy type. She was sweet, that

much was true, but she had a biting wit and an irreverent humor that made her a favorite with nearly everyone at KLP.

“Sorry,” I said with an exaggerated sigh. “He already has a job.”

“As a movie star, right?”

“He’s a detective,” I said with a grin. “And I think I have a date with him tonight.”

“Get out!”

I shrugged. “He asked me out.” I thought for a second. “Actually, he didn’t ask. He just told me I was going to dinner with him.” Which should have ticked me off, but instead I found it to be kind of...sexy.

“If I didn’t like you so much, I’d hate you right now,” Megan sighed. “As if it’s not bad enough you work for the hottest guy in the building. Now you have a date with a sexy detective.”

“There are some days I’d gladly trade you bosses,” I said dryly. “You know that.”

“I know Parker can be a total pain in the ass,” she said. “But don’t give me that. We both know you’d come to work even if you were miserable sick—and have—if Parker said he needed you. So don’t play that ‘I hate my job’ card with me. I know you’re full of crap.”

“He’s not that bad,” I said.

Megan snorted. “You’re the only one here who’d put up with him. Even I could only let that pretty face go so far before I’d have to slip something in his coffee.”

I couldn’t argue with her. There were some days *I* wanted to slip something in Parker’s coffee.

“So I take it Brandon’s no longer in the picture if you’re going to dinner with a smokin’ hot detective dude?” she asked.

“His name is Ryker and no. I got dumped last night.”

“No shit,” she said, looking completely unsurprised.

I held up a finger. “Don’t say it.”

“Say what?” she replied, all innocence.

“You know what.”

“You mean that I’ve been telling you for months now how you’re never going to have a decent relationship so long as you let Parker rule your every waking moment? That I keep reminding you that this is a job and not your life? That Parker doesn’t appreciate you and that I can’t for the life of me understand why you allow yourself to be at his beck and call to the point where you can’t even date? Is that what you *don’t* want me to say?”

I sighed. I couldn’t be mad at Megan. Nothing she said was wrong. I knew she only said those things because she loved me and worried about me, but it was what it was. I needed this job. I liked this job, despite the demands it made on me. The pay was awesome, the benefits were great, and I liked living in Chicago. Though Megan would call me a masochist—and probably had at some point—because most of my waking hours were consumed by Parker and my job, I liked it that way.

At my silence, Megan looked contrite. “I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I should just keep my mouth shut sometimes.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s okay.” It was kind of depressing when I thought about Brandon dumping me—yet another short-lived relationship to add to my tally—so I pushed the thought aside.

“So I texted Brian this weekend,” she said, and I was glad for the change of subject. Brian was a guy who worked in I.T. He was really nice and very good-looking, but I thought he wasn’t terribly bright when it came to women.

“And?” I asked. Megan had had a thing for Brian since the day she first met him a year ago. They’d had to work together on a project and had become good friends. “Did he text you back?”

“Yeah, a little,” she said with a sigh. “I think I’m permanently friend-zoned, though. He doesn’t seem to get it no matter how much I flirt.”

“Of course he doesn’t,” I said. “He’s in I.T. You’d have to parade in front of him topless for him to get it.”

She laughed. “I don’t know what it is with him. Any other guy, I’d just ask them out. But him... I don’t know.” She sighed.

“It’s because he’s different from all the other guys you’ve dated,” I said. “You’re actually friends, which is awesome. They’re supposed to make the best husbands.”

Now it was Megan’s turn to look slightly uncomfortable. “What was a detective doing here anyway?” she asked, changing the subject.

“No clue,” I replied. “But I think they know each other, him and Parker. Their conversation was a bit...hostile.” A massive understatement.

“Huh. Weird. Maybe he’ll tell you?”

I shrugged. “No way to know. But I’ll definitely give you the gossip if he does.” I shot her a grin. Megan loved gossip.

“You’d better.”

After swearing to tell her all the juicy details of my date with Ryker, Megan headed back to her desk and I went to retrieve the lunch tray from Parker’s office.

He was deeply involved in something, judging by his frown and fierce look of concentration, so I didn’t speak. His jacket had been discarded and flung onto the sofa. I picked

it up and hung it on the valet in the corner closet so it wouldn't wrinkle. Parker always kept an extra suit and a couple of extra shirts at the office. Once I'd done that, I picked up the tray he'd pushed to the side of his desk.

"Thank you," he said.

I glanced at him, for a moment wondering if he was speaking to me, but he was still engrossed in the computer screen. Since there was no one else there and he wasn't on the phone, he must have been speaking to me. It was a little odd. He didn't usually say anything when I took away his tray or hung his jacket.

"You're welcome," I murmured, since it would have been weird to just ignore him. I couldn't help but wonder if Ryker's biting comment earlier was why I was getting a thank you now, which kind of took the pleasure from it. Not that I did my job for thank yous; I did it for a paycheck. But still.

"Could you get me the file on that new Russian firm we've been buying from," Parker said. "Rogers has it, I believe."

I frowned, thinking. "You mean Bank ZNT?"

"That's the one."

"Of course." I headed for the door, then hesitated, glancing at Parker. He looked up.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I was just wondering, and it's probably none of my business, but about the detective who was here earlier. Um, is...everything okay? Do you need anything? Something I could do..." I was rambling now so I shut up.

Parker was looking at me in that intense way of his, which had me rethinking sticking my nose in something that was obviously private. I looked down at the tray I held, unable to meet his gaze, and uneasily shifted my weight from one foot to the other.

“Never mind. I shouldn’t have pried,” I blurted, balancing the tray on one arm so I could pull open the door.

“Sage,” Parker called out, stopping me. I looked back at him. “There’s nothing you can do, but I...appreciate the offer.”

That eased my embarrassment somewhat and I gave him a fleeting smile and short nod before hurrying out of the office.

I watched the clock much too closely that afternoon, the butterflies in my stomach getting more fluttery with each passing hour. By five forty-five, I gave up working at all and just started cleaning off my desk. I didn’t know if the butterflies were from nerves, anticipation, or both.

What if he’d just been messing with me? The men I’d dated tended to be safe types, men who had solid white-collar jobs and worked in office buildings. I’d never in my life dated a man who knew how to shoot a gun, much less carried one on him. All my dates wore suits and ties, drove sensible cars, and didn’t own leather jackets. And none of them embodied the guy-my-mom-warned-me-about cliché quite like Ryker did.

I must be out of my mind.

I went to the ladies’ room to check my hair and touch up my makeup, looking myself over critically. I looked very...businesslike, I guessed. My pretty yellow heels and scarf at least dressed up the dreary white blouse and navy skirt. I had a decent body that should probably get to the gym more often, but my waist was narrow, my hips curved, and I filled out a C cup bra reasonably well.

Digging in my purse, I added some more blush to my cheeks and reapplied my pale rose lipstick. My skin was a warm peach and in the summer I tanned to a golden brown. My dark hair went well with my deep brown eyes, though I often wished I had light eyes, which was probably why I was always attracted to men with blue eyes.

After tucking some wayward strands of hair back into my braid, I took a deep breath. I eyed my blouse. Should I maybe undo a button? It was done all the way up with only about an inch of skin showing between the bottom edge of my scarf and the top of my blouse. I hesitated, then undid a button, then one more. I had decent cleavage, might as well show it off. And now I looked a bit more like a woman who'd get asked on a date by a cop named Ryker.

Glancing at my watch had me scurrying out the door. It was six o'clock and I was going to be late, not that it was necessarily a bad thing. I'd rather he show up and wait than me stand downstairs waiting for a man who never arrived.

Parker seemed to be packing up, too, when I rapped lightly on his door and stepped inside his office.

"Anything else for today?" I asked, as was my custom to do before I left.

"No, I don't think—" Parker glanced up from where he'd been adding files to his briefcase. When he caught sight of me, he stopped talking. I waited, but he didn't continue, his gaze dropping to my chest.

Okay, maybe cleavage wasn't businesslike, but it wasn't like it was eight in the morning. Technically, business hours were over. I glanced at my watch again. Crap. Six oh-five. "Um, okay, well I'll see you tomorrow then," I blurted. I tossed a "Have a good night," behind me as I rushed out the door.

Grabbing my purse from my desk, I hurried to the elevator and punched the button, waiting impatiently for the car to arrive. What would I do if Ryker wasn't there? What would I do if he was?

I didn't race across the lobby. Instead, I took my time and walked at my normal speed, joining the dozen or so other people exiting the building. When I hit the sidewalk, I glanced around, trying not to be too obvious that I was searching. But within seconds, my eyes found him and I froze.

Ryker was waiting all right, his sunglasses on and arms crossed over his broad chest as he leaned against a massive black and chrome motorcycle parked at the curb. He saw me and his lips curved in a slow grin that made a warm tingle spread underneath my skin.

I got my feet moving again and Ryker pushed himself upright as I approached, waiting until I was near to speak.

"About time," he teased. "I almost thought you were blowing me off."

"Does any woman blow you off?" I asked.

His grin widened. "Nope."

I rolled my eyes, but I could admit it. Arrogance and cockiness turned me on, and Ryker had them both in spades.

Gesturing toward the motorcycle, I said, "I hope the restaurant is within walking distance because there's no way I'm getting on *that*."

"Ever ride a bike before?"

"A bike, yes," I said. "A death machine that can do ninety miles an hour with only a helmet for protection when my head hits the asphalt? No. I'm allergic to danger."

Ryker stepped closer, right into my personal space, and I tipped my head back to look him in the eyes. All I saw was my own reflection staring back at me. His proximity was electric, though, making my body hum as though a current ran from him into me.

“Sweetheart, I’m as dangerous as it gets.”

The low thrum of his voice sent my heart into triple time. My gaze drifted down from Ryker’s sunglasses to his lips, still curved in that shit-eating grin. What would it be like to be kissed by a man like him? To be swept off my feet?

“Whaddya say, Miss Prim and Proper? Wanna take a walk on the wild side?”

My eyes flew back up to his. “Did you just call me—” I began, indignant.

“Yep. Now let’s get out of here. I’m starving.” Grabbing a helmet from the back of his *bike*, he plopped it on my head. I would have protested, but was immediately flustered when he began fastening the strap beneath my chin. His fingers brushed my skin and suddenly it was harder to breathe.

“Well, don’t you look as cute as can be,” Ryker said once he’d finished.

I bet. Helmets were just oh so sexy.

He swung a leg over the bike and moved the kickstand back with his booted heel. A moment later, the engine fired up. At the noise, people nearby turned to look.

I stood, staring dubiously from the sidewalk. As if going to dinner with Ryker hadn’t made me nervous before, the prospect of riding a motorcycle with him made me lightheaded. My mother was so going to kill me.

“C’mon,” Ryker said over the noise. “You know you want to. Don’t be a scaredy-cat.”

He held out his hand to me.

My eyes narrowed. Schoolyard taunts were for children. And that's what I told myself as I reached out to take his hand. He tugged me forward, his mischievous smile changing to one of triumph.

I wouldn't have worn a skirt had I known I'd be climbing on the back of a motorcycle. For a girl whose mom had drilled into me the appropriate way a lady exits a car in a skirt, hiking my skirt up my thighs made me cringe.

Shoving aside thoughts of what my mother would say, I quickly got on behind Ryker, letting out a squeak when he reached back and pulled me tighter against him. At least the strap of my purse was long enough to hook over my chest so it rested against my back.

Grabbing his leather-clad shoulders, I steadied myself. I would've been showing the entire street the fabulous black satin and lace panties I wore if they weren't currently pressed against Ryker as I straddled the bike. His hand drifted down my thigh to hook around the back of my knee, his calloused palm warm against my skin. I gasped at the sensation, a flash of heat and want racing through me.

"You have to hold on like this," Ryker explained, turning his head to talk to me. He let go of my leg to reach up, moving my hands from his shoulders to circle his chest beneath his arms. "And hold on tight."

I was shaking now, fear and—yes, a tinge of excitement making adrenaline rush fast through my veins.

"Scared?" Ryker asked.

"Do I have reason to be?" I asked rather than admit to my fear.

I could feel him laugh, though I couldn't hear it over the noise.

“Trust me, sweetheart. I’ve got you.” The motor revved and I tightened my grip around him.

Glancing at the sidewalk and people passing by, I suddenly saw Parker standing just outside the building entrance. He had an unreadable expression on his face, which wasn’t unusual, but he was staring right at Ryker and me. There was something about the set of his jaw and tension in his body that made me uneasy.

Then the bike was moving and I lost sight of Parker as we shot down the street.