



Toren

*Christina
Brunckhorst*



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Toren

Christina
Brunkhorst



Prologue



It was the slap heard around the world.

Everyone on the movie set tucked between Dillon and Bozeman, Montana — from extra to grip to international film star— turned with unabashed eyes to watch the drama unfold.

Vivian Cray, an actress with Halle Berry’s looks but lacking her demeanor, stormed through the sea of extras towards her trailer. The ear-piercing sound of a megaphone hitting a wall followed in her wake and echoed across the newly erected “town” streets.

Julie Bishop, a movie director with a reputation for eviscerating wit and inspiring films, tore after the actress, angry determination fueling her steps. “Now I *know*,” the striking black woman called after her, “that I did *not* just see you crack my star in the face! And I *know* you did *not* just walk off *my* set!”

It didn’t take long for the taller woman to catch up with the outraged, younger one. A slender, dark gold brow rose, creasing the otherwise smooth, dark chocolate skin as Julie stepped in front of Vivian and stopped her with a hand out —palm forward with fine-boned fingers spread— in front of the actress’ face.

“Because,” Julie said, “you would have to be *outside* your *mind* to consider pulling that diva crap with me.”

“But Julie—”

“That’s *Ms. Bishop* to you, Miss Thang.” The director’s brow furrowed as she scowled. “Your behavior was completely inappropriate, totally unprofessional, and—”

“Not to mention,” a male growl interposed, “excessive!”

The enthralled audience sighed collectively when the latest player in the drama joined the scene.

Oscar[®] winner Ty Benson, an actor known for having the quintessential blend of looks, talent and a strong work ethic, walked from the crowd like Moses through the Red Sea. His left cheek bore a vivid, scarlet handprint, and the mark brought a low wave of murmurs from the people around him. While the movie star was jokingly described by peers and friends alike as “diplomatically challenged” — Ty Benson frequently suffered from open-mouth-insert-foot syndrome— it was widely agreed that the star’s blunt honesty never warranted an act of physical violence.

Thoroughly disgusted with the scene brought upon by the young starlet, the Best Actor[®] award-winner came to a halt in front of her, and crossed his arms over his chest. He eyed the young woman up and down, took a step back and softly applauded. “Brava, Vivian,” he drawled, arching an unimpressed brow. “I had no idea you aspired to be Erica Kane.”

The beautiful, black actress drew an affronted breath. “Well, I—”

Ty rolled his eyes. “Good Lord, Scarlet, you’re not going to say ‘I never’, are you? ‘Cause heaving breasts and glycerin tears might work on Daytime, but you’re

playing in the big leagues now. If you want to run with the wolves, Vivian, stop pissing like a puppy.”

Hands on her hips, Vivian glowered at the director and her star. “I don’t have to put up with this! My cousin—“

“Your cousin,” Julie interjected smoothly, “is the only reason you were hired for the role. He asked a favor and I tried to accommodate. But your acting is sub-par. Your behavior is outrageous and *completely* unprofessional. And I won’t tolerate either on my set.” The director lifted her chin, pushed her glasses down her long, slender nose, and studied the other woman through her gold cat’s eye frames. “*You* may go.”

Vivian’s jaw dropped a moment before she fisted her hands at her hips, and lifted her chin. “You can’t do that! I have a contract.”

Julie crossed her arms over her chest, unconsciously mimicking the stance of the famous actor at her side. “Consider it null and void. See what happens when you don’t read the fine print?”

On quicksand and having the sense to realize it, Vivian looked at the crowd around them. A smirk curved her lips upward as she scanned the sea of Caucasian faces. Confidence, smug and brash, stiffened her spine and put her dainty nose in the air. “And you think you can just replace me? The other black actresses you wanted for the role had conflicting schedules and couldn’t take this part. Where,” she asked, stretching her mocha arms outward to encompass the surrounding gawkers into the question, “will you find another on such short notice?”

Julie frowned, her golden brows drawing low on her forehead. Crap. She scanned the white faces as Vivian Cray had done. *Crap!* She felt a not-so-gentle nudge in her ribcage, and glanced over at her male star.

Ty Benson's gaze was fixed on something behind Vivian, and Julie craned her neck to see. No. Not something. *Someone.* Ty pointed with his chin for emphasis... and Julie grinned.

~ * ~

Chelsea Morgan took another bite of bagel and blindly reached for the bottle of Coke Classic at her side. Seated with several other extras on the edge of the newly erected boardwalk, her feet tapped the dirt with nervous energy as she watched the unscripted scene play out. Her eyes hurt from staring at Ty Benson. She really needed to blink, but she couldn't tear her gaze away if her life depended on it. On screen, he was gorgeous. In person, he was *beautiful*. Christ! She took a sip of the sweet, carbonated beverage—washing down the cream cheese— and set the bottle down next to her foot. She felt a not-so-gentle nudge in her ribcage, and glanced at her friend.

“Chels... Ty Benson's looking at *us!*” Lynn Hoffman's whisper had Chelsea whipping her head back around. Sure enough, the actor had taken a step back from the two arguing women, and had focused his attention on their audience.

“Oh, damn,” Lynn sighed as the handsome actor glanced in their direction. “He's even *more* gorgeous in person.”

Chelsea laughed. "Isn't *that* the understatement of the year. Just remember, Tyler's *mine*. *You* have Mel Gibson." She took another bite, larger than the first. Beside her, Lynn suddenly stiffened, then jammed her elbow into Chelsea hard enough to leave a bruise. Chelsea started; her foot jerked out, and knocked the bottle over. Soda poured out onto the dirt, running in rivulets into the makeshift road. Crap. She snatched up the clear plastic container, using the heel of her shoe to kick fresh dirt over the spill.

"Chelsea!"

Attention on her task, Chelsea chewed, then swallowed. "What?"

Chelsea didn't know what made her look fleetingly in Ty Benson's direction. Perhaps it was habit; she'd been staring at him for weeks now, ever since she was hired as an extra for his new movie. Her heart stopped. He gaze was on *her*.

He nodded, and her heart started beating again.

Way too fast.

Then the director... What was her name? Julie Bishop... looked at her, and a Cheshire grin split through her stormy expression. To Chelsea's horror, Ms. Bishop started towards her... Ty Benson at her side, and Vivian Cray at her heels.

The trio approached, Julie Bishop leaving the others to orbit around Chelsea muttering about bone structure and costume alterations. "Ty," the director called.

"Yeah?"

"Come stand next to..." Julie looked expectantly at the young woman next to her.

"Chelsea." Lynn spoke up for the suddenly mute woman.

“Ty, stand next to Chelsea.”

The actor did as instructed, taking Chelsea’s hands and pulling her to her feet. He even put an arm around Chelsea’s shoulders, tucking the stunned female into a semi-embrace.

The director circled the pair with eagle eyes. “Right age... excellent coloring... The nose studs would have to go, of course... It could work.”

“You can’t be serious!” Vivian Cray stomped a foot, planting the expensive prop-shoe she wore into the soft-drink mud pie on the ground.

The director glanced pointedly at the actress’ foot. “That will come out of your pay.”

Dismissing both shoe and starlet, the Julie Bishop took Chelsea’s trembling hand and tugged her gently from Ty’s hold. She wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and steered her away from the other extras. “How would you,” she asked, “like to be Ty Benson’s wife?”

Chapter One

*H*e's just a person. Even if he does look like a god and actually once portrayed Apollo on the big screen. No big deal. He has to light a match after he farts like everyone else... Chelsea Morgan rolled her eyes at herself and laughed softly. Yeah, right.

“Share the mirth, darlin’?”

Chelsea looked from the lighted, oversized, dressing room mirror to the dark chocolate-skinned man smoothing cosmetics onto her face. “Just trying to remind myself that Ty Benson’s human like everyone else, Drew,” she said. Her foot, encased in a late nineteenth century shoe, tapped against the wood bar of the stool with each ankle jiggle. “My nerves are shot.”

Drew Maverick— the so flamboyantly gay he embodied the stereotype makeup artist — chuckled as he dusted powder across the bridge of her nose. “Girl, first, quit bobbing your foot — I’m not going for the Egyptian look with your eyes. Second, don't worry about it. You’ll be fine. You *look* fine, at any rate! Those cheekbones! Those lips! They make Angelina Jolie’s look penciled in.” He waved the oversized powder brush. “Top of my head, hon, I know at *least* five A-List celebs that paid big

bucks for kissers like yours. And those luscious brown, bedroom eyes ... Like wet brown sugar! To die for!”

Arching a slender, albeit skeptical brow at his flattery, Chelsea turned her head to look in the mirror. Her exquisitely made up eyes widened in shock. “Oh, wow, Drew! You are *amazing!* Is that *me?* I look... *Gorgeous!*”

“Thank you, hon, but I only work with what’s available.” He tossed her a saucy wink, and Chelsea grinned.

“I don’t suppose I could talk you into staying in Montana when the filming is done.”

Drew laughed. “Girl, it’s beautiful out here, but *hell* no! It’s not nearly... *cheerful* enough for me, you feel me?” He winked again and Chelsea laughed.

“I can imagine.”

The impeccably dressed homosexual gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Don't worry, Girlfriend,” he eyed her up and down as she stood, shaking out her heavy skirt. “You look the part. Now, all you have to do is act it. You’ll do great.” He rolled his eyes and snorted. “Couldn’t be worse than *La Cray*. I mean, that devil spawned bitch—”

Chelsea’s perfectly groomed eyebrows rose. “Thanks, Drew,” she quickly interjected. She wasn’t above gossip, but she was nervous enough already. Any talk about the recently fired actress she was to replace would probably tip her over the edge.

His lips twitched, but he refrained from any further comment about the soap opera star. “You’re welcome. Now you’d best shake a leg before Julie comes looking

for you. Jules is a wonderful lady, but *damn!* She can even top a drag queen on the rag when she's mad!"

"Thanks for the tip," she murmured dryly.

"Anytime, honey."

Chelsea walked out into the warehouse, onto the set, where Julie had already instructed her to go for her screen test. Looking around, she quickly noticed that Ty Benson hadn't yet arrived, but some of the film crew milled about a coffee and bagel-laden table, waiting direction. She headed over to the group and introduced herself.

The man closest to her shook her hand. "Welcome aboard," he said. "I'm Mike. I'll be shooting your screen test." His hazel eyes gleamed as he looked her over with professional detachment before he smiled. "You'll do great."

Chelsea grinned, rolled her eyes. "*If I get the job.*"

Mike shrugged, popped a large, delicate slice of lox into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed the meat. "It's pretty much in the bag," he said, "unless you totally suck. Julie doesn't want to spend the time or money searching for someone else. So relax." He picked up one of the freshly baked breads, topped it with a generous portion of cream cheese, and offered it to her. "Have a bagel."

She declined with a shake of her head. "Not with this face on. Drew would kill me if I ruined his artistry."

"And take it from someone who knows," said a voice behind her. "You don't want to mess with Drew. He may seem angelic, but when he's mad... look out."

Oh, God. Chelsea's breath caught in her throat. She whirled around, her brown eyes wide and anxious. It was him!

Heart pumping so loud in her chest, she was certain everyone could hear it, Chelsea gawked at the movie star, her eyes opening even wider as she perused his six-foot-plus frame. She didn't even register the friendly greeting the actor shared with the cameraman. Good Lord, the man was *fine!* Sinfully fine. *Illegally* fine. *No* man on the planet had a right to look *that* fine. And in his historical, wild mountain-man-of-the-west costume, he was every woman's romantic fantasy come to life.

Scuffed and worn brown leather boots. Dark taupe trousers covered by rumble-rough, honey tan, suede chaps. Cream muslin cowboy shirt with dusky pearl buttons, worn loose and open at the collar to reveal golden tan, smooth skin. Complete with a vintage, chocolate brown leather duster, Ty Benson was a gunslinger of estrogen dreams. All that was missing was a pair of six-shooters at his lean hips.

Forcing herself to look up without swooning — courtesy of a bit of tender cheek clamped between a couple molars — she didn't hear her soft sigh as she gazed up into his face. Full, delicious lips — that succulent, bottom lip *cried* to be sucked! — jaw strong, nose straight, though perhaps a little large — but you know what they say about large noses — eyes so blue that in the low light they looked almost indigo, expressive sandy brows, and shaggy, golden blonde hair in layers to hang loose past his broad shoulders... Brad Pitt in *Legends of the Fall* had *nothing* on this guy.

"We haven't properly met." He smiled at her and extended his hand. Twin dimples book-ended his flawless, white smile. "I'm Tyler Benson."

Even happier that she resisted the temptation of those bagels, and hoping that her purring was heard only in her own head, Chelsea placed her hand in his, feeling

warmth on her palm where skin met skin. She opened her mouth to reply and mentally crossed her fingers for functioning vocal cords. “Chelsea Morgan.”

Tucking her hand in the crook of his arm, Tyler strolled further into the warehouse, leading her away from the others. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Chelsea. We didn’t exactly have the opportunity before.”

She flushed, remembering how embarrassingly tongue-tied she’d been at their first meeting.

“Are you nervous?” he asked, mistaking the reason for the blush. At her nod, his smile became indulgent. “Don’t be. It’s just a screen test. A formality, really. I wouldn’t worry about it; Julie’s set on you being Tina.”

He stopped suddenly and looked down at her. Chelsea shifted, her brow furrowing as she took in his six-foot-three-inch frame. His height made her feel tiny, and at five-eight, that was a first. It was also, she observed with some concern, quite a turn-on. And when Ty Benson picked up her left hand and glanced at it; the small opal ring glimmered softly on her third finger. “Married?” he observed, “What’s your husband’s name?”

“Jake. He’s a Sagittarius, like you,” Chelsea murmured absently, then felt her cheeks flame when the actor grinned.

His smile was a slow, sexy sprawl that made her toes clench in their expensive costume slippers. “So you know I’m a Sag, huh? What else do you know about me?”

“That you’re married and a Sag...” *And that husband or no husband, when you smile like that, I want to eat you with a spoon...* Chelsea tried to hide her

discomfiture with a shrug, withdrawing her hand from his grasp. "What else could I know about you? I don't know you."

"True." Tyler inclined his head to the left in agreement. "We don't know each other. Yet. But we will. We'll be acting the part of each other's spouse. We'll get to know each other rather well, I'd say. Do you have any kids?"

"Two girls. Six and three." Chelsea automatically reached for the white gold, oval locket necklace she usually wore, then remembered that she was in costume. "I can show you their pictures later if you're still interested."

Tyler's smile grew warmer, melted into his eyes. "Sure. I love kids. And I'm jealous. I've always wanted daughters."

"Do you have any?" she asked, feeling more at ease, and not wanting the conversation to end. "Kids, I mean?"

"Not yet. But I've several nieces and nephews in the meantime."

A tiny smile hovered around Chelsea's lips, and Tyler's endearing, lopsided grin widened. "You wouldn't be trying to get the inside scoop, would you?" he asked, only partially joking.

"Is there any other kind worth getting?" Chelsea quipped, and felt a strange, warm satisfaction when he chuckled.

"You see? You and I will get along just fine." He turned and started walking back towards the set, Chelsea following. "Do you want to do a quick run through of the scene?" he asked, stopping and looking at her over his shoulder.

"Yeah, actually, That'd be great. I'd like to go over it, make sure I haven't misunderstood what's expected of me."

Tyler opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by the sound of Julie Bishop's voice.

"Oh, good, you guys have gotten acquainted. Are we ready to shoot the scene?"

Chelsea watched, amused, as the film crew present snapped to attention when the director walked onto the set. Julie Bishop was a tall —slender to the point of thin— woman, with a full head of long, gold and brown dreadlocks. Not the neat, tidy dreadlocks that were currently *en vogue*, but the big, fat, beefy ones that screamed *Rastafari*. Her dark skin resembled smooth, dewy, ebony; her cheekbones traced to Mandingo ancestry. Her lips were full and broad, and so was her contagious smile. Her wit was sharp and dry, and her tongue even sharper. On her way to becoming a fixture in Hollywood, some in the business referred to her as being the female Spike Lee.

Julie took a seat in her personalized director's chair and Tyler and Chelsea walked to their marks. "Chelsea, you understand the scene?" she asked, then launched into dialogue, not waiting for an answer.

"Paul is going to ride off to confront the man at the saloon who insulted you and your marriage because you're not only a light-skinned colored woman, you're married to a white man. He's an ignorant, racist bastard, so naturally your relationship with Paul is unacceptable to him. You, being a black woman and a survivor, understand *why* he behaves as he does, even while you don't agree with it.

Tyler, as Paul, is incensed, and has made up his mind to defend your honor and that of your marriage. While you're touched that Paul is so dedicated to you, like

I said before, Tina's a survivor. She's been through this racial ignorance before and knows it won't be the last time in her life it will rear its ugly head. You know some battles are worth fighting and others are best to walk away from. You'd rather Paul save his energy for the family you and he are starting. In addition, you, Tina, have a bad feeling about the whole thing, and are trying to convince him by any means necessary, not to go. Okay? Remember, Chelsea, Tina knows that Paul would do *anything* for her. She knows how much he loves her, and she believes she will win this argument." Julie paused as she looked quickly around the set. "Ready?"

Chelsea nodded.

"Action!"

Chelsea took a deep breath, grabbed on to Tyler's forearm, wrapping her fingers around it tight enough to lighten her knuckles.

~ * ~

"Paul!" she cried out. "Please! Don't go! You don't understand! Men like him—"

"Men like him what?" Tyler turned abruptly to face Chelsea; his blue eyes glittered with rage, but softened as they gazed on his wife's features. One large hand, warm and protective, covered hers over his arm. "Men like him need to realize that *no one* insults my wife the way he has and gets away with it!"

Watching Ty Benson work up close and personal was so surreal that Chelsea would have forgotten her place if not for the actor's encouraging squeeze of his hand

over hers. With a start, Chelsea remembered her next line. “That’s a realization that’s *not* going to happen! What he said... He’s a product of his upbringing. He’s ignorant, and—!”

“That doesn't excuse what he did!” Tyler slipped an arm around Chelsea’s waist, tugged her close against him. His hand lifted, his fingers touching her cheek, his thumb caressing the smooth curve of the bone beneath the skin. “Sweetheart, he called you an ‘uppity, high-yella nigger’, and he...” His eyes flickered briefly to the curves of Chelsea’s breasts; the hand at her waist gently rubbed her back in a soothing motion. “He touched you. He put his *hands* on you! If it wasn’t for Parker...”

Chelsea latched onto his thought and clung to it, finished it. “That’s right, honey, Mr. Parker stopped him—”

“And for that, he has my eternal gratitude, but that bastard—” Tyler cut himself off, stepping away from Chelsea, his hands clenched into fists.

“Please, Paul... I’m *begging* you...” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I have a really bad feeling about this. Leave this one alone. It’s not worth it. *He’s* not worth it. Please don’t go. Just stay home with me...” Inspired, Chelsea touched her flat abdomen with her fingertips, “...with *us*.”

“Tina...” Tyler’s blue gaze darkened, his jaw relaxing for a moment as he stared into Chelsea’s brown eyes.

Chelsea held her breath, tamping down a surge of triumph; he would stay!

When he spoke, his voice was tired, raw. “Tina... I can’t. I just... I can’t let this go.”

Her breath expelled in a *whoosh* as shock washed over her, drained the blood from her face. “Paul...”

Tyler turned to leave, grabbing his pistols and tucking them into the waistband of his trousers. Chelsea’s eyes widened, frantic. “Paul!” He opened the door and took a step over the threshold.

“*Paul!*” Chelsea screamed, running to the door after him.

He turned around as Chelsea ran out of the house; her eyes glistening with unshed tears. He opened his arms and she flung herself into his embrace, inhaled the scent of leather from the collar of his duster, of him. “*Please!*” Lord, she loved his smell. Her hands reached up to grab his face and he bent his head down, claimed her mouth with his own.

Flames of desire sped from Chelsea’s lips throughout her body, sparking an awareness of herself —of him— that she’d not thought possible. Tyler’s tongue flicked across her lips and she parted them with a soft moan, gave him access. He took it ruthlessly, his warm, moist, full lips slanting over hers as his arms held her tightly against him.

~ * ~

Tyler was consumed with heat the moment Chelsea’s lips touched his. All he could feel was an intense, ferocious hunger for the woman he held in his arms. It burned him. Scared him. Thrilled him. He thrust his tongue into her mouth and the electricity she sparked when she gently stroked it with her own, shot fire directly into

his groin and ignited his heart. He gathered her closer against him, feeling himself harden against his thigh.

“I love you, Tina,” His voice was rough with emotion. He stepped back and released her.

“Paul!” Chelsea cried, but his back was to her as he strode off. “I love you!”

~ * ~

“Cut!”

Chelsea jolted at the sound of the director’s command, and turned to face the older woman, her heart pounding, her lips burning.

The director beamed from ear to ear. “And you said you weren’t an actor! When you threw in that improvisation by touching your stomach, you’re a natural!” she exclaimed. “That was amazing! Ty! Wasn’t she incredible!”

Tyler rejoined the women, a can of Mountain Dew in hand; grateful for the long coat he wore. His body still hummed from the feeling of Chelsea’s lips on his. His eyes, indigo with remembered passion, focused on the woman under discussion. “Incredible,” he softly agreed, staring at her lushly swollen mouth.

Chelsea stared at him for a moment, the heightened blush on her cheeks telling him that she too, was affected by their kiss, then looked at anywhere but him. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

If Julie noticed any strange undercurrents between the pair, she was too ecstatic to comment. Besides, there were more pressing matters at hand. “How soon

can you start shooting?" she asked in a jubilant voice that contrasted with Chelsea's incongruently subdued tone. "Tomorrow?"

Chelsea frowned. "I think so. I'll have to check with my husband first. See if he can look after our girls." Absently, she fiddled with the opal ring on her left hand, unwittingly bringing Tyler's attention to it.

Her husband. *She's married*, he reminded himself, his eyes falling to the gold band on his own left hand. *So am I*. He blinked, suddenly realizing that for the first time since his marriage, his focus had actually been on the woman in his arms during the scene, rather than on his actual wife.

"Or you could bring them to the set, we've got a day care system set up here," Julie was saying as Tyler brought his attention back to the conversation. "What are their names again?"

Chelsea smiled. "Faye and Grace."

"Yes, if Jake can't look after Faye and Grace tomorrow, bring them with you."

"Alright," Chelsea acquiesced.

The director nodded, satisfied, her head turning at the sound of her name being called. "See you tomorrow then!" she said, and waved before walking away.

Tyler and Chelsea looked at each other. Tyler was the first to break the silence. "Congratulations," he said.

Chelsea licked her lips, unintentionally calling his attention back to them. They were red and swollen from his kiss.

“Thanks,” she murmured. She noticed that at some point, he’d wiped off the subtle lipstick color she wore from his mouth, but it still looked... branded. Like she’d staked a claim somehow, by kissing him. Forcing her gaze elsewhere, Chelsea glanced over at the crew, watched them prepare for tomorrow’s shoot.

“Chelsea—“

“Tyler—“

They both spoke simultaneously, then laughed softly. “You first.” Tyler conceded, taking off the duster and strategically draping it over an arm.

“Well, I... I was wondering if you’d like to come to my home for dinner this evening? Meet the girls, and Jake...”

“Jake?”

“My husband.” A gentle reminder.

“I...”

“It wouldn’t be anything fancy, just elk steaks. Beer.” Chelsea licked her lips again, nervously, not seeing Tyler’s eyes darken as they followed the pink tip of her tongue. “U-Unless you have plans?”

He was having a harder time than usual getting his mind off of the silky, seductive memory of her mouth on his. He shook his head to clear it. What was she talking about? Dinner, that’s right. Tyler shuddered and winced as he thought of the miserable fare offered by the hotel’s room service. Because of the unusual and long work hours of filming, most restaurants were closed whenever he was free. Fast food, when it was open, was an option he frequently took advantage of, but Lord, did it

have to be so close to the highway? Any more autographs at that place and he would have carpal tunnel.

There was one all-night grocery —amazingly enough— but by the time he was done for the day, he was usually too exhausted to buy groceries, haul them back to the hotel, and cook up something edible in his suite’s miniscule kitchenette. The thought of an actual, home-cooked —and not by him!— meal made his mouth water.

Plus there was the added bonus of not having to eat either alone or with a film crew. It would be nice to visit with non-Hollywood people. It didn’t take much for the L.A. scene to get old. He trusted the film crew, his fellow actors. Enjoyed spending time with most of them. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. But what other options did he have out here in... What was the name of this town again? Oh, right. Black Creek.

His thoughts came back around to the young lifesaver in front of him. By the faint rosy hue over her smooth cheeks and the embarrassed look in her pretty eyes, he’d taken too long to respond. Oops. He opened his mouth, “I—“

Chelsea noticed his flinch, saw him shake his head, and was surprised at how disappointed she felt. To hide it, she cut him off before he could refuse. “You’re probably busy. That’s cool. Maybe some other time.” She looked down at herself, remembering that she was still in costume. “I’d better go change,” she murmured, then turned to go. She stopped when she felt Tyler’s hand on her shoulder.

“Wait... I was going to say that I would love to join your family for dinner.”

She turned around, a smile lighting her face, bringing a glow to her dark eyes. “Really?”

“Yeah, really.” He grinned in response. “You have no idea how much.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “Huh. Want to bet? You’re staying at the Sweet Grass Inn... Don’t tell me you actually *eat* there too.”

His grin turned sheepish, and he tugged his ear. “Yeah... I do actually.”

Chelsea clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth in a way that somehow managed to convey both sympathy and amusement. “Esther Jones is a wonderful person and a great friend... But a cook?” She shook her head. Knowing how dire his eating situation was gave her courage; she placed a hand on his arm.

“Tell you what. Consider this invitation open indefinitely.”

Tyler laughed. It was a rich sound that Chelsea somehow remembered... Felt its echo from long ago. Hearing it left such a feeling of warmth and satisfaction that she took a step back, as if doing so would somehow distance her from the emotion.

“So what time?” he asked.

“Whenever,” she replied. “We’re not into formalities.”

“After my own heart.”

Chelsea blinked at his innocent choice of words, and Tyler’s smile widened.

“How about in around three hours? It’ll give me time to change.”

Chelsea nodded. “Works for me. Oh, directions...” She looked around for a piece of paper or something to write on, and came up with one of the napkins from the lunch table. Tyler walked up next to her, and located a pen hidden between the nearly empty lox platter and cream cheese bowl.

She murmured her thanks, scribbled her address, phone number, and directions on the flimsy paper, and handed it to him. "It's only a little way out of town, but not hard to find off Two-Eighty-Seven."

Tyler looked at the napkin briefly, then tucked it into the pocket of his shirt. "See you in a bit," he said, and walked away.

Chelsea hurried in the opposite direction to the dressing room. She couldn't wait to get home and tell Jake the exciting news.

Chapter Two

As he took the left turn that merged him onto the two-lane highway, Tyler again debated whether joining Chelsea Morgan's family for dinner was the wisest choice. Insofar as gaining knowledge of her in a home setting that could prove to be valuable as a resource while filming, the answer would be yes. Seeing what Chelsea was like with her family, her husband, would give him a resource to utilize as he played the role of her spouse.

On the other hand, hours had passed, and he still wasn't able to erase the feelings, the passion, their shared kiss had invoked during the screen test. And that, in itself, was a novel experience for Ty Benson.

After leaving the set, he'd returned to his hotel room, showered and – against his better judgment – called his wife, thinking it would help him focus. To Tyler's surprise, it was good to hear Jennifer's voice. Or, at least it was until she remarked, in rather snide tones, how the press was bombarding her with questions about when she and Ty were going to start a family, start having babies. "It's like, 'Hello? I'm in the middle of solidifying my film career, and they want me barefoot and pregnant. As if!'" Tyler sighed, his hands unconsciously clenching tighter around the leather-

wrapped steering wheel. A year ago, maybe two, he would have wondered the same thing. Now... Now he knew better.

His wife was in Greece, also working on a film, and it was the first time in nearly three weeks that they'd talked. He laughed with her over the Vivian Cray drama— knowing she'd enjoy that bit of news; Jennifer and Vivian did *not* get along. He also told her about the new cast member, that he'd been invited to dinner with her family tonight. He ignored the familiar, derisive tinge to her laughter, her sarcastic comment about how bored he must be out there in the sticks to have set himself up for such an auspicious event —chalking it up to stress and exhaustion. He knew firsthand how grueling a film schedule could be. It hadn't been the longest, or most interesting, or most intimate conversation they'd shared, but when he hung up, Tyler felt more like himself. More in control. And less compelled by the character he'd signed on to portray.

The rented, four-wheel drive pickup turned into the Morgan drive easily despite the deep drifts, and came to a stop in front of the oversized, two-car garage. Immediately, two big dogs rushed from the house, barking, and when he looked up, he could see Chelsea Morgan framed in the doorway before she walked towards him, her breath misting in the frigid air, her boots softly crunching through the pristine white snow.

“Iya! Kemah! Down!”

Iya, the slim white and black creature he guessed, from the way that Chelsea touched the dog's head when it came running back to her, barked once more, then settled down. The Bernese Mountain dog he surmised, familiar with the large breed,

must be Kemah. This one stayed next to the door of his truck, and kept barking until Chelsea reached the truck and pulled the enormous dog aside with an exasperated roll of her eyes.

“Honestly, Kemah!” she exclaimed as Tyler opened the door and stepped down from the truck. Chelsea looked up and smiled at him. “Thanks for coming, Tyler.”

“I’m sorry I’m late. I had to make a stop.” He reached into his truck and picked up the rather large bouquet of pale peach roses that lay across the passenger seat. He held them out to Chelsea. “For the lady of the house.”

A smile lit from within. He must have gone to Manhattan, or even Bozeman; she knew their local florist didn’t carry this color rose. She blushed with pleasure. It tinted the cocoa of her skin beneath the overhead light from the deck. Her gaze lifted from the flowers back to him.

Was it his imagination, or did her eyes seem even warmer than before?

“Thank you, they’re beautiful.”

His lips curved and he patted the Bernese’s head. “You’re welcome.”

“Well, come inside, no need to stand out here and freeze.” Chelsea started back to the house and Tyler fell in step beside her. He held the door open for her and laughed as Iya and Kemah scrambled past their owner —nearly knocking her over— in their haste to get in where it was warm.

“Your dogs are gorgeous,” he observed, watching as the dark, tri-colored Bernese ran over to a dish of water on the floor.

“Yeah, but their manners are atrocious.” Chelsea looked warmly at the dog. “Can you believe we found Kemah in an animal shelter? Whoever got rid of her was a fool. Just like the hunters who abandoned our Iya six years ago.”

“Iya?” He assumed she referred to the other canine, but seeing a white and orange and brown longhaired feline strut by, he wasn’t sure.

“The Pointer.”

Iya heard her name and trotted over, giving Tyler the once-over with her brown eyes before returning to circle three times over her dog bed and dropping down onto it with a contented sigh.

“They’re both so amazing with the girls. I don’t know how they put up with them. I keep telling Faye and Grace that if I were a dog, I would have bit them a long time ago. But Iya and Kemah just take it in stride.”

Tyler heard footsteps behind him and turned just as Chelsea said, “Jake, honey, look what Tyler brought for me.”

Chelsea’s husband eyed the flowers in his wife’s hand and arched a dark blonde, amused brow. “They’re nice.”

Chelsea rolled her eyes. “I’m gonna find a vase.” She started to walk away, then seemed to remember that her husband and Tyler hadn’t been introduced. “Tyler, this is my husband, Jake. Jake, Tyler.”

Keeping his amazement that Chelsea’s husband looked like he’d belong a Benson family reunion to himself, Tyler held out his right hand. “That’s a sweet instrument you got there.”

Jake Morgan shifted the vintage Golden Höfner archtop guitar into his left hand before clasping the taller man's hand. "Yeah, she's a beauty. Good to meet you, Tyler."

"You too."

Jake cocked his head in a manner that clearly suggested he was sizing the other man up. "Do you play?"

"God, no" Tyler looked over the guitar again, as one would a fine sculpture. "Though I received one similar to yours a few years back as a gift. To this day, I don't know why. When it comes to music, I'm strictly a listener."

A smile tipped up one half of Jake's mouth. He glanced over at his wife who was rummaging through cupboards for a vase in the kitchen behind them. "Chelsea calls her the 'Other Woman'".

Both men smiled in the indulgent way men do when a woman's thoughts entertain them. Jake Morgan's lopsided grin widened, became mischievous. "I've heard a lot about you," he added.

"Good lord. You have?" Tyler's brow furrowed slightly, and he tilted his head to watch Chelsea as she set the flowers on the counter. "Is that a good thing?"

The grin faded and Jake looked over his shoulder to see his spouse stand on tiptoe and pluck a white Fiesta[®] vase from the back of a cupboard. He shrugged, a casual movement that barely lifted his broad shoulders. "Well, Chels told me about her screen test success... and you're here, aren't you."

Wondering what Chelsea's husband meant by the cryptic tone under his comment, the gleam of Tyler's smile hardened. "Looks like."

“At any rate, Chelsea’s been floating on air since she got back to the house. I like seeing her so excited about something.” Jake paused, his blue gaze hardened as he eyed the other man. “I’m not overly thrilled about you kissing my woman, mind you, but I can understand it being part of the role.” Picking up the guitar again, Jake turned and walked into the kitchen. “Can I get you a beer? Pop? Water?” he called as he neared the refrigerator.

Direct and to the point, Tyler mused as he struggled to keep his surprise from showing. He could certainly respect that. Relaxing, Tyler called out, “Beer is good,” as Chelsea hurried past him with the flowers and set them on the dining room table.

She smiled when she turned back to face him. “Are you cold, or can I take your coat?”

Snorting, Tyler started to comply by shrugging out of his thick, black wool jacket, but as he started to hand it over to Chelsea, a young girl with long, fawn-colored hair, bounded down the hall, and barreled into the heavy fabric. Bouncing off the material and landing on her bottom with an *Oof!*, she tipped her head back and cocked it to one side as she stared at him much like her father had done.

Tyler bent down on one knee, draping the coat across a denim-clad thigh. Eye-level, he forced himself not to smile as she took his measure. His patience was rewarded when she arched a brow in distinct replication of her mother as she eyed him up and down. “I’m Faye, who are you?”

Another, smaller girl followed her and nearly tripped over the first. “This is Grace. She’s my baby sister,” Faye declared. “She’s three and I’m six. How old are you?”

Enraptured, Tyler barely noticed Chelsea slipping his coat from his grasp as he looked over to Grace, who studied him with large, almond-shaped eyes. He smiled at the little pixie, then returned his attention to the older child. "I'm Ty," he said. "I'm thirty-eight."

The six-year-old's hazel-amber eyes widened. "Wow, you're like... *old!*" She looked at her mother, flipping a lock of silky hair over her shoulder. "Momma, is Ty as old as you?"

Chelsea's right eyebrow hooked up on her face as she scrutinized her oldest daughter with a faux-stern look. "I'm ten years younger, Miss Thing. You tell me."

Faye scrunched up her nose and frowned, concentrating.

"Remember to count backwards," Chelsea murmured as she gracefully dropped to squat beside her eldest.

Muttering, Faye looked at her hands, folding down a finger for each year from the ten splayed digits as she took her mother's advice. Suddenly, her teeth flashed in triumph. "No. He isn't. You're twenty-eight."

Chelsea snorted. "Yeah, and thanks for reminding me. Good counting though, Pumpkin."

"I'm three," Grace announced suddenly. Her eyes, so green they were almost black, sparkled at the newcomer. "I'm a Leo."

Tyler's eyes crinkled with humor and a laugh escaped. "You are?"

Grace nodded, her tan cheeks dimpling as she smiled. "Yep. I'm a kitty cat." That being said, she dropped to all fours and crawled away from the trio, meowing in a manner that made her sound like a cat with a twisted tail.

“*Oi*,” Chelsea murmured, sliding Tyler a glance from the corner of her eye, watching him watch her daughter as he straightened. “She’s going to be in rare form tonight.” Chelsea and Tyler were both laughing as Jake returned from the kitchen, three open bottles of Corona in his hands and a quizzical look for his wife.

“Grace,” Chelsea said.

Jake snorted. “Goofy kid,” he muttered, but a deaf man could hear the love in his tone. He gave a beer to Tyler first, then his wife. Taking a sip, he shook his head.

“Faye’s Scales,” the budding astrologer paused in her caterwauling to declare it to the adults from clear across the room, then resumed her yowling.

Tyler looked over at Chelsea, his eyes questioning. She chuckled. “Gracie is telling you that her sister is a Libra.”

“Oh.”

The actor’s gaze met Jake’s, who rolled his eyes and shrugged. “Don’t look at me. It’s Chelsea’s thing,” Jake said, taking another swallow of his beer. “She studies it, shares it with our girls. I figure one aspiring astrologer is enough for any family, but the girls disagree.”

A gentle but persistent tug on his hand had Tyler looking down to his right. Faye dimpled at him, flipped another errant length of hair over her other shoulder. “Momma could do your chart,” Faye added. “She did ours.”

Tyler shot a questioning look over at Chelsea who looked delighted by the prospect. “I’ve always wondered what time you were born,” she admitted. “And I have this really cool computer program...”

“Three after twelve in the afternoon,” Tyler responded to her unasked question.

Chelsea’s eyes sparkled. “I’d almost guessed it. I had a feeling you were born around noon.”

“Can you roll your tongue like a burrito? Like this?” Faye suddenly interjected, adding action to question as she tapped his arm.

Tyler stuck his tongue out, and to Faye’s delight, its sides were curled up to form a cylindrical shape, just like hers. Giggling, she hollered for her sister to come see, who ran to show the newcomer that she also could manage that trick with her own tongue, having figured it out just a week or so earlier.

“Momma can’t, you know. Daddy and Gracie and me can do it, but she can’t. She’s the *only* one.”

Chelsea rolled her eyes, nudged her eldest lightly with a hip, causing Faye to shriek out a laugh as she collapsed to the floor. “It’s true. I’m not in with the In Crowd.”

“Welcome to *my* world.” Enjoying the dazed look on their guest’s face, Jake propped his guitar against a wall, his lips twitching as he fought a smile. “I’ll put the steaks on the grill. I’ll rescue you when they’re done.”

“‘When they’re done’? The steaks or your kids?” the actor called after the other man’s retreating back.

“Both!”

~ * ~

It was close to four hours later by the time Tyler set his spoon down and leaned back in his chair. He picked up his cup of coffee and took a long, fortifying swallow. "I can't remember the last time I had a meal that good," he said, carefully placing the white, ceramic, Fiesta[®] piece back on its saucer.

Beaming from the praise, Chelsea held out the nearly empty, matching platter of fresh baked, still warm fudge brownies and wiggled it. "One more?" she asked, shaking a can of whipped cream with her free hand.

Shaking his head even as he reached for another of the delectable treats, Tyler sighed, "You're a temptress, Chels." He patted his flat abdomen. The action pressed the soft folds of his charcoal grey shirt against the hard planes, and he smiled at his hostess whose attention seemed to waver from the plate she held to his body. "Evil woman." He winked at her to show that he was joking, and Chelsea uttered a soft laugh.

Surprised by his familiar use of her name, Chelsea's gaze shifted to her husband doing dishes, then to the can of whipped cream, a ghost of a smile hovering about her lips. "So I've been told," she murmured. Her brown eyes focused on her guest as she put the dessert down and picked up the can of whipped confection. She tipped her head back and squirted the foamy treat directly into her mouth.

Realizing he was gaping, Tyler used his open mouth to take a big bite of his brownie, and focused on the act of chewing. It was either focus on that or focus on Chelsea and the whipped cream, and that particular path led to folly. He shifted

awkwardly in his seat. Too late. He'd been alone for too long, he decided. If this was her way of paying him back for his earlier tease, she won this round.

Chelsea winked at her famous guest as she wiped a smidge of errant cream from the corner of her mouth, then stood and began clearing the table. She brought the dishes to Jake, who took them from his wife and placed them in the dishwasher.

Finishing his brownie, and deciding with amusement that maybe he couldn't stand the heat, Tyler walked over to the living room and dropped onto the overstuffed, cream sofa. Head tipped back as he soaked in the soothing atmosphere of soft, murmuring voices and the clinking of dishware, he closed his eyes. One foot lazily tapped the honey-oak floor in time to the Willie Nelson that poured from the stereo speakers.

He was content, he realized. Relaxed. Probably for the first time in... He stopped the thought, and tried to remember when. Eesh. Had it really been that long?

~ * ~

Tucking Faye and Grace in for the night, Tyler was gifted with the distinct and welcome pleasure of telling the two girls a bedtime story, then kissing their sweet foreheads goodnight. Something wistful inside him clenched when Chelsea, who followed him into the room to kiss her girls good night, walked up to him, briefly placing a palm on his shoulder before turning to her children.

He watched —with that same something relaxing deep within— as she smoothed back the dark blonde locks on each small head, an intimate smile curving her lips upward as she gazed at her children. She glanced back over her shoulder, and their eyes met... and held. Suddenly he thought of her placing her hand on her belly earlier that day, as though she carried his child. How that tiny, impromptu gesture had touched him. He thought of how good she felt in his arms, of how soft her lips felt under his own. He wondered if her thoughts ran alongside his, what she would do if he reached across to her and —

Jake walked in to the bedroom then, his presence inadvertently breaking the connection between his wife and the actor. Chelsea stood and slipped her arms around her husband's waist, and Jake placed an absent kiss on her forehead, one hand gently caressing the small of her back. It was a gesture Tyler could easily see himself do; it was a place he could easily see himself fill.

Tyler walked out of the bedroom, feeling very much a third wheel... and more than a little disturbed by the strong feeling of jealousy provoked by Jake's familiarity with Chelsea. He walked back into the living room, sat down on the couch, and stared morosely out the window. He was a married man for God's sake. Briefly, Jennifer and her latest escapade came to mind, and his frown deepened. More to the point, Chelsea was a married woman, and he'd just finished sharing a meal with her husband. In their home, with their children.

Even with that reminder, the golden sound of Chelsea's soft laughter made him look up. She walked back down the hall with Jake. Their hands clasped together, her face raised and open like an adoring flower as she gazed at her

husband. Jake, his handsome face light with love that Tyler doubted he cared could be seen, lifted his head to look over at the actor.

“Ready for dessert?” he asked, releasing Chelsea’s hand as she stepped forward.

Tyler jolted, stunned. Surely Jake didn't mean...

Chelsea took another step forward and turned into the kitchen. “I baked brownies,” her voice called from the other room.

Tyler closed his eyes, disgusted with himself. For a second, he’d thought Jake had offered his wife for dessert... And all he could think of was... Yes.

~ * ~

A tap on his shoulder, snapped him out of his reverie. Opening his eyes, Tyler saw that Jake held out what looked to be a tightly rolled cigarette, but one whiff revealed more than that.

“Thanks, man,” Tyler said. He took the joint from Chelsea’s husband and inhaled deeply. It’d been a long while since he’d partaken in smoking marijuana. It felt good. Holding the smoke in his lungs, he offered the joint to Chelsea, who shook her head. Exhaling a cloud of pungent smoke, Tyler felt muscles he hadn’t even known were tense relax.

“No thanks,” she said, and took another bite of brownie.

“She doesn’t smoke pot anymore,” Jake clarified, taking the ganja cigarette from Tyler’s fingers and bringing it to his lips. “Hasn’t for the last eleven years.”

“Why not?” Tyler asked, directing the question to Chelsea, who shrugged.

“I don’t know. Just didn’t feel like it anymore, I guess. Especially once I knew I’d be having children. Besides, the last time I did, all I wanted to do was sleep, so what was the point. I think I was just too accustomed to New York buddha.”

Inhaling more sticky smoke, Tyler blinked through it at the young woman.

“New York buddha?”

A low, intimate chuckle full of unshared memories escaped from her lips.

“What my friends and I used to call Mary Jane back when I lived in The City.”

“You’re from New York?” Tyler couldn’t keep the surprise from his tone.

Chelsea’s answering grin was almost feral in its smug Manhattan pride. “Born and raised, yo.”

Snorting and trying not to laugh, Tyler stood and stretched, shaking his head the next time Jake silently offered another hit. “I’ve gotta be going,” he said. “Got to be on set early tomorrow.” He eyed the joint again. “Well, maybe one more for the road.”

Rolling her eyes, Chelsea withdrew from the room and returned a moment later with Tyler’s coat. As he shrugged into the garment, Jake stood, Iya and Kemah automatically coming to his side, escorting the humans as they walked to the door.

“Thank you for supper,” Tyler said as he straightened his collar, “and the company.” He smiled at the two of them. “I had a great time.”

Chelsea grinned. “Thank you for coming.” She took a step forward, rose onto her toes, and impulsively brushed her lips against Tyler’s cheek. “We loved having you.” Her grin was wider when she stepped back, Jake’s arm slipping, possessively,

Tyler thought, around his wife's waist. "And don't forget, the invitation's open indefinitely."

"Good to have you," Jake added, seconding his wife's opinion, and holding out his hand. "You're welcome anytime. And thanks for your help with our girls. Faye and Gracie were pretty wound up tonight." He laughed. "They love showing off for company."

Tyler shook Jake's hand, his eyes brightening with warmth. "It was my pleasure. Your girls are great. I hope to have several of my own just like them some day." He walked over and stood next to his car, looked back at the couple silhouetted in the doorway. Chelsea was leaning into Jake's embrace, and Tyler had no doubt that the reason why he couldn't see Jake's other hand was because it was cupping his wife's rear end. After all, it was where his hand would be, had Chelsea been his. Brows knitted slightly, he waved, and then climbed into his rig.

"See you tomorrow," Chelsea called out as he reached for the door.

Tyler looked up. Thanks to the new moon and a serious lack of neighbors, it was genuinely dark night. Only the wash from the security lamps on the garage and the warm glow from inside the house provided light. Even so, brown eyes met blue through the windshield of his vehicle. For the second time in his life, Tyler felt that tingle of awareness. Even the sudden bright flood of his headlights didn't diminish the feeling.

Trying to push the feeling aside, Tyler turned the key in the ignition and, as he drove back down the driveway, he glanced into his rearview mirror. He was strangely relieved to see the door closed.

Chapter Three

*H*e watched for a moment as Chelsea carefully smoothed the soft cotton calico of her gown. It was obvious from the gesture that she enjoyed the foreign feel of the material, of the light crunch of the petticoats beneath her palm. Something had occurred to him after he'd left the Morgan home last night: He'd seen Chelsea before. The memory was but a faint wisp, but it was there. Like the elusive song dancing on the tip of one's tongue, it bugged the heck out of him.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Tyler glanced around the set, as, in the distance, Julie cried, "Cut!" From the depth of exasperation in her voice, he figured their break just became longer than the originally planned hour. Long enough for him to thank Chelsea again for inviting him to dinner... and long enough to put to rest that nagging glimmer of recall.

For once, he wasn't disappointed in the shooting delay. That was a surprise in itself for the consummate professional. Even more surprising was his eagerness to use this extra time to get to know his co-star. Maybe they'd go for a walk. The late afternoon sun just gave off a "going for a stroll" aura to the day. Plus, even though

they couldn't wander far, they'd get some privacy, which to him, was a precious commodity.

Tyler found his attention drifting back to the woman a few yards from him. There was just something about her that drew him to her, but damned if he could pinpoint what.

"Hey, Chels."

She looked up and as he approached, a warm, ready smile in place as she raised a slender hand to shield her eyes from the sun behind him. Was it him, or did her eyes seem to shine a little brighter? Tyler rolled his eyes at his own ego. *Note to self: Don't believe the hype.*

"Tyler." Her smile widened between twin dimples, and she nodded over at their director who appeared to be in deep discussion with a few of the other stars of the film. "Looks like it'll be a while before Julie gets to our scenes. I was thinking about going for a walk." She paused, her brown eyes shifted toward the setting sun. "Try to clear my head." Her shoulders rose and fell in a tiny shrug, and she laughed softly at herself before facing him again. "Care to join me?"

Tyler blinked at her in amazement, a slow smile curving his own full lips.

"Sure."

Chelsea's sheepish smile deepened into a full-fledged grin.

"In fact," he continued, "I was going to ask *you* if you would like to join *me* for a walk... And thank you again for dinner last night. I had a great time. You have a beautiful family."

“Thank you,” she said as she stepped toward him. He turned slightly to accommodate her capacious skirts, and the pair walked slowly away from the set, moving easily together as if they’d done it for a lifetime.

“You’re welcome to join us anytime,” Chelsea said. “And Julie too.” She laughed softly, under her breath. “Jake thought I was a character when he met me... what with me being from New York. I can’t wait until he meets Julie.”

The New York mention nagged at him, so he asked, “You mentioned the City last night. Which borough?” he asked.

“Manhattan. Born and raised.” Chelsea glanced at him again before dropping her gaze to the uneven terrain. “Careful... Cow pies and deer droppings abound,” she warned, lifting her skirts to keep the material from getting snagged by sagebrush.

Tyler, who’d been watching her rather intently as he tried to place this new piece of information, felt his boot slide into something suspiciously thick and squishy. He looked down to see puffs of steam escape from the edges of his boot, engoosed, as it was, by the hot pile. “Shit.” He narrowed his eyes as hers perused the landscape, trying to find the bovine instrument of his costume’s destruction.

“Correct on the first try,” Chelsea laughed as he did a weird shuffle-hobble over to a rock to attempt to scrape the dung from the shoe. “Tyler...”

“Crap. Leslie’s going to kill me.” It was a doubtful scenario — the costume coordinator adored Tyler and everyone, including the young woman at his side who rolled her eyes at him, knew it.

Still laughing, Chelsea tugged on his arm with one hand and pointed to the dirt road not far from them with the other. “Let’s walk on a relatively safer surface,”

she suggested. “The dirt and gravel will probably take it off without much effort on your part.” Chelsea stepped back and eyed him up and down, her look blatantly admiring as she took in his costume of brown leather duster, tan leather pants, brown wool vest, and the loose, cream colored, muslin shirt. “Besides, you can always tell Leslie that it’ll lend authenticity to your character.”

“Good lord. Julie’s created a monster.” A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth and he let her pull him with her over to the road. “Who happens to be right,” he agreed, lagging for a moment to give the manure another chance to remove itself from the sole of his shoe against a clump of dried, snow-encrusted grass.

When they reached the road, Tyler automatically held out his arm —much like Paul would do for Tina— and Chelsea, just as automatically, took it. He stopped, and she shot him a questioning look. It quickly became one of comprehension when he took off his coat and wrapped her in it before hooking her arm with his once more. “It’s chilly... I noticed the goose bumps on your arms.” He didn’t mention that he also noticed the hard beads of her nipples against the cotton of her gown. In addition, he refrained from mentioning the way the golden rays of the sun cast a reddish hue over the mocha skin, her dark, near-black hair, giving her a glow as though she walked in fire.

“Thanks, I was getting cold,” she lied, grateful he didn’t know the real reason for her goose bumps. The sun appeared to be caught in his hair; the sun-kissed, shoulder-length locks were bright yellow flames against his golden, tanned skin. Chelsea shivered, looked away from him and noticed a red-shafted flicker in a tree skeleton not far from them. A good omen. But of what?

“Hey, look at that bird.” His whisper in her ear made her start, and Chelsea glanced at him long enough to note that he saw the bright orange and brown bird as well.

“It’s a flicker,” she said in low tones, hoping the bird wouldn’t fly off. It’d been a long while since she’d seen one, even though Jake often brought home their feathers.

The thought of her husband made her look at her hand; her palm rested against the fine, silky, platinum hairs of Tyler’s thick forearm as though it belonged there. She slipped it from the warm skin, planning on letting it drop to her side, but Tyler caught her hand in his and, as if by their own accord, their fingers entwined together as they walked on.

“Where in Manhattan?” Tyler asked. “Which part?”

“Uptown, on the outskirts of Harlem.” And, though Chelsea figured Tyler knew what she meant, she clarified anyway. “Near Columbia University.”

He laughed and she looked at him. “What?”

“You mean to tell me that you’ve never noticed how New Yorkers always capitalize ‘The City’ when they speak of it, as if no other city exists?”

Chelsea grinned. “You mean like how people from Los Angeles always say ‘L.A.’ rather than ‘Los Angeles’ when asked where they’re from?”

Tyler rubbed the dark blonde stubble at his chin, as if pondering the question. “Yeah,” he drawled, his teeth white in his face as her smiled at her. “Exactly.”

She shrugged with false modesty. “That’s because there *is* no city like New York City.”

“Can’t argue with that. How long has it been since you’ve been back there?”

“Long...” Air left her full lips in a long sigh. “Nine years? Something like that.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Sometimes, I do. Jake and I keep saying we’ll go back for a visit at some point, but something always seems to come up.” Her smile faded as her eyes glazed as her focus turned inward. “I’d love to take the girls to The Bronx Zoo, the Botanical Gardens, the ballet, the Met... V & T Pizzeria...” She shook her head, dispelling her East Coast memories, and looked at him. “Eesh. I sound like a tourist guide. What about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. When was the last time you were in ‘The City’?”

“A month ago.”

Chelsea laughed. “A month ago?”

“Yeah. I went for a party.”

“A party?”

Tyler’s gaze fell on her, one corner of his mouth quirked upwards. “You fishing?”

She smirked at him. “Of course.”

Chuckling, he said, “It was a birthday party for a friend of mine. He threw it in a bar in the Village.”

Grinning, Chelsea asked him, “Which bar?”

Tyler frowned, trying to remember the name of the strange place. “It was a weird one, but had a cool vibe. I remember it had this... I don’t know. Motorcycle parts and metal sculpture of sorts at the door, which was actually a flight of steps that led down to the bar. Not a very big place once you were inside, but was it packed!”

Chelsea stopped in the road, her hand tightening around his. “Was there a great, big, black guy at the door whose voice had a higher pitch than expected given his size?”

He tilted his head as he thought back. “Yeah. Nice guy. Body-building-looking fellow.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “Dave the Libra.”

“Huh?”

“His name is Dave.”

To Tyler’s amazement, tears gathered in her eyes.

“That bar you were at is called the Scrap Bar.” Her large, dark eyes grew darker, wetter. “I used to hang out there with my friends all the time... From when I was fourteen, until I moved out here.”

“*Fourteen?*”

“Was there another bouncer there, a white-looking guy with brown curly hair to here?” Ignoring his exclamation, Chelsea gestured with her free hand to her shoulders. “Another muscular guy. *Very good-looking guy.*”

Tyler rolled his eyes. “I don’t know. I wasn’t exactly looking for a date, you know. Possibly. *White-looking?*”

“He’s a mutt, like me. Multi-racial.” Her lower lip trembled. “Dan the Leo.” The trembling turned into quivering as it stretched into a smile. She blinked, and the collection of unshed tears spilled down her cheeks. Chelsea reached to wipe them away, but Tyler was faster. His thumb swept the moisture away, and he looked at her, shocked.

“You’re homesick!”

“Once a New Yorker, always a New Yorker.” Chelsea shrugged again and Tyler thought to himself that she was doing a lot of that lately. “Sometimes,” she admitted. “I don’t know.” She blinked again, and Tyler found himself catching another tear. “More so with you guys here.”

His brows came together. “What do you mean?”

She caught her bottom lip in her teeth, chewed it as she contemplated the question. “I haven’t seen a movie set since I left New York... I used to run across them a lot.” She grinned as she looked at him. “This isn’t the first time I’ve been in a movie. Bet you didn’t know I was an ‘extra’ in *Ghostbusters*, did you.”

Dumbfounded, Tyler shook his head.

“Yeah, well, they shot a large portion of that movie in my old neighborhood. I was among hundreds walking across the Columbia University campus that day. I wore my navy school uniform and crossed that campus as I did nearly every day on my way home from St. Hilda’s and St. Hugh’s.”

Tyler smirked. “A Catholic school girl, eh? Sweet.”

“Episcopalian, thank you very much.”

His smirk widened. “Even sweeter.”

“Perv.”

“Guilty.”

Her grin turned into laughter. “Well, anyway... If you squint really, *really* hard, you might be able to notice me on the steps in the background.”

His laughter joined hers, rumbling from his chest into the cool air between them.

“Then there was *Who’s That Girl*.”

Tyler’s laughter turned into a groan.

“Say what you want, but *I* got to meet Madonna. I think I was like in the sixth or seventh grade at the time. I can’t remember. All I do remember, was thinking, ‘She’s so tiny!’ Here I was this... whatever-grader, and I was taller than Madonna Mega Star. Such a humongous personality in such a petite package. It boggles the mind.”

“If you say so.”

Chelsea laughed. “Okay, it boggles the *grade-school* mind. Happy?”

“Infinitely.”

She rolled her eyes, and without a word, the pair began walking again. Tyler observed that as Chelsea warmed to sharing her memories, a sparkle appeared in her voice that hadn’t been there before. As egotistical as it sounded, he couldn’t deny that it seemed as if she’d kept the information locked inside herself, and now that she had someone who could relate, who’d perhaps been in similar places and situations, she was free to share them.

“I can’t even begin to tell you how many times I ‘ran into’ John Taylor from Duran Duran,” she said, “and his girlfriend at the time. That was when he still lived in that building on the Upper West Side... hell, I can’t remember it, but it had its own name. I kept hoping Simon le Bon would be with him. And of course the rest of the band. Then I started hanging out with my friends at clubs like the Cat Club and the Limelight and Danceteria, CBGBs, and bars like Holiday, Z Bar, and Scrap Bar. Met lots of rock stars... I even met River Phoenix in my own neighborhood before he died.” Her voice blurred, turned sad. “What a *nice*, really nice guy.”

Tyler dimpled at her. “Sounds like you’ve met more famous people than I have.”

She dimpled back. “Not likely. But I did meet quite a few. What’s funny is that I never wanted to ask anyone for his or her autograph. The thought of asking for one always made me feel stupid. I think I did it a couple of times when I was younger, but then I just stopped and visited instead. That was always more special to me, more fun.”

“Well, I’ll let you in on a little secret,” Tyler said.

“What?”

“I always feel stupid *giving* my autograph. I mean, I’m a grown man getting paid to wear makeup. It’s not like I *do* anything. It’s not like I’m a musician or anything. *That* I can understand. But an actor?”

Chelsea laughed. “Kiss wore makeup. So did Mötley Crüe.”

“Yeah, but *they* helped me get laid back in the day. I seriously doubt that *I* can say the same for my services.”

Her shoulders shook from the force of her laughter, and the duster slipped as she slapped her knee and howled.

Tyler took a step towards her and she waved him away, gasping for air. "I got to sit down," she managed to squeak out, "my sides hurt from laughing in this damn corset."

"There's a big rock over there that could probably handle all those petticoats."

She followed where he pointed with her eyes. "Thank God." Without waiting for him, Chelsea plopped herself down on the boulder, thankful for the yards of material that kept the chill of the stone at bay.

He lowered himself onto the one across from her and grinned. "Well, it's true."

An unladylike snort raised his brows. "Yeah right. Like you needed any help," she stated.

A smart man, Tyler said nothing.

"I can count the actors I've met, back in the day, on one hand," Chelsea continued.

Tyler folded his arms across his chest and waited with amused patience.

"River Phoenix," she began, ticking off the name on a finger, "Eddie Murphy, Kevin Costner..." She rolled her eyes. "Don't ask."

Tyler cracked up.

"Robert De Niro..."

His laughter ceased. "You've met Robert De Niro? I haven't even met him yet. That's messed up."

She smirked and had the audacity to stick her tongue out at him. “*That* was a coup. He’s *hot*.”

Tyler flipped her the bird, and Chelsea laughed. “Jealous much?”

“Bite me,” he stated.

She laughed harder. “Oooh, the possibilities!”

“Who else?” Tyler asked quickly, flushing at the sudden image of Chelsea biting his shoulder as he—

“Hmmm,” Chelsea’s murmur interrupted the reckless thought, and he gratefully brought himself back to the conversation.

“I think there was *one* other person... Who was it...” She tapped a delicate, unvarnished fingernail against her lips. “What was his name?” She looked at the handsome man who sat across from her. “It’s been about ten years or so...” She crossed a stocking-clad leg over one knee and propped her chin on her hand, her elbow braced against the raised knee. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“Me? How the hell am I supposed to know?”

Chelsea slowly shook her head, clucked her tongue against her upper incisors. Her drawn-out sigh was thick with pity. “They say the memory is the first to go.”

“What are you talking —”

“And they always forget the little people.”

“—about.” Tyler stopped. Stared. That nagging feeling came back in a rush.

“No. Way.”

Her smile blinded him. “I even got *your* autograph.”

“No way.”

“Course, I sold it for fifty bucks a month later.”

“No way.”

She sighed. “No, you’re right. I kept it. In fact, I still have it around somewhere.” She knew exactly where. Her smile became brighter.

Tyler sat back, mouth slightly open as he stared at her.

“Yeppers. Got your ol’ John Hancock.” She laughed at the look on his face. “I was around seventeen at the time.”

He blinked at her, shut his mouth.

“My friends and I were a bit tipsy — bar-hopping and buddha can do that to a person — and belting out rock tunes as we wobbled in our high heels down the street to the next one.”

He leaned in close, his eyes wide, his ears open. *I’ve met her before?*

“We ran smack into you — you had this blonde chick hanging all over you, and another couple was with you. This was shortly after *The Hunted* was released.”

Tyler nodded; it was one of his earliest movies.

“I was drunk enough to ask for your autograph because I wanted proof for myself that I hadn’t dreamt the whole thing.”

Slowly, as if making its way through thick fog, Tyler caught a fragment: Toned legs in black fishnet stockings. As he gaped mentally with his mouth closed at the woman across from him, more fragments found their way to the fore: Platform high heels and worn, soft looking, blue denim shorts that curved around a succulent, illegal rear end. Full, red lips puckered around a tightly rolled, white cylinder. A flash of neatly manicured, matching dark red nails as they tucked either side of the joint

and pulled it from her luscious mouth. A riot of black curls, dark brown eyes that smiled at him. *You're Ty Benson! I love you!*

Her friends chorusing, *We love you too!*

A marker finding its way from one of the many pockets of her black leather motorcycle jacket into her hand. *May I have your autograph, please?*

The question so proper for someone in that outfit... The blonde at his side, forgotten as he ogled the young, mocha-skinned beauty, took note of the dusky cleavage that peeked from the edges of her zipped jacket. He became aware of a lack of paper. *What do you want me to sign?* he'd asked with his most flirtatious smile.

Her answering grin was cheeky, and flashed the most adorable pair of dimples he'd ever seen and, turning, presented her left hip. She pointed to the pocket of her shorts that silhouetted the generous swell of her derriere. *Right here.* And, thinking thoughts that would no doubt have him arrested if known, Ty Benson dropped to his knees, palmed that firm, lascivious backside, and signed his name. With Love. Then he'd straightened, planted a kiss on that dangerous mouth before the blonde reclaimed her position at his side. As he'd swaggered away, he looked over his shoulder. "Look me up when you're legal." Her friends had giggled as she blew him a kiss. He'd laughed and winked and she'd walked out of his life.

And into the present. His jaw lost the battle as the past faded. His eyes bugged as he gawked at the prim looking woman in front of him. "That was *you?*"

His shocked amazement had her blushing. "That was me," she admitted quietly, not quite meeting Tyler's eyes, bunching a fistful of material. "A long time ago... in a galaxy far, far away."

Holy shit.

Her dark eyes darting at anything but him, they found something to fixate on and she stood. “Julie sent the cavalry. Looks like our stroll down memory lane is over.”

Tyler came to his feet slowly, feeling as though he’d been sucker-punched and not quite knowing why. Jesus Christ. That was *her*. He’d gone back to his friend’s house alone that night because he hadn’t wanted the frivolous blonde who’d accompanied him. He’d wanted *her*, and her hot, bedroom brown eyes had haunted him for the rest of that night and for many nights to follow.

His gaze never left her as she greeted the grips guy Julie had sent after them. He followed the pair back to the set as if in a trance. Maybe Chelsea felt their stroll down memory lane was over, but as far as he was concerned, it had only just begun.