



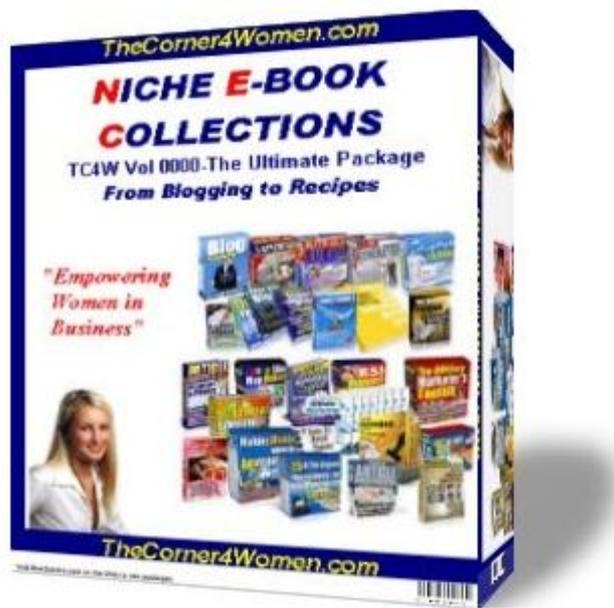
*Second Chance*

WITH MY

**GRUMPY BOSS**

Small Town Enemies to Lovers Romance

**SHELLY MELBOT**



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# **SECOND CHANCE WITH MY GRUMPY BOSS**

A Small Town Enemies to Lovers Romance

**Shelly Melbot**

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# CHAPTER ONE

## *Kyla*

The drive back to Milltown is across the country, but I have nothing but time. I sigh as I turn off at an exit to get some gas, wondering if I should stay here for the night and start again tomorrow.

A man walks by me while I stand at the pump, and for an instant, his jawline makes me wonder if I know him. My heart jumps up into my throat, but when he turns, I don't know his face.

I breathe out a sigh of relief. I'm so wound up about going back home that I'm seeing things.

Seeing Tristan Hayes, my high school sweetheart.

I hope he's not in Milltown anymore. I don't think I have the guts to see him again. I'm sure that none of my friends stayed in Milltown, except for the few who got married too young and had families. I once thought that would be me and Tristan. I thought we'd get married right out of high school, have a couple of kids...

But part of me wanted to get out to see more of the world. Tristan was never like that. He was always happy right there in our small town.

I remember the last time I saw him, the memories washing over me.

*"Where have you been, dove?" he asked, sweeping me up into his arms.*

*I giggled, letting him bear hug me before he put me down.*

*"It's only been a day," I argued, but he frowned.*

*"That's a long time away from you," he insisted, his arms around my waist, pulling me close to him. "Can you stay tonight?"*

*I shook my head. “No, Mom and Dad are arguing,” I sighed. “Again.”*

*He hummed, kissing the crown of my head. “Then maybe it’d be good to get away.”*

*I bit my lip. “I don’t think so. Dad said he wanted me home right after school, but I skipped my last period to come and see you.”*

*“My truant baby,” he cooed, leaning down to kiss me.*

*Usually, we’d make love in his parent’s garage or at the industrial complex or maybe in the backseat of his car, but that night, he just held me until it was time to go home.*

*I waved goodbye to him as I got into my dad’s beat-up sedan, and that was the last time I saw him happy.*

I shake my head to rid myself of the memories, my heart aching. I don’t want to remember how it all went wrong anymore. I’ve never been able to bring myself to call him after what happened. I still have his phone number burned in my brain.

I’ll certainly never meet anyone else like Tristan. No one that makes me feel the way he did. I felt so free with him, like nothing could ever touch us. We were so solid.

And now... he probably barely remembers me, and even if he does, I’m sure he still hates me. I’m sure he has a wife and family, someone to love him. It stings, but I am happy for him at the same time.

I just wish I had someone in my life like I did back then.

Having Tristan made my high school years a lot easier.

I haven’t been with many other guys since Tristan—just a few flings here and there—because no one can compare to him. Not to mention that I never want to hurt someone the way I hurt Tristan.

I push those thoughts out of my head, get back into the rental car,

and drive off. It is still an hour and a half drive to Milltown, and I don't want to think about Tristan the whole time.

I blast music the rest of the way, and when I finally pass the Milltown city limits sign, a burst of nostalgia rushes through me. The water tower sits just behind the sign, and I have a brief, bittersweet memory of Sarah, Frank, Tristan, and I breaking in to swim in it. Of course, we were caught by the sheriff, but he let us off easy, telling us that he was young once, too.

We'd all had so much fun together—until I ruined everything.

I pass a small bar, The Golden Boar Pub, and impulsively swing into a parking space. I didn't secure a job before moving here, and that is for one simple reason: I can work anywhere.

I went to bartending school, and I have a bit of a passion for mixology, so I hope that my resume will get me a job as soon as possible. It might not happen at the first bar I try, but at least I can drop off my resume and see how it goes.

“Welcome!” the bartender says warmly as I walk in. “What can I get you?”

The bar is mostly empty, with just a few people sitting at tables and one person at the bar. It's early, though—just about three in the afternoon—so that is probably why. For as small as it is, Milltown's downtown is popping with action on nights and weekends.

I smile, walking up to the bar. “Actually, I was hoping to leave my resume with you.”

She raises a blonde eyebrow. “Oh? We are hiring for a couple of positions. Can you bartend?”

I nod, handing her my resume. “I'm licensed to bartend in California, but I can get my license transferred here immediately.”

She scoffs. “I don’t have a fancy license, and I’ve been pouring drinks for fifteen years.”

“I didn’t mean to offend,” I say quickly, thinking this is all going sideways.

She grins. “No offense taken, honey. I’m just saying, you’re overqualified for a small-town pub like this.”

“I make good tips,” I try to explain. “I just need a leg up.”

“Are you new around here?” she asks curiously.

“Not exactly,” I admit. “I grew up here—went to Milltown High. Just moved back.”

“Oh, well, you know how it goes, then, don’t you?” she says and tilts her head. “You know, I like your confidence and enthusiasm. If it were up to me, I’d hire you on the spot. But the boss... he likes to meet all the new hires. Are you up for an interview with the owner in—oh, let’s say a couple of hours?”

I grin, happy that it’s going well. I usually do great in interviews, so I figure the job will be a cinch.

“I’d be happy to. In the meantime, do you serve food? I’m starving.”

“We sure do,” she drawls. “Traditional Irish fare. I recommend the shepherd’s pie.”

My stomach rumbles. “Perfect. And just a glass of water, please.”

The woman sticks her arm over the bar to shake my hand. “I’m Theresa, by the way.”

“Kyla,” I say, shaking her hand firmly.

I sit down at the bar, and Theresa brings me the entree and pours me a glass of water.

“This is delicious,” I say, covering my full mouth with my hand. “You must have a great chef.”

“We do,” she agrees. “Susannah is an excellent chef, and all the recipes come from the boss’s grandma.”

“That’s lovely,” I comment. I think I am going to really like this place.

“I don’t think you’ll have any trouble with the owner,” she says reassuringly. “He likes people who are dedicated to their work.” She winks at me with a grin. “Plus, you’re a pretty face. Boss likes pretty faces.”

I flush a little. I sure hope the owner isn’t some creepy old man who likes taking advantage of pretty girls. If so, he has another thing coming.

I can picture him now—balding, with a beer belly—and I shudder.

Five o’clock rolls around, and Theresa ushers me to the back office to wait for the owner. I’m so nervous that my palms are sweating.

Finally, the door swings open, and I look up to see the most attractive man I have ever seen.

He is tall, probably at least six feet, with dark brown hair that is slicked back but long at the nape of his neck. His jawline could cut glass.

It isn’t until I meet his eyes that my mouth drops open.

Bright green, beautiful, stormy eyes.

*Tristan Hayes.*

The love of my life, the one person I hurt more than anyone else, is the owner of The Golden Boar Pub.

# CHAPTER TWO

## *Tristan*

I'm already having a shit day because my ex-wife pushed back against watching our daughter, Katrina, for the day while I work. I'm running late, and I hate being unpunctual.

When Theresa calls to tell me there is a potential new hire, though, I think my day is turning around. We've been desperately needing a new bartender since our last one, Yolanda, quit in order to pursue an acting career.

I wish her all the best, but she really put us in a bind.

Theresa sounds happy over the phone, saying that the potential has a good resume, so I hope I can just hire them on the spot.

"She's in the office," Theresa says as I walk in, and I give her a curt nod.

I swing open the door, and as soon as the woman looks up at me, my heart drops to the floor.

Deep blue eyes you could get lost in, a little button nose, and a full mouth that parts as she gapes at me.

*Kyla Summers.*

The once love of my life. The bane of my existence.

I freeze with the door half-open, not sure how to exist with her in the same room as me. I haven't seen her in a decade, and I never wanted to see her again.

It was the first heartbreak of my life, and I don't know if I've ever gotten over it.

Kyla still looks just as beautiful as the first time I saw her, with her

long legs in a flouncy skirt and the auburn streaks in her brown hair obvious in the overhead light. My throat tightens.

“Tristan,” she breathes, and my name on her lips threatens to take me over. Bittersweet memories try to rush through my mind, but I push them away.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I ask, my tone harsh.

She swallows visibly. “I, um, I’m moving back to town. I needed a job, and...” She starts to get up. “I’ll just go.”

“Shocker,” I say, bitterness evident in my voice. “You’ve always been good at running away.”

Kyla pauses, looking down at her hands. “Do you still want to interview me?”

“Of course,” I say quickly, huffing out a breath. “I need a bartender. Can you pour drinks?”

“Yes,” she says, looking up at me with her lips thinned. “I’ve been bartending exclusively for the last five years in California.”

“Shifts are either two to eight for lunch or eight to two for dinner. You’ll keep a clean bar, organize the shelves, label and date everything. And you’ll show up for work. I require a doctor’s excuse if you miss even one shift.”

Kyla nods, glancing away from me again.

I want to roll my eyes. She can’t even look at me. I hope she’s ashamed of what she did to me.

I know that I shouldn’t hire her. I know that having her around will make my life so much harder, but I need a bartender, and part of me...

God, some stupid part of me wants her around. Wants to find out why she did what she did and if she’s sorry.

“Tristan,” she says quietly. “I wanted to apologize—”

“None of that,” I say, my voice coming out raspy. “Don’t you ever bring up our past. Got it?”

Kyla focuses her deep blue eyes on me. “Got it.”

“You’re hired,” I say finally, having not even laid eyes on her resume. If Theresa vetted her, I trust her. My bar manager has been here with me since I opened the doors of the pub, and I trust her with my business.

“When do I start?” she asks simply.

“Tomorrow night. Eight on the dot.”

“I’ll be here,” she says.

I find myself wishing I had a bigger office. I’m too close to her, and when she stands, her shoulders brush mine. I draw in a sharp breath, but she just hurries out the door. I hear the bell ding as she exits the pub.

I plop down at my desk, my breath coming out of me in a rush. God, what the hell did I just do?

Kyla Summers. I try not to think about her, but often, she is the only thing on my mind. Sarah would have a conniption if she knew I hired Kyla, but Sarah has no reason to stick her nose in my business. Not anymore.

Our divorce was finalized eight months ago, and I couldn’t be happier about it. We’ve been at each other’s throats ever since Katrina was born, and it is best for everyone that we separated.

But Sarah never strayed. Not like Kyla.

I rub a hand across my face and go through the books, cutting checks for the employees and trying to allow work to take my mind off of everything.

By the time I finish, it is nearly ten in the evening, and Sarah is

calling me.

“Are you going to be at the bar until close?” she asks, clearly annoyed.

“No,” I say. “I’m leaving now.”

“Good, because you know you can’t just use me as a babysitter—”

“You’re not a damn babysitter, Sarah. You gave birth to Katrina. You’re her mother.”

“You know what I mean.”

I’m sure I do. Sarah and I have fifty-fifty custody, which means that we do two weeks on, two weeks off. Katrina couldn’t have stayed at daycare this morning because she has a cold and a bit of a fever, so I had to call Sarah.

“Thank you for keeping her on your off time,” I say, gritting my teeth.

“Was that so hard? You’re welcome,” she says snarkily, and I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from snapping back at her.

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes to pick her up.”

Sarah starts to say something else, but I hang up.

I walk out of my office, and Theresa looks up at me. “Did you hire that girl?”

“I did. She starts tomorrow night,” I say.

Theresa nods. “She’ll be good,” she says confidently.

I don’t know what kind of bartender Kyla is, but she has to be better than not having one at all.

I make my way to Sarah’s house. When I knock on the door, she opens it with her hair up in a bun and a glass of wine in her hand, wearing a pair of sweats and one of my old T-shirts.

“Having a good night in?” I ask, snickering.

“Don’t judge me,” she huffs. “It’s my night off. Kyla’s sleeping. I didn’t want to wake her. She’s in her pajamas, so you can just put a jacket on her. She probably won’t wake up; you know she sleeps like a rock.”

“She does,” I agree, smiling softly. For all that I can’t stand Sarah sometimes, we have one thing in common: we both love Katrina so much.

I walk into Katrina’s bedroom. She is face down on the bed, snoring softly in her Disney Princess pajamas.

I pick her up, throw her jacket over her, and put her in the car. She rouses a little when I strap her into her seat, but she is back to sleep in seconds.

“I’ll see you Sunday,” Sarah says flatly, closing the door in my face.

By the time I get home, it is nearly eleven. I’m exhausted, but I have no idea how I am going to get to sleep.

I get Katrina into bed and back to sleep, then pour myself a stiff drink.

I’m going to need it.

# CHAPTER THREE

## *Kyla*

I stay at a small hotel for the night. I should have secured an apartment before I moved, but Dad got so sick so quickly. I didn't really have a lot of time to plan.

I have some money left from his life insurance payout, though, so I'll go apartment hunting tomorrow. Tonight, I will work a shift at The Golden Boar.

The pub that my ex, Tristan, owns.

I don't know how I got myself into this mess, but I did, so I need to follow through with it. Maybe I should have turned down the job, but something about seeing Tristan again makes me hope that we can talk—that I can explain and apologize.

But he firmly said he never wants to talk about our past.

Maybe it will be okay. How often do you see the owner of a bar, anyway? They usually only come in every once in a while. Hopefully, I won't even see him tonight.

I dress in a low-cut shirt that shows off some cleavage, knowing from experience that it helps with tips. It's gross, but men are the best tippers, so I play the game.

I also throw on a skirt and my non-slip shoes before I head out around seven. I get to The Golden Boar early by half an hour, and Theresa grins at me from behind the bar.

"Early? Great," she says, gesturing for me to come behind the bar. "Boss will love you."

"Unlikely," I mutter, but Theresa doesn't seem to catch it.

“Here’s the well liquor,” she says, pointing at the speed rail. “You’ll need to familiarize yourself with our wells because... well, most of our customers are cheap, and we do three-dollar wells on Wednesdays.”

I nod, picking up the bottles. They are common bottom-shelf liquors, so I don’t think it’ll be too difficult to memorize them.

The door dings as someone walks inside, and I look up to see Tristan strolling through the doors, holding a little girl.

“Her mother won’t watch her,” he huffs out, looking straight at Theresa and not at me. “I’m going to stick her in the office until I can finish the new hire paperwork.”

*Tristan has a daughter?* Oh, my God. Is he married?

“Oh, poor little lamb,” Theresa says. “Leave her here at the bar until it gets busy. She can color on the kid’s menu.”

Tristan lets out a long breath and places the little girl down on a barstool.

“Be good,” he says, but his voice is gentle.

After Tristan goes into the back to do the paperwork, I realize that I don’t have any customers yet, so I walk over to the little girl and slide her a kid’s menu and a couple of crayon boxes.

“Hi there. I’m Kyla,” I say.

“I’m Katrina,” she answers brightly, pulling out a red crayon and beginning to draw hearts all over the kid’s menu. “I’m four.”

I chuckle. She’s precocious, only having a bit of a lisp as she speaks.

“Nice to meet you, Katrina.” I take a blue crayon and draw a little heart on the top of her paper.

“That’s a blue heart,” she says, as if she has never imagined such a thing. “It’s pretty.”

“Thank you,” I say, smiling.

Tristan comes back out to the bar, and he looks over at me and Katrina, his face slack.

“Let’s go into the office, little one,” he says, sweeping her up and taking her into the back without looking at me.

Theresa has me cleaning glasses, dusting them, and putting them back up, so I go back to my task.

“His ex-wife is such a dud,” Theresa comments.

*Oh.* Ex-wife. For some reason, that makes me feel so much better. I wonder if I know her. I’m sure I do; I know everyone around Tristan’s age in Milltown, or at least, I did when I was in high school.

I hum in response, wanting to know more but also knowing I shouldn’t pry. It doesn’t matter who Tristan married and divorced. He’d never want anything to do with me, anyway.

“You’re leaving streaks all over those glasses,” Tristan snaps, and I look up, surprised. “Use the non-streak dishwashing liquid.”

“Where is it?” I ask, not sure where the cleaning materials are. Tristan sighs, walking around the bar, and hands me a pink bottle.

“This one.”

“Thank you,” I say, and he frowns.

If he wasn’t so gorgeous, maybe this wouldn’t be so hard. He is muscular but slender and tall enough to tower over me, with those bright green eyes piercing right through me. My body wants to lean toward him, but I keep myself together. He doesn’t want me anymore, and I’d do well to remember that.

“Get it together. Your shift hasn’t even started, and you’re already fucking up.”

I draw in a breath through my nose. I’m trying my best not to get angry. I deserve for Tristan to be pissed off at me, but this seems

extreme.

I am doing my best, and I just started working thirty minutes ago.

It starts to get a little busy, and I throw myself into work, ignoring Tristan. He mostly stays in the back, anyway, just coming out to snap at me about something I'm doing wrong.

Every fifteen minutes, he criticizes something I did—simple things, from getting a table number wrong to forgetting a customer's side of ranch.

I keep struggling not to get angry, but it becomes harder and harder, especially when a total creep hits on me at one of my tables.

"If you show me those, I'll give you a hefty tip," he says, leering at my chest.

I glare at him. "Not only is that illegal, but it's also disgusting."

He shrugs. "I know a place where there's no cameras. Just let me know."

As I turn, he reaches out and tries to pinch my ass. Luckily, I move out of the way at the last second, and after that, I bring out his check and ignore him. I don't want to tell Theresa about it—don't want her to think I can't handle myself.

I've dealt with difficult and creepy customers a million times. The best thing to do is to just ignore them.

As I'm finishing up with a customer at the bar, Tristan comes storming out of his office, slamming the door behind him, and walks up to me.

"I just got a customer complaint about you," he says, and I sigh.

"Was it that guy in the corner?"

He glances over. "Yes. Why? Did you ignore that customer on purpose?"

“Yes,” I say finally.

Tristan’s face turns red. “I don’t know what you do in California, but in Milltown, you don’t ignore customers.”

“He tried to grab my ass,” I say, huffing out a breath. “I’m not going back over there. If you want his business so badly, you can wait on him.”

I start to storm away, but Tristan grabs my elbow.

“You’re coming with me,” he says and leads me to the table where the guy smirks up at me.

“I hope your boss got on your ass,” he snarks.

Tristan looks down at him, his bright green eyes going dark with anger.

“Speaking of her ass, she said you tried to grab it,” Tristan says in a calm, even voice.

The guy shrugs. “Sure, I did. She wouldn’t dress like that if she didn’t want it.”

Tristan hums as if he agrees, but then he grabs the guy’s collar, heaving him up out of the chair.

“Hey!” the guy exclaims, and Tristan punches him in the stomach. When he doubles over, heaving, Tristan kicks him in the ass, making the guy stumble toward the door.

“You ever come back to this pub, I’ll call Sheriff Jones and have you arrested for harassment.”

The guy gulps in air, clearly still winded, and Tristan grabs him and physically throws him out.

I stand there, blinking and watching Tristan.

As he walks by me, he leans down to whisper in my ear, making me shiver.

“You ever have a guy like that again, you come and get me,” he orders, and something about the anger and protectiveness in his voice makes pleasure rush through me. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Yes, sir,” I mumble, unable to say anything else.

I have to admit, it was attractive as all hell to watch Tristan get physical with a guy who was a creep to me. Something about the way he protected me... Does it mean that he cares? Probably not. He’d do the same for Theresa or any other woman.

Still, I’m glad to know that Tristan has my back, even if he hates me.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## *Tristan*

I keep having to grab Katrina and get her away from Kyla. It seems as if my child is drawn to her just like I am.

“She drew me a blue heart,” Katrina says, like it’s the best thing since sliced bread. “I like her.”

“She’s trying to work, little one,” I tell her. She is too young to hear the real reason: I don’t want her getting attached to Kyla. I know she won’t be around very long.

I let out a long breath, sticking Katrina back in the office and going into the walk-in freezer to cool off after kicking out Freddy Johnson. The guy has been coming to my pub for years, and he always causes trouble—but usually, it is just getting too drunk and rowdy, not sexually harassing my employees.

That’s another problem with hiring Kyla; she is gorgeous, and some of my less classy customers might try to take advantage. But I’m not going to let anyone touch her. I’d do the same for Theresa, and I have, but something about it happening to Kyla... well, it makes me see red.

Soon after, Kyla puts in an order wrong, and a few moments later, I stalk into the kitchen.

“You have *got* to stop messing up,” I hiss.

“It’s okay, boss,” Susannah says. “She apologized, and we’re going to fix it. No harm done.”

“We have to remake a dish. That costs me money,” I say, still looking at Kyla. “You think money grows on trees?”

“N-no,” she stammers, her cheeks flushing red. “It’s my first night

—”

“I thought you had experience.”

“Not here!” she exclaims. “I have to learn the ropes, Tristan, and you have to let me make a few mistakes to learn.”

Theresa hears our argument and comes to the back. “The customers can hear you, Tristan. Stop being such an ass,” she grumbles.

Theresa Meadows is about the only person who can talk to me like that and get away with it.

I draw in a breath. “Just get it together,” I say to Kyla, and I turn and go back into the office.

Katrina looks up at me, frowning, her brown eyes so much like her mother’s that it drives me crazy. “Why are you so mad, Daddy?”

“I’m not mad,” I assure her softly. “Just busy.”

Kyla hums. “You should let me work here. I’d do a good job.”

I chuckle. “I bet you would, honey, but you can’t start working until you’re sixteen.”

“That’s so *long*,” she argues. “How will I make money?”

“You get an allowance,” I remind her.

“Five bucks,” she grumbles, as if that isn’t nearly enough, and I can’t help but laugh. The only good thing about having Katrina here is that she brightens up my night. As conflicted as I am feeling about Kyla coming back to town, Katrina can always make me feel better.

I lean down to hug her. “Just a couple more hours, kiddo. You can play on the tablet if you want.”

Her eyes light up. “Can I watch TV?”

“Yeah, sure,” I say easily, although I am trying to monitor her screen time. Tonight is just an off night, and I’m going to let her get away with murder as long as she stays well-behaved.

“I’m hungry.”

“I’ll get you some fries. How about that?”

“With ketchup,” she reminds me, and I nod, chuckling again.

“Of course.”

I walk into the kitchen to speak to Susannah. “Can I have an order of fries for Katrina?”

Susannah narrows her eyes at me. “You can, but you have to let up on Kyla. She’s really good, you know.”

“That remains to be seen,” I say dryly.

“She really is. She’s respectful of the kitchen, which not all bartenders are, and we like her. So let up, will you?”

“I’ll give her a shot,” I say.

And I plan on it—hoping to busy myself talking to customers and making sure things are going smoothly instead of harping on Kyla—but the next thing I know, the bar is full.

It is ridiculously busy for a Thursday night, but then again, the local college doesn’t usually have Friday classes during the summer, and I suppose that accounts for the new foot traffic.

“Tristan,” Kyla says, coming up behind me as I stand at the point-of-sale system computer. “I need you to take off a beer for me.”

I turn to look at her. The skirt she’s wearing is a little short on her, falling a few inches above her knees, and her long thighs tempt me. She looks up at me from under long eyelashes, blinking her blue eyes.

“Why?” I bark, angry because I am still so attracted to her. “You rang it up wrong? Let me guess, you fucked something else up.”

“I didn’t,” she says calmly, not looking at me. “I—”

I snatch the receipt from her hand. When my fingers brush hers, it feels like electricity shooting through my forearm, but I ignore it. I

enter the receipt number into the computer, taking off the beer. “There, it’s done. If you ask me to remove one more thing—”

“Hey.” It’s Greta Hamburg who speaks, a regular of mine. She is in line for mayor in the next election, and she’s been campaigning all over town. “Don’t treat her this way. I ordered a beer but then changed my mind and ordered a martini instead. It’s not her fault.”

“She needs to learn,” I say harshly. “Besides, she won’t be here long.”

“I sure won’t,” Kyla says quietly. “Not if you keep treating me like this.”

“You always wanted to leave Milltown, anyway. Why are you even back? You always had big city dreams, and you left to realize them, so why didn’t you keep doing that?”

“You don’t know me at all,” Kyla says in a shaky voice.

I snort. “I know you a lot better than you think.”

Kyla storms off back to Greta and hands her the new receipt before going back to work. I don’t care. Maybe she’ll stop messing everything up.

By the time the night is over, Katrina has fallen asleep in my office while watching the television, and I feel a pang of guilt. I need to get a regular babysitter or nanny, but I just haven’t had the time.

The Golden Boar Pub was my dream. I’ve always wanted to open up a bar and grill, and when I did, I expected the first year to be hard. It was, but by the second year, I’d made enough money to open a second location. Instead of doing so, though, I stayed in Milltown and gave all my staff raises, especially Theresa.

Theresa knocks softly on the office door, and I open it up, holding a finger over my lips so she won’t wake Katrina.

“You should be glad the little lamb is asleep because I would yell at you otherwise,” she says flatly. “What is your *deal* with the new girl?”

“She’s not that new,” I huff, but Theresa doesn’t seem to know what that means.

“It’s her first night! She’s bound to make mistakes. You’ve never treated any other employee like this, so spill.”

I sigh, running my hand through my hair. “We have a bit of a history.”

Theresa pauses, waiting for me to continue, and when I don’t, she pushes.

“She worked for you before?”

Theresa means when I worked in real estate, before I bought the pub. It was how I raised the money, but I’d always hated selling houses. I shake my head. “She was my girlfriend in high school,” I admit.

Theresa gapes at me. “The one who broke your heart?”

“One and the same.”

She blinks. “She doesn’t look the type.”

“Devils wear disguises, Theresa.”

“Nevertheless, she’s doing a great job. She’s probably made three hundred bucks in tips and made over fifteen hundred dollars in sales tonight. She’s an asset, Tristan. If you keep treating her like shit, we’ll be out a bartender all over again.”

I want to tell her that we will be, anyway—that Kyla is good at fucking up and then leaving—but I know I’ve been harsh on Kyla. And it’s not because she isn’t a good employee or bartender. It’s because she put my heart in a blender when I was eighteen.

“You’re right,” I say. “I’ll ease up on her.”

“Good,” Theresa says. “Because I’m pretty sure she’s crying in the walk-in right now.”

Theresa turns to leave, and I look down at Katrina, wondering how I’d feel if she grew up and had a boss who treated her like this. I’d probably tear his head off.

I really have to let the past go.

But how can I do that when she is back in my life?

# CHAPTER FIVE

## *Kyla*

I am still staying at the hotel, but since bad weather is coming, Theresa offers to drive me there so I don't have to walk. I plan to buy a car soon, but for the time being, I always walk to work. It's always a burst of nostalgia to see the city.

"Thank you," I tell her, truly grateful for her. She's been so nice to me when Tristan has been so awful. Although he's been terrible to me, I somehow can't stop thinking about him. The way his green eyes follow me all around the restaurant, how he glowers at me. Even angry, he is so gorgeous that it is hard not to constantly think about what might have happened if...

Well, there are too many ifs.

"Don't worry about it," she says, leading me to her simple sedan. "I even talked to Tristan about how awful he was acting toward you."

"You didn't have to do that," I say quickly, feeling guilty. "He has his reasons."

Theresa tilts her head. "Does he? Looked like he was just bullying you to me."

"We have a past," I say quietly, and Theresa scoffs, pulling onto the highway.

"I know. That's still no excuse to treat you like trash when you were doing a great job."

I hum, not sure how to continue the conversation without going into detail. I only remember bits and pieces of that night, anyway. But alcohol is no excuse.

“It’s not raining yet, but it’s supposed to,” I tell Theresa.

“It’s going to flood, but the pub has storm windows, so we should be okay,” she says. “I practically live there.”

“Are you married?” I ask her, wanting to get to know her better. I like Theresa.

Theresa flashes her finger, which has a small diamond ring and a wedding band on it. “For the last twelve years,” she says brightly.

“That’s lovely,” I say, smiling. “Most marriages don’t make it that long.”

“Randy can’t get rid of me,” she chuckles, and I laugh in response.

It’s nice, talking and laughing with someone. My life has been so dark recently. After my father passed, everything seemed dimmed, and seeing Tristan in Milltown didn’t make it better.

I remember what he said to me, in the days before his death. *“Don’t let this break you, Kyla. Don’t let anything dim your light.”*

I feel, deep down, like I’m disrespecting my father when I get upset. But he would understand. I talked to him endlessly about Tristan and how bad I felt about how everything went down.

Theresa drives me home, and I plop into bed before I even shower, exhausted.

I think I’ll fall asleep right away, but I don’t. I keep thinking about Tristan and his little girl, Katrina. She has his dimples, and at one time, I thought I would have a baby with those dimples. Those dimples have been in my dreams ever since I left town. I wonder if I will ever see them on Tristan’s face again. It isn’t like he smiles much anymore, and I am sure that it’s my fault.

It’s like someone else lived my life. But apparently, since they divorced, she’d messed it up.

I sigh. There is no point in thinking of what might have been. What happened was what happened, and I can't escape it any more than I can escape having my father's blue eyes or the button nose on my face.

Finally, I slip off to sleep.

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The next day, I have a lunch shift, and I'm hoping that it'll be less busy than last night.

"Please tell me it's not going to be busy today," I mumble to Theresa. I made enough last night to pay for a couple of nights at the hotel, so I feel like I've done well.

She laughs. "It shouldn't be. Tonight, will be busy, but *tomorrow* night is our real sales night."

"I work tomorrow night, don't I?" I ask flatly.

"You do," Theresa says brightly. "But be grateful you have a Friday night off. I haven't had one off in years."

I am grateful, mostly because I recently talked to an old friend and want to catch up with her.

Olive Bridges was on the outskirts of our friend group, but she was a good friend to me after Tristan and I split. Of course, I haven't talked to Frank or Sarah in ten years, because they were there that night.

Frank is the one who ruined my life, even though I suppose I made the decision, too. It just doesn't feel like it because I was so drunk that I don't remember it.

I don't get a table for an hour, so I clean and polish glasses, making sure to use the cleaning solution that Tristan pointed out.

When I do get a table, it's a very attractive man—a blond with bright blue eyes.

“Lucky,” Theresa mumbles.

“You’re married,” I tell her, laughing.

“Doesn’t mean I don’t like to flirt a little,” she shoots back, and I grin.

I guess that flirting might make me feel a little better. But who knows? The guy could be married or completely uninterested.

He blinks as I walk up to his table. “Are all bartenders in Milltown so beautiful?”

I flush, smiling. “I don’t know. Haven’t met many other bartenders here.”

“Are you new in town? I am. I moved here from upstate New York, and it’s a total culture shock,” he says. “Oh, God, I’m babbling, aren’t I? I tend to babble when faced with incredible beauty.”

I throw my thick auburn braid over my shoulder, picking up my notebook and hovering my pen over it.

“What can I get for you, Mr. Babbler?” I tease.

“It’s Paul,” he says. “And I didn’t get your name.”

“Oh,” I say, a bit flustered. “I’m new, and I keep forgetting to introduce myself. Hello, I’m Kyla, and I’ll be taking care of you today.”

“Kyla,” he breathes. “It’s a beautiful name.”

I flush deeper. He certainly is cute and seems a little nervous.

“Thank you. And what can I get for you, Paul?”

“Aw, shit, I forgot to order,” he mumbles, and I laugh. “Just a beer, please. Anything light.”

“Draft or bottle?”

“Draft,” he answers.

“Could I get a card to put down on file?”

“You can get anything you want,” he answers, pulling a black credit

card out of his wallet.

I laugh softly and take it. “Be right back with your card and your beer.”

I turn around, and as soon as I do, I’m met with Tristan’s bright green eyes and blank face.

“You should be doing your job instead of flirting with customers,” Tristan barks as I walk behind the bar to pour a beer from the draft.

I want to roll my eyes, but I also need this job, so I don’t.

“Yes, sir,” I say quietly.

Paul walks up to the bar, sits on a stool, and frowns at Tristan. “Hey, man, she wasn’t flirting. She was doing her job.”

“I don’t think I asked you,” Tristan says, glaring at him.

“Tristan,” I say, putting a hand on his arm.

Without warning, he grabs my elbow, dragging me toward the office. I nod toward Theresa, who sighs and gives Paul the beer I was pouring while Tristan hauls me away.

He leads me into the office, slamming the door behind us.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Tristan*

“What in the hell do you think you’re doing? Are you trying to drive me crazy?” I demand, and Kyla pulls her arm out of my grasp.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest.

“You’re actively flirting with men in front of me. Don’t you think that kind of stings?”

“I didn’t know you cared,” Kyla shoots back. “You’ve been treating me like garbage ever since I started here! I thought it was nice that someone wanted to talk to me without yelling.”

“He wanted to do more than talk,” I grumble, my skin feeling hot. I haven’t been this angry and jealous in a *long* time—probably ten years. Probably since that horrible night.

“Listen, Tristan, I know that you are still mad about what happened —”

“Mad?” I ask incredulously. “Mad is an understatement, Kyla. You ripped my *heart* out.”

Kyla stares at me for a long moment. “I don’t even remember it,” she whispers.

“That makes it even worse,” I tell her. “It’s like it was so insignificant to you that you didn’t even care that you were ruining our relationship.”

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly, and she steps forward, putting a hand on my cheek. “I’m so sorry, Tristan. I would have never done that if I were sober. I would have never let anyone else touch me...”

I know that I should step away from her. I know that I should stop looking at her mouth, stop feeling this urge to kiss her, but I can't seem to pull away.

I lean down, pressing my mouth to hers, sliding my tongue between her lips. She gasps, surprised, then moans into my mouth as her arms go around my neck.

*Fuck.*

My brain completely turns off, and I grab her by the hips, lifting her on top of my desk and standing between her spread thighs.

She kisses me again and again and I slide my hand down her shorts, feeling how hot and slick she is.

"Tristan," she breathes, and then a huge crash interrupts us. I curse and pull my hand out of her pants, then walk outside.

"It's a window," Theresa says. "The wind and the storm blew a tree branch into it."

"Everybody," I call to the three or four customers in the pub. "I need to get this cleaned up and fixed. We're going to be closing for the rest of the day and night—let your friends know, okay?"

"I'll post it on the website," Theresa says, hurrying to the back office.

I wonder if she'll find Kyla in there, shell-shocked.

I start to sweep up the glass. It's a good thing that what happened with Kyla didn't go any further, for many reasons; I try to put everything I feel into cleaning instead of going back into the office and finishing what I started.

Closing on a Friday night isn't great, but I'd get to spend the night with Katrina, which is a plus. That's what I need right now. I need to focus on what is important: my daughter.

I nail up some plywood over the window and usher everyone out, including Kyla. She keeps staring at me, but I completely ignore her.

After everyone is gone, I call the glass company and have them come to replace the window. After a couple of hours, the job is done, so I leave the bar and drive to Sarah's to pick up Katrina.

Sarah meets me at the door, wearing a simple shift dress, and I frown.

"You got a date or something?"

She shakes her head. "Just making dinner. You want some? Katrina's still eating."

I shrug. "Might as well."

I know that Sarah isn't interested in rekindling our relationship. The divorce was as mutual as mutual could be. So I don't mind having dinner at her place, especially since Katrina loves it when we have family dinners.

"Daddy!" Katrina cries when she sees me walk in, and I grin and lean down to kiss the crown of her head. "Mama made pork chops."

Katrina is probably the only four-year-old girl in the world who loves pork chops. She is chewing meat off the bone when I sit down, and Sarah makes me a plate.

"So, how's your new hire?" Sarah asks as soon as I take a bite, and I nearly choke.

"How did you know I had a new hire?" I ask.

"Katrina was all aflutter about the new girl who drew blue hearts," Sarah chuckles.

"Hearts aren't really blue, but you can draw them that way," Katrina says, her mouth full.

"Chew with your mouth shut, little one," I scold gently, and she

closes her mouth, chewing. “She’s fine, I guess,” I mutter. “It’s Kyla Summers.”

Sarah’s eyes widen. “Kyla Summers is working at the Golden Boar?” she hisses.

“She is,” I say, and instantly, Sarah stands up, grabs Kyla, and puts her down in the living room with her tablet.

“Mama and Daddy need to talk, sweetheart. Just watch TV, okay?”

Katrina, happy to get to watch TV when she isn’t supposed to, just nods and grins.

Sarah comes back into the kitchen, closes the swinging door, and stares at me.

“You didn’t tell me Kyla was back in town.”

“Why would it matter? You hate her as much as I do.”

“Of course, I do,” she says flatly. “After what she did to you... to all of us... So why would you hire her?”

“I needed a bartender,” I say, but it sounds weak even to my own ears.

Sarah crosses her arms over her chest, shaking her head. “You’re still in love with her,” she accuses. “You always have been.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” I growl. “And you’re not in a spot to tell me how I feel, Sarah Hayes.”

“Sarah Green,” she spits out.

“I think it’s time for me and Katrina to go,” I say, my cheeks hot. I don’t want to get into this fight with Sarah—not again. We had fights about Kyla when we were married. She’s always had the idea that I’ve never gotten over Kyla.

Maybe she is right. But now, she has no right to tell me how to run my life, even if I am making bad decisions.

I only took a bite of my food, but I'd eat at home.

I pick Katrina up—she has mostly finished her pork chop, anyway—and grab her suitcase, taking her out to the car after Sarah gives her a kiss on the cheek.

“You're mad again, Daddy,” Katrina accuses, and I huff out a breath.

“Just a little, honey,” I tell her. “I'll feel better when we get home.”

“We could watch a movie,” she suggests, looking at me in the rearview mirror as we drive home.

“Absolutely,” I say. I need time with Katrina, maybe more than she needs time with me.

We cuddle up in my big bed, watching *Moana*, and with my little girl beside me, the anger slowly leaches out of my system.

Katrina is like free serotonin, laughing heartily at the chicken on the screen, and it is easy to slip off to sleep while she cuddles up to me.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Kyla*

Theresa offers to drive me home, but I decline.

“Are you going on a date with that blond from earlier?” she asks, wagging her eyebrows.

I laugh. “No, nothing like that. Meeting up with an old girlfriend.”

Theresa frowns. “It’s dangerous to walk when there’s flash flooding,” she says. “Listen, how about this? I’ll call up my husband and get him to pick me up, and you can borrow my car.”

I stare at her. “You’d do that?”

“Of course. I trust you. Just don’t drink and drive, okay?”

“Of course not,” I say, and I am still a bit shell-shocked when she hands me her keys. “Theresa, I want you to know how much I appreciate you helping me.”

She waves her hand at me, already on the phone. “Don’t worry about it. Have a shot for me.”

I laugh. “I will.”

In another fifteen minutes, Olive meets up with me on the street. When she arrives, I smile, and she squeals, running toward me and gripping me in a huge hug.

I laugh, hugging her back before pulling away.

“It’s been an *age*,” she says. “How are you?”

“Let’s talk about it over drinks,” I say, feeling antsy.

“That’s my girl,” she says, chuckling. “This is a real dive bar,” she explains. We walk down to the bar at the corner—a bar simply called The Dive—and she takes my arm, leading me inside.

We sit down at a table near the bar, ordering a couple of mimosas since it is still early.

The bubbles tickle my lip, and I giggle as I sip.

“You seem to be in a good mood,” she says.

I suppose I am. It makes me feel a lot better to know that Tristan is still attracted to me and that he still wants me, at least in some way.

“Probably the best mood I’ve been in since Dad passed,” I say, and Olive’s face softens. She puts her hand on my arm.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “Your dad was always good to all of us.”

I nod slowly. He supported my friendships and my relationship with Tristan. “Yeah, it’s been hard.”

“But you’re doing okay? Where are you working?”

“The Golden Boar Pub,” I say, and her eyes widen.

“Do you know that Tristan Hayes owns that bar?”

“Unfortunately, I do,” I say flatly. “And he still kind of hates me,” I admit.

“Kind of?”

“Well,” I say in a low voice, “he got jealous of me flirting with a customer and kissed me today.”

She gasps. “Oh, wow, does that mean the romance of Tristan and Kyla isn’t over?”

I swallow hard. “I don’t think so,” I say glumly. “He still hates me.”

Olive sighs. “Kyla, you have got to stop blaming yourself. It was shitty what Sarah and Frank did—”

“It was shitty what *I* did,” I say firmly. “So yeah, I blame myself.”

“They didn’t have to take pictures, though. That was just a violation of your privacy,” she goes on, and I huff out a breath.

“I don’t want to talk about Sarah and Frank,” I say, but Olive is on a

roll, and she keeps going.

“And to think, she married Tristan.”

I stare at her, my eyes wide. “She did what?”

Olive looks away from me. “Oh, God, I thought you knew. Sarah and Tristan got married about one year after you left. They’re divorced now, I hear, but—”

“Tristan married Sarah?” I ask incredulously, still not believing it. Sarah was my best friend and my confidant; even after what she did to me, I never thought she’d go that far.

Olive nods solemnly.

“I need another drink,” I mutter and order a pitcher of mimosas. I know it is a bad idea, and I’ll probably get drunk and maudlin, but I can’t seem to help myself.

An hour later, I am feeling no pain, and Olive and I are dancing around the dive bar, even though there is no dance floor.

“I gotta get home,” Olive says, and I groan.

“You can’t leave me,” I say, trying hard not to slur my words.

“The little one wakes up at seven,” she says, sighing. “I wish I didn’t have to go, but Brett is picking me up.”

Brett is her husband and her high school sweetheart. Olive is living my dream, honestly. I guess Sarah lived it, too.

“We can take you back to the hotel,” she offers.

“I think I’m going to stay a bit longer,” I say, not wanting to go back to those four walls in that small hotel. “I’ll walk home later. Don’t worry.”

Olive hugs me and kisses my cheek. “Don’t be a stranger, okay?”

I stay and have one more drink after Olive pays the check, and then I decide to walk to Theresa’s car, just to take a nap and see if I feel

okay to drive.

By the time I get to her car, the world is spinning around me, and I know I'm not going to make it back to the hotel tonight. I could schedule an Uber, but that costs money, and I don't have a lot of it.

Besides, the hotel room is lonely.

I get into the car and curl up in the back seat, falling asleep quickly due to all the champagne I consumed.

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I wake up the next morning to someone rapping on the window.

The sound is like nails in my head; I'm so hungover.

I slowly sit up and roll down my window, seeing Tristan standing outside of it.

"What the hell are you doing?" he shouts, and I can't tell if he is really angry or just shouting over the wind. The skies are almost black, and the storm is coming in earnest. "You can't be sleeping in your car in this kind of weather," he scolds me.

Maybe I am still a little drunk because all I say is: "Didn't think you cared."

"I don't," he says quickly, his tone low and harsh. "But it reflects poorly on me to have my employees sleeping in their cars. You know, I only pulled over because I was surprised to see Theresa's car in this part of town. I wasn't expecting to find you."

"I had a little too much to drink," I admit. "And I needed to sleep it off."

Tristan huffs out a breath. "You're supposed to be at work in half an hour. Are you even good to drive right now?" When I just stare at him, he reaches out a hand and tersely says, "Keys."

“You don’t want to drive your car?” I ask, reluctantly handing them over.

He sits in the driver’s seat, and I climb from the back into the passenger seat. “I can get a ride to pick it up later,” he says, starting the car. “And I’m sure Theresa didn’t agree to you abandoning her car here all day.”

That is true, but I don’t know how to thank him, so I sit in silence for a while.

“I heard you married Sarah,” I say eventually, and now I know I am still a little drunk; otherwise, I would never bring it up.

He freezes. “What business is that of yours?”

“She was my best friend, Tristan,” I say softly, tears springing to my eyes.

“And Frank was mine,” Tristan says shortly.

A minute later, we pull into the pub’s parking lot. He climbs out and walks around to open the passenger door, reaching out his hand for me to take.

I take it, electricity shooting through me at his touch as he drags me out of the car.

We head for the pub together, and he drops my hand as he unlocks the door.

I sigh heavily and walk inside.

“Where is everybody?” I ask.

“At home,” he says shortly. “Everyone called in.”

As sick as I feel, I really should have called in.

“Excuse me,” I say, and I run to the bathroom, thinking I might throw up.

In the end, I don’t, and instead splash cold water on my face to feel

a little more human.

When I open the bathroom door, Tristan is standing in front of the windows, frowning.

“What is it?”

“Tornado warning,” he says. “It just came through on my phone. The storm windows have been treated, but that didn’t stop one of them from breaking before. We need to go down to the basement.”

“The basement?” I ask, shocked. I didn’t know the storm would be this bad.

Just then, the wind picks up, sounding like a train whistle. Tristan sprints to me, taking my elbow and dragging me toward the back of the building.

“We gotta go,” he says firmly, and we go down into the basement together.

Am I going to be trapped with my high school sweetheart who hates me for the whole day—maybe into the night?

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## *Tristan*

I can't believe I found Kyla asleep in Theresa's car on the way to work this morning. I thought for sure it'd just be me at The Golden Boar tonight—thought I'd open and serve a few drinks to stragglers and then hang it up.

I could have closed for the day, and maybe I should have, but I've been throwing myself into work lately. Having Kyla back in my life is stressful, and work is the only way I know to get my mind off of things.

Once Kyla and I enter the small basement, I realize that my shoulders barely make it through the opening. We are going to be too close to each other and I don't think it will be a good idea.

*Shit.*

I pull my phone out and call Sarah.

She picks up right away. "Tristan? Are you safe?"

"Is Katrina safe?"

"Yeah, we're in the basement. Where are you?"

"I'm stuck at the Golden Boar. I just wanted to check on Katrina. Stay in the basement until the storm blows over."

"I will. Tristan, be careful."

"Will do," I say, hanging up the phone.

Kyla stares at me with her arms crossed over her chest.

I groan. "You can't possibly be upset that I married Sarah."

"Of course, I am," she shoots back. "How would you feel if I married your best friend?"

"Probably the same way I felt when you fucked my best friend," I

nearly shout, and the words come out of my throat like poison, burning on their way out.

Kyla looks away. “I didn’t mean to,” she says in a small voice.

I choke out a laugh. Here it is. After a week of dancing around the issue, we are finally going to have it out.

Maybe it will give me the closure I need to stop thinking about her twenty-four hours a day.

“What, you just tripped and fell on his—?”

“I was drunk out of my mind,” she snaps. “You and I had that big fight about my wanting to leave Milltown, and Frank kept plying me with booze. Next thing I knew, you were shoving your phone in my face, showing me pictures of me and Frank in bed.”

I open my mouth to yell at her, but then her words penetrate my brain.

“What are you saying?” I ask. “Are you saying that Frank took advantage of you? Because I’ll fucking kill him.”

“I don’t know,” she says, her voice shaky. “I’ve never knowingly been with anyone but you, Tristan. Even when I dated after you, I never got past second base because... I kept comparing them to you. Everyone else came up wanting.”

I step closer to her, and now, our chests are nearly touching. There are only a few crates in the basement, and she plops down on one of them, covering her face.

“I don’t know what happened, Tristan. I really don’t. Sarah took those pictures—”

“Sarah took the pictures?” I ask incredulously, sitting down across from her, my chest heaving with emotion. Is it true? Is it possible that Kyla is the victim here? I’ve had it all wrong.

She nods, looking up at me with her deep blue eyes swimming with tears. “I woke up to her taking them, with Frank’s arms around me. I don’t remember anything else.”

“Kyla,” I say softly, taking her hands in mine. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I tried!” she exclaims. “But at the same time, I wasn’t even sure that nothing happened. That was my fault. I should have never been drinking with him in the first place. He always had eyes for me; even you knew that.”

I set my jaw. She’s right. Frank always flirted idly with Kyla, but I let it go because I thought that was just how he was. He was captain of the football team, for God’s sake; he was a natural flirt.

It feels like there is something bitter and viscous in the back of my throat. I’ve blamed Kyla all this time. I hated her so much, and she’s right—I never would’ve let her explain.

“You’re telling the truth,” I say, and it isn’t a question. I see it in her eyes.

“I was so in love with you, Tristan. I would have never done anything to jeopardize our relationship. I’m...” Her words trail off.

“You’re what?” I ask softly, caressing her knuckles with my thumb and pressing my forehead to hers. “Tell me, Kyla.”

“I’m still in love with you,” she says brokenly, and then I can’t hold back anymore. I kiss her, slowly and deeply. Her arms go around my neck, and she kisses me back, her tongue sliding against mine.

My heart is so full that I can barely stand it. Kyla still loves me. She still loves me just like I still love her. No matter how I tried to love Sarah, no matter how I tried to forget Kyla, in all of those years, I never could.

She is the one for me. And she wants me back. She loves me back.

I kiss her again, and then she scrambles into my lap. I rest my back against the basement wall, the crate creaking under our combined weight, but I don't care if it breaks. I don't care how long the storm lasts as long as I am with her.

I can't breathe because I am kissing her so deeply; when I finally pull away and gasp for air, Kyla is staring down at me with those beautiful blue eyes of hers.

"Tristan," she breathes. "Can you forgive me? Could we... could we start over?"

"No," I say, and her face falls. I cup it with my hands, making her look at me. "I don't want to start over. We can pick up right where we left off."

Kyla grins—the smile making her look so beautiful that my heart aches—and she kisses me again, grinding her hips down against my half-erection.

She rips off her top, throwing it to the ground. Her breasts bounce in her bra, and I let out a low groan.

I dart forward, tasting her through the fabric and making a peak of one nipple, and she arches her back, throwing her head back.

"Kyla," I say. "Dove."

She grabs my face, kissing me hard and rolling her hips, and that is all it takes. I have to have her, storm or no storm, dirty basement floor or not.

I grab her around the waist, pushing her down to the floor as her auburn hair flows out around her.

I pull off her shorts and panties in one go, tossing them to the ground.

“Wish I had time to taste you,” I murmur. “But I want you so bad, dove. It’s been so long.”

“I want you, too. Quick, Tristan,” she pleads, and I can’t say no.

I fumble with my slacks, and then her small fingers are unbuttoning them, sliding down into my boxers to wrap her slender fingers around my cock.

I gasp and thrust into her hand, fully hard now and so ready to feel her.

She releases me from my clothes, and I put my hand over hers as she strokes me, pulling her off.

“You’ll make me come too early like that,” I chuckle, and she smiles.

“Just missed you so much,” she says, tears still streaming down her cheeks. I lean down to kiss them away.

I line up, guiding myself into her, and at first, the glide is rough because we didn’t have much foreplay.

Kyla moans loudly, rocking her hips up to meet my thrusts, and then her slickness starts to lubricate me, and I can move freely.

She feels like hot velvet, clenching around me, and I don’t know if I’ll last for very long.

“God, you feel so good,” she moans, and I quicken my pace, wanting to feel her come around me before I reach my orgasm.

“Kyla,” I groan. “Little dove. I always want you. Always need you. Never leave me again.”

“Never,” she promises, her breath coming shorter and shorter. She cries out my name when she comes, pulsing around me.

After only a few thrusts, I spill inside her, moaning against her mouth.

“Tristan,” she calls, and I lift my head to look at her. “I think the

storm is over.”

I smile, looking down into those blue eyes that have haunted my dreams for years.

“I think it is.”

# CHAPTER NINE

## *Kyla*

After putting our clothes back on and leaving the basement, everything seems too bright, and I hold my hand over my eyes.

Tristan doesn't even look at the pub to see if there is any damage. He just takes my hand and leads me out to Theresa's car.

"Where are we going?" I ask as he speeds away from the pub.

"To talk to Sarah," he says firmly.

My eyes widen. "We don't have to do that."

"Oh, yes, we do," he says, pulling onto the highway.

My palms are sweaty when we arrive at Sarah's place. It is a nice little cottage with red shutters, and I wonder if Tristan lived there before, too. It stings to see such a nice little place, like the one I dreamed of having with Tristan.

Tristan all but drags me up to the front door, and Sarah comes to the door when he rings the bell.

She looks a little older, and she has gained a little weight since high school, but haven't we all?

Sarah looks right at me, and her eyes nearly pop out of her head.

"Kyla? What are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to you," Tristan says flatly. "Come out onto the porch so Katrina won't hear."

"She's sleeping," Sarah says, but finally, she comes outside and shuts the door behind her. "What's going on?"

"You need to tell me exactly what happened that night," Tristan says, glaring at her.

Sarah looks from me to Tristan, and then at our joined hands, and she heaves a deep, exhausted sigh.

“Does it matter? It was all so long ago...”

“It matters, Sarah,” Tristan says, and I feel caught in the crossfire, watching them.

Sarah’s eyes move to mine, and I swear I see guilt in her gaze.

“We were young and stupid,” she mutters. “And Frank talked me into it, anyway.”

Tristan stiffens. “Talked you into what, exactly?”

Sarah looks at him for a moment longer, and my heart seizes in my chest. What if she lies? What if she tells him, it was all my fault? I don’t remember it, so it very well could have been.

“Frank said if he could have Kyla just for one night, he’d make her fall in love with him. And then... well, then, you’d be free to love someone else.” Sarah pauses. “You’d be free to love *me*. But you never did, did you, Tristan?”

“Exactly what happened?” Tristan demands.

Sarah looks at him. “I guess it’s time to come clean. I wasn’t the best kid in high school,” she admits. “I partied too much, did bad things. I changed once we got married, Tristan. I wanted you so much... but I’ve realized that you never wanted me. I’ve tried to be a better person—tried to be the person you wanted.”

“Sarah,” Tristan starts, glaring at her. “This isn’t about our marriage. This is about you.”

“You’re right.” Sarah sighs again, looking down at the ground. “Frank and I formulated a plan. He wanted Kyla. I wanted you. So, we got her drunk, and when she passed out, I took pictures of her and Frank together. It was just a prank, Tristan. Just a stupid, high school

—”

“You ruined my life,” Tristan says, his voice cracking at the end. “You ruined my life, all for a prank?”

“I wanted you so badly, Tristan. I wanted what you had, Kyla,” she says, addressing me for the first time. “And I’ve always wanted to take it back.”

“You can never take that back,” Tristan says flatly.

“I’m different now, Tristan. After we had Katrina, I realized that I needed to change things. I stopped drinking so much, started going to church—I’m trying to be better. For her,” Sarah insists.

I almost feel bad for her. Almost.

“You’re the mother of my child, Sarah, but nothing else. We aren’t friends, and I’m making that clear,” Tristan says.

Sarah hangs her head and doesn’t respond.

“I’ll see you on Sunday when I pick up Katrina,” he says, and then he takes my hand and leads me back to the car.

His shoulders are stiff, and he seems so emotional that I worry he will have a breakdown.

I put my hand on the back of his neck, letting my fingers play in the hair there, and he slowly relaxes. I used to do that when we were together, and Tristan always said I was the only one who could calm him down.

“I want to find Frank and kill him,” he says flatly.

“Baby,” I argue, “we have to let it go.”

“I lost you,” Tristan says, looking at me with wet green eyes. “I lost you, and it was all my fault.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I assure him. I am relieved beyond belief to learn that I didn’t sleep with Frank, that it was all some sick joke. For

the past ten years, I have believed that I ruined my own life, my own future.

“I should have listened,” he says brokenly. “I’m so sorry, dove.”

I kiss him softly. “It’s over now,” I say. “We’re together, right?”

“Forever,” he says fiercely. “I’ll never let you leave me again.”

I smile. “Then let’s just go, Tristan. Let’s live our lives. It’ll be the best revenge.”

Tristan gives me a half-smile, showing those dimples I love so much, and starts the car.

I don’t know where we’re going, and I don’t care, as long as I’m with him.

\*\*\*

Six months later, Tristan and I are living in his house along with Katrina. I have never been happier. I still work at the Golden Boar, but Tristan doesn’t ride me like he used to.

Katrina and I have grown close, almost like best friends.

Everything is perfect.

So when Katrina comes to me one morning, looking nervous with her brown eyes shining, I frown.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart?” I ask, sitting up in bed.

“I’m just worried,” she says, holding her hands behind her back.

“Worried about what?”

“Worried that you’ll say no,” she says.

“Say no to what?” I ask, confused. I reach for her, but she steps back and holds out her hands.

There is an open ring box in her little palm, and inside is a diamond engagement ring, at least eighteen carats, with inlaid sapphires.

My hand flies to my mouth.

Tristan appears in the doorway, leaning against the door jamb and giving me that half-smile that makes my knees weak.

“Will you marry Daddy?” Katrina asks, her words full of nerves.

“Of course, I will,” I say, glancing over at Tristan. “Your daddy really pulled out all the stops.”

“I did,” he agrees.

“It’s beautiful,” I say. I take it and put it on my finger, tears streaming down my face. “I love you both so much.”

I hug Katrina tightly, and she snuggles against me; Tristan comes to crawl onto the bed, pulling us both into his arms.

“I heard there’s a storm coming,” Tristan says idly.

“Good,” I say, smiling. “We always come out shining after the storm.”

**The End.**



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