

Chapter 7

The bright lights and flashing neon in the windows gleamed off of the shiny chrome surfaces of the ultra-clean diner off of I-80 where they ate dinner about half-way through Pennsylvania. The aroma of coffee and cigarettes lingered in the smoking section along with a faint hint of maple syrup from breakfasts.

Brian picked up his cheeseburger and took another bite. It was juicy, with mayo, lettuce, and tomato, just the way he liked it. He'd been famished after such a long day of driving, and they had many miles to go before they slept. He sat across the yellow-Formica-topped table from Peggy and eyed her playing with her taco salad. How could she not be starving after only rare stops to eat all day long? They'd made pretty good time. Then again, they would've made much better time if they hadn't been stopped just outside of South Bend. He hadn't realized how fast she'd been going. He had to admit that she was smooth and entertaining. It was unbelievable that she'd built up to ninety miles per hour, and he hadn't felt a thing. After he'd woken from a nap, he'd gotten wrapped up in talking to her. She was a handful, with strong opinions that were entertaining as hell.

She was beautiful, sitting behind the wheel of his car, simply chic with her hair untidy with wisps of blonde strands that had escaped her ponytail and long, curvy legs clad in tailored shorts. Her strong, elegant hands grasped the steering wheel with a light nonchalance of someone who had spent years driving. She had a need for speed; that's for sure. She'd taken to getting a ticket like a duck to water. She'd pulled everything she had out of her arsenal, including unbuttoning a couple more buttons on her blouse, to try to get out of the ticket. It had been an eye-opener to see her flirt shamelessly with the highway patrolman as he approached the window and all he could do to keep from bursting out laughing. She'd been just so obvious and far be it for him to stop her from what she intended to try. He just sat back and enjoyed the show.

"Is that all you're gonna eat?" he asked, pointing at her plate. "You'll be dying by the time we get there. Aren't you hungry?"

She looked at him over a pair of reading glasses that had fallen down her tiny nose, her deep-sea blue eyes meeting his. "Nah. I don't get that hungry on a trip. Something about the motion makes me not feel like eating." She pushed the plate back an inch or two, pulled off her glasses and tucked them in her purse and sat back in the teal-colored Naugahyde booth. "I don't know how you can eat like that and stay so thin. That's a mountain of food."

He held up a finger and finished the bite of burger he was chewing. "Metabolism. I can't gain weight no matter what. I've tried."

She closed her eyes and shook her head as she placed both palms on the table top. "Okay. That's it. I officially hate you. How can you say something like that to me? That's just so blatantly unfair."

He cocked one eyebrow up and took another bite of cheeseburger.

"I kill myself trying to lose weight while you eat nothing short of Mt. Rushmore and you can't gain weight?" Her voice was becoming somewhat shrill, and Brian's eyes were widening the higher it got. "I'll be fat 'til the day I die, and you'll be a stick because of what? Genetics?" She huffed out a breath away from the table and looked away from him. "It's just wrong."

"I'm sorry? I wasn't my idea, you know."

She crossed her arms across her chest and just stared at him.

"I'd be happy to share with you. Want some of my fries?" he asked, pushing the plate towards her. "Come on. You gotta eat more than that. You'll wither away."

"No, thanks. It's sad enough to sit and watch you eat all those grease-ridden foods. Ugh, it almost makes me sick just to see it. It smells a little like the SPAM factory."

"You've been there? I've always wanted to go."

"Yeah, been there. Done that. We raised hogs, you know. It's about as exciting as you'd think it would be. And I'm on to you. You're just trying to change the subject because you're uncomfortable."

"Can you blame me? I'm sorry about the genetics thing, I am, but there's nothing I can do about it. If I don't eat like this, I get grumpy," he said, stuffing another couple of fries in his mouth. "I'm a growing boy. Besides, you're not fat. You're..." He paused before continuing. He had to phrase this just the right way. He wanted to let her know how beautiful she was in his

eyes and yet not come across like he was flirting. This was a tightrope he was walking, and he needed to take his time before he planted the next foot.

“Uh huh...you were saying?”

Okay, now she was just trying to get his goat. “You’re pleasantly proportioned. How’s that?” he asked.

“Well done. You just tip-toed around that with the skill of a master,” she said. “I’m fat. It’s okay. I know it.”

“No, you’re not. If I may be so blunt, what you are is stacked,” he said. He wiped his chin and looked back at her, anticipating a comeback.

A full-on smile crossed her face, and he got to see her radiance shine through the way God intended. God, she was gorgeous. He felt a lump form in his throat, and he made a deliberate attempt to swallow it down as his heartbeat picked up its pace. He returned her smile.

“Thank you. That’s just about the nicest thing anybody’s ever said to me.” She winked at him. “Thanks for noticing.”

He raised an eyebrow at her and returned his eyes to his food. “It’s kind of hard not to,” he said, as he winked right back, going back to finish his cheeseburger. “And you played it very well with that cop. I think if I hadn’t been there, you just might have worked your way out of that ticket. Maybe.”

“I had to try. What kind of girl would I be if I didn’t at least try to con my way out of a ticket?”

He continued chewing and waited a minute. He wasn’t quite done eating when he said, “A law-abiding one?”

She blushed at that comment. “I’m sorry. I know that put us almost an hour behind. I sort of lost track of things.”

“It’s okay, but from the sounds of it, I should drive the rest of the way. We don’t want you getting another ticket before we get there if you lose your license because of it. You may need to drive sometime again, although, thank God, you won’t need to drive much in New York.

It's the perfect place for you to rehabilitate yourself, driving-wise. Almost like a driving penitentiary," he said, smiling at her.

"Okay. I can see you're going to be Mr. Law and Order, aren't you? Does the badge ever come off? Am I going to need to worry about having hospital corners on my bedspread?" she asked.

He shook his head and ate some more fries. "Not any more than I'll need to worry about Tchaikovsky taking over my life. I had a concern that you'd bombard me with classical music all the time. Now that we've established that you're not fat, at least eat the salad."

She picked up her fork and stabbed at a piece of lettuce and lifted it to her mouth. Talking while still chewing, she said, "Don't worry. My keyboard has headphones, so you won't hear a thing from me. You might not even notice I'm there, except for when I play head-banging stuff."

Her attitude about music astounded him. He'd just assumed that she was a lover of all things classical, and that would be the full extent of her musical tastes. He assumed she was like those high-society folks who dressed well to go to the opera or ballet, who had a chamber orchestra at their wedding receptions. He didn't know who those people were. Nobody in his life was like that, but he figured that somebody must be that kind of people, or they wouldn't have that sort of music anymore. That's what he got for assuming. He'd know better from now on than to take anything for granted when it concerned Peggy.

"Besides," she said, "I'll be playing a variety of stuff for Julliard. I'll be part of jazz and blues groups. I'm paying part of my tuition by playing as an accompanist for other musicians. I'll be playing with the orchestra, get to know violinists, flutists, brass players, even drummers. It's not just classical music that rules the day at Julliard." She tilted her head and looked at him with more keen eyes. "You've never been to a professional musical concert, have you?"

He opened one of his eyes wider. "Can't say that I have."

She shrugged one shoulder. "That's a shame. Would you be open to it?"

"Sure, if I could afford it and had the time."

She smiled a tight-lipped smile. "We'll see what we can do. Maybe when I play at Carnegie Hall one day."

“Wow, will you get to do that?”

She nodded. “That’s the plan, Stan. Every pianist at Julliard is part of a big show at Carnegie at some point, as long as they make it through the program. How soon you get to play at Carnegie depends on how hard you work. I intend to shoot for getting there yet this year, God willing.”

Brian’s heart felt like it was going to burst in his chest. His attraction to her left him staggering for breath. He found so much about her exciting, her vitality, her brains, her energy, and enthusiasm. She had ambition in spades. She was charming and witty, and her skin blushed so easily. He imagined what it would be like to be with her and feel that perfect porcelain blush beneath his fingertips. He closed his eyes and shook his head to clear his mind and looked back at her again.

“We’re going to learn a lot about each other living together, Brian. You’ll know more about me from listening to my music than from anything else. Music comes from a person’s soul, from the strength of who they are as a person.”

He had little doubt of the truth of what she was saying. He’d heard her play, and it had touched him in a way classical music never had before. He had always seen it as cold and unfeeling, but when she played it was anything but cold. It had heat and passion and a fluidity of motion that moved him in a way he’d never experienced. If her music would show him who she was as a person, then he knew that she was exactly what he thought. She was a beautiful person, both inside and out.

“Oh, and Brian, I know I haven’t said this yet. Thank you for taking me on as a roommate.” She reached across the table and laid her hand on his. “I know you didn’t have to. You’re probably only doing it as a favor to Etta and Tom, but I promise you, you won’t regret it. I’m very grateful.”