

I enjoyed sitting out in the open air surrounded by trees and earthy, floral aromas. It was a clear night with a pearly moon that beamed a ripple onto the swimming pool.

Fanning away smoke that suddenly blew in my direction, I looked up and noticed Bronson, his back to me, puffing on a cigarette. He turned and, noticing me there, distanced himself.

My eyes were drawn to him in a way I wished they weren't. Under the moonlight, he seemed like an almost mystical being bathed in shadow, especially when the smoke formed a halo around him.

He turned again and said, "Is the smoke annoying you?"

I put my fork down and ran my tongue around my lips to wash away the chocolate. "Um... no. It's okay. I'm kind of used to it, anyway."

A slight shift of the brow was his only response, and then he went back to smoking while looking up at the sky.

"I work for a lady who smokes a lot."

He turned and faced me again. I wasn't sure if he wanted to be left alone. He didn't exactly give anything away with that remote stare.

"She makes sure she's on the balcony, though." As I babbled, a little voice within told me to stop, because he wasn't exactly encouraging me with that gaze that bordered on blank, even though I detected a whisper of depth in there somewhere. He just kept sucking on his cigarette as if his life depended on it.

Perhaps it was the champagne and the sugar hit because I kept talking anyway. "I read for her, you see. She also makes me mix martinis."

After a moment and one more drag on his cigarette, he said, "With an olive?" A hint of a smirk touched his lips and boy... he wore it well.

I remained transfixed. "Um... no. Hmm... that's funny." I chuckled in a goofy way. "I have to admit I'd never mixed a martini in my life. I hadn't even tried one. Until now, that is. She makes me join her, which means I always leave with a smile."

"She sounds interesting."

"Agatha's a cross between Miss Havisham and Greta Garbo."

"Let me guess," he responded, butting out his cigarette. "A lonely woman with revenge in her heart who slinks about demanding to be left alone."

My eyes brightened. "Justin didn't know what I was talking about when I described her as that earlier. I'm impressed."

He shrugged. "Let's just say I've had plenty of time to read."

"Then you're a rare being because these days not many people read. And to be honest, when I got this job being asked to do just that, reading from a book that I hold so close to my heart, I nearly broke out in a happy rash.... I..." I

suddenly lost my chain of thought, mainly because he ran his tongue over his cushiony lips again.

"You were saying?" His voice had a deep, guttural resonance that suited him perfectly.

"Just that I feel blessed. It hasn't been easy lately. I had the worst boss ever, and then I landed this job."

"Do you always break out in a rash when you're happy?" His lips twitched into a hint of a smile.

I giggled. "No. Sorry. I've had a bit of champagne, and I tend to say silly things."

"Silly's entertaining."

His eyes burrowed deep into me again. And the best I could return was a cheesy tight smile. I looked down at my half-eaten cake, and strangely, my appetite had gone. "Do you have a favorite author?"

"Do you?" he asked.

"I think I love Emily Bronte."

"*Wuthering Heights*," he returned. I must have shown my surprise because he added, "Why that look? Am I giving off some kind of illiterate vibe?"

"No. Not at all," I lied, because he was the last person I'd expected to know of *Wuthering Heights*. "I'm sorry. Most younger guys don't really go for books like that."

"I'm not like most younger guys." His eyes darkened again. He'd gotten that right. There weren't too many guys I'd met who read books, let alone looked like him.

He came toward me, and as I sat there staring up at him in suspense, for I wasn't sure what he was about to do, my heart raced.

He leaned in, and placing his finger on my cheek, he wiped it gently.

"You had a brown mark there." His eyes softened slightly. He put his finger in his mouth in a way that made me want to sigh. It was so suggestive. "Mm... chocolate. Nice," he rasped as if he'd dipped his finger somewhere forbidden.

I wanted to speak but lost my voice due to that subtle cologne scent wafting up my nostrils, combined with his melty brown eyes boring into me.

"Um... Yeah, I..." As I stammered, seeking a coherent response, Justin and Marcus came out, holding cigars and laughing loudly.

Bronson turned to face them. The brothers' obvious cold regard for one another made me think of the classic Cain and Abel relationship.

