



The One For Me: A Danvers Novel

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But for the first time, Mark wants to take things slow, which—considering the electricity between them—may take far more willpower than he's ever had.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Danvers Novels

“Wonderful...Landon’s foray into contemporary romance has just the right amount of angst, sass, sexiness, humor, and, of course, romance.”—Fresh Fiction

“If you like the Cinderella-style story, this modern-day version is sure to be a hit.”—Once Upon a Twilight

About the Author

Sydney Landon is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the Danvers series, including *Because of You*, *Watch Over Me*, *Always Loving You*, and *No Denying You*. She lives in South Carolina with her husband and two children, who keep life interesting and borderline insane, but never boring. When she isn't writing, Sydney enjoys reading, swimming and being a mini-van driving soccer mom.

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Also by Sydney Landon

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About the Author

Chapter One

There are just days that suck, Crystal Webber thought as she used one hand to rub her aching head and the other to clutch her cramping stomach. Why in the world had she come to work this morning? True, she hadn't felt quite this sick when she'd left home, but she had been nauseous. She'd attributed it to skipping dinner the night before since she had fallen asleep on the sofa hours before her usual bedtime.

Now, though, she could no longer avoid the fact that she was ill. Her boss, Lydia, had gone to lunch, so Crystal sent her an e-mail explaining the situation before getting shakily to her feet. She quickly grabbed the edge of her desk and held on until the room stopped spinning. "You can do this," she mumbled under her breath as she put one foot in front of the other. She was grateful for her recent promotion to assistant to the director of marketing at Danvers International. Otherwise, she would be struggling to make it through the cube farm where her last desk had been located. There was little to no privacy there and someone would have certainly noticed that she was weaving as if she'd had one too many drinks. Thank God, things were quieter on the management side of the hallway.

She was relieved when the elevator doors opened as soon as she hit the DOWN button. The next few moments passed in something of a daze, and she had no idea that she'd actually made it to the sidewalk outside the building until the bright sunlight blinded her. As she blinked her eyes quickly to adjust, her

stomach roiled alarmingly. The realization that she was going to be sick before she made it home had her so focused that she didn't notice anyone standing beside her until a hand touched her arm. "Are you okay?" Crystal jumped aside in shock at the sound of the voice, whirling around to see Mark DeSanto looking down at her with concern-filled eyes. *Please, no.* Fate couldn't be evil enough to throw the coworker she'd lusted after for months into her path at this moment. *Not today of all days.*

Using the last reserves of her strength, she pushed her shoulders back and attempted to give him a bright smile. "I'm fine," she replied in a voice that sounded scratchy, even to her own ears. He gave her a skeptical look and then, before she could do anything to stop it, the unthinkable happened. Her body went into a full revolt, and almost in slow motion, she threw up on a pair of shoes that likely cost more than her Volkswagen Beetle. Words of apology rose to her lips but before she could utter them, her world dimmed and then turned black.

As consciousness slipped away from her, all she could think was that she'd met the man of her dreams face-to-face and she wasn't going to live long enough to do a damn thing about it.

• • •

Mark DeSanto stood on the sidewalk in shock with the now-limp body of the woman who had just moments before ruined his favorite pair of Tom Ford shoes in his arms. He knew the effect that he had on most women. Hell, he'd had more than a few swoon at his feet, but the whole throwing-up thing was completely new. He had no idea what to do now with the unconscious woman whose weight he was supporting. It wasn't as if he could just lay her on one of the nearby benches for someone else to find—could he?

No, he discounted that option, despite how appealing it sounded.

When he'd seen her staggering out the door, he should have turned the other way and left her to be someone else's problem. He had walked out the doors of Danvers just steps behind her. Normally he preferred tall blondes with the occasional redhead thrown in for variety, so she wasn't his usual type. However, as if drawn by some unseen force, he had found himself reaching out and touching her arm, wanting a glimpse of the face that belonged to the enticing body.

But he'd caught glimpses of the woman he followed down the sidewalk in the hallways and lobby of the office many times in recent months. For some reason, she was always turning away by the time he became aware of her presence. He'd recognize her ass anywhere because that was the body part usually facing him as she walked in the opposite direction. She was petite but had curves in all of the right places. Her long brown hair hung in loose waves that stopped just inches from her delectable backside. Today, she was wearing a black skirt that reached her knees, but the slit in the middle had shown shapely thighs as she'd moved unsteadily. When she had lifted an arm, rubbing her neck, the top she wore had edged up, revealing a hint of skin. She seemed to be everywhere lately, and he was ready to meet his mystery woman so that he could move on.

Anything beyond that was doubtful. He didn't like to muddy the waters where he worked. That was not to say he'd never made an exception, but he tried not to.

When she'd jerked around to face him a few moments ago, he'd felt a jolt of electricity shoot through his body. He wasn't a man prone to romantic foolishness, but there had been songs written to describe women like her. Wide eyes close to violet in color. Plump pink lips that made a man's cock sit up and take notice, and a flawless peaches-and-cream complexion that some paid millions for but never achieved.

He had still been gaping at her as she'd assured him that she was fine before she further shocked him by

vomiting and promptly passing out. She had been seconds away from her beautiful face meeting the unforgiving concrete when he'd caught her. As he stood with her light weight in his arms, a black Bentley sedan pulled to the curb. His driver, Denny—who was also his cousin on his mother's side of the family—got out of the car gawking as if in disbelief of what he was seeing. As far as the employer/employee relationship, theirs was very informal. They'd grown up together, and although Mark's family had money from the DeSanto side, Denny's did not. So years ago Denny had proposed that he become Mark's driver and assistant when Mark had taken over the family business, and it had worked well for both of them. Mark compensated Denny more than probably anyone employed in a similar position, but he trusted him implicitly.

"I'm almost afraid to ask what you did to that girl, but if I'm going to become some kind of accessory, then I guess I need to know." Denny sighed in resignation.

Walking toward his driver in shoes that sloshed with every step, Mark shook his head helplessly. "I have no idea. She was weaving as she walked, and then she got sick and fainted."

Denny wrinkled up his nose as the smell finally reached him. "Shouldn't we do something with her? I mean, do you think she's drunk?"

"How in the hell am I supposed to know?" he snapped. "I didn't smell any alcohol, and it's barely midday. Also, she just left Danvers, so it seems unlikely."

"Then we need to get a doctor. She obviously has something wrong with her," Denny pointed out.

Rolling his eyes, Mark said, "You think? Open the car door so I can get her inside." Denny jogged ahead and had the door ajar when Mark reached him. "Here, you're going to have to hold her for a minute. Then you can give her back to me when I'm inside."

Denny held his hands up, trying to back away. "She's got puke on her. Can't you just get in with her? There's no need to ruin both of our clothes."

"Oh, for God's sake, Denny, I'll get you a new suit. Just take her for one second." Mark couldn't believe how hard it was for two men to juggle such a tiny woman. Finally, as Denny gently handed her off to him and shut the door, Mark slumped against the leather seat with her curled against him. Since he had no idea of her name, he rubbed his hand along her leg as he said, "Angel, open those eyes and look at me so I'll know you're okay."

He continued to say variations of the same thing as Denny started driving. He had almost given up when she finally shifted in his arms.

Suddenly, the violet eyes that had captivated him earlier were staring at him with an expression that was hard to decipher. He was too stunned to react when she lifted her hand and stroked it down the side of his face. "Oh, Mark, it's you—can we please have sex this time before I wake up?" No sooner had she finished the question than her head dropped back to his chest. If not for the soft snore that emitted from her mouth, he would have been checking her for a pulse.

He was chuckling at her words when it hit him. She'd called him by name. His angel wasn't deliriously asking for sex from a stranger. He had no idea who she was, but for the first time in so very long, he was interested in knowing more. This beauty seemed different from most of the women he'd met and with whom he had enjoyed a few hours of pleasure. As soon as she was conscious and coherent, he intended to find out who she was.

She'd already accomplished something that no one had in years.

Chapter Two

Crystal rolled over in bed, wincing at the wave of pain that one movement seemed to have caused. The glow of the clock on the bedside table showed that it was four in the morning, which would explain why the room was still pitch-black. Her limbs were heavy with fatigue as she curled around a pillow—and then she froze. She sniffed again just to make sure she hadn't imagined it—but no, her bedding smelled like a man. Considering she hadn't slept with anyone since her divorce, this was a very strange occurrence. Jerking upright, she fumbled on the bedside table for her lamp—but it wasn't within easy reach as it should be. She stretched farther until, with a shriek, she was falling out of the bed.

She landed on the floor with a thud and a jarring of limbs. *Ouch*. She couldn't remember her carpeted floor being this hard and cold. What happened next convinced her that she must still be dreaming. Light suddenly filled the room and a man who looked a lot like Mark DeSanto stood looking down at her in concern.

Instead of screaming in terror, she began laughing hysterically. Couldn't she have just one hot sex dream? Maybe her riding Mark while he told her how perfect she was? Heck, she'd even be happy with a plain old missionary fantasy. But no, even in her dreams, she was awkward and always managed to embarrass herself. "Sorry about this," she mumbled to her dream Mark. "Just let me get back in bed and fall asleep. If I'm lucky, you'll be back and we'll try this again."

"Are you all right? Did you hit your head when you fell?" He sounded so real, his question caused her to frown. Her eyes widened as he squatted next to her.

Okay, this was officially freaky now. Dream Mark never talked this much. She quite liked this new development. He seemed so concerned for her. She decided to enjoy it while it lasted—or at least until she woke up. "I'm too weak to stand. Could you help me?" That wasn't a complete lie, as her limbs were heavy, and she was sore already from the fall. Her breath hitched when he slid one arm under her knees and the other around her back before straightening with her in his muscular arms. "Wow, you smell good," she moaned as she buried her face in the curve of his neck. When he didn't protest, she took it one step further—and licked at the throbbing pulse she felt there with the tip of her tongue. He shuddered, freezing with her in his arms.

Crystal felt like a kid in a candy store. Shouldn't she be awake by now? This felt so real. . . . And he smelled just like her pillow. She was pondering her next move when her stomach cramped. "What—?" she murmured in confusion. Then a wave of nausea rolled over her and she clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Oh no, not again," dream Mark said, sounding panicked. He walked at a fast clip with her to the bathroom—only it definitely wasn't hers. This one was opulent, with gleaming marble double sinks, a huge shower, and a Jacuzzi bathtub big enough to swim in. Crystal was still gawking when he lowered her to her feet in front of the toilet. He made no move to leave, though; instead, he kept a supporting hand on her back. "How are you feeling, Angel? Are you going to be sick?"

"Um—I don't know," she answered absently. "I think I just need to sit here for a minute." He helped her down to the floor then seated himself just inches away. She could only stare at him since this whole dream was beginning to seem more like a walk into the twilight zone. Hesitantly, she reached out to touch his chest. She paused as she felt his heart beating against the palm of her hand. Jerking back as if burned, she began to notice little things like the fact that she was wearing what looked like a man's button-down shirt while Mark

had on a pair of lounge pants and a T-shirt. When her eyes met his, she found him staring at her with equal parts concern and curiosity. It was then that his last words really registered. “‘Angel’?”

The corners of his mouth turned up into a grin as he said, “Well, when you appeared to fall from the sky into my arms, I didn’t know your name, so I just called you what seemed to suit you best. Of course, now that I know who you are, I find that I still prefer ‘Angel.’ There’s something so innocent about you.”

“Oh, my God,” she wheezed. “This isn’t a dream? I’m actually here with you. How—why?” Looking around frantically, Crystal desperately tried to remember what could have possibly brought her to Mark’s apartment. Shit, why couldn’t she remember something as monumental as being with Mark DeSanto? Then a horrifying thought occurred to her. “If we had sex, I’m going to kill myself!”

A laugh erupted from his mouth, followed by a cough. “I must say, I’ve never had that reaction from a woman before.”

She felt her face heating up as she imagined how he must have taken her comment. “No! Crap, that came out wrong. I just meant if we slept together and I didn’t remember it, I’d be so pissed off.” When he raised a brow in question, she quickly added, “You know, because I’ve been dreaming of doing that with you for so long—” Now he looked supremely amused as she continued to ramble, which only made the situation worse. Putting a hand over her face, she said from behind her palm, “Please forget I said any of that. I’d just like to know what I’m doing here.”

Mark gave her an assessing look before saying, “I’d rather talk about that somewhere other than the bathroom. Are you going to be sick?”

Thankfully, her bout of nausea seemed to have passed during their conversation. “I—think I’m okay now.”

Her growling stomach caused him to chuckle as he got to his feet and extended a hand to her. “Let’s go find something to eat. You’ll probably feel better after that.”

Not only was her body letting her know it needed food, but her bladder was also making its presence known loud and clear. “I—er, could you wait outside for a minute?”

Looking adorably confused, he asked, “Why?”

Could the man not take a hint? “I need to use the bathroom,” she mumbled, embarrassed to be having such a personal discussion with him.

Apparently, it wasn’t something that bothered him, though, because instead of leaving, he leaned against the wall. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to leave you in here alone. These floors are stone. If you pass out again, they could do serious damage.”

Her mouth dropped open, and she put her hands on her hips. “There is no way I’m peeing with you in here.”

Giving her a chastising look, he said, “Angel, not only have you already done it in front of me, I kept you from falling off the toilet and onto the floor. Not to mention, I had to—”

“Oh, my God—please stop!” She moaned in horror, knowing exactly what he’d been about to say. How could that have happened? What was *wrong* with her?

Quirking an amused brow, he stepped back through the doorway. “I’ll wait out here, but don’t close the door all the way in case I need to rescue you—again.”

Crystal pondered not only shutting the door but locking it as well. He'd probably just break the damn thing down, though. There was no way she could actually do her business with him so close. She was a timid tinkler at the best of times. Therefore, she turned the water on full blast in the sink and giggled as she imagined him wondering if she was flooding the bathroom.

After taking care of business, she washed her hands but left the water running. She needed a moment to process what had happened since she'd woken up here. How in the world had she ended up with Mark DeSanto? In what world did someone like her find herself in this sort of situation? The last thing she remembered was leaving work early because she hadn't been feeling well and then throwing up on a pair of expensive shoes. *Shit!*

Please, no. Tell me I didn't toss my cookies all over my fantasy man. Fate could not be that cruel. Then there was the issue of her clothing—or lack thereof. She was wearing what she could only guess was one of Mark's shirts and her panties. She knew her bra was missing even before she confirmed that fact by pressing a hand against her chest. Had he—? No, surely she had been able to change her own clothing.

As her thoughts raced, she made the mistake of looking up and almost screamed at the sight of her reflection. Oh, sweet heaven, the image in the mirror staring back at her was beyond terrible. She looked like a rabid animal. Instead of nursing her to health, she was surprised he hadn't called animal control to have her put down. Her hair was sticking out in all directions, and her eyes were puffy, bloodshot, and rimmed in black like a koala bear's. Looking around frantically, she spotted a cabinet in the corner and said a silent prayer of thanks when she found a stack of washcloths as well as a comb inside it. She wet one and began washing her face.

Crystal was just attempting to tame her hair when Mark called out, "Are you all right in there?"

"I'm fine," she yelled back before turning the water off. Grimacing at her reflection, she put the comb down and decided there wasn't much more she could do at this point. She was in need of a shower, but that could wait until she got some answers from Mark. Schooling her features into an impassive line, she opened the door and tried not to drool in his direction. Did the man have to be so freaking hot? *You probably wouldn't have been stalking him for months at the office if he weren't quite so good-looking,* her inner voice chided.

She had been smitten with him practically from the first glimpse. Mia had caught her ogling him in the coffee shop of Danvers one morning. She'd unknowingly poured half a container of sugar in her coffee, while watching him add creamer to his. Then she'd done something completely juvenile and pulled her cell phone out to snap a picture of the unsuspecting hunk. She had thought him the most handsome man she'd ever seen. Tall, dark, and polished in his obviously expensive suit. He'd seemed so unaware of all of the female attention centered on him. One thing that had really drawn her attention was how he'd run a hand through his hair repeatedly as if stressed over something. Crystal had never been prone to developing crushes, but something had changed for her in that instant. There was no denying her attraction to him. She must have looked at the picture she had taken dozens of times, and her curiosity had been well and truly whetted.

Maybe it was the fact that she was more lonely than she would care to admit, but she found herself watching for him around the office from then on, even going so far as to go to his floor for no reason other than to catch a glimpse of him again. She'd also checked social media and been thrilled to find he had both Facebook and Twitter accounts. He wasn't a celebrity as such, but according to Google he was a wealthy business owner who attended high-profile charity events on a regular basis. He was photographed often at these gatherings, no doubt due to his drop-dead good looks. Possibly a big part of her attraction to him was the fact that he appeared so opposite from her ex-husband. Bill had never possessed the type of power and

confidence that Mark seemed to emit so effortlessly.

She snapped from her daze as he looked her over as if checking for injuries before motioning for her to follow him. He flipped on the lights to dispel the darkness as they passed through a hallway that was made almost entirely of glass. She saw water in the distance and was just opening her mouth to ask about it when he glanced over his shoulder, saying, “The house is on the ocean. I live near Jason and Gray.”

She’d been to both Jason Danvers’s and Gray Merimon’s homes since she was friends with their wives, Suzy and Claire. Well—technically, her sister, Ella, was friends with them. Crystal was more like an acquaintance through her family connection. She liked both women a lot, though, and sometimes had lunch with them along with Ella, Suzy’s sister-in-law Beth, Mia, and more recently, Emma, Ava, and Gwen. Gwen Day and Mia Gentry were her best friends, and she was lucky enough to see them at work almost every day.

“I thought you lived in Charleston,” Crystal blurted out before realizing that she wouldn’t know that unless she’d been looking him up online.

He didn’t seem to find anything strange about the question, though, saying simply, “I have homes in several places. Living in a hotel gets old after a while, and since I’m spending a great deal of time in Myrtle Beach now, it just made sense to have a more permanent place here.”

Mark flipped on another light and she saw they were now in a gourmet kitchen straight from the pages of a magazine, with designer black granite countertops and a huge island. Next to it were a commercial-size stainless steel stove and refrigerator. The area was easily five times bigger than her galley kitchen in her own apartment. If she had this kind of space, she thought, then she might actually enjoy cooking, a pastime that had been spoiled for her during her marriage to her ex-husband. Bill had insisted on a full meat-and-potatoes type of meal each evening, which in itself might not have been bad if he hadn’t felt the need to criticize her efforts the entire time he was cleaning his plate. No matter what she made, it was never good enough for him.

She perched on the edge of one of the barstools that he’d indicated before saying, “You have a really nice kitchen. Do you cook a lot?”

He smirked as if she’d said something amusing. “I’d like to say that I’m a whiz in the kitchen like the Merimon brothers, but my skills in that particular area are pretty basic. I can do enough to get by, but I’m on the go a lot, so I tend to eat before I come home.”

Laughing, Crystal said, “I’ve heard Suzy and Beth talk about how Nick and Gray were raised to work out their problems in the kitchen. I guess they cooked with their mother while they talked. It sounds as if they could open their own bakery if they ever decided to change professions.” Thinking of her own overbearing mother, she added, “I wish I had grown up with someone that nurturing.”

Mark paused for a moment in the act of adding bread to a toaster, then he said quietly, “Yeah, I wouldn’t know a whole helluva lot about that either. Celine DeSanto’s idea of parental bonding was to help my father remain upright until dinner was finished. Otherwise, he’d be passed out cold before the salad course was over.”

Crystal didn’t know what to say to the information that he’d just revealed. The stiff set of his shoulders said that he wouldn’t welcome her sympathy, so instead, she changed the subject. “So, why am I here? I’ve put together enough to know that I must have gotten sick—possibly on your shoes,” she added weakly. “But I don’t recall anything other than that.”

He worked silently for a moment before setting two pieces of dry toast in front of her along with a chilled bottle of water from the refrigerator. “I know it’s not a great breakfast, but I think we should be cautious since you were still feeling nauseous just a short while ago.” Pointing to the food, which she still hadn’t touched, he added, “Now eat, while I talk.” She began nibbling on the bread while he seated himself across from her. “I was walking a few steps behind you when you left Danvers two days ago.”

“Two days?” she gasped out. “I’ve been here that long?”

“It was pretty late by the time we got here on Friday, so not quite two days. You were staggering, so I asked you if you were feeling okay. You said you were fine, but then you promptly puked on me before passing out. My driver and I managed to get you into my car with the intention of taking you to a hospital. In the end, my house was closer, and I decided to bring you here first. You seemed a bit better when we arrived, and I hated to move you again. Therefore, I paid an absurd amount of money for my personal physician to make a house call. He did some blood work and—”

“WHAT?” Crystal gasped. “You took my blood while I was out of it?”

He gave her a puzzled look before shaking his head in amusement. “Angel, I’m not a vampire, so I didn’t personally take your blood. Dr. Francis handled that. I can assure you that he followed the same protocol here that he would have in the hospital. You’ll be glad to know that you’re not pregnant.” Wiggling a brow, he added, “Good news for both of us, right?”

“You—I,” she stuttered before managing to take a deep breath. “I could have saved you some money. I already knew that. You have to actually have sex to get pregnant!” she snapped. “And I’ve only been here for two days. I don’t think there was much risk of you being made a father this quickly. So I’m not sure why you’re relieved at the news.”

He began laughing, and dammit, she could only stare at him, admiring how sexy he looked when he smiled. It wasn’t fair for one man to have so much going for him. His midnight-black hair was thick and just begged for a woman’s hands to tug on the shiny strands. Even through the loose shirt he was wearing, she could see the defined muscles of his shoulders and chest. He would no doubt have a set of washboard abs that you’d yearn to lick, and his eyes were an intense shade of blue that glowed back at her like twin sapphires. Somehow, he managed to be pretty, sexy, and rugged all at the same time. Her clit throbbed with pent-up desire, and she had to fight the need to wrap herself around his waist and beg him to fuck her—hard. She’d never had a sexual experience like that before, but she’d read enough romance novels to know that was what she wanted in the worst way. And she knew instinctively that Mark was a man who could give it to her.

She was still lost in her fantasy when a hand on her bare leg jolted her back to the present. She was almost certain by the grin on Mark’s face that he knew she was having dirty thoughts about him. “Well, it just clears the way, since you’ve expressed your desire to have sex with me several times in the last few days.”

Mortified, she whispered, “Oh no,” before dropping her head into her hands. It was fine to lust over him, stalk his Facebook and Twitter pages, and trail after him in the hallways of the Danvers building—as long as he didn’t know about her interest. But now she’d made a complete fool out of herself. She’d seen enough pictures of him with women on Google to know that she wasn’t even in the same league with them. He had been photographed at a lot of society charity events, but never with the same woman. “I was sick and didn’t know what I was saying,” she defended weakly.

“If you say so, Angel,” he said with a straight face. “The doctor said you had a viral infection along with being anemic. That’s probably what caused you to pass out. I had my driver pick you up a bottle of iron supplements. Dr. Francis suggested that you talk to your OB/GYN about birth control pills since sometimes

a heavy period can cause low iron levels.”

Crystal could only gawk as he talked about something completely personal as if they were discussing the weather. Most men would be terrified even to mention a woman’s menstrual cycle, but it didn’t appear to bother Mark at all. She quickly raised her hands and clamped them over her ears while his mouth continued to move. “I’m not listening to any more from you,” she said until he gave her an exasperated look. “Can we please not discuss my bodily functions? I don’t even know you.”

With a look that was hot enough to have her body tingling again, he said, “No, but you want to, don’t you, Angel? I’ve seen you around the office—or at least glimpses of you. I have to say that seeing you up close was a surprise—a damn good one.”

Dammit, he was charming and sexy. Crystal had no idea how to respond because she’d never really had a man compliment her before. Her ex’s idea of saying something nice was *I guess you’ll do*. Mark, though, looked at her as if he wanted to devour her. It was only fair since she’d wanted to eat him up from the first moment she saw him. Clearing her throat and breaking eye contact, she asked huskily, “Can we get back to what’s happened since I’ve been here? Did you stop to think that there are possibly people looking for me?”

“Being that it was Friday when you got sick, I didn’t think anyone from work would notice. Plus, once Denny, my driver, found out who you were, I gave Brant a call and had him pass the information along to Declan.”

“Ella and Declan are out of town,” she murmured, remembering they were having a weekend away while Ava and Mac babysat for them.

“Yeah, I know. Ella called, though, and was rather freaked-out until I assured her that you were in good hands. She said to tell you that she’d cover with your mother.”

“Oh crap—thank goodness.” Crystal sighed.

“Do you still live at home or something?” Mark asked, looking confused.

Shaking her head, Crystal said, “No, but that doesn’t stop my meddling parents and my husband from minding my business.” When he appeared shocked, she quickly added, “I mean my ex-husband! We’ve been divorced for a while—but my mother chose him in the unofficial settlement and they gang up on me all the time.”

“Hmm, I see,” he murmured. “Well, back to what has transpired since you passed out at my feet. I brought you home, showered you off—clothes and all—then put you in one of my shirts. You don’t seem to remember it, but you were awake for the most part. You were sick a lot, though. I was going to take you to the hospital after I cleaned us both up, but you begged me not to. Said you were afraid of staying there alone. So instead, I brought the doctor to you. He suspected you just had something viral but did blood work to verify it. That brings you up-to-date, as I’ve mentioned your mild anemia and negative pregnancy test.”

Crystal’s head was spinning as Mark finished running through the last two days at breakneck speed. Puzzled, she asked, “Why would you do all of that? You don’t even know me.”

Giving her a roguish grin, he said, “I feel like we’re pretty well acquainted now.” When she narrowed her eyes at him, he added softly, “I couldn’t take you to the hospital, Angel. You were so fucking scared for some reason when I mentioned it.”

Looking beyond Mark's shoulder to where the sun was beginning to rise over the water, she rubbed her arm absently before saying, "I had my tonsils removed and had to stay in the hospital overnight when I was young. No one stayed with me, so I was alone, in pain, and scared out of my mind. My mom had told me before she left that I had better behave myself or the nurses would tell her in the morning and I would be in trouble. So every time they came to check on me and ask if I was in pain, I said no so that word wouldn't get back to my mother that I'd been bad." Trying to make light of what had been a terrifying experience, she forced out a laugh, adding, "It was a long night."

"Ah, I'm sorry, Angel. Your reaction makes a lot of sense to me now. That was a real shitty thing to do to a child. Is your mother still a heartless bitch?"

Crystal began choking on the sip of water she had just taken. He got up and walked over to pat her on the back until she managed to catch her breath. "Sorry about that," she said huskily. "It's just that no one is brave enough to call Dorothy Webber names. Most people are terrified of her."

"Trust me, Angel, I'm fully versed in bad parenting. Mine aren't exactly the type to give you the warm fuzzies either. Of course, I haven't seen either of them in a while, so maybe they've turned over a new leaf."

"How have you stayed away from them for that long?" Crystal asked incredulously. Considering her mother called her no fewer than ten times per week, it was hard to imagine going that long without her popping by for one of her awkward, unannounced visits.

Mark took her empty plate and put it in the sink before turning back to her. "It's not complicated. They only communicate with me when they want something. I only wish that weren't as often as it is."

"You're so lucky." She sighed before she could stop herself. Mark chuckled, nodding his head in agreement. Then she forced herself to say the last words that she wanted to utter. "I guess I should be getting home now. You must be so ready to see the last of me." *Please God, say no . . .*

He didn't speak for a moment. Instead, he studied her intently, as if looking for a sign of something from her. Just when she thought he wasn't going to say anything at all, he shrugged his broad shoulders and grinned. "What's one more night, Angel? I'd hate to take you home now and you have a relapse. Stay here and we'll leave early enough tomorrow morning to swing by your place before work. Today, we can take it easy and watch some movies."

Crystal could only gawk at his suggestion. She wanted to stay more than anything, and he was making it possible without her having to do something crazy like begging. So why was she hesitating? She'd never get the opportunity again to spend time with the man she had all but stalked for months now. She looked down at her hands, trying not to let her excitement show. "I guess that would be all right," she said, trying to sound flippant. She was on cloud nine until she remembered how she looked. "Um—do you think I could take a shower?"

He gave her a look that was pure wickedness. "Of course—but I should probably help you again. What if you get dizzy? I'll do your back—and front—if you like."

Down, girl—roll your tongue back into your mouth. "I—er, believe I'll be fine." She'd never wanted to scream YES before as she did now. She needed to remove herself immediately from the temptation he offered.

He rolled his eyes. "If you insist. After we've both showered, we'll go back to bed for a while. I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted."

Fighting back a yawn, Crystal nodded her head. “That sounds good.”

Mark led her to the same bedroom and handed her more clothing from his closet—this time a soft T-shirt. He then pulled a pair of boxer briefs from a nearby drawer and passed them along to her as well. “Knowing you aren’t wearing panties might be more than I can take. I’m only human, Angel. Hopefully, you can make those work.”

Crystal knew her face was probably five shades of pink as she took the items and went into the bathroom, avoiding glancing at herself in the mirror. By the time she was finished with her shower and drying her hair, she was about ready to drop from exhaustion. When she opened the door and walked back into the bedroom, she was disappointed to find it empty. Mark had apparently decided to bathe elsewhere. Shrugging her shoulders, she crawled into the bed that she had so recently vacated and fell asleep almost immediately.

• • •

Mark stood staring down at the woman in his bed. It unnerved him that she looked so right lying there—as if she belonged. He rarely brought women to his home, and he certainly didn’t do sleepovers. He’d broken all of the rules with her already. He’d nursed her back to health for the last two days and then asked her to stay with him for another night. Hell, he was pretty sure he’d have begged if she’d refused. He was drawn to her and he had no idea why. He fucked women—period. She was beautiful—but he could get that anywhere. She was sexy—again, that was a dime a dozen. She was also innocent—even though she’d apparently been married at some point.

She might not remember it now, but while she’d been sick, she had looked at him as if he was her hero. She had nestled into his arms between bouts of sickness, bringing out protective instincts that he didn’t know he possessed. Dr. Francis had suggested Mark hire a nurse to care for Crystal until she had recovered, but Mark had brushed him off quickly. He didn’t want anyone else taking care of her, which was fucking insane. Even having another man’s hands on her creamy skin while the doctor examined her was torture. He’d excused himself from the room at that point to have a glass—or two—of bourbon.

Mark was an alpha male; he always had been. He was the one in control of sexual encounters. Being that way, he’d learned, kept emotional hassles to a minimum. He was a leader—never a follower. He was dominant in the bedroom and liked to push boundaries. He didn’t cuddle, nor indulge in sweet talk. He’d never sent a woman flowers or anything even approaching a romantic gesture like that. So why was he so tempted to get in the bed and pull Crystal into his arms? He’d showered in one of the guest rooms with the intention of sleeping there as well, yet here he was. He couldn’t stay away. He’d been with her almost constantly because she’d needed him since she’d been here. She seemed fine today, though.

He had turned, forcing himself to leave, when her voice brought him back around. “Mark?”

Going to the bed, he sat next to her. “It’s me, Angel. I was just checking on you. Can I get you anything?” She didn’t need to know that he’d been staring at her for the last ten minutes.

“No,” she answered almost hesitantly. When he started to rise, her hand shot out and she grabbed his arm. “Do you—think you could stay with me for a while?” Before he could answer, she rushed on. “It’s just that I get kind of nervous in new places sometimes.”

He felt a wave of tenderness go through him as he remembered her telling him earlier about her ordeal in the hospital when she was younger. God knows he hadn’t grown up with nurturing parents, but at least his nanny would have stayed with him had he been hospitalized. His poor Angel had been left alone to suffer. What a bunch of assholes. The decision made, he motioned her over, and settled in beside her under the comforter.

Without a word, he lifted one arm and she was instantly under it and curled into his side. He dropped a kiss onto the top of her head as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to be doing. He had no idea what was happening, but he had a bad feeling that he was in over his head with her.

The only thing he couldn't figure out was why he wasn't running the other way. He'd been so damn restless and edgy lately. Nothing seemed to excite or appeal to him anymore. He blamed it on stress, but his reaction to Crystal had him wondering if maybe it wasn't more. Spending time with someone who appeared so different from most of the women he met had been surprisingly appealing.

Always in the past if he was in bed with a woman, then there was sex involved. But now, he found himself content to hold the beauty who had literally fallen into his arms—just like an angel.

Chapter Three

The next morning, Crystal settled in the backseat of the car next to Mark. She vaguely remembered him getting in bed with her the night before, but he'd been gone when she woke at seven. She'd stumbled into the bathroom for a quick shower. When she'd walked back into the bedroom, she had been surprised to find a new dress with tags and matching shoes lying on the bed. A quick check showed both items were the correct size. The dress was a pale lilac color in a soft, whispery material. Crystal gasped in shock when she turned the tag over and saw that it was almost fifteen hundred dollars and the strappy sandals were well over a thousand. There was no way she could afford to pay Mark back all at once. She finally decided to leave the tags on the dress and tuck them out of sight. Hopefully, he'd be able to return it if she was careful with it today. The store would never take the shoes back, though, and God, she loved them. Surely, he'd be okay with her paying him in a couple of installments.

“You look beautiful.” His words jarred her back to the present. His eyes were intense as he stared at her appreciatively.

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