

1

~ Now ~

I slowly and deliberately disentangled myself from the strong male arm that was wrapped around my waist like a boa constrictor. After nearly a decade of marriage, I should have been used to the possessive way he reached for me, even in sleep. But I still felt suffocated. Sometimes he frightened me with his intensity.

Sliding to the side of the bed, careful not to make any sudden movements, I took a deep, silent breath and fanned myself, trying to fight off the slight panic that always seemed to creep up every time I woke up and felt trapped in Jack's overheated embrace.

The bedside clock said it was four eighteen. I let out a frustrated breath. I was wide awake, and there was no way I'd be able to fall asleep again before the alarm went off in barely two hours. Lying as still as possible, willing my heartbeat to slow down to normal, I stared at the ceiling, vaguely listening as Jack snored softly beside me. This was the third night in a row I had woken up in the wee hours of the morning, unable to calm down enough to complete the night's slumber.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out the reason I had trouble sleeping. It was a guilty conscience, plain and simple. I was a married woman and the only man that should be taking up residence in my mind was the one lying beside me. But ever since I had run into Travis Tucker three days ago at the Fenton Hills Savings and Loan, it was his face – not my husband's – that I saw every time I closed my eyes.

Yes – Travis Goddamn Tucker. The boy that told me he loved me then left me standing on my front porch waiting for him in my ridiculous pale pink prom dress, after disappearing into thin air. The boy that broke my heart in devastating fashion. The boy I could not seem to get over, even with all the many miles and years between us.

Why on earth did he have to come back now, anyway? Things were going along just fine. I had accepted my lot in life, and was even growing fairly comfortable in my new role as potential First Lady of Fenton Hills. I hardly even thought of Travis Tucker anymore. I had trained my mind to block out any and all reminders –although staying in Fenton Hills meant there were way too many – and had all but squashed the longing I felt whenever he slipped into my mind accidentally.

But seeing him in town had brought a fresh wave of grief and regret over a bunch of silly dreams I had long ago given up on. My life was with Jack now; helping him run his campaign for mayor, making sure he looked as perfect as possible in the public eye. Ensuring that at every moment he appeared always the loving husband, the impeccable leader, the community's advocate. Never mind whether that was an accurate portrait of him. My job was to stand by my man, smiling until it hurt the muscles in my face, and glancing at him constantly with adoration every minute of the day, just in case the cameras were rolling.

Wouldn't Jack's opponents just love to know the fact that his wife was pining away for her high school sweetheart? And wasn't it convenient how the object of those affections had

happened back into town just when the campaign was heating up, and the stakes were higher than ever?

Travis Tucker. How dare he show his face now, after all this time? Why couldn't he stay down in Georgia, where he belonged; or wherever it was he'd been hanging his hat for the last decade and a half?

Well, I would just have to suck it up, that was all there was to it. There was no reason the two of us couldn't inhabit the same town and be perfectly civil to one another. And there was nothing that said I had to be hospitable. I would simply stay out of his way, and hope to God he planned on moving on out as quickly as possible. Then I could go about my business and start all over again trying to pretend he never existed.

I gave up on the pretense of falling back to sleep, and slid silently out of bed. I crept to the door, pulled it closed behind me and felt the air fill my lungs completely now that I was out in the hallway.

Despite my utter exhaustion, I was glad to have the early morning hours to myself. The break of a new day was always the best for thinking and figuring things out. I took a cup of steaming coffee out to the sunroom, curled up on the oversized reading chair, and stared out at the vast lawn. It wasn't so much that it was large in size, but the flourishing gardens made the property appear to be much more lavish than it was.

I was quite proud of that garden. By the light of the moon, I could see the late summer blooms bursting with color. With their purple daisy-like petals and sunshine yellow centers, the New England Aster pulled together the unruly Goldenrod and abundant Morning Glories in pink and purple. And my favorite, the untamed bright red Cardinal Flower, seemed to stand as a sentry among all that color, as if daring anyone to try and suppress all that natural beauty. The wildness of the garden was starting to win out over the organized rows and patterns Jack had insisted on, and I felt a small twinge of victory at the thought.

Chaos was something that I loved and thrived on. It was one of the things that Jack and I argued about the most – that is, when I bothered to argue back. He was so regimented in everything he did. Everything in his life had to be planned and laid out. He was never spontaneous; he needed order.

When I first started dating Jack, he seemed to embrace my "free spirit", although by that time, most of that spirit had been long gone. He never got mad when I was late, or when I changed plans on him at the last minute. He thought my rumpled, disheveled sense of style was endearing – or at least that was what he told me. But as soon as we were married, everything changed. He became a different person, and the unreasonable demands he made of me went against my very nature. I fought him a little at first, but as time wore on, I found it much easier to alphabetize the spices, rather than endure a speech about how disorganized I was. And simply removing all personal effects from the house, including the 'trashy clutter' of photos and magnets on the refrigerator, seemed a small price to pay as long as it meant I didn't have to watch Jack's nostrils flare when he spotted something out of place in his castle. Now I was used to his obsessive compulsiveness, and since I craved peace above all else, I tried not to rock the boat too often. It didn't hurt me any to try to please Jack, to stroke his rather large ego. Nothing he did or said could really hurt me. He had never had that power over me.

I looked at the garden wistfully. When I had planted all the flowers according to Jack's diagram, I knew that the natural order of things would eventually turn the garden into the wild

thing of beauty it was today. I also knew that by the end of summer, Jack would have me rip it all out. He would not allow the greenery and the wild flowers to spill out over the walkway, or the creeping ivy to climb up the garden bench. I had only a matter of days to enjoy my masterpiece before I would be forced to start all over. But my small act of rebellion made me feel stronger, and it fanned the embers of a fire that had burned out inside of me long, long ago.

I bit my bottom lip, hard enough to draw blood, as I wondered what Travis would say to the idea of destroying a garden so beautiful, just to establish "order". I didn't have to wonder too hard – I knew he'd be appalled. Travis had always had a green thumb. He had put his natural talents to good use from a young age, and from what I had heard, he had made quite a good living at it as well. Last I knew, he was making a name for himself all up and down the east coast as a landscape architect. He had even appeared on HGTV a time or two, though I hadn't been able to find the episodes.

My stomach growled and I looked around in a daze, surprised to notice it was already half past six. I stood up from my curled up position on the chair and stretched, wincing as I felt the stiffness in my body. I made a mental note to start making time for yoga again, as I went into the kitchen in search of breakfast.

Jack found me a half hour later, sitting at the table doing a crossword puzzle, and sopping up the last of my egg yolk with a piece of rye toast.

"Rye bread is as bad as white, Sophia. Why do you even buy it?" Jack said, barely glancing at me as he made his way to the coffee pot.

I popped the last morsel in my mouth defiantly, rolling my eyes at his back. Just once, I would love to eat a meal without him making a comment about the fat content or the lack of health benefits. "It was leftover from the luncheon the other day." My mouth was still full when I spoke, and I received a wilting glare from my husband over my poor manners.

I laid down my crossword puzzle as he sat down across from me. This was the time of day when we would go over the day's itinerary. I knew I had at least two obligations having to do with the campaign today – a breakfast with the Women for Change at the Fenton Hills Country Club, and a staff meeting at campaign headquarters that afternoon. I was anxious to see if I would be allotted any free time in between.

After Jack had recited - in excruciating detail - his minute by minute schedule for the entire day, I stood up and walked slowly into the kitchen, carefully keeping my back to him. "So, you don't need me at all until the staff meeting at four?" My heart started pounding fast. I was nervous all of a sudden, and the reason popped into my head out of nowhere.

I was planning on visiting Travis. I could try to say it was because it was only right that I drop in on an old friend and welcome him back to town or I could say that I was anxious to satisfy my curiosity about the exact reason he had come back. But the real truth was, there was simply no way I could stay away. As always, I was drawn to Travis Tucker, and since he was presently residing merely a mile away...

"Why, do you have something to do?" Jack asked absently. I had to tread carefully. My husband may appear to be only half listening, but I knew better. Anything out of the ordinary with my routine, and Jack would be suspicious. Besides, he so rarely gave me free time without a list of errands; surely he would wonder what I would do with several hours unaccounted for.

“No, nothing specific.” I shrugged. “I thought I might spend some time working on the flowerbeds, and maybe catch a yoga class this afternoon.”

I turned around just in time to see Jack look up from the papers he'd been reading over. He looked me up and down as if he were evaluating me. I felt a brief, but violent flash of anger which I expertly tucked away. I knew what was coming and braced myself for his next words.

“Yoga? You know how I hate that hippie bullshit. Every time you go to one of those classes, you act all strange. Besides, a spinning class or kickboxing would probably benefit you more, don't you think?” His eyes lingered on my midsection. I may not be as toned as I was at twenty-two, but I was in excellent shape, and while not much irritated me, his constant insinuation that I watch my weight, was grating.

But I knew how to placate him. I had become quite adept at it. “Great idea. A spinning class sounds like fun!” I air kissed him as I blew by, disappearing into the bedroom so I could prepare for my morning; the whole time thinking that I would rather sit through a root canal than ride a fake bike to nowhere, listening to some self-important, perky twenty-year-old telling me to pedal faster. I stifled a giggle as I stepped into the shower, idly wondering if I had time to stop for a donut on the way to the country club.

2

When Travis Tucker swaggered across the Fenton Hills High School campus for the first time that frigid January day, there was barely a soul who didn't take notice. New kids transplanting in the middle of a school year were usually subject to swift rejection and ridicule by their peers, but that was not to be the case with Travis. Maybe it was the way he sauntered by, all full of self-assurance, or the fact that he wore only a light jacket, sleeves rolled up on his darkly tanned arms instead of the bulky ski jackets the sub-zero Connecticut temperatures warranted. Or maybe it was just that it was January; Christmas break was now a distant memory and summer was still eons away. The winter doldrums and boredom had set in. Here was a shiny new toy for the students of Fenton Hills High. A shiny new toy complete with a Southern drawl and a killer smile.

There was one person, however, who was not so easily swayed. In fact, despite the fact that I am normally a very accepting person, I was downright skeptical of this Travis Tucker and his instant fame.

Perhaps that was ultimately the reason that he sought me out. It would be months before he would even lay eyes on me for the first time. I kept my distance until then as best as I could, feigning indifference; but once he had me in his sights, it was game over. Travis Tucker had me under his spell, and all he did was smile.

Now, I felt utterly ridiculous, thinking that there was still that special connection that had existed back in high school. We had once been inseparable. But any special bond I felt with him was clearly one-sided. He had proven that when he stood me up on prom night with no explanation and no apology.

I was sitting in my car across the street from the modest house Travis had rented. He was on a month to month rental, my sources had informed me. Fenton Hills was not a very small town, but being the mayoral candidate's wife made it easy for me to obtain information without much effort.

I tried to convince myself that I was only there as a steward of the community, welcoming Travis back to the town he had briefly called home, once upon a time. But even I couldn't help but admit that my excuse was pathetically thin. He would likely see right through me.

He was home. A truck bearing the logo of his landscaping business sat in the driveway. I wondered what he was doing inside. Was he alone? Did he bring along a girlfriend with him? Could he be staring out his window right now wondering if I was ever going to get out of my car?

It seemed so stupid and juvenile to me that I was sitting out here with such hesitation. I had already made the conscious decision to tell a lie and drive myself to this point. What difference would a few more steps make? I had chickened out earlier in the day when it would have made a little more sense and been easier to explain should I have gotten caught. I was going to ditch the whole plan, but when I got home at dinnertime and saw the familiar red Honda parked behind Jack's Audi in the driveway, I felt my actions were justified. I'd backed right out onto the street and headed straight here. I called Jack on the way over, knowing I

would get his voice mail, and made up some story about needing to shop for a last minute birthday gift for my mother.

My breathing was getting heavier, and it occurred to me that this behavior was not at all normal. But wait... by realizing that I was acting like a crazy person, didn't that make me that much less of a crazy person? Oh, crap... I wasn't even making any sense inside my own head.

A truck drove by, and I ducked down self-consciously even though the entire length of street was lined with parked cars, and it was just dark enough that no one would notice me. My heart was pounding now; enough that I swore my chest was visibly pulsating with every beat. That yoga session earlier had done absolutely nothing to calm me down. Maybe I should've worked out some of my pent up agitation in a spinning class after all.

The clock switched to 7:17. *Okay, I rolled my eyes upward, send me a sign. If another car passes by before 7:18, I will get out of the car.* I started counting in my head as if I could make the minute go faster. I saw headlights just as the clock changed. That was too close to call. Did I mean it had to pass by, or it had to come into view? Try again. If one of the next three cars that passed were red, I would go home. I leaned my head back and lowered my eyelids, not closing them all the way just in case a car should go by.

This was insane. Why couldn't I just go on and get it over with? It was what I wanted, wasn't it; to satisfy my curiosity, see if Travis could still make my heartbeat triple and my vision fuzzy? To see if I still had that effect on him. It was human nature to want those burning questions answered. Wasn't it?

I ran a hand through my hair in frustration and looked up just in time to see a red car speed past. Now what did I say – that I would go home or that I would get out? I felt like pulling my hair out. My head fell to the steering wheel and I started to laugh. First it was just a giggle that bubbled up inside, then I was laughing low and deep and holding on to my midsection. Tears welled up in my eyes and spilled down my cheeks. I was laughing and crying both at the same time as if the two emotions were fighting each other. I was losing my mind, is what I was doing.

A knock on the driver's side window had me jumping out of my skin. I tried to open it and remembered the car was turned off. My hands were shaking so much, I dropped the keys and it took several attempts to put the key back in the ignition. The window lowered, reminding me of a giant wall coming down in slow motion.

"Hey stranger. Are you lost?" I looked up at that smirk, into those gleaming eyes that crinkled at the edges. Images of that very look on his face, from years before, passed through my mind. I pressed my clammy palms against my thighs and dropped one shoulder, attempting to appear more at ease than I was.

His face went a bit blurry, then refocused. And with the clarity of my vision came a sudden and unwelcome epiphany.

I would never in a million years be able to extract Travis Tucker from my heart, no matter how many times he broke it.