

CHAPTER 9

Des was, indeed, in very real trouble when Miller's hand caught the door to River Street as she and Britt exited the old, brick front building. The sudden jolt of the door startled her and she stumbled backwards, nearly tripping over the uneven cobblestone beneath her.

Of course, Miller caught her back with the hand that wasn't holding the door open. When Des straightened again, her eyes narrowed to slits.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, instantly pulling away from him.

"You really might be the clumsiest woman I've ever met," he replied, ignoring her tone. "And that's a dangerous thing, seeing as you're always wearing heels." He glanced down to her feet, which he appeared surprised to discover were actually covered by frilled black leather ankle boots.

"Joke's on you," Des said coolly, then rubbed her arms. "Did you have a reason to be assaulting us on our way out the door, or can we get to our cars to escape the rain?"

Miller looked up at the cloudy night sky and made a face. "Huh, so it's raining. Seems like the perfect reason to stay a while. Band's just setting up."

"Band?" Des glanced over his shoulder to see that, just as he said, a small group of obvious country singers were setting up their equipment in the back corner of the bar area. She looked back to him, very aware of Britt's stare from beside her. "I don't really do live music."

"You don't *do* live music?" Miller repeated, aghast. "Do you live in Savannah or not?"

“It’s not Nashville.”

“It might as well be, with all the up-and-coming country stars on the prowl every night to have their music heard. And a lot of it’s really good. Look, I’ll pour you another glass of that Chardonnay if you agree to one dance with me.”

She heard Britt’s breath catch, but her own expression tightened at the thought.

“Not a chance,” she replied tightly. “It’s late, and I have a full day’s work tomorrow. It’s Wednesday, for God’s sake.”

“No rule against dancing on a Wednesday night,” Britt cut in, and Des suddenly wanted to strangle her.

“This band’s here every week,” Miller continued. “And they’re really good. Upbeat, old-school. Great dancing music. In about ten minutes the entire bar will come alive.” Again, he glanced down at her boots. “And thankfully, your footwear is appropriate.”

“I’m not dancing. We have to get home.” She looped an arm through Britt’s and started to turn away, but found that her best friend’s arm came untwined just as quickly.

“Actually,” Britt protested. “I was going to head back to the office. Just for a little while – I wanted to do a little more research before I pack it in for the night.”

“It’s almost nine o’clock,” Des pointed out.

“And I’m not meeting Colton at the house until ten.” Britt beamed.

Of course she had a date. Or, rather, a hook-up. And here was Des, faced with a traitorous best friend who was practically – mentally – throwing her in Miller’s direction.

“Dancing sounds fun,” Britt continued wily. “If you ask me—”

“I’m not.”

“And yet,” Miller grinned. “It *is* fun, and anyway, I’m only asking you for one dance.”

Crossing her arms, Des leveled a look at him. “Aren’t you working? You have a bad habit of neglecting your bartending duties to hop onto the dance floor.” *Among other things*, she remembered.

He was clearly remembering the same things, because his eyes twinkled at her as he answered.

“I don’t think any of my coworkers will tattle on me, and I’m off at ten anyway.”

“I’ll be long gone by then.”

His brow rose. “So you’re agreeing to one dance?”

Feeling a shove against her back, Des realized that Britt was pushing her back into the restaurant – and straight into Miller’s chest.

“Yes, she’s agreeing, and I’m getting the hell out of this rain. Have fun, you two!” And with that, she was gone – having slipped back down the sidewalk and into the Savvy Homes office, leaving Des pressed against Miller’s hard chest. Annoyingly, it took several seconds before her brain registered that she should step away from him. His mouth spread into a grin once again.

“Succumbing to my charms again,” he murmured. That same feeling in her chest and stomach flipped and flopped uncomfortably. She felt fourteen again as he placed a hand against the small of her back and walked her towards the bar.

“One dance,” she bit out.

He took her hand just as the band played its first chord and crowded bar area whooped with anticipation.

“One dance.”

And just as had happened the night of Carlee and Josh’s wedding, one dance turned into many, many more. The band, as it turned out, was really good. They were reminiscent of some of the greatest classic country artists – quintessential honky-tonk fun that even prim and polished Des couldn’t resist. The truth was, she loved to dance. And although she rarely actually let loose, whenever she did, it was hard to turn the dial back down. Her body swayed to the music and pressed against Miller’s as they moved together to the crooning of the old, rich voice and the strumming of guitar and banjo. It all reminded her of the feeling she’d gotten less than a week ago, and as he pulled her off the dance floor at the closing notes of one of the songs, she found herself – yet again – wondering just how she’d let this happen.

“It was supposed to be one dance,” she panted breathlessly, realizing that she was also laughing. Sweat trickled down the back of her neck and she felt like a college kid – out for a night on the town, not a care in the world. She felt very unlike herself, really, and it felt good.

“Remember my charms?” Miller laughed back as he swung behind the crowded bar to pour two glasses. One tall glass of water for him, and another glass of wine for her. She lifted a hand to stop him.

“Water,” she said. “I’ve had enough to drink tonight. And I’m sweating through my clothes.”

The bar area was alive with the high-energy music and the excitement of its patrons, all jumping and dancing along – sloshing their drinks drunkenly as they had the time of their lives. Des saw Miller’s eyes flick to the phone he held, and he smiled.

“Ten o’clock. You know what that means.”

“That I should have been home a long time ago.” Des grabbed her purse and jacket from where he’d stashed them behind the bar.

“Wrong,” he said. “It means it’s quitting time for me – just in time for my coworkers to get the pleasure of cleaning up after these fine people.”

The restaurant didn’t close for another hour, Des knew. Which meant that Miller’s coworkers had quite a bit of ‘fun’ ahead – and likely a good amount of spillage to clean up when all was said and done.

Just as she began turning towards the door, intent on heading to her car and berating herself for the rest of the night for staying out so late – when she had an eight a.m. meeting scheduled for the next morning, no less – the lead singer of the band’s voice boomed into the microphone.

“We’re gonna slow it down now,” the young, long-haired crooner said in a southern twang that sounded local. “So grab your honey and take it back with us to the good ol’ days of classic George Strait.”

Miller sucked in a breath between his teeth as he slanted a look towards Des. “Not sure I can resist that one.”

“Oh, no.” Des started to back away, shaking her head – though her protest felt playful now, even to her. She was still vibrating with the adrenaline from dancing for an hour, and while her feet were feeling slightly cramped in the leather boots that hadn’t been fully broken-in yet, she was surprised to find that she still had the energy to keep going.

Without realizing it, she let Miller pull the jacket and purse back out of her arms and curl his fingers around hers again. She let herself be pulled to him, even as she wondered for the millionth time, *What am I doing?*

“Come on,” he said again. “Wanna be my honey?”

His teasing smile made her laugh and she slapped a palm to his chest as the guitar started to strum. The first notes of ‘Carrying Your Love with Me’ began and Miller expertly spun Des into the throngs of couples who already clung to each other, swaying sweetly to the music.

“I love this song,” she heard him murmur against her temple as his arm wound its way around her waist. His palm pressed against her back – the heat of his hand sending a tremor through her as she sank closer to him. His other hand held hers, and his warm smile spread when her free arm moved up to hook over his shoulder, fingers grazing the back of his neck. They were close – too close, she knew, for comfort. And yet she felt incredibly comfortable in this man’s arms.

“Who doesn’t?” she answered. George Strait was a legend, and this song had to be one of the most romantic country songs of all time. Even for a woman who was decidedly anti-romance, Des couldn’t help but close her eyes as she let the lyrics pour over her. She leaned into him, breathed in his scent. There was a touch of whiskey there, and something she didn’t recognize. His soap, it must be. Something manly and subtle – something that made her want to rest her cheek just there, right at the base of his collarbone. Right where the shallow V of his t-shirt dipped.

She felt his arm tighten around her as the song played, as their bodies moved effortlessly together. She was hardly aware of anyone else on the floor around them as her hand curled around the back of his neck, as she felt his chin lower towards her. His warm breath – again, tinged with whiskey – tickled her cheek.

“Dancing is dangerous for us,” he whispered. A chill of something that felt wonderful ran up her back as his fingers tightened. He wanted to kiss her, she knew. And God, she wanted to kiss him, too. But they couldn’t – not here. Not in the middle of the bar.

And so, Des found herself saying something that was, perhaps, the least Des-like statement she had ever uttered in her entire life.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Just as the chorus to the song swelled for a final time, Miller pulled her from the floor and swung towards the bar, grabbing her things in one swift movement as he motioned to his coworkers. The message was clear – he was on his way out, and he was taking her with him.

She didn't let herself think about it for a moment longer. She just held onto his hand and followed, stifling a laugh in her throat that bubbled up from her inner fourteen-year-old self.

He hadn't considered what he was doing when he led Des from River Street and down the cobbled pathway to the left, down a few blocks from the hubbub and activity, until they were just steps away from the white-washed brick townhouse with the ornately-carved black door. If he *had* been thinking straight, he might not have taken her here. He might instead have asked her where she lived, and then suggested that they go there. But when she said nothing as he led her away from the restaurant, his feet had done the thinking for him. And so, here they were.

"Where are we?" he heard her ask as he fumbled in his jeans pocket for the key, still holding her hand.

As he slid the key into the lock and pushed the door open, he felt rather than saw the exuberant greeting of Bella, who leapt at him from the tiled foyer. Blinking against the furry mass and the darkness that overwhelmed the room, he struggled to find a light switch – finally succeeding. He heard the sharp intake of breath from beside him as the space in front of them illuminated and the elegance of the home was revealed.

"Holy—"

"Never mind that," he said, nudging Bella away and winding his arm around Des again. He didn't want her to focus on the house, the space, the things. He wanted her attention on him. Only on him.

"You live—"

"Upstairs," he whispered gruffly, pulling her to him as he moved towards the ornate oak staircase. "Unless you've changed your mind."

At that, her dark green eyes gleamed, and it was then that he noticed she had a freckle just to the side of her left eye. She was mesmerizing at this closeness. His mouth literally itched to taste her again.

“I haven’t changed my mind,” she replied. And as if those words weren’t already music to his ears, her hands coming to rest at the belt of his jeans nearly undid him. He gripped her hand, pulling her up the stairs with an intensity that he almost didn’t recognize in himself. He didn’t have time to think about the fact that he was slightly uncomfortable bringing a woman back here – to *this* house. It wasn’t him at all, it would give the wrong impression.

So maybe if he didn’t think – if he just felt and acted, he wouldn’t have to worry about whatever impression she currently had.

He led her to his bedroom at the far end of hall once they reached the second floor, and blinded in the dark, he navigated expertly to the bed, tossing her lithe little frame onto the mattress. She caught her breath, then pulled herself up to grip his shirt – clearly not one to lie there and wait for him to do the undressing. He remembered this from that night at the wedding, how she’d taken him by surprise. Now, he found his body tingling with arousal as her fingertips traced the skin just above his jeans – teasing him before lifting his shirt up and over his head.

“Last time I mentioned how I wanted to savor this,” he said on a low groan as her lips claimed his. God, she tasted sweet. Remnants of wine played at his tongue as her mouth moved over his, inviting him in. He couldn’t help himself – his free hand moved to grip a fistful of her silky black hair, and he growled against her lips.

“But I can’t. If I don’t have you within the next ten seconds—”

She flipped open the buckle on his belt, shoving his jeans down and freeing him in what seemed like one single movement. Her breath rasped as she replied between kisses.

“If you don’t have me in the next *five* seconds, Miller, then I might just lose my mind.”

His mouth moved over her jawbone, down her neck, over her chest – with a hunger that had his blood boiling. Hovering over her, he unzipped her black jeans and tossed them off the bed – only to look up and find that she had pulled her shirt and bra off in the same moment.

He stared at her body as if it was a feast prepared only for him, and when she reached for him again, his mouth closed over her breast. She gasped, running her fingers through his hair – and damn, did that feel good. Her legs moved up and around him, anchoring at his waist.

Shit. The woman was going to kill him.

“Miller.” His name came from between her teeth with a warning growl, and he heard the message loud and clear. He plunged into her, instantly feeling every muscle in her body constrict and relax around him as her hips ground against his. She forced his mouth back to hers, capturing him in a kiss that had his vision blurring, his pulse pounding. They crashed together, bodies slamming with a ferocity that reminded him of that night nearly a week ago. There was no time for softness, no patience for sweet caresses or tender kisses. They made love as if they would never do another damned thing in all their lives – as if this was all they’d ever have. And he felt the climax racing against his best efforts.

Thankfully, he felt hers, too. She clutched at him as a cry of ecstasy escaped her, and he let himself go just as he was sure that she was right there with him. He pulled himself up, arms bracing to either side of her, and his eyes locked with hers. And just as they did, an unnerving thought jolted through him.

Not only could this woman drive him absolutely wild – she was unknowingly doing a hell of a lot more than that. He knew all at once that it wasn’t going to be long at all before he found himself falling helplessly in love with her.

Meanwhile, several blocks away at the Italianate mansion on Bull Street, Mitch Green paced outside of his boss’s office.

It was going on eleven o’clock. He’d been putting in fourteen, fifteen-hour days for the past several weeks, doing whatever he could to keep Roger Bellamy and the board members of the Bellamy Foundation happy. It hadn’t been an easy time since Rachel’s death a couple of months ago. Roger’s lawyers had been in and out of the mansion nearly every day, while reporters had only recently started to back off of the front lawn at all hours. Everyone expected a statement from Roger, and yet he wasn’t giving one.

Mitch’s job, as it had been since a couple of weeks prior to Roger’s wife’s death, was to see that the Foundation continued to run smoothly. He was handling the press, the statements to charity, the polite declining of charity event invitations, which the Foundation was expected to contribute to, as it had always done.

“This is a difficult time for the Bellamy family,” was Mitch’s canned reply to every inquiry and plea for a donation. “We appreciate your understanding as we navigate this shocking loss and pave a way forward.”

In all honesty, though, Mitch didn’t have a clue why Roger wasn’t making his expected statement and giving the press what they needed – what the only answer really was. Rachel Bellamy had died of a tragic overdose. How difficult was it to explain? Plenty of rich, privileged wives struggled behind closed doors with addiction to some degree. Rachel had been Savannah royalty – a beloved, admired focal point of the city’s elite. Surely, no one would be too surprised if it was announced to the press that Roger had silently done his best to support his wife – only to find that his efforts hadn’t been enough. It was all too often the case.

As he paced, he glanced at his watch for the hundredth time, stifling a yawn. God, he was exhausted. These long hours were doing him in, and it was getting to be about time for him to advise his boss about exactly what he was thinking.

No sooner did he think it, than Roger’s lawyer stepped out from behind the oak-paneled doors leading to the office. His glance in Mitch’s direction held something unsettling, which made Mitch frown. Then, a voice from within the office called out, “Mitchell.”

He quickly darted into the room, closing the door behind him and trying to shove aside the thought of the tight-suited lawyer’s odd expression. He stepped towards the enormous mahogany desk where Roger sat, still dressed in a suit and tie of his own. His face was drawn and weary.

“Sir,” Mitch started. “I think we need to make a statement.”

Roger’s index fingers came together at his lips, and his eyes narrowed slightly. “Are you now in the business of giving me directions, Mitchell?”

He swallowed at that. “No, sir. I just think—”

“Sit down.”

Somewhat pathetically, he did what he was told. He lowered himself into the leather armchair beside him and straightened his own tie uncomfortably. He waited a beat before Roger continued speaking.

“It just so happens that I agree with you,” he said slowly, authoritatively. “My lawyers and I have been in discussion about this for weeks. The matter is delicate. My dear wife had a very... tragic... addiction to substances, as you know.”

Mitch nodded. “You told me.” Good, he thought. So, maybe this was moving in exactly the direction he was hoping for.

“I’ve considered just how to handle this very precarious situation, Mitchell. On one hand, it is a fairly simple thing to tell the press that my beloved Rachel took a few too many pills. That her death was unintentional. A complete accident. That I am heartbroken – as I am – after years of standing by her side, of trying to get her help.”

Yes, Mitch thought. Exactly what he was going to suggest. It *was* simple. Give the statement to the press, let them publish Roger Bellamy’s official response to his wife’s accidental suicide, and let the Foundation move on. Let things get back to normal. Let Mitch have the chance to prove himself in this new, important role as Roger’s right-hand man.

“The trouble is,” Roger continued, his tone taking on a darker note. “There is a bit more to it than that.”

“Sir?”

Roger straightened in his own chair, clasping his hands on top of the desk. Slowly, dangerously, his ice-blue eyes lifted to Mitch’s and caught him in a firm, penetrating stare.

“It seems, Mitchell, that the Fentanyl Rachel took that night was crushed – mixed, as I hear, into a gin and tonic. Her favorite drink, you might recall.”

Mitch nodded slowly. Where was this going?

“A number of people that night – you remember, it was a large gathering for the Savannah Historical Society’s benefit...”

Mitch nodded again, waiting for Roger to continue. But the man only continued to stare.

“Sir?” he prodded again.

“A large number of people, I’m told, witnessed *you* deliver Rachel her drink that night. The very one that appeared, after the fact, to be laced with the lethal dose of crushed Fentanyl.”

