

Lori tugged on the jeans and turtleneck that comprised her new work uniform, the ungodly hour still flashing in neon green on the bedside clock.

Four thirty. Not even the damn birds were awake.

She made herself a cup of strong tea then proceeded to burn her tongue on it. Cursing herself for being late for the first day of Brewing 101, she snagged her keys and was headed out the door when the bouquet of tulips on the kitchen counter caught her eye. The card was typical Garrett, few words, tons of meaning.

“Until next time. Yours, G.”

She held onto it a minute and let it sink in, allowed herself be a bit later in order to relive the previous night’s official date—her first real date in years.

A thrill of anger forced a shiver down her spine. She swallowed the urge to crawl back under the covers, making herself think about Garrett—his deep green eyes, old-fashioned, almost courtly manners, and dry sense of humor. And the patient, friendly way he’d handled himself the whole night. *That* had almost worn her down. Her heart stopped its annoying pounding, and she congratulated herself for taking a huge step. As she headed to the car, her heart and step light at thoughts of Garrett, her breath made visible puffs into the cold air.

Brockton Brewing’s commercial facility was in an industrial area on Ann Arbor’s far west side that had revived after her family’s company had re-located and expanded there nearly twenty years prior. The drive from her house allowed time to calm her breathing. Thoughts of the handsome man who seemed intent on wooing her made her grin, then flush at the memory of how they’d ended up at a Red Wings game for their first date.

He’d been all over the place his first weeks on the job. Briskly reorganizing the office, charming the ordering department women into changing their entire system from semi-antiquated to almost-modern overnight. Her father had been ecstatic. “That kid has done more in a week than I could have done in a year. I swear it.”

Garrett had swept through the warehouse too, hired new staff to clean up, and already had an automation company drawing up plans to bring Brockton Brewing kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century. At one point she'd "bumped into him," yet again, as he traversed the back offices where she was completing her last few days of accounting and ordering work. She had touched his suit-covered arm, relishing the easy familiarity of the connection. Then had flushed bright red at his captivating smile and at the hand he'd placed on her back as they stood together. She had forced herself to keep her voice light as she spoke. "Better slow down. People are starting to talk."

He had given her an eyebrow waggle that made her giggle in spite of her serious message. "Talk about what? Us? Did I miss something?"

"No, smart ass. About all this automation stuff. I mean, I agree it's gotta be done, but some of these people have worked here practically their entire lives and they would be the first to get replaced by machines or computers." She recalled the sensation of his warm, non-threatening touch as he leaned in to her ear.

"No one gets let go from Brockton unless they deserve it. Deal?"

She'd moved away from him, alarmed. From the tingle in her scalp to the warm glow starting in her belly, the sound of his voice, the proximity of his comforting presence, all made her more nervous than she cared to admit. By the end of that day, she'd looked up to find him half sitting on her temporary desk in the ordering department. The entire room was watching them. Lori hated it that the whole damn place knew her story and many times wished for something resembling a private life. But she'd grown up in this building, had been brought here as a baby, learned to walk among fermenters. These people were her family.

"Hey Lori."

She'd tried to avoid his eyes, but his presence sucked up all the oxygen in the room. He simply would not be ignored. "Can I help you?" She attempted to keep it businesslike. Mrs. Anderson, the

oldest employee in the place and un-crowned matriarch, had stifled a giggle nearby. Lori had rolled her eyes and was gratified to see his huge, warm smile, yet again.

“Yes, as a matter of fact you can.” He went on to request a complex sales study that would take her a solid day to complete. She’d frowned, half disappointed, half relieved that he hadn’t been there to ask her out or something. Then he’d winked and left without another word.

Three days ago he’d plopped down next to her while she ate a salad in the break room. He kept tossing an apple in the air and catching it without looking, which had unnerved her. He was so comfortable in his skin and so unaware of his effect on her it made her aggravated, and something else—something she had not allowed herself to feel for years.

“I have tickets to the hockey game this weekend. Would you like to come with me? Because I’d like it, I mean, that is.... Oh, hell. Do you even like hockey?” He’d blushed and let the apple roll across the floor when he missed. Lori had stayed quiet, looked down at the bowl of lettuce and tomato she’d grabbed on the way out the door this morning.

Was this it? The moment she would finally let go of the fear?

She’d looked back into Garrett’s eyes. They were earnest, questioning, and eager.

“Sure,” she’d said. “I’d love it. I am from Michigan, after all. What time?”

Lori wrestled open the back brewery door, ears already ringing from the curses that echoed through the brightly lit room. The brewery boys and three second brewers stood in a line, all looking as nervous as mice observed by a very hungry cat.

“And, who the fuck,” boomed a voice, “might you be? No one told me there was a girl brewer in this place.”

As a reflex, Lori looked around, seeking out the female who'd pissed off the faceless angry voice. She'd been instrumental in convincing her father to hire Eli Buchanan. He was a brewing celebrity, a genius, temperamental, and prone to quit perfectly good breweries if the mood suited him. He was exactly what Brockton needed. They had to get past their staid, complacent attitude in a rapidly changing craft beer environment.

"Yeah, I'm talking to you. The one who showed up fifteen minutes late for my morning staff meeting." She flushed, frowning at the line of men, many of whom had worked for her father for years, as they shuffled their feet and wouldn't meet her eyes. "Who the hell are you, and why are you on my brewery floor?"

She cleared her throat, squared her shoulders, and channeled the anger building in her chest. "I'm Lori. Lori Brockton. This is the first day of my brewery rotation." She hated how thin her voice sounded.

"Your brewery rotation eh?" She stumbled back when he emerged, striding straight towards her from between towering stainless steel fermentation vessels. "What is this? Brewing Day Camp? I'm supposed to babysit the Brockton kids?" He glared at her, making her blink in the glare of his bright, steely blue gaze.

Elias Buchanan was the dictionary definition of "larger than life." At least six foot five, with long blonde hair held back by a small piece of leather. The span of his shoulders and definition of his torso barely concealed under a Brockton Brewing grey T-shirt forced an exhale from Lori's lips. He kept quiet as her eyes took him in, from rubber boot clad feet to the light red stubble covering his jaw.

"See anything you like?"

"Uh, no, I mean, it's not camp. I mean, you are...I'm..." she stuttered, then stopped. The man remained stock still, still holding her gaze as if challenging her. She stood up straighter. "I'm here for the next six months to learn this part of the business. You know, so I can be your boss someday." He frowned at her. She frowned back.

Then he tilted his head back and laughed, stepped into her personal space and smacked her ass so hard she yelped. “I look forward to that day little girl Brockton. Yes, I do.” A couple of the men started forward as if to protect her, but she waved them back. This asshole had another thing coming if he thought she’d be intimidated by the likes of him. As much as she felt she should have been frightened by him, he was as non-threatening as Garrett, but in a different way—a much more spine-tingling way.

The following ten hours of back breaking work nearly made her throw in the towel. But, after an hour scraping out the last of a twenty barrel’s worth of wet, heavy spent mash—the leftover grains from a batch of beer made on their smaller system, she was sore as hell, but invigorated. The smells, sounds and sights in this heartbeat of the entire operation—the reason all three hundred of her father’s employees came to work every day—*this* she loved.

“Brockton!” An angry voice echoing around behind her made her jump. Wet, sticky malt grains dripped from her face where she’d accidentally splashed some onto herself as she cleaned out the large vessel. She swiped at them, smearing even more across her cheeks. Without warning, Eli wiped her face with a clean white towel, his touch surprisingly tender. But his frown stayed stuck in place. She stepped away from him, confused and aggravated by her automatic response to his brief touch.

“Some guy in a tie is looking for you.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder but didn’t move. Lori had no experience with hypnosis, but she’d swear at that moment he’d done it to her. Then the sound of harder heeled shoes on the concrete floor forced her look past him. Garrett’s bright smile was familiar, yet somehow strange and out of place in this, most definitely now Eli’s space.

“I’m actually here to see you, Eli.” Garrett stuck out a hand and the other man looked at it, glancing over to Lori then back over before gripping it without a smile. “Glad to have you on board.”

Eli took his hand back, and swiped at it with the towel he’d used on her face. If he noticed the rude gesture, Garrett didn’t indicate it in the slightest. Impressed, Lori moved a step closer to him and glared at the tall, arrogant, blonde man.

Eli shot her an unfathomable look, but spoke to Garrett. “Sorry, but no suits in the brewery. Wouldn’t want to get you messy.” He walked away, waving over his shoulder. “Glad to be on board, boss, thanks.” The sarcasm dripped from his words like venom.

Garrett turned to her, his handsome face calm, as if the odd exchange with the rude employee had never happened. He stepped close and whispered in her ear. “What’s up his ass?” She shrugged and leaned the trowel she’d been using for the last hours against the wall. Rolling out the stiffness in her upper back, she sighed when Garrett tugged her into his arms, the connection surprising but pleasant all at once. “Mmm...you smell great,” he muttered into her hair. Lori relaxed, realizing this was as far as they’d gotten two nights ago on her front porch before he’d given her an utterly mind blowing kiss and then sauntered back to his car, leaving her open-mouthed and wanting more.

Feeling strong and unafraid for the first time in years, she molded herself into his lean frame, the expensive wool fabric pleasant against her exposed arms, the warm, malty smell of the day’s brew still filling her nose. She pulled them into an alcove between the small brew house platform and a nearby fermenter. Her body sent a cacophony of mixed signals to her brain—fear at letting go, utter terror at the touch of his hands mixed with a pure burst of lust that left her breathless.

The sudden vision of Eli, the single day’s memory of his large hands, rough jaw and strutting attitude shot through her brain. Garrett tilted her face up to his, concern in his eyes. “You okay? I’m sorry. I guess seeing you covered in sticky malt turns me on. Sick, I know.” He shrugged, and ran his thumb over her lips. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly freezing cold.

Garrett’s eyes darkened. He slipped his jacket off and tried to drape it around her shoulders. She stopped him. “No, no, Garrett, I’ll ruin it.” He folded it over his arm and propped his other hand on the fermenter at her back. She looked down at the floor. “I gotta finish this, or he’ll make me stay all night. Guy hates my guts.”

Garrett chuckled. “I doubt that very much.” He grinned which lifted her heart. “Can I take you out for a drink later? Beer? Wine? Coffee? Tap water? Anything, really, if I can only....” He sighed and wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close, so close she felt it—the unmistakable press of

an erection. White hot anxiety made her throat close up and turned the room an eerie shade of orange as her vision narrowed and her body went into flight mode.

She struggled out of his embrace, unwilling to let him see how lame she was but knowing if he held her much longer she'd likely scream and run away and that would be a disaster. She grabbed the hose and started spraying out the inside of the metal container, holding back tears with everything she had. Garrett was a good man. He wouldn't hurt her. But she obviously was not ready for much more than a few kisses. Poor guy. She should cut him loose now. Let him find somebody normal.

"Hey, hey, it's okay." He tossed his suit coat onto a stack of malt bags, took the nozzle from her hands and turned it off. "Didn't mean to rush you. Sorry for being so pushy." The noise of the slowly cooling metal vessels, the clank, clunk of their contracting sides filled the silence. He reached out and touched her cheek with a fingertip, pulling it back with a single tear quivering from the end. She hadn't even realized she'd been crying.

He started to speak at the same time she opened her mouth to tell him why she was so skittish.

"Hey, love birds, cut the shit and let her finish!" Eli's loud voice boomed through the space. "I would like to go home sometime today, if that's okay with the boss lady there." He sauntered over, plucked Garrett's suit jacket off the malt bag as if touching road kill and handed it back to him. "Save yourself a dry cleaning bill and head out, Hunter. I'll send your girlfriend after you soon enough." Garrett ignored him, keeping his eyes on Lori as he shrugged back into the dark blue coat. Straightening his tie, he turned and put a hand on Eli's shoulder, making the other man hesitate.

"Take good care of this one, Buchanan." Garrett's voice dropped an octave lower, giving warning in spite of the jovial tone. "As you said, she is the boss lady." The two men locked eyes and Lori's face warmed at the testosterone-fueled tension between them. Garrett walked away without another word, leaving Eli glowering. And apparently pissed as hell—which he took out on her for the next two hours, making her wash down every exposed piece of stainless steel in sight.

Twice.

