

So Sensitive

Prologue

Two Months Earlier...

Gracie couldn't take her eyes off the man leaning against her desk. His dark, wavy brown hair and easy smile sent a shiver of awareness down her spine. He was large, with well sculpted, drool worthy arms. Arms that would hold a woman tight. And he was looking at her as if he'd struck gold.

"I don't believe we've been properly introduced. I'm Wade Harrison, Cherry's friend, and you are?"

God, his voice was just as yummy as the rest of him. Deep, a little gravelly, as if he'd just gotten out of bed. It took her a few seconds before she could answer without stuttering. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Gracie Baron, Cherry's new receptionist."

He held out his hand. Gracie promptly dropped the pen she'd been using and let him take hold of her. The calloused, firm feel of him against her skin nearly had her creaming in her panties. He dipped his head and kissed her knuckles. A light brush of his lips and she was ready to surrender.

He winked as he let go of her. She missed his warmth, but forced herself to pick up the pen again.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Gracie." He looked down her body, his progress hindered by the desk, then snared her in his milk chocolate gaze as he asked, "So, what do you do when you aren't answering the phone and setting up appointments here at Serene Comfort?"

"I have another job. I'm an administrative assistant."

His brows shot up. "You work two jobs?"

She thought of her dad's utility bills, which were late, again. "Yeah, I need the money to help support my dad."

He straightened and crossed his arms over his chest. "A devoted daughter, huh?"

She stiffened at the term. "Yeah, you could say that, I guess."

More like doormat, she thought bitterly. What was the use in complaining? Nothing was ever going to change. Her father would always drink away his social security check and call her in a panic because they were about to evict him for not paying the rent. She was tired of being the fall guy, but she couldn't bring herself to leave him to his own devices. He was her father, after all.

"Do you have a significant other to keep you company when you aren't working, Gracie?"

The way he said her name made her think of silk sheets and candle light. It was a nice image. Then reality intruded when she thought of his question. "I'm not seeing anyone right now. To tell the truth, I'm not sure when I'd even have the time."

His grin widened. "How about I take you to dinner Friday night? I'd like to get to know you better."

Like dangling an ice-cream cone in front of a five year old, Gracie's mouth practically watered at the thought of spending time alone with the delicious man. "I'd really—" A strange tinkling sound interrupted her. She glanced over at the computer and cringed. An email, and she recognized the name in the 'from' column. Her creepy secret admirer, reminding her that while she might not have a husband, she did have a man in her life. The fact that she didn't want said man didn't seem to matter to the jerk. Who the hell was she kidding? How could she possibly spend time with Wade when she had an alcoholic father to take care of and a weirdo stalking her via the internet? Add in two jobs and you have a woman with zero energy left over for leisure time.

"Earth to Gracie."

"Oh, sorry. I'm...I'm sorry, but I'm not in a good place right now. Can I have a rain check?"

He placed his hands on the edge of her desk and leaned forward until only a few inches of air separated them. "I can be very patient, Ms. Baron."

The determination in his gaze sent a rush of adrenaline through her body. Why did she suddenly feel as if her days were numbered?

Chapter One

Present Day

"If you'd give me a valid reason why you won't go out with me, I'd leave you alone. Instead, all I get are snarls. Snarls aren't valid, Gracie."

"I said no, which should be enough. Actually, it is for most guys. You're just mad because every other woman you proposition fawns all over you like you're a bar of chocolate or something. It makes me want to puke."

Wade tried to contain his grin. It wasn't easy with Gracie's description of him. "A bar of chocolate, huh? I don't suppose you have a sweet tooth, do you?"

Her frown turned into a vicious smile. "I'm allergic to chocolate. In fact, just the sight of it makes me irrational and I get this insane urge to take a hammer and crush it into oblivion."

Wade grabbed his chest, feigning hurt. "Ouch. You're one scary lady."

She sat up a little straighter in her chair and turned her attention back to her monitor. “Exactly. So, go find a cute little bunny to warm your bed, I’m really not interested, Wade.”

Wade braced his palms on Gracie’s desk and leaned forward. “A piece of fluff can’t even begin to satisfy me. Not when I have my sights set on a curvy redhead with a wicked temper.”

“Wade, stop bothering my employee.”

He turned his head at the feminine voice. Cherry DuBois, soon to be Cherry Ricci as soon as she married the big Italian from the financial consulting business next door. Wade watched Cherry walk toward him, a cup of coffee in one hand and a cell phone in the other. Her purposeful strides exuded confidence. He smiled, proud of the woman she’d become. After her first husband had asked for a divorce, Cherry had crumpled a little. But making her massage therapy business a success had helped her to see she didn’t need a man like Brody in her life. Meeting Dante had done the rest. The man acted as if Cherry hung the moon. If Wade was honest with himself, he’d admit to feeling a twinge of envy for the happy couple.

“I came to take you to lunch,” he explained, “but you’d already slipped out. So, I asked Ms. Persnickety here.”

“Dante and I grabbed lunch at home. You should’ve called. I could’ve made other plans.”

Wade turned, leaned against Gracie’s desk and crossed his arms over his chest. “You would’ve dropped Dante for me, huh?”

“Well, I could’ve—”

“He’s your fiancé now, Cherry,” Wade interrupted, his voice gentling. “You don’t have to make excuses for wanting to spend time with him.” He tossed Gracie a look over his shoulder. “Besides, it’s not really a hardship to spend time with your pretty receptionist.”

Cherry stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek, then leaned around him to look at Gracie. “You have my permission to drop-kick him if you want, hon. It would do him some good.”

Gracie laughed, but Wade could tell it was strained. She never seemed at ease around people. Not even Cherry, and everyone got along with her. “It’s fine. He was just leaving anyway. Right, Wade?”

Wade stood and stepped away from the desk. “Fine. My heart can only be stomped on so many times.”

The phone rang and he watched Gracie practically leap for it. While she took the call, Wade said his goodbyes to Cherry and moved toward the door. He was halfway to his truck when he remembered he’d forgotten to tell Cherry about the phone call he’d received from her ex-husband. The asshole had it in his head that he suddenly wanted Cherry back. The chance of that happening was about as good as finding Elvis alive and living it up in Graceland.

Wade sprinted back across the parking lot and pulled open the door, expecting to see Gracie where he'd left her behind the receptionist desk, but her seat was empty. Figuring she took a break, Wade started down the short hall toward Cherry's private office. A sound caught his attention and he stopped. His gaze narrowed on the closed bathroom door at the end of the hall. He moved closer and listened harder. The noise came again and it sounded suspiciously like a woman crying. Cherry or Gracie? Wade knocked softly. He didn't want to intrude, but the thought of either woman in tears didn't sit right with him.

"Y-Yes?"

Gracie's trembling voice floated out to him. What the hell? "Gracie, is everything all right?"

"F-Fine."

Fine my ass. In the months Gracie had been working for Cherry he'd seen her spitting mad, shy as a butterfly and sarcastic as hell. He'd never once heard that quiver in her voice. He didn't like it one damn bit either. He wasn't going anywhere until he got to the bottom of it. As he waited, a horrible thought struck and he froze. Had he been the cause? His teasing? He'd thought their little cat and mouse thing was all part of the game, but maybe it made Gracie more uncomfortable than she'd let on.

The door swung open and Wade stiffened. Gracie's head was down and she was dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. She didn't see him and smacked right into his chest, nearly knocking herself over backwards. Wade grabbed her shoulders to steady her before she had a chance to topple. Her head shot up and her pretty green eyes filled with tears the instant their gazes clashed. Shit, that sure as hell wasn't real promising.

"I think it's time you tell me what's wrong, Gracie. And don't tell me it's nothing."

She shook her head and blew her nose as she tried to step around him. Wade blocked her path. He cupped her chin in his palm and forced her to look at him. "Is it me? Did I do this?"

She blinked a couple times, as if unsure what he meant, then she let out a hysterical laugh.

"Wade, your ego is showing."

The fact that she was laughing, even while tears continued to stream down her cheeks, was further proof that something was very wrong. For the first time, Wade looked beyond the soft red hair, curvy figure and pouty lips. He saw the dark circles under Gracie's eyes now and they spoke volumes. She looked as if she hadn't slept in days. "Gracie, I know we may have gotten off on the wrong foot, but I can be a good listener if you want to talk."

She squared her shoulders and gently wiped her eyes in an attempt to get a handle on her emotions. "It's just a woman thing, Wade. I'm fine, really." The chimes over the door jangled, signaling a client's arrival. "I've got to get back to work. Thanks for the concern."

She brushed past him and Wade was left staring after her, dumbfounded. His instincts were screaming at him. There was more to that crying jag than PMS. He'd bet his new truck on it. Short of tying her to a chair and interrogating her, there wasn't a damn thing he could do. When he went out to the front, his gaze sought out hers. She smiled and she looked as contained as ever. If it weren't for the redness in her eyes, he never would've guessed she'd been so upset, which made him wonder just how often she wore that mask. Layers and Gracie Baron were old friends. Wade was determined to get beneath a few.

Of course, it might help if she weren't so damned stubborn.

Gracie watched through the large glass windows as Wade climbed into his truck and drove off. She let out a relieved sigh. She was smart enough to know that had Cherry's next client not shown up when he did, she would have ended up pouring out all her problems to the big, intimidating man. It would be a horrible mistake to involve someone else in the mess her life had become. It was enough she had to live it, others shouldn't be forced to as well. She looked back at her monitor and groaned. Another email from her crazy stalker. This one had a more sinister feel to it somehow. He'd threatened her before, but now it seemed there was an edge of desperation to the words on the screen.

I watch you every day, my love. Every move you make is recorded in my soul. I love the way you walk. Always in such a rush and yet so graceful. You should know though, I'm not happy about your second job. I asked you to quit and you ignored me. This can't be allowed to continue. I've let you have your fun, but it's time you understand obedience. It's for your own good, remember that. I love you, Gracie Lynn. Nevertheless, sometimes I will need to be tough to prove to you that our love can withstand all obstacles.

Forever,
Your Admirer

Gracie shivered even as she saved the email to her flash drive. She'd started saving them when she realized the man wasn't just a secret admirer, he was plain nuts. She now had over a hundred emails. At first it had seemed sweet. He'd been complimentary and always signed the emails with 'your admirer'. She'd never replied, but she'd felt flattered. The attention had bolstered her self-esteem. Then he'd used her first and middle name together and it had sent cold chills down her spine.

Her middle name wasn't listed. Anywhere. Not her driver's license, phone book, not even her credit cards. Whoever sent the emails had done their homework. She'd known then that ignoring them wasn't going to make the situation go away so she'd done what any woman with a crazy email fan might do, she'd gone to the police. That road had gotten her exactly nowhere. He hadn't threatened so he'd done nothing wrong, the detective had explained. He'd instructed her to save the emails and contact him if the situation worsened.

That had been two weeks ago and the emails hadn't let up. In fact, he'd gotten more persistent. He emailed every three hours now, like clockwork. Each email rambled on about how much he

loved her, how they'd be together soon and they'd be able to live happily-ever-after. Still, he was careful never to threaten her outright. She had nothing to bring to the police save for a lot of emails from a guy who had the hots for her.

Bile rose in her throat as she imagined what sort of person spoke like that to a complete stranger. It was like something out of a scary movie. Only in the movie the bad guy usually ended up dead and the damsel in distress would be rescued just in the nick of time.

Fear threatened to consume her when she thought of what this guy might be willing to do to keep her all to himself. An image of Wade Harrison filled her mind and Gracie quickly banished it. She couldn't think of Wade. He would only want to help, but she refused to burden him with her problems. Besides, what would her stalker do if he suspected she desired another man? The creep hadn't done anything to harm her yet and she knew it was partly due to the fact she kept to herself. She didn't date, didn't even go out with friends. When she wasn't at work she was alone. The instant someone came into her life, someone as handsome and charming as Wade, things would escalate. She could very well be putting more than just herself in danger then.

Gracie closed down the computer and slipped the flash drive into her purse just as Cherry came out of her office. "Ready to go?"

"Yep."

Cherry always insisted they leave together. More often than not, Dante would show up and escort both of them out. Gracie liked Cherry and Dante. They were good people. As if she'd conjured him, Dante opened the front door and held it for the two of them. He waited while Cherry set the alarm and locked up, then he took her hand in his. The little green monster rose up as she watched them. She wondered what that kind of bond was like. That kind of all-consuming love. Would she ever know?

"I wanted to tell you now that Wade's not here that if he really ever bothers you, just say the word and I'll have a talk with him. I don't want you feeling uncomfortable, Gracie."

Gracie smiled for the first time in hours. "He doesn't bother me. Not really. I just like to give him a hard time."

"I sort of figured. Do you...like him?"

Gracie stiffened, unsure how much to say. "He's attractive. The idea of going out with him is very appealing, but I don't have time for a man right now."

Cherry looked up at Dante and smiled. "Sometimes it's worth it to make time."

Gracie nodded, pretending she understood. In truth, she'd never been loved. Not the way Cherry and Dante loved. She'd had boyfriends, but it had always been surface relationships. Deep, soul mate stuff wasn't something she knew anything about.

Once Gracie was in her car and on her way she thought back to the day Cherry had hired her on as a receptionist. Gracie had been thrilled. The extra income meant she could help her father with his bills and still keep her own apartment. Maybe she could even get him out of debt once and for all.

Hell, who was she kidding? Her father was a drunk and a pathetic excuse for a human being. He started drinking when he woke up in the morning and didn't stop until his head hit the pillow. The only thing keeping a roof over his head was his only child working two jobs. If she didn't pay both their bills one of them would be on the street.

As she turned a corner and started down the long, winding road to her apartment complex, her mind once again went back to Wade. God, the man was beyond delicious. His large, hard body and gorgeous brown eyes were like something out of a tough guy action movie. She'd been sucked in. He'd grinned at her and she'd nearly fallen at his feet. His dark hair seemed forever disheveled. Models spent good money on hair products to get that tousled look, while Wade simply ran a hand through his hair. Women sighed as they watched him, longing to do the same. She knew, because she was one of those women.

The first time he'd asked her out she'd nearly caved. Then, like an omen, a bell on her computer signaled a new email message. When she recognized the email address as her stalker's the yes she'd been about to utter died on her tongue. She'd tried every trick in the book since to keep Wade at a distance, but, damn, the man was tenacious. She had to admit to herself that he didn't push, not really. Deep down Gracie knew if she truly meant no, he'd hear it and leave her alone. He wasn't an ass, just intuitive. He knew the attraction wasn't all on his side of the desk. He just couldn't understand why she was so reluctant to act on it. Unfortunately the truth simply wasn't something one brought up in casual conversation. "Oh, by the way, you might become the target of a crazy man if you and I went out on a date. My stalker has this thing about having me all to his wacko self." Yeah, that'd go over well.

As she neared the S curve a half mile from her apartment, Gracie pushed the maudlin thoughts out of her head and concentrated instead on simply getting home in one piece. Friday night and she was alone. Damned pathetic. Pressing her foot down on the brake, Gracie managed the first curve and started into the second when something slammed into her rear bumper.

Gracie automatically hit the brake. Slowing down, her hands shook as panic started to settle over her. She glanced in the rear-view mirror, but it was too dark to see more than a set of headlights behind her. She started to move her small sedan to the side of the road, her mind already on calling the police and exchanging insurance information, when another impact, harder this time, sent her car careening out of control.

"Oh God!"

Panic turned to all out terror as she witnessed the other vehicle speed up and smash into her yet a third time. As fear tore a scream from her throat, her car spun. Looking through the windshield, Gracie's gaze locked onto the thick woods, and the deep ravine she knew lay hidden fifty feet beyond. She clutched the wheel in a death grip and pushed the brake pedal clear to the floor, her only thought on keeping from diving into that ravine. Her car tore through weeds and brush, the world turning upside down. Suddenly, everything went black.

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