

Chapter One

Kylie handed the cab driver two twenty dollar bills and apprehensively exited the car. Much as she'd rather have just told the driver to turn around and take her back home, she knew she needed to take care of this errand—the sooner the better. With one last wistful look over her shoulder, Kylie watched the taxi pull away from the curb, assuring herself that, no matter whether or not she took care of this, she was at least in the right place to do it.

If only she could muster enough courage to walk the ten small steps it would take her to enter the door in front of her. It wasn't that the door itself was any different than a million others—it was just one of many similar doors in a strip center, with a variety of different stores, each seeing their fair share of people coming and going, making their purchases, and then moving along with the rest of their everyday lives. But for Kylie, the store in front of her was more than that. It was a symbol of her lifelong shame, a reminder that she was not like everyone else, and probably never would be.

Nervously, she shifted back and forth, twirling a piece of her long curly blonde hair with her left hand, while the thumb and middle finger of her right hand pinched a section of her skirt; the two digits rubbing against one another through the thin cloth.

Had she been able to see her reflection at that moment, including the bowed head and submissive posture, she would likely have tried to pull herself together and gain back her determination to be more mature and self-sufficient, which is what had gotten her out of the house that morning and to this sidewalk.

Having lived a very sheltered life thus far, Kylie was determined to start living the way she wanted, the way she should; her goal being to operate as independently as possible, taking care of herself, and her own needs. If nothing else, the last few months had taught her that it was not a good idea to rely too heavily on anyone else, and she needed to be able to act like the mature adult she was—and face every necessary task head on.

Inside the store, and unbeknownst to Kylie, she had a small audience. Brad Moore, the owner of the shop, had come in to discuss various business matters, and was talking to Mara Graham, the shop manager, about a special shipment that would be arriving, as well as providing her with details of an after-hours pick up that had been arranged. While waiting for her to

respond to a question he posed, he looked up from the paperwork that had been holding his attention, and noticed that Mara seemed to have stopped following the course of the conversation, and was instead focused on something beyond him, outside the store.

Brad turned to see what was creating the distraction, and saw the small blonde standing in her sundress and sandals outside, looking lost and frightened. The protective side of his instincts immediately went on alert, and he had the strangest impulse to go outside, scoop her up, and let her know she was safe, and that no one would harm her. Just as he was planning to take action of his own accord, Mara spoke as she pushed past him. "Looks like we have either someone who's lost, or a reluctant shopper outside. I'm going to run out and see if she needs some help."

Brad watched as his employee approached the girl, while he slowly began making his own way toward the door. He was relieved that Mara had taken the first step, knowing that the girl was less likely to be frightened away when approached by another female. Mara, as a woman, would be less intimidating, and therefore was obviously the better choice to initiate a conversation with the girl. Hell, if he'd have gone running out there like his initial instincts dictated, he might now be chasing the little thing down the sidewalk.

Mara slowly approached the girl, who looked as though she might faint now that she realized she had been noticed, and that someone was going to talk to her. "Hello sweetie. I'm Mara. I saw you standing out here, and wanted to make sure you were okay. Are you looking for a particular store? I work right here," she said, gesturing in the general direction behind herself, "and I'm familiar with pretty much every place around here. Do you need some directions?"

Kylie slowly allowed her gaze to travel upward from where they had been focused on the tips of her shoes, her thickly lashed hazel eyes taking in the tall, professional looking woman standing in front of her. The sight of this confident looking brunette, with her shiny hair and beautiful green eyes, combined with the kind and soft tone of her voice, helped bring Kylie back into the present. After releasing the gulp of air she did not realize she had been holding since she saw the door opening, Kylie tried to reply, but her voice came out sounding more like a whisper, and was unintelligible at first. Taking another breath, she made her second and more successful attempt at a response.

"Y-you work here? A-at this store?" she stuttered. "Yes, I'm coming here. Um, this is where I want to come, it's where I'm coming." *Oh god, she thought, I sound like a total idiot.*

What is wrong with me? This is just a nice lady, wondering why the crazy girl is standing in front of her store, acting like she's afraid it's Freddie Kruger's house.

Kylie was so intent on keeping eye contact with the woman in front of her, hoping her steady gaze would convince the woman that she wasn't unbalanced or weird, that she hadn't yet noticed the very tall and imposing man who had now also exited the store, and was carefully watching the interaction between the two.

Unfortunately, his time of going undetected came to an abrupt halt. Upon hearing Kylie's unfortunate turn of phrase, he was forced to clear his throat to prevent the laughter that instantly and unexpectedly rose up and fought to be released. Not a man who normally responded to puerile humor, Brad was surprised that her wording hit him as it did. Perhaps it was less what she'd said, and more the adorable way she'd stammered over her words, trying to respond sensibly, but getting tied up by her shy nervousness. Whatever the cause, Brad felt even more protective of her now that he had heard her sweetly melodic voice, and was now more inclined than ever to make sure she was not in any danger or distress.

In response to the unexpected sound of Brad's stifled chuckle, Kylie's attention was immediately drawn in his direction. Her eyes widened as she took in his tall, nearly six foot eight frame. He was dressed in boots, jeans and a plain black shirt, and she felt suddenly frozen to the spot, as though he had somehow absorbed all of the energy from her body.

Not wanting to appear obvious in her perusal, she cautiously peered at him from the corner of her eye, taking in his sharp features, his keen navy blue eyes, and hair so dark and black that it looked almost indigo in the places where the sun hit it. With his harsh features and a large frame, this was a man who would more commonly be referred to as arresting, rather than handsome. But whatever the description, there was no doubt that this was a guy who could easily have his pick of available women.

Goodness, she thought, he's a giant, like a real life giant. I don't think I've ever seen anyone so tall. She wouldn't be surprised if he had to duck when he went through doorways. His legs seemed to go on forever, and she was pretty certain that if she stood next to him, she wouldn't clear much past his waist

Looking at him, Kylie was unaccountably struck with conflicting emotions, feeling both that he was dangerous, and somehow, strangely, safe. Not sure how long she had been standing there, staring at him like a dolt, she realized that it had surely been much longer than was polite.

Blushing furiously, she slid her eyes back to Mara. She was embarrassed that she had so completely zoned out under the gaze of the huge stranger, and wasn't even sure whether the woman was still speaking to her or not.

By this time, Mara had also turned and was facing Brad, gesturing with her eyes for him to try and keep things relaxed and nonthreatening. It was apparent from her expression that she feared a misstep by either of them would result in causing their little visitor to flee—before they'd even determined why this particular store was her destination. And why she seemed to be so scared and timid.

Turning back toward Kylie with a wide smile, Mara spoke to her in the kindest and most soothing voice possible. "So dear, why don't you come on in? I don't know about you, but I'm ready to get out of this heat and into the nice air conditioning. Brad, can you get the door for us, please?" Taking the opportunity to loosely circle her arm around Kylie's narrow shoulders, she slowly but effectively began to escort the young woman into the store—before she had time to fall back into a state of nervous trepidation.

Gently steering Kylie into the store, Mara did not halt their progress until she had reached the low sales counter located toward the rear of the shop. Subtly turning them around, Mara neatly manoeuvred the girl onto one of the chairs that were provided for waiting customers.

Bending down and leaning slightly toward the girl, Mara peered intently into Kylie's unusual gray eyes with their little green flecks, careful to keep a certain distance to ensure she was not invading the girl's space. Once assured that the girl did not look ready to jump up and run screaming from the store, Mara spoke. "So sweetie, now that we know you are at the right place, why don't you tell me your name, and what I can do to help you."

Though it was not like her to be nosy about her customers' lives, it wasn't often that a young girl like this would need to visit a medical supply store. Most of their clientele were elderly, or in the healthcare field. While it was not impossible that this young woman was a health worker of some type, something about Kylie's demeanor suggested that her presence was the result of something more personal. Of course, the basic list of expected customers did not account for their more 'elite' clientele, however it seemed unlikely that this child was part of that group.

Their special customers came to them for the products that epitomized the true nature of all of Brad's stores, and were primarily wealthy individuals looking for special and custom made

items; such as St. Andrews' crosses, spanking benches, stocks, and other items not readily available in a typical sex shop, or easily obtained online

Realizing the other woman was expectantly watching her and awaiting her response, Kylie gulped nervously, feeling overwhelmed and slightly nauseous as she quietly replied. "My name is Kylie. Kylie Shannon, ma'am."

Glancing over Mara's shoulder, Kylie noted that the tall man from outside—the man Mara obviously knew, and called Brad—had followed them inside. She wondered if the two were a couple. It would make sense; two tall beautiful people like that could only belong to one another. So why did that make her feel sad? She did not even know these people, and yet she felt undeniably drawn to them somehow; especially to the man, Brad. She couldn't explain why, but she was almost mesmerized by him. His mere presence caused her breath to shorten, and her palms to become slightly sweaty and warm.

Having had little experience or opportunity to interact with others, Kylie had developed an odd habit of trying to categorize and make up stories about the people that she would come across, and she immediately cast Mara as the cool aunt—the type you read about in books or see on TV. Responsible, but fun, women you could count on to help you through friend and boyfriend troubles, to help you pick out trendy clothes, teach you about make-up, and take you to get pedicures. Kylie wasn't sure whether such women actually existed outside of fictional stories, but if they did, she imagined they'd probably be just like Mara. Brad, on the other hand, well he was much harder to categorize. She had no storyline for this man who made her feel so off balance; both weak and weirdly energized at the same time. For the first time in her almost nineteen years, Kylie was attracted to a man, and it was a disconcerting feeling.

Though she vaguely recognized that her reaction to him might be considered similar to that of a teen to a rock star; the physical aspects of that attraction were so new and unknown that she could not name them for what they were. She just knew she was somehow drawn to him, and that, like a dark angel, inviting him in could be both very bad and very good.

As her gaze flickered between Mara and Brad, Kylie knew that she had once again allowed her mind to go off on a tangent, and they were now both waiting for her to reply to the last part of the question. Why was she here?

She unconsciously began twisting her fingers into knots in the folds of her dress. *Oh God, she thought, I can't, I just can't tell her what I'm here for. Especially not with him standing there,*

able to hear every word. I'd die. Why can't I just disappear? Just melt into a puddle right here and ooze out the door, go home and pretend that I never tried to do this?

Effectively picking up on the girl's obvious discomfort, and correctly guessing its cause, Mara turned to Brad, and with a raised eyebrow and discreet hand motion that could not be mistaken to convey anything other than 'please leave, you're making her uncomfortable', she silently implored him to make himself scarce.

Brad caught the look, stunned to find himself still standing there and staring at the crown of the young girl's head—no, not just 'the girl' any longer, but Kylie; a cute name for a cute girl.

Normally, he'd have already excused himself, leaving the young lady in Mara's capable hands. He did not do emotional outbursts. Not only did he have absolutely no idea what to do with a freaked out female, he'd never before had even the slightest inclination to find out.

Though he'd felt an uncharacteristic and immediate pull toward Kylie, there was no way he could overlook the fact that she was definitely too young and too innocent for someone like him. Rousing himself from his momentary musing, he began walking toward the back of the store, calling, "Mara, I'll just go in the back and look over those final inventory sheets, and then check in with you before I leave," over his shoulder as he left.

With Brad's exit from the area, Mara could see Kylie visibly relax, releasing some of the tension that had been evident throughout her body. Uncertain how long Brad planned to wait in the back room, pretending to check inventory, she again spoke to the girl, her questions designed to figure out what Kylie could possibly need from their store.

"Kylie, since you've already said that this is the store you were looking for, can you tell me what you need? Is this for you, or for someone in your family?" Mara asked; having had the sudden realization that she'd actually overlooked an obvious possibility—perhaps the girl could be shopping for an elderly or incapacitated family member. While that was technically a potential option, it had not immediately occurred to her, perhaps because the girl's demeanor did not tend to indicate that was going to be the case.

"Yes ma'am, this is the right store. I'm sure," Kylie replied, as she reached into the purse strapped across her chest, and pulled out a small wallet and a folded piece of paper.

Taking the sheet Kylie held out to her, Mara unfolded it, instantly recognizing it as one of the store's delivery receipts. As she began scanning the details, she asked, "Was there a problem with the order?" Once she had read the two-month-old form fully, Mara recognized both the

address and the order as one from a long established delivery client, who had placed online reorders every forty-five to sixty days for the past several years. Efficient in her management of the store's day to day operations, it was almost a sure bet that when she'd failed to see a new order come in the few weeks prior, she would have addressed it somehow, but without looking at the account records, she could not recall if she'd sent out an inquiry to the customer to make sure nothing had been overlooked, or if there was another reason they hadn't placed the customary order.

"No, no problem. I, I just need to, um, get some, ah... well, to reorder and get a delivery, please. As soon as possible, please," Kylie replied, her voice shaking and eyes visibly filling with unshed tears.

"That's fine, Kylie," Mara assured her. "I can take care of this for you, no problem. But why didn't you just place the order online, as you have been doing?"

"Well, I need them now, and I didn't know the password for ordering, and Mrs. Granger isn't there anymore, so I didn't know who to ask to help me, and I'm almost out, and I need, I need..." Kylie said, her voice breaking as she fought to force the final words through her tight throat.

The tears she'd tried to hold back began spilling forth, running down her cheeks in glistening trails, turning her hazel gray eyes to a shimmery silver.

Without thinking, Mara immediately crouched down in front of her and pulled her into the circle of her arms, pressing the overwrought young girl's face to her shoulder, patting her back and speaking soothingly to her. "It's okay, Kylie. No need to cry, darling. We'll get you all sorted out. There, there baby, you're okay, everything is okay."

Mara continued to hold the girl for several more minutes, whispering soft assurances and waiting for her to calm down. After Kylie's sobs had subsided to the occasional hiccupping shudder, her subsequent withdrawal from Mara's arms indicated she seemed to have gained back most of her self-control. Reaching across the counter, Mara grabbed some tissues and passed them to the girl. "Okay, Kylie. Here, honey, wipe your face,"

Kylie gratefully accepted the wad of tissues. Wiping her face and blowing her nose, she was mortified by her behavior. She had just cried on a perfect stranger. Bad enough that Mara would think her a baby for needing diapers, but now she'd just proved how much of a real baby she was by acting like a two-year-old, and crying in the middle of the store. She was sure her

face was now all red and splotchy. Not to mention that her nose was running, and her head and throat were aching from her long crying jag. She had only thought she was embarrassed before, now she felt totally ashamed, and couldn't even imagine how she would ever recover from the memory of this low moment.