

Wynter's Waif
South Dakota Dreams – Book Three

By

Megan McCoy

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Chapter One

“You’ve lost more weight.”

“You’re still a lying, cheating ass.”

“I didn’t know you knew any bad words,” he said.

“I didn’t need to know any bad words until you left me,” Lily stood in her doorway and glared at her ex-husband, putting her hands on her hips. “Where’s the Mrs.?”

“She stayed home to work, she wanted to take some time off while Tyler is with us, and is getting in some extra hours now.” He smiled at her as if he expected her to approve of this. Of course, she wanted another woman mothering her son for the next month over Thanksgiving and Christmas and almost all summer. Nothing would make her happier! Lily folded her arms and glared at Jason, ignoring the niggle of attraction that was still there. The man she thought she’d be spending the rest of her life with, who’d betrayed her harshly and didn’t seem bothered by it at all. Who now took her son away from her for weeks at a time. Yeah. Nothing to be attracted to there.

“Tyler’s ready. He’s not happy, but he’s ready,” she said, and stepped back reluctantly so he could come inside to get their son.

“Don’t worry, it’s just the transition he doesn’t like, not the time he spends with me and his stepmom,” Jason said as if it were consoling. It wasn’t. “He doesn’t like to come back here, either.” Oh yeah. That helped a lot.

“Tyler, your dad is here,” she called out without taking her eyes off Jason “There’s his stuff. I’ll make sure he goes to the bathroom. Do you have snacks and things for him?”

“He doesn’t need all that stuff. His room at home has everything he needs,” Jason said, frowning at the small pile of bags. “Britt fixed it up for him last time.”

“He has some of his favorite things in there,” Lily chewed her thumbnail in frustration, then took it out of her mouth as she saw his frown. Again. Another frown. She could bring it out in him like no one else. “Just take it and don’t make this harder than it already is.”

“You are the only one this is hard for,” he said, grabbing the two bags and walking to the cab that she knew would take them to the airport, then her five-year-old would fly across the country and she wouldn’t see him until next year. Seven weeks. This would be the last time, she consoled herself. Next year he would be in school and wouldn’t be able to take off the month of December. He’d have school to attend, and Jason would only have him for two weeks over the holidays and a shorter time in the summer. She didn’t want to keep Tyler from his dad, but hated that Jason always threatened her with not bringing him back. Plus, she was, yes, a bit jealous that Jason and Brittany could give Tyler more monetary things than she could, and a two-parent home. Sighing as she went to get her son from in the front of the TV where he’d sat sullenly all morning, she straightened her shoulders. Switching off the TV, she smiled brightly at him, as he looked up at her.

“Your dad is here,” she repeated. “Ready for a ride to the airport and then go on a plane?”

“I’ve been on a plane,” he pointed out to her. “Dad took me on one last time I stayed with him.”

“That’s true, I forget you’re just a world-weary traveler,” she teased her five-year-old. “Well, it’s still fun, isn’t it?”

He nodded, looking up at her through the most impossibly long, thick eyelashes. He was a mini her, with her face shape, thick dark hair and the lashes she'd inherited from her dad. Jason couldn't take that away from her. "Don't be sad. I'll be back before you even know I'm gone," he said. Lily smiled. She always said that to him before she left for work.

"And you and your dad will have a great time, I bet he has lots of fun things planned for you to do. I hear your Grandma Montgomery will be coming for Christmas," she was glad about that. She always had liked Jason's mom, who adored Tyler, her only grandson.

Tyler smiled at that and pulled his small phone from his pocket. Five was too young for a phone, but she didn't want to not be able to get ahold of him anytime she wanted and she wanted to talk to Brittany as little as possible. "We can talk every day," he reassured her in a too adult tone, while she solemnly nodded back.

"Don't forget there's games on there too, and your charger is in your backpack. Make sure you charge it after we talk every night, okay?" California was a long way away from Blizzard, South Dakota. Jason and Brittany had both moved their practices out there after the quickie divorce and remarriage last year. He said it was for the weather, but she wasn't so sure.

"Hi, buddy, you ready to go?" Jason had come in behind her shooting her a nasty look, probably about the electronic device. Nothing in their custody agreement said she couldn't give him one. Childishly, she felt like sticking out her tongue at him, but needed to adult for her kid.

"Hi, Dad! Gotta get my backpack," Tyler rushed over and hugged his dad, and Lily felt a pang of jealousy. Idiocy. The child was allowed to love them both. She wanted that for him. Two adult parents who didn't fight over or in front of their kid. Lots of kids had divorced parents and Tyler had the best of both worlds, she assured herself again. She had to keep telling herself that to get through this.

"Did you go to the bathroom?" she asked him, and when he shook his head, she said, "Better do that really quick before you go, and I'll check to make sure you have your charger, okay?"

"Does he really need a phone?" Jason asked softly, after Tyler left the room.

"Yes, he needs to call me every night and there's some games on there for the plane ride in case he gets bored or you get stuck at the airport," she said stubbornly. "You never know what the holiday traffic is going to be like. There could be delays and he might need some entertainment."

Jason didn't say anything but just shot her what she used to call his Patented Jason Frown. It meant he wasn't happy, and she smiled just a little realizing that wasn't her issue anymore. She was no longer in charge of his happiness or his moods. It was just about her favorite part of being divorced, besides being able to keep the thermostat wherever she wanted it.

Her kid leaving her for weeks was her least favorite part. She swooped him into a hug when he came back in the room and inhaled his little boy smell, feeling tears prick her eyes. She couldn't let him see her cry and forced a smile for him, as she looked into his hazel green eyes that mirrored hers.

"You have a great time, and call me when your plane lands in California, okay? I love you to the moon and all the way back." She hugged him one more time.

"I love you, too, Mom. I have my phone and I'll call you," Tyler smiled at her, and kissed her cheek. "See you soon, ready to go, Dad?" he said. "I'll show you how to play my new game, okay?"

"Zip your coat. Bye, I love you," she called, watching them climb in the cab and drive away. Letting out one choked sob, she turned and went back into the house, and shut the door

behind her. Now what? Shaking her head, she sniffled and looked around her small house. Her house. All by herself for the next seven weeks. She and Tyler had downsized to this one after the divorce, and it was just perfect for the two of them. She hoped to be able to buy it one day, but for now, renting would have to suffice. Wandering into Tyler's room, she picked up the small cars he'd left scattered about and stored them in the container. It smelled like little boy in here. Debating, she decided not to wash his sheets just yet. They held his scent and she would enjoy that a day or so. There was no hurry, anyway, he wouldn't be back for seven weeks after all. Choking back another sob, she wondered if Jason felt this way when he had to bring Tyler back. Well, he had a trophy wife to run home to, so it probably didn't bother him as much. They were still newlyweds, after all, though she found out after he laid the divorce on her, that they'd been together a few years. All those late nights at the hospital, yeah. She knew what was going on, now. He and Brittany were playing doctor. Well, she wished them happiness. Or something like that. She didn't have a choice in the matter. Between Jason and his fancy lawyer, she didn't have a choice in anything.

"Well, that was dramatic," she said out loud. "Figure out what to do now."

She pulled her phone out and wished Tyler read better. All she could send him was short texts, "I love you." And, "Be good! Kiss Kiss." Or he couldn't read them. But she'd talk to him later. She flipped to her calendar. No work until tomorrow, then they would be slammed until New Year's. Lily was glad about that, the less time she had to spend home alone the better it would be. Not only were there two huge flower holidays coming up, Thanksgiving and Christmas, but they had two weddings to work and she was in one of them. Talia Hansen and her ex-husband, Lucas, were getting remarried and Brenda's florist shop, where she worked, was doing flowers for it, plus she was attending. Before that, though, her old boss and friend, Stormy, was finally marrying her long-time guy, Cade, and she was a bridesmaid. She'd never been a bridesmaid before and the thought would be thrilling if she didn't know she'd be helping Brenda with the flowers before, during and after, also. She loved her job, which was a good thing, because she'd be spending a lot of time there. The woman who owned it, and her boss, Brenda, had broken her ankle while skiing two weeks ago and was still hobbling on crutches. That was good and bad, bad for Brenda of course, but she'd given Lily a promotion, making her assistant manager and hiring two more people for the season. Tomorrow was their first day, so not only was there going to be much to do, but she'd be training a couple newbies.

Looking around her living room, she wondered if she would even bother to decorate this year. Why bother? It was only her. She'd be the only one here for Thanksgiving and Christmas both. Plus, she'd get all the decorating bling she needed to look at while she worked at the florist shop. They'd been up to their ears in autumn decor, and next week they would have to pull it all down and put up Christmas. She would have lots of holiday in her life, even if she did nothing here.

Her phone chirped and she smiled as she looked at the caller ID. Stormy. "Hi, Stormy," she answered.

"Is he gone and are you sober?" Stormy asked.

"He just got out the door and yes, I'm still sober. I wasn't really planning to drink my dinner. I'll be fine. He's going to call when he lands in California," Lily said and laughed.

"How was the ex?" Stormy asked. "Hunky and horrible as ever?"

"Yes, and yes," Lily said. "Made sure to let me know all the stuff the most recent Mrs. Montgomery was planning and doing for my kid while she was playing mommy."

"Aww, he's always so thoughtful, isn't he?" Stormy said. "We can always count on that."

“Men don’t change,” Lily said, trying not to sound bitter.

“Oh, I don’t know. Talia seems to have roped and hogtied Lucas Never-Marrying-Again Strong.”

“Since she’s his ex-wife and the reason he said that, then I’m not sure that counts,” Lily smiled again. Stormy was good for her. “So, what time is the fitting this afternoon? I’m looking forward to it!”

“I’m picking up Joan at two and then we will all meet at the shop at two thirty. I have to remember to bring my shoes, they want me to try the dress on with them.” Stormy chattered about wedding details for another few minutes, then said, “Whoops, Cade is calling. Will see you this afternoon! Love you, take care and hang in there.”

“I will,” Lily promised, ending the call.

Okay, she felt a little better. Today would pass and it would get easier, just like it did when she first went back to work and had to leave Tyler at daycare. The first week she sobbed all the way to the car, after she’d left him, but it did get easier. This would too, and he would be home soon. Going into the kitchen, she flipped her wall calendar, and circled in red the day she would be picking him up at the airport. Brittany had made noises about being the one to fly back with him. Part of their custody agreement when Jason moved out of state, was that he paid for the plane tickets back and forth, and that someone would accompany Tyler until he was ten and able to fly alone. Shuddering, she couldn’t imagine losing her kid every year for weeks until he was an adult, but that was her life now. She had to accept it.

Sighing, she went to the fridge to make a sandwich. Jason had said he planned to have lunch with Tyler at the airport. She could imagine them sitting at the cafe’s window, eating, laughing and watching the planes fly in and out. He’d taken her on several dates there, both before and after they got married. She wondered if he and Brittany had done that too, while she was home with Tyler, making his dinner, washing his socks, and waiting on him to grace them with his presence. Probably. He loved being at the airport, and had proposed to her there, but it didn’t matter, she didn’t know why she cared. She didn’t care about him, she cared she was out of bread and couldn’t make a sandwich.

Bread, she carefully wrote on her grocery list. She had to be careful when she went to the store, and not buy for Tyler’s needs. Things like milk would go bad before he came home. Glancing at the clock, she realized she had almost three hours before she needed to meet Stormy and the rest of the wedding party at the shop. She wanted some fresh air and to stretch her legs. Debating going to the gym, she decided against it. Instead, she grabbed her heavy jacket from the hall tree, pulled it on and made sure she had her hat and gloves. A quick walk around the block would clear her head and invigorate her.

The bite of icy air hit her as she opened the front door and she hoped Tyler would remember to keep his coat zipped. Though that wouldn’t be an issue for long, apparently California was warm and sunny. She wouldn’t know, she’d never been there. Deciding she would walk to the gas station a few blocks away to buy a loaf of bread, she headed in that direction. Sure, it would cost her fifty cents more than at the store, but overtime would pay for that this week, plus it gave her a sense of purpose. Like Tyler did. Hard to remember her life before him, he seemed to have always been her purpose. He enriched every part of her existence, and made her whole.

Shivering, Lily wrapped her gray scarf around her neck, and waved her arms a few times to get the blood pumping, and figured she’d be warm by the time she got to the gas station. Arriving, she paid for her bread and headed back home. Now, she didn’t want a sandwich,

though, she wanted a bowl of hot soup. She could make a pot of soup, and then put it in little containers to take to work with her this week for lunches. See, she had lots of things to do! Once home, she busied herself finding a recipe and making a wonderful sweet potato minestrone soup. That would taste very good on the cold days to come.

Finally, she got the soup simmering in the crockpot, and it was time to go to the shop and meet Stormy. She'd be a little early, but who cared. Lily opened her garage door, and double checked to make sure her ice scraper was in the car. It looked like snow, which often meant ice. Late fall in Blizzard could be like mid-winter in other places. You always had to be prepared for the weather. Her trunk always had enough supplies in case she got stuck somewhere, and heavy boots in case she needed to walk home in the snow.

It was only a few miles to the shop where Stormy had purchased her wedding dress, barely enough time for her car to warm up. The bridal shop looked cozy and welcoming, so instead of waiting in the car, she hurried into the store.

"Welcome," a greeting called out to her as she entered made her turn and smile. That was one thing Brenda constantly drilled into her. Always welcome someone when they came in. It set the tone for the entire interaction.

"Thank you," she said as a short, stout woman hurried over to her.

"I'm Sierra. Are you here looking at dresses today?"

Lily shook her head and unzipped her jacket. "No, I'm waiting for Stormy Wagner. She's coming for her fitting and I'm here for moral support." She smiled as Sierra helped her off with her jacket. Now how often did that happen? "We want to check and see if the bridesmaids' dresses came in, also." They had ordered them online a few weeks ago, and no one had seen them in person yet. She needed to know how high her black heels needed to be. This wedding stuff was expensive, she was finding out, even though Stormy kept insisting she was just having a small wedding. Well, that was okay. Overtime was coming, she reminded herself. A lot of it, and besides, she'd do about anything for Stormy. She'd given her a job after Jason had left her, and she hadn't worked in five years. He didn't want her to work after he graduated medical school, which was weird, because he was all excited about Britt being his 'equal' as a doctor. Lily had two years of community college, got her Mrs. degree, put him through his last few years of school, then stayed home to apparently become dull and stupid, and not as interesting, or as well built as the women he worked with. Shaking her head, Lily nibbled on her thumb nail. No. She wasn't going there. No one could make her feel bad without her permission. She was not second class and not going to be, ever.

"Lily!" she heard as the door opened and Stormy came in behind Joan's wheelchair. Joan had gone downhill fairly recently during her long cancer battle. Cade's mother smiled at her cheerfully, though. "Lily, I've not seen you in a while, how are you, dear?" She clutched her hand and Lily was surprised how strong she was.

"I'm good, Joan, so glad to see you. Keeping that boy of yours in line?"

"Oh, I handed him off. He's Stormy's problem now."

They both laughed, college professor Cade was as far from a bad boy as anyone could be. He and Stormy were both marathon runners and with a flash of insight, Lily wondered what she and Jason ever did together? Well, sex. But really, that wasn't an actual hobby, was it?

"I think she can handle him," Lily said, and smiled up at Stormy. "You ready to get beautiful? Is your mom coming?"

"No, Mom's still in Florida but she will be here for the wedding, provided," Stormy emphasized, "the weather is okay." She only rolled her eyes a little.

“Does she know you are having a very late fall wedding in South Dakota?” Lily laughed. “What’s the odds of that? I think it’s going to snow today, it feels like it.”

“I feel it, too,” Stormy said. “Who knows, but if she can make it or can’t, my dad is driving up from downstate, so that will help.”

“I hope she can come,” Lily said, feeling a pang for her. “But Joan will be here for you, and so will I, either way.”

“And I’ll be married either way,” Stormy smiled. “Which is really the only important thing to me.”

The diminutive sales lady bustled up. “Ms. Wagner! So glad to see you again! Are you ready for your final fitting?” She turned to Lily. “I’m sorry but the dresses aren’t in just yet, but they should be before Thanksgiving. Now, come on,” she said to Stormy, “let’s get you dressed up!”

Stormy left the room with her, while Lily waited with Joan. “How is little Tyler?” Joan asked. “He all excited about Christmas?”

Lily felt her stomach clench. “He’s actually on an airplane with his dad right now, heading to California for the holidays. He’s going to have a blast.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful for him, but so hard on you,” Joan empathized. “You doing all right, honey?”

Nodding, Lily admitted, “As well as can be expected, I imagine. Sometimes life hits you where you don’t expect it, though, you know.”

Laughing wryly, Joan said, “I know. Like my cancer diagnosis. Not how I expected to be spending the last few years at all.”

Lily sighed. Yes, that put having her kid gone for a few weeks in perspective. “I can only imagine. You still having treatments?”

Joan nodded, “With my doctor’s blessing, I put it off until after the wedding in two weeks, but then I’ll start another round. I need to build up my strength so I can dance with my son.”

“That’s important,” Lily agreed.

“What are you doing for Thanksgiving?” Joan asked.

“I hadn’t really thought about it,” Lily said. “Probably resting, we’ll be working twelve hours the day before and after. I know my mom and dad are booked solid at their bed and breakfast, so we are having Thanksgiving there Sunday evening after everyone checks out.”

“Well, you just come over to my house, okay? I’m having a crowd and would love to have you. No reason to sit home alone when you can show up and have some turkey and all the trimmings.”

“Oh, that would be lovely,” Lily said. “I make a wonderful broccoli casserole I can bring.”

“Then it’s settled,” Joan said. “Oh, look how beautiful Stormy is!”

Her fair, blonde friend was a vision in a blush pink wedding dress. She said she didn’t look good in white, and she could wear what she wanted. Her eyes lit up with sheer happiness and she cooed at Lily, “Look! It has pockets!”

Lily laughed, “Yes, pockets are very important and you are gorgeous!”

An hour later, they were heading out the door again, when Stormy said, “I’m going to take Joan home, and then I’m meeting Cade and a friend of his at the bowling alley. Want to come?”

Lily started to shake her head, but then thought, why not? There was nothing waiting for her at home. Her soup was in the crockpot and set on low, it would be fine if she was gone another hour or two. "That sounds like fun," she said. The Roll On In was a local hang out, and not only had bowling, pool and arcade games, but had surprisingly good food. She was hungry anyway, because she hadn't had her sandwich she'd wanted, the soup isn't done, and she hadn't eaten since this morning.

"Good, I'll meet you there in about half an hour, then. Joan, put your hat on, looks like the wind has picked up," Stormy said.

"Bye, Joan, take care. I'll see you Thanksgiving Day, if not before. If you think of anything else I can bring, let me know," Lily said.

She wished she'd thought to warm her car up, as the icy wind whistled around her. Maybe she should just go home and stay there, curled up on her couch with a cup of hot lemon tea. Or she could just decide that life was going to be cold in Blizzard in the fall and winter and live her life. That seemed a better idea. She didn't know why she had to make that decision every single year, but it seemed she did.

Driving around while she waited for Stormy to drop Joan off, she looked over at the hills a few miles out of town. Right now, they were drab and bare, the green was gone, but there was no snow to frost their tops yet. Despite the weather, hot summers and bitter winters, she loved her little town and looked forward to raising her son to love it as much as she did. She never wanted to leave the area, her family was fifth generation here, and she loved everything about her small town and life. Except for the part where her kid left, of course.

A few minutes later, she pulled into the parking lot, saw Stormy's car already there and hurried into the Roll On In, smiling at the noise of pins crashing, the heat and the smell of rich smoky barbecue. Stormy and Cade sat in a booth across the room with another man, and her heart lurched as she recognized him immediately.

Mr. Wynter. Her husband's divorce lawyer.

He concentrated his practice on getting men, who he said got shorted out of their children, equal rights in a divorce and custody issue. Paternal rights, they were called. He was the one who got Jason such generous visitation, and had tried his best to get her child support lowered when Jason moved to California and received more visitation time.

She had no desire to sit and have a drink with the man, or to ever see him again. Stormy saw her, though, and motioned her over. This should be fun. He probably didn't remember her anyway. Another face in the crowd of his clients. She could be polite for a drink, plead a headache and go home. She didn't want to hurt Stormy's feelings so she would overcome her revulsion for a few minutes. She had no clue Cade and Mr. Wynter were friends. Shuddering slightly, she pasted a smile on her face and walked deliberately across the room. She'd put her kid on a plane this morning. She could sit next to the man, who all but put him on it, for a few minutes. She nibbled her thumbnail, but took it out of her mouth. She was strong, she could do this.

Stormy waved to the spot beside Mr. Wynter and Lily slid in. "Lily, this is Sam, he's Cade's best man, and Sam, this is Lily, she's my very good friend and in the wedding party. If Cara can't make it home for the wedding, she'll be my maid of honor."

"Nice to meet you," his voice sounded in her ears, just like she remembered it in her nightmares. Deep, strongly male and alpha. He never seemed to miss a step and was so self-assured. He looked different out of his power suit, dressed in jeans and a softly patterned sweater that emphasized his warm blue eyes. She remembered them much colder. His hair was even

adorably tousled instead of neatly combed to the side. Not adorably. What was she thinking? She'd had a stressful day, she reminded herself. It was throwing her judgement off, that was all. Nothing more. She started to chew on her thumbnail, but then stopped. No. He did not bother her.

Keeping her forced smile, she did not look at him as she said, "You too," then turned to Stormy and Cade. "Have you heard from Cara, recently?"

"She's back in the states," Cade said, about his little sister. "We're hoping she just shows up in the next few days." Cara was in the Navy and was stationed on one of the big ships in the middle of nowhere a lot. They never let her fly straight home, she had to debrief or whatever they called it before she was allowed to be on leave.

"We ordered for you," Stormy said to Lily. "And I think they just called our number. Come on, Cade, let's go get the food and let these two get acquainted."

They headed up to the bar, and Lily felt her heart hammering. She did not want to be here with this man, especially alone. "How do you know, Stormy?" he asked, obviously trying to make conversation.

Lily deliberately didn't look at him, the man who was one of the reasons her son wasn't here with her right now. Should she try to be nice? She'd be seeing him a few times in the next few weeks if he was Cade's best man: the rehearsal, the rehearsal dinner, then the wedding. She should. This was about Stormy, not her. She could do this.

"She gave me a job after my husband dumped me for another woman," she said. So much for being nice. Why was her heart hammering so hard? She'd done nothing wrong but her body felt as if she'd been hit with a two by four.

"She's a good friend then," he said, mildly. She felt his sharp look but still refused to look at him. She wished Cade and Stormy would get back, or she had something to do with her hands besides not chew her thumbnail.

"Yes, at a time when I felt everyone was out to get me, she was a rock," Lily managed to say with only mild heat. She needed to stop this. He obviously didn't remember her and all he had done was his job, anyway. It wasn't his fault he was so good at it.

"That sounds like a very hard time in your life," he said. "Divorce is horrible." His voice seemed surprisingly tender and she couldn't deal with it.

"So are divorce lawyers. I need to go. Tell Stormy I have a headache," she said, giving up. She could not do this, could not sit and eat with the man who all but took her kid away from her. The man who said in court, Jason and Brittany could give him a better home than she could, his own mother. No. It was asking too much of her. Sliding out of the booth, she felt his hand's burning heat on her arm and paused.

"I'm sorry," he said, softly, and she jerked away from him and rushed out the door into the frigid air. Fumbling for her keys, she set off the car alarm accidentally. Mortified, she couldn't figure out how to turn it off. Stupid, she scolded herself, as people all over the big lot stared at her. Yeah, no one thought her car was being stolen, they all thought she was an idiot. They were right. Finally, she got it shut off, though not before she unlocked the trunk and it flew open. Could this be any worse? She closed the trunk, figured out how to get the car unlocked without the alarm going off through her blinding tears, then slammed herself inside the car, as her hands shook so hard she couldn't put the key in the ignition.

Deep breath, she told herself. Deep slow breaths. She did not need to hyperventilate in the car in the bowling alley parking lot. Tyler would be back. That evil man didn't succeed any more than Jason had. He only had visitation. She had custody. Mr. Wynter, she refused to call

him Sam, had no power anymore. Finally, she got the car started, and sat there a few minutes while it warmed up and she tried to calm down. The threatened snow started to spit down, and she simply stared out the windshield, willing herself to calm down so she could drive home.

Her phone chirped and she snatched it up. Tyler's ring. "Hi, baby!" she said eagerly. Just what she needed. Thank goodness.

"Tyler's in the men's room. I thought I'd let you know we landed, and I have his phone. He doesn't really need one here, since either Britt, or I, or his Grandma will be with him all the time." Jason. Of course, he'd taken Tyler's phone.

"Give it back to him," she hissed. "I need to be able to talk to my son when I want to."

"Then call one of our cells and we will put him on. A five-year-old doesn't need a phone. You just need to know we landed safely and I'm taking my son home, where he belongs."

Lily stared at her phone. Call ended.

With that, she put her head down on the steering wheel and started sobbing. At least it was warming up in here.

Samuel Wynter stared into his glass. That didn't go well. He remembered her and her case. Hot shot doctor with a new trophy girlfriend and bored with the little stay at home wife. The divorce was simple and so was the custody agreement, until he remarried, moved to the west coast and wanted to take the boy with him. He could have easily won. He had the money to fight, but seemed to settle for a more than generous visitation schedule and even agreed to pay for the flights there and back each time. Sam was a huge proponent of father's rights and fought for them, but this small woman with her dark hair and pain filled eyes had haunted his dreams for months after. He had no issue with what happened or how the visitation was scheduled, the young boy had as much right to spend time with his dad as with his mom. Boys needed a father figure and his mother would be just fine.

He had ignored his dreams of her and her eyes. He was a practical man with no time for nonsense and neither took it or dished it out. But for some reason, hearing a car alarm go off in the parking lot, he felt a need to go check on her. He always followed his instincts, despite his practicality, so he got up and motioned to Cade, who was heading to the table with a tray of food, that he was going outside.

Looking around the large parking lot, he saw a car running with a figure inside, leaning against the steering wheel. Had to be her. Striding across the lot, he could see her shoulders shaking. Women and their tears. What good did crying accomplish? He never understood the concept but from past girlfriends knew it was something they apparently needed to do occasionally.

Opening the door to her unlocked car, he said gruffly, "Scoot over." Instead of complying the woman shrieked and shoved him. "Oh, calm down, I'm not going to steal your car," he said and moved her over, physically, while he climbed in. It was almost warm in here but not quite. Well, with their body heat it would warm up fast.

She hauled off and tried to hit him. He easily caught both her wrists in one hand while she screamed, "No!" in his face.

"Seriously? I just wanted to make sure you were okay." Instead of screaming more, she looked at him and then collapsed against him, sobbing as if her heart were broken. He let go of her wrists and patted her on the back.

"It's all your fault," she cried. "Yours. He won't even let him have his phone!"

Well, that sentence made no sense. "Hush," he said firmly. "Stop crying."

She cried harder and hammered on his chest with her small fists. Apparently, telling her to stop didn't work. Sighing, he decided to just let her cry herself out. No one could cry forever, and what else was he doing? Not eating a bacon cheeseburger and drinking an icy cold beer. Just hanging out here in the car and letting this petite female soak his coat. Hell, it wasn't like it was one of his hand tailored suits. Just a sweater that could take a little dampness.

He reached over with one hand and turned down the radio as she began to wind down. His legs were cramping and he needed to move the seat back. He shifted her onto his lap after he got the seat shoved completely back and for some reason she let him. He was used to people doing what he wanted, but felt pleased she did. Why? It made no sense. None of this did.

"Hush," he said again, even though her anguished sobs had died down to small little hiccup things. She sniffled and he wished he had a tissue.

"So. What's this about a phone?" he asked finally, as she sat docilely on his lap with her head against his chest. At least she'd stopped hammering on him, not that it hurt.

"Jason won't let my child have the phone I gave him to get in touch with me. He wouldn't even let him talk to me after he got off the plane and I promised him he could," she said with hitching breaths. "Tyler probably thinks I lied to him, and now I'm not even sure if he will be allowed to talk to me every night like we planned, or if Jason will even give him back or..." her voice trailed off. "And I shouldn't be telling you this. You're the enemy." She began struggling to get off his lap. "Get out of my car!"

"I'm not your enemy," he said, realizing she wasn't going to believe him and not quite sure why he was trying. He should just leave. She didn't mean anything to him. Why did he care? He took a deep breath and got a whiff of her hair. Lavender? He inhaled again.

"You are!" But suddenly, she wasn't fighting him. Instead her fists curled against him and she nestled, again, as if she belonged. Probably just a crash from the crying jag. He'd been with enough women to recognize the signs.

"I'm not the enemy," he repeated. "Your son is on a court mandated visitation with his biological father who loves him as much as you do." He felt her hitch into silent sobs, but kept on. "He will be home when the visitation is over. When is that?"

"Next year," she whimpered.

He tried to remember how old her kid was. That was a long time. Well, fathers went without seeing their kids for weeks often, too. She would learn to handle it. "Is there a house phone you can call? Do you let his father call every night and talk to your son when he's with you?" What was the kid's name? Tyler. That was right.

She pushed away from him and scrambled off him. "Get out of my car! This has nothing to do with you." She started crying again.

Tempted to haul her over his lap, and give her something to really cry about, he decided to do as she wanted. It was her car, her life, her kid and he was her ex's lawyer. He didn't need this in his life.

Silently, he got out of the car, and went back into the bowling alley to tell Cade and Stormy that Lily had a headache.

Lily drove home, shakily, giving up on grocery shopping tonight. She had bread and soup and felt like screaming and pulling her hair out. That wouldn't help any more than her mortifying meltdown in the car did. Why had she let him hold her on his lap and why did his arms feel so comforting and right and like... home? She shook her head and tried to put it behind her. She'd made a mistake and needed to get home, to her safe place. The world wasn't out to get her, she

reassured herself. Things would settle down and right themselves. This woman who had beat on a man, screamed in his face and sat on his lap wasn't who she was. She didn't behave like that, ever. She just needed to be home, put on her pink flannel pajamas and have a cup of hot cocoa. Or a drink. Sleet began hitting her windshield and she flipped her defroster and wipers on. It wasn't too far to home, safety and security. She'd make it just fine. Maybe she would get to talk to Tyler before he went to bed. She'd have to call and make nice with Brittany, because she knew they had no intention of letting Tyler call her. Her heart broke again, what must he be thinking? They had made plans to talk every single night, she'd looked forward to hearing about his day, and knew he was expecting her to do as she said. She'd never lied to him. She tried to not think of Tyler waiting for her calls. It was too hard.

Why had she let Mr. Wynter comfort her? There was no excuse for that and her face flamed as she thought about it. It had been so long since she had a man's strong arms around her, and it had felt so good and so right. So bad and so wrong. Shivering, she wondered why the only thing she wanted was to be in his arms again. Lily knew she had to get past this. She'd be seeing him again in a few weeks for Stormy's wedding festivities. By the time she saw him again, she'd be stronger, it would be two weeks closer to getting Tyler home and there would be no issue. He would have forgotten all about it and so would she.

With a sigh of relief, she pulled into her driveway and once again, was grateful for her garage and automatic door opener. Home. To her quiet empty home. Home alone.

You are being dramatic, she told herself, but then reminded herself there was no one around to care if she was or not. She could be all the drama queen she wanted to be. She didn't have to be at work until nine in the morning.

She glanced at the clock in the car as the garage door closed behind her. Seven. It seemed like midnight. She had fourteen hours before she had to be at work, and she planned to spend the next thirteen in bed well, maybe twelve. It would probably take her a little while to put the soup up. She loved a plan. Walking in the door, she locked it behind her and started stripping off her clothes before heading to her lovely, wonderful, cold and empty bedroom to put her cozy pajamas on. She plugged in her cell phone and made sure the ringer was turned all the way up. Then speed dialed Tyler's phone. No answer. "Hi, Tyler, I just wanted to tell you good night, and that I love you. Call me, okay?" Reluctantly she first called Jason's and then Brittany's and left messages on both since neither of them answered. "Hope things are going well. Have Tyler call me, please."

She knew the chances were slim to none she'd get a return phone call from him tonight. Wearily, she scooped soup into small containers for her lunches then put the crockpot in the sink to soak overnight. Right now, looking at it made her queasy. Who needed to eat?

At least she had the thoughts of Mr. Wynter's strong arms around her as she drifted off to sleep.

"Morning, Brenda," Lily said as she came in the back door. Excited about a ten-hour day today didn't begin to describe her mood. She wanted to be elbow deep in flowers and arrangements and customer demands and have no time to think about anything at all.

"Morning, Lily," her boss called from the cooler. "Unpacking the roses that just came in this morning."

"I'll start on the orders," she called back, shucking off her coat, stashing her lunch in the mini fridge, putting on her brightly colored smock and checking the daily to do list. Today was Tuesday and there were so many Thanksgiving arrangements to get out before tomorrow. She

felt a brief bit of guilt about taking yesterday off, but reminded herself no one was irreplaceable. It had been important to spend the morning with Tyler before he left.

The morning went swiftly as Lily forced herself to only think of work. The two new employees were doing well, and the delivery driver started taking out orders before ten. Lily almost felt calm for the first time in a few days when the door jingled as another customer walked in. "Welcome to Brenda's Flowers," she said brightly, tying up a bit of fall decor to the cornucopia she'd just filled. "Be right with you."

Looking up a minute later, she saw Mr. Wynter standing in front of her. "Hello, Lily," he said. Damn, the man was hot and damn, she needed to not think that. What had happened to her weeks of not seeing him? She felt cheated and her cheeks flamed as she said, as professionally as the butterflies in her belly let her, "Hello, Mr. Wynter. How can I help you today?"

He smiled at her, and she felt her stomach flip inside out. That was not a good thing to happen at work, no no no. Despite herself, she couldn't help but smile back. Only for a fleeting moment, and then she came to her senses. Professional, she reminded herself. She remembered what a fool she'd made of herself, sobbing in his arms last night. He probably thought she was an idiot and was checking to see if the crazy lady was alive. How did he know where she worked? Stormy probably told him. They probably had a good laugh at her expense last night.

"I'm needing to order a bouquet to send to a friend," he said. "Usually I order online, but am doing my best to support local businesses."

That pang was not jealousy of some random woman who could be snuggling in those strong arms, she told herself. It was excitement for new business. "We have an online ordering system, so you know for the future," she told him. "I'll give you the business card with the web address, but I'll be glad to help you with that order."

"Thank you," he said, and she felt a tingle as his hand brushed hers as she handed him the business card. "Traditional roses, whatever color you have fresh, baby's breath, you know, just make it look pretty."

"We can do that. Is this for you to take with you or for delivery?" Was he going to see this woman now? What was it to her? Nothing, that's what it was.

"I'll just take it, if you have a few minutes to make it up now?" He smiled again and her stomach did that weird thing it did when he was around.

"I can do that," she said, as her boss emerged from the cooler balancing a dozen peach roses already in a vase, while on one crutch. Lily hurried over to take them from her before she fell.

"Here you go, Lily," Brenda said, "all ready to go, just add the ribbon and card. Hello, Sam, haven't seen you since the Chamber meeting last month. Glad you came by."

"Hello, Brenda, yes, I took to heart your speech on supporting local businesses." He smiled at her and Lily took the opportunity to cut coordinating ribbon and make a bow on the vase, then added a bit more greenery while they chatted. "How's the foot?"

"Annoying." Brenda smiled. "But with Lily's help I'm managing."

"Would you like to write the card or would you like me to do that?" Lily asked him.

"Oh, you do it, I'm sure your penmanship is better than mine," he said.

She smiled at him again, wishing he would leave so she could get her emotions under control and stop this asinine physical reaction to him and his smile. Well, and his body. He took her kid away, she reminded herself. "What would you like it to say?" she asked as Brenda went back to the cooler to finish up.

"How about Happy Birthday, Sam?" he said.

“That’s easy enough,” she wrote it out, and put it in the card holder. “Someone special?” She took his proffered card and ran it through the register.

“Yes, someone very special,” he said, taking back his card and the receipt. Then before he took the vase, he reached his hand out. He wanted to shake hands? Why? Tentatively, she did though. Her hand felt swallowed up in his and her heart hammered again. This needed to stop, and yet she could feel the blush rise in her cheeks.

Grabbing the vase, he said, “It was very good to see you again, Lily. I hope you feel better and I’m certain we will run into each other again.”

So, she smiled and nodded, exactly why? Not certain of anything but relief when the bell tinkled behind him as he left, she sank to the small stool behind the register. Well, he certainly was a force of nature, wasn’t he? Shaking her head, she stood up, and went back to her to do list, trying to put all thoughts of Mr. Wynter and her reaction to him out of her head. She didn’t need another layer added to her already messy life salad.

Many long, fragrant hours later, she wearily took off her smock and called bye to Brenda who was still working. At least she was sitting on the stool doing computer work and resting her broken foot. The new girls had both gone home two hours ago and the delivery driver stopped at six. “See you in the morning! Don’t stay too late!”

“I won’t. You have a good evening, got any plans?”

“Grocery store, so I don’t have to go in the rush tomorrow, and pick up things for the salad I’m taking to Thanksgiving on Thursday. You have big plans?”

“Going to my daughter’s and she’s expecting about twenty, I think. You going to your mom and dad’s?” Brenda asked, as she pulled up another computer screen.

“No, they are both working. The bed and breakfast is full. We always do holidays on non-holidays with them. I’m going to Stormy’s mom’s house. It should be fun.” Without her child, her heart added silently.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, oh, Lily, look! We just got a huge order for tomorrow. Sam Wynter ordered ten arrangements to be delivered to his office staff. You must have made an impression on him this morning!” Brenda beamed at her, and Lily felt her stomach clench again.

“I’ll come in a little early, that’s a lot on top of what we already have,” Lily said, and left quickly. Why did he do that? It wasn’t to see her, even though that thought was very flattering and a little exciting. Because he ordered online and for delivery, he wouldn’t be seeing her. She had no clue what this meant. It meant nothing, she was certain.

Shivering in the cold, she drove to the brightly lit grocery store on the other side of town, hoping she’d stuck her list in her purse. She would make the salad tonight to take Thursday, because she had the feeling, she’d be working a long day tomorrow. Luckily, or not, Brenda’s was closed on Thanksgiving. If she were open, there would be that distraction. Going to Joan’s though, was good, it was a change from what she usually did with Tyler, and she needed that. Then Friday she would be back at work, they would do the holiday changeover and the Christmas season would begin and be crazy. By the time she collapsed after Christmas, it would only be a very short amount of time before Tyler came home. Until summer, she reminded herself. He would be gone for six weeks in the summer, too. Right now, however, she wasn’t going to think of that. She just needed to get through the next seven weeks. Forty-six more days. The countdown had begun.

Almost an hour later, she arrived at home, and let herself into the dark, chilly house. The store had been much busier than she’d anticipated, and she was more worn out than she thought she’d be, but she still wanted to get her salad made. It was better when left to sit a day.

Pulling out her cell phone, she saw no missed calls from Tyler or either one of the adults in charge. Looking at the clock, she realized it was a two-hour time difference, and still very early evening there, but decided to call anyway. No answer on Tyler's phone and she left a cheery message. Reluctantly she dialed Jason, and to her surprise he did answer. "Hello," she said. "Things going well?"

"Doing great and having fun," he said shortly.

"Any chance that Tyler is close by and I can talk to him a bit?" She hated having to beg to talk to her child.

"He and Brittany went to the store, she's buying him some new clothes for some events we will be attending. You didn't send anything appropriate," he said.

Why did she feel suddenly guilty? "I'm sorry, you must have forgotten to send me your itinerary."

Icy silence on his part. This would not get her a chance to talk to her son. "Have him call me when they get back, would you, please? I miss him." Would begging work?

"Now, you know how I feel when I go months without seeing him," and with that he clicked off.

Lily stared at her phone. Was it her fault he and the new Mrs. moved to California? No. It wasn't. He'd had generous visitation here that he often flaked on while he lived less than a half a mile away. But now he was father of the year? Or maybe he thought Brittany was the perfect mother. He probably wanted to give her that job full time.

Shaking it off, she realized she wasn't going to get to talk to Tyler for a while. But she would keep trying. It was all she could do. Heading to the kitchen, she started her salad, and crossed another day off her calendar. One day closer to picking up her son. She hoped. She had to decide on a plan to get through the holiday, Thursday. She would wear herself out, Lily decided. Get up early Thanksgiving morning: go to the gym, help cook and clean up while at Joan's, and hopefully sleep very well that evening with a stomach full of turkey and pie. All, without worrying about Tyler, or the thought of Mr. Wynter's arms wrapped around her. Turkey was supposed to help you sleep and it was a great substitute for her kid or a man. Yes, it was. That was her plan and she was sticking to it.

Sam woke up and stared at the ceiling. He hadn't slept well last night, thinking too much. Today was Thanksgiving, and a rare four-day weekend for him and his office staff. He hoped they enjoyed it, because they worked long hard hours and deserved every day off they got. He had a few hours to kill before he went to Cade's for a holiday dinner. He needed to remember to call his dad later and see how he was doing down in Florida. Half wishing, he had accepted his invitation to fly down for the holiday, he decided to make plane reservations for Christmas. He hadn't seen the old man in over a year now and it was time. Plus, December in Florida would be much warmer than December in Blizzard.

Deciding to go to the gym and work off the calories he expected to consume later, he thought he should check and make sure they were open. He usually didn't go early in the morning, preferring late afternoon or evening to work off the day's stress, but why not? He planned to eat extra pie today. Flipping through his tablet, he double checked that they were open, despite the holiday, and got dressed.

Arriving at the gym about fifteen minutes later, he saw very few cars in the lot. Usually it was packed when he arrived in the evenings. Maybe this was the time to come. Grabbing his

gym bag, he went in and smiled at the unfamiliar face at the desk while he checked in. Looked like he'd have his pick of equipment this morning.

There were a few men on the weight machines and one very strong looking woman. One woman on the treadmill and he went over to warm up on a different one before he started working out. Walking behind her, he noticed a nice ass and great legs in those shorts. Lots of dark hair pulled up in a ponytail. Picking a machine three over from hers, he started with a slow walk, then looked over at her. Lily. What were the odds?

She had ear buds in and was looking straight ahead, he wasn't certain if she had seen him or not. Starting out at a slow walk, Sam thought about the feel of her in his arms, sobbing as if her heart would break. His protective male instinct had come out for her as it hadn't for years. His practice was almost all father's custody rights during and after a divorce. He had many clients coming in from bigger towns for his specialty services. He had done the right thing for his client and their child during their custody battle. They'd been divorced over a year, Jason had remarried and he and his new wife had moved to California. He'd looked up the details of the case after he'd seen Lily, just out of curiosity.

He'd done the best to keep the father in the child's life, giving him visitation for a few weeks over the holidays, and then most of the summer. There had been a provision that they would revisit the custody agreement when the little boy started school full time. That would be next summer more than likely.

He saw another man come in and pick a machine right next to Lily. Were they friends? It didn't matter, he told himself as he saw them strike up a conversation. He picked up the speed on the treadmill and focused on his heart rate. Seemed too high for normal. It had nothing to do with the cute butt, long legs and dark hair bouncing around delicate shoulders. Or did it? A few minutes later, he slowed the machine down to head to the weights. He noticed Lily had gone from the treadmill to the free weights. For a little thing, she seemed surprisingly strong. He walked over and smiled at her, noting she seemed startled to see him. "Need a spotter?" he asked.

"I've never seen you here before," she said.

"I usually come at night, but thought I'd work some calories off before the big meal later," he said. "You doing the same?"

"Yeah, that and a little stress." She looked like she wanted to bite her tongue.

Sam didn't smile. "I'm sorry if you think I'm part of the cause of that."

"Hard not to," she said, shortly. She gave him an excellent withering glare. She had a face meant to smile, though. She looked adorable in her little shorts and t-shirt. He realized he'd only seen her dressed up before. Court and work clothes. He liked this casual look, but not the stress wrinkle between her eyes.

"I'll leave you alone and let you work off your stress," he thought about adding a Happy Thanksgiving but decided silence was the better idea. She probably wasn't having a happy Thanksgiving, but he hoped her son was. Getting to see the dad he rarely got to see and spend quality time with him.

"They still haven't let me talk to him, and it's been five days," she said very softly. He turned back to her.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I doubt that sincerely."

This time he left. His presence was upsetting her and he didn't want to do that. He'd apparently already upset her enough, and he felt a little badly about that. Reminding himself all

he did was the job his client paid him to do, he squared his shoulders and headed to the showers. The least he could do was leave her in peace. He hoped she'd have a good day full of family and friends. He was, and tried to focus on that. He had a few bottles of wine to take, and his infamous chocolate bourbon pecan pie, per his hostess' request. His day would be relaxing and fun, and he'd head home to change and arrive scandalously early to help in the kitchen.