

Cherish checked out the man who dropped onto a stool next to her, and tuned out his conversation with Leo. His golden brown hair was in need of a trim, but the shaggy around his ears and above his collar at the back of his neck softened his rugged features.

“I haven’t seen you at the beach lately, Grayson. The water is actually warm, for Lake Michigan.”

“I’m not twenty-two anymore, you know? I have to make a living.”

“Hey, so do I, dude. What do you call bartending?” Leo laughed.

“It looked more like flirting just a minute ago. How about that beer?”

“Sure.”

The man faced Cherish and her thoughts vaporized. His crystal-blue eyes glinted clear and direct. “Leo is harmless, but sometimes he comes on strong,” he said.

Words stuck in her throat. He’d caught her staring at his profile, sizing up the strong, straight sweep of his nose, his solid jawline. His voice was low and richly baritone. The sound of it drifted through her like a rolling, deep wave. “I wasn’t offended. He’s young. I take it you know him well.”

The corners of his eyes crinkled and his smile lit his face. “I’m a regular customer.”

“Oh, you’re an alcoholic?” His statement demanded teasing, and his open demeanor made saying it easy.

He thanked Leo for the beer and took a slow series of gulps of his pale ale. Cherish watched, unabashed, and marveled. She was engaging in a casual conversation with a strange man, free of strain, defensiveness, and annoyance.

“You’re a funny girl, I see. No, I am not a heavy drinker. I just like this place. I’m a local small business owner and I want to support other independents.”

She didn't want to know anything more about him. By tomorrow, she'd be married. "My name is Cherish." She offered a handshake.

"Nice to meet you." He took her hand and held it without shaking. "I'm Grayson Steele, but everyone calls me Gray."

His hand enclosed hers in warmth, but she shivered. "You don't really want to get to know me. I'm a mess. I'm a workaholic just like my parents, and I don't like pepper." She put her fingers to her temples. "My temper is presently combustible, and I'm afraid I'm making some big mistakes with my life."

She glanced down, noticing he still held her hand. She lifted her gaze to find his expression calm, thoughtful.

She pulled her hand away. "I'm sorry, I just spilled my anxiety all over you, and I don't even know you."