

Chapter 1

It was all she could focus on – and feel – as she followed the swift movements of his hands. He had big hands. Big, strong hands. Her mind ventured off in tantalizing delight as she began to imagine how they would feel on her skin. The thought made her shiver.

He handed her the coffee cup without as much as a glance up in her direction. She reached out and took it carefully, not letting their fingers touch. Who knew what might happen if they touched? She couldn't risk it; as it was, he was killing her just by existing.

“Tall, black,” he said distractedly to her, and gave her the change. “Careful, it's pretty hot.”

She smiled. Tall—she always ordered tall. That way she could spend more time there pretending not to watch him.

“Thanks, that's how I like it.”

She took the coffee and made her way to her usual table. She positioned herself at the perfect spot where she knew she could watch him without being too obvious, and opened her laptop.

It had been a month since she had moved to New York City. The place she rented wasn't her first choice, but it was cheap and would have to do until she could afford better. Her apartment was on the fourth floor of Earle's Coffee Shop's building. Lucky for her, it made it quite easy to see him every day. A legitimate excuse...after all a girl needed her coffee every day, right?

She had first seen him the night after she moved in. Having nothing to eat, she had found herself downstairs in front of the closed coffee shop. She had stood there for what seemed like an eternity, and watched him sweep the floor. It may

have been a bit stalker-ish, but she wasn't a stalker. She was intrigued and he was beautiful.

She was twenty-four years old, for God's sake. She had seen shirtless men before. She had seen plenty of naked guys in college, but none of them had prepared her for the way *he* looked. He...impacted her. She had found herself trembling as she watched the way his muscles moved, sculpted and perfected. And the way the sweat trickled down his chest. Yummy! Anyway, she'd completely forgotten about food at that moment and ran back upstairs on wobbly knees.

She had become addicted to watching him over the past few weeks. She knew it was weird, but there was just something about him she couldn't resist. And she didn't want to. It was more than him being good looking, she was sure of it. It was terrifying to even think that, but she was starting to believe that he *was* the need. Good lord, maybe she *was* a stalker.

But at that moment, as she struggled to peruse another uninteresting article, she kept sneaking a glance at him. One day, she thought. One day she was going to either stop watching or finally do something extremely brave—or extremely stupid. One day.

“So, Turner, are you still refusing to make a move?”

Joe Turner turned his death glare to Martin Valenzuela. Could his day get any worse? The guy was a complete jackass, but Joe had to bite his lip and stop himself from snapping at him.

Joe had inherited the shop from his uncle, who had been army buddies with Martin's late father. He'd given the jerk a job when he was a teenager, kind of felt like he owed him it. Martin's father had died in the line of duty while saving Joe's uncle's life. But now...he was nothing more than a twenty-five year old lazy bum

still working there, and Joe just couldn't find it in his heart to fire him. He sure liked to think about it, though.

“What are you talking about, Martin?”

“The chick at the table, she's hot!” Martin said with a grin that Joe wanted to smack off his face.

He looked over to the corner table where she always sat, and let himself *see* her. Her hair was wild, wavy and falling around her face. She was small. And delicate. Yes, he knew she had delicate hands, he had delivered her coffee for long enough to notice that.

He watched as her hand reached up to push a strand of hair behind her ear, and then her eyes connected with his. They stared at each other for a brief moment.

Time stopped, and he froze where he stood, unable to look away. She had hazel eyes. Long eyelashes. Full, luscious lips. Then time started up again when she lowered her head to her laptop, letting her hair cover her beautiful face again. But he was sure he saw a blush. She looked beautiful when she blushed.

Joe jerked away in disgust when Martin put his arm over his shoulder. “She wants you,” he stated.

“Don't be stupid,” Joe muttered as he arranged the cups, although they did not need it.

“Hey, you know, I can get lucky if you're not interested.”

Joe saw Martin smirk at his obvious discomfort, and shook his head. The guy was just clueless.

Sandrine walked down the crowded street, bouncing like Mary Tyler Moore did walking down that Minneapolis street in the opening credits of her show. She was entranced by the twinkling lights shining everywhere. It was funny to watch so

many people get all flustered over a holiday. They were buying presents, trees, and food in a last minute effort to make Christmas perfect for their families.

She thought of how much effort went into what ended up being waste. No one was going to use those presents, and half the food was going to be thrown away. Trees were going to die, and the sweet panic of another past Christmas would be locked away in people's memories in a couple of days.

But not hers.

She didn't have a family to share Christmas with anymore. She didn't have anyone to buy presents for. Most of the time she enjoyed living alone, and not having to explain her every action to anyone. Freedom. It felt good. Powerful. But sometimes she was just plain lonely. Sometimes she just needed someone else's warmth.

Stopping in front of a red and white window display, she thought about buying a tree for her apartment. It could make her feel a little more in the Christmas spirit. Maybe. But seeing the ridiculous prices, she quickly changed her mind. She couldn't chance starving just to make herself feel up to singing Jingle Bells. She looked up at the sky when she felt the first drop of a downpour. She took off hurriedly toward home.

By the time Sandine entered the coffee shop she was soaking wet, water dripping from her wavy, curly hair. The only thing worse than a lonely Christmas was a rainy Christmas. This was New York. Wasn't it supposed to be snowing? Taking off her coat, she sat at the counter with the dream of a holiday hot chocolate that day. She usually never sat at the counter. It was too close. Watching from a distance was okay, but being close enough to touch was dangerous. She had started to confuse reality with fantasy a long time ago when it came to him. She needed to believe she was still sane, and losing control and even hinting to him that she wanted to kiss him badly would make that really hard.

At that moment, cold and wet, all she could think about was drinking something hot, and doing it fast. The stools at the counter were much closer to the hot liquids she knew were hiding back there, ready to warm her. That was her motive—only that!

Her eyes darted over to the other guy who was always behind the counter and reached out for his arm. “Can I have a hot chocolate, piping hot, please?”

Martin smirked at the girl and thought about how he’d like to warm her up. He just stood there and smiled.

“Hot chocolate, please,” she said, looking at him with mild curiosity.

“Of course.” He grabbed the least stained mug and filled it up with some hot chocolate, and then slid it over. “Here you go.”

She grabbed the cup and wrapped her hands around its warmth, and brought it up to her nose and took a deep whiff of it. It smelled great, and it tasted even better.

After she finished her first cup, she noticed the guy who had served her leaning against the wall, watching her. She raised her eyebrow questioningly at him. What the hell was his problem?

“Martin Valenzuela,” he said, extending his hand to her.

She hesitated for a moment, but decided to be nice. It was two days before Christmas after all. “Sandrine Ross. Nice to meet you.”

“So, Ms. Ross,” Martin said slyly, leaning over the counter toward her. “Do you live close to here? I always see you around.”

“I do actually,” Sandrine stated, already sorry that she had decided to play nice with this guy. She had a bad vibe about him.

“You always come alone and I think that’s such a shame. A beautiful woman like you...it’s hard to believe you’re alone.” He stared into her eyes. “Hey, what color are your eyes?”

Martin's words were cut short with the sound of a banging door. Joe placed one firm hand on his shoulder, and pulled him slightly back, away from Sandrine. "Martin, you can leave now, I can handle the rest."

Sandrine's heart fluttered in her chest, and her body started to throb all over with the knowledge that he was so close. She wanted to close her eyes, and just listen to his voice. She was sure it would be enough to carry her over the edge all by itself, but his face so close was too much of a temptation.

Martin mumbled a silent goodbye, and headed out. She wasn't that hot anyway. Definitely not hot enough to get beaten up by the big bad Turner. That guy had problems... and muscles.

Joe kept his hands busy and his eyes away from the only customer in the shop. She was staring at him, and he sensed it. Her eyes were wide and her expression...shocked, maybe? It was starting to get to him.

He stopped in front of her, and sighed in exasperation. Meeting her eyes dead on, he tried to keep his *back off* glare. She ducked her head and blushed. Damn, she looked so hot when she blushed.

Her mocha brown skin was now staining red around her cheeks. She began twirling her wavy hair around her head and pinning it with something she used her teeth to open. He gulped when his eyes traveled down, and her cleavage entered his view. He tried to push away the pictures of her naked breasts from his mind. Not good. Undressing customers was so not good.

Her eyes met his, and her lashes fluttered before moving back to the contents of her empty cup. Joe felt trapped. Even though he knew she had no idea what he had been thinking about, he was embarrassed at getting caught like that. He probably had "guilty" written all over his face.

She wet her lips, gathering the courage to talk without squeaking. Her mind screamed *too close* as she found herself moving fast away from reality. It was just two words she needed to say, but it took all her strength to get them out.

“Thank you,” she said with the softest, most melodic voice he’d ever heard. His brow creased for a moment as he tried to figure out what she was talking about. He hadn’t served her, and he hadn’t talked to her.

He nodded once, terrified of saying something stupid if he spoke.

Pushing the cup away, she stood up abruptly. That wasn’t good. She had started to think about how he would smell, and pictured herself burying her face in his neck. That couldn’t be good. She had to get out before she embarrassed herself.

With a small smile that made his stomach muscles clench and flutter, she covered her head with her coat and ran outside into the pouring rain. When she was out of his sight he took a deep breath and went back to work, his mind starting to create pictures of her he knew he wouldn’t be able to shake off.

