
Chapter 1

Chandler Laureltree

"So. You admit that you lied."

I exhaled heavily out of my mouth, wisps of my shoulder length, razor cut blonde hair flying around in front of my face before settling over my eyes and cheeks again. The rain continued to pour outside of the large window I stood facing, making everything in a normally serene landscape seem gray and grim.

Just like the moment.

"I admit nothing," I finally sighed, tired of what I could only call harping by my insanely masculine, sexy boyfriend. I mean, truly, I didn't believe in beating dead horses.

An exasperated sigh blew out behind me, followed by the sound of big boots pacing on a hardwood floor. I dug my bare toes into the softness and warmth of the pin striped area rug as I waited for him to relax. He was a man who needed a patient woman. I could be patient for this handsome, brilliant cowboy because I also didn't believe in looking a gift horse in the mouth.

Basically, any horse proverb applied to my situation.

"I seem to remember a little tow-headed angel telling me that she didn't have time to get married because she worked too hard helping *other* people get married."

Ah, and the argument continues. True, I'd said as much. And true, I didn't have a spare moment, especially during a particularly warm Wyoming summer. Perfect. Wedding. Season. My pupils had practically transformed into dollar signs.

But, marriage? For me? It was so final. So permanent. I'd watched it run my father off and turn my mother into a worthless drunk. I'd seen it turn highly educated, sweet-as-pie women into monsters, dependable men into absolute disasters, and worst of all? I'd been on the receiving end of what it did to a couple's bank account. Well, best of all from *my* wedding-planner-point-of-view.

"You foolin' around on me, cowboy?" I asked, looking over my shoulder with a smile. I knew that I was the little tow-headed angel to which he was referring, but I couldn't help but try to lighten the moment. What could I say? Half of my duties as a wedding planner involved diffusing insanely intense situations. The smile quickly faded when I found Drake staring down at me, brown hair pointing in a hundred different directions as he ran his hands through it, a hurt look in his dark eyes.

Oh shit. When he'd asked if I wanted to talk about long term arrangements like moving in and commitment and ring shopping, well, my head just went to that place—that panic place. I'd been casually chatting with him while we sipped on a beer and watched the storm roll over the plains. Blake and West came up, perfectly normal since they lived in the house full time with Drake and with me on my off days between weddings, and I'd mentioned, *casually*, that they looked so in love and that it made me a little curious.

Drake had said that he thought I was going to say happy, or jealous, but when he asked about curious, I told him I knew what

had happened after the July fourth incident. Fireworks, a small brush fire, nothing to bring out the entire volunteer fire department, but enough to get cute Blake into big trouble with West. However, unlike that last time—when I'd been involved—he didn't do or say anything demeaning to her around me.

I'd heard them. Accidentally, but I heard them as I was frantically running around on the dark lawn outside with my phone held high above my head, trying to get a signal so I wouldn't be disconnected from my flower guy in Rapid Springs.

"You scared me so much, sweetheart. God, you could have hurt someone...or yourself. What would I do without you?"

"I'm so sorry, West. I didn't think about the dead brush. I didn't want—"

"I know, Blake. I'm just glad you're okay."

Kissing sounds. Solicitous moaning.

"Thank you for not yelling at me in front of everyone. And I'm sorry I caused a brush fire."

"Hey. Hey, sweetheart, you know I don't want to hurt you."

"You don't wanna embarrass me, but I think you do want to hurt me."

A manly chuckle.

"Well, what did I say?"

"That I needed to learn not to use fireworks during a county-wide burn ban."

"And if you'd asked me, instead of sneaking around, I would have told you."

"I know."

"And what else did I say?"

"Don't make me say it."

"Blake."

"Ugh, fine. I have to...every night..."

Another chuckle.

"I didn't catch that, sweetness."

"Jesus. Okay, I have to get a...spanking every night this week."

"That's right. Followed by vigorous lovemaking."

"Can't we just skip to that part?"

"Absolutely not, you bad little girl."

I had been a little taken aback. I mean, sure, Drake and I certainly engaged in some of the fun stuff, but that had seemed like a real punishment, and my impression of Blake had been that she wasn't into that sort of thing. She was a debutante, and I mean that in the nicest way possible. She wasn't a crazy kinky skanky kind of girl. To my surprise and curiosity, though, every morning they were absolutely all over each other. She sat in his lap, and he treated her so tenderly and lovingly, no resentment at all.

Honestly, it just made me curious.

So, when Drake and I had talked about it and he'd told me that people who were in love and about to get married certainly acted that way, he tried to segue into talking about *us*. Long term. Forever.

To which I candidly and callously replied that I wouldn't ever be getting married because after all I'd seen, I didn't necessarily believe in forever.

"So, which is it?" Drake asked, rain falling in sheets against the window pane behind me. The room was dark except for a small fire in his enormous fireplace, so the shadows across his face and tall frame weren't exactly comforting.

"Hm?" I asked, playing innocent as I picked up my beer and took a sip.

He stepped forward and pinned me with a look. That look that says I'd better get with the program. He didn't scare me. He excited me. I just wasn't certain how much further beyond that my feelings went.

"Easy, my little angel, I'm not proposing here," he said,

folding his arms over his chest in an authoritative way. "We have plenty of time for that. We'll discuss it soon, but we have plenty of time. What I'm asking is for you to tell me what I'm supposed to believe. Are you too busy to get seriously involved with a man or are you too afraid?"

"Who said anything about afraid?" I snapped, stepping forward and glaring up at him. This was one of those moments that I wished I had my six-inch platforms on so my eyes would at least be at his chin instead of his chest.

"Is your time too monopolized by work, or is your head too preoccupied with doubt?"

My mouth fell open as I looked up at his handsome face, piercing right through every defense I'd ever put up and stripping me bare. How in the hell did he do that?

"I-it's not—"

"So, admit it. You lied to me," he said in a softer voice, crowding me back against the icy blue walls of his bedroom. He smelled so good and he looked even better. My underwear was becoming a lost cause. And yet, I still tried to defend myself.

"N-no..."

"Too busy or too frightened?"

"It's not that simple..."

He folded his arms again and waited with a silent stare. The kind that made me want to blurt the truth. The kind that made me want to crawl into his arms and cry into his shoulder.

And that terrified me.

"If you knew what my childhood was like, you'd understand why I won't marry anyone!" I yelled, feeling my ears and neck heat. I was angry and insulted and nervous, so much that I failed to notice the small smirk of victory spread across his face.

"You didn't say *can't*. You said won't, so that just leads me to the conclusion that you do, in fact, have time for a serious relationship that could lead to marriage."

I stared up at him, loving and hating his smart-Stanford-boy

act that I'd become familiar with over the last few months. It was just—his way. He'd been in New York for so long working with other smart people that his language just reflected knowledge. Admittedly, it could be intimidating. Like when I was in trouble.

"Well, then I am led to the conclusion that you, in fact, are a shitstick for trying to pressure me into something that I've told you clearly and in very small, easy to understand words, that I don't want!"

I got the eyebrow quirk. You know how it goes. Jaw set, arms crossed, lips tight, and the only movement you detect is one little lift of that eyebrow. It was very powerful.

"Okay," I sighed, holding up my hands and refocusing. I'd been harsh. Time to back pedal a little. "We're in a committed relationship. I am committed to you, Drake. That's...that's all I can give you."

Strong arms wrapped around me and my face pressed into a hard chest. He rubbed my back and cupped his hand around the back of my head, something I never knew I could like so much. I quickly wrapped my arms around his waist and squeezed, inhaling his manly scent of leather and pine and—man.

"My little angel, you've given me everything," he simply stated, still holding me. "You've given me more than I ever hoped to get. More than I deserve."

"Drake," I whispered, hating that the idea that he was unworthy had even entered his brilliant brain. I looked up at him and found him grinning adoringly down at me. His hands cupped my cheeks, his thumbs ran along my cheekbones, and I wouldn't have even dreamed of looking away from his dark eyes, but then he spoke.

"We are committed to each other. That's not what's in question. The issue at hand is more of an elemental sin. And certainly, very naughty of my little angel."

"Huh?" I asked, unable to back away as his hands held my face and the wall kept me pinned.

"You lied to me. And I do *not* like being lied to. By anyone, but especially not you. We need honesty between us. Don't you think?" he asked, lowering his hands, and taking a step back. He was really asking. He wanted to define our relationship.

Holy Mother, what a day. Up until then, our relationship had been phone calls, texting, helicopter rides, crazy sex, and lots of excitement. I knew how I wanted this to go, though.

"That's what I want, too." I nodded, smiling, and looking down at my toes. Wow, would we say the 'L' word next? I'd never said it to anyone but at that moment, I was seriously thinking that if I could say it to anyone, it would be Drake Hamilton.

Then, of course, he continued.

"Good, because naughty little angels who lie to me go over my lap for a hard spanking. Every time."

My mouth went dry as my head jerked up and my hair fell over my eyes. I slowly brushed it to the side as I looked up at him and his dead serious face.

"Excuse me?" I choked, unable to find any other words. He couldn't possibly be serious. I wasn't seven.

He calmly placed a hand on either side of my head, leaning against the wall behind me, so close his breath blew in my face. Minty.

"That's how this is going to work."

"Says who?" I huffed, unable to stifle a nervous laugh.

His head dipped down, and suddenly, his hot breath and low voice rumbled in my ear, making all of the hair on my body stand up. "Drake, your boyfriend who cares a great deal about you."

For some reason, that got me really hot, and I would've done almost anything he said after that. Almost.

"I'm sorry, Drake, I shouldn't have...I should've told you about the real reason behind the marriage thing."

"I'm not going to pressure you. Okay?" He grinned, kissing

my jaw and neck so tenderly. "If we get there, and I kind of think we will, I want it to happen organically."

"Yes," I breathed, and my eyes closed as he gently touched his moistened lips to my ear. His hands trailed down his Stanford shirt I had on and paused at the hem then ran up my thighs to rest on the black Hanky-Pankys I was wearing.

"And I think you know," he continued between kisses, "that you're going to get spanked sometimes."

In my head, that declaration had been like a bucket of cold ice water. I huffed and pushed back into the wall with my hands pressing against his chest. But, naturally, there was the matter of my body and its downright betrayal.

My stomach swirled. Yes, it was exciting to hear him say that. His control? My loss of it? I didn't know. Wasn't I supposed to be a modern, self-sufficient woman?

"Chandler," he muttered, running his finger along my embarrassingly wet underwear. "My angel, this is how it is between us. Would you want it any differently?"

"We aren't West and Blake!" I argued, feeling my neck and ears flush. I was flustered and feeling a little lost.

Drake's arms wrapped around me as he leaned down, squeezing me to him. I fought for half a second before melting into him and letting him hold me. When he lifted me up and sat back on the gray tufted sofa in front of the fireplace, I broke into tears. Who knows why. I just felt so safe with him.

"You feel safe with me, right?"

I smiled up at him and knuckled away a tear, so comfy in his strong hold. "I was just thinking that."

"But you also think that feeling safe is at odds with me wanting to hurt you."

"Well, yes." Nail. Head. He'd hit it.

"You know I would never hurt you," he softly said, holding my back and the back of my head as he looked right into me.

"You wanna hit me. For real," I whispered, feeling a little ashamed for some reason.

"I want to spank you when you misbehave. Get your backside a dark shade of pink so that you learn a lesson. That's all. Well, I'll probably make you come at least twice afterwards. Then that will be all."

"So, what, it's for me to learn a lesson—and for your amusement?" I frowned, leaning back.

"I won't hate it; I'm not gonna lie," he sighed, holding me still as I tried to push back off of his lap to get some distance between us. "And judging from that heat radiating off of your little body, you won't hate it, either."

My mouth dropped open. Christ, he was astute. I certainly didn't want to congratulate him by telling him he was right, though.

"I...when we're just playing around, maybe, sure, but..."

"Angel." He grinned, leaning in for a kiss and frowning as I pushed hard against his chest and fell back against the couch cushions.

"I'm not going to allow that, Drake," I stated loud and clear, standing to give the words a more genuine feel. "That's not the kind of relationship I want."

He quirked his eyebrow again. Damn it. Did that mean anger? Was he just thinking? Giving me a chance to cower away? But I couldn't back down. Not on this point.

"I think you're lying again, Chandler," he said, standing and staring down at me, hands on his hips. "But we'll discuss it and you can decide later whether or not you want to be with me."

My heart jumped when he said that. Did he really think I didn't want to be with him? Was it such an important issue?

The questions in my head stopped as he grabbed my arm and pulled me into him, giving me a look that I'd never seen before.

"Regardless, my naughty little angel, you're getting a spanking. Now."

I squealed as he fell back to the couch and pulled me with him, my body crashing down on his hard, jean covered legs.

He was going to go through with it. My question as to what I meant to him felt asked and answered.

He really was a shitstick.