

Chapter One

“Who is Big Red anyway?” Landon angled his chin toward the tall strawberry blonde standing with her volleyball teammates on the other side of the sports bar.

Boomer laughed as he swung his arm across the back of the booth. “You mean the girl who just kicked your ass?”

“She must have played in college somewhere.” No girl had ever gone toe-to-toe with Landon at the net like she had. Hell, no guy had ever done that.

He took a pull from his longneck beer and studied her. She had to be six feet tall. Maybe even six one. And she wore it proudly—an athlete whose height had served her well. Worn orange kneepads hung at her ankles like badges of honor from victories of the past.

“You think she played at Florida State?” Boomer asked.

Landon shook his head. “I’d have met her at an athletic banquet or something.” After all, Tallahassee had been his town for the last six years. He’d pretty much owned it since earning the starting quarterback position his sophomore year. And even though he’d been out of college for two years now, this town worshiped its football players in perpetuity.

Yes, he’d definitely have noticed her.

“And someone would have recruited her onto their team a long time ago,” Boomer said.

Landon nodded in agreement as he watched her across the bar. She tugged at the bottom of her bright red shirt—a jersey that had undoubtedly belonged to a smaller player the previous season. Landon’s gaze slid from the fabric pulled tight over her breasts to the hint of skin that peeked out above the waistband of her shorts.

Ricardo slid into the booth seat beside him, jarring his attention back to their table.

“You up for some hoops on Saturday?” his friend asked before breaking into a sarcastic grin. “Or are you going to practice your spikes instead?”

Ricardo and Boomer bumped fists, a little too happy that Landon may have met his athletic match.

He drilled them both with a glare. "Can't. I'm helping Imelda move."

"Imelda?"

"The lady who sweeps the gym. She's moving to a new apartment."

"Since when are you tight with the cleaning crew?"

"I talk to her sometimes. Her husband had back surgery last week and she was telling me how they had to get a new place." Landon paused before he took another swig of beer. "I told her you two would help."

Boomer grunted and looked toward Ricardo. "He didn't really tell her that. He's just pissed 'cause the tall girl made him look bad."

Ricardo chuckled. "Let's hope she doesn't play rec football in the fall. I'd hate for her to make him look bad there, too."

"My place," Landon said. "Saturday morning at nine o'clock." He pushed Ricardo over towards the edge of the booth. "Now let me out."

Ricardo complied. "Where are you going?"

Landon inclined his head to indicate the group across the room. "To talk to the competition."

He watched her as he ordered a couple of beers at the scarred wooden bar. She stood near the rest of her team, talking with a couple of the girls and the stocky guy with the knee brace. Like everyone else on their teams, she'd come straight from the gym. He liked the camaraderie. Reminded him how most of the players used to hang out together during his football days.

He paid the bartender and headed Red's way with the beers, trying to remember the last time he'd found a girl this interesting.

"Trying to forget your loss?" one of her teammates teased as Landon approached their group with two bottles in his hands.

“A peace offering,” he said. “For the new girl.” The redhead’s eyebrows rose as he handed her the beer, the same brand he’d seen her drinking from across the room.

“You didn’t buy me a drink when I was new,” the stocky guy said. “But I guess I’m not your type.”

The team hooted with laughter, though they scooted away and gave him some space. He clinked the neck of his bottle against the one he’d just handed her. “Good game tonight.”

“Thanks. They should have warned me the other team had some height.” She grinned. He’d noticed her great smile from across the court earlier, but it was even better now that it was focused only on him.

“I’m Landon.” He offered a handshake. “Landon Vista.”

“Sounds like a subdivision,” she teased as she placed her hand in his. “Gina Blanchard.”

She had a firm grip, but with a softness that made him want to hold it longer. Her eyes locked on his long enough for him to know that she, too, was intrigued.

He liked her confidence. The way she stood her ground. “You’ve played a game or two of volleyball before.”

“University of Tennessee.” She slid her hand away, her fingertips lingering on his. “And you played football at FSU.”

Ahhh, so she did know who he was. He normally disliked his regional celebrity and the people who’d fawned over him during his playing days. And since that time, those pitying looks that implied he should have done more with his football talent. But in this case, the notoriety seemed to be working in his favor.

“You a Seminoles fan?” The garnet and gold of the Florida State Seminoles blanketed this college town, which pretty much made him a hero to the local fans, whether he liked it or not.

Her ponytail floated in a gentle swish behind her as she shook her head. “Just here for the summer. An internship at a local nonprofit. For law school.”

Stacked and smart. “We come here after every game. Kind of a tradition.”

She looked around the dimly lit bar where patrons in their twenties and early thirties moved from table to table greeting friends. “It’s cool how everybody knows each other.”

“Some grew up in Tallahassee,” he said. “Some came for college and never left.” He’d always liked the small-town feel of the place. “Seminoles blood gets in your veins.”

“That must make you a pretty important guy around here.” She gave him a teasing grin as she raised the beer to her lips.

“Yeah, I used to be a real player. ’Til some girl started blocking all my shots in volleyball.”

She laughed. “My mom used to tell me to take it easy on the boys on the playground.”

The chorus of a country song bellowed from the jukebox. Several people in the crowd joined in. Landon moved closer to talk over the music. She was tall, but he still had three or four inches on her. A chubby man with a pool cue passed behind her, pressing her toward Landon. Her breast grazed his arm.

He tried to ignore the frisson of awareness that sizzled between them. That one touch gave him the urge to pull her closer. To see if her skin felt as soft as it looked. “Doesn’t seem like you listened very well,” he said.

“At least not in volleyball.” She gave him a flirtatious smile. “But it doesn’t seem to have scared you off.”

He chuckled. He liked a woman who would challenge him. A woman whose brains were as attractive as her body.

“And what did your mom teach you growing up?” she asked.

He sucked in a breath. A jagged memory, like a shard of broken glass, lanced through his brain. The picture of a country store flashed through his mind—his mother’s body bent over the counter, her white thrift-store tennis shoes soaked in blood. That picture he couldn’t shake, no matter how many years had passed. He

groped for something else to talk about. Luckily, the crowd started to sing along with “Sweet Home Alabama,” which gave him an opportunity to change the subject.

“It’s kind of noisy in here.” He glanced through the windows toward the outside deck. “You want to go out on the patio?” At least heading out there would give him a few seconds to think of a different topic of conversation.

She nodded and made her way through the boisterous crowd to the door to the deck. The thick humidity weighed them down the second they stepped outside.

The moonlight glinted off her hair as she settled her hips against the porch’s railing and faced him. The few loose tendrils that framed her face danced from the soft breeze of the ceiling fan.

“So what does the famous Landon Vista do now that he’s not playing football?” she asked.

He cocked his head to look at her. He liked her teasing tone. Her playfulness. “You guys at Tennessee probably hated me.”

“You were the guy my father cursed at while we watched the game on TV.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. He wished he could do it for her. “I saw you play in person a couple of times.”

“Yeah? How’d I do?”

“I think we won once and you won once.”

He nodded, though he knew the score of every game he’d played during his college career. He’d never lost to her alma mater. “You guys were always tough to beat.”

“So what do you do now that football is over?”

“I work in Senator Byers’s office.”

Her eyebrows rose. She started to say something, then stopped herself.

He laughed. “What’s that look supposed to mean?”

“My boss has done battle with Senator Byers since he got elected to office. She pretty much thinks he’s the Antichrist.”

“Because he fights for tougher sentencing laws?”

“Because he doesn’t understand the notion of innocent until proven guilty. He just wants to lock them all away.”

“No—he just wants criminals to have long sentences. So they won’t commit more crimes.” Shit. How did this conversation go in such a random direction? He didn’t want to be talking politics with a girl who . . . looked like that. Sure, he wanted to do a lot of things with her, but this wasn’t one of them. “Where is your internship, anyway?”

“At a nonprofit called Morgan’s Ladder.” She tugged at the bottom of her shirt. “We help wrongly convicted prisoners get out of prison—”

“Using DNA evidence.” His work for the tough-on-crime senator meant he’d come across Morgan’s Ladder a few times before. He thought of Cyrus Alexander, the man Landon had seen running from the country store the day his mother had been murdered. The day his life had changed forever. Thank God Cyrus Alexander would never get out of prison.

“Maybe not what you bargained for when you bought the new girl a beer, huh?” she asked.

Not even close.

She smiled. “I do have some other redeeming qualities.”

There was that playfulness again. He definitely liked the playfulness. “And what might those be?”

“I bake the second-best lasagna anyone’s ever eaten.”

“Only second best? That’s disappointing.” He took a step toward her, enjoying the closeness. Glad they were the only ones on the quiet patio. The beat of a raucous country song from inside the bar thrummed at the windows, but seemed miles away.

“My mother bakes the best, but I use her recipe.”

“And what else?”

“Hmmm . . . let’s see.” Her gaze fell briefly as she thought, then rose again, her eyes bright. Her forefinger rested briefly on his chest with a playful poke. Her light touch burned him with anticipation. “I’m pretty sure I can still do a back flip off the diving board.”

“Seems like a useful skill for an attorney.” He stepped toward her as she relaxed back onto the railing behind her.

She laughed—a light, airy sound that floated into the Spanish moss hanging from the trees on the other side of the railing.

“And what else?” He wanted to keep her talking. Maybe she’d never have to leave if the conversation didn’t end.

She gave a sultry smile. “I’m a really good kisser.” Her voice had dropped to a husky whisper.

“Oh, yeah?” His hands rose to the railing behind her, framing her hips. “How do you know?”

“Mickey Taylor told me.” Her chin slanted to a cocky angle. “He was my boyfriend freshman year of high school. I had to break up with him when I got to be four inches taller than he was. Tall girls feel gigantic when they date guys who are shorter than they are.”

“I’m six foot four,” he said, nudging closer to her. He was almost always the biggest guy in the room.

She leaned forward and whispered playfully. “Then you would be taller than I am.”

“So Mickey said you were a good kisser?”

She hesitated, then nodded slowly. An invitation.

His gaze rose to hers. “Maybe you should prove it.”

Gina's skin prickled in the humid air as Landon's lips grazed hers. Once. Twice.

"Is this okay?" His husky voice was barely a whisper.

"Yes," she said, bathing in the warmth of his breath. His lips settled on hers, soft and gentle. His tongue flicked against her lips—flirty, but not too aggressive. God, what was she doing? The last time she'd kissed a guy without going out on a date first was during Truth or Dare in Megan Crane's basement when she was thirteen years old.

But this felt so good. There was no way she could stop herself. Her body had been on alert since she'd first seen him in the gym tonight—his shoulders, arms, and calves sculpted with muscle, but not bulked up like some overmeaty weightlifter or football lineman. When he'd raised the bottom of his shirt to wipe the sweat off his forehead, she'd gotten a glimpse of his lean, flat belly. That sexy little trail of dark hair that disappeared into the waistband of his nylon shorts had made her warm all over.

And now here he was kissing her. Touching her. Making her want to get even closer to him.

She rose from where she leaned on the railing. His well-muscled body invited her to press against it, to thrill over its hard planes. She opened her lips, welcoming him in. A masculine groan echoed in his chest. His hand rose to her jaw. His fingertips swept across her skin. His touch was so gentle. So unexpected for a man who'd made a name for himself being mauled by oversize linemen. For the first time in ages, she felt wanted.

In the periphery of her brain, the door from the bar swung open. She pulled away from him, suddenly aware of another presence on the patio. His hands fell to her hips and held her still, as if he didn't want to let her go.

"Hey, Landon. We're up on the pool table," a male voice said from the doorway, but Gina's brain didn't register anything other than a blur standing at the door. Her senses danced around her—Landon's scent, his dark, curly hair, those distinctive olive-green eyes.

"Find someone else to play," he said, his gaze not leaving hers.

“It’s those guys from last week,” the male voice said. “They’ve been talking smack all night about how they’re going to beat us.”

“Not tonight.” Still, his attention didn’t leave her.

“You’re really going to walk away from a rematch?” the other male voice said.

Landon’s shoulders dropped. “You’ll still be here when I finish the game?” he asked her.

She shook her head. “I told my friend . . .” She quickly thought of ways to change the commitment she’d made to her teammate.

“Then Saturday night. Can I see you then?”

Her heart hammered in her chest. “I’d like that.”

He pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “What’s your number?”

She reached for the phone and enjoyed the surprised look on his face as she gently slid it from his hand. She punched in her name and number, then handed it back to him.

He grinned and nodded. “Saturday night.”

“Thanks for the beer,” she called as he headed toward the door to go back inside the bar.

He smiled as he turned to look at her. “No problem.”

“And sorry you had to lose tonight.”

He chuckled, a low, husky sound that echoed through the night air. “I don’t consider tonight a loss at all.”