

Forever, Alabama

Everybody, who knew him, loved Ben Laroux—especially the female population of Ministry, Alabama and surrounding counties. Ben had to admit that’d been a pretty accurate statement in his experience—right up ’til now.

It made no sense. Still uncertain how his few interactions with Sabine O’Connor had gone so badly, Ben tried to catch up to her before she stalked out the door. She’d shaken his hand with formal politeness but obvious disdain earlier, then she’d dismissed him completely.

The woman was magnificent, with black hair, pale skin, and the lightest blue eyes he’d ever seen; they were nearly silver. He watched as she stopped short just before exiting the building, madly digging through her purse.

“Looking for something?” he asked.

He might have been just a bit too close for comfort—her comfort.

Her head snapped up, and she nailed him with a level stare. “Let me guess; you found my phone?” The sounds of country music and laughter made it difficult to have a normal conversation.

“Now, why would you think I had your phone?”

“Because you’re grinning at me in a smirky, satisfied way, while I’m obviously panicking and searching for it.”

“I might have it,” he admitted.

She placed a hand on her hip and asked, “So, what will it take to get it back, and for you to leave me on my way?”

“Have dinner with me.” Well, she’d asked, hadn’t she?

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Okay. Give me your business card, and I’ll call you.” She nearly yelled to be heard above the din of music and laughter.

She’d probably toss his card into the trash on her way out. “How about I enter your number on my phone and I’ll call you to schedule?”

“Are you planning to stalk me?” It sounded like a bit of a challenge.

“Nah, I just want to figure out why you’re such a Ben-hater. I’m intrigued. If I fail to change your opinion of me, I’ll leave you alone. Scout’s honor.” He held up the international Boy Scout hand gesture.

She rolled her eyes in unmistakable doubt of his scouting background.

“You seem so certain you know my character.”

“It’s not so hard to figure out,” she said.

The certainty in her ice-blue eyes bothered him. Seriously, he’d not done anything to her, or anyone else he could think of that warranted this edgy hostility.

Did he detect a whiff of bourbon along with her Coco Chanel? “Can I offer you a ride home, or call you a cab?” His upbringing forbade him leaving a woman stranded at a bar without a ride.

She shook her head. “I’d planned to ride home with—a friend, but they didn’t show, so I’m going to call a cab.”

“Wait, somebody stood you up?” He tried to keep the shock from showing in his expression.

“What? Of course not.” She smiled then, apparently realizing how incredibly nasty her tone and demeanor had been toward him. “It was a—misunderstanding.”

“I’d be happy to drive you.”

“No, thank you.”

“I’ll wait here with you for the cab.” She didn’t seem like the type to get behind the wheel after shooting whiskey, but he’d hang around just to be sure.

“Fine.”

He figured she realized by now the uselessness of arguing with him after their brief time spent together.

So, they stood just outside in silence as she waited for her ride.

“Nice night,” Ben observed.

“Uh huh.”

“I want you to know that I appreciate what you’ve done for my family,” he said, and meant it.

She was a family therapist and had played a big part in helping his brother-in-law, Grey, and Grey’s daughter, Samantha, deal with some incredibly nasty stuff last year when they’d come back to town. But he’d not spent any real time with her, personally.

“You’re welcome.”

More silence. Alrighty, then.

The cab arrived just as the silence was wearing awkwardly thin. Ben cleared his throat. "It's been my pleasure." He grinned. "Looking forward to dinner," he said as he opened the car door and tucked her into the backseat.

He couldn't tell through the window if that was a wave or not. Ben decided to remain optimistic for now.

Perhaps he should write her off as unfriendly, or simply uninterested and trying to make her point but, in his experience, people didn't go out of their way to be snippy and rude unless they had a reason. Really, something was up with this gal. It was odd, because his family members thought the world of her.

Why had she singled him out for such raw treatment? Who hated Ben Laroux? Go figure.