

ONE

Izzy

Two pink lines. Panic. The realization that my life was about to change forever.

And it all started the night Michael visited the bar.

Working at the Crescent Tavern felt like stepping into a whole different world. The air was thick with the scent of alcohol, the sound of music, and the laughter of patrons. The bar was always packed, and it was my job to take orders, mix drinks, and chat with customers. Rowdy crowds and crazy nights were difficult of course, but I loved every minute of it.

On this particular night, I was serving up drinks and chatting with Jackson, one of my regulars. Then he walked in - Michael Beaumont - billionaire, investor, owner of the Crescent Tavern, and the long chain of successful restaurants and bars passed down for generations in his family, a man I hated - and my best friend's father. He strode into the bar like he owned the place, which he actually did, but it didn't stop the frown that creased my face.

He approached the counter, his confident stride and expensive suit catching the eye of every person in the room. What was he doing here? And why did he have to look so damn good? I shook my head and reprimanded myself. That was my best friend's dad, and he was an asshole. So, what if he was attractive?

As he took a seat at the bar, I noticed the way his eyes roamed over me, taking in every inch of my body. "Miss Martinez," he said, his voice low and gravelly.

"Mr. Beaumont," I said through clenched teeth, grabbing a glass and reaching for a bottle of top-shelf whiskey. "What can I get for you?" I asked, trying to mask my irritation.

"I'm not interested in your average cocktails," he responded coolly. "Kindly inform my son that I'm here to see him."

I felt a surge of anger, but instead of lashing out, I grabbed a glass and filled it with ice, vodka, and orange juice. After shaking it vigorously to mix the contents, I added it to a tray with a few other drinks.

Michael turned, his back facing me as he looked around the bar. I grabbed the tray and walked around the counter. No one had ordered a drink, but I acted as if I was delivering one to a table. Just as I reached him, I pretended to trip and the drink flew out of my hand, splashing all over his shirt.

"Oh, my goodness!" I exclaimed, feigning shock. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to spill it on you!"

He glared at me, his shirt stained with orange juice and vodka. "Watch where you're going!" he growled.

I kept my expression neutral, but inside, I felt a sense of satisfaction.

"Is this how clumsy you always are, Miss Martinez?" he asked.

I couldn't resist one last jab. "The look suits you; don't you think?" I smirked.

Michael glared at me and was about to respond when Finn interrupted. "Hey, Izzy?"

I turned to see Finn emerge from his office. His eyes landed on me before shifting to his father. "Dad?" he said gently, pushing his tousled, coppery hair out of his bright blue eyes. He was wearing a tailored vest that hugged his lean frame and hinted at a playful spirit.

"Finley," Michael acknowledged him without looking up from his shirt.

Finn's rosy cheeks seemed to glow with warmth as he asked, "I didn't know you were coming. What happened?"

"I was just asking Miss Martinez to come get you," Michael replied, "but she seemed to find drenching my clothes more important."

They both turned to stare at me. I couldn't help but notice how strikingly different they were. Finn had soft, round features, smooth skin, wide innocent eyes, and a warm smile. Michael, on the other hand, exuded rugged toughness with his chiseled jaw, sharp features, jet-black hair, steely piercing eyes, and muscular build.

"Are you busy, Finley?" Michael asked, without taking his eyes off me.

"Oh no, let's go into my office. We can talk there and get you all cleaned up," Finn responded.

As Michael made his way to Finn's office, the latter leaned over the counter and opened his eyes wide at me.

"What is he doing here?" I asked.

"I don't know," Finn sighed. "Maybe he missed me?"

I chuckled, "highly unlikely."

"He's here to get his usual dose of my soul and energy then." Finn shook his head tiredly. "Could you send some drinks in? I may need alcohol to get through this, and maybe it'll loosen him up. Also, try not to spill them this time."

I wanted to mention that Michael didn't appreciate my cocktails, but I chuckled and nodded instead.

Finn walked into the door Michael had disappeared through while a cleaner came to take care of the mess. Jackson, one of our regulars, spoke up, nursing his hurricane from earlier.

"That's Finn's dad?" he asked. "Damn, they do not look alike at all."

I glanced at the door before I got to work on the drinks. No, Finn didn't look like his father at all. He looked like a woman we both knew years ago, his mother, a ghost. Isla Robertson.

An hour and thirty minutes after I delivered the drinks to Finn's office, the night was drawing to a close. The bar was slowly emptying out, its walls echoing with the faint murmur of conversation and the clink of glasses. The crowd that once packed the room, laughing and shouting, had dwindled down to a handful of patrons, their faces flushed with the warmth of alcohol.

I wiped down glasses and counted cash, casting a wistful glance at the empty seats. The bar stools, once a colorful mosaic of personalities, now stood in stoic silence. The booths, once filled with raucous laughter and lively conversation, now sat empty and still.

This had always been my least favorite time of night. The atmosphere was tinged with a bittersweet sense of finality, as if the end of the night were also the end of an era. The

hum of the neon lights and the soft music playing in the background seemed to underscore the loneliness of the moment.

The door behind the counter opened again, and this time, I didn't need to raise my head to know that Finn and Michael had come out. One could always feel the air around them shift when Michael Beaumont strode into a room. It was like a sudden breeze that brushed past everyone, stirring up a flurry of emotions in its wake.

The few heads turned, and eyes darted toward him and Finn as they walked to the front of the counter. I kept my gaze on the glass I was wiping, as if it wasn't shiny enough.

"So next week then?" I heard Finn ask.

What was happening next week?

"Yes," Michael's tone was gruff. "Do not fail me, Finley," he said in a way that made me think he expected him to fail.

I rolled my eyes.

"Sure, Dad," Finn said. "Why don't I escort you?"

"I can see myself out, thank you."

I looked up then to watch as he walked out of the bar, a confident gait in his steps, despite the stain on his shirt. He moved with a fluid grace that belied his age, like a panther stalking its prey. And yet, there was a sense of detachment about him, as if he had already moved on to his next target.

Because that was what Michael Beaumont was, a predator.

"How did it go?" I asked Finn as he slumped onto a stool across from me.

He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "Well, he spent the first thirty minutes talking about how disappointed he was in the way the bar was doing. Apparently, he's been going through our figures."

I reached for a bottle of his favorite whiskey and poured a healthy amount into a glass, letting the rich amber liquid splash against the sides. As I slid the drink towards him, I could see a flicker of gratitude in his eyes. "The Crescent Tavern is the best night bar in New Orleans," I said, "and it's all because of your management."

“And your amazing cocktails,” he grinned.

I smiled. “So, forget what your asshole father says.”

He took a sip of his drink. I could see the tension in his shoulders ease, and a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I know I stopped caring about what he thinks a long time ago,” Finn said, “but he’s still the owner of this place, and his opinion matters.”

That was true. When Michael asked Finn to take over the management of The Crescent Tavern, following our graduation from business school, we were both shocked. But Finn wanted to prove himself. If Michael wasn’t satisfied, nothing stopped him from replacing Finn.

He could kick both of us out if he wanted to.

It’s not like he cared about his son anyway.

“He wants to throw a party here at the bar,” Finn said, “a few of his friends are coming from New York next week. They could be potential investors if we show them that the place is worth investing in.”

“Hmm,” I said, placing both my elbows on the counter. “That’s a good plan actually.”

“So, you’ll do it?” Finn played with the rim of his glass with his lean fingers.

“Do what?” I grimaced.

“Make the drinks next week,” he grinned. “On Friday night.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “That’s my night off. Get someone else to do it.”

“Oh, come on, Izzy, no one makes the drinks like you do.”

I couldn’t stop myself from saying, “Your father called my drinks average. I’m sure his friends have higher tastes.”

Finn waved his hand dismissively. “My father is more of a food guy than a drinks guy,” he said, grabbing my hand and pouting. “Please. Please. Please. I’ll do anything.”

Truthfully, I agreed the moment he asked. The Crescent Tavern was more than just a bar. It was a haven, a sanctuary, a place where people could come to escape their problems for a while.

And I knew, without a doubt, that anyone who walked through those doors would fall in love with the place, just as I did. It wasn't just the cozy ambiance or the delicious drinks, although those certainly didn't hurt. It was the feeling that you got when you stepped inside, like you were part of a community, a family.

I'd seen it happen time and time again - people coming in feeling lost or alone, and leaving with a smile on their face, maybe even a new friend or two. There was something magical about the place, something that brought people together in a way that was hard to explain.

So, I turned to Finn and said, "You have to buy Luna's next batch of cat food."

"Deal," he replied without hesitation.

"Okay, I'll do it."

He grinned, letting go of my hand and leaning across the table to kiss my forehead. "Thank you, Izzy," he said. "You're the best friend ever."

"You bet I am," I chuckled.

"Can't wait to show my scummy father what we're made of."

I smiled. Finn was right. All we had to do to ace the night was wow the investors by showing them the magic in The Crescent Tavern. Michael expected Finn to fail, but he wouldn't.

Certainly not on my watch.

TWO

Izzy

Finn and I worked tirelessly in the days leading up to the party, sourcing the best ingredients and curating a playlist that would keep the crowd dancing all night long. The night of the party arrived, and we were ready. The locals arrived first in a buzzing crowd, and the music was already pumping. I stepped behind the bar and greeted the two other bartenders. Finn was charming, and I was determined to create a night that people would talk about for weeks to come.

The energy in the room was palpable as the guests lined up at the bar, eager for a taste of our signature cocktails. I worked with precision and grace, creating a symphony of clinking ice, shaking shakers, and popping corks.

Finn stepped into my view, a wide grin on his face as he asked, “How do I look?”

I let my eyes take in his appearance. His kilt was the first thing that caught my eye, with a tartan pattern in shades of green and blue. He paired it with a crisp white shirt and a smart blazer, completing the ensemble. His hair was a tousled mess, a copper shade of brown that contrasted perfectly with his bright blue eyes. A hint of stubble adorned his chiseled jawline, giving him a rugged and masculine edge I wasn't used to.

“Not bad,” I tapped my chin, “I really like it.”

His eyes crinkled as he smiled. “Great. I considered wearing a suit at first to at least seem formal.”

“Please,” I waved my hand as I turned around and grabbed a bottle of liquor, “you're not your father.”

The door to the bar opened, and I knew immediately who had arrived.

Speak of the devil, and he shall appear.

Michael Beaumont strolled into the bar, and the energy shifted. He stood at the center of the group and exuded confidence and arrogance; his demeanor commanded attention. He was impeccably dressed, his suit tailored to perfection. His hair was slicked back, and his chiseled features were set in a perpetual smirk. I could see the glint of his Rolex watch as he gestured for Finn to come over to him and his friends.

“Wish me luck,” Finn said to me.

As he walked quickly over to the group, I stared at the rest of them. Michael's friends were no less impressive than him, all dressed in designer suits and carrying themselves with the same air of entitlement. They were clearly men of means, with the trappings of wealth evident in their expensive watches, cufflinks, and shoes.

The night was young, and I hurried to grab the bottles of liquor, shakers, and glasses, moving with precision and grace. My fingers worked their magic, creating a symphony of clinking ice, shaking shakers, and popping corks.

The guests lined up at the bar, eager for a taste of our signature cocktails. I focused on each customer, greeting them with a smile and asking them what they wanted to drink. Some knew precisely what they wanted, while others asked for recommendations. I was delighted to oblige, whipping up drinks that were both scrumptious and beautiful.

A little later, Millie, one of the servers, called out to me, "Izzy, Finn needs you in the VIP booth."

I rubbed my hands together and stepped out from behind the counter, my heart racing with anticipation. These weren't ordinary patrons - they were a group of affluent men, all dressed in suits that cost more than my monthly rent. But I needed to impress them, for Finn and for The Crescent Tavern.

As I approached the booth, I could see Michael sitting in a corner, his face slightly obscured by the dim light, but his narrowed gaze was on me. His friends lounged on plush leather seats, their gazes lingering a little too long on my curves. But I didn't let it faze me - Finn took my hand and pulled me to his side.

“This is Isabella Martinez,” he said, “she’s the best bartender we have here, and she’ll be serving you for now.”

I greeted them with a smile and asked what they would like to drink. One of them requested a scotch, and another wanted a simple martini. The others rattled off a list of high-end liquors and exotic ingredients.

As I worked, I tried to ignore the swirling haze of cigar smoke and chatter in the booth. Instead, I focused on the soft glow of the liquor bottles lining the shelves. My fingers danced across the bottles and mixers, crafting the perfect drinks that I hoped would soothe the sophisticated palates of those men. With each pour and shake, I attempted to

imbue the drinks with a subtle flair - a slice of citrus fruit here, a sprig of mint there, and even a sugar rim for the lemon drop martini to leave a lasting impression.

When I glanced over at the men, I could tell that they were watching me. However, they didn't affect me as much as Michael did. He had a smug look on his face, as if he could see how nervous I was and was taunting me for it. I gritted my teeth and channeled my frustration into making his cocktail, even though he hadn't ordered one.

As I passed the drinks to the waiter, my heart raced with a mix of excitement and dread. I watched as the men took their first sips, their faces quickly switching from surprise to satisfaction. They murmured excitedly amongst themselves. With a deep breath, I wiped my sweaty forehead and smiled at Finn. He grinned back at me. Then my gaze moved to his father. I watched with bated breath as he lifted the cocktail to his lips. His chiseled jawline tensed with anticipation as he savored the aroma, his eyes closed.

I couldn't help but admire the way he held the glass, his fingers wrapping around the stem with practiced ease. But even as I appreciated him, I felt a burning anger within me. How could he be so confident and assured, so completely in control of his surroundings?

As the liquid passed his lips, I watched his face transform. His features softened with pleasure, as if the cocktail had unlocked a hidden aspect of his personality, revealing a vulnerable and tender side that I had never seen before. He opened his eyes and squinted at me, frowned, then looked away quickly.

"Okay, weirdo," I muttered under my breath.

An hour passed, and the party was still going strong, but the night was coming to an end. A different bartender, Milo, had taken over making drinks for Michael and his friends while I celebrated the successful night on the dance floor. I was done being the bartender and was just another guest for the rest of the night.

I downed drink after drink, feeling the warm liquid fire of alcohol course through my body, invigorating me. Finn was upstairs in the VIP booth, still discussing with the guests, and I needed to let loose.

My movements became fluid, and I swayed to the music, ordering yet another drink. The alcohol made me feel even more carefree and giddy. My hair whipped around my face, and the colors around me blended and danced, the lights blurring together into a kaleidoscope of colors.

The pulsing beat of the music coursed through my veins as I swayed my hips to the rhythm, my eyes closed, and lost in the moment. Suddenly, I tripped and felt a hand on my waist, steadying me.

“Oh, thank you,” I said, looking up at my savior. When I saw who it was, I pushed away from him as if his hands were made of fire.

“You're as graceful as ever,” slurred Michael.

I narrowed my eyes at him. He looked really handsome under the warm glow of the dim bar lights. “Well, well, well, if it isn't number three on my list of least favorite people in the world.”

He rolled his eyes. “I see I still have much work to do if I'm not number one.”

I frowned. “Were you watching me dance?”

His jaw clenched, and he looked away quickly, “Why would I do that? I just happened to see you.”

Was he nervous?

I leaned in, “Is that so, Beaumont?”

He bit his bottom lip, and his cologne, a heady, masculine scent with notes of leather and spice, made my heart skip a beat. He looked down at me and tilted his head, “Don't ask questions you don't want answers to, Isabella.”

I leaned back, my eyes opened wide. Did he just call me Isabella?

“You're drunk,” I said, “I'm drunk too, but I thought you don't drink.”

He slid his finger over his bottom lip, “The cocktails weren't so bad,” he said, “Let's dance.”

“What?”

“This conversation bores me,” he said, taking my hand, “Come on.”

His touch sent shivers down my spine, and the electricity between us sparkled with each passing moment. My body followed him before my mind could ask what the hell was

happening. We moved together on the dance floor, our bodies molding to each other. Our eyes locked, and I could feel the chemistry between us sizzle as we danced, our bodies in perfect sync.

“You look so beautiful tonight, Isabella,” he said, his hand reaching out to brush a strand of hair from my face.

I blushed, feeling a warm sensation spread through my body. “I thought I was unattractive,” I said as my eyes traced the shape of his jaw and the curve of his lips.

He took a deep breath, “Tell me something.”

“Something like what?”

“Anything,” he said as our bodies inched closer.

“Okay,” I teased him with a playful smile and a flick of my hair.

His hands confidently explored my curves as we continued to dance.

“Did you know that the term "cocktail" originated from an innkeeper named Betsy Flanagan in New York City in the early 1800s? Legend has it that she mixed the remaining liquor she had with sugar, bitters, and water, and served it to customers with a rooster feather as a garnish. When she was asked what the drink was called, she replied ‘a cocktail,’ supposedly because the feather reminded her of a rooster's tail.”

Michael spun me around and said, "That's an interesting fact," before pulling me back to him. Our bodies moved together in perfect harmony, each step a carefully choreographed dance of seduction. "You like cocktails."

"I love cocktails," I said, licking my lips. "It may seem like just drinks to some, but there's an art to it, and it makes people happy. I love making people happy."

The air crackled with electricity as we continued to dance, our bodies now so close that we were almost touching. "And you?" he asked. "Are you happy?"

I shrugged. That was probably a question for sober Izzy. "Right now, I am," I said, reaching up and running my fingers through his hair, enjoying the feel of his strong hands on my waist.

He leaned in closer, his lips almost touching mine as we moved to the rhythm of the music. "That's good."

The alcohol had taken away my inhibitions, and I suspected that it was the same for him. I couldn't believe we were this close, willingly. My stomach fluttered with a mix of nerves and excitement. We danced for what seemed like an eternity, lost in our own little world of passion and desire.

It was like we were the only two people in the room, lost in our own little bubble of attraction. And as the song finally came to an end, I could feel the heat of his breath on my face as he leaned in, his lips hovering just inches from mine.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I-I'm not sure," he muttered

Our mouths met in a fiery collision of desire. Michael's lips were soft and full, his kiss an intoxicating blend of sweetness and passion that left me dizzy and breathless.

As we kissed, I could feel myself losing all sense of time and space, lost in the sensation of his lips on mine. I ran my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer as our bodies pressed together in a heady embrace.

When he released me, I leaned in, my lips brushing against his ear. "Let's get out of here."

Before I start to regret this.

He sighed heavily. "Okay."

We stumbled out of the bar and into the cool night air, our hands intertwined as we made our way over to his car. The door was opened for both of us by his guard.

I laid my head against the headrest and closed my eyes. "Where to, sir?" a gruff voice asked from my front seat.

"Home," Michael responded as his hands caressed my cheeks.

I blinked at him. His lips were plump, and I ran my thumb along the bottom one.

"Isabella," he said. "Are you..."

I didn't let him finish his sentence. I kissed him again, finding it hard to keep my hands off him, our drunken flirtation turning into something more intense. His hand found its way to my thigh, sending shivers down my spine.

As we pulled up to his luxurious apartment building, I couldn't help but feel a rush of nervousness that was quickly diffused by the alcohol. Michael took my hand, leading me up to his penthouse and the moment we walked in through the door, the air was electric. His touch was intoxicating, and we were quickly lost in each other. As we moved together, our bodies melded into one, our hands exploring every inch of each other. I felt completely vulnerable and exposed, but also weirdly safe in his embrace.

We stumbled towards Michael's bedroom, our lips never parting, I couldn't believe that this was happening and I didn't want to think too much about it either. Michael's touch was like fire, igniting a passion within me that I never knew existed. We reached the bed and as he gently laid me down, he leaned over me. "You're so beautiful," he whispered, his voice thick with desire.

He pressed a kiss to my neck and I blushed, feeling a rush of excitement course through my body. Yet, I couldn't stop myself from saying, "you're not so bad yourself Beaumont."

His rose his head to face me and I noticed his eyes sparkled with something I couldn't recognize, before he kissed me again. "Do you want this?"

His hands trailed down my body and I moaned as they found their way to my most sensitive areas, my body arching towards him. "Yes," I breathed out, my heart racing, "Michael..."

He leaned in to kiss me, his lips soft and full. "Shh, it's okay," he whispered, sensing my nervousness. "I'm here with you."

And with those words, all my fears melted away, and I gave in to the pleasure. The night that followed was a blur of ecstasy, passion and pleasure as we were both lost in the moment.