



**Carly Phillips**

**Dare to Touch  
Sample**

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iBooks Edition

CP Publishing 2014

Cover Design: The Killion Group Inc.

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## Chapter One

The birthday party had wound down and only family and a few close friends remained in the private room where the celebration had been held. Olivia didn't feel any older, only ... more jaded. Was it any wonder? Her twenty-fifth birthday, surrounded by friends and family – if you excluded her wayward father. Of course he hadn't been able to make the party. When had he shown up for anything important in her life?

She leaned against the bar on both elbows and closed her eyes for a few seconds to gather herself before packing up the presents and heading home.

“Happy birthday, Olivia.” A familiar masculine voice drawled in her ear. She shivered at the sound, all her senses prickling with awareness as Dylan Rhodes' warm breath heated her skin.

She turned to find him close. Too close and her pulse picked up speed. Sexy chocolate brown eyes gazed at her. And his close cut goatee teased her with its nearness. In her dreams, that sexy goatee felt delicious against her bared flesh.

*Jesus, Olivia, get a grip.*

“Thanks for coming to the party.” Her voice came out too husky for her liking but Dylan always had this kind of effect on her. He was travel director with the Miami Thunder, her coworker, and the man she'd lusted after from the day they'd met.

“I'm glad your sister invited me.”

She wished Avery hadn't insisted on throwing her a party, but now that it was nearly over, Olivia had had a wonderful time and was grateful her mom and her siblings, half and full, cared enough to attend the event. Friends and coworkers too.

Especially Dylan.

He studied her beneath his hooded gaze. "I wouldn't miss your celebration." He tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear, his fingers trailing a path over her cheek in what was a deliberate, lingering touch.

She shivered, her traitorous nipples puckering at his light caress. This was more than the flirting dance they normally did. There was intent in his coffee colored stare.

She shouldn't be surprised. Until recently, a sense of corporate responsibility kept them as coworkers only. And then Olivia's brother Ian had fallen for his now wife, Riley, and given her a job with the Thunder. Next her half-brother Alex had hooked up with his now-wife, Madison, and they too worked with the team. Ever since, Dylan had stepped up his game. It was like her family's willingness to mix business with pleasure had given him the green light to pursue her. She'd managed to hold out so far, but she knew it was only a matter of time before she gave in.

What are you fighting, Liv? She asked herself. Too many things, came the reply. But her quivering insides and the liquid desire pulsing through her veins told her she was going to take the dive and deal with the repercussions later.

"I asked if you wanted your present?" Dylan's voice brought her out of her own head.

She managed a nod, trying not to betray the excitement fluttering inside her. "Sure. I love gifts."

A grin edge the corners of his mouth and he treated her to those irresistible dimples. He was raw, intense and kept his emotions in check. On simmer, never boiling over.

Although she didn't come from his rougher background, she could relate to the need to hold things close. A father who'd betrayed his entire family in a way only soap operas saw and a first love that walked away when she needed him most taught her hard-won lessons. Hell, she was still learning them. Hadn't she believed her father would come? He hadn't even called to say he wouldn't be able to attend. He'd sent a message with her half-brother Alex. She swallowed hard. The confident, tough Olivia people saw on the outside was far different than the sensitive, hurt girl that lived inside her.

She searched and found that outer Olivia now. "So? What do you have for me, hot shot?"

He grasped her hand and pulled her away from the bar, giving her no choice but to follow him, rushing in her heels to keep up.

Her sister, Avery, stared open-mouthed as she passed. Olivia's face burned as she realized her entire family was watching Dylan pull her through the lounge area they'd rented for the night and into a darkened hallway.

He came to a halt, turned and steadied her with strong hands on her waist. "Dylan, what are you –"

He cut her off with a kiss. His lips on hers, hard, demanding and oh so good. Just as her brain told her this was stupid, he slid his lips over her jawline, she felt that rough beard for the first time, and her mind shut down.

He nipped at her ear and a low moan reverberated from her throat. "Dylan -"

His hand gripped her hair, tilting her neck back and his mouth returned to hers. The slight tug on her scalp had the odd effect of arousing her, the moisture

dampening her panties a clear indication she liked this birthday gift and wanted more. Tongues tangled and she reveled in his taste, a malty flavor from the beer he'd been drinking. No refined scotch for Dylan, he was rough in ways she hadn't been exposed to before him. And she loved it, meeting his demanding kisses with more of her own.

He turned and pushed her against the wall, his hard body aligning with hers. The thick swell of his erection pressed against her belly and her knees went weak at the thought of what could come next.

He grasped her jaw in one hand and brushed a finger over closed lids. "Open and look at me."

Her eyes fluttered open. Up close he was even more devastating to look at, pure want and need in his expression. For her.

His hand never left her neck as he gazed into her eyes. "Happy birthday, sunshine." He leaned in and kissed her hard once. Then he slid a box into her hand, curled her fingers around it tight and stepped away.

She glanced down at the gift, dumbfounded. Her body still tingled in all strategic areas and her heart was beating a mile a minute. If not for the wall at her back, she would have collapsed to the floor in a heap. But before she could gather her wits, he winked at her. Then he turned and walked away.

#

Dylan's head spun from that kiss. He'd wanted Olivia for a long time and this party provided him the perfect opportunity to make it clear things between them were going to change. No more staring at those red glossed lips and wondering what she tasted like. Now he knew.

He ran his finger over his mouth, coming up with sticky gloss and he grinned. He'd rendered her speechless, not an easy feat. The sexy vixen now knew where he stood.

So no more using her job as an excuse, either. "It's difficult being a female in a male dominated profession. Getting involved with you will make it look like I can't handle things myself."

He called bullshit on that one. Once his assistant, Olivia was now the team's executive director. She was dedicated to her job in a man's world and had to work twice as hard to prove herself as her predecessor had. But she never complained. She was smart, intelligent, and everyone in the industry that met her came to both like and respect her. She'd more than proved herself in their world.

And given her family's propensity to mix business with pleasure ... yeah. He wasn't buying her reason. She was scared of something. Fine, that he could deal with. He sure as hell didn't do well at relationships either. Which didn't mean he wasn't about to try one with her. They could be good together, given the chance. They shared a mutual passion for football, something that was rare. Dylan ought to know. He'd had enough women try to distract him from his love of the sport.

Added to Olivia's brains and wit, she had a killer body. She was slender with small curves in all the right places, breasts just made to be held in his palms. He'd had to hold himself back from taking things in that hallway even further. Her waist was made for him to grip hard and those legs starred in his most heated fantasies. He was a leg man and he couldn't shake the thought of those long limbs wrapped around him as she slid inside her wet heat.

Now that he knew her sweet taste and her feminine scent, he craved so much more. He intended to have it, too.

Dylan headed for the door, only to be stopped by his boss, Olivia's brother.

"I'd like a word," Ian said.

He didn't want to get into his personal choices with Ian but he respected the man. So he gave him the time. "What's up?"

Ian glanced around. No one was around to overhear. "I realize I'm in no position to judge relationships in the work place."

Dylan cocked his head. "And?"

"I saw you two in the hallway." Ian shifted on his feet, clearly uncomfortable with the subject.

Dylan had made a scene by pulling Olivia away. He knew Ian was overprotective of his sisters and since Dylan felt the same way about Callie, his sister, he wouldn't lose his temper now.

But that didn't mean he was opening a vein for the man either. "I don't owe you an explanation."

"The hell you don't. That's my sister you're playing with."

Dylan blew out a long breath. "Who said I'm playing?"

Ian inclined his head, acknowledging Dylan's words. He cleared his throat. "My sister is tough on the outside but she's ... more fragile inside," he said, clearly considering his words carefully.

"Your point?" Dylan asked the other man, not wanting information about Olivia from anyone but her.

"Don't play with her head or her heart."

Dylan inclined his head. "I don't intend to."

Ian eyed him through his infamous narrowed gaze, assessing him, causing Dylan to straighten his shoulders and meet his stare head on.

"We good?" Ian finally asked.

“Sure thing.” He and Ian known one another a long time.

They’d both attended the University of Florida and Ian had given him a job when they’d run into each other again a few years after graduation. Dylan owed the man but that didn’t mean he had to put what he wanted on hold. Ian would deal with whatever happened. He had no choice because Dylan wasn’t backing down. He was going after Olivia.

#

The Monday after her party, Olivia grabbed her coffee from the break room and settled into her office at the stadium. She loved her job. Growing up, she’d always wanted to hang with her older brothers, Ian and Scott, both of whom loved football. Although Scott was now a police officer, he never missed a home Thunder game. And since their father’s brother, Paul, owned the team, Olivia been exposed to the sport early. And often.

When Uncle Paul had left the country to travel with his partner, he’d turned the presidency over to Ian, who he’d groomed for the position. Olivia had graduated college knowing she wanted a position in the front offices. She’d started in PR and moved to travel, learning all she could before being promoted to executive director last year. She loved her job, loved that she worked with some of her family members, and appreciated how hard the players worked and their dedication to the sport and the team. Coming into work was never a hardship. She considered herself lucky.

Her birthday party merely reinforced the fact that she was surrounded by people she loved. She’d spent yesterday going through presents and anally finishing her thank you notes for each gift. Her sister, Avery, also her apartment-mate, made fun of her but at least she didn’t have those still on her To Do list.

She settled into her chair and reached into her bag for her eyeglasses. She didn't wear them often but she'd had a headache today and opted not use her contacts. But instead of the case she ended up with the gift box from Dylan in her hand.

She ran her fingers over the velvet covering. Knowing what was inside, her stomach flipped over. This wasn't just a, walk into a store and pick out the easiest present, kind of gift. This was well thought out and chosen with her in mind. She couldn't bring herself to wear it and she couldn't stand to leave it home either.

She snapped open the box and looked down at the necklace. The delicate gold pendant of the sun with a sparkling diamond in the center twinkled up at her. Because he called her *sunshine*.

She'd thought it was a lighthearted nickname, not something with more meaning. Even if every time she heard it her heart fluttered inside her chest. Olivia had no problem admitting she was attracted to Dylan. She was just wary of smooth talking guys. Oh hell, she was wary of most men and for what she thought was good reason. Hello, daddy, she thought with disgust. He'd called the next morning to apologize for missing her party, but too little too late. She'd murmured her easy acceptance because that's what she did. Olivia accepted things as they were. She might be the peacemaker who'd convinced her siblings to at least outwardly forgive the father who'd betrayed them, but that didn't mean she didn't have her own issues and internal scars.

As for Dylan, he was a contradiction. From a rough part of Miami, he still managed to attend the University of Florida on scholarship. She didn't know much about his past as he didn't discuss it. She respected that. After all, they weren't friends, they were colleagues. Even if he wanted to be more.

He possessed an edge, one that was apparent even when he wore a suit and juggled the schedules of dozens of players and team management. It was that edge that appealed to her. She liked the guy who took control and dragged her across the room, then kissed her senseless. She was drawn to the man who called her sunshine and gave her this gorgeous necklace. It showcased a softer side of him and that was the side that scared her. Because she could fall for a man like Dylan. So hard. Which meant she'd be open and vulnerable... and experience told her that kind of pain didn't go away easily. She preferred dating men with whom she didn't have a chance of getting in too deep.

She placed the delicate necklace into the box and snapped it closed just as a knock sounded at the door.

She dropped the box onto the desk. "Come in."

The door swung open and Dylan strode in. Speak of the devil, she thought.

Today was casual, no meetings, meaning he wore a pair of black slacks and a white collared shirt open at the neck, revealing a sprinkling of dark – mouthwatering – hair. His sleeves were rolled up and she found that even his forearms were muscular and sexy.

"Morning, sunshine." He treated her to a heart stopping smile.

She swallowed hard. "Good morning."

"Got a minute?" he asked.

She nodded.

He shut the door behind him. "You look sexy in those glasses."

With shaking hands, she pulled them off, suddenly self-conscious.

"You're sexy without them, too." He started towards her desk, where his gift sat front and center.

It was too much to hope he wouldn't notice.

The big grin on his face told her she was out of luck.

He sat on the corner of her desk and folded his arms across his chest.

“So?” he asked, his knowing gaze on the incriminating box.

Better to face it head on, she decided. “Thank you, Dylan. It’s beautiful.”

“But you’re not wearing it.” His lips turned down and she suddenly felt awful and didn’t want to disappoint him or hurt his feelings.

“I was just about to put it on.”

His gaze held hers for more than a few seconds before he picked up the velvet box and took out the necklace. “Turn,” he said in a gruff voice.

She stood and pivoted around. He stepped up behind her, his body heat already testing her resolve.

“Hair.”

She tilted her head forward and raised her long hair off her neck, allowing him to slide the necklace in place and engage the small hook. Instead of moving away, she suddenly sensed him closer.

His breath fanned her neck, warm air causing a wave of arousal to nearly knock her off her feet.

“What are you—“ She couldn’t continue, not when his lips skimmed her neck and her words morphed into more of a moan. His mouth was warm and he lingered, inhaling her where she stood. Her nipples puckered beneath the silk of her tank and she grabbed onto the desk for support.

“Do you want to know why I gave this to you? Why I call you sunshine?” His words vibrated against her skin but he didn’t give her a chance to reply. “It’s because when I come in to work every morning, seeing you lights up my day.”

Oh God. “That’s —“

“Corny but true.” He grasped her shoulders to keep her steady and rimmed her outer ear with his tongue.

He lit a fuse that ran straight to her core. Suddenly that's all she was aware of, the pulsing of her sex, her damp panties and her heavy breasts, all three aching and needing his touch more than her next breath.

She wanted to turn, throw herself into his arms and kiss him for all she was worth. Wrap her legs around his waist and –

A quick knock and her door opened wide. Riley, her sister in law, strode in, speaking as she walked. "I wanted to talk to you about – Oh!" She came to a halt. Took in Olivia and Dylan and a big smile crossed her face. "Looks like I'm interrupting," she said, but made no move to leave.

Olivia tried to step away but Dylan's hands on her arms held her tight.

"Dylan and I were just – umm... I mean Dylan came to discuss the trip to Arizona for the Pro Bowl, didn't you?" she asked on a rush, grasping for a business related reason for him to be in her office. Not that anything would explain how close they stood or how his lips had been on her neck....

Dylan merely looked amused. "Apparently, yes. I'm here to talk about the trip." He stepped away but his hand dropped, skimming Olivia's lower back. "We can pick this discussion up at lunch," he said.

"Lunch?" she asked, parroting his words because her entire body was still tingling unable to process what had just happened between them. What would have happened if Riley hadn't barged in?

It wasn't much. It was everything. Shit.

"Lunch," he stated. "I'll come get you at Noon." He turned to her and winked.

She ignored that in favor of his overbearing push to make plans she hadn't agreed to. "Don't I get a say?" she asked. "What if I already have plans?"

Ignoring Riley's amused grin, Dylan met her gaze. "I gave you a say for the last couple of months. I decided it's my turn. See you at Noon." His fingers

glided over her hand as he walked out. “Nice to see you, Riley,” he said, disappearing out the door.

“What was that!? And while you’re at it, what was with the caveman routine, dragging you across the room and into the hallway at your party?” Riley, her brother Ian’s wife, the team’s assistant travel secretary and Olivia’s close friend, settled into the most comfortable extra seat in the office. Her brown curls hung down her back, her eyes glinting with amusement as she waited for an answer.

Olivia eased back into her chair behind her desk, her awareness of everything around her heightened. Hell, she was trembling.

“I don’t know. We’ve always flirted but I thought I made it clear I wasn’t going to mix business with... anything else.” She didn’t want to use the word pleasure right now. She didn’t think her over stimulated hormones could take it.

“Didn’t seem like he was listening.”

She reached for pendant around her neck. “He gave me this for my birthday.”

Riley rose and leaned in for a good look. “That’s gorgeous. Obviously he’s not taking no for an answer. Are you still planning on resisting? And I have to ask, why? He’s a great guy and not hard on the eyes either... but don’t tell your brother I said that.” She grinned because they both knew how proprietary Ian could be.

Olivia groaned. “I can’t resist him. I don’t want to. But he’s so intense. Like all or nothing and I honestly don’t know if I’m ready for that.”

“You could keep spending nights home with your TV or you could go out with a guy who obviously worships you. Really difficult choice.”

“Oh that’s rich coming from how hard you fought Ian when he went after you.”

Riley rubbed her hands together. "Ian scared me because he's so... dominant. And you know about my father."

Riley's father had been an abusive, controlling bastard. She'd had good reason to be wary of Ian and his dominating personality. Not that he'd ever hurt her. Worship her was more like it. He'd won her over but not before she'd almost lost him first.

"I know, but —"

"Just hear me out, okay?" Riley asked.

Because Olivia knew her friend was coming from a good place, she nodded.

"I mistakenly thought trusting Ian would cost me my self-esteem and independence. But you don't have those issues."

"No, but I do have serious trust issues of my own and you know why."

"Yeah. Your father and his other family. You know I'm well aware of both sides of that issue." Riley was best friends with her half-brother Alex.

"So I get why you're wary, but you ought to give Dylan a chance to prove he's one of the good guys."

Olivia forced a smile. There was more to it than just her father. Although she had to admit, he'd been the first man to shatter her faith and continued to do so. She'd thought the sun rose and set on Robert Dare and believed she was his princess, just like he'd always claimed. Problem was, he'd said it when he came home from his varied and extended business trips, arms loaded with gifts. And she'd been too young and naïve to know that those presents let him assuage his guilt because he had a mistress and other kids on the side. Kids he gave more time and more of himself to than he ever had to Olivia and her siblings.

Then came Olivia's huge college mistake that merely reinforced the fact that she found it difficult to believe what any man she was involved with claimed.

“Look, I’m sure Dylan is a good guy.” A sexy man with dark hair she wanted to run her fingers through and lips she wanted to taste again.

Riley shrugged. “So go into it with your eyes open. Hot sweaty sex can be very fulfilling. You don’t need to worry about things like relationships and being hurt if you don’t invest your heart.” Riley met her gaze. “Right?”

A slow smile curled Olivia’s mouth. Maybe she *should* stop over thinking things. Dylan wasn’t asking for her hand in marriage, God forbid. Then she’d have to dig into her deepest fears and darkest pain. He was just asking for lunch. And probably more but that kind of more she could handle.

Olivia nodded, finally getting her head in the correct frame of mind to deal with Dylan Rhodes.

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