

SHERYL LISTER

IT'S *You*
THAT I
NEED



Chapter 1

Melissa Tucker walked down the hall to the office she shared with another counselor and dropped down heavily in her chair. She leaned back, closed her eyes and massaged her temples.

“You look like you’ve been run through the mill.”

Melissa glanced over at her friend standing in the doorway and chuckled. “Girl, that and more.”

“Problems with your group tonight?”

“No. It went fine.”

Sandra Carter came into the office and leaned against the desk opposite Melissa. “Then what happened?”

“I stopped off at the Nelson’s to drop off more schoolwork for Jamie and—”

“Don’t tell me his father threatened you again.”

“Not in so many words, but he told me not to come back.”

“Has he left any other notes on your car at school?”

She shook her head. “Not aside from the two you already know about.” Twice in the last week since making visits to the family’s home, Melissa found threatening notes on her car in the school’s parking lot where she worked as the psychologist. “But the notes were typed and unsigned, so the police can’t prove he was the one who left them. You know as well as I do between what I do at the school and here, it could have been anyone.” Aside from her day job, Melissa volunteered three nights a week at the women’s center Sandra oversaw. The center provided counseling and basic medical services to women and children, and housed up to twenty clients as an emergency shelter. The loss of one of their college girlfriends to domestic violence had been the catalyst for Sandra’s opening of the place that was simply called Sanctuary.

“Maybe you need to find a bodyguard or something.” Sandra shook her head and opened her mouth to say something else but was interrupted by the night guard, Floyd McBride.

“Evening, ladies.”

“Hey, Floyd,” they chorused.

“Just wanted to let you know I’m going out back to check on things. Be back in a few.”

Sandra nodded and waited until he left to continue the conversation. “I don’t know how you do it—working all day at the school then coming here in the evening. It’s almost six and I’m about to fall on my face. These twelve-hour days are a killer.” She handled the day-to-day operations and had hired another woman to work the night shift.

Melissa chuckled. “Well, it’s not like I have anything to occupy my nights these days.”

“I hear you. What happened to that guy you—” The rest of her sentence was preempted by a woman’s screams coming from the lobby. The women shared a look and then took off toward the front.

When they arrived, a woman with two children was screaming hysterically and asking for help.

“Ma’am, slow down. I can’t understand what you’re saying,” Melissa said.

“I can’t. He’s... he’s...” The woman screamed again as a large man barreled through the door bellowing for her. He latched on to her arm and tried to drag the woman and her teenaged daughter out the door.

“Daddy, no!” the little boy, who looked to be eight or nine, yelled.

The man lunged at the child and, without thinking, Melissa jumped in front of the little boy. She registered pain as the man’s fist glanced off her cheek, but kept the child firmly out of harm’s way.

Seconds later, Floyd entered with his gun drawn. “Step back, sir and put your hands where I can see them!” The man raised his fist and Floyd added, “Don’t make me repeat myself. Step. Back.”

The man hesitated briefly before deciding he didn’t want to test the former police officer’s prowess with a gun, and raised his hands.

“Get down on your knees and put your hands behind your head. Slowly.” The big man complied and Floyd handcuffed him and hauled him to his feet. Floyd turned to Melissa. “You okay?”

Her face throbbed and her hands still shook, but she nodded.

Sandra hustled the woman and her two children down the hall to the secure area.

The lobby was flooded with sirens, flashing lights and several police officers within minutes. Melissa stayed around to give a statement, watched the police escort the man out then headed toward the back to check on the new clients.

“Melissa?”

She turned back when Floyd called her.

“Are you sure you’re okay? You should put something on your face,” he said gently. “It’s already starting to swell.”

She gave him a tired smile. “I will. Thanks.” She punched in the code and went through the door. Melissa found Sandra in one of the waiting rooms doing an intake. Sandra made the introductions—Mrs. Deborah Brown, nine year-old Darren and fourteen year-old Briana.

Mrs. Brown turned her concerned gaze on Melissa. “Are you okay, Ms. Tucker? I’m so sorry you ended up in the middle of my mess.”

She smiled, hoping to put the woman at ease. “I’m fine.” Melissa stayed around until Mrs. Brown and her children were settled before heading for her office.

Floyd was waiting. “I knew you’d make sure the clients were straightened out before taking care of yourself, so I brought you an ice pack and two Advil. You’re going to have a hell of a headache.” He gestured to her desk.

“You’re a lifesaver, Floyd... in more ways than one. Thanks for your help tonight.”

He nodded. “Anytime. You ladies are doing a good thing here.” He gave her a soft smile and departed.

Melissa washed down the pills with a few sips from her water bottle then placed the ice pack on her aching cheek. She leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes and shuddered to think about what the damage to her face would have been had the man hit her full force.

“How’s your face?” Sandra asked from the doorway.

She rolled her head in that direction. “Not as bad as it could’ve been.” They were still discussing Mrs. Brown when the receptionist called to let them know Mrs. Brown’s sister-in-law

had arrived. Melissa and Sandra met with Maxine Fletcher, who was upset that her brother had been taken to jail, but acknowledged he had to be held accountable for his actions. She would be returning for Mrs. Brown and her children in a few days, once she fixed up her place for them.

After seeing the woman out, Sandra came back and told Melissa, “Let’s go, sis. You need to go home.”

She came to her feet with a groan. “Normally, I’d argue with you, but not tonight.” Floyd escorted them to their cars. The two women shared a hug and went their separate ways.

When Melissa got home, she trudged down the hall to her bedroom and dropped her tote on a chair. She went into the bathroom to check her face for the first time, not really sure she wanted to see how it looked. She cringed at the purple tinged bruise on her left cheek. A couple of inches higher and he would have caught her in the eye. She surveyed the bruise a moment longer and hoped she’d easily be able to cover it with makeup. Shaking her head, she muttered, “It is only Tuesday.” At least Mrs. Brown and her children were safe. With any luck her husband would stay behind bars and things worked out with her sister-in-law until Mrs. Brown could find a new place of her own. She showered quickly and went to bed.

By Friday, the bruise had all but disappeared and Melissa had successfully concealed it so that no one at the school noticed.

“Hey, Melissa. You have a minute?”

Her head came up and she smiled. “Of course, boss,” she said to her friend and the school’s principal, Karen Bradshaw. Karen had been appointed to the position two years ago after the former principal’s sudden retirement due to a tragedy.

Karen laughed and entered Melissa’s office. “Whatever.” She slowly lowered herself pregnant body into a chair.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like there are butterflies dancing inside of me,” she answered with a wry smile.

“I envy you. I’d give anything to be a mother. But at the rate I’m going, I’ll most likely have to adopt.”

“I thought you were dating someone.”

Melissa shook her head. “We only went out a few times. I tried to give him a chance because he was a nice guy, but he was too focused on himself. He spent every date name dropping, telling me every great idea he had and how he was going to meet with this person or that one.” She waved a hand. “Come to think of it, I don’t think he ever asked what I did.”

Karen shook her head. “What about Kyle? I thought for sure that was going somewhere. You guys dated for over a year.”

She blew out a long breath. Kyle Jamison, along with his two best friends, Karen’s husband Damian Bradshaw, and Troy Ellis, owned a safety consultant firm and traveled the country conducting workshops on school and workplace safety. Melissa had met Kyle, Damian and Troy two years ago when their firm, DKT Consultants had been contracted by the school to overhaul their program. The two of them had been attracted to each other from the beginning, but it wasn’t until Karen and Damian’s wedding that Melissa and Kyle began a mini affair. “We had an agreement. No strings attached and either of us could end the relationship, no questions asked.”

“Did he end it?”

“No. I did.”

“But, why? Judging by the heat you two generated whenever you were in ten feet of each other, you can’t tell me the attraction just died out.”

Melissa averted her eyes and didn’t respond.

Karen’s eyes widened. “Oh, my goodness. You’re in love with him. Does he know?”

She shook her head. “What part of no strings attached didn’t you hear me say? I knew the score going in and wanted the same. I didn’t think I’d be able to fall in love again after what Alan did to me. And I wasn’t looking to. One broken heart is enough.” Melissa shook her head. “It was supposed to be just great sex, but I didn’t count on all Kyle’s sweet and thoughtful gestures.” Memories of flower deliveries and text messages or phone calls just to see how she was doing flashed in her mind. “Somewhere along the line, I broke the rules. I fell in love,” she added softly. “So I ended it.”

“Melissa, you should have talked to Kyle. He might’ve had the same feelings.”

“Kyle made his intentions perfectly clear. Enough about that. Did Damian get back yesterday?”

Karen grinned. “My wonderful husband was waiting for me when I got home and had dinner and a warm bath ready. That was their last training for the month and I’ll be glad to have him around for a while.” She paused. “How are you going to handle Kyle being here for Christmas next month? You know he and Troy plan to be here for almost two weeks. And you opting out of all the festivities isn’t an option. Terrence and Janae, Donovan and Simona will be here with their kids, too.” Janae was Karen’s best friend and had taught at the school until marrying R&B superstar Terrence “Monte” Campbell and moving to LA. The couple had a two

year-old daughter and was expecting their second child around the same time as Karen and Damian. Terrence's manager and best friend, Donovan Wright had married an ER nurse, who was guardian to her niece and had recently given birth to their first child, as well.

Melissa stood and Karen followed suit. "I don't know, but I have a good seven weeks to figure it out. I'll see you later. Enjoy your weekend and tell Damian I said hi."

The two women walked toward the front and Karen stopped at her office. "I will. I'll be right behind you as soon as I lock up."

Melissa said goodbye to the school secretary and went out to the parking lot. Her steps slowed as she neared her car. With shaky hands, she removed the sheet of paper tucked beneath her window wiper, unfolded it and read: *You're going to find out how it feels to ruin other people's lives.* Her gaze darted around the lot, but she saw no one. Unlocking the door, she slid behind the wheel and rested her forehead against the seat. This time she was frightened. The other two notes had merely warned her to stay away, but this one was a definite threat. It was typed like the others, so she held no hope by going to the police. Sandra's words from earlier in the week rang in her ears. *Maybe you need to find yourself a bodyguard or something.* Digging out her phone, she hesitated briefly then dialed the number she knew by heart. *Please let him answer.*

Kyle Jamison shot a dark look at his friend and business partner, Troy Ellis. They had concluded the office safety training workshop for a company in their Charlotte, North Carolina hometown that day. Their other partner, Damian Bradshaw, had done his portion of the training yesterday and immediately flew back to San Jose, California to his wife, Karen. Since they'd married, Damian met them at the training sites, and all the company meetings were held through

videoconferences. When two of the women invited them to dinner, Troy had readily accepted the invitation and Kyle hadn't objected since it had been a few months since his last date. But after listening to the woman next to him go on and on about being single for the last couple of hours, he was more than ready to call it a night. They'd finished dinner and dessert more than half an hour ago and he could think of a thousand other things he'd rather be doing at the moment. He eyed the bill sitting on the table, trying to come up with a subtle way to pay and leave. A touch on his arm drew him out of his thoughts. Carol, Colleen... or Charlene... was smiling at him... again.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" Kyle asked.

She giggled. "We were talking about the latest movies. I haven't been to one lately because I hate going alone. It's so much more fun when you go with someone else. Don't you agree?" She gave him a meaningful look.

Troy, with his wine glass to his lips, covered a laugh with a cough. "Sorry, went down the wrong way."

Kyle skewered him with another glare over the rim of his own glass then smiled pleasantly at the woman and said, "I'm sure your friend here would go with you." He gestured to the other woman.

Troy must have sensed that Kyle was at the end of his patience because he said, "Marjorie and Colleen, we want to thank you for your company this evening, but we're going to have to call it a night. Kyle and I have some business we need to wrap up."

Thank God. "Yes, thank you," Kyle added. He reached for the bill, but Troy got to it first.

"I'll take care of this and we'll walk you ladies to your cars," Troy said.

Once the bill was settled and the women drove off, Kyle scrubbed a hand down his face and slanted Troy a glance. “Next time you’re aiming to play Mr. Nice Guy, leave me out of it.”

Troy laughed. “What? You didn’t enjoy the two hundred fifty times Colleen mentioned she was single? I thought you were looking for a hookup.”

“Even if I was, Colleen would definitely not be the one.”

“That’s what you said about the last three women you went out with. I thought you wanted someone only interested in a one-nighter. You’ve been singing that same tune for the past two decades.”

He shrugged. “We didn’t hit it off and there’s no need to keep wasting time with the wrong one. I might miss the right one.”

Troy folded his arms. “You sure that’s the problem? Maybe you’re looking for something a little more permanent these days.”

“I don’t know, maybe. But I’ve still got some time before I think about settling down.” Kyle said the words, but a small part of him wasn’t so certain that was the case anymore. “I don’t see you taking the plunge.”

“I don’t have a problem with marriage. When I find the right woman, I’ll gladly settle down. The older I get, the more I’m finding I want what Damian and Karen have.”

Kyle pulled his keys out of his pocket and nodded. “I’ll see you later,” he called over his shoulder as he walked toward his car.

“You should call her, you know,” Troy called back.

He stopped and turned. “I’m not calling Colleen. I just spent almost three hours trying to get away from her.”

Troy shook his head. “Not her.”

“Then who are you talking about?”

“Melissa.”

Kyle’s jaw tightened. “Melissa made it clear ten months ago that what we had was over.”

“That’s only because you never told her how you feel. Night, bro.” Troy got into his car and started the engine without waiting for a reply.

Muttering under his breath, Kyle stalked to his car and made the twenty-minute drive home. Once there, he went directly to his bedroom, stripped off his clothes and showered. He emerged ten minutes later still thinking about Melissa. He hadn’t talked to her since she broke things off right after Christmas last year. It would be Christmas again in a few weeks and he wasn’t sure he wanted to be alone.

He dropped down on the side of the bed and powered on his cell. He’d forgotten to turn it back on after the training. Kyle went still upon seeing a missed call from Melissa. He listened to the message: *Kyle, it’s Melissa. I know I’m probably the last person you want to talk to, but I don’t know what else to do. I... I need you, Kyle. Please call me.*

Something in the tone of her voice gave him pause and had his heart pounding in alarm. He glanced at the time. It wasn’t quite seven in California. Kyle started to call her back, but changed his mind. They didn’t have another training scheduled for a few weeks, so he had some time. He called the airline, booked a flight for early the next morning, packed, then called Troy.

“What, you changed your mind about hooking up with Colleen and need her number?”

Troy asked with a chuckle when he answered.

“Melissa left me a message and wanted me to call her. Something’s wrong and I’m going to San Jose in the morning. I’ll be back in about a week if everything gets settled by then.”

Troy’s voice turned serious. “What happened?”

“I have no idea, but the sound of her message has me worried.”

“Does she know you’re coming?”

“No.”

“I see,” Troy said slowly. “You said she wanted you to call her, yet you’re flying across the country... unannounced. Sounds like you’re planning to do more than just help her.”

“You might be right.”

“Wishing you luck. Keep me posted.”

“Will do. Later.” Kyle disconnected and smiled.

Chapter 2

Melissa woke up Saturday morning and tried to swallow her disappointment that Kyle hadn't called back. But what did she expect since she had been the one to abruptly end their relationship? She regretted ending things as she had, but there hadn't been any other way around it. Finding out about Alan Norris' betrayal had done a number on her, so a friends-with-benefits relationship worked perfectly in her world. That way there would be no broken promises, no waiting around for a ring and a house that, in the end, had been given to someone else. Shaking off the bad memories, she got up and decided to go over to the center to check on Mrs. Brown.

Sandra greeted Melissa with a smile and shake of her head. "What are you doing here today? I swear you put in almost as many hours as I do, and this is my job."

"Good morning to you too, Sunshine," Melissa responded with a laugh. "I just came in for a few minutes to check on Mrs. Brown and her children."

"Well, you're in luck. Her sister-in-law just arrived. Mrs. Brown is gathering up her things now. Come on."

Mrs. Brown's eyes lit up when she saw Melissa. "Ms. Tucker. I'm so glad you're here."

“How are you?”

The woman looked over at her children, then back to Melissa and let out a long breath.

“Well, I think we’re going to be all right. I’ll never be able to thank you enough for what you’ve done, especially keeping Darren safe.” She swiped at the tears and reached for Sandra and Melissa’s hands. “Thank you both so much.”

Melissa gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “You’re welcome. Please let us know how you’re doing.”

Sandra handed her a card. “If you ever need anything for you or the children, be sure to call us.”

“I will.” She turned to her sister-in-law. “We’re ready, Maxine.”

Maxine nodded. “I’m sure my brother would want his family safe.” She turned to Sandra and Melissa. “You know he’s facing up to a year in jail and a fine because of the assault charges. Don’t know how he’s going to be able to keep his job if he’s in jail.” She shook her head and added with a rueful smile, “I’m sorry for going on and on. I just wish he’d made better choices. And, like I said the other night, he has to pay for what he did. Thank you for helping my family.”

Melissa and Sandra shared a quick look, knowing since this wasn’t the man’s first offense, and with the current assault charges, he more than likely would serve some time.

Sandra said, “I truly wish Mr. Brown the best.” They led the family out and went back to Sandra’s office.

Sandra closed the door. “Okay, was it my imagination or did Ms. Fletcher seem a little upset by the fact that her brother may have to do some extended jail time?”

“You caught that edge in her voice, too,” Melissa said. “But then she made the comment about him having to pay for his actions and thanked us. Strange.”

“Agreed. I’m glad to see that the bruise is gone from your face. Anything else going on?”

She hesitated before confessing that another note had been left on her car.

“Oh, Melissa. Did you call the police?”

“No. The note was typed just like the other one so they’re probably going to tell me the same thing.”

“But this one was an actual threat. I would think that changes things. Have you thought about hiring a private investigator?”

“Actually, I called Kyle.”

Sandra’s eyes widened. “Kyle? I thought you two... um... how will he be able to help you? You need someone who knows what they’re doing. I don’t think teaching safety training qualifies.”

“It does if the trainer is a former police detective.”

“You never mentioned that, missy.”

Melissa smiled. “You never asked.”

“Well, what did he say?”

“I left a message for him yesterday, but he hasn’t called back. Not that I can blame him because of the way I ended things.”

Sandra came and put an arm around Melissa’s shoulder. “Even if he was upset about that, I can’t see him not responding to a request for help. But what will you do if he doesn’t?”

“I already decided that if he doesn’t call me by tomorrow, I’ll go to the police.”

“I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I. The good thing is whoever this person is doesn’t know where I live. Yet.”

“You need to be careful. If necessary, you’re more than welcome to stay at my house for a while.”

She chuckled. “I don’t want Joe accusing me of interrupting time with his baby.” Sandra’s husband, Joe, doted on his wife and everyone around them knew it.

“Girl, please. We have plenty of space in that house, and I’d put you in the guest bedroom downstairs, far from our room. That way you wouldn’t hear a thing.”

Melissa laughed. “Okay, fast mama. I think we need to end this conversation.” Still chuckling, she left to grab some papers from her own office before leaving. However, she was cornered by two teens and ended up staying for another two hours.

She made it home around noon and her growling stomach let her know that the piece of toast and cup of coffee she’d had in the morning was long gone. She changed into a pair of sweats, long-sleeved tee and her favorite thick purple socks then made her way to the kitchen. Too hungry to fix something elaborate, Melissa settled on a turkey sandwich, raw carrots and a few pretzels. She got a glass of water and went to eat at the desk in her bedroom. She had several Individual Educational Plan meetings for her students to get done before the Christmas break and wanted to start gathering the information she’d need to determine whether each student had reached his or her yearly goals. Then came the daunting task of testing. She would have to coordinate dates with the teachers, as they would be doing their own testing.

Halfway through her meal, the doorbell rang. Melissa dropped the pretzel back on the plate and wiped her hands. She wasn’t expecting any visitors and figured it might be a solicitor. She had so many people coming to her door these days that she seriously considered getting one of those signs that read: No Solicitors. But when she looked through the peephole, her heart nearly stopped upon seeing Kyle. She quickly opened the door.

“Kyle? What are you doing here?”

His brow lifted a fraction. “You said you needed me. May I come in?”

Realizing she was still standing there in shock, she unlocked the screen and stepped back. But not far enough. The touch of his body as he brushed by her sent a shock of desire through her. He looked even better than she remembered. Just like the first time she had seen him, she thought the locs and pierced ears gave him a sexy, dangerous edge. He’d let his hair grow and it almost reach his shoulders now. He, now, also sported a small mustache and neatly barbered goatee, all of which made it hard not to drag him to her bedroom and pick up exactly where they’d left off.

Kyle leaned down and touched his mouth to hers. “It’s good to see you, Melissa.”

“Same here,” she murmured and moved past him toward the living room. He’d only been in her house for one minute and already her body ached for him. “Can I get you something to eat or drink? Why didn’t you call me back? I wasn’t expecting... I didn’t mean for you to jump on a plane and—”

He cut her off with a kiss. “Relax.” Taking her hand, he led her over to the sofa and sat next to her. “What’s going on?”

“I can show you better than I can tell you.” Melissa went to retrieve her cell phone and pulled up the pictures she had taken of the first two notes and placed the third one on the table. She pointed to the first one picture. “This was left on my windshield two weeks ago.” She waited until he read it, and then scrolled to the second one. “This one was left a few days later and this one,” she slid the paper in front of him, “was on the car when I came out of the school yesterday.”

He said nothing for several seconds, but she saw the solitary muscle ticking in his jaw. Finally, he glanced her way, concern etched in his features. “Have you contacted the police?”

“I did with the first two—I took the pictures before giving the notes to them—but they told me there wasn’t much they could do since they were typed and didn’t actually make a threat, just basically asking me to stay away from the family. I called you when I got the last one.”

“I’m glad you did. You should have called me sooner.”

“I didn’t expect you to just show up, I only…”

His dark gaze held hers. “Only what? You had to know I would come.”

She nodded. Yes, she had known. And on some deep level she wanted him here.

“You think I could get a cup of coffee? Then you can tell me more about what’s going on.”

“Of course. I’ll be right back.” While brewing the coffee, Melissa tried to convince herself that she had made the right decision in calling Kyle. She had no doubt he could help her, but the way he’d been staring at her since he had arrived and the way the chemistry between them still burned said it would be easy to fall back into an affair. And she couldn’t let that happen.