Chapter One

Ellora Duvall picked up her morning latte with an extra shot of espresso and merged into the throng of Wall Street suits packing the sidewalk. She dodged a gang of skateboarders and inhaled the exhaust-filled air as if it were the fresh Colorado mountain breeze she’d breathed since childhood.

It was Monday morning, she lived in New York, and she worked at the most prestigious equity firm on Wall Street. Life couldn’t be better, though her family insisted she should think about marriage.

Ridiculous. She was only twenty-two years old. She was starting her career. She was making more money than she’d ever thought possible. Marriage wasn’t an option, though once she would’ve considered it.

Her heart drummed, and her mouth went dry. She pushed thoughts of what-might-have-been out of her mind.

From the newspaper stand in front of her office building, she scooped up an investment newspaper and plopped several bills on the countertop. She scanned the headlines and pushed through the revolving doors into the marble lobby that echoed with the taps of script-embossed shoes crossing the tiled floor. It was the same headline she’d been reading since she’d graduated college over a year ago—STOCK MARKET CRASH IMMINENT.

She tucked the newspaper under her arm and raced to the elevators. The markets hit record highs every other day. A crash wasn’t possible.

The elevator doors slid open and she joined the mass of humanity cramming into the postage stamp sized space. She sucked in one last deep breath, tightened her stomach and faced the elevator doors.

The suits towered around her. Some spoke about their weekend, others, sipped their coffees. All seemed charged and ready for the opening bell of the stock market.

“Ellora Duvall.” The voice behind her was deep and rich and made her spine go rigid.

Zach Lowe. Alarm blew through her. She hadn’t heard that voice since high school, but she’d memorized it along with his square jaw, his crooked smile and the mischievous glint in his eyes.

She jerked her head up. Raging hot latte squirted through the cap’s spout and splashed over her hand. She gritted her teeth. Yell in this cab filled with suits? Not on her life. She hadn’t looked to see who else was in the cab. She hadn’t realized she stood right in front of Zach. It’d be her luck that her company’s president would be in the elevator. And what would Zach think?

A handkerchief with a monogrammed Z wrapped around her hand and mopped away the coffee.

The elevator glided to a stop and the doors slid open.

“This is my floor.” Ellora stepped from the cab. When the doors closed, she’d race to the bathroom and stick her hand under cold running water.

And scream—from humiliation and pain.

The doors closed.

“You need ice on that.” Zach was standing behind her.

She whirled around. He stood in front of the mirrored doors that reflected his muscular form cloaked in a gray suit.

“You got off the elevator,” she stammered.

“Of course, I got off. You burned your hand. I feel responsible. Let’s take care of that. Now.”

“Zach, you don’t have to help me. I’ll just run some water—”

He said nothing. He stepped past her and strode through a sea of cubicles toward the break room at the end of the hall. Several heads rose above the cubicle panels and stared after him.

That happened to Zach in high school. When he passed by, every head turned.

The company president moved down the hallway studying a prospectus. He stopped and stared over his glasses at Zach.

“Zach Lowe.” He glanced at his watch. “I didn’t expect to see you today. Our golf game isn’t until Wednesday unless you’re having second thoughts.”

“On the contrary, George.” Zach shook the president’s hand and strode down the aisle. “I look forward to it.” He stepped into the break room.

“Hello, Mr. Miller,” Ellora murmured to the president. Her shoulders hunched, she scooted past him.

“Hello. Erica, isn’t it?”

“Ellora. Ellora Duvall. It’s nice to see you again, sir.” She turned to him. The smile she pasted over her mouth felt as if wires had been threaded through her cheeks. When he turned away, she raced to the break room.

“Come here.” Zach dropped a handful of ice into a plastic bag. Where did he find the bag? He lifted her coffee cup from her hand.

She set her briefcase and purse on a round table. “How did you know where the break room was, and how do you know Mr. Miller?”

“If you’ve been in one equities firm, you’ve been in them all. The break room’s always in the same place. As for George, he and I go way back.”

“How far back could that be? You were only one year ahead of me in high school.”

“And two years older since you skipped a grade.” His eyes grazed hers.

Ellora flushed. That and the fact that she had a December birthday made her the youngest in her class. She’d always felt awkward and she’d never really fit in.

“I didn’t even realize you worked in this building,” she said.

“Now you do. I’m going to wrap this bag around your hand.” He uttered the statement as if it were a warning. He gave her a full look.

Heated blood raced through her veins. “Zach, I don’t need—”

He took her hand and draped the ice bag over it. “Does that hurt?”

He had no idea. “A little.”

“Let’s take care of this.” He lifted his gaze to hers. “When did you start working for JRK?”

“Almost the day I graduated.” She couldn’t look away from the deep brilliant blue eyes that scooped air from her lungs. “I had planned to backpack through Europe with some friends, but when JRK offered me the job, I didn’t want to miss this opportunity. I mean, a chance to work on Wall Street and for one of the most prestigious firms. I accepted their offer and canceled my trip.”

“That was smart.” He said it in a way that spread warmth through her chest.

“What about you? I’d heard you were in New York.”

“Where’d you here that?”

Her throat dried. She couldn’t tell him he was the number one gossip topic whenever she got together with her high school friends.

“Somewhere.” She dragged out the word. “Which firm are you with?”

“Bell Equity.”

“The Black Knight of Wall Street?” She almost hiccupped. “Zach, they have a terrible reputation. They buy companies and fire employees. Maybe I should be afraid of you.”

“You can’t believe everything you read.” His smile seemed dry. “How does your hand feel?”

“Huh?” She’d almost forgotten why he was standing in front of her, looking into her eyes and holding her hand. “Oh, it feels better, so much better.” She pulled her hand free from his touch and took one step backwards. The void dropping between them felt as if they were floating in different galaxies. “It’ll be fine. Not damaged or anything.” Why had she said that? She wanted to slam her palm into her forehead. It sounded stupid—stuck-in-high-school stupid.

He studied her a moment. Something flickered in his eyes. “If you think you’ll need anything...”

“I won’t need anything but thank you for helping me.” She was talking too fast.

The corner of his mouth curved. “It was the least I could do. You should still keep ice on your hand.”

“I’ll do that.” She hadn’t even heard what he said.

“Congratulations on the Wall Street job. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

Her jaw froze. She couldn’t say anything.

For a moment she thought he’d touch his hand to her cheek. She could almost feel his heat.

He didn’t touch her. He didn’t do anything except nod and walk out of the break room.

And out of her life.

Ellora stared at the empty doorway. The break room felt cold and dark.

The heat in her chest had to be from the high school crush she had on Zach Lowe.

If that were true, why did it burn? She wanted to rush after him, ask him out on a date.

Date? Hadn’t she told her family she didn’t want to date? Didn’t have time to date?

But if she dated Zach...

He wouldn’t date her. His mother, Kim, had told her he’d never date her. Ellora had been high school geeky. Her family wasn’t in his class. Zach had been one of the cool kids. She’d heard about the girls he’d dated. She’d heard about how much fun he was at parties. She’d heard how all the girls wanted to be with him.

She and Zach had been in the same chemistry class and she was always helping him. Today, he’d helped her, and seemed happy to do so.

That meant nothing.

Kim’s cold words rang in Ellora’s ears. Her insides shivered. It was six years ago when Kim had cornered Ellora at her parents’ party. No one else was around. No one heard Kim’s warning. But Ellora never forgot the look on Kim’s face and the sharpness in her voice.

“Don’t get any ideas about Zach, hon. You’ll never be good enough for my son.”