



Wild Impulses

Anisa Damien

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Chapter One

What was the proper protocol for addressing a one night stand?

There is no process, hence 'one-night' stand!

Chills swept down Blu Evan's spine. She hadn't been able to get that night out of her mind, no matter how much she'd tried. The last place on earth she'd expected to find herself was forging her way through the hustle and bustle of downtown Chicago. The blustery morning air made her teeth chatter and her toes were frozen solid inside her boots. Winter in the windy city was a bitch.

If there was one morning she'd wished she'd tossed the covers over her head, it was today.

Blu wondered for the hundredth time if she'd made the right decision about confronting the man whose touch had branded his presence into her dreams, turning her sleep into an erotic frenzy of need.

She offered the doorman a stiff smile and groaned as the immediate rush of heat inside the Sears Tower enveloped her frozen body. She removed the scarf from around her neck, smoothed the shoulder-length twisted braids atop her head, and glanced into the shiny glass wall. Her flushed brown cheeks reflected back at her, along with fear and anticipation...

What the hell was she going to say to him?

"Thanks for the multiple orgasms" or "Care to go for another round of tongue laps?" Or maybe "I hope that hell has a place warm enough to fry your lying ass." None of those retorts seemed adequate. An entire month had lapsed since she had rocketed out from under J's satin sheets without a backward glance, only to find out that he wasn't who he'd said he was.

She'd slept with the enemy!

What a night of carnal bliss it'd been. Not that roll-over-and-smoke-a-cigarette crap either. No, what they'd shared was like a scene from one of her most blatant fantasies. She'd been captivated by his Afro-British accent that could give James Bond a run for his money and his tall, sleek dark looks. He'd shaken and stirred her in ways she hadn't even imagined.

Blu wished that she could push the stop button on the erotic images replaying in her mind. Instead, she stepped inside the elevator, punched the button for the thirty-fifth floor, and willed the powers that be to cover her back. Just this once. Her destination? Suite 3530, J. Graeham Corporation.

His cover had been blown the moment she'd recognized him on the cover of *Business Today* magazine. Jaden Graeham and J were indeed one in the same. He was a corporate shark, raiding fledgling companies until he'd whittled their remains into a hefty profit. She paid no mind to the fact that he looked sexy as hell in his Armani suit, or the equally devastating smile that caused heat to pool between her legs at the mere memory of feeling those lips on her skin. The smug bastard had outright lied to her.

She wanted to strangle him. No, forget strangulation—castration—now that could be just the punishment he deserved. Pity, seeing as her overactive libido had become particularly fond of that well-endowed part of his anatomy.

Bedding a corporate raider was a big no-no in Blu's book, especially when he had a secret plot to take down her family's company, or so she thought. It'd be a cold day in hell first! She knew how men like him worked; they took what they wanted, *when* they wanted it, consequences be damned.

Jaden Graeham ate, breathed and slept adrenaline. She'd learned that lesson the hard way, from a man just like him. She wasn't about to take a repeat course. He'd set this little game into motion that night in Paris and now she was going to finish it. She should have known something was amiss weeks ago when a mysterious buyer had somehow beaten Elan Cosmetics, Blu's family business, to the punch by buying out Mirage Industries, Elan's long running competitor.

She knew what hard work was, especially being an African-American woman in the cutthroat world of cosmetics. It always came down to the bottom line: money. Her ability to produce some of the most alluring fragrances in the business was what made the competition want to steal her away from Elan.

There wasn't enough money in the world to make Blu turn her back on her family, a fact that she was promptly going to school Jaden on.

"We were better off without the complications of a man, isn't that what we agreed upon?" she questioned the fierce pounding of her heart.

With a melodious ding, the elevator doors opened, causing her body to jolt with anticipation. A streak of hesitation shot to the pit of her stomach. In a million years, she'd never thought their paths would cross again, which made it impossible to forget the ways he'd touched her inside and out.

Blu took a deep breath, stepping out of the elevator. "Get it together." She was here for one reason: to give Jaden or J, or whatever he cared to call himself these days, a piece of her heavily hormone-induced mind. As long as she kept that straight, she wouldn't worry about imagining having him in her bed again, demonstrating moves that would give the ancient rituals of Kama Sutra a run for its money.

Again her guilty conscious pinched her. Deep down, she knew none of this would be happening if she hadn't had sex with him. The past was the past. She couldn't change it. She *could* however, shape the future. She'd fight him and her wayward desires to her last breath if that was what it took.

"Ma'am, excuse me. Do you have an appointment?" A robust redhead stated in an irascible voice from the front desk of Jaden's office.

Blu breezed past the secretary. She'd handle this matter without someone running interference for him. "No, I don't need one." She smiled brightly at the woman and raced to the closed door of his office. "Thank you."

Just as she reached for the doorknob, the secretary—Martha, her heavily embossed name tag proclaimed—pulled her hand away.

"We can do this the nice way and you can schedule an appointment," the woman huffed, her breath coming in short bouts, "or the hard way and have security escort you out of the building."

"I'm not leaving until I talk to Graeham. *You* can either pick up your phone and tell him Miss Evans is here to see him, or *I* can walk in unannounced." Blu inhaled sharply. The woman reminded her of the stern-faced Catholic nuns from grade school.

"You can't go in there. He's in a meeting," Martha countered, her face turning red. Her gaze darted over Blu's outfit, sizing her up. "What *is* your business with Mr.

Graeham?”

“That’s between me and him,” Blu stated, twisting the doorknob.

“Oh, no you won’t.” The secretary’s words dissipated into thin air as Jaden’s office door burst open. Both women froze.

“What in the bloody hell is going on?” a husky male voice questioned. Irritation clipped his words; his intent gaze roamed over the two women.

“I’m sorry, sir. I tried to stop her.” Martha tilted her chin defiantly as she shot a look at Blu.

Blu straightened herself into a standing position. Her heart bungee jumped against her chest. She smoothed a palm down her red leather jacket. She focused on Jaden Graeham warily. The man was as determined as he was ruthless in his pursuit to get what he wanted, even if that object was someone who didn’t want him back.

Okay, so that last part wasn’t entirely true! Blu would never admit it aloud. Her body hummed to a vibration that could only be sated by feeling Jaden thrust deep inside of her. She remembered all too well the feel of his tongue on her skin. The sweet, almost painful tension of that same tongue on her clitoris, bringing her to earth shattering climax. Again and again.

Damn, but the man did have some skills in the bedroom!

She groaned inwardly. If she kept her thoughts on that night she would never accomplish what she set out to do by coming here.

Jaden turned to his secretary. “It’s all right, Martha. Please see that Miss Evans and I aren’t disturbed. Thank you.”

Blu pursed her lips at the woman’s disapproving scowl. With one last glare, the woman returned to her desk.

You didn’t come all this way to turn tail and run!

She squared her shoulders and faced the devil. “Well, well, J—I mean, Mr. Jaden Graeham, we meet again. Except this time it appears all cards are on the table.”

Blu tried not to take in his handsome profile as she narrowly maneuvered her way past his powerful presence into his office. His six-foot two-inch frame made the feat unavoidable. Her nipples tightened. Her body was on fire, making her movements seem laborious. The look in his wicked gaze seemed to say that he hadn’t forgotten their interlude any more than she had.

Her eyes roamed around the spacious office, fully stocked with a mini bar, a full-size Corinthian leather sofa and matching winged-back chairs. The rich mahogany wood and hunter green décor suited Jaden, she decided silently, turning around to find his gaze resting on her.

His gray Brooks Brothers suit fit him to the proverbial “T”, lining a pair of broad shoulders and long, muscular thighs. A crisp white shirt, geometrical tie and Italian leather dress shoes spoke of opulence. His Afro-European heritage was etched in the hue of his rich penny-brown complexion. Long eyelashes fanned the sharp-featured angles of his lean cheekbones and retrousse nose—the only imperfection being a scant few freckles. His wavy, jet-black hair was bluntly cut and framed an unlined forehead.

She had to concede that, in this case at least, the clothing wasn’t what made the man. Quite the opposite, the man made the clothes. She couldn’t deny the steamy masculinity that Jaden presented.

Nothing was amiss. Blu hadn’t expected anything less. She’d read up on him and had

learned he had a flair for fashion, women, spending money and equally quadrupling his fortune in the same heartbeat. Nothing but the best would do.

“This is a pleasant surprise.” His resonant voice wrapped around her, luring her deeper under his spell, every word carved out in his sensual British accent.

“So was finding out about your true identity.”

“You got me,” Jaden said. His gaze feasted on her like a starving man, scalding Blu from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes.

“That is what you expected, isn’t it?”

His hazel eyes turned a deep holly green, touching her in ways his body could not at the moment. He moved closer, as he bracketed a hand above her head at the door frame. “I didn’t expect to be standing at my office door, trying to decide whether to pick you up and make love to you on my desk...” he lifted his fingers to toy with one of her twisted locks, his eyes burning with sensual secrets, “—or against the wall.”

He wanted to make love to her? Again? Now?

What was it about this man that projected such raw energy and power that undeniably attracted him to her? She had to get a grip. She hadn’t come here to make another mistake. Although her body was willing to pay the price, she would never put her family at risk. “Sex and business don’t mix.”

Blu licked her lips while Jaden continued to stare hungrily. He seemed unconvinced of her statement. “Can we discuss business or is playing games part of your normal regimen?”

“If only you knew, love.” He stepped back, allowing her minimal space to pass. “Please, have a seat.” He made a gesture for her to enter the office, appearing to be ever the corporate mogul he was.

She knew better and didn’t dare to ask what his enigmatic statement meant. The answer would come at too high a cost. The passion she’d witnessed in his eyes still remained. Potent. Blunt. Just like the man himself.

Blu didn’t bother fooling herself; she wasn’t Jaden’s main target. It was the challenge she presented, more to the point, her family’s company. She couldn’t confuse lust for competition and it was a full-fledged war between her and Jaden. Nothing would change that. Not even the fact that she could feel the dampness between her thighs at just the thought of having him there. Licking her. Teasing her.

She slowly moved to a high-back chair. The sound of the door closing made her all the more cognizant of his presence. A quick glance around the office confirmed what she already knew of his taste: expensive, classy and modern. All man.

“Are you after Elan Cosmetics?”

Jaden frowned, leaning a firm hip against the edge of his desk. “Is that any way to greet an old friend?”

“Is that what you think we are? Friends?” Blu willed the blood in her veins to stop sizzling. This was insanity! She shouldn’t be attracted to him, but felt like the moth to his flame. “You are deceitfully charming as usual, Mr. Graeham, but you shouldn’t waste it on me. You were simply one night of pleasure and little else.”

“Ouch.” Jaden grimaced. “I for one, have not been able to get your lips off of my mind since that night at Hotel Crescent.”

“I can’t say the same,” Blu lied. She forced her wayward thoughts from the steamy open-mouthed kisses they’d shared. She’d been so impulsive. The reminder made her

more determined to avoid his sensual web. "I'm surprised that a man of your stature doesn't practice self-restraint. It appears you make yourself more vulnerable than you may realize."

"Vulnerability only makes passion more attainable. I never deny myself anything, especially pleasure." Jaden's deep voice smoothed over her like silk. "I have to admit ... I'm not accustomed to a woman walking away from me."

She'd bet he wasn't!

"Was it a good view?"

He chuckled, his eyes smoldering. "Smashing."

The woody scent of his aftershave invaded Blu's senses, tingling her nostrils. She supposed his do-or-die attitude came with the cutthroat territory he reigned in, but she could be just as ruthless when someone was messing with her family. "Thanks."

"What I remember the most was you screaming my name as you climaxed in my arms." He walked closer, his scent washing over her. "What better view could a man have?"

The temperature elevated in the office. Tension mounted.

"Pleasure is overrated." Blu tossed a pointed look at him. She could play with the best of them. She'd overcome so much in her life. She was long past the days of being easily intimidated by powerful men.

She told herself that Jaden Graeham was just one more man. But what a man he was! He was everything she'd once thought appealed to her, but life had taught her differently.

"You've been indulging in the wrong pleasures." His eyes sparkled with playful mischief. "I could remedy that, if you'd like."

Blu's breath caught as she imagined how he could "remedy" her unwavering case of lust. "I don't *like* and I pity you. I've forgotten all about that night and I suggest you do the same."

Yeah, easier said than done. She wanted to laugh out loud. Trying to forget about spending the night in Jaden's arms was like forgetting how to breathe.

"Well then, I guess now would be a splendid time to inform you that I want more than just one night with you." His gaze sought hers, his voice lowered. "I want to smell your scent on my lips. Again."

He was toying with her!

Blu cleared her throat, her grip tightened on the arm of her chair. "Forgetting should be simple for a man used to going from one conquest to the next."

"Sometimes a venture starts as a conquest and ends up being much more." Jaden rose, strutting to his chair behind his desk. He sat down regally as if he had all the time in the world, lacing his long fingers together. The pensive look on his face would have made anyone who entered the room think intense negotiations were taking place.

"Cut the bullshit!" Blu sat rod straight. She swept a few thick locks behind her ear and tried to appear unfazed by his nearness. "What game are you playing here?"

Jaden folded his arms across his broad chest, his gaze sweeping her face. "Game?" His outward appearance gave nothing away, except for the slight rise of his thick eyebrows, which only infuriated her more. "I don't have time for games, darling."

"You stole Mirage Industries from Elan Cosmetics. You want my family's company, don't you? That *was* your whole purpose for Paris, wasn't it? Screw the daughter of a multi-billionaire and calculate your next move of attack. Although you are a shrewd

man—your plan,” Blu clapped her palms together, “bravo. It’ll be a cold day in hell before you get your greedy hands on my company.”

“Is that the story you tell yourself, love? Anything to stop you from clenching your thighs together, wishing I was there in between them, right?” Jaden nodded his head.

Blu clamped her lips together. Did the man have x-ray vision? Could he feel the tension building within her body, the heat deep within her womb? His words left her feeling exposed.

“Yes, let’s play it safe,” He went on, “For the record, I *bought* Mirage *before* I knew that Elan Cosmetics was connected to you.”

“I don’t believe you. There’s no such thing as ‘playing it safe’ when you’re involved.” She bolted from her chair, placing her hands on her hips. “I won’t be a pawn in one of your little conquests.”

“Oh, I want to toy with you, but not in the way you think.” His gaze was riveted on her face, and then moved to her breasts. “Remember what it felt like when I was inside of you?”

“Why? Will my answer cause you to admit your true intentions?”

“I have, but maybe you didn’t hear me. So let me be blatantly clear.” Jaden rounded his desk, glaring into her face. “If you believe that Elan Cosmetics is my target, you’re not even bloody warm,” He closed the few inches between them. “I want to be there when you find out what it’s like to lose yourself. When you realize what it means when a woman forgets where her body ends and a man’s begins. The only challenge I want to meet is breaking your control, to send you over the edge as many times as you want me to.”

Blu opened her mouth but no sound emerged, and she couldn’t ignore the blatant lust in his eyes, it only intensified the tingling sparking throughout her body. The man had her number. She looked away from him, refusing to acknowledge the slow burn of heat that spread down her limbs at his open perusal. Taking a deep breath, she willed the fierce pounding of need to ebb. There was too much at stake to give in to this ... attraction to Jaden. It just couldn’t be.

Blu went on. “You used your sordid connections to get inside information.”

“You’re avoiding the real issue.”

“The only issue being discussed here is your underhanded business practices.”

Jaden sighed as if bored with her accusations. “You’re referring to Miss Prescott, of course?”

He was referring to an unscrupulous employee that had worked in Elan’s advertising department under Blu’s brother, Napier. A suspected implanted spy from Jaden’s team. During Prescott’s employ, valuable information to several new product lines had been mimicked by another competitor that Jaden’s corporation had taken over.

The way she saw it, no one other than Miss Prescott could have been the culprit. She’d quit her position without an explanation shortly after the copy-cat products had been announced to the public.

“Of course.” Blu narrowed her eyes.

“Do you have proof?”

“Are you denying that that *woman* didn’t provide you or a member of your staff with confidential information regarding Elan’s business strategies?”

Jaden placed his hands in his pockets. “I’ll give you one thing, you are persistent.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’.”

“You can take it however you want to Blu. The fact remains, I have a bigger objective.”

“Surely, you haven’t resorted to using women to do your bidding, although I wouldn’t put it past you.”

She watched a nerve twitch in Jaden’s jaw. She wondered if he’d ever let any person, business or otherwise, speak to him in such a manner. She didn’t give a damn. He was messing with the wrong woman.

“Not that I’m admitting to which fashion I receive information or that I have to justify my actions to you...” Jaden eyed her hard. “—but I will use any means necessary to get what I want, Miss Evans. Surely you know of my reputation.”

“Your reputation is what makes me wary of you, Mr. Graeham. You and I both know you bought Mirage Industries for one of two reasons: A, you’re after Elan Cosmetics, or B, you’re after me, because I ... we...”

He grinned. “Say it. Made love.”

She cut her eyes at him. “Had sexual relations in Paris.”

“Now you sound like a former US president, darling.”

Blu gritted her teeth. “Care to tell me which objective is on your plate, so I can throw it back in your face?” His expression was one of complete and utmost defiance, arrogance and pure male satisfaction.

Jaden stood, bringing his body a fraction of an inch from hers. Heat, anger and desire vibrated between them. “We need to get something straight right here.”

“Yes, *we* do. Paris was a one-time event and I don’t respond well to intimidation. So if your takeover of Mirage has something to do with my rejection...”

He laughed. “Rejection?” He stepped closer. His chest rose and fell in a heavy cadence. “I can’t remember when making love to someone three times in one night signified rejection.”

Blu’s eyelids fluttered. She wanted to tell him—say anything that would take that smug look off of his face but she was tongue-tied. It’d been a month ago, yet barely a moment passed when she wasn’t thinking of the him fucking her. Every time she closed her eyes, she remembered the vibrant smell of newly bloomed blossoms, Jaden’s spicy cologne and the heady scent of sex.

It was enough to drive her insane. She despised this man and everything he stood for and yet she was attracted to him more than she’d been to any man in a long time.

Blu opened her eyes, startled at the blatant passion reflected in his green eyes. She wanted to look away, but couldn’t. She’d never encountered a man so intense or forbidden.

“Some things can’t be forgotten.” Jaden traced the tip of his finger against the soft skin of her cheek. Her body responded swiftly. She couldn’t breathe. He was standing so close that she could feel the heat projecting from him, witnessed the firm bulge pressed against his suit pants. He was hard, and she was oh, so ready.

Blu drew back abruptly. “Damn you!”

He smiled. “You want me and I want you. What’s wrong with that?”

“That was before I found out what you were up to. Don’t hold my lack of judgment against me.” She balled her hands into fists to keep from striking him. “I don’t want you.”

Jaden shoved his hands back in his pockets, retreated a fraction of an inch from

where Blu stood. “So, you choose to deny what’s going on between us? Can’t you feel it?”

“Feelings are fleeting.”

“Not so fleeting that your pulse didn’t speed up. I bet you’re wet for me right now.”

Blu’s eyebrows rose. “Look, I came here today to warn you to stay the hell away from my business. I’ll only say this once.” She swung her purse over her shoulder to keep from touching him, and then turned to watch the blatant amusement on his face. “Stay the hell away from me, too.”

She turned to walk out of Jaden’s office on shaky legs. She glanced over her shoulder to look at him, the sucker-punched look on his handsome face didn’t fool her; he was already devising his counter attack and she’d better be ready.

* * * *

Sod it all!

Jaden leaned against his desk; his body throbbed, like it did anytime he was near Blu Evans. The moment he’d laid eyes on her at the business convention in Paris, he’d wanted her. Coincidence would have it that he had stayed at the same hotel she did, while attending several tedious business meetings. She’d bumped into him, her hands overloaded with a cell phone, a briefcase and files.

He’d looked down into the sweetest brown eyes, the color of coffee beans, slanted at the corners, he’d ever seen. The woman’s nut-brown skin gleamed with exuberance and vitality. Her heart-shaped face only made her other facial features that much more pronounced. High cheekbones kissed by thick near-black eyelashes were practically his undoing. A small nose that turned upward at the tip and full, delectable lips that had him imagining what they would feel like tasting his body. He’d barely resisted the temptation to pull the wild whiskey-colored twists that spouted about her head out of their tight upsweep.

Immediately, Jaden had wanted to know more about the woman he’d briefly held in his arms until she’d righted herself, saying a quick and hurried “excuse me”.

There had been a jolt of awareness that had shifted from his body to hers. He had no idea if the current of electricity had occurred in reverse order. He was as he’d been then, entranced. There was something about Blu that made him want to be closer to her. She was like a kaleidoscope, ever changing and consistent in its radiance. She had a style that refrained from conformity of mainstream style, from the multidirectional locks on her head to the eclectic outfits she wore—usually something retro in design with a mix of something he could only call “Blu.”

She probably thought that all he’d wanted was to shag her, but it was much more than that.

Jaden didn’t like the fact that Blu thought he wanted to hurt her. It wasn’t her family’s business he was after. Business was business. He’d simply seen a double opportunity when he’d bought Mirage Industries: the chance of quenching the urge to be closer to her, to know more about her and taste her sweet lips again, and of course, the profit that stood to be gained.

A huge gamble on both counts, Jaden knew, but what was life if not a risk? Feeling Blu’s small, curvy body pressed against him again was one challenge he wasn’t going to back away from.

He closed his eyes, recalling the outfit she'd worn today. The tight material of her red skirt had encased shapely thighs and a high firm ass he wanted to kiss. He never thought he'd see the day that he was envious of a woman's clothes.

To say that she was unlike any other woman Jaden had ever known would be an understatement. Blu had a natural aura that vibrated raw sensuality. The women he usually entertained wouldn't be caught dead without tons of makeup on. Then again, the women he usually invited to his bed never stayed around long enough to reapply their lipstick, which was the way he'd always preferred it until that day in Paris.

He refused to put his finger on the reason he'd gone to such lengths to find out everything he could about her. A month ago, she'd spent the night and early morning hours in his bed, leaving without so much as a goodbye. It wasn't like him to chase after a woman, and he couldn't remember the last time he had felt so alive.

Not since—

Jaden shook his head, blocking the demons that threatened to overtake everything he'd worked towards. He never understood how people could say that the past was dead, when he felt it around him everyday, no matter how much he willed himself to move on. To forget that face from the past.

Jaden thought back to what had just happened in Paris. He had never in his life felt as off-kilter as he had looking into Blu's eyes. It was almost as if he saw his own thirst for something more reflected with their depths.

In a matter of twenty-four hours, he'd known everything from what dress size she wore to her occupation, but not whom she was employed by. He'd arranged an "accidental meet" in one of the dining rooms, where he'd been persistent enough to persuade Blu to a drink. She'd agreed reluctantly, while Jaden had barely been able to take his eyes off of her or the sheer design of her dress and the way it molded her curves.

He couldn't explain what had gotten into him, maybe the wine or the soft undertones of her voice, but he'd asked her to dance, which he rarely did. Her eyes had lit up as she'd placed her tiny hands into his large ones. They swayed to the seductive beat of jazz on the terrace. Her body had felt so right against him. Small, soft and utterly tempting. They fit perfectly, despite their height difference.

The smell of jasmine and roses had assaulted his senses, sending his body into overdrive. He wanted her, right then under the stars. He hadn't cared who watched as long as he could claim this woman. He'd kissed her, more roughly than he'd anticipated. Instead of pulling away, Blu wrapped her arms tightly against his neck, bringing him closer.

Jaden hadn't even been aware that he'd picked her up. All he could concentrate on was the rhythm of their tongues melding together. The quick rise and fall of her chest. He felt the hard tips of her nipples brushing against him. She could become an addiction.

"Stay with me tonight." The words slipped out of his mouth before he could fully register their meaning.

The exposed look in her beautiful eyes had rocked Jaden to the core. He couldn't say he'd ever noticed such vulnerability in another human being. The overwhelming sensation to explore her both terrified and surprised him.

"No." The solitary word had held him in complete awe. Women didn't usually say no to him. He found the change scintillating yet baffling. Blu had excused herself and he'd assumed that that would be the last he'd ever see of her until ... she arrived at his

hotel door well after midnight, looking every bit of sin and temptation he'd ever conjured up in his mind.

She'd taken him by the hand to her room and schooled him on what passion really was, a fact he wasn't ready to admit to anyone and barely to himself. The remembrance of it brought the same intense reaction to his body. They'd barely made it to the bed before her clothes were ripped off and she was writhing beneath him. She fit him like a glove. Tight and wet.

When his fingers had brushed against the hard flesh on Blu's back, he'd wanted to stop and ask about them, but his body had demanded more. He had wondered days after how'd she had gotten the scars. Had someone hurt her?

Would he ever get the answer to his question?

Jaden sighed, thinking of what had transpired between them this morning. Not in this lifetime. It was unfortunate that she wanted to deny what even a fly on the wall could see. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. He was far from giving up. Life had taught him a series of hard lessons, and giving up wasn't one of them. He wouldn't have accumulated the wealth he had if he'd given up as the poor son of a prostitute. He would overcome the odds just as he always had in his thirty years of life.

Blast!

It wouldn't be easy, Jaden conceded, to get Blu to see that what they could experience together could be mutually satisfying. He was interested in more than a couple of tosses between the sheets with her. It intrigued him to know that she would require more than his usual charm. He liked a good fight.

He closed his eyes. Not that she'd even had the chance to encounter his charm. Hell, she probably thought him a bugger incapable of captivating trash.

That will have to change, Jaden thought, as he stood and walked to the picture window, which displayed the chaotic rush of downtown Chicago traffic.

Once he'd set his mind on his objective—taking over Mirage Industries and in turn making a huge profit—he'd moved from his hotel suite in the five-star hotel in New York and relocated to a Lakefront condo in Chicago. He hadn't known that Blu was linked to Elan Cosmetics until he'd had a dossier drawn up on the organization, a couple of weeks before he'd acquired Mirage. Seeing her today had been the sweetest shock of his life. Who was he not to play the hand that fate had dealt with him to the hilt?

Jaden would kill two birds with one stone.

The buyout of Mirage Industries had been mutually benefiting for the former owner, who was ready to retire from the beauty and cosmetic industry. Lagging sales and unwise marketing strategies had also been a catalyst in the buyout. Jaden had made his move. He would reconstruct the inner foundation of his new venture, while tying into his initial goal of getting closer to Blu.

"Knock, knock, or is this a private party?" a sultry female voice called from the door, stealing him from his thoughts. "Although you know how I love to crash private events."

Chapter Two

Jaden turned to face Sandrine “Sand” Rowell, her exotic dark beauty still had the ability to make him stand back and appreciate her as a woman instead of just seeing her as the good—platonic friends they’d become. He shook his head at her sexy swagger as she made her way beside him. He could count on few people in his life and Sand had always been one of them, since their college days back at Columbia. She’d been everything to him: champion, lover and lawyer, and not necessarily in that order.

Despite the interesting times they’d shared between the sheets in the past, Jaden preferred and treasured Sand’s friendship, although he often got the feeling that she wanted more. He’d known that the physical ties of their relationship had to be extinguished when she’d claimed to love him and he couldn’t reciprocate the feeling. What he felt for her bordered on brotherly love, anything more would present a territory he had no longing to venture into—commitment. While Jaden didn’t doubt that love was possible, he hadn’t made time for the deeper connection it would take to keep a relationship intact.

“Was that the infamous Blu Evans I witnessed storming out of your office?” A playful pout appeared on Sand’s full lips.

“Indeed it was.” Jaden shook his head, and looked back to the window. “A sight I doubt you will ever see again.”

“Pity.”

The spitefulness in Sand’s voice brought his focus back to her grass-green eyes. There was no mistaking the disdain in them. “Jealousy doesn’t suit you.”

She crooked her head to the side, sending thick ringlets of honey-brown cascading over her shoulders. “Nor does your playing lamb to the slaughter, Jaden, but then you always have loved a challenge.” Her fingers snaked around the brim of his shirt collar, stroking his neck.

Jaden removed her hand, and gently leaned down to kiss it. His eyes met hers. “You know that you and I are better suited as friends than lovers.”

“I beg to differ.” Sand lowered her thick eyelashes, looking up at him with longing. “I seem to recall some unforgettable moments together.”

“Sand, I believe we tabled this discussion long ago.”

She must have witnessed Jaden’s regret, because gone was the light playfulness in her eyes, a cold, distant shield taking its place. “I know, I know.” She maneuvered her manicured fingertips through her curls.

Her head came up rigidly. “You don’t like things that get complicated. Let’s face it, things between you and I would naturally be that way. Two strong-willed people who constantly challenge each other, passionate encounters that leave each other on the brink of breathlessness. I mean, you’re right, what man would want a woman like that?”

Jaden chuckled, placing his hands in his pockets. “You would be a handful for any man, but just the same, any man would be thankful to have you in his life.”

Sand looked away. When she turned back, her eyes glittered with unnatural tears. “But not you, right? You’d rather chase after a woman who for all intents and purposes hates you.”

“Hate does make a strong bedfellow.”

“And to bed—*your* bed—would be precisely where you intend to have her, isn’t it?”

Jaden’s head snapped up at the fierceness in Sand’s tone. “Bloody hell!”

He wasn’t accustomed to having to justify his decisions to anyone, especially Sand. He couldn’t believe the venom in her eyes. At most, their affair had been short and passionate, barely lasting a full year. Neither had made any promises. He’d never presumed that she thought of him as anything more than a conquest, a challenge. The thrill of their relationship had ended right along the time Jaden found an office romance not to his liking.

“What is this about?”

Sand cut her eyes at him. “You know damn well.”

“I’m not in the mood to play with you.”

Jaden had assumed she had moved on, especially after the several boyfriends she’d gone on to directly after they’d ended their relationship. He’d never known her to show one jealous bone in her body. If anything, she’d always believed in “live and let live”. Her current behavior told him something different entirely. He didn’t like where this was going, but it was ending here and now.

“You’d throw everything we’ve done together, made—together over a piece of ass?” she placed her hands on her shapely hips. “I thought we meant more to each other? The sex must be decent.”

His jaw clenched. He tried to remember that it was Sand he was talking to and not to an insubordinate employee, although she did work for him. “I’m only going to say this once. You and I have a wonderful *friendship*, one that should have never been jeopardized by taking it farther. I can’t change the past and I’m sorry if I led you to believe otherwise. The fact remains that my personal life is just that—personal—and I don’t need to justify my reasoning to you or anyone else on any subject of my life.”

He watched her intently and noted the defensive way she folded her arms across her chest. If there was one thing he had learned, it was reading other people. In his line of business, it was a necessary trait.

Sand met his gaze. A brief sigh escaped her lips before she reached out to touch Jaden’s arm. “I’m sorry. I really am. Of course, we’re friends. I didn’t mean to sound envious.” She paused, as if trying to gather her words carefully. “It’s just that I don’t want you to be taken for a fool, especially by a woman who would obviously like to throw you to the wolves and watch them eat you alive.”

Jaden grinned. He could imagine Blu wishing that very fate on him. “I’m a big boy and I can take anything Blu Evans throws at me.”

Sand grinned, although the smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Yes, indeed, you can. Perish the thought of you ever being weak.” She turned on her heels and walked out of the room.

Jaden turned his attention to the activity of the busy Chicago streets.

He didn’t know whether to take his old friend’s comment of being worried about him seriously, since she’d never concerned herself with his welfare before. He didn’t have time to think further into her actions. His mind became once again entranced with the woman who’d been on his mind day and night since his trip to Paris. There was some invisible force that pulled, twisted and locked whenever they were in the same room. Each time, he was held captive to her every move. Damn if he could walk away from her.

A buzz from the intercom brought his attention from the window; Martha's resounding voice broke through the silence. "Mr. Graeham?"

"Yes, Martha?"

"Sir, you asked me to remind you about your appointment tonight."

Jaden smiled. His Rolex showed four-thirty. "Indeed, I did. Thank you." He depressed the intercom button, scooped up several documents into his letter attaché, and picked up his jacket. He barely acknowledged his secretary's parting words as he boarded the elevator car and the steel doors closed in front of him. He had only one thing on his mind and it all started with a petite beauty and a date he couldn't miss.

* * * *

At the age of twenty-seven, Blu considered herself a pro at making the competition come to her. However, when it came to Jaden, to say that something was wildly amiss was an understatement.

Damn the man for getting underneath her skin! He was changing all the rules.

This was the first time she'd gone to the enemy. He was more than just an enemy though, he'd been her lover. Not that she would even confirm that insight with the man himself. She didn't have time for his games. She couldn't risk everything her mother had built for a couple of rounds of hot sex.

A shudder of trepidation swept down her spine. Blu shut it out. She'd be damned if she'd ever let Jaden win, or get in her pants again. She silently pulled her thick braids into a ponytail before walking to the small room adjacent to her office that housed fitness equipment. She might as well work off some steam and couldn't think of any better way than a session of kickboxing.

Most of the other employees had left for the day. Blu hadn't been able to confront her empty home—a two-bedroom condo on the Lakefront. Nothing awaited her there except leftover Chinese food. Her stomach growled in protest.

"That'll just have to wait." The rugged planes of Jaden's face and his trademark smile invaded her peace of mind. His infuriatingly arrogant demeanor and the sexy way his lips turned up, one side higher than the other, caused heat to rush to her core. She positioned herself in front of the punching bag.

Damn It!

Shwack!

She kicked, hard, imagining that it was Jaden and his pompous hide. She jabbed at the bag again and again, repositioning her body, maneuvering her kicks, but to no avail. She couldn't stop thinking about him or the lust she'd witnessed in his wicked green eyes. Her body yearned for him, like the last piece of her favorite chocolate cake.

She groaned as she wiped the perspiration off her forehead. This was what you get for acting on your impulses. Hadn't she learned anything from her divorce from Seth? Their whole marriage had been one big whirlwind of illusions. Funny how finding her ex in bed with his secretary had turned magic into a nightmare.

The first time he'd hit her, she'd been in shock. He'd blamed her for his loss of control. When her talents in perfumery were taking off, his jealousy had increased. Then, it'd been the fact that someone had barely acknowledged his attributes because of her. Soon, it hadn't mattered what his reasons were, her audacity was always to blame.

Blu closed her eyes. Tears no longer spilled down her cheeks at the thought of Seth's

hard knocks against her body. She'd learned to be tough. Learned to put aside her basic needs—men being on the top of that list. She'd refused to allow Seth's cruelty rule her life. She was more than her short marriage would ever allow, which brought her to her next obstacle: Jaden.

He was an entirely different breed. The man was a one-man tornado, picking up and discarding whatever he chose to at the moment. Enigmatic was just one word to describe him. He was a puzzle—one her body wanted to unravel and put together again. And again.

Why Jaden? Why had she given in to him of all men after three years of abstinence? The answer to the question had haunted Blu ever since she'd found out about his identity.

She blamed herself. She had always harbored the secret fear of becoming too much like her biological mother, a woman who lived by her sexual needs with her eye always focused on her next conquest, which usually had something to do with her singing career.

Blu had been a victim of her mother's one-dimensional wantonness, always coming up on the short end. Iris Jones had never considered her daughter a factor when she'd disappeared one day, leaving her to be raised by her grandmother, Queenie.

A familiar wave of sadness wrapped her soul. She considered her maternal grandmother the first woman to show her gentleness and love. Her death had left her devastated and an orphan. Completely alone.

Blu was no longer the little lost girl she'd once been. She no longer clung to those dark days of abandonment after her grandmother died, leaving her to depend on the social service system. When Monica Evans had adopted her less than a year later, she'd been angry and bitter at the world.

It had taken a long time for Blu's protective shield to break down. Monica's love had penetrated the shadows of disillusion and disappointment. Her adoptive mother was the reason she'd become the woman she was today. The reason she'd become a perfumist. She'd gained a brother, Napier—Monica's biological son. In time, Blu had grown close to her new sibling and felt she was truly part of a family.

Blu kicked furiously at the bag. "Shit!" She couldn't deny that unyielding feeling of displacement, as if no one wanted her. After all, her own mother hadn't wanted her.

She believed in tangible objects, like when she was creating a new fragrance. She could smell, decipher a scent—her memory never failed her. One aroma blended into another and another. Concocting her own special and one-of-kind mixtures of soul-stirring bouquets was her field of expertise; there was no mystery for her. Surely denying herself the raw need of making love with a man had gotten easier, considering the crap she'd gone through with her ex.

Who was she fooling? The need to connect with a man in the most sexual, elemental way had only gotten stronger over time. Hot sprigs of desire had shot to life every underused feminine muscle in her body from the moment she'd accidentally bumped into Jaden in the hotel lobby in Paris.

She had quickly forgotten the pact she'd made with herself: no flings. One look into his sensual green eyes and having white hot sex with him had become her sole mission in Paris. If just for one night she'd be unafraid to show her true emotions and desires. She'd been a seductress, telling him where and when to touch, caress and lick her.

Blu had given herself more than a night of erotic memories to hold on to. Now she also held the guilt of possibly leading a scavenger to Elan. Her mother had worked so

hard on making the company one of the top leaders in cosmetics. Under her tutelage Elan had remained one of the leading cosmetic giants in the industry and Jaden could possibly take all of it away and it would be her fault.

The fact that her body craved his was a moot point. She'd be damned if she let a man like him take everything away that her family had worked so hard for because of her carelessness.

How could she ever explain that to her mother?

Blu closed her eyes as she visualized his body slamming into hers. During their conversation, he hadn't looked fazed by her guarded demeanor. Was it that evident that she wanted him as much as he wanted her?

Damn it!

Why couldn't she get it together? "That's for being an arrogant son-of-bitch."

Every kick she made had her wishing that Jaden was the recipient of the fluid hard movements. She had never met a man so infuriating; just thinking of him made her blood boil. It was evident that he knew nothing about loyalty.

Blu grimaced at the knock on her office. She was in momentum and heaven help the person who had dared to invade on her space. "Yes!"

"If looks could kill, I'd be a dead woman," Jacinta "Sunni" Suarez said, her thick Latin accent punctuating her words. She looked around the dimly lit office, resting her slender frame against the door jamb.

Blu turned to her good friend and assistant, wiping the perspiration running down her face. She untied the elastic band that suspended her twists. "What are you doing here so late?"

Sunni smiled, her whole face lighting up. "I was finishing up some filing, but I'm about to head down to *Stratosphere*. Why don't you come with me?"

Blu thought of the hot nightclub that some of the most sought-after bachelors in Chicago frequented. Exactly the kind of place she needed to avoid. She took a quick gulp of bottled water before responding. "I'm sorry. I can't."

Sunni frowned. "Do you ever allow yourself to have a good time, woman? Mi dios! There's more than business meetings, work and ... work." She laughed, clapping her hands together. "I happen to know that the bartender is hot. I mean, the man is on fire and very much single."

Blu laughed at her friend's antics. "You know I'm not looking to date right now."

"What ever happened to a heavy dose of flirting? You used to do plenty of that."

Blu thought of her last session of 'friendly flirting'. It had ended with her having hours of frenzied sex with Jaden. Her clit tightened at the memory of tasting every inch of his gorgeously virile body.

She was thrown back from her sexual fantasyland in time to hear Sunni say, "... we haven't really talked since you came back from that convention in Paris."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you." Blu knew that her friend was right. Since arriving back from Paris, she had thrown herself into her work, even more than usual, all in the hopes that her lingering appetite for a man she never thought she would see again would evaporate.

She'd been so very wrong. She felt the pangs of another kind of guilt emerge. Sunni was her best friend and they hadn't had a GNO, a.k.a. girls-night-out in ages.

"Uh, huh."

"Can I have a rain check?" Blu grinned at the pout on her friend's mouth. "I promise. We can go wherever you want. How's Saturday night?"

"Deal." Sunni agreed. "I'm holding you to it."

"Of course." Blu glanced up at the clock on her wall. "Damn it, I'm going to be late." She grabbed the terry-cloth towel from her desk chair, smoothing it over her skin.

"For?"

Blu shook her head at Sunni's natural nosiness. "Dinner."

Her hazel eyes lit up as she placed her hands on her ample hips. "Oh, dinner!" She smiled brightly and sashayed over to where Blu stood. "Would this dinner happen to have anything to do with Jaden Graeham?"

Blu almost choked on her water. She swiped the excess liquid off her chin. "Do I dare ask how you know about Jaden?"

A playful smile appearing on Sunni's crimson painted lips. "Are you forgetting that I have unlimited resources."

Blu laughed, stuffing her belongings into her oversized bag. "No, how could I never forget that. I would have never known that Charlotte in accounting was having an affair with Joelle from advertising's ex." She faced the avid curiosity of her friend. "But to answer your question, I'm having dinner with my mom at *Coterie*."

"Oh, girl, it's about time you get some business."

Blu turned sharply on her heels, hoisting her bag on her shoulder. "Oh no, you didn't?"

Sunni jutted her chin out defensively. "Yes, I *did*. Your mom is nice and all and signs my paycheck, but in the middle of the night she can't compare to a hard dick."

"Watch it!"

"Watch what? You are doing battle with a handsome devil of a man. Honey, do you know what I would do to have that problem?"

Blu chuckled. "I don't want to know the answer to that one. Besides, Jaden Graeham isn't an ordinary, average man. I could never consider him a love interest, let alone the fact that I can't stand to be in his presence for more than two seconds."

Sunni rubbed her hands together. Her pencil-thin eyebrows wiggled conspiratorially. "Oh yeah, he sounds like my kind of man—roguish!"

Blu shook her head. "You're impossible! The man is trying to take down Elan. If he succeeds, we'll all be out of jobs."

"Are you sure it's the company he's after?"

If you think I'm after your company, you're not even bloody warm? Jaden's words echoed in her head.

"I have no interest in what that man is after. He's up to no good."

"Hmmm! He definitely sounds like my kind of man." Sunni laughed wickedly.

Blu couldn't help but grin. "Girlfriend, not even you want that sort of trouble." She saw the unconvinced look in her friend's eyes, but didn't care to elaborate. The less she talked about Jaden, the less she'd have to think about him—if that was possible. So far, she was failing miserably.

She couldn't see him in any other light but that of the enemy. The man was unpredictable. Her trust wasn't easily won and she wouldn't waste it on a man who liked to play games with people's lives. She had once been a victim to a man of the same nature and had no desire to ever go back to those times. Had no desire to have him

anywhere near her life, personal or professionally, and she could never see that changing, not now and definitely not later.

“Come on...” Blu picked up her keys. “I’ll walk you out. Try to stay out of trouble tonight.”

“What the hell kind of fun is that?” Sunni laughed, and then, “You know you’re not fooling anyone, right?”

Blu sighed. She knew sooner or later she was going to have to come clean about her involvement with Jaden. For now she planned to shuffle him under the many other things she’d designed to deal with for a rainy day. She turned out the light, closed the door to her office, and then turned to her friend. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Chapter Three

“You’re late, baby.”

“Sorry, Mom.” Blu smiled down at the vibrant face of Monica Evans, her adoptive mother and icon. She leaned down to kiss her flawless ebony cheek. She straightened, wondering how her mother did it. She smiled guilelessly at woman she considered her ultimate heroine.

Monica’s engaging smile immediately put one at ease. Her flowing jet-black hair curled at her chin without an inkling of silver and warm gray eyes belied the fact that she was a woman rapidly approaching her sixties. She was everything Blu hoped to be when she became fifty years plus young. Poised. Elegant. Regal.

“I could blame it on traffic...”

“That would be too easy.” Monica glanced up at her daughter, laughter and adoration shining in her eyes. She laced her fingers together, pursing her lips. “So what’s the real reason you’re late?”

Blu sat down and smoothed her hands down her slim-fitting wool slacks. She fiddled with the buttons of a matching quarter-length jacket to keep from facing Monica. “Blame it on Sunni. You know how she goes on.” She looked up to find her mother’s intent gaze on her. She cleared her throat. “She caught me on my way out of the office.”

Monica tapped her French-manicured fingertips against the linen covered table. “You know I haven’t really had a chance to catch up with you since the convention in Paris.” She narrowed her eyes. “That was a little over a month ago.”

Blu squirmed in her seat, her fingers idly playing with a fan-styled napkin. “I’ve called.”

Monica laughed. “Oh yes, the five minute conversations once or twice a week. I hate those. You know I like to see my children. You’re becoming as work obsessed as Napier.”

Blu smiled at the mention of her brother, who headed the advertising department for Elan. “No one can be as bad as Napier. I believe I saw a cot laid out in his office.”

Both women chuckled.

A waiter arrived to take their drink order. Blu ordered her usual, a cosmopolitan, and Monica a wine spritzer. The interruption didn’t last as long as she hoped it would before she felt her mother’s eyes on her once again.

“I worry about my children. I want to see you and Napier happy, preferably with someone special in your lives.”

Blu groaned. She knew what was coming next and there was no way in hell she could interrupt with a bathroom break. “Mom!”

Monica held up her hand. “You and Napier hide behind Elan. Both of you are young, attractive and sweet individuals. Life isn’t meant to spend alone and the company is doing fine so don’t use it as your crutch.”

Blu felt everything within her tense. How could she tell her mother that she’d slept with the man who could possibly bring ruin to their company? How could she explain that Jaden Graeham didn’t give a damn about who he hurt in the process of getting what he wanted? Oh, and then there was the little problem that in spite of it all, she still lusted

after him. Wanted him like a desert-ridden traveler in the Sahara wanted water.

“Sweetie? Are you listening to me?”

Blu shook her head, trying to shake the sensual haze. “Uh ... yes.”

“Good.” Monica clapped her hands together; the look on her pretty face spelled trouble. “I have a project.”

Blu felt that there was much more to that statement, and the underlying meaning set her nerves on edge. Her eyebrows quirked upward. “Exactly, what kind of project are you proposing?”

She held on to the slimmest belief that this ‘project’ would be something she’d excel at. Like another conference, where she could strut her stuff. She loved showing people the diversity and cutting-edge technology that Elan Cosmetics offered in creating fragrances.

The cat-swallowed-the-canary look on her mother’s face made Blu tread with caution. Monica was a shrewd businesswoman and she had no doubt that whatever this “project” was it would in the end benefit the company.

So why did she still have a knot doing belly flops in her stomach?

Blu leaned forward. “Okay, I’ll bite. What does this ‘project’ entail?”

“Well...” Monica paused and then a vibrant smile crossed her face as she looked at a point beyond Blu’s shoulder. “You’re about to find out.”

She turned, and nothing on earth could have prepared her for the sight of Jaden walking towards them. He approached them with a sexy smile; his stride purposeful and confident. Her mouth dropped to the floor. Her palms began to sweat. And heaven help her, but an image of making love to Jaden on top of one of the elaborately decorated tables entered her mind. An erotic vision of him sliding in and out of her body flitted through her head.

Blu did a double-take, not believing her eyes. *This can not be happening!* Her worst fear had just presented itself. What was he doing here? She glanced back to her mother, who had no idea how quickly her smile would fade once she knew what the snake was really up to.

She felt him next to her, could feel his masculine heat mingle with her own. She had never been so spellbound by a man, which made Jaden dangerous, but so damn appealing. By habit, she inhaled, smelling sandalwood, patchouli and pure abandon.

“Good evening, ladies,” Jaden said, his hypnotically deep voice stirring something deep with her. “You both look smashing tonight.”

Blu felt her temper rise. She could think of something she wanted to smash all right!

“Why thank you, Mr. Graeham.” Monica touched her fingers to her coiffed hairdo. “Have you met my daughter, Blu?”

Had she just heard correctly? Her mother’s voice had lowered. What the hell was going on?

Blu watched awestruck as he bent to kiss Monica’s outstretched hand, while she looked pleased as punch. Pity, she didn’t feel the same.

Jaden looked striking in a designer suit that powerfully outlined his broad physique. The rich navy jacket contrasted drastically against his burnish-brown skin.

She sucked in air. Would he tell her mother the truth? That he knew every inch of her body and then some?

“No, but it is a pleasure, Blu.” His lips caressed her skin gently as he kissed her

hand. His eyes burned into hers. A sigh almost broke free from her tightly clenched lips.

She forced herself to smile and nodded her head. "Mr. Graeham." She pulled her hand out of his, looking away from his knowing smirk.

Jaden's intense gaze roamed over her. "Nice to meet you, Miss Evans. I've heard wonderful things about you."

Blu forced herself to speak. "Really?" She was so stunned that she merely nodded her head and reached for her drink. Unfortunately, the cold liquid couldn't quench the thirst that only Jaden could elicit.

"Yes, and they were all true, especially your beauty."

"Please, have a seat, Mr. Graeham," Monica said. "There's much to talk about."

"I can't imagine why," Blu grumbled, cutting a dark look toward Jaden. "Unless, that is ... you've come to confess."

He seated himself to the right of her. Underneath the table she could feel his body heat scathing her thigh as his leg brushed against hers. She moved away, but not without witnessing the slight smile on his lips. She looked again, but the teasing look on his face had evaporated as quickly as it had appeared. She was losing her mind!

Jaden folded his arms in front of him, looking as calm as he pleased. "I've heard confession is good for the soul."

"You mean you have one?"

He chuckled. "Of course."

Blu ignored the tsk sound that escaped her mother's lips. Didn't she know that Jaden couldn't be trusted? She hedged on. Daring him. "Well, then you won't mind baring your soul."

He smiled sensuously. "You first."

Blu felt fire flare up in her belly. She'd caught his innuendo and he damn well knew that she could never tell Monica about their encounter in Paris.

Touché.

"I'm sure Mr. Graeham's intentions are noble, sweetheart," Monica stated.

"Oh, it's all right, Ms. Evans. I can understand your daughter's hesitations," Jaden responded, not looking away from Blu. "As to baring my soul, that's a rather intimate task, but I can assure you that my intentions are pure."

"Do you believe in extending the rules of business to intermingle with pleasure?" she asked, batting her eyes at him. Did he think she was going to make it easy for him? That he would charm her mother into trusting him and she'd let him?

He wanted to play, so she'd play.

"Business is its own aphrodisiac, Miss. Evans," he countered smoothly, looking amused at their sparring.

Blu felt the screams of frustration at the back of her throat and opened her mouth only to close it. She realized that everything about him was built on challenge and no matter how much she debated him, it would only up his ante. For the moment, she let her eyes display her anger before turning her attention to her drink.

Monica broke the uncomfortable silence, tossing a questioning gaze at her daughter before smiling gingerly at Jaden. "Time is money and I'd like to keep mine. Shall we get down to business?"

Blu nodded and watched as he nodded in unison. She pressed her mouth into a firm line, silently adhering to her mother's quip. "What do we need to discuss with Mr.

Graeham?” she lowered her voice at Monica’s frown. “Surely, you know of his reputation.” She chanced a look at Jaden, everything within her that was female responded to everything that was male in him. “He dismantles companies and to hell with the people who get in the way. Do I have that right?”

“What is the matter with you?” Monica cast Jaden a sympathetic glance. “I’m sorry for my daughter’s rudeness.”

He smiled at Blu. “Oh, it’s all right. I’m sure your daughter is just looking out for the best interests of her family and Elan Cosmetics. She wouldn’t be the astute businesswoman she is, if she didn’t. I like that.”

Blu wanted to tell him what she’d like, for him to disappear as quickly as he’d come through the restaurant door and to leave her family alone. “Then you won’t mind me asking, Mr. Graeham—what brings you to Chicago?” She offered him a pointed look. “The grapevine reported that your offices were housed in New York City.”

Jaden folded his hands in front of him, giving her his undivided attention. “The grapevine actually had it right, but captivatingly new interests and business have brought me to your fair city. I must say, I’m finding it very appealing in spite of the frigid winter nights.”

Blu smiled bristly. “Well, I’m sure you’re apt to find numerous ways of warming up your ... nights.”

Monica frowned at her daughter, her eyebrows raised. “Mr. Graeham, I’m sure you’ll find Chicago has many vehicles in which to assist with your recent move.”

“I’m sure I will, although with a schedule like mine it doesn’t leave much time for play.”

Monica smiled. “Which is why I’ve decided to approach you about this joint venture.”

“Joint?” Blu took another drink of her cosmopolitan. She had a feeling she was going to need more than one to take away the dull heat that had pooled between her legs and shock of what her mother was proposing.

“Yes, it appears your mother has devised a marketing coup d’état that will bring in a huge profit for both Elan Cosmetics and Mirage Industries...” Jaden paused. “We’ve been in negotiations regarding a merger between Elan and Mirage.”

Blu choked. “W-what?” Jaden reached to pat her back but she ducked. She turned to Monica, recomposing herself. “Mother, surely you aren’t suggesting...”

“Longevity in the market isn’t made by being stagnant and one-dimensional. There’s a wager on the table. Elan and Mirage Industries combine forces to corner the market, starting with the new Ultra cosmetics and fragrance line headed by you and Mr. Graeham’s team from Mirage. The transition will be smooth.” Smiling, Monica met her daughter’s questioning gaze. “We will still be Elan Cosmetics, only stronger.”

Blu’s ears were ringing. She couldn’t have heard her mother correctly. Join forces with Jaden? Her mother wasn’t thinking rationally. She was handing Elan to the slaughterer!

“What do you get out of all this?” Blu asked bluntly, not caring if she sounded impolite. Her blood pressure skyrocketed as she stared at him. “Certainly, there’s a gain in it for you.”

He leaned closer, his eyes burning into hers. “This is a win-win situation for everyone. The profit will be incredible, I assure you.”

* * * *

The sun had set and the last rays of light were quickly shadowed by grey clouds. The glitter of the skyline pronounced the city was still alive despite the pending heavy snowfall predicted earlier on the news forecast.

“Blu, wait!” Jaden yelled, as they left the restaurant an hour later. He struggled into his leather coat, his breath crystallizing in the frigid air.

She’d waited long enough to see her mother off by limo and then promptly handed the valet a ticket to retrieve her Jaguar, never once making eye contact with him.

As she walked away now, her steps made clear prints in the fresh snow on the sidewalk, long and bold strides for a woman of her height. He admired that in her.

Blu Evans wasn’t going to turn tail and run, not even for him. She tied the cashmere slash around her slender waist, and reached into her coat pockets with her gloved fingers. “Go away and stay away!”

In two purposeful strides, Jaden caught up to her and stopped a mere inch behind her. He pulled her around to face him. Desire shot to his groin, hardening him yet again. Not even the crisp late February air could cool the aching need to fuck her. He’d been so hard at the table that he’d been tempted to pull her hand out of her lap and place it against his rigid flesh. The slightest touch from her would ignite every illicit dream he’d had about her. It usually started with burying his dick inside of her, watching her climax and shattering that unwavering control of hers. He wanted to give in to the rampant necessity to fuck her senseless.

“Now, now, love, is that anyway to talk to your new business partner?”

“I don’t care what you call yourself. You are a menace!” Her brown eyes shot sparks at him. “How dare you trick my mother into doing business with you!”

“I didn’t have to trick anyone. Your mother approached me, Blu. She is an intelligent businesswoman. The merger will see that Elan Cosmetics stays in the game for a long time to come.”

Blu frowned. “Do you really think that I believe you? That I trust you enough to turn over Mirage Industries when this little charade is done and over with?”

Jaden sighed. “I thought this would reassure you of my intentions.” He wanted to make it known that he wasn’t the bugger she thought he was.

“Excuse me; did I just hear you say ‘reassure’ me?” Blu smiled, but the sincerity of the gesture didn’t fully reach her eyes. “I have to give it to you, Jaden, you’re one tenacious man.”

“I tend to be when it’s something I truly desire.”

“I’d hate to see the object of your disdain.” She eyed him warily. “If there’s an obstacle in your way, buy it, right? Well, you’ll forgive me if my knickers are in a twist over this supposed merger.”

Jaden couldn’t help the wicked grin that crossed his lips. He’d love the chance to untwist Blu’s knickers. Any time. Any place. “I thought if I annihilated your source of contention for me—you know, secretly plotting away with some diabolical plan to take over Elan Cosmetics—and handed your family Mirage Industries on a silver platter, that you would see things differently.”

She huffed, folding her arms around her waist. “Why? Why would you do such a thing?”

Jaden looked down into her sparkling eyes. He witnessed the vulnerability in her

brown depths, but there was much more. Strength, determination and the same tenacity she'd described in him.

He felt like a hundred needles were prickling him all at once. He could only tell her what was true, what was real. "I want *you*, Blu." He ran a hand over his hair. "I'm not the sort of man to leave anything to chance."

"So you buy anything that stands in the way of getting what you want?"

"Blast! Woman, I'm not after Elan Cosmetics. We both know that you just use it as an excuse not to acknowledge what's really going on between us."

The valet arrived with Blu's car. She managed to take one step before Jaden's hand clamped over her arm.

"Has it ever occurred to you that I don't want to have an affair with *you*? All your acquisitions would be for..."

Jaden captured her words with his lips. She resisted in his arms, pushing at his chest with her gloved hands. He deepened the kiss, slipping his tongue between her lips. He groaned.

Blu tasted like the chocolate cake she'd ordered after sprinting through her shrimp Alfredo. Sweet. Provocative. Hot. He thought of drizzling chocolate all over her body. The delectable task of licking every last swirl of the sticky concoction off her dewy skin made his mind whirl with possibilities. Blood surged to his dick. Would he always be an easy target where she was concerned?

The wintry night air had nothing on the hot currents exploding through Jaden's veins. His body responded swiftly to the honeyed taste of Blu's kiss. He wanted this woman like no other.

He felt her muscles release built up tension as she leaned into him. She moaned softly, her fingers wound in his hair, her tongue mated with his, combining her sweetness to his raging hunger. He pulled her closer, and felt her tremble through the layers of clothing. His hands roamed down her back to her shapely hips. He wanted much more. A week. A month. The length of time didn't matter as much as just being with her. Inside of her.

Jaden smiled against her lips as Blu's hands brought his head closer, deepening the kiss. She was naturally aggressive in the bedroom and out. He wanted her to see just how good they could be together, but knew that this kiss wouldn't do it. She would see this as a weak moment. He saw it as a means to show her just what she'd been missing.

Jaden broke away, his breathing labored. He looked down at the dazed expression on Blu's beautiful face. She had gotten underneath his skin. He didn't want to analyze just how much.

It came as some consolation that the same raw desire was blatantly displayed across her face. He reached up to touch her cheek. She made him want things he hadn't thought he'd ever want again. His fast and faster life, his holdings, his whole career of maneuvering challenges until the obstacle became weakened to his whim all paled in comparison to the need he felt for her. The realization made him take a step back. He knew when he was treading on dangerous territory.

Blu was as risky to him as she claimed him to be to her.

Jaden prided himself a realist. He knew the next move had to come from her. Her trust didn't come easy. Usually, he'd take his losses—which weren't many—but when they did occur, he was man enough to go about his business and pursue the next

challenge.

Blu was different.

He watched her struggle cloud her eyes. “That was presumptuous of me ... I’m not sorry though.” A slow smile tugged at his lips.

“Yes. Yes, it was.” She hugged her arms around her waist. “But then I’ve come to expect nothing less from you.”

“And I you.” He watched the puzzled look cross her face, and balled his fists to keep from touching her. “You pull away when you think things are going too far from your control.”

Blu glared up at him. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.” She turned to see the valet. She opened her purse, and exchanged a twenty for her car keys. “I don’t have to listen to this.”

“Oh, yes, you do.” Jaden placed his hand on her wrist and pulled her around to face him.

“You think one kiss proves something?” She shrugged her shoulders. “Surely, you don’t base all your decisions on the physical.”

“I’ve kissed every nuance of your body, measured your response to me and...” He ignored the shocked grasp of several onlookers. “found you wanting.”

Blu yanked away from him. “How dare you!”

“What? You can’t be surprised that I have the gall to admit what’s going on between us? Something you seem so frightened to do, by the way. Why is that?”

“Damn you! I don’t have to prove anything to you. I owe you nothing.”

“Your body says otherwise.” Jaden knew he was crossing the line, but this was the only way it could be for now.

Blu turned abruptly on her heels and then whirled around. Her eyes blazed with anger, her face taut with rage. “I’m surprised to know that you would leave everything to chance because of my physical responses.” She walked closer until they stood toe to toe.

Jaden felt a muscle jerk at his jaw. He wanted to kiss her. Hard. And take her to bed. Instead of listening to every impulse in his head, he stood still, his eyes silently stalking her.

“And you choose to leave the physical equation out of spectrum.” He smiled, leaning down to inhale the sensual scent of her perfume. No doubt one of her designs. He brushed his lips against the soft shell of her ear. He wasn’t surprised when a tremor shook from her at his touch. “I trust the human response more than any other, and sooner or later, so will you. Until then, the ball rests in your court.” He straightened, smiled, and walked to his waiting limo.

Chapter Four

Blu had never been so mad. Forget seeing red, she was vividly imagining the whole ever-loving rainbow!

Who the hell did Jaden think he was? Her knight in shining armor? She didn't believe in those anymore. Why didn't he get it? Why did he persist on holding her captive on this passionate whirlwind? She didn't have time for this, just like she didn't have the time to work on this "project" her mother and Jaden had concocted.

How in the world was she supposed to work alongside the man she wanted both to undress and kill whenever they were in the same room?

She blamed the current events on fate's cruel intention of a joke. By merging Mirage with Elan Industries, Jaden had single-handedly taken her reasons for not continuing with what could be considered the greatest sex she'd ever had.

Blu slapped her palm on the steering wheel as she drove out of the restaurant's driveway onto Michigan Avenue. She'd married her ex after a frenzied courtship, giving in to love and her naiveté. Giving in to her wants and not listening to common sense when her mother had told her to hold off on making such a big commitment with Seth. But she hadn't listened. She still had the scars to prove it, physical and emotional. Pain no one knew about because she couldn't bare the fact of feeling weak. She'd sworn that she would never allow herself to be that weak again. Never.

Blu knew she wasn't like her biological mother, yet she couldn't help but compare her mistakes to the woman she barely knew. Iris Jones had given in to any man who'd walked in her direction, promising her the moon and advancement in her singing career.

She chuckled bitterly as tears trickled down her cheeks causing the road to blur. Iris hadn't stayed off her back long enough to realize she actually had a daughter. A daughter who wanted just one kiss. One touch. Some kind of acknowledgement that she mattered just as much as singing some sensual love ballad. Had that been the reason she'd so blindly fallen in love with her ex-husband? Had she been so desperate to be needed?

No, Iris had gone after what she wanted and to hell with the consequences. Blu wouldn't live that way. She knew the road she would wander if an involvement with Jaden continued—a path to nowhere. As long as she remembered that, things would be just fine.

She exhaled. *Let Jaden think what he will. He doesn't know me or what I've been through and that's the way it's going to stay.*

Blu couldn't afford anything else.

* * * *

Sand picked up her wineglass. What more did she need? She sampled the merlot, grinning in pleasure. "Perfect." She smoothed the bubbles from her bath against her skin. The intrusion of the telephone ringing brought a frown on her face. "Damn it, this better be important," She said harshly into the receiver on the fourth ring, after securing a towel around her slim figure.

"Oh, it is," a gravelly male voice replied from the other end of the phone. "He just

left.”

“I’ve been waiting for your call, Harris. Did he leave alone?” Sand asked, anger lacing the last word.

“Yeah. Alone.”

“Good.”

“Do you want me to follow him?” the man asked, starting his car engine.

There was a pause on the other end.

“No, I’ll call you when I need you.”

“What about the other part of your arrangement?”

Sand chuckled. “Are you accusing me of not sticking to our agreement?”

“Look, you’re the one that has been dodging me. I want what we agreed upon.”

“I always keep my promises.” Laughter erupted through the phone speaker. “I suggest you come and get exactly what we ‘agreed’ upon.”

“Give me five minutes.”

* * * *

The next morning, Blu found herself looking like something from a horror film. She almost didn’t recognize her reflection in the floor-length mirror. Her eyes were red and swollen from the tears she’d told herself she wasn’t going to shed. She turned on the faucet and winced when a bolt of pain pulsed at her temple. She had one hell of a hangover. She’d succumbed to the cosmopolitans after trying to come up with some sort of plan to lure Jaden away from her life. She’d come up empty while her mind continuously replayed the kiss they’d shared.

That’ll teach you to overindulge!

Blu struggled to keep her eyes open. She had never been a morning person and hated people who were. She clipped her tight twists in a haphazard upsweep, paying no attention to the loose tendrils that escaped to caress her cheeks. She brushed her teeth, washed up, and ignored the desolate look in her eyes as she dropped her pajama top and entered the shower.

The warm water flowed over her curves like a man’s caress. Soothing. Methodical. Without the complications of actually having a man in her life. The thought brought her back to Jaden.

Her body tensed. What was it about the man that set her on edge?

His arrogance, for starters. Had she ever met a man as set and determined? A man who was aware of his own power and skill? The answer was “no”. Never had a man elicited such fire within her. One heated gaze from those mysterious green eyes was enough to stoke all the wild embers Blu thought she’d extinguished long ago.

The man was like a tornado. Always stirring. Uncontrollable. Dangerous. They believed in very different principles. She wanted a chance to prove to herself that she didn’t need a man to feel complete, a chance to say to the world that she had indeed survived. While he wanted a challenge, to prove that he could take and have whatever suited his fancy. He wielded control like breathing air.

Blu slathered the bath gel into her sponge, the citrus scent assailing her nostrils with its tangy aroma. It might not make sense to everyone else why she chose to live her life without the companionship of a man, without love. She couldn’t remember how many times she had tried to explain this to her mother and Sunni. They thought she was bitter.

She exhaled slowly. She knew what they all didn't—love was so overrated, especially when it came to her freedom. Freedom she had given up to be Mrs. Seth Lennox. She wasn't going to hide her identity behind a man ever again and she didn't care who understood her reasoning, including Jaden Graeham.

Her mind drifted to the previous night. Her lips still burned from his kiss as if she'd been branded. Damn the man for knowing how to kiss the daylights out of her! He'd tasted of rich chocolate ganache cake from dinner. Sensual. Erotic. His body had felt so good melded to hers. It was as if they were meant to fit together.

The sponge drifted from her small breasts, over her erect dark nipples. Slowly, Blu drew the sponge over her sensitized skin. A sharp grasp escaped her lips. She imagined it was Jaden touching her, his lips on her heated flesh. Caressing. Tasting. Suckling her until she screamed in pleasure. His tongue would dart out and swirl around her areola, feasting on her slowly at first and then faster and faster. A pinch of desire ached between her legs. She squeezed her buttocks, wishing it was his cock pushing deep inside of her. Pushing her further, breaking past her barriers. Fucking her into a frenzied storm of sensation. His dick pumping harder into her pussy. The rhythmic sound of his balls slamming against her slick heat.

"Oh!"

Blu shuddered at the guttural sound escaping her lips. She dropped the sponge as she pressed her palms against the tight curls in between her thighs. She closed her eyes, seeing Jaden kneeling in front of her, a wicked grin spread across his delectable mouth. She wanted him to call out her name as she suckled his cock deep into her mouth. It was no longer just her in the shower, but her and Jaden. It was his finger she felt massaging the hard bud of her clit. It was his fingers that slipped in between her dewy folds. In and out. Deeper. Faster.

There was no shame, no restraint as she cried out her pleasure and she writhed from the thrusting of her fingers. The vivid streak of her climax wrenched out another hoarse moan from her lips. Blu's inner muscles spasmed over and over again.

"Jaden!" she screamed his name, her body going limp against the wet tiles. Her breathing was uneven and quivered from the temporary rapture.

Blu turned off the water as the last of the soap lather rinsed off her moist skin, trying to ignore the hollow feeling in her heart. She took a deep breath, opened the shower curtains, and toweled off.

"Damn! Damn! Damn!"

Jaden only wanted her because he couldn't have her. Why couldn't she leave it at that? Even now, her body wanted more—craved more. Craved *him*.

She dried the moisture dripping down her neck "You always want what you can't have. Just move on." The moment she looked up, her movements came to an abrupt stop. Her mouth went dry and her heartbeat accelerated. Everything swept into slow motion as her eyes riveted to the bathroom mirror.

"I'm watching you."

Someone had written the eerie words in the steam! While she'd been in the shower! Her blood stopped cold. The towel dropped out of her hand, falling soundlessly onto the floor. Fear gripped her stomach into tight knots of disbelief. A chill that had nothing to do with the temperature change from the shower swept over her.

Someone had been in her house!

Blu's throat constricted as her eyes slowly went to the door. She remained perfectly still as she tried to assess any noises or shadows under the closed bathroom door. The possibility of the intruder still lurking inside the condo made her flesh crawl. She neither heard nor witnessed a thing. Her footfalls were soundless against the wet tile as she walked slowly to the door. She listened. Nothing.

Blu grabbed her white terry cloth robe from the hook on the back of the door, tying the knots quickly before returning to the vanity. She opened the medicine cabinet. The old screws in the hinges groaned in protest. She cursed silently. She couldn't take the chance of the intruder hearing her. She reached into the cabinet and pulled out a pair of scissors. Gripping her newfound weapon tightly in her palm, she returned to the door.

Blu reached for the doorknob, saying a silent prayer before cracking open the door. She had barely taken a step when someone pushed her back in the bathroom. Hard. She tried to move the door forward, but it was no use. The person on the opposite side had incredible strength. The sound of the scissors skidding across the floor had her pulse escalating.

She had to get to them, but to do that, she had to relinquish her grasp on the doorknob.

All thought evaporated from Blu's mind as the air was knocked out of her lungs. The intruder used the door as a battering ram against her body. The back of her head slammed against the brass towel holder as she fell. Striking pain zipped through her head and down her shoulders. Sandwiched between the wall and the door, she landed with a thud on the wet floor. Her vision blurred. She blinked, trying to get some clarity. A shadow loomed over her. Maybe two. She heard a voice, but couldn't make out what was being said.

Blu struggled to sit up, but her legs wouldn't obey. The pain in the back of her head felt as if she'd been struck by lightening bolts.

"Help." The word came out in a hushed whisper and not the yell that had she intended it to be. "Someone, please..."

The room spun and everything went black.

* * * *

"Where in the hell have you been?" Sand barked into the phone. "I called you hours ago." She closed the door to her office.

"I've been handling my part of our business arrangement, sweetheart. Did you think I wouldn't hold up my end? I thought I showed you that last night."

"This has nothing to do with how well you fuck," she replied.

Harris smiled, male satisfaction gleaming on his ruddy face. "Well, I aim to please. I've got to get going."

"I want to know what's going on," Sand barked.

He scowled. "You'd better be nice to me or I'll make things more difficult for you, I promise."

There was a pause.

"Why don't you stop by tonight and let me ... thank you for a job well done," Sand cooed into the phone.

"How can I refuse?"

Harris turned off the cell phone, gazing down at the still form on the floor. Blu Evans was quite a lovely woman. A man would love to spend a night between her thighs. An

evil smile flickered across his lips. Graeham was in for a rude awakening when all was said and done. Poor bastard wouldn't know what hit him.

* * * *

Jaden glanced at his watch. It was well past nine-thirty in the morning. He'd never acquired patience as a virtue and doubted he would attain it now. He'd sat restlessly in the reception area of Elan Cosmetics for the last forty-five minutes.

He hated waiting and blamed his lack of the ability to perform the task on the lightning speed he ran his life. He was a man who was able to make a decision on what he wanted and when he wanted it. Once his target was set, there was no second-guessing.

Jaden thought of Blu. If ever there were a woman he'd blow time off for, it was her. She had no idea how intoxicating she truly was. Desire ignited his blood as he thought of seeing her again. They were supposed to meet to go over the marketing strategies with Napier Evans, Blu's brother, whom Jaden had yet to see hide or hair of. Napier's secretary had assured him that he hadn't forgotten about the meeting.

He preferred to deal with just Blu this morning. He wanted to be alone with her, watch her spit out one of her voluminous rebuttals at his flirtations while her brown eyes lit with fire.

Why was he going out of his way to make himself available to her? Especially when the list of willing females avidly awaiting his time grew longer and longer. Women who would jump at the chance to be his arm .

Jaden frowned. He didn't want arm candy. He wanted Blu. That realization was starting to irritate him as much as it intrigued him. He'd been in many liaisons, but not relationships. No, relationships were foreign to him, even with Sand, the arrangement had been on his terms. The depth of his intentions was always established from the start, less complicated that way.

Blast!

He was a grown man. She was a grown woman. What was wrong with two people enjoying a little harmless sex? They'd obviously hit the ground running in Paris. Now, she acted as if fucking him was like asking if she wanted to walk down Lake Shore Drive in her drawers.

He simply couldn't figure out the equation that had him panting around Blu like a dog in heat. He'd never walked away from a challenge. She was that in spades. It was what he'd witnessed in her eyes that night in Paris that had given him the balls to alter his life. He didn't know whether to be grateful or scared to death. He hadn't thought of the next acquisition since he'd left New York. The restlessness that usually invaded his body had turned into mellowness. He was in no hurry to leave Chicago or Blu. He wanted to see what tomorrow brought and the day after. Wanted to see the world through her eyes and watch her pretty face light up with a smile.

Jaden shook his head. He hadn't even considered pursuing another woman since Blu denied her attraction to him. He knew other women wouldn't compare. Nor could they make his blood boil just from watching them enter a room. When he'd telephoned his mother earlier this week, Deborah Graeham had claimed "That's what one does when in love".

He had swiftly explained to his mum that he'd never known such an animal as love. His mother hadn't been surprised by his lustful thoughts about Blu—given her colorful

past as a call girl until she'd met Jaden's mentor and friend, Edmond Slyvestre. For the last twenty years their love affair had grown into a steady companionship, neither seemed to care that there were no wedding rings on their fingers.

Jaden had only given away that there was something about Blu that intrigued him and he planned on finding out what that mysterious piece of the puzzle was. Time had never allowed him the luxury of pursuing a relationship the good old-fashion way. He shook his head at the inaccuracy of the thought. The truth was that *he* hadn't allowed time to pursue an actual, living, breathing connection. Perhaps it was time to start.

He could marry her? Marriage?

Jaden shook his head. He was satisfied with his lifestyle. Wasn't he? What he'd shared with her was... What?

Before he could ponder further, Napier Evans raced out of his office, his winter coat and briefcase in hand. The man's body language exuded tension; his tall frame carried nervous energy as he directed his secretary with instructions.

Jaden stood. Something was wrong. He could tell by the agitated movements Evans was making. He hadn't gotten as far as he had without being able to read people. "Mr. Evans?" The worried gaze Napier shot him was answer enough.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Graeham, but a family emergency has occurred. We'll have to reschedule." Napier turned back to his secretary, "Alice, please see that messages are forwarded to my cell."

"Yes sir." The skinny brunette replied, her focus intent on both men. She looked as if she would jump up from her swivel chair any moment and tell all the company secrets.

Something was wrong with Blu?

"I don't mean to be insensitive..." Jaden's stomach tensed, a streak of anticipation streaking down to his gut, "—but does this concern your sister?"

A puzzled look crossed Napier's face. "Look, Graeham, I really don't have time for this..." He wrapped a cashmere scarf around his neck, "—but to answer your question, it does."

Jaden watched helplessly as the other man ran to the elevator. He couldn't tear his gaze away until the mechanical swish of the doors carried away the one man capable of answering the questions raging in his head.

Unless...

He turned to face the secretary and walked up to the counter that supported her desk. Her near-black eyes beamed at him. He'd simply use his charm to get what he needed. He offered an easy smile that was known to cause women to melt.

Alice's white smile brightened like a hundred kilowatt light bulb. He leaned on the counter, facing the flushing secretary. "Well, it would appear that I need to reschedule an appointment." Jaden looked up slowly. She was hanging on his every word. "Pity, I was hoping to conclude business today."

"Yes, it is." Alice nervously licked her lips, while her eyes hungrily ate up him as if he were a succulent steak. Her voice lowered. "It couldn't be avoided, Mr. Graeham."

He laced his fingers together. "Why is that?"

Alice stood and glanced around. Her eyebrows furrowed into a rigid line. "It appears that there's been a serious accident."

Jaden straightened, his face grim. "Accident?" His throat constricted. What would he do if something had happened to her? Fear sliced down to the pit of his stomach. He

clenched his fists at his sides to keep from hitting something. “What happened?”

“Ummn...” Alice blinked, apparently surprised by the rapid change in his nature.

“Mr. Evan’s sister was found unconscious...”

“What hospital?”

“Loyola, but I don’t...”

Her words came too late; Jaden was all ready racing down the hallway, struggling into his black pea coat. He tugged on his derby hat, punching the elevator button impatiently.

“Come on, come on!” He paced back and forth in front of the elevator doors, ignoring the inquisitive looks of onlookers.

A vivid curse tore from his mouth, as he gave up on the elevator and bolted to the stairs. By the time he made it to his limo driver, Charlie, Jaden’s breathing was coming at a rapid rhythm.

“Where to, Mr. Graeham?” The older gentleman asked in his clipped New York accent.

“Loyola University Hospital.” Jaden untied the knot in his tie, flinging the scrap of fabric against the opposite door of the limo. He knew he wouldn’t be able to relax until he knew what was going on. He flipped open the compartments for the mini bar, opening a bottle of water. The cool liquid did little to relieve the hot knot of fear in his throat. He hesitated to think on all the scenarios to be fearful of. Deep down he knew if something were to happen to Blu he would never again breathe quite the same.

He’d deal with that possibility later ... if, God forbid, it presented itself.

Chapter Five

The consistent beeps and bells of the hospital monitors caused Monica Evans' blood pressure to rise. Her tear-filled eyes took in her daughter's still body and the reddish-purple bruises on her forehead.

This couldn't be happening. It just couldn't. She'd just seen Blu last night and everything had been fine—except for the curve that had been tossed to her regarding the merger of Elan and Mirage.

Monica wiped the tears from her cheeks. She turned to face Sunni's tear swollen gaze. "H-how did you find her?"

Sunni exhaled, drying a tear from the back of her hand. "I'd spoken to her the night before. She'd sounded upset but wouldn't tell me what was bothering her. I offered to come over, but she told me she was just about to go to bed." She paused. "I decided to check in on her this morning. I used my spare key and I..." Her voice faltered as emotion took over. Sunni closed her eyes. "Why would someone do this?"

Monica reached out to touch the other woman's hand. "I don't know. But, by God, I will find out."

"Mom!"

Monica turned to find her son standing in the doorway of Blu's hospital room. "Napier." She went to him and embraced him tightly.

He pulled away, but didn't take his arms from around his mother's shoulders. His gaze locked on Blu's prone form. "How did this happen?"

His mother shook her head. "I don't know. Sunni found her."

Sunni slowly explained the whole scene and by the end everyone stood in silence, waiting for Blu to open her eyes.

*

Napier grounded his teeth, slamming his hand against the wall. "Damn it!"

"The police say that whoever the intruder was they entered with a key. There were no signs of forced entry." Sunni hugged her arms around her waist.

Napier turned to his mother. "What did the doctor say?"

Monica smoothed her hand over Blu's bruised forehead. "She has a concussion. She dislocated her arm during the assault. Dr. Talbot says that it will be only a matter of time before she wakes up."

There was a deafening silence in the dimly lit hospital room.

"I wouldn't put this past Lenox," Napier said, bitterness lacing his words.

"Seth?" Monica replied, a frown marring her face. "Their marriage ended years ago."

Sunni shook her head. "I don't think that jackass has the ability to think past himself." She looked into Napier's eyes. "Blu hasn't heard from him in a long time."

Napier paced back and forth, running his hand over his bald head. "The bastard still hasn't gotten over my sister leaving him."

"That may be true," Sunni conceded, "but to attack her after all this time? That's not likely."

Monica sighed. "I just want her to wake up."

"She will." From behind, Sunni placed her arms around the woman's shoulders,

enveloping her in a hug. "You know she can't stand to be out of the loop for long."

Monica smiled. "Yes."

*

"Ouch!" Blu groaned. "Oh ... my head..." She mumbled, trying to focus on the blurry faces above her. She tried to sit up, but a blinding pain forced her back down to her pillow. She made out her mother's voice. Her eyes fluttered open. "Mom?"

Monica smiled, moving to her daughter's side. "Yes, baby. I'm here. Don't try to move."

"Sure is nice of you to finally wake up, woman." Sunni smiled. "I'll go get a nurse."

Moments later, a nurse hovered over her. "Miss Evans, it's nice to see you're awake. I'll check your vitals and then update the doctor." Nurse Kearns said, smiling down at her as she took her wrist in her hand and glanced at her watch.

After the doctor had examined her and confirmed that there were no serious affects from her fall, Blu breathed easier. He prescribed some pain relievers and wanted her to stay in the hospital overnight for observation.

She placed her hand on her head. Pain ricocheted through her skull. She felt like she'd been hit by a sledgehammer. "Who did this?"

Napier took his sister's hand in his. "We could ask you the same thing. Do you remember seeing anyone?"

Blu looked at her brother and then the white bandage on her arm. She closed her eyes. Every bone in her body ached. She reopened her eyes. "The last thing I remember is taking a shower."

"I found you in the bathroom," Sunni said. "The police say that it wasn't a forced entry."

Blu's throat constricted. A thread of fear skipped down her spine. She looked at the three people who mattered most to her in the world. "Then I guess the question is who would want to hurt me?"

"Whoever it was had to be after something," Napier sat on the side of the bed. "Can you think of anyone who would want to do this?"

"No."

"What about Seth?" Monica asked. "I've never forgotten his maliciousness from the divorce when he went to all the tabloids exploiting your pain and spreading his vicious lies."

Blu chuckled and then grimaced when her head started to pound. "Seth is too vain to acknowledge that any thought of me still filters through his warped mind, let alone attack me."

Sunni looked at her watch. "I really need to get to the office." She smiled at Blu. "I promise I'll check back later to see how you're doing."

Blu managed a grin. "That's the first time I've heard you say you want to go to work."

Sunni laughed. "Ha, ha." She leaned down to hug her. "I'm so glad you're okay, girlfriend."

"I second that," Monica replied.

Sunni waved her goodbyes, closing the door behind her.

Blu met Napier's worried look. She knew that she wasn't out of the woods just yet. Someone had meant her harm and she wanted to know why. "Where's the phone? I need

to get in touch with the officer in charge of my case.” Blu reached for the phone on the small table beside her bed.

Monica shook her finger at her. “Oh, no! There is no way you’re going to deal with that right now.”

Napier nodded. “You need your rest. I’m going to make some arrangements—like putting a guard outside your door—and I’ll schedule for your locks to be changed. I’m going to have a talk with the management at Arden Towers.”

Blu sighed wearily. She knew when she was fighting a losing battle. That didn’t mean that she liked being spied on by some bodyguard. Though, she had to concede, with reason. Someone had broken into her condo.

Blu couldn’t believe it. She’d lived in the Towers for the last five years and nothing like this had ever happened. Arnold Peters was the head of management, a man known for his impeccable service. She doubted he would ever staff someone of blatant incompetence to work at the luxury complex.

It just didn’t make any sense. The fact that someone had had a key meant that they’d come after her on purpose. But why?

Blu didn’t have any enemies. She was sure if she did, she’d have more than the dislocated arm and bruises she had now.

“None of this makes any sense,” Monica said.

“No matter how bizarre it seems, we can’t take any chances. Someone was after something in your condo, Blu.” Napier stood, looking out the window. He turned to face his mother and sister. “Are you sure you have no idea what that something could be?”

“You mean like some sort of governmental secrets?” Blu chuckled, and then grimaced as her head throbbed in protest. “Highly unlikely.”

Napier frowned. “This is serious little sister. You could have been seriously hurt.”

“Thank God, that wasn’t the case,” Monica countered. She sat down beside Blu, her eyes misted. “If something had happened, I don’t...”

Blu grabbed her mother’s hand. “Don’t even think about that, Mom. I’m going to be fine.” She turned to look up at her brother. “We just have to find out what this impostor was looking for.”

She tried to remain calm in front of her family. She didn’t want them to be any more worried about her than they already were. She couldn’t deny the fear that raced in her veins. She considered her condo her sanctuary. The fact that some stranger had been amongst her belongings unnerved her.

Blu hated being a step behind whoever had dared to make her their enemy. She swore when she was able to walk out of the hospital she would find out all there was to know about this elusive intruder.

* * * *

Jaden tossed back the small tumbler of premium whiskey. He’d hoped the alcohol would help cool him down. His nerve endings buzzed. He’d paced the living room of his suite about a hundred times since he’d told Charlie to change directions and deliver him to the Palmer House Hilton, where he’d maintained a suite for the past few weeks.

He poured himself another drink, aware that the liquor wouldn’t cure what ailed him. It had taken everything within him not to continue on his journey to the hospital. Reality had caught up with him. He was nothing if not a realist. The reality was that he didn’t

belong at the hospital beside Blu. How could he explain his presence to her family when he could scarcely explain it to himself?

Jaden's fingers tightened around the glass. The fact that he couldn't get a handle on his emotions wasn't a good sign. He prided himself as a man who controlled everything he ever needed, unlike his poor upbringing. This whole situation threw him over the edge. He was on unfamiliar ground when it came to Blu.

When he'd found out that she was in the hospital, genuine concern had taken over and several other unnamed emotions as well. Of course, he didn't want her to be hurt. He was human. A man made of flesh, bone and blood. He had a heart, but what would his presence at the hospital represent?

Affection? Would her family be able to see that his fondness for Blu was growing? Was that what he wanted?

Jaden hadn't counted on anything outside of the physical with Blu. He wasn't looking for complications, yet the more he stayed around her, the more he was drawn into her world. The more he wanted to know about her world, the more confused he became.

He walked to the wall-to-ceiling window, losing his unsettling thoughts in the countless amount of traffic that went about its daily trek through the city below. He wasn't used to this magnetic pull that made his equilibrium seem more than slightly askew, like he was on some tightrope, trying to hold on for dear life.

Bloody hell!

What was he doing? He had long passed the point of no return when it came to Blu. He'd never had to do this much pursuing with any woman before. The problem was he didn't know what that meant in and of itself. Why did he seek her approval even at the cost of her rejection?

Why—because the woman intrigued the hell out of him.

Jaden had sworn long ago that he'd never allow anyone to break his control. He'd lost it once before and it had cost him dearly. His childhood had been filled with cruel teasing and judgments by his schoolmates as the prostitutes' bastard son had taught him a harsh lesson. Use or be used.

The ridicule was still there even though Jaden wasn't the little boy who'd worn hand-me-downs. How many times had he gotten into a fight, defending his mother's honor, when in truth he'd known she put food on the table by sleeping with strangers? Men who cared nothing about his mother's dreams or worth. Or that she had a son who worshiped her.

Jaden sighed, closing his tired eyes. If there was anything he'd learned from his mother, it was survival. The world didn't wait for you to take what you wanted. You had to make the world attainable to you and that's what Jaden had done.

He'd graduated top of his class at Columbia College in New York. He'd invested in some very enterprising stocks with the help of his mentor, Edmond, and had even started his entrepreneurship by buying out one of Edmond's real estate firms.

Jaden thought of the man his mother cherished. Edmond was more like a father than his biological one could ever be. Still, Jaden knew what it was to yearn to know where you belonged. He'd built on that yearning with every business venture he'd entertained.

His career was his solace. It was where he belonged. A true security net that never let him down. When he walked into a room, he was a force to be reckoned with—a giant step from the meager boy he'd been back in London. Yet a familiar pang struck him.

Jaden refused to acknowledge that he still harbored remnants of the past. He was a grown man. A man who made multi-million dollar decisions everyday. He knew his worth but ... he couldn't remember when it had started. When he had started to feel so restless? From the women he kept company with, and the tedious parties and social gatherings, to the backstabbing, envious gleams of business associates who wanted everything he'd accumulated. And most of all, the ghosts from his past. He was tired. The weight was heavy on his soul.

Yes, if there was anything he'd learned it was survival, but there was a part of him that wished there was someone he could share the weight he carried on his shoulders. He wasn't fool enough to confuse lust for love. He knew what he shared with Blu had a hell a lot to do with lust. What if there was more?

Jaden shook his head, blaming his musings on the booze. He wanted to pick up the phone and call her. To make sure that she was all right. To let her know that...

Let her know what? That he cared? That he didn't want to just fuck her. The words sounded blunt, and he knew if he actually spoke them to Blu, she would promptly hang up the phone in disbelief.

Jaden shook his head. He was going crazy. He had pondered every imaginable fate that could happen to Blu, and each one set him more on edge than the next.

He emptied his glass, turned away from the window, and picked up the phone. He'd deal with this bout of confusion later. He'd never been one to focus on limitations, possibly because he obliterated the source.

However, this time the heart of the predicament was one hell of a lady. A lady he happened to know was fond of pink roses.

He ordered two dozen.

* * * *

"You idiot! I didn't tell you to rough her up," Sand hissed into the receiver.

"What the hell was I supposed to do? She knew I was there!" Harris shouted. "You expect to leave a message such as that and have nothing go down?"

Sand signed. "Now we have the police looking into this. It was supposed to be a warning, not an assault."

"There's no way the cops can trace this back to us."

"Us?" Sand laughed.

"Yes, 'us'," Harris stated intently, his gut clenching. "We're in this together, lady, and don't you forget it."

"I think you're confusing the issue at hand. None of this can be traced back to me. I can't be touched."

"Fuck you! You want to double cross me now?"

"Let's get something straight, Harris. The only reason I agreed to this is because you and I have similar agendas. You're ticked off at your daddy for selling your company to Jaden and I want him to pay for disrespecting me."

"Agendas, my ass! I want my money."

"You'll get your goddamn money." Sand paused. "Why do you have to make this complicated? You were only to get the files."

"Because it *is* complicated." He sneered into the phone. "and if you don't give me my fucking money I'll go straight to DeWitt." The line disconnected.

Sandrine cursed vividly. She ignored the curious look from onlookers as she sauntered into the busy Sears Tower. Harris would need to be handled, and quickly. She stepped into the elevator, and snapped open her small compact and groaned inwardly at the bags under her eyes. She hadn't slept well. Her mind had been on Jaden and this infatuation with Blu Evans—another man who needed to be controlled.

What the hell kind of name was that anyway?

Sand had to find some way to put a stop to this maddening tryst at once. She'd been with Jaden too long to let some witch like her take him all away.

She snapped the compact closed as the elevator opened to the floor that stationed his office.

Her thoughts flickered to Harris Robertson, the son of Theodore Robertson, former CEO of Mirage Industries until he'd turned the reins over to his incompetent and alcoholic son, Harris. She thought getting him involved had been a good idea. A chance to stick it to Jaden and to end this budding affair between him and the Evans woman. Now, she would have to deal with him as well.

Sand sighed, hating to deal with such unpleasantness this early in the day. "Morning, Martha. Is Jaden in?" Sand asked, tossing her thick tresses over her shoulder.

Martha squinted. "Do you have an appointment?"

Sand's mild manners turned into sharp disdain. "I don't need an appointment. I work with him," She turned and walked toward his office. "Better work on those office skills, Martha, or I might have to mention to Jaden he needs a new secretary." She tossed a warning look over shoulder at the shell-shocked look on the woman's face.

His office door was ajar when Sand reached it. He was talking to someone on the phone, "I'm glad to hear that Blu is better."

Sand's blood pressure rose. That bitch! Pity, Harris hadn't done her the favor of eliminating the woman altogether.

Well, never leave a woman's job up to a man. Sand smiled wickedly. She'd take care of everything. Her attention turned back to Jaden's conversation.

"Yes, tomorrow would be good to meet. My counsel will be here today to handle the paperwork, so everything will be on schedule. Right. See you then."

The sound of the receiver being placed on the base was Sand's opportunity to enter. She took a breath before rapping the door and stuck her head in the room. "Got a minute?"

Jaden looked up from some reports. He smiled. "Come in, Sand. Did you bring the papers?"

"Nice to see you too." Sand entered the brightly lit office. She took a closer look at Jaden's face. His eyes spoke of restlessness and his handsome face hadn't been shaved. It was only ten in the morning and already he looked like he'd put in a twelve-hour workday. "You look like hell."

"Sorry. I didn't get much sleep last night."

Sand searched his face, waiting to see if the source of his tension would be revealed. She tried to cover her irritation and decided to tread lightly. "Dare I ask why?"

*

Jaden watched her sit. He squinted as she made a big display of toying with her short, gray skirt. He knew when she was up to something. However, he would let her come to him. Right now, his mind was elsewhere, with a certain petite beauty who had

invaded his mind.

He never thought he'd see the day that he actually wanted someone so much. Every other aspect in his life, including his personal one, had come as a result of hard work and dedication. With Blu, it seemed as if his hard work and pursuit would be as taxing as climbing Mount Everest.

Jaden had just received word from Napier that Blu was fine. He wouldn't believe it until he saw her—could touch her. It was driving him crazy not to see that saucy mouth of hers or to hear a hot retort tossed his way.

"Hello? For heavens sake, you're not even listening to me," Sand said.

"Sorry," he said, refocusing his attention on her. "There are going to be some big changes and I wanted you to hear it from me first."

Sand smiled. "Sounds intriguing."

He rose from his desk, his hands clamped behind his back. "It is."

"Well, don't leave me in suspense. You know I don't like surprises..." Her heated gaze wandered over Jaden's face, stopping just short of his fly. "Well, some surprises are more welcomed than others."

He ignored her flirtation. "Mirage Industries is merging with Elan Cosmetics."

*

Sand's mouth dropped. This couldn't be happening! He had to be joking!

"Well, what do you think?" he asked, now leaning on his desk, facing her.

She clamped her mouth closed. Anger rose like bile in her throat. "Do you suppose this merger will get you any closer to that woman's bed?"

Jaden crossed his arms at his chest, causing the stark white shirt to bulge against his muscular frame. "Tell me how you really feel Sand." A slight grin played on his lips, but a blatant warning shone in his eyes that booked no argument.

Sand eyed him harshly. "You didn't answer me."

"I've never known you not to mean what you say, but then, you should know that I stand behind my words as well," Jaden replied firmly. "I will *not* discuss my personal life."

She bit her bottom lip, hating the woman who stood between her and the man she was meant to be with.

"I don't understand why you have changed everything you used to be for this ... woman." Sand gestured with her hands; her chest rose and fell rapidly with each heated word.

"I haven't changed," Jaden countered, a frown lacing his forehead.

"The hell you haven't!" She stood, turning her back to him, running her hand over the wispy curly layers of her hair. She swung back around to face him. "It used to be just you and me against the world. Do you remember?"

"Sand, that was long ago."

"No, I mean from back at our days at Columbia." Her eyes gleamed with desperation. "We worked so well together. We dreamt of the day that we would be able to have everything our hearts desired. Now look at us."

"Yes, I remember, but the fact remains..."

"What remains is the fact that you are going after something that you simply can't have, Jaden. Someone you aren't meant to have." She hissed. "Don't you understand that?"

He frowned. "Who are you to tell me what I can and cannot have?"

"I *was* your friend and at one time we were lovers. I'm the woman who has stood beside you and watched you become the man you are today."

Jaden walked closer, glaring into her eyes. "Blast! You know that I can't begin to repay you for everything you've done for me, but I don't owe you any explanation about who I chose to take to my bed."

"You owe me more than that, starting with a little loyalty."

"*Loyalty?*"

"Yes! Do you expect me to stand back and watch you make this unwise business deal knowing it's destined to fail?"

"Your vote of confidence in me is overwhelming." He turned to walk back to his desk.

"I don't appreciate being treated as if I'm out on a limb here. This thing with this woman can't be as important as what you and I share."

Jaden tapped his fingers on the opaque glass desk. "What you and I *shared* is over—a fact you seem to keep forgetting," he paused. "Sand, what's going on with you? I've never seen you like this."

"You've been so busy chasing after women to notice what's been going on with me." She snapped.

"And what would that would be?"

Sand gave him a pointed look. "Surely you jest." She laughed. "My God, Jaden! It's so obvious. You and I have been fighting our feelings for so long. You know the game: I pretend not to care about your liaisons with other women and you allow me my little exploits on the side. I'm tired of the games."

"So am I."

Sand's face lit up, as she slowly outlined the lace fringe of her blouse with her fingers, her eyes fastened on him. "Then you know what must be done."

Jaden sighed. "Sadly, yes." he hesitated, looking away and then back to into her eyes.

"You're fired."

* * * *

"I'm going to check around, Miss Evans," Zander, her bodyguard proclaimed.

Blu offered the muscle bound man a slight grin. "Okay."

"That man can check my place anytime," Sunni sighed, closing the door behind them. "Every nook and cranny."

Blu turned to face her friend, rolling her eyes. "You are shameless." She refocused her attention on the russet-colored leather couch and matching chaises. Afghan throws lined the ceiling to floor pine bookcases, numerous volumes of hard covers to the worn paperback suspense novels covered the panels.

African artwork lined the opposite wall. Blu's gaze caught on one of her favorite pieces, a mahogany carved statue of a man and woman intertwined.

She walked to the mantel, her fingers tracing the deep etchings in the wood. A chill raced down her spine.

She was home, yet just being there made her blood run cold. A police detective had already been to the hospital to question her about the attack and she had little faith that

any leads would be uncovered.

Blu sighed. The whole twenty minutes Detective Olivierez had questioned her, she'd felt her frustration grow. The bottom line was that she didn't know what the intruder could have been after any more than she would have known who would want to do her harm. According to Olivierez, the building manager hadn't been seen or heard from in the last two days. That had only intensified her wariness of the whole hellish situation.

Zander reentered the room, making his entry as quiet and lethal as the man himself. "Everything looks secure. We've already checked for any bugs or cameras. Found nothing out of the ordinary, ma'am."

Blu nodded. "Please, call me Blu."

He smiled and she thought Sunni would melt to the floor. "Ok, Blu." He looked to Sunni. "And you are?"

"Jacinta Suniga, but you may call me, Sunni."

Blu rolled her eyes, trying to laugh at her friend's flirtations.

Zander nodded, a grin appearing on his lips. "I've set up camp in the condo right across the hall. This is my cell number." He handed Blu a card with digits scrawled on it. "I'll reiterate that you aren't to go anywhere without me, all right?"

She nodded, suddenly feeling like she was two years old again. She couldn't believe all that had happened. Having a guard was even worse because it meant that the bastard who'd broken in had succeeded in scaring her.

"I'll be back in an hour or so. Later, I'd like you to go over your schedule for this week, so that you and I can cover some basic guidelines," Zander replied and then he was gone.

"He is one hell of a man." Sunni whistled. She turned to find Blu, who was staring off into space. "Are you all right?"

"This has been a tad overwhelming."

She looked over the verdant green plants hanging in their asymmetrical plant holders. Pictures of family and friends lined the huge window seat that she often found herself looking out of. "You know, I've always loved this place. After leaving Seth, I felt so misplaced. Not that it's the first time in my life," Blu looked to Sunni. "Once I moved into this place. I felt like it was my own."

"Nothing is going to happen to you," Sunni reasoned. She placed her hand on Blu's arm, a lopsided grin appearing on her pretty face. "Did I mention that I'd be willing to be your roomie for as long as Mr. Muscles is stationed here?"

Blu laughed. "You are hopeless."

"That's why you love me." Sunni chuckled. The smile on her face turned serious. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"And I you, girlfriend." Blu hugged her friend. She could always count on Sunni. The two had met in an elevator on Sunni's first day reporting to work. The heel to Blu's Manolo Blaniks had broken as she hobbled into the elevator car. It had been one of the worst days and there had been Sunni with her bubbling warmth and quick-witted humor. The women had been friends ever since.

Blu grimaced, pain shot through her arm as she sat down in the chaise lounge.

"Here, let me help." Sunni offered.

She shooed her away. "I didn't ask for a nursemaid."

"Don't start with me. I'm here for the duration. So don't even think about booting

me out of here.”

Blu’s eyebrow quirked up. “Please, you could care less about my injuries—you just want to screw Zander.”

They laughed.

“There might be some truth to that.”

Propping her legs beneath her, Blu said, “I know you have things you need to take care of.”

Sunni hesitated. “No I...”

“Truth is ... I could really use some time to myself. You don’t have to worry, Zander will be here to protect me.”

“Oh, all right. I do have some errands, but I will check back with you later.” Sunni gathered her purse. She walked to the door and turned, hesitation showing on her face.

“I’ll be fine. Go and do your thing.”

“Ok, ok.” Sunni smiled, shrugging into her jacket. “Need anything?”

“Nope. I’m fine.” Blu didn’t exhale until the door clicked softly behind her friend and heard the lock secure into place. She looked around the condo. It suddenly felt bigger than it had ever before.

Big and lonely.

Twenty minutes of the deafening silence and Blu found herself ready to climb the walls.

Oh, stop it! You can do this! She told herself. She rose from the couch, deciding to take a pain pill for her head before the dull ache got more intense.

Blu looked around. Everything in her kitchen was in order. All appliances neat and shiny. She opened her fridge and was greeted with a couple of cartons of yogurt, some leftover Moo Shoo Beef, which she threw out, and a liter of water. A quick inspection of her freezer brought the same result. Emptiness. She needed to go grocery shopping.

She closed the refrigerator door, deciding she really wasn’t that hungry. Her bare feet made soundless steps against the plush beige carpet.

Blu glanced at the phone. She knew if she called the office, someone at Elan would alert her mother. In fact, Monica had gone as far as to have Blu banned from the facilities at least for the next forty-eight hours.

Still she felt the need to call her team, especially with this new merger and product line on the forefront. Things were going to get crazy but there was nothing that she could deal with today, seeing as she was no where close to her lab.

Blu decided to write out a rough schedule for Zander. They’d gone over his rules, which left a lot to be desired in her opinion. His guidelines were dangerously close to imprisonment.

Once she was alone again, she decided to take a long leisurely bath. The scenes of the day before played vividly in her mind, causing fear to tap on every one of her nerves.

After what seemed like eternity, with the bathroom door wide open, she descended into the sunken bathtub made for two.

When she reemerged from the hot, rose scented water, it was evening. She lathered shea butter lotion on her smooth skin, deciding on a pair of worn cotton drawstring pants and a white cropped t-shirt that skimmed her midriff.

A solid knock sounded at the front entrance. Blu closed her bedroom door and ended up running to the living room as the second rap at the door sounded.

“Who is it?” She gazed out the peephole. Zander stood beside ... Jaden.

Her mouth went dry.

“It’s Zander and I have a visitor,”

Blu swung the door opened. Her eyes met Jaden’s. She couldn’t tell if it was pity she witnessed in those wicked green eyes of his or just the underlying passion that fused with every feature on his handsome face.

“It’s all right. Thank you.”

Zander nodded and walked back to the condo across the hallway he’d rented while guarding her.

She turned her attention back to the intense man standing in front of her. “Jaden, what are you doing here?”

His eyes roamed over her, first settling on the purplish bruises on her forehead, the bandage on her arm down to her eyes and lips and proceeded downward. By the time Jaden looked into Blu’s eyes, she was engulfed with heat.

“I had to see you.” His voice was husky, ragged with need.

She shivered. She wasn’t used to this. Was that genuine concern she witnessed in his eyes? She grasped the doorknob tighter as the emotion in his gaze did something to her insides. She licked her lips nervously, unaware of the affect the simple action had on him.

“Maybe you should have... I don’t think...”

Jaden held up his hands, brown paper bags in each of them. “Before you say no...” A devilish smile appeared on his handsome face. “I brought dinner.”

Maybe it was the way one side of his mouth tilted a little higher than the other. Or the fact that her stomach groaned in protest that made Blu ask, “Dare I ask what’s in the bags?” If her nose was correct, Chinese food.

He shook his head. “Oh, no. First you have to let me in. Then I’ll share my goodies.”

The sparkle in his green eyes made her smile. What would be the harm in a little dinner? She could always sic Zander on him should he get out of line.

“Welcome to the Evan abode.” She stepped aside as he entered but was aware of his powerful presence just the same. His subtle aftershave tingled her nose. She couldn’t help herself, she let her eyes drift over his denim covered backside. She had never seen Jaden look so relaxed and ... undeniably eatable. Closing the door, Blu watched him take in his surroundings.

“Nice place. It fits you.”

She crossed her arms around her waist. “How would you know what fits me?”

The seemingly innocent words rewarded her with a searing look from Jaden. She’d walked right into that one and felt her body respond to her own verbal mishap.

He smiled. “Are you ... sure you want me answer to that?” His eyes met hers.

“No.” Blu replied quickly, keeping the knowing grin off her lips.

He placed his hand to his chest as if mortally wounded. “I didn’t think so.”

“I’ll take your coat.”

Jaden shrugged off his coat and handed it to her. Their hands touched and she could have sworn that she’d been zapped by electricity. She quickly pulled her hand away, carefully hanging his coat in the hall closet as to not hit her arm.

When Blu returned into the living room, she found Jaden holding a picture of her and her family. She thought having him amongst her private belongings would be an oddity. Strangely, enough she didn’t mind his invasion. He looked right. His sudden appearance

felt right.

“That was taken two years ago at my mother’s birthday party.”

“Monica looks so happy.” Jaden turned, his eyes lighting up when he saw Blu. “You are a gorgeous woman.”

“Thank you.” She tore her eyes away from him and walked over to the coffee table, opening one of the bags he’d brought in to smell the aroma of shrimp fried rice, Chicken lo mein, pot stickers and pepper beef and green peppers.

Blu’s eyes almost rolled back. She didn’t look up, but delved into the other bag. “How did you know?”

“How did I know what?” Jaden sat down on the couch, watching her

“That Chinese food was my favorite.”

“I have my sources,” he replied quietly, leaning his arm against the back of the couch, his long legs stretched out before him.

“I’m sure you pay them well for supplying you with accurate information.”

She wondered if it was possible that Jaden truly did care about her? No, he couldn’t. He cared about his profit margins, hostile takeovers, investments and having a warm, willing body in his bed. He was a calculated man and only he knew his next move. Blu reasoned silently, her defenses up. She had to keep her wits about her.

His face turned solemn. “I’m sorry about all of…” He waved his hand at her arm. “…”this.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. You didn’t know this would happen?” Blu sat in the chaise facing Jaden, folding her hands in her lap, unsure why she felt the need to console him. What had happened to telling him to simply go away? Of course, leaving the food.

“It still shouldn’t have happened.”

“Believe me, had I known, I would have liked to arrange for fewer bruises.”

Jaden stared at her intently. “How’s your arm?”

“It was dislocated, still sore.”

“Do the police have any leads?”

Blu shrugged her shoulders. “No. Not that I’m surprised. Nothing is missing that I can see.” She watched Jaden ball his fists in his denim pockets. The harsh lines of his angular face were a shield of tension.

Blu could feel his anger emanating the air. The last thing she needed was for Jaden to lose his temper. She knew he was passionate but to actually direct those emotions toward her attack left her in a state of uncertainty.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m starved,” She said, rising to get plates and cutlery. He followed her.

Blu was aware of his commanding presence with every move she made. His magnetism was so naturally potent. She felt his penetrating gaze on her as she handed him two plates. She turned to find him eyeing the hanging pots and pans above the standing island.

Jaden smiled. I never thought of you being a cook.”

“Your sources are slipping.”

He laughed. “I’ll have to fire them right away.”

Blu grabbed some silverware out of the oak cabinet drawer, wagging the shiny utensils at him. “Please, don’t fire anyone on my account.” She gave him an incredulous

look. "I couldn't stand for someone to lose their job because of me."

Jaden looked away. "But that's exactly what you think I would do." His eyes captured hers. "You thought I would bankrupt your family's company and pilfer your employees."

Blu opened her mouth but no words came out. She managed to shrug and say, offhandedly. "It is, after all, what you do."

"You still think of me as the bloody tyrant after your family?" he asked quietly. His expressive face changed and became almost somber.

A tension-filled silence enveloped them before Blu slowly walked out the kitchen. She couldn't deal with the hurt in his eyes. What the hell was going on? What had happened to the challenge she presented. The man in her kitchen didn't appear to be that man at all. When had the tables switched on her?

"No," she took a deep breath and adjusted a smile on her face. "Just after me."

Chapter Six

Jaden shook his head, following Blu out of the wood-floored kitchen, enjoying the view of her backside. The gentle sway of her hips contained a rhythm he was desperate to see underneath his bedroom sheets.

He smiled as her words repeated in his head. He was after her. All of her.

He knew to some extent she didn't trust him. He was working on that. He watched in amazement as she returned to the adjoining Regency-styled table with Jamaican roped legs into an elegant setting for two. He took the plates from her and placed them on the table. The whole room was decorated in rich mahogany wood and a massive British curio occupied the opposite wall. Ferns and banana leaf sconces gave the room a tropical flair.

It was apparent to him that Blu had exquisite taste and a flair for mixing and matching styles and patterns. She was unique and he wanted to drink deeply of her essence until they both burned for more.

The aroma of the food made his stomach grumble. Jaden smiled sheepishly. "Mind if I wash up?"

"A little hungry?" She grinned.

"A tad."

"This way, please." Blu led him to a small half bathroom, right off from the kitchen.

He brushed past her, inhaling sharply as his arm pressed into her soft skin. Fire, hot and intense spread to his cock. He wanted to grab her, lay on down on the carpet and fuck her until she begged him never to stop. He'd abide his time. He knew this evening was a test and he aimed to pass.

Jaden watched her hands cover her chest as if she'd been scorched. It did his heart good to see that he affected her as much she did him. Her eyes diverted from his, trying to hide the desire he'd witnessed in them. He grinned, watching her scurry back to the dining room.

Finished washing up, he returned to the table. He had never felt so aware of a woman. He smelled the hypnotic scent of her perfume: peony. He felt comfortable, more than he probably had a right to.

"Everything looks good." Jaden sat down, his eyes wandering over her methodically.

"Yes, it does." She held his gaze for a heartbeat and began filling her plate and passing a container to him.

He knew from the night he met with Monica and Blu that she wasn't one of those women who ate rabbit food. No, she was a woman who enjoyed her food and savored every bite. He had watched as her tongue darted out for every last morsel, as if teasing the food and seducing him all at once.

"This is nice," He said.

"Yeah, well the least I can do is share the delicious food you brought me." Blu moaned, closing her eyes as she sampled the pepper beef and green peppers.

Jaden swore the sound was damn near orgasmic. His dick responded swiftly. "My pleasure." He shifted uneasily in his seat as he imagined her soft mouth tasting him just as sensually. The thought rewarded him with a rock hard erection. Silently, he thanked the powers that be for the table and its linen tablecloth for containing his response to her.

He wanted nothing more than to have Blu spread-eagled on the table, naked and writhing beneath him as he plunged and retreated from her slick heat. He inclined his head and watched her. He'd missed the silky sound of her climaxing, the sexy moans that escaped her pretty lips and the way her body molded around his cock like a vise. She was simply intoxicating. Every bit as exciting as he'd thought from the first moment he'd looked into the fire in her eyes that dared to be quenched.

Jaden wasn't satisfied. He wanted to claim her right here, make her his, so that she wouldn't even think of any other man. No other man would be able to touch her without her thinking of him first.

Egotistical, Jaden knew, but he'd be damned if she'd forget him and the red-hot passion they'd experienced together. Not when he couldn't forget the heady smell of her sweet pussy on his lips.

Blast!

The woman had turned his world upside down. Jaden would be the first to say it. He idly brought his chopsticks to his mouth; the food couldn't quench the thirst he had for Blu's taste. He pretended to enjoy the Chinese while his body thunderously hungered for something not on his plate. The thought of not having her in his life dimmed the light that she brought into it.

The thought provided Jaden with a host of complexities he'd never pondered.

"Would you like something to drink? Wine?" Blu asked, snapping him out of his private thoughts.

He nodded, his mind whirling with emotions. "Yes, please." He felt slightly unbalanced, as if walking on hollow ground. He watched silently as she rose from her seat. He stilled his hands to keep from pulling her into his lap. His world had turned anti-clockwise and it scared the shit out of him. He wanted Blu and one night, one week would never do. He wanted to go beyond all of that. He wanted to be there to make her smile. He wanted to be there to wipe her tears and ease her pain with as much sex as she could handle.

Brilliant!

Jaden didn't know why it had taken this long to notice. He was already arse over tit for Blu. *Now* what was he going to do about it?

Blu reentered the room, carrying a bottle of vintage Chardonnay and two wineglasses. She handed one to Jaden. "Hard to believe this is actually happening."

"What's so hard to believe?" he asked.

Blu placed her hand on her chest. "Us." She moved to her seat. "This."

"If I may be so bold..." Jaden picked up a piece of shrimp. "What *is* happening here?"

She chewed her food, swallowed and looked into his eyes. "Well, for once, I don't want you to go away."

Her eyes held his. He saw vulnerability in the chocolate depths and wanted to reassure her. He smiled boyishly. "Well, that is a step in the right direction."

Blu laughed. "That it is."

He admired her bravado. Her quiet strength. She didn't ask for help, because to do so would infringe on the fierce determination and independence she craved, of which Jaden couldn't agree more with—there was nothing he loathed more than a dependent woman. She wasn't a woman who gave her trust willingly. He could understand that, too,

especially in his world. A world that gave nothing and took everything.

“Tell me...” Jaden paused to pour wine in her glass and then repeated the action for himself. “How did you become one of the most acclaimed perfumists in the cosmetic world?”

Blu rolled her eyes skyward. “What can I say?” She toyed with her chopsticks. “I love experimenting and developing fragrances. There’s something to be said about the creative process. I understood the vision my mother created and nurtured for Elan. All our products endorse inner beauty. I believe a lot of companies actually exploit women’s insecurities.”

Jaden’s eyes roamed over her face, as if memorizing every feature. “Of which you have no cause to have any.”

The rapid pulse at her collarbone confirmed that his words had hit their mark.

She leaned her head, eyeing him intently. “I have insecurities just like any other woman.” She waited a second before she continued. “The competition is fierce in the cosmetic business. It’s a do or die world, Jaden. One of which I’m sure you are aware of.” Her eyes roamed over him. “Not that I buy into gender bias, but being a woman makes the world we compete in that much more complicated.”

He lifted his wineglass up to her. “You handle the complications well.”

“If only you knew.”

“So, tell me then. Tell me what drives you.” Heaven knew he wanted to. Hard.

Blu licked her lips, her eyes lighting up as she spoke. “Everything. It can be as simple a trip down memory lane to the smell of some of my favorite foods.”

Jaden leaned back in his chair. “Now there’s an aroma I’d sell my soul for if it included you.”

She laughed. “Be careful what you wish for.”

“I think I can handle it.”

Blu changed the subject. “Surely, you have the same exhilaration in your work.”

Exhilaration? He no longer knew if the thrill remained or accurately described what he felt regarding his business pursuits.

“It has its challenges,” Jaden finally said, feeling the hollowness he had tamped deep down inside for so long rise and form a lump in his throat.

“What was it like growing up in England?”

The question brought a smile to his face. “I grew to love it. Growing up poor makes you love anything you can get, which wasn’t a lot.”

Blu’s eyes sparkled with surprise. His humble background wasn’t something that he televised to the public.

“It must have been difficult for you.”

“You learn to get by.” Jaden replied, remembering those lean years when it was just him and his mother.

Blu nodded. “Isn’t that the truth.” She leaned forward. “Is it true about your mother?”

Jaden grinned. “That she used to be a high-priced call girl?”

She looked uncomfortable. “Do you mind me asking?”

“No, and yes she was. I’ve made amends with my mother’s past long ago.”

“Did you ever find it hard?”

Jaden laughed. “Yeah, every time some little bugger punched me for being her son.”

“Oh Jaden, that’s awful.”

He shrugged. “I lived through it.”

“That’s all you really can do.” Blu said, looking down at her fingers and he wondered what she thinking.

Jaden didn’t pry, but suspected that she had her own childhood tales of disillusionment.

“Well, I’m stuffed.” Blu stood, taking her plate into the kitchen.

He followed behind her, with his plate in hand. He wasn’t ready to leave her. He wanted to talk with her, watch her eyes light up with excitement. He wanted to be inside her body and lose himself in her. “I hope not too stuffed.”

She took his plate, placing it in the dishwasher and turned back around to face him, her eyebrows arched. “Sounds as if you have something in mind. Dessert?”

“Perhaps.”

“If your sources were any good, they would have told you that I love dessert.”

Jaden walked closer. “Are you suggesting that I had you investigated? He couldn’t help himself. He had to be near her.

Blu raised her eyebrows conspiratorially. “Didn’t you?”

He heard her breathing hitch. “I always check out my business prospects.” His gaze roamed and lazily appraised her. He couldn’t wait any longer. He had to touch her. Kiss her. His fingers caressed the side of her cheek. “Your skin is so soft.”

She blinked. “What about dessert?”

“Dessert is as decadently erotic as a man’s touch. Don’t you think?” Jaden stepped closer, his breath fanned her face. He pulled her towards him, careful not to reinjure her arm. One hand on the small of her back, the other gripped her lush ass in his palm. He pressed his dick against her soft flesh, wanting her to know the trouble she’d caused.

Blu moaned. “How so?”

“The texture, color and taste all have the ability to seduce. Just like this.” His fingers dipped under the waistband of her cotton pants, lightly teasing her sensitive skin above the elastic.

She swayed against the hard muscles of his body. “I declare, Jaden Graeham...” Her gaze traveled down the length of him. “Are you trying to seduce me?”

He stared deep into her eyes as his fingers massaged the lacy pattern that covered the sensitive nub between her legs, he pressed his fingers against her mound. She was wet and ready for him. “Are you willing?”

“Mmmn ... willing?”

“Would you seduce me in return?”

“Touché.” Blu disengaged herself from his intimate embrace as if realizing her control was slipping, righted herself.

Jaden felt her nipples harden and he ached to strip her out of the cotton. Her eyes darkened with passion. “Well?”

She licked her lips. “You’ll *know* when I’m seducing you.”

“Indeed.”

Blu smiled and he felt something within him stir. She was beautiful.

Did she have the slightest clue that he was completely under her spell? Maybe, it was time to show her.

*

Heat expelled from Blu's body. She retrieved the paper bag and opened it. Her eyebrows creased. "Fortune cookies?"

"You don't like fortune cookies?" Jaden asked, settling down on the couch.

"Sure, if you like frivolous proverbs."

Blu laughed, folding her legs beneath her as she sat beside him. She could feel the sexual tension emanating from his body. How long could she avoid not touching him?

"Ah, you don't believe in fortune tellers?"

"I believe things happen to people by their own devices," she paused, and then shifted so that she could look him in the eye. "What's your theory?"

Jaden skimmed his fingertips over the curve of her collarbone and over her shoulder. "I believe some people create their own destiny and others are fortunate to have fate on their side."

Blu shuddered. "Which are you?" Her heart accelerated. The attraction she felt for him only intensified.

"I'm a man who creates his own destiny."

She inhaled sharply as Jaden's fingers skimmed the pulse at her neck, sending butterflies to flurry in her stomach. Her body came alive with just one touch from him. She found herself suspended in time. Her eyes met his. She wanted his cock buried deep inside of her. Anticipation coursed to her slick center.

"Yes, a man with little patience."

"Oh, I have patience." He searched her face. "If the object is worth obtaining."

Blu almost groaned out loud when Jaden removed his hand, taking his warmth with him. What was happening to her? Between them? She picked up her wineglass, hoping that the wine would dull the keen ache she felt between her legs and the need to feel him there. "What determines an object's worth?"

Jaden sampled his wine. "Depends on how much I value the object." He placed his wineglass on the table, turning to look at her. "Lately, that's been thrown into question."

"Really?"

"Yes. What I used to value doesn't seem important anymore."

Blu felt her stomach dive. She licked her lips. Why was she allowing this to continue? Allowing Jaden to reach within her soul and touch her so deeply. She should get up and tell him to go but was rooted to her seat.

"How can you be so sure?" Blu felt as if she were on the edge of a cliff. His words only accelerated the emotions twirling her into knots.

"It is," he replied.

Jaden knelt in front of her, sinking into the thick carpet. Before she could open her mouth to protest, his fingers touched her lips, slowly outlining their shape. She sighed. He continued his inquisitive trail, tantalizing her right down to her toes.

He lightly touched the bruises on her forehead. Blu nearly jumped at his tenderness. "I want you." He leaned closer, kissing her cheeks and whispered. "Can I have you?"

Those four words were her undoing.

Blu's answer came in an urgent kiss. His lips tasted hot, spicy.

She pulled him closer, wrapping her arm around his neck. She wanted to lose herself in his taste. Time seemed to slow down as her tongue melded and suckled against Jaden's. Her body jolted, thanking her for the erotic delight.

"Hell yes!"

He tasted like the first day of summer and every bit of sin. She hungrily nipped at his lips, while he delivered playful licks to hers. He was a hundred times more potent than any drug.

Blu ran her hands up the hard planes of his chest. He groaned as her fingertips traced slow circles on his nipples. She smiled, reveling in the knowledge that he wanted her touch as much as she wanted his. He inched away from her long enough to discard his shirt. His skin was hot, his heart pounded against her eager palms.

Jaden's hot fingers trailed up under her t-shirt, scorching her tight back muscles until they released under his hands. In a heartbeat, her top was stripped off as his greedy hands teased the hard tips of her breasts with the pad of his fingers, pinching and rolling until she thought she'd come just from the sheer pleasure of it.

"Come here." He caressed Blu's hips, pulling her closer against him so that she could straddle him.

Jaden nudged his aroused cock against her wet pussy. His hands massaged her thighs and slowly trailed upward to her hips. Blu arched upward as he pulled her pants and then her underwear down. He traced a seductive path over her wet mound. She arched up wanting more of his torture.

Jaden leaned inwards, inhaling her musky scent of her arousal. "God you drive me crazy." He swept her up in his arms; her feet dangled just an inch or so above the carpet, her pants puddled on the floor. His eyes conveyed what his straining cock clearly demonstrated.

"This is getting out of control, isn't it?" He licked her lips.

"Yes," Blu murmured in his ear. "Are you going to stop?"

"You know the answer to that."

She wrapped one arm around Jaden's neck and gasped again when she felt the hard surface of the wall behind her. She hooked her legs around his waist, bracketing him intimately, her feminine core brushed against his hard cock and Jaden groaned as she ground her hips against him. Her hands shook as she fumbled with his fly.

"Look at me."

Blu complied with his demanding request. His eyes burned into hers. "You don't have to be afraid of me."

Her eyes widen at the size of his cock. "Oh, afraid is the last thing I feel right now."

His hot fingers trailed to the waistband of her pants and dipped into her slick folds. "Hmm, you're so wet, sweetheart." He slipped another finger deep within her tight sheath. He began pulling them in and out slowly; then increasing the pace. "Damn!"

"Don't stop!" She pumped her hips against his hand.

"That's right, baby. Let go."

Blu's mind was lost in the sheer sensation of his ministrations. She was getting close to her release, could feel the tight bud of ecstasy rising deep in her soul. He swirled his finger against her clit and everything within her clenched tightly moments before she exploded.

"Jaden!"

Blu rested her head against his shoulder, willing her breathing to return to normal. Her breath caught as Jaden pressed his swollen cock against her. Instinctively, her hands found his lean hips, pulling him tighter against her as he ground against her again.

"Again?"

He tore his mouth from the sensitive spot on her neck. “Baby, we’ve just gotten started.” His eyes burned into hers; challenging her with sensual promises she knew he could more than keep.

Chapter Seven

Started?

At the moment, Blu could barely form the word, let alone speak it out loud. If he hadn't had his arms around her, she swore she'd have fallen. Her legs had turned into jelly. Her heart threatened to thud right out of her chest.

She forced herself to stay alert despite the passion-induced haze surrounding her. This is how she'd gotten in trouble before, but that was before Jaden had truly gotten to her—underneath her skin. The man was more than the jet-setting playboy she'd judged him to be.

He was hardworking, passionate and every bit of a man. He'd given his word that he'd turn over the reins of Mirage to Elan Cosmetics. That stood for something, didn't it?

She could deal with whatever tomorrow would bring.

Blu opened her eyes. She wanted Jaden now. She wound her fingers in his short, inky waves. "Make love to me."

He met her hungry gaze. "You don't have to ask, love."

She brushed her mouth against his. "Good, because all I want is to feel you. All of you." She proceeded to kiss him, her exploration of his mouth deepening the kiss until she wasn't sure where he started and she ended.

"Talk like that will get you anything." His lips descended against Blu's. Hard and unrelenting.

A gasp of awe escaped her mouth as he maneuvered them to the leather couch. The soft fabric felt cool and electrifying against her skin.

Her hands skimmed the solid planes of his flat abs, pulling his shirt upward with her fingers until the obtrusive cloth went flying somewhere overhead. Next came his jeans.

She kissed his lips, ending any response he intended, her fingers wound around his neck pulling him closer. She groaned. He wasn't close enough, she decided as she pressed her pelvis against his. Hot waves of pleasure shot down to her groin.

"If you don't stop that ... you'll make me lose control." Jaden hissed, between clenched teeth.

"Show me," Blu teased. "Show me what you do when you lose control."

He grinned lasciviously down at her, before planting an open-mouthed kiss. His hands found their way down to her hips and angled her soft flesh on top of his bent thighs so that the apex of her sex was wedged against his swollen cock. He gyrated against her, watching her writhe beneath him.

"Oh! Don't stop."

He bent down to kiss the pouty tips of her ebony nipples and looked up to catch the raw passion on her face. "Don't worry, I wasn't intending to."

Jaden laved one swollen peak with slow, deliberate licks, and then turned his attention to its twin. The slow swirling of his tongue built a steady frenzy of need through Blu's body. She arched into him, unable to get enough of his touch. Of him.

Blu wanted him to feel what he was doing to her. Her hands skimmed down the hard planes of his back, her nails gently scraping his skin until she cupped his firm hips. The man was wonderfully made.

"I want you. Now," she mumbled, pressing her lips against his.

Jaden nipped her plump bottom lip. "Oh, not yet." He stood up. "I have plans for you."

She reached for him, but he caught her hands in his, kissing the palms. He knelt in front of her while his hand busied themselves with tracing every sleek line of her body, from her slender neck to the tips of her erect nipples and down further to her ribcage.

Blu inhaled abruptly, her eyes fluttered closed. She thought she would surely go insane at the torture Jaden was eliciting inside of her. Her breaths came in short huffs as his fingertips skimmed her belly button.

"I wondered, and now I know." He smiled wickedly up at her.

She licked her lips. "Know what?"

"You're ticklish," he chuckled.

"Are you planning to use my weakness against me?"

Jaden's eyes darkened. "Only for pure pleasure." He dipped down to taste her dewy skin. His lips teased her navel and descended lower inch by inch.

"Let's see where else you're ticklish."

Blu was close to jumping off the couch as Jaden's warm breath caressed her feminine walls. She barely had time to catch her breath before his tongue delved against the sensitive folds for her clitoris.

Waves of pleasure rose and crested over her. She cried out, but Jaden's skillful onslaught didn't stop. The tip of his tongue dipped in and out of her with a cadence that brought her to another climax.

"That was..." Blu was at a lost for words, her breathing ragged.

Jaden smiled down at her, scooped her up into his arms and asked. "Which way to the bedroom?"

*

Jaden felt Blu turn in his arms. He looked into her eyes. He could see the worry in them. He'd felt the welts on her back, and though he wanted to question her; he knew that now was not the time to do so. "Are you having second doubts?"

An infectious grin lit up her pretty face. "Not on your life?" She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I was just thinking that the bed could wait." She slid down the length of Jaden's body, then pushed him onto the couch.

His thick eyebrows quirked up. Placing his arms behind his head he said, "Well, well, what might you have in mind, Miss. Evans?"

She straddled him; taking the heavy weight of his cock in her hands, she gently stroked him. Up and down. She rubbed the ball of her fingers over the head.

Jaden felt his blood boil. He had never been a man to come to a climax so quickly, but with her wickedly tiny hands, he found there might be a first time. He grabbed her hands, pulling her against him. "I want to fuck you." He groaned out gruffly. "Now."

He angled her pliable body so that he could enter her slowly. Blu had other plans. She gyrated her hips against him. He gritted his teeth as his body joined with hers. She was so tight. Wet. And felt so bloody good!

He let his head roll back. God, he'd missed the tight sheath of her pussy. He watched as deep guttural groans tore from the back of her throat. She had to be the most beautiful woman in the world. A fine shine of perspiration silhouetted her brown skin; her loose twists were free and as wild as her sensuous movements.

Jaden moaned as he surged deeper into her, his hands gripping her full hips. With every stroke she made, he rose to meet her with one of his own. Deeper. Faster. Until the pace was one of such delirious frenzy that the world around them ceased to exist.

Blu's climax arrived with such breathtaking force that no sound came from her mouth as he kissed her sweet lips. He surged upward with one deep stroke just before his own powerful release took him over the precipice.

For a few moments, Jaden said nothing. He was in complete and utter awe. Their bodies were still intimately joined as if they were made to fit each other. He might never get enough of the vixen in his arms.

She kissed his temple. Her eyes sought his, a saucy grin on her face. "Did I work you too hard ... or are you ready for another round?"

Jaden's eyes darkened with newfound desire. "Who's going to be the death of whom, woman?" He grinned, rolled her underneath him, nudging her legs apart with his knee.

Her hands guided his cock inside of her. He closed his eyes. Being inside of her felt so right. He focused on her pretty eyes.

"I hope you're ready for anything I can give you, love." He bent down to kiss her lips, thrusting inside of her again.

* * * *

Every muscle in Blu's body ached in the most delicious way. The way a woman would feel after a long night of lovemaking. She lifted up the crisp white sheets, wondering if last night had been a dream. Her eyes roamed over the tangled limbs of Jaden's lean body against hers.

A shudder of renewed need greeted her. Hunger pains. The man was addictive. She placed the sheet against her chest, and closed her eyes.

What in the world had she gotten herself into?

There was no way she could escape the questions Jaden would surely have about the long welts along her spine. Scars that had physically healed with time but had taken a long time to mend mentally.

How could she explain her past to him? A newfound shame swept down her body. Tears swelled in her eyes. It'd taken her years to overcome the feeling of blame that her ex-husband's abuse had caused. She'd always thought of herself as a strong woman, but in her marriage, to show any signs of strength would be just cause for a black eye. A broken nose and the last horrifying fight she'd ever had with Seth had resulted in a stay at a London hospital healing broken ribs.

Anger raged through her as she recalled bargaining for a divorce from Seth in exchange for her discretion from the paparazzi who would kill for the chance to get the juicy story of a successful entrepreneur's son being charged with physically abusing his wife.

How could she explain to Jaden that she could never allow another man to ever enter that deep place within her?

Blu reopened her eyes just as his arms curled around her waist. Her hip pressed against his rock-hard cock. "Well, that's one way to greet a woman in the morning!" she said.

She felt Jaden's grin against her, "I'll have to remember to do it more often." He nibbled on her ear.

She tried to ignore the desire that ignited through her body at his touch. Breaking away from his embrace, she sat up, carefully tugging the bed sheet around her. “I-I have an early morning.”

Jaden chuckled. “I could think of more interesting things to occupy our time.” He reached for her but his hands weren’t quick enough for her spasmodic movements.

Blu tied the sash to her terry-cloth robe. Her eyes were devoid of emotion. She sighed, “You know as well as I do, that there is a lot of work that needs to be done before we bring the Ultra line to production next week.”

He sat up; the sheet drifted down his flat abdomen. She forced herself to look away from the temptation he presented.

“Are you having regrets ... about last night?” He asked, failing to mask his anger.

Blu tilted her head, feeling as if a huge weight had been harnessed to her body. “No. I have no regrets.” She went to her closet, searching for an outfit. “Last night was what it was.”

Jaden got out of the bed, not bothering to cover his nakedness. “What was last night about?” At her silence, he forged on, “Would the scars on your back have anything to do with your rapid departure this morning?”

She snapped around. “I don’t have to explain anything to you.” She attempted to step out of the bedroom into the adjoining shower but Jaden out stepped her, pinning her against the door.

“How long do you plan to run?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you?”

Blu sighed. “I don’t have time to play games with you.” His green eyes gleamed with anger and something else—sadness? She looked again, but witnessed nothing short of the hurt mirrored deep within herself that she refused to show.

“Just as you don’t have time to be honest with me, right?”

“Jaden, this isn’t about you.”

His grip tightened on the door frame. His breathing came in short bursts. His virile presence towered over Blu. At one time, she would have been fearful had she not come to know the gentleness she’d witnessed inside of him.

“No, but it has everything to do with you. The woman I want to get to know. But you keep me at arms length.” He reached out to caress her cheek. “I’m not going to deny it ... last night was...”

Blu searched his eyes. “Last night was what?” Her heart thudded against her chest. Even her reminiscing about her dead marriage to Seth couldn’t extinguish the desire she felt being so close to Jaden.

The sexual currents sparked between them.

Suddenly, Seth was the last thing on her mind. She wanted to forget about the scars and the question Jaden had asked.

Her gaze traveled lower to the rugged outline of his six-pack and lower, to his rigid outline of his cock. Her fingers traced the sprinkling of black hairs that continued downward past his belly and lower until the only object in her sight was his dick. She wrapped her fingers around it, squeezing gently.

Blu’s gaze swept back up to Jaden. “You were saying something about last night.”

He gripped her hips, lifting her up into his arms and sat on her on the vanity. His

eyes darkened with passion. "Are you trying to divert my attention?"

"Maybe." She reached out to test the weight of his balls between her fingers and massaged them. "You are so wonderfully made." She watched the muscles in Jaden's jaw twitch.

"There are things we need to discuss."

"Later." She grounded her hips against him, the slow hum of tension knotted between her thighs. "There are more pressing issues to go over." Her body sought the release that she'd become addicted to. The wickedly bone-melting climax that only Jaden could give her. She felt wicked. Powerful. Feelings she'd never felt with any other man.

She liked it.

Blu continued to massage him in slow circles, applying light pressure when he least expected it. She watched as a low groan erupted Jaden's lips.

"You don't play fair, love." He leaned in to kiss her, his tongue darting out to trace the provocative curve of her lower lip.

"Your more than welcome to even the score."

"Hmm, I love a woman with a challenge" Jaden grinned, his skilled fingers untying the sash of her robe. A grin of satisfaction appeared on his handsome face, as the robe fell to the floor in a haphazard pile.

He leaned forward plant an open-mouthed kiss on Blu's lips that left her breathless. His free hand made deliberately slow trails down her breasts until they reached her erect nipples.

Jaden manipulated her heated flesh with smooth circles; then moved to her other breast, delivering the same deliberate seduction. Soon his mouth replaced his deft fingers. She gasped out loud as wave upon wave of desire ricocheted her body. A pool of heat gathered between her legs.

"Mmmn." Blu groaned, as the bud of tension grew an edge tighter in her womb. She wanted Jaden inside of her. Now. Every hard inch of him.

He tore his lips from her taut skin. "You like?"

Hello! She was nearly coming undone. Surely the devil knew that. She decided to play a little game with him, just to see how far he was willing to go.

"I don't know, Mr. Graeham. You may have to convince me."

A wicked gleam of pleasure shined in his eyes. "Oh, do I?"

"That's if..." Blu tilted her head, loving their brand of foreplay. She traced her fingertip over his mouth. "...you can."

Jaden chuckled. "Just you watch me." He didn't give her a chance to respond before he dipped his head to lave one of her nipples, flicking his tongue just so.

The wickedly delightful motion sent a shudder up Blu's spine.

"Mmmn!"

He ignored her cry and paid the same excruciating attention to her other nipple, his tongue licked. Nipped. Teased. Sucked until she arched against him in sinuous stretches. She couldn't get close enough to him. Her fingers wound in his hair. Her legs wrapped so tightly against his waist she was sure there was an imprint.

Jaden lifted his head, a devilish smile playing on his lips. "Hmm, I think you need more convincing." He carried her in his arms, placing her down on the edge of the bathtub. "I have more in store for you."

"Sounds good to me."

Blu felt giddy, something she shouldn't want to get used to if she knew what was good for her. Yet, she couldn't help but smile like an adolescent school girl, lovestruck by the bad boy in class. Not that love had anything to do with what was transpiring between her and Jaden.

No. What was happening between them was about two consenting adults enjoying time together. Some hot, erotic episodes. She had no trouble acknowledging that when the time came for them to bid each other farewell that she would be ready.

Blu owed herself this time with *this* man and she'd be damned if she felt guilty about it. Maybe some impulses were meant to be indulged, no matter how wild.

God knew being married to Seth had nearly destroyed any joy of life that she ever thought she'd be able to feel. Blu watched as Jaden bent over to turn on the shower head, the muscles in his lean hips flexed, powerfully displaying the sinewy built of his gorgeous physique.

Heat blindsided any rational thinking on her part. All she wanted was to have him buried so deep within her that she felt as if she would surely spontaneously combust.

Blu took his hand and walked to where he stood looking like an African king in all his naked glory. And he was all hers. No matter how short their time would be.

"Ready?" Jaden asked. His hazel eyes half-lidded. He lifted her into his strong arms.

"Oh, yes," she answered, pressing her lips against his as they entered the shower.

The water was warm and the shock of it against her already heated skin made her that much more sensitive. The whispery feel of Jaden's fingers glided over her slick flesh. Desire renewed itself as his lips swirled around her nipples, then continued downward until his heated breath was at her navel. He placed butterfly kisses there and descended further until he was on his knees in front of her. He positioned his hands on both sides of Blu's hips.

"Have I convinced you yet?"

Blu was a bundle of quivering nerves, raw with desire. Jaden's answer wouldn't have sounded sincere enough had she not witnessed the devilry in his amber eyes. "I don't..."

Before she could finish her sentence, his tongue dipped between her feminine folds. Suckling. Twirling and probing deeper into her honeyed recesses.

"Oh my God! Jaden!"

She moaned; her fingers gripped the back of his head as his tongue milked her of every ounce of strength she had left. She was dizzy with the sweet anticipation of joining her body with his in the most primitive way.

Blu felt herself falling into abyss of pleasure only for her and Jaden. She forgot to rein herself in. Her responses were loud, passionate and fevered as his expertly skilled tongue delved deeper. Faster. Until her inner muscles clenched tightly bringing with it a release so fierce, she felt tears at the back of her eyelids.

"Convinced?" he asked.

Blu offered him a saucy smile. "Maybe." She grabbed the sponge and lathered soap into its ruffled layers. "Turnabout is fair play."

"Hmmn, show me." Jaden growled.

Spirals of steam enveloped them, enclosing them into a private world of their own making. She took her time lathering his body, using feathery touches from his pecs to his waistline. She smiled up at him when he inhaled sharply as the sponge touched his navel.

"You're ticklish too." Blu chuckled, as Jaden shook his head at her teasing. She

knelt, coming eye level to his rigid sex. She wasted no time, using her hands and the sponge to clean and rinse him off. She had never taken the time to really satisfy her curiosity of a man's body. Not even with Seth.

With Jaden, she found she wanted to know every crevice of his body just as he'd gotten to know hers.

Blu used her thumbs to massage the tip of his cock, glancing up as his head dropped back. His eyes closed and his mouth clenched down firmly. She wanted to please him as he had pleased her. She took him in her mouth, just the head and then slowly, all of him. She teased him with her mouth. In and out. She increased the erotic rhythm of her tongue and lips, loving the raging pulse of his oncoming orgasm neared.

Jaden moaned. "Yesss." His fingers threaded through her twists. "If you don't stop you'll make me come."

She didn't stop. Her tongue made tiny circles around him over and over. She could feel him tremble. The sweet brink of his climax was a heartbeat away. She tasted the salty taste of his essence and relished that she had the power to make him come just as passionately and fiercely as she had.

Jaden pulled away, his breathing labored. "I want to be inside of you."

Blu smiled, rising up on her feet. "Convinced?"

"Touché," he smiled, heat suffused in his green eyes. He picked her up, placed her legs around his waist and delved one finger into her hot core.

"Oh," She cried out.

"Do you like that?" Jaden asked, kissing her lips. She must have not answered fast enough to his liking because he slipped another finger into her slick folds. "What about this?" He drove his fingers deeper. Faster. Harder. Until she cried out his name as she fell off the precipice into blissful satisfaction.

"Oh! Yes! I like it." Blu dug her fingernails into his back. "Fuck me. Now."

"You never were one to mince words." He entered her with one hard thrust. "How do you want me?"

She looked deep into his eyes. "Any way I can get you." She kissed his lips as he drove into her again and again in long deep strokes until her orgasm and her cries echoed against the bathroom walls.

He thrust into her twice more before his own climax shattered his resolve. He held her close, riding the wave of completion. Their bodies were still intimately intertwined. Pulsating from the frenzied lovemaking they'd just shared.

Jaden kissed her forehead. His breathing still uneven, a fact that made Blu grin. "I'm convinced."

She ran her fingers down his cheek to cup his chin, loving the mischief in his eyes. "What are you convinced of?" Even as she asked the question, the sudden stiffness in his body caused her to moan out loud.

Jaden began to move against her, slowly. "That I'm going to be quite fond of playing hooky from now on."

Blu closed her eyes as the passion built up within her again, taking her as a willing captive. She didn't care what was going on outside her shower. Nothing mattered but the world she and Jaden shared at that moment. There were questions she knew needed to be answered. Answers she didn't want to give.

Chapter Eight

Jaden couldn't keep his eyes off of Blu as she displayed the samples of new cosmetics and a vivid array of inserts selected to run in numerous women's magazines across the country.

Though her words were concise and clear of any hidden emotion, he saw what the other staff members from various departments didn't see: the wariness and uncertainty in her brown eyes whenever their eyes met. He wanted to know why.

He could feel her body's climate change even though he sat on the opposite side of the boardroom—too far away for his tastes. The rigid line of her back and the firm set of her generous lips all spoke of the underlying tension. He wanted to help ease her mind. Three days had passed since their night together. Several times he'd tried to address her distant behavior but they'd been interrupted. He was going crazy trying to figure her out.

What was she thinking?

Jaden had to get her alone. Ask the questions that had been burning the tip of his tongue. The first being, why was she backing away from him? Did her behavior have to do with the scars? Why had she gotten so defensive as if he'd touched a forbidden subject? There was more going on than she'd let on.

Blu had tried to dismiss his questions with a hot round of lovemaking but the questions hadn't gone away. The strategic marketing and advertising plans for the Ultra line in the upcoming weeks, which included an around the clock advertising blitz, had been productive and she'd used every meeting or phone call to avoid him.

Usually Jaden could deal with the boundaries a woman made. He usually had his own. However, with Blu, he was slightly off kilter and didn't know what one day would bring, let alone the next minute.

In the past, he'd welcomed the uncertainty of what one engagement would bring and what he could do to make sure the odds were in his favor. Something had changed. Had he changed?

Jaden snapped out of his self-analyzing daydream as Blu smiled, "Naturally, I will be also aboard—so to speak—the road trip to announce Ultra to the public. We're targeting some of the major department chain stores with free mini makeovers and facials, all from the new Ultra line devised by our Research and Development team."

"The Ultra line will pulverize the competition. Why? Because we are a company known for our high standards and high quality of product and today's economy shows that today's consumer is out for the biggest bang for their buck. We've priced the skin and cosmetic line with competitive prices, new and high demand products for women of all ethnicities." Napier interjected, sitting beside his sister.

Jaden's eyes met hers, intense heat spread like wildfire through his body. He couldn't deny that he wanted her as much his next breath. What happened to the man who believed in no-strings attached? The man that wanted to jump to the next plateau listed on his career must-do list?

Did that man even exist anymore?

He sighed, realizing that the answer to his dilemma was standing mere inches away, her eyes reflecting the same heat in his own.

Was he falling for Blu? The thought made Jaden sit straighter in his seat. No, that couldn't be? He was infatuated, maybe, but falling for her?

Growing up as a prostitute's son had left little to the imagination. For him, love had had little to do with what he called the supply and demand his mother's world dominated. The supply, being his mother's physical services and the demand, being lustful appetites. He'd known little else.

But love?

Love had never weighed in the equation of his world. He was intrigued with Blu's feistiness and her passion to see things to the end, as well as her stubbornness to see that she remained independent.

Jaden looked away from her then as the meeting was adjourned. He fiddled with the binder filled with marketing documentation that'd been presented at that start of the conference.

Bloody hell!

He had no business feeling the emotions tossing about within him. But he did. Sensations that left him feeling alarmingly off-guard. He felt his throat constrict. A voice told him to just get up and pretend that he wasn't curious about the scars or puzzled by the complex woman that Blu Evans was.

Before Jaden could think of an alternative route, he heard someone call her name and was shocked to find that the husky sound spewed from his lips.

He watched, mesmerized as she turned to face him, the agitation registered on her tightly-drawn full lips. The lighthearted smile she tried but didn't quite pull off wasn't lost on him. She was as reluctant as he was to broach on the subject from earlier.

"Look, if this is about this morning, I'd just assume to forget about it," Blu whispered, her hands tightened around the handle of her briefcase. Her eyes watched anxiously as the attendees filed out of the room.

Jaden stuffed his hands into his pockets. He was out of his element for sure, but something deep within him wouldn't let this go. "And if I had not shared what we've shared the last couple of days, I would leave this in your hands but..."

She groaned. "It's not a big deal. I prefer to keep what's in the past—in the past."

"I know things are brand new between us and I have no intention of compromising that. But I can't help thinking that what you say is in the past is still very fresh for you."

Blu's eyes glittered with anger. "Jaden, I'm asking you to leave this alone. If it was important, I would tell you."

He remained silent, knowing that the opposite was true. He knew she would rather chew nails before divulging information about the scars.

She smiled brightly. "Besides, I thought we agreed to keep things light."

Before Jaden could respond, the melodious sound of her cell phone went off, relieving him from making a complete ass of himself.

"Excuse me," she said, placing her briefcase on the conference table and reaching into her pants suit pocket for her phone. She turned from him, tucking a few of her twists behind her eye. She answered the phone on the third ring.

"Blu Evans."

Jaden tried to busy himself with gathering his own paperwork, while trying to ignore the disquieting voice nagging him. He knew there was more to the scars than she'd let on but if she refused to tell him more, what could he do?

He could only respect her privacy. Blu was right. Keeping things light between them was the best route possible. Neither of them could commit to more. He looked up when she disconnected the phone call. He'd made out enough that whoever was on the other end needed to see her right away.

"Something wrong?"

Blu waved her hand dismissing his question. "No! I do however need to step out of the office." She picked up her briefcase, looked into his eyes. "Look, I know we haven't set the terms of this ... this..."

Jaden smiled wickedly. "Affair?"

She grinned. "Yes, but I don't want things to become intense between us. Anything more right now would be too much for me."

He nodded his agreement. He was treading on thin ice. Being around her made him think and feel things he long thought impossible. He'd best get his bearings. "Will I see you later?" he asked, closing the distance between them.

Heat swirled around them, cocooning them in need that was never too far from the surface. He leaned down to lick his tongue against the exposed skin at her neck. Her pulse thudded against him, her body vibrated.

Blu took two steps back, her eyes fluttered closed, then reopened. "I-I don't know if tonight will be good. I still have a lot of work to do." She headed toward the door. "I'll probably be working late. I'll call you." She walked out the conference room without looking back.

Judging from the way she had vaulted from the room, Jaden had accomplished exactly what he didn't want to: to make her feel like she couldn't confide in him.

Relationships—who needed them?

He picked up his papers and briefcase and stopped too late as his body collided with a shapely female form. He was the first to right himself, bracing his arms out to steady the woman in front of him.

"I'm sorry. I..."

"Hell of a way to greet someone, Jaden."

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What in the hell are you doing here?"

Sand smiled wickedly. "Well, your secretary said I might find you here and might I say that you definitely have braced the challenge of emerging with Blu Evans." She laughed, picked up her handbag off the floor and straightened again. "In more ways than one I might add."

"I don't have time for your games." Jaden eyed her, wondering when he'd come to feel such distrust towards her. He remembered when times had been different between them. Seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Games?" She grinned, folding her hands together. "I didn't come here to play games, Jaden."

"Then exactly what did you come for?"

Sand moved past him, took a deep breath and then turned around, unnatural tears shining in her eyes. "Could we please sit down and talk? My goodness, I don't know where to start."

Jaden walked back into the room, closing the door behind him. "I have a half an hour before I have another meeting to attend. Why don't you start from the beginning."

* * * *

Blu didn't know how she had made it to Loyola Hospital without getting into an accident. Thirty minutes after the shocking phone call, she pulled into a parking lot. Her mind replayed the conversation she'd received again for the thousandth time.

A Nurse Spenser had called her to explain that a woman named Iris Jones was in ICU and had asked for her. *Iris Jones*. Her mother. The sadness of an abandoned little girl swept over her as if she had transcended time. She remembered that day. The day that despite how many times she had ached for the memory to be repressed, resurfaced in a blink of an eye. Iris had announced to Blu's grandmother that she was leaving.

Blu leaned her hand back against the headrest. Her eyes closed as she remembered the last day she saw her mother. She remembered the smell of her fresh blueberry muffins wafting through the cramped two-flat house. Her grandmother occupied the lower flat, while Iris and Blu had taken the upper apartment with the mountainous stairs that her grandmother refused to climb due to her arthritic knees.

Queenie had just taken the muffins out of the oven when Iris entered the kitchen, dressed in her evening best: a short chemise with a plunging neckline. The four inch heels made her seem like she towered over everyone. "Well, well, isn't this heartwarming." Iris rolled her eyes, bracing her hands on her hips.

Her intense gaze took in her daughter's getup. "You need to stay here with your daughter tonight. I promised Sister Joanne that I would go with her to choir practice."

Blu rushed to her mother. She smiled. "Mama, I made some blueberry muffins and I..."

Iris cut her off, waving her hand through the air. "There's something I need to tell you. Both of you." She took a deep breath as if steadying herself. "I got me a record contract out in California."

Queenie turned away from the wistful look in her daughter's eyes. "Is that so?"

"I have to take this chance, mama. It may be the only one I get. The only blessing I get."

"Blessings? God gave you the most wondrous blessing He could give a woman; your child. What about your daughter, Iris?"

Blu took her mother's hand, jumping up and down. "Mama, does this mean we'll move to California?"

For the first time, Iris looked down at her. "No, baby. *I'll* be going on to California. I'm leaving tonight. I'll get things started for us. You'll have to stay with your grandma."

Queenie turned back around so swiftly her mouth twisted in pain from the rheumatism in her joints. "You can't do this. This is not fair to her or to me."

Blu started to cry. "But mama, you said we'd never be apart. You said ... you'd never leave me." Tears skidded down her brown cheeks.

Iris kneeled down on one knee. She wiped a tear from her face. "This is all your mama knows how to do. I have to do this for us and once I'm settled I'll come back and get you, I promise. But until then, you have to stay with your grandmother." Iris stood up, facing the condemning look of her mother.

"Mama, please! I have to take this chance."

Queenie folded her arms over her bosom. "To hell with everyone else, right Iris? By God, I've always tried to do right by you and I don't see how you can walk out on own your child."

Iris tilted her chin defensively. "I ain't letting anyone hold me back ever again." She

looked at Blu. “I did that with *her* no-count father and what did it get me but alone and pregnant while some robbery gone sour took his life.”

“She’s not to blame for your choices, Iris. She deserves a mother.”

“And what do I deserve? Huh? I want a life and I’m taking it.” Iris looked down at the tearful eyes of her daughter, planted a kiss on her cheek and said, “Be a good girl for me, ok?”

Blu nodded unable to stop crying. She hugged her mother tightly. “Don’t forget me, mama.”

Iris pulled away, smiled and then looked to Queenie. “Aren’t you going to wish me well, mama?”

Her grandma looked away, unshed tears in her eyes.

Iris wiped her face dry and quietly walked out the kitchen. Blu followed her until they stood at the door. A man stood waiting for Iris.

“Come on, we got to go,” He said, taking the bags from her hands. The smell of his cigar made Blu’s eyes burn.

Iris smiled. “I know you’ll be a good girl for grandma, won’t you?”

“Yes mama, I will.” Blu held her mother’s hand.

The man was back at the door telling Iris that it was time they get going. She hugged her daughter goodbye and closed the door behind them.

Blu watched the old Cadillac her mother left in until it turned the corner and was out of sight. It was the last time she’d seen Iris. That was nineteen years ago.

She wiped at the tears spilling down her face fiercely. She was not that lost little girl anymore. She was accomplished, smart, and successful. She had all the family she needed. Yet, that hollow part of her, that part that ached silently, but echoed so loudly within her, called out. She needed closure and it was high time she got it.

Blu breathed deeply, placing her gloves on her hands and turned off the car’s ignition. She opened the car door and decided that it was time to close this chapter of her life and once she did; she would be rid of Iris Jones and the ghosts of the past for good.

She nearly jumped at the ping sound as the elevator doors jolted open. Despite the fact that she knew there was nothing to fear, apprehension enveloped her. Surrounding her like a velvet glove with vise-like tension.

She’d always hated hospitals and the clinical smell that came along with them. The last time she’d been at the hospital was when her grandmother had died from a stroke.

Blu rubbed her hands against her slacks, the leather gloves she wore did nothing for the chill that swept through her veins. She walked up to the nurse’s station, watching idly for the swift moving nurses to notice her arrival.

A woman with wire-framed glasses and a slight frown on her face turned to her. “Yes?”

Blu could understand the tiresome undertones in her voice, but her nerves were already on edge and dealing with the woman’s attitude was the last thing she needed. “I’m here to see a patient.”

The nurse’s thinly arched eyebrow arched. “Name?”

Blu felt her throat constrict. She wanted to turn around and not look back at the obscenely white walled hospital with its gleaming floors. She wanted to run—not walk and forget.

“Ma’am?” the nurse replied, her disdain lacing the solitary word.

Blu's head shot up. She knew if she left, she would regret it for the rest of her life. She could almost laugh out loud at the irony of the situation. Iris had lived her life to the hilt without one call, one visit, not even a birthday card.

"Yes." Blu ran her hand through the loose twists that clung to her shoulders, releasing a deep breath. She frowned back at the irritated nurse. "I'm sorry. Iris Jones. I'm her..." She stopped before she uttered the word that made her feel closer than she felt to the woman. "I'm a relative."

The nurse turned her attention to the desktop computer, her fingernails making a click-clacking sound. "Room 113."

Blu said a quick thank-you. The sound of her high-heeled boots clicked against the floor. Luck would have it that the room was down a long corridor to the right.

Frankly, Blu never expected coming face to face with Iris again. Maybe when she was younger, the return of her mother would have been the one thing she wished for. And now? She was a grown woman and Monica had filled the voids in her soul. She had no idea why after all this time Iris cared to see her now. Why?

Room 109. 111.

Blu paused as she read the room number. Room 113. She turned away from the door, unsure as to what lay on the other side.

She squared her shoulders. She was strong enough to endure anything and seeing her long-lost mother again would just be one more bridge to cross.

Opening the door, her breath caught in her throat. Standing fully in the room, her hand slowly let go of the door. She was unable to walk, paralyzed in the moment. There in the dimly lit room was Iris Jones lying in a bed with a series of machines beeping around her.

A nurse scribbled something down on the clipboard and as if just realizing Blu was in the room, she smiled. Their eyes held for a brief moment. "Are you here to see, Ms. Jones?" She walked to where Blu stood, raw emotion surged from deep inside of her. The name tag said "Brenda Spenser, R.N."

Blu sniffed. "You were the nurse who called me?"

The maternal-looking woman nodded her head. "Yes, I did as Miss Jones requested."

"She asked for me?"

"Yes, several times."

Blu looked away from the motionless figure in the bed. "Did she say why?"

"No, she didn't." The other woman looked into Blu's eyes, sensing her discomfort. "I must tell you that her prognosis is not good. She suffered a lot of internal injuries."

"Injuries? Was there an accident?"

"Apparently, a drunk driver hit your mother broadside."

Blu felt as if she would be sick at any moment. Nurse Spenser told her if there was anything she needed to just use the call button and left quietly out the room, leaving Blu to her privacy.

Her eyes darted back to the woman in the hospital bed. The thick, white bandages were wrapped around Iris's head; her eyelids were swollen and blackened. Her right leg was in a cast, while a smaller cast encased her left arm.

Blu stepped closer to the bed. Iris had graying hair and her body was slender. Her brown face was pale except for the black and blue bruises along her swollen jaw line and lower lip.

Her eyes fluttered open. She turned slowly, squinting upward. "You came." Her deep voice still held the husky quality to it.

Blu, exhaled. She didn't know what to say other than, "Yes."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask why. Why had she cared to contact her now after all this time? Why did it matter now?

"You turned out to be beautiful." Iris groaned. "I bet you were surprised to hear from me."

That was an understatement. Blu thought. She remained standing, gazing down at a ghost from the past. "You could say that."

Iris' chocolate brown eyes lit up. "Don't say much, do you?"

"Exactly what do you expect me to say? Thanks for dumping me on Queenie, whose funeral you missed. Not to mention nineteen years of my life."

Iris turned her head, looking away from the anger on her daughter's face. "You don't understand."

Blu's anger bubbled over. "Don't I?" Suddenly, she couldn't keep it in. She'd thought she could remain unaffected, but she'd been wrong. "You promised me that you would come back for me."

"You don't have a right to talk to me like that." The older woman spat out. "I'm still your mother."

Blu huffed. "My mother? If by 'mother' you mean someone who cares enough to be around and who makes sacrifices for their children then you are sorely lacking."

Iris closed her eyes, her chin trembling. "I had to take my chance." She turned to look at her daughter. "Haven't you ever been so frightened to take a step that could lead you to everything you ever hoped for? Wouldn't you do anything to have that chance to have your day to shine?"

"Not at the expense of my own child." Blu felt her resolve slip, her voice rose louder than she would have liked. She hadn't come to the hospital to cause a scene.

Iris let her eyes travel over Blu slowly. "Seems you turned out just fine."

"Fine?" Blu felt her throat tighten. How many times had she dreamed of her mother coming back for her, only to awaken the next morning to find nothing had changed.

"I suppose dumping me on grandma and never looking back was 'just fine' or the fact that when grandma died, I was left to the foster care system." She paused, wanting to see exactly what Iris would say. Complete silence.

"I wanted you to come back. I prayed for it and it never did quite materialize. I have a wonderful life now. I'm a chemist for a major cosmetics firm that is ran by Monica Evans. She's the woman who took me in, loved me, cared for me. She's my mother." Blu wiped the tears falling from her eyes. "I became the woman I am because of Queenie and Monica."

Iris looked down at her hands. "Then you did better without me."

"Better without you?" Blu frowned. "Because of you, I fought that much harder, tried to be that much stronger to not be so impulsive. I never wanted to be hurt like that again," She huffed in frustration. "I've been so scared to reach out that I've sheltered my whole life and I won't live that way again."

The realization left her feeling exposed. Yet, she felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

Iris cut her eyes at her. "I didn't ask you here for a history lesson, girl. I need money

and I hear you have lots of it from that woman who adopted you.”

Blu cringed, anger radiated in every inch of her body. “You never change, do you?”

“What? It’s not like you can’t help me out. Besides, I have to get back to California, I have a gig I can’t miss.”

She blankly stared at Iris, finally realizing that this woman had given birth to her, but never could have been a mother to her. She reached into her purse, grabbed a pen and her check book. She wrote a four-figured amount on the check and tossed it on the nightstand beside the bed.

“My advice is never to contact me again, which shouldn’t be too hard seeing as all these years have passed without one word from you.”

Blu took one last look at Iris and left the room, finally ridding herself of the past.

Chapter Nine

By the time Blu left the hospital, it was evening. The sky had turned a midnight-blue. The sun had disappeared into its celestial abyss. The temperature had dropped severely, bringing with it a strong gusty wind. Her thoughts went with the strong currents that caused her cashmere coat's hem to rise. Her mind was on overload, racing from Iris' reappearance.

Blu hadn't even had enough stamina to digest it all. She scurried to her car, hitting the keyless entry button on her keypad. She started the ignition, immediately hitting the manual seat warmer. Her breath crystallized in front of her. She felt free now that she had actually faced Iris. She felt as if all the anger and pain she'd held on to was melting. She was finally free. She leaned back in her seat, feeling the heat from the seat and the automated massage system kick in.

The last person she wanted to tell about Iris' reentry into her life was Monica, who would only worry. No, she needed someone who would be levelheaded and who she wouldn't be forced to put up a front. Someone who would listen and she wouldn't have to tread lightly to spare any feelings.

Blu dialed Sunni's number on her cell phone. After two rings her friend picked up the phone with a breathless greeting.

. Ah, did I catch you at a bad time?"

Sunni chuckled into the receiver. "Girl, if you had asked when I started working out thirty minutes ago, I would have told you to come save me from myself."

Blu grinned, instantly feeling some of pent up tension in her body ease at her friends humor. "I know it's late but..."

There was an odd pause for a couple of seconds before Sunni said, "What's wrong?"

"Well, if you can believe it, a ghost from my past showed up."

"What?" A sound of awe passed from her friend's lips and loudly through the receiver to Blu's ear. "Who was it? Seth?" At her friend's silence she continued, "It *was* Seth!"

"No, it wasn't him. I really need to talk."

"Come on over. How soon will you be here?" she asked, and then without missing a beat asked, "How about picking up some of that Mexican food at El Paso Grille?"

Blu laughed, knowing she had made the right decision in calling her girlfriend. She could always count on Sunni for two things: a hearty appetite and a good ear.

She took her friend's order and ended the call. As much as she knew her presence had been needed at work, the need to break away was top priority.

* * * *

"Did you meet with Graeham?"

"Of course," Sand laughed into the phone receiver. "Everything went according to plan." She sighed as she slipped her naked body into the bathtub filled with warm rose-scented water. "Did you think I would leave anything to chance?"

"Is that a trick question? Need I remind you of Harris?"

Sand sighed into the phone, as if bored with the direction the conversation was taking. "Harris is being taken care of." As Sand said the words, she looked up and smiled. "You just deposit the money you promised in the account number I supplied you with in exchange for the information I provided you with and everything will be fine."

Harris stood naked in front of her, a greedy smile on his face. He handed her a champagne glass filled with Moet.

Laughter sounded through the receiver. "Don't you worry about my end of the bargain, Ms. Rowell. You just tie up your loose ends and for heaven's sake; make sure this doesn't link back to me."

Sand chuckled bitterly. "Of course. We wouldn't want that." She disconnected the call and focused her attention on Harris. She licked her lips and took a sample of the Moet. "Delicious."

"Exactly, what I was thinking," Harris stated, slipping in the tub behind Sand. He nuzzled the back of her neck with his lips.

"Oh! That feels good."

Harris hooked his arms around her slim waist bringing her full fledged against the solid wall of his chest. The thunderous pounding of her heart supplied the impact he wanted. He leaned forward, nipping Sand's ear with his teeth. "You know what would be even better?"

"What?"

"We'll be two million dollars richer when this is all over."

Sand grinned, thankful that he couldn't see her eyes rolling skyward. "Yes, money is a powerful aphrodisiac." She slipped from his pawing fingers, standing up in the tub. She turned to face him. It was time to tighten all loose ends. She couldn't allow for one slip up and Harris was a very big roadblock just waiting to happen. She'd used him as a pawn long enough.

She would use her ultimate weapon: her body.

"Do you know what's just as good?" Sand asked, splaying her hand over her chest, down to her protruding nipples.

Harris shook his head, his eyes transfixed to Sand's breasts.

"Fucking me," she smiled wickedly before exiting the tub, walking into the bedroom. "Make sure you bring the champagne."

It didn't take long for Harris to follow suit and when he did he would never know what hit him.

* * * *

Hours later, Sand looked at Harris' limp body. The mickey had taken affect faster than she'd thought it would. The knock at the door signified that her plan was in action. She wrapped the robe around herself as she opened the door.

"Good, you're here, Zander." Sand smiled up at the tall man. "He's on the bed."

He looked at the figure on the bed and shook his head. "That's just like my brother getting in over his head. He should have listened to me when I told him to leave well enough alone." He turned to look at Sand. "You got the money."

She handed him a white thick envelope, pausing just before laying it in his hand. "You have the documents."

Zander smiled, reaching into his inner jacket pocket and pulled out small black

folder. "Here."

They traded.

"You and your brother have been most helpful in helping me with Jaden."

Zander sneered. "That bastard demolished our father's company without a backward glance. The least we can do is repay the compliment."

"What happened with your job with Blu?" she asked, stepping aside as Zander made his way to the bed.

"She fired me. The police have no leads and so far they're blaming the building manager for drinking on the job. They think someone stole the keys and it was a blotched robbery."

"Well, when it's all said and done she won't want Jaden anywhere near her either." Sand grinned. "Payback is a bitch."

* * * *

"So, how do you feel?" Sunni asked, sitting Indian style on her cream-colored chair.

Blu ran a hand over her hair before she answered, pushing aside her aromatic beef enchiladas. "Feel?" A deep sigh escaped her lips before she answered, "Like I'm on a puppet on a string and someone is yanking me about as they please."

Sunni watched her friend make a face. "I know this isn't easy for you, but at least now you can say that you know the truth."

"Or the truth as Iris relayed it."

"Are you saying you don't believe her?"

Blu stood up, her hands waving wildly through the air. "I don't know what to believe. The whole thing has been so mind-blowing that I'm having trouble just catching up."

"Oh sweetie, I wish I knew what to tell you," Sunni replied, her concerned eyes roaming over the edgy movements of her friend.

Silence fell over the living room as Blu walked to the balcony window, watching the new snowfall pile against the glass of the sliding door. "For as long as I can remember I've tried not to be a carbon copy of Iris. And what did that get me, you may ask..." She swung around. "Nothing but grief and a failed marriage to the world's most controlling man." She shook her head incredulously.

"Don't start belittling yourself. You were young and as I have come to realize, since I have yet to grow older, impulsiveness comes with the territory of youth."

Blu's eyebrows quirked at the comment. She burst out laughing. "You are such a good friend."

"I try." Sunni winked. "I really think you should give yourself some time to cope with all of this."

"I guess." Blu walked back to the couch, she picked up her fork, cut into the cheesy enchilada. She stuffed her mouth to keep from externalizing her thoughts.

"Are you going to tell Monica?" Sunni asked, reaching for the TV remote. She clicked through a couple of channels.

Blu settled back in the soft cushions, kicking her feet on the ottoman. "What? And have her on twenty-four hour guard—I think not."

"You know your mother will do anything for her babies."

Monica Evans had done everything to ensure that her adoptive daughter had had the

best and it had all started with the gift of her enormously giving heart. Blu had been blessed beyond means. She'd never questioned it, especially after hearing how so many other kids in the foster care system had fared over the years.

Yet she couldn't shake the nagging feeling that she had yet to come face to face with her demons. She didn't want to admit what was actually haunting her was the fact that she might be more like Iris than originally anticipated.

How could she ignore the significance of what Iris had explained about taking your chances in life? There had been so many times that Blu had nearly tripped over her own feet, trying to get away from her own impulses. Something deep within her called to her to live dangerously. Vibrantly.

After the fiasco with Seth, Blu considered the safest way to live was to avoid complications. It was simpler that way. No one to hurt and more importantly, no one to hurt you.

Blu shared a secret smile as she thought to the steamy nights and morning she'd shared with Jaden. She was jarred out of her sensual dreaming as Sunni cleared her throat.

"Excuse me, Miss Thang! Exactly what is that smile about?" She crossed her arms over her chest.

Blu giggled, knowing it was past time to divulge the four-one-one on Jaden. "Well, there is something that I need to tell you..." She paused for dramatic effect.

"Ok spill it!"

"Well, you were right something happened in Paris."

"Happened?"

"All right, I sort of had a one-night stand with Jaden."

Sunni's jaw dropped. "What? As in Jaden Graeham, the sexy British man with soulful eyes? My God, and the way the man wears those suits." She fanned herself. "As in Jaden Graeham, your business partner?"

Blu nodded her head, feeling a sensual heat pull deep within her just thinking about him and the things they had shared. "Yep."

Sunni punched her in the arm.

"Ouch! What was that for?"

"For waiting so damn long to tell me. I knew something was going on. I knew it!"

"Well, now you know for sure. But no one else can know about this."

"Of course." Sunni said, making a cross over her heart. "Well, you'd better tell me more than that. What's he like?"

Blu smiled—the smile of a woman who had many sensual secrets. "He's intense. Sexy as all hell. Definitely more than I think I can handle."

Sunni wagged her Passion Pink painted fingernails in the air, shaking her head, sending her deep chocolate curls swinging around her shoulders. "Too much to handle? Girl, is there such a thing with a man like him?"

"Oh, yes." Blu had been shielding herself from Jaden so long. "It's just that..."

For reasons that didn't even seem clear anymore.

Iris' appearance had dropped a whole shit load of emotions that needed to be sorted out. But not tonight. Tonight, Blu just wanted to chill out with her best friend and laugh.

"Never mind."

"What?"

She closed her eyes, reopening them to focus on an unseen object. "There's something else I must tell you."

"Okay, now you're scaring me."

"It's about Seth and our marriage. Everyone thinks that I left him over his infidelities, but that's not the only reason." Emotion naked and potent settled in her throat, making it hard to breathe, let alone talk.

"It's not?" Sunni reached out to hold Blu's hand as tears formed in her friend's eyes. "You can tell me anything, you know that don't you?"

"Seth was abusive. He was very domineering, always afraid that I was showing him up when I took any interest in his family's cosmetic company." She sighed, trying unsuccessfully to release the tension that had tied a knot in the pit of her stomach. "I became this ... this scared, fretful little girl. It was as if I couldn't get from under Seth's thumb. Before I met Seth, I was so belligerent with Monica. I wanted her to know that I didn't need her to make decisions for me anymore, that I wasn't the wounded girl she'd adopted. When I went off to college in the U.K., I felt brash, independent. I felt like I had finally made a life for myself that wasn't at the beck and whim of someone else's impulsive needs."

Sunni smiled. "It sounds amazing."

Blu laughed. "I thought it was. I had my own one bedroom apartment, my junior year I actually got a shot at working for Seth's family's company. I felt like my life was finally turning for the better."

She looked down at her hands, wondering when the violent scenes would possibly fade in intensity in her mind. Four years had already passed since her divorce from her ex and the memories still crossed her mind.

"I know the feeling," Sunni said quietly.

"It wasn't too long after that that I met Seth. It was as if I had been hit by lightning. He was new, exciting and powerful. Son of successful business mogul and totally in tuned with me, or so I thought in the beginning," she paused, clearing her throat. "Everything was so intense with him. He made me feel more than I thought I ever could or would. When he asked me to marry me, I immediately said yes, wanting to belong. I guess that makes me so silly, doesn't it?"

"It makes you human. I mean what person on the planet doesn't want to belong?"

Blu chuckled bitterly. "I gave in to my weakness: the fear of not belonging, of needing to feel needed and Seth used that to his advantage, but it was only because I let him."

Sunny gave her a look of incredulousness. "Don't tell me you blame that yourself for his violent ways? It's not your fault."

"Needless to say, I have embedded the lesson into my head that giving into my needs is worse than death."

"Which naturally explains the fact that you run scared from commitment at any chance you get? From men and any resemblance of a relationship. Life is too short for that. You must know that, considering your relationship with Jaden, right?" Sunni's eyebrow lifted as she stared Blu down.

"Yeah, right. My affair with Jaden has made me see the light. If anything I feel more confused than ever. Here I am again with a powerful, wealthy man who makes me feel things my mind tells me I have no right to feel."

Sunni offered her a lighthearted smile. "What's your heart say?"

Blu didn't know what to say to that, instead she stood. If she dared even add her heart into the mix, things would go up in smoke to be sure. "It's too soon to be talking about matters of the heart. Things between Jaden and me are in the beginning stages." Yet she felt closer to him than any other man.

"If I know you, you've thought about this."

"Thought about it? Yes. Pondered if Jaden and I were soul mates? No. There is something that draws me to the man as if I'm addicted."

Sunni laughed. "There could be worse things." She took a sip of her drink. "What's wrong with allowing yourself to feel wanted? Desired?"

The corners of Blu's mouth turned upward as she pondered that very question. What was wrong with her enjoying her time with Jaden? It'd been so long since she'd allowed herself to even embark on a personal relationship with a man.

Relationship?

She shook her head. Affair. That was the right word. Would it really hurt to give in this once? For once she wanted to be free. Oblivious to all the "whys", "what's" or "how's". This time it would be for her. Just for her.

She turned around to face Sunni's expectant gaze. "I think your right. I think it's high time that I did some living."

* * * *

Jaden had done everything he could do to dilute the heady strum of energy that coursed through his veins. Despite spending all afternoon in meetings with his staff from Mirage to smooth over the transitional phase of the merger, he was wired.

He thought of his conversation with Sand. She'd pleaded with him for her job back. He'd asked why, when any law firm would be crazy not to snap her up. She simply stated that she loved her work while being employed by him, that she didn't want a moment of insecurity to come in between their friendship. In the end, he'd decided to think it over.

Throughout the afternoon, Jaden hadn't been able to keep his mind off of Blu. Her sudden departure left his mind whirling and left with no possible escape from the strong undercurrent of worry. She had aptly fired her bodyguard and refused for anyone to baby her. Still, he worried. He fought the urge to pick up the phone and call her. Tell her that he wanted to see her. Take out his sexual frustrations on her shapely body.

Jaden did his hundredth push-up, perspiration glistening on his bare chest. Funny thing was after a four-mile jog on his treadmill, dozens of sit-ups, he couldn't even register his body's fatigue. His mind was on his own journey. He was haunted by his own demons.

Jaden knelt, bent over at the waist. He wiped his hands over his brow, closed his eyes as he thought back to another time when his world was coming apart.

Taylor.

Had he really thought that he would be able to not deal with the memory of her existence and what the demise of her presence from his life had cost him?

Taylor Olivia DeWitt had been the one woman he'd sworn to love for the rest of his life. The woman who he had devoted his mind, body and soul to, had perished one foggy night in London. His world had shattered and to this day, he still wasn't the same. Had he ever thought he would be? As if, the stark reality of being responsible for the death of the

woman he loved could ever dissipate.

It'd been five years since he'd been to her grave near her family's home. It'd been even longer since a night had gone by that he didn't remember the sounds of panic and screams from that evening.

Jaden felt his body drift as he remembered the night of their engagement party. They had just attended dinner at Taylor's parents' home. He remembered feeling anger at the knowledge of her ex-boyfriend, Anthony's presence at dinner. She'd explained that Tony's appearance had been arranged by her father, Dr. DeWitt, who thought of Jaden as the lesser choice for a husband.

During the course of dinner, he had noticed how easily Tony seemed to 'fit' and how obviously he did not. The realization had sparked an instant argument. Taylor had blamed him for his bout of rootless insecurities and Jaden accused her of being too accommodating to Tony's obscene flirtations.

Things had gotten out of control. In an instant, Taylor had tried to strike him and he'd lost control of the car. Why? Because he'd questioned her loyalty. He'd literally told her without any qualms that they way she'd flirted with Anthony, he believed she fucked him.

Jaden's body racked with guilt as he remembered trying to get the car under control, he tried unsuccessfully to dodge the car in front of him, and his own car went off the road and slammed into a tree.

When he'd awoken, it had taken him minutes to realize that he'd been thrown from the car. His arm had hurt like hell and he was sure it was broken. He'd been too conscious of the fact that the car was wrapped around the tree almost in sandwich fashion, Taylor's body still inside.

The smell of burning rubber and engine fluid was so strong; it seeped into Jaden's pores. He limped to the car, he could hear whimpering coming from the passenger side.

There was blood everywhere. Taylor's head was bleeding profusely, her eyes strained to open. He'd tried to open the crushed metal of the door, but it wouldn't budge.

Jaden begged her not to close her eyes, but she had lost so much blood. Her pulse was weak and before the ambulance could get to them, Taylor struggled with her last words and died seconds later in his arms.

He looked down to his palms where unconsciously he had dug his nails into his flesh. His pain was nothing compared to Taylor's labored breaths that night. He would never forget the desperation and pure raw pain he'd witnessed in her eyes, knowing that he was the blame. Nothing could change that.

The DeWitts had blamed Jaden. He didn't blame them. He *was* responsible for Taylor's demise, picking a fight with her was as unintelligible as Anthony's appearance at the party, If he could have taken it back, he would. If he could exchange his life for hers, he would in an instant—without hesitation.

Even with the risky challenges Jaden took, he could never escape the blame and guilt he felt over Taylor. Try as he might deny it, Blu was invading every fiber of his being. He wanted her like he hadn't wanted a woman in a very long time. The question was, how far could they truly go if she knew he was a murderer?

* * * *

"Do you have the documents?" a hoarse voice asked from across the seat of the

stretch limo.

The question was a simple one, yet Sand hesitated, knowing if she crossed this line there was no turning back. Her mind thought back to Jaden's indifference during their conversation the day before. The only thing he cared about was getting Blu Evans into his bed.

How dare he make her beg for her job? She had made him what he was today. And how did he think of her—with behavior one stop from being crass.

Well, Sand wasn't going to let Jaden get away with it. He would pay dearly for his ego. Had he really thought she would beg him for the scraps he tossed her way? If he'd only known that she held some precious documents that would destroy his dealings with that bitch for good then, he'd come crawling on his knees.

"What's the next step, Mr. DeWitt?" Sand asked, sliding the folder to the man opposite her, his cold grey eyes glittered with success.

"I'm surprised you would ask me that knowing that you compromised everything I've tried to do by fucking that incompetent leech, Harris."

Sand looked affronted. She smoothed her hand over her hair. "How did you know about that?"

"Don't underestimate me, Miss. Rowell," he grasped her wrist, sending her sprawling on her knees in front of him. He leaned forward. "Nothing or anyone will get in my way. Nothing."

Sand yelped in pain. "I'm sorry! It won't happen again."

DeWitt chuckled. "Of course it won't, because if you so much as tell anyone about our arrangement, it won't be a problem to have you disappear." He flung her away from him as if she were four-smelling garbage.

The edge in his voice sent a chill through Sand's body. Bile rose in her throat as the full weight of her actions settled in her gut. What had she done? "W-What will happen to Jaden?"

"Why, Miss Rowell, I'm surprised you care. You might have wanted to think about what you were getting yourself into before you supplied me with papers that detail the business endeavors between Elan Cosmetics and Mirage Industries. Information which, if given to the wrong people, could spell big problems for Mr. Graeham."

"You didn't answer my question."

DeWitt gritted his teeth. "Don't worry, by tomorrow morning Jaden's credibility will be shot to hell and so will his liaisons with Miss Evans. He'll get exactly what's coming to him. That is what you wanted, isn't it?"

Sand felt her heart stop cold. God help her, she'd just brought down the only man she'd claimed to love. "What did Jaden ever do to deserve this?" she whispered, not expecting in answer.

"He killed my daughter."

Chapter Ten

“This had better be good,” Jaden grumbled, making his way to the front door. He was already frustrated, his peaceful sleep had been interrupted by the erection pressing against his cotton pants and hot visions of fucking Blu in any position she wished kept invading his brain.

He opened the door. His mouth went dry. There stood the object of his sleepless dreams. Blu. His gaze roamed over the sensual sight she made, dressed in nothing but two scraps of black lace and a full-length leather coat. The black heels encased her dainty feet to perfection. This moment overrode any dream he could possibly ever have. Her body was curvy, sexy and soft. She wore a devilish smile on her pretty face that made Jaden want to pick her up and make love to her right then and there. The hell with whoever walked by and caught them.

“Blu?” Jaden scratched his head. “W-What are you doing here?”

“I was hoping you were...” her sensual brown eyes found the hard bulge in his pants, “up.” The word dripped off her tongue like ice on a hundred degree day. She walked around him, her scent drove him crazy. He wanted nothing more than to comply with whatever naughty deed she had in mind.

He closed the door and turned just in time to see the coat hit the floor and the firm curve of her backside encased in a black thong. His self-control slipped. “I won’t be able to promise to keep my hands off of you.”

Blu turned around toward him. “Maybe I don’t want you to keep your hands off of me.” She walked closer. “Just maybe, I want you to make me scream your name, make me come. Do you think you can do that?” Her fingers toyed with his flat nipples and trailed upward to trace the lines of his mouth.

Jaden wrapped his lips around her fingers, gently sucking them in and out. His eyes never left hers. “I think I can do that.”

“Good.” Blu smiled.

Before she could say another word, he turned her around rapidly; one hand caressed the rigid tips of her breasts through the lace. The other dipped lower over her stomach to her panties. “Spread your legs.” Blu did and Jaden’s fingers fluttered over her damp mound.

The moan that escaped her lips was practically his undoing. He drew in a shaky breath. “You’re so wet,” he whispered against her ear, nipping the lobe with his teeth. His fingers moved gently over her slit, felt the rage of built up passion within her body.

Blu ground her hips against his cock; her skin scourged him as if no clothes were between them. “You’re so hard.”

Jaden’s hand pushed the side of her panties to the side, finding her clitoris; the sensitive bud grew harder under his ministrations, then dipped into her slick center. One finger then two. Deep and fast. Faster. Deeper still. His fingers worked Blu’s nipples into tight points.

“Jaden, I can’t...”

He grinned in the darkness. “Oh, yes! You can, my love.”

The tension built and built until Blu was on the edge of climaxing, but Jaden wasn’t

going to let her off that easy. He removed his fingers and maneuvered her until she was gripping the back of the leather lounge chair. He dropped his pants to his ankles, removed his cock and teased her clit from behind.

“Mmmn!” she cried out.

“You like?”

“Yesss!” Blu hissed.

Jaden held her buttocks in his hands, smoothing over her soft skin. Her hips were high. Heated anticipation filled him with longing. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you. Now.”

Never to keep a woman waiting, he smiled. “Yes.” He edged the head of his cock inside of her pussy, her muscles stretched against him. She was already so close to the brink of coming. He could easily take them over the edge; instead he entered her slowly, inch by inch.

Blu was so hot and wet. It took everything within him not to give in to the overwhelming need to thrust into her again and again, to become entranced with the feel of her sweetness until he had claimed every piece of her.

“You’re driving me crazy,” she said, pumping her hips against him, trying to take control.

Jaden stilled her frenzied movements, placing his hands on her firm ass, “Trust me?” He moved his cock skillfully out and in with a methodical rhythm, felt the tension build so swiftly inside both their bodies as if they were one mind. He knew she was as aware of his body as he was of hers. It was so elemental, yet he’d never felt the need to possess a woman like this, to be in tune with her body and soul. He wanted to feel that with Blu and not for just now, but always. She was in his blood and he wanted her to know it. To feel it. To smell and taste it.

“Yes, I trust you.”

His heart palpitated at her admission. He knew he could never betray her hard-won trust. He leaned down to kiss the scars on her spine, not caring that she hadn’t divulged their mystery. All he cared about was bringing her pleasure, and tonight he would have all of her.

“More. Jaden, I need ... oh, I need more!”

“Yes, and you shall have it.”

He quickened his tempo, moving within her tight pussy like a piston. Deeper. Harder. Faster. His fingers found her clitoris and he moved with short circles, feeling everything within Blu’s body tighten. He grunted as she ground her hips against him, taking him deeper within her moist depths.

“Jaden!” she screamed, clutching the back of the chair. “I-I...”

“Will you come for me?”

“God, yesss!”

A bead of perspiration was rolling down his face; his heart pounded against his ribs as Blu’s inner muscles clenched against him so fiercely, he feared a heart attack. Her orgasm held him captive for the ride as her essence flowed like warm honey over his dick. The feel of her release was so intoxicating, so erotic, he had to be there with her.

Jaden pounded into her once, twice and on the third time, he came with a ferocity that rendered him speechless. “Blu!” His seed spewed long and hard inside of her, connecting his body to hers in a dance as old as time.

He would never be the same again.

*

Blu wiped the tear that had fallen from her eye as Jaden had driven her to climax. Something had changed between them. She felt bereft when he disengaged their bodies.

“You were wonderful.” He gently turned her around, a gentle smile on his lips as he brought her against him. He leaned down to kiss her lips, stirring up a new need within her belly.

“So were you.” Blu couldn’t help but smile.

“Please feel free to drop by like that at any time.”

She chuckled. “Will do.”

Jaden picked her up in his arms, crushing her breasts against his chest. “I must be inside of you again.”

Blu looked down. He was hard again. She looked up into his heated gaze. “Which way to the bedroom?”

* * * *

Hours later, she felt her muscles groan in protest against her quick movement to remove herself from Jaden’s large bed. Oddly, she didn’t feel out of place under the crisp white sheets. She couldn’t say exactly what had drawn her to take such a bold move and come to his house, but it surely it hadn’t been a mere impulse.

Blu had never felt the way she did with any man other than Jaden. He made her feel desired and what woman didn’t want that? She knew deep down, she wouldn’t have been able to show her brazenness if she didn’t trust him.

Her eyes wandered over his smooth brown skin. One arm was over his head, covering his eyes and the other lay on his stomach. Hadn’t she told herself that she wouldn’t allow this to happen? That she wouldn’t fall for him. But she had, and her soul stirred looking at the man who could touch her with a mere glance. Hadn’t she always wanted someone who wanted her just as much? Someone who didn’t want to dominate her but truly cared? Just how far would she go?

As if he’d heard her silent musings, Jaden woke up, his eyes immediately focusing in on her. A lazy smile materialized on his handsome face as he stretched languidly before her. “Good morning.”

His eyes traveled slowly down her nude body and Blu felt her heart flutter and her womb clench. “Morning.” Jaden pulled her closer until she was cradled in his arms. His eyes gazed into hers deeply.

“Last night was…” Blu’s mind shattered as his hands skimmed the dip at her waist, and lower to her hips. He squeezed and tickled, and pulled her legs apart, dipping his fingers into her wet heat, his gaze never leaving hers.

“Beautiful,” Jaden said, kissing her lips, his tongue brushed past her teeth and sent chills down her spine.

“Mmmn, yes.” Her eyes closed for a moment, reeling in the sensation of need that swept through her body like wildfire. She pulled away as the dull ache between her thighs grew intense, forced Jaden onto his back and maneuvered his cock deep within her pussy. “Mmmn, just what I needed.”

He groaned. “Whatever you want, baby.”

Blu rode him slowly at first, gradually picking up her pace. She couldn’t look away

from Jaden if she tried. Their souls intertwined in that moment. The blinding spectrum of light and erotic connection their bodies blocked away any doubts or fears, and all that mattered was the cadence of skin on skin, heat and pleasure.

She witnessed tenderness, passion and something deeper reflected in his eyes. Something she hadn't expected to find—emotion.

Blu knew as surely as her heart thudded against her breasts that she was inevitably lost in everything that made up Jaden, the man and her lover.

She had fallen for him. Plain and simple.

Blu screamed out her release, watching in amazement and wicked abandon as he come with her. To know that she had that hold on him did something to her ego. She was excited, aroused ... and home.

Jaden cradled her against his chest. The smell of him and the sex they'd shared settled deep in her mind. She would never be able to rid herself of the heady fragrance. She never wanted to.

"My ex-husband."

The words tumbled out from her lips. Blu sighed, ignoring the warning signs flashing before her eyes. Her emotional wall threatened to climb higher, but the gentle touch of Jaden's fingers trailing up and down her spine splintered the rest of her resolve.

"You don't have to tell me anything..."

She pressed her fingers to his lips. "I want to," she blinked, recalling that dark time in her marriage, "My ex was a man who believed that a woman had her place, which was usually in the bed and being displayed as his arm candy. Funny, I never realized this during our frenzied courtship. I was proud to be on Seth's arm. He made me feel needed and cherished." She paused, realizing that the memories didn't sting as much as they had.

Jaden tensed. "The bastard didn't realize what he had." He planted a kiss on her forehead, holding her tighter.

Blu chuckled. "More like I didn't realize what I'd gotten myself into. Seth lost his charm the moment I started becoming more involved in his family's cosmetics firm. He didn't like that I was showing him up with his father. He would go out of his way to make me look incompetent, threaten me and eventually he resorted to slapping me."

"The scars on my back were a result of the worst of my time with him. It was the last straw." She rose up on her elbows to look him squarely in the eye. "Jaden, no one else knows about this. Please..."

*

He cupped her chin in his palm. "I would never divulge your secrets. I'm just sorry that you had to endure that son of a bitch's cruelty. " He stared incredulously at her. "How did you find the strength to leave him?"

Blu's eyebrows arched. "It was either leave, or stay and die."

"You're a strong woman." Jaden's admiration for her grew in spades. She had overcome her demons and lived to tell her story and she'd cared enough to tell him her secrets. The move weighed heavily on his own conscience as his thoughts turned toward Taylor.

"I bet you say that to all the women you know."

His attention snapped to alert. "I don't have women. Not since meeting you." He let his gaze roam over her. "There could never be another you." He kissed her. When had he ever felt that way after a morning after of sex?

Never.

He was usually too busy making sure no signs of his tryst existed, so that he could go about his business. He couldn't shuffle Blu's existence from his memory if he tried. Could he divulge his own demons as she had? Could he trust in what was building between them and tell her that he had caused Taylor's death?

A knock at the door interrupted his private confessions, but not before he noted the pleased look on Blu's face at his comment. She settled back on the pillows, allowing him room to answer the door. "Expecting anyone?"

Jaden looked at the alarm clock on the nightstand. 7:30 a.m. "No." He turned to face her, liking what he saw; Blu in his bed. Mentally, he calculated what measures he would have to take to keep her there. With him. Indefinitely.

"Don't go away."

Her eyebrows wiggled conspiratorially. "Don't be too long or I'll start without you."

How could a man ignore a challenge like that? She would be the death of him. He'd die a happy man if it meant having her smile at him the way she was at that moment. She'd suffered much in her life and he wanted to make her smile, hear her laugh, and watch her eyes light up as he made love to her.

He made quick work of putting on his cotton pants and jogged to the front door. "If this has anything to do with business, I don't..." his words died on his lips as his gaze sharpened on Sand's tear-stained face. "What's wrong?" He pulled her inside, his protective nature taking over.

Sand's eyes glazed over with new tears. "Jaden, please don't hate me."

"Hate you?" His hands wandered over her, smoothing away some of the runaway mascara, her skin was pale and she shivered. "Tell me what's going on?"

She swallowed, closing her eyes as if she were trying to avoid seeing ghosts. "I only wanted ... wanted to get even with you."

"Even?" He grasped her shoulder gently. "Sand, you're not making any sense."

"I only did it because I love you, Jaden. I..." Her words trailed off as she stared at some unforeseen object over his shoulder.

He turned and saw Blu clutching a sheet around her nude body. Her appearance left no room for imagination.

"What's *she* doing here?" Sand barked. Her eyes were cold as she jerked away from Jaden's hands.

"That doesn't concern you," he replied. "Tell me what's going on?"

Sand gritted her teeth. "What's going on?" she grunted. "What's going on Mr. Graham is that your life as you know it will end. You'll be so damn sorry." She turned her attention back to Blu. "And so will you, bitch!"

Jaden watched, amazed at his former friend's behavior. "Get out!"

Sand laughed, affronted at his nerve. "What?" She placed her hands on her hips. "You choose this tramp over me?"

"There was never a choice. Don't ever come here again," he warned, looking away from the undeniable hurt in her eyes.

An odd silence passed over them.

"You bastard! You just can't keep your dick in your pants, can you?" Sand proclaimed, stepping backward out the door. "You deserve whatever's coming to you—both of you!"

Jaden slammed the door so hard he thought the hinges might come undone. He balled his fists at his sides, his breathing ragged. He hadn't the slightest idea what Sand's dark proclamation meant and didn't want to know. He was, however, sad to see their friendship come to an end. He supposed it had been inevitable, seeing as she'd clearly shown her venomous feelings about Blu.

Blu.

He turned to where she'd been standing only to find he was alone in the living room. Before he could step foot inside the bedroom, she had thrown what little clothes she came with on.

She held up her hand to stop the explanation on the tip of his tongue. "Please, don't."

"It's not what you think. Sandrine "Sand" is a good friend of mine."

"I bet," Blu snapped, stepping into her shoes and trying to walk past his looming body, but Jaden grabbed her arms, swinging her around to face him.

"Sand is—*was* my lawyer and friend," he met her questioning gaze. "There is nothing—I repeat—nothing going on between us."

"Then what's with the hostility, especially toward me." Blu pulled her arm out of his grasp. "I don't even know her."

"She doesn't agree with our relationship." He felt a strange tug inside at that word but didn't show it. "Believe me, I wish I could explain Sand's actions or why she does the things she does, but I can't."

"Well, I can explain it."

"Try me."

Blu shook her head. "She's jealous, Jaden."

He pulled her into his arms, although she fought him. "There's nothing for her to be jealous about. Sand and I haven't been involved intimately in years."

"Well, she must think there's still something between you two."

"There was, friendship," he gazed deeply into her eyes, raw hunger shining within their depths. "Would you like me to show you what I'd like between *us*?"

"There is no label for us," Blu replied adamantly, crossing her arms over her full breasts.

Jaden pulled her tightly against his body. His nudged his cock against her and he was more than willing to do anything to take the frown off of Blu's face. He nuzzled her neck with his lips. "Lady, you know as well as I do that you own me from my head to my toes."

"Ahh!" she gasped.

Jaden dipped his tongue into her ear. Then in a low voice, "Do you want me to show you?" He pulled one of her legs around his waist and instinctively Blu wrapped her other around him, his hands cradled her butt and pulled her mound against his throbbing dick. "Do you want me to fuck you?"

"Damn it, you don't play fair." She smoothed her hands over his hair.

Jaden grinned triumphantly, kissing her lips tenderly. "Perhaps, you'll let me make love to you and slowly, I'll claim your pussy. It's all up to you." He began to move her up and down against him slowly. Senuously. "Do you want me to take you right here?"

She made unintelligible sounds as she ground her pelvis against him. Her eyes narrowed in on his. "Shut up and just *do* me, Graeham."

* * * *

Donovan DeWitt smirked victoriously at today's edition of the paper. The Caption "Corporate Raider Immersed in Scandal." All he had to do know was lie back and watch Jaden's life go down in flames. He gritted his teeth against the stogy in his mouth.

Just like his sweet Taylor's.

He pulled out his gun. By the time he was done, he would take everything that bastard held dear. He'd start with that slut. His eyes glazed over with hate.

Graeham wouldn't know what hit him. Donovan laughed out loud. "Oh, yeah one of his shiny little bullets will take care of that." He loaded up his gear into his bag and exited his hotel suite. Everything was going according to plan.

It was time to watch the fireworks!

Chapter Eleven

Blu walked into her office at eleven o'clock with Sunni right on her tail. Her head had been in the clouds ever since she'd left Jaden's. She tore herself from her inner musings as Sunni waved a paper in her face.

"Hello! If you could escape from Fantasy Island for a moment, maybe you'd care to read this," Her friend said, placing her hands on her hips and a frown on her brow.

Blu tossed her purse and attaché case on the top of her desk and took the paper from Sunni. "What is so important that I have to..." Her eyes reread over the black type. She slumped down to one of the high-back chairs, her legs failed. Blood drained from her face. Her hands shook in rage. "T-This can't be."

Corporate Raider Immersed in Scandal!

A source who's worked closely behind the recent Elan Cosmetics and Mirage Industries merger reports that Jaden Graeham, shrewd corporate raider and entrepreneur, has sold out to the highest bidder—neither of which would include the two companies listed above. According to a source that asked to keep their identity hidden: explicit business plans of the merged companies joint venture—Ultra was sold for an eight figure sum to Beauty and Health competitor, Vigor Incorporated. While this allegation has not been confirmed, the source of these juicy tidbits is said to have documentation to support these claims. Representatives from Elan Cosmetics and Mirage Industries—and most importantly, Jaden have declined comment...

Blu felt as if she were seeing double as tears formed in her brown eyes. Her heart ached. A little voice inside of her kept repeating what a fool she'd been. "I can't believe this is happening."

Sunni rubbed her shoulder. "I can't either—that bastard! I say let's go string him up by the balls." She smiled wickedly. "I know just where to get the keys to his office."

"Don't bother!"

They both glanced up to the evil sneer of Donovan DeWitt.

"Hello Ladies," he said, slamming the door behind him.

Blu jolted up from her chair. "Who the hell are you and..."

"Shut up!" Donovan yelled, pulling out his gun. He eyed them wildly, as if not really seeing them. "You're going to pay for your lover's sins."

"Mister, I suggest you turn around and get the fuck out of here." Sunni stuck her finger at the strange man.

Donovan lunged closer, and in the blink of an eye backslapped Sunni with the barrel of his gun. "Shut up, you stupid bitch!"

The sound vibrated in Blu's ears, as she raced to Sunni's side as her head hit the side of Blu's desk. "You asshole!" she shouted to the deranged man. She turned frantic eyes to her friend. "Sunni, wake up. Wake up."

The cold muzzle of the gun burned into her back, stopping her loud protests.

"Get up." Donovan grunted. "Move!" He yanked Blu up by her hair, ignoring the gasp of pain she made.

She stood, bracing herself on the edge of the chair. "I-I can't just leave her."

"You will..." he glared at her hard, "—unless you want me to shoot you right here."

Blu stared back, ignoring the thud of her heart. “Who are you? What do you want? Do you really think you can get away with shooting me and walking out of the building?”

“Graeham will know who I am.” Donovan turned her around sharply, pressing the gun against her spine. “Now, we’re going to walk out of here and if you alert anyone that I have my friend here, I’ll kill you in a blink of an eye. Do you hear me?”

His icy words made her blood run cold. Blu forced her mouth open. “Yes.”

“Let’s go.”

She tried to get a glimpse of Sunni, but Donovan’s hand was fastened to her waist. To anyone passing by it would look like they were merely friends. His other hand kept the hard steel angled at her back. She felt sweat break out on her forehead. She opened the door. The picture of co-workers going about their normal day was one she’d seen thousands of times over. For once she wished for just one person to turn and read her mind. To stop the crazy man behind her for his nefarious thoughts. She didn’t think for one minute that he wouldn’t kill her or anyone else who tried to stop him.

Blu tried not to panic as they swiftly made their way from the busy office and to the elevator without hesitation. Once the elevator doors closed, she tried to breathe and fought the urge to collapse. She shook her head. She had to remember details. She’d heard that during a program on this very thing, but her mind was racing. She closed her eyes. Six-feet, almond complexion skin, dark-brown eyes, thinning salt and pepper hair, medium build. She opened her eyes. The man smirked at her.

“Praying is the least of your problems.”

Think. Think. Get him to talk.

“You said, ‘Graeham knows who you are’ what did you mean? Why do you want to hurt Jaden?”

DeWitt laughed bitterly. “You’re the second woman who has asked the question. Is he really that good in the sack?”

Blu held her head high. “Who are you? Where are you taking me?”

“Do you really think I’ll tell you that? It’ll spoil the surprise.”

The elevator doors opened and DeWitt forced her out, not letting her get too far ahead of him. She forced a smile at Ivan the doorman and continued out the door. They walked rapidly to a nondescript black van. He opened the back door. “Get in.”

In that moment, Blu knew she could kick him in the groin and scream her head off, but the odds weighed higher on the side of a bullet being lodged into her head before she’d reach anyone. “Tell me where you’re taking me.”

“You are a determined bitch, aren’t you? Turn around, or I’ll put a bullet right in between your pretty eyes.”

She had no choice but to comply with his demand. Like a lamb to the slaughter, she turned around and fought the desire to vomit as she kicked and screamed into the rag that covered her mouth. The strong smell of chloroform overwhelmed her into a dark sleep.

Her last thought was of Jaden. She wouldn’t live long enough to kill him for getting her into this mess!

* * * *

Jaden hurled the newspaper cross the room. He had read the article over and over, tried to decipher who the “source” was and called Blu. He wasn’t naïve enough to believe that she hadn’t read the article that accused him of selling company secrets to the highest

bidder. He could only hope that he could make her understand that he wouldn't betray her trust. Pray that she knew how precious she'd become to him.

"Bloody hell!" he yelled to no one in particular. He was in love with her. He loved Blu Evans and nothing was going to stop him from telling her.

The self-admission did little to assuage the hurt that he knew she'd feel. How could he blame her? The article had proven very convincing. Napier had called and threatened legal action. He'd dared Jaden to set foot near the building or his sister.

Just when he thought he was about to lose his mind, his cell phone rang. Jaden practically tripped over his feet getting to the blasted contraption before the caller hung up. "Blu?"

"Always the impetuous fool, aren't you?" a cold voice whispered into the phone.

"Who is this?" he asked.

"Take a wild guess."

As if time never lapsed, recognition washed over Jaden like a cold wave. "Donovan DeWitt."

"Very good. You got a gold star, Graeham."

"How the hell did you get my number?"

"Don't waste my time. What you should concentrate on is this..."

His eyes filled with deathly silence.

"Jaden?"

Blu!

"Are you hurt?"

"Jaden, we're..."

"Blu! Wait..." His heart clenched with fear.

"I'll call you back in ten minutes with the location."

The line went dead.

Jaden fought the urge to throw the phone across the room, but held on to it for dear life. Blu's life depended on it and it was his fault.

His stomach dived when he heard the panic in her voice. His past had come back to haunt him. His mind catapulted to the newspaper article and Donovan's sudden phone call. The older man's idea of revenge, Jaden was sure. He gritted his teeth. The sick bastard had Blu.

Donovan had better not hurt her or he'd kill him with his bare hands. Jaden couldn't disregard the irony that his love for Taylor had destroyed her life and could possibly do the same for Blu. He couldn't let it. He *wouldn't* let it.

Jaden watched helplessly as the minutes ticked. He paced the room, swearing he could hear the electrical currents in the wall clock, the sound grating on his nerves. The shrill of the phone ringing caused him to jump.

"Graeham," he answered tersely.

"Meet me by the Crown Fountain, Millennium Park, in 20 minutes and don't try anything stupid," DeWitt spat into the receiver.

"I'll be there." Jaden glanced at his watch. "You better not disturb one hair on Blu's head or I'll..."

"You'll what? You killed my daughter! Did you really think that I would let you walk away from that?"

Jaden closed his eyes, fully weighing the situation. Donovan was crazed there was no

telling what he would do. “Eye for an eye?”

The other man laughed bitterly on the phone. “I’m settling for nothing less than a life for a life, Graeham. Taylor deserved better than you and now you’ll pay for taking my daughter’s dreams, ambitions and life.” DeWitt disconnected the connection before Jaden could respond.

He ran a hand over his head in frustration. He went to his bedroom, pulled a black carrier bag from under his bed, and took out the shiny 9mm. He loaded it, deciding within that moment that he wouldn’t hesitate to defend the woman he loved.

With the gun secured at his back, Jaden hurried out of the house. He realized, for the second time, he was at the complete mercy of someone else. The first time had been the moment he’d fallen in love with Blu.

* * * *

Blu looked around, recognizing her surroundings as Millennium Park. She hugged herself to keep warm from the cold blast of air. She had no idea how long she’d been out. It was dusk now and the secluded section of the park her kidnapper had chosen was perfect for getting rid of her body. No one would ever find her!

Panic streaked through her. She had to think, to stop his mad plot. But how? His tight grasp bit into her shoulder blade. “Why are we here?”

Donovan ignored her inquiry as he searched the crowd, his eyes lit up. He looked down into Blu’s worried gaze and pressed the gun harder against her. “Have you ever lost something unjustly, Miss Evans?”

Her heart lurched in her throat. She wanted to scream, yell—anything to keep him from killing her. “Yes.”

Donovan tossed her a doubtful glance. “I bet you’ve never suffered the loss of a child,” his voice hissed. “Graeham robbed my daughter Taylor of her life and now, I will take his.”

Blu shook her head, confused. “J-Jaden would never do what you’re accusing him of.” She felt the fatigue and worry chop her strength in half. She felt groggy; her mind fuzzy. She tried to concentrate on Donovan’s face, but her vision blurred.

“Wouldn’t he? Just how well do you think you know him?”

“I know Jaden enough ... enough to know that he would never deliberately hurt someone he loves.”

Donovan chuckled. “Love? You really are naïve, aren’t you?” Not waiting for her answer, he pulled her against him roughly to stop her from falling over. “You read the article. You think he loves you?”

“He didn’t write that article, you did.”

He shook his head. “Love is what caused that jealous bastard to slam his car into a tree. He was the one driving that night. If he’d really loved her, Graeham would have known that he was never right for her. I lost everything with my daughter, my marriage, my livelihood—all because of him.”

Blu felt dizzy, her mind struggling to concentrate on Donovan’s words. “W-What did you give me?” She fought the bile that rose in her throat. Everything around her appeared distorted. Her heartbeat echoed in her ears.

“Something to keep you under control.” He stopped walking. “I see you decided to show up, Graeham. Lucky for Miss Evans here.”

“Jaden,” Blu whispered, trying to control the tears from rolling down her face, but quickly lost the battle.

He’d come to save her!

* * * *

The instant Jaden caught Blu’s eye, he knew she’d been drugged. Her eyes were hazy. She looked right through him. He gritted his teeth, his body trembling with anger. “Let her go!”

Donovan shook his head. “Not until I get what I want.”

“What is it that you want?”

“I want your life for taking Taylor’s.” Donovan’s eyes hardened. “I want you to lose everything like I have. Your reputation, your money, everything.”

“I don’t care about any of that, I just want Blu safe.” Jaden felt his heart pound against his chest. He edged closer.

“Stay where you are.” The other man clutched Blu closer, a sharp object pressing into her side through his jacket. “No. I’ll trade you for Miss Evans here and we’ll be on our way.”

“Fine!” Jaden conceded, slowly reaching to his side for the gun. He couldn’t let his guard down.

Donovan waited skillfully until Jaden was within reach, pushed Blu to the ground and trained his weapon on him. “You always were a fool. Keep your hands where I can see them!”

Jaden straightened as he eyed Blu. His eyes implored her to stay where she was. He had to act fast. “It doesn’t have to be like this. We can work this out...”

“Do you think anything you can give me can replace my daughter’s life? You have to die.” Donovan cocked his gun, aimed at Jaden’s heart. “I’ll see you and your slut in hell.”

“You said you’d leave Blu out of this.”

The other man grinned cynically. “I lied. Now everyone will think the great Jaden Graeham went crazy after his nefarious dealings were uncovered by a secret source and killed his lover as well.” He redirected his aim at Blu’s head.

“No!” a female voice shouted and a gun shot rang through the air.

Jaden made a split decision, charging for Donovan. More shots buzzed through the air. Someone screamed and then everything went black.

Chapter Twelve

Blu forced her eyes from the morning paper. She was tired of being the topic of conversation. Three weeks had passed since the man who had kidnapped her, Donovan DeWitt, had been fatally shot. She shuddered as the image of the man's bloodied body resurfaced in her mind. Everything had happened so fast. Jaden had lunged for the gun. She'd screamed and the sound of bullets whizzed through the air...

She closed her eyes, willing her heartbeat to slow down. She still couldn't believe all that had transpired. Jaden had been clipped in the shoulder by one of Donovan's bullets, but Donovan had been shot dead by Sand, who had confessed to being in cahoots with the vile man, because she'd been jealous of Jaden's relationship with Blu. The woman was going to be disbarred for her involvement in the scheme.

Elan Cosmetics had been working in overdrive to produce a new product line called Sensation to replace the defunct Ultra products and so far, things were looking on the brighter side.

Too bad she couldn't say the same thing for herself.

Blu turned her thoughts back to work and the piles of it that still required her attention. Despite her mother's protests, she'd returned to work. She'd had asked that her return not be advertised so that she could have a few moments peace, time to not think about her life and Jaden.

She sighed. He'd been released from the hospital over a week ago and they still hadn't talked. Blu hadn't seen him since they'd both been rushed into separate ambulances after the shootings. Reporters had hounded her condo from the moment the story had been released.

Jaden had even gone as far to have his lawyers draw up papers for his shares of the merger to be given to Monica free and clear. Blu didn't know why his actions bothered her so much. He had requested she be honest with him, he'd failed to do the same. He'd asked her to trust him.

Why hadn't he been able to trust her to do the same with his own? Hadn't he cared enough about her to see that she could be trusted with the knowledge of Taylor's death? Enough!

Blu wasn't going to cry—again—over a situation that was best left alone. Despite the fact that her heart was breaking, she had to go on with her life and her family agreed. She wished she could turn her heart away from anything that reminded her of Jaden.

She was interrupted from further thoughts by a knock at the door. "Come in."

"I hope I'm not disturbing you." The deep voice that had invaded every one of her dreams each night washed over her.

She looked into Jaden's eyes; tried to remain calm. He looked devastatingly handsome in his blue suit, his face unreadable. She felt her heart pound. "Jaden! I didn't expect to see you." Blu looked away from his intense stare. "How are you?"

He closed the door, but made no attempt to enter her office any further. "I'm..." he looked around her office, seeming out of place. "...okay, I guess. One day at a time. You?"

Blu offered him a small smile, folding her hands together. "I'm okay."

There was an awkward silence.

His eyes burned into hers. "I can't do this." He closed the door and stormed across the office and hoisted Blu out of her chair, smiling at her surprise.

Jaden pressed his lips against hers. His tongue whipped into her mouth, tasting and exploring as if for the first time. She tried not to respond, to touch him. She didn't want to want him...

But she did!

Blu wound her hands in his hair, inhaling his scent, craving his taste. God, how she'd missed it! Felt like her heart had been ripped out and torn into bits. Now, he was here kissing the life out of her and igniting a fire that couldn't be quenched.

Jaden was the first to break away. He cradled both sides of Blu's face in his palms, leaning his forehead against hers. His breathing came in rough spurts. "I've missed doing that."

"I've missed it too," she said.

He pulled away from her, holding her shoulders and stared into her eyes. "I'm so sorry." His voice was raw with emotion, his eyes swelled with unshed tears. "I could have lost you and..."

Blu felt her own feelings swell within her chest. "We're alive and we should be thankful for that."

"I should have told you about Taylor, but I..." He sighed. "I was afraid—of losing you. Afraid of what you might think of me and that I was losing a part of myself. Surprising for big risk taker like me, huh."

"No, it shows that you're human after all." She looked at her fingers and then back into his eyes. "It appears that we both have had to deal with our ghosts of the past."

He shook his head. "Indeed."

"I don't think you killed Taylor, Jaden." Blu looked into his eyes. "It was an accident. I know what it's like to carrying the scars with you for so long that it seems like it's just a natural part of you."

Their gazes held. A newfound respect formed between them.

He kissed her hand, his tongue darting out to taste her flesh. His eyes never left hers. "I'd like to start over."

"We would have to start from the beginning."

"I know and I know that I love you, Blu, with all my heart. I've learned that a relationship requires give and take. I'm willing to give you all I have. The question is; are you willing to take me?"

"How do you know that this will be enough? How do you know that I'm enough?"

Jaden kissed her lips, this time softly, sending a tingle down her spine. "The biggest risk is losing you. I want to wake up and be the first person you see and the last at night." He took out a black box, popped it open. "I'll wait for you."

"As long as it takes?" she asked.

He took out the square-cut diamond platinum ring and slipped it on her finger. "As long as it takes. Maybe we can forge our way together. What do you say?"

Blu tried to recover from her shock, but couldn't keep the tears off her face. "Damn, that's one hell of a rock!"

"Bloody hell, woman, don't keep me in suspense." Jaden laughed. "Is that a yes?"

"I want to be your wife," she smiled up at him. He lifted her into his arms and spun

her around.

“You’re the only challenge I’ve never conquered.”

Blu grinned saucily at her soon-to-be husband. “Oh, I wouldn’t say that.”

“Are you trying to seduce me?” Jaden said.

She laughed, hearing her own words coming back at her. She slowly unbuttoned her blouse and skirt. “That depends on how fast you can get your clothes off.”

His eyes flashed with heat as he shucked his shirt and unfastened his pants, within seconds standing naked before her hungry eyes. “How’s the view?”

Blu knocked everything off her desk and sat on top of it wearing nothing but a sinful smile on her face. She crooked her fingers at the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with.

“Smashing.”

The End

About the Author:

Anisa Damien lives outside of Chicago with her husband, 10-year old son and demonic cat, Sly. The love for writing has held her captive since grade school and hasn't let go since. When not working at her day job, she is concocting sexy heroes, sassy heroines and the mischief she can get them into!

Anisa enjoys spending time with her family, watching movies, eating chocolate and reading.

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