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DEE TENORIO

*Midnight  
Temptation*

# Midnight Temptation

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*Can a man who knows he shouldn't, resist a woman who knows she can't?*

Book Two of The Remingtons

Raven Remington has secrets. Only one of which is how badly he wants his personal assistant, Vanessa Kaye, the beauty who refuses to be anything more than professional. A smart man would remove himself from temptation, but Raven can't quite make himself ignore the longing in her eyes or the taste of her kiss. Soon, neither of them can fight their passion.

What Raven doesn't know is that Vanessa has secrets of her own...

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# Midnight Temptation

*Dee Tenorio*

## Dedication

For my girls: I never dreamed I would be so lucky or so blessed.

## Chapter One

He knew those legs.

He'd spent the last two years pretending he didn't have a fixation with them. He rarely saw them, only during the few steps to cross or leave his office after direct dictation, assuming no one was in the room to watch *him*. She hadn't made one trek without his noticing the long, curving muscles or her slim-boned ankles encased in sheer stockings, but he wasn't moronic enough to pay them any scrutiny when he could be observed. That was tantamount to lawsuit. Or stupidity. So far, he hadn't decided which was more dangerous to him. All he knew for certain was that every step she took in his presence was tattooed into his memory and replayed endlessly in his mind whether he liked it or not.

Currently, those fascinating limbs were straining to the toes in a pair of black heels, leading up to a perfect bottom weaving left and right in the warm, late summer air. The rest of what he imagined to be a perfect body was lost in shadows, under the hood of a car so beaten its makers wouldn't want to identify it. He braked his own car, pulling over before consciously coming to the conclusion that he was going to help.

He scrubbed a hand over his face, but regret refused to surface. Only weariness. Sooner or later, he was going to learn to walk away from potential problems. His gaze slid to the rear view mirror, the reflection of his briefcase and the world of trouble inside it making him sigh for lost causes. Hopefully he'd learn some time in this lifetime...but definitely not tonight.

"I hate you, you stupid car!" Vanessa Kaye's smoky voice yelled to the staccato rhythm of metal rapping metal.

Raven Remington flinched, getting out of his convertible, knowing she was pounding ruthlessly on something vital. He watched with interest as she got a knee up on the edge of the engine port to reach further back into the dark hole. Eleven o'clock at night, on the edge of the heartlessly black bay and she didn't even have a flashlight. Why was he bothering to be surprised?

"Turn *over*, damn you!"

"Vanessa?"

Her slim hand stopped in mid-swing, its grip tight on the silver crescent wrench. She didn't turn around and for that he'd be eternally grateful—her raised skirt bared an almost indecent amount of slim, brown leg and he wanted another few seconds to enjoy it.

"Mr. Remington?"

Hearing her, one might not imagine that if she leaned just another inch or so forward her panties would be visible. He wondered if they were lacy.

"Car trouble?" Cotton? Maybe silk? In his dreams, it was always silk. On the outside, he'd be exactly what he'd been brought up to be, a cultured professional. In the safety of his own thoughts, however, he figured he was entitled to be as sex driven as the next man. Perhaps more, since other men were undoubtedly having sex. His family had no idea what he'd given up to take over Remington Medical Industries and if she knew, Vanessa Kaye was in no mood to take his sacrifices to heart.

Or was she simply being very, very generous?

The thought made him smile. What style would be cupping all the feminine secrets Vanessa liked to hide behind her frosty voice and garish horn-rimmed reading glasses? G-string? T-back? Was his staid secretary hiding a seductive nature in her steamy violet eyes? Perhaps acting the prim schoolmarm, biding her time while waiting for her moment to attack him with her supposedly repressed sexuality?

It was a fun game to play while she paused atop her engine, but Raven knew better. The likelihood of his secretary hiding anything but her share of

their bizarre attraction was slim to none. He knew secrets. Vanessa Kaye didn't have any, least of all any she'd let him touch.

"No, not particularly," she answered finally, bringing her foot back down to the ground.

Despite his decision to end the game, Raven couldn't help but glance at her bottom as she backed her head out from under the hood. For some reason, he couldn't see any edges lifting the taut fabric. Could his uptight assistant somehow be wearing nothing at all underneath? He swallowed, his body tightening against his will.

"Do you usually pull over at night in the city to abuse your car?"

She turned around to face him, her chin high and her lush mouth in a firm line. Raven made sure to keep his eyes above her waist. Finding no neutral territory on her chest, he amended that above her neck would have to do.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. Now, if you don't mind, my alternator is in need of my help."

"Help? Is that what beating it into submission is called these days?"

"Yes, it is," she replied, turning away from him as if she had the right to dismiss him. Raven put his hands in his pockets to wait. If she was going to climb back up there, he might as well stick around to enjoy the show.

"It's not like *you* know how to get it going again," she grumbled, preparing her shoulder with the rolling motion of a boxer to whack the machine a few times more.

Much as he'd like to answer the underwear question, he couldn't let her go smacking around a combustible engine. "I can't do anything worse than what you are."

Vanessa looked over her shoulder at him, then glared back down to the dark pit of the engine. She shrugged, as if it didn't matter. It probably wouldn't, he doubted she left anything inside not destroyed beyond repair. She handed him the wrench and stepped back. Apparently, he was going to need some room.

Either that or she didn't want to get caught in the blast when it exploded.



Shrugging off his jacket, Raven went back to his own car—a black Mercedes-Benz that didn’t know how to break down, thank you very much—and opened the trunk. From there he retrieved a long-handled flashlight and headed back to the tall woman next to the pathetic heap. One flash of direct light inside and he knew the car was beyond hope.

“Most engines don’t have quite this much duct tape.” In the white glow of the flashlight, he could see she was flushed. From the exertion of bashing or from his own stare, he didn’t know. This wasn’t the time to find out.

He turned back to the car. Inside the engine were small dents here and there from what must have been earlier beatings. Bending down to get closer, he found dangerously worn wires barely connecting where they were supposed to, greasy components, burned-out sparkplugs and an air filter that had given up the ghost long ago. He unbent himself, clicking off the light and turning back to her.

“Get your purse.”

“What? Why?”

“Because there’s no way in hell I’m letting you drive that car, even if you could bring it back from the dead.”

“It’s not dead. I just need to—”

“It’s dead, Vanessa. No amount of duct tape and prayer is going to bring it back this time. Even if it did run, I couldn’t let you drive it. That thing is a firetrap waiting to happen.”

Her mouth pursed and her eyes narrowed. He didn’t need the light to know her cheeks were turning crimson. “I know a few wires are getting thin—”

“Your electrical system—if you can still call it that—is half-bald. Your intake valve is blocked and if that corroded battery has any juice in it, it’d be a miracle worthy of sainthood. Do us both a favor and get your purse. I’ll take you home.”

She wanted to argue. He almost dared her to, but she knew him better than most. He would win.

She spun on her heel and headed toward the open window of the car. He waited while she gathered her belongings and locked it up. Raven lowered the hood with a shake of his head. No self-respecting car thief would touch this pile, but it was her pile and she obviously wanted to keep it.

Once she'd finished securing the car, he led her toward his own. He allowed himself to guide her by touching the small of her back, to breathe in the scent of roses from her hair, an action that brought equal amounts of agony and pleasure. She walked ramrod straight, waiting politely while he opened the car door, then sat on the leather seat with the grace of a queen.

It took every ounce of self-control not to slam the door, greedily claiming her as his own, but last time he checked he was no marauding king, and he sure as hell wasn't a Prince Charming to whisk her away in his chariot. And, of course, he *was* thinking of Vanessa here. Even if he had the colossal nerve to attempt such a thing, she'd kneecap him and crack his head on the steering wheel. He shook his head again, reached for the door handle and scraped his mind clean of any more pointless fantasies.

After all, wasn't fantasy what got him into this miserable position in the first place? Beyond the ridiculous thought of playing prodigal son to take control of RMI so his brother could retire, his imagination had yet to recover from meeting Vanessa Kaye's shy violet gaze his first day in the office. He'd seen the same flash of startled awareness on her face as he'd felt coursing through himself and ever since, his subconscious had been having a field day. Then he'd made the mistake of touching her, dancing with her at his brother's wedding and that did it in. She'd shed her boxy, buttoned outfits for a slinky burgundy dress held together by straps he could snap with his teeth. He was doomed from the first touch of his fingertips to her bare spine. Nothing had happened in the last year and a half to give him any relief, either. No, all he had were questions he'd never get any answers to. What if he hadn't hesitated to kiss her? What if he'd never breathed in the rose scent of her skin? What if...

All the what ifs he could conjure didn't matter. The lady said no. Or might as well have, running from him like some kind of modern day Cinderella...

It should have made a difference that she didn't want him, at least, not with the all consuming power of his own desire for her, but for the first time he could remember, it didn't. He couldn't blame her because he was such a bastard he couldn't let his hunger for her go. But when they were this close, this silent, each of them pretending the pull wasn't there, it would help if he were able to.



Vanessa Kaye sat in the soft leather seat of her employer's car, keeping every muscle tense because relaxing would be a mortal mistake.

If she relaxed, even Raven Remington in a high holy rage couldn't get her out of the plush luxury of the seat. She watched in the rear view mirror as he circled the back, his lithe body moving with a seductive rhythm that seemed to permeate every move he made. There were days when she wished she wasn't so aware, wasn't so keen to his fluidity, his grace. There were certainly nights she could do without it.

He slid into the driver's seat, slamming the door as he adjusted the length of his legs on either side of the steering wheel. She watched his hands graze the leather circle until he found his place, his long fingers wrapping around it and taking control of the car as if it were designed with him precisely in mind. Before she knew it, the San Diego night was sweeping by, its city lights reflecting on the black mirror of the bay.

"We may well end up in Mexico if I don't get some directions soon." Raven's rich tones startled her, making her jump as they always did. He'd probably grown used to it because he ignored her reaction as often as she ignored the fact that it wasn't his volume scaring her.

"Drop me near the train station, there's plenty of cabs there." She kept her gaze pointed out the window.

"Why bother with the expense of a taxi when I'm perfectly capable of taking you myself?"

How should she explain that a cab fare would be far less of an expense than what he'd lose if he drove this car into her neighborhood?

"Vanessa?"

"I don't want you taking me home, Mr. Remington. Just drop me near the station."

His sigh conveyed what several swear words wouldn't have. "Directions, Vanessa, or I'll take you home with me."

She did look at him then, startled. He stopped the car at the next light and glared back, a sardonic eyebrow raised in question. She hated that eyebrow. Imperious. Demanding. Completely impossible to defend against.

"North Park," she finally answered, making sure not to turn away lest he consider it weakness on her part. She couldn't afford weakness where he was concerned. He knew too many of hers.

A muscle twitched in his jaw, but he returned his attention to the front windshield. "Nothing like threatening you with a night in my bed to get the job done." He gunned the engine before tearing off towards the freeway.

She wanted to say something that might salve his ego, but that was too dangerous to her resolve. She didn't kid herself, a night in Raven's bed would probably be heaven on earth and she'd be lying if she said she didn't want it, but there was more to life than getting what you want. A night with Raven was something she'd never be able to have, and discussing it would only give him an opportunity to change her mind. Better his ego than her self-respect.

*How much longer do you expect that excuse to last?*

It was a question she'd been asking herself every time their eyes met. How long could she hide behind self-preservation when she knew it was driving him as crazy as it was her?

She could have sent out resumes and gotten out, after the wedding she'd stupidly attended and where she'd more stupidly lost control of herself. But she hadn't. She'd endured Raven's silences and questioning gaze. She'd stayed so she could steal the little bit of pleasure his presence gave her each day. Savored the satisfaction of his approval if not his touch. She had his respect

and unlike most of the world, she knew how hard it was to acquire. It wasn't worth a night in his arms. It couldn't be.

She returned her eyes to the window. Unfortunately, she could still feel his heat and smell his cologne, so her attention remained where it shouldn't be. She'd probably feel and smell him long after she left his car. Her hands clenched at the unjustness, but life was unfair and she knew that better than most. Someday, she'd learn to stop railing at it and just accept what could never be changed.

Like her family.

Like her life.

Like the undying hunger she had for this man.

She could only hope someday came soon.

"How will you get back to the office tomorrow?" Raven asked ten minutes later, his first conversational volley aside from requests for directions. He pulled up in front of her small triplex, already unbuckling his belt to escort her out.

"What are you doing?" she asked, horrified. She could get around fairly unnoticed by her neighbors—they didn't particularly want to be noticed either—but there was no way a man like Raven was going to just stroll past these sagging porches unseen. He practically glowed, he was so out of place.

"I'm walking you to your door," he replied, no doubt pretending he had no idea she was going to argue with him. He liked to think saying things made them fact.

"No, you're going home or where ever it is you want to go. I don't need an escort." *I need you to go away; far, far away.*

"I want to make sure you get to your door. Preferably alive."

Well, it was safe to say he was aware her neighborhood left something to be desired. She could stay in the car with him and argue, but that only gave onlookers more time to consider how best to make off with the Mercedes. With a sigh, she unlatched her seatbelt and opened her door. If he wanted to walk with her, he'd have to catch up.

"You never answered my question," he said, making up the distance easily with his long legs.

"I'll catch the bus. My lunch may run long because I'll have to get my car to the shop."

His eye twitched. She sensed a new battle about to form and picked up the pace to her apartment. The pink stucco building ran perpendicular to the street. Hers *would* have to be the last one.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow and see to it that you have decent transportation by the end of the day."

The prickly side of her wanted to throw something at him. The reasonable side simply wanted to slam her door in his face. "I'll get to work on my own and get home on my own. Any *decent transportation* that is to be provided, will be provided by me."

He took one of his long pauses without breathing, then slowly expelled it. A sure sign he was about to push some of her buttons and none of the good ones. She used the time to insert her key into the door. "We have unusual hours. I won't have you waiting for a bus in the middle of the night."

"But—"

"Since you must be available to me, it is the responsibility of the company to supply you with a working and reliable vehicle. There is no arguing this point. I need you at the office and I will not permit *your* pride to interfere with *my* work, is that understood?"

Normally, she wasn't meek with him. Everyone else, yes, she found herself giving in more often than not. But as she had no plans of letting him past her threshold, she considered it a wise move to get him back to his car while it was still in one piece. Considering she'd seen cars like his stripped to the floorboards in ten minutes, he didn't have a whole lot of time left.

"Am I understood?" he repeated, his voice all but reaching out to shake her. He knew better than to touch her with his hands—for both their sakes, contact was silently off limits.

“Yes, Mr. Remington.” Understood didn’t mean allowed, but she didn’t bother to clear that up for him.

“Now about this apartment—”

“Goodnight Mr. Remington.”

“Vanessa—”

It felt good to close the door on him and hear the shuffle of his feet on her stoop. He stood out there quietly for a second, grumbling something about not being finished with their conversation. Finally, he must have decided it was pointless to appeal to her, because all he did was knock and insist she lock the door before he left. She obliged—she was going to lock it anyway—and after the final click, she heard the scuff of his fine shoes leaving her porch along with his warning that he’d be back for her at six a.m. sharp. She shouldn’t have smiled...but she did anyway.



Raven drove home, itching for a cigarette and some time at the piano, but he had a feeling neither would stop Vanessa’s apartment from bothering him. It didn’t take much imagination to see that each apartment was a studio. A single room, tiny bathroom behind a curtain and a stove somewhere. Although, these looked tiny enough that “stove” easily translated into “hot plate”. He paid her better than that. Hell, the tax deductions on each check probably ran higher than the rent for all three rooms combined. Why the hell was she living there?

North Park was barely a step above poverty, sometimes not even that. The number of gang members, drug addicts and homeless people there was staggering. Of course, it could be worse. She was on the edge of the rougher areas. Hundreds of perfectly decent people lived around her, just not enough of them to make him feel comfortable. If it were up to him, he’d kidnap her immediately.

He might kidnap her anyway. It would force her to answer his questions, which he knew she sidestepped too easily tonight. Every time he was about to

demand answers, she'd interrupt and it became too hard to decide which was of more immediate importance, her bomb with a steering wheel or the utter inappropriateness of her housing.

Given her propensity for yelling at him when pushed into defensiveness, he'd gone the safe route and asked her about the car. But now he wondered if maybe he shouldn't have asked something else. Not that she'd have answered. Vanessa didn't trust him with her secrets, surprising as it was that she had them in the first place. She barely trusted him with her address. She probably had no idea how holding back whet his curiosity. Which meant she'd never respond to direct questioning. He was going to have to go at her the old-fashioned way. At the first possible opportunity—and every opportunity afterward—he would have to corner her and chip away at her until she gave him the answers he wanted. It wasn't much of a resolution, but for tonight, it would have to do.

Tomorrow, he'd start with the car she agreed to. However ungracious it was to be amused, when she accepted his offer, that uncomfortable-looking office facade of hers was just about bolted to her face. Good. If he was going to be unhappy, he was taking her with him.



## Chapter Two

Despite knowing they were essentially the last two people in the building, Vanessa worked hard not to scream at the man across from her. Her throat hurt from the effort of keeping her voice modulated and even. “I am not going to drive a Mercedes, Mr. Remington, and that’s final.”

All right, fine, it was a growl, but it was still more than he deserved.

As usual this late after hours, Raven reclined in his high backed office chair like a king, his suit jacket abandoned, shirt sleeves rolled up over his dark forearms, an expression of bored indulgence smoothing his rugged features.

“Nothing is final until I say so, Vanessa. You’d do well to remember that.” His burning gaze centered on her, the intensity almost enough to make her flinch. He’d been that way all day, practically inspecting her like a bug. She was irritated with it; with him. The prodding, the questions that felt like they were leading somewhere before dropping away, forgotten. He’d been driving her crazy and he knew it. Now, when it was finally time to go home, he dropped his little “decent transportation” surprise on her.

“Giving me a car like that would prove an unnecessary cash drain. I’d need a new one every day,” she said, her jaw tight and her patience gone.

“If you didn’t live in such a dangerous part of town, you’d be fine,” he replied smoothly. At least he’d finally got around to the point he’d been trying to make all day. She *knew* she should have taken a cab.

“I don’t have to justify my choice of home to you and I won’t. All I’m saying is that this car is unacceptable to be taken into my neighborhood. Why do you think the last one was such a wreck? No one would steal that mess.”

His eyes narrowed to slits, the vivid color of his irises glowing between his inky lashes. "This conversation might have been amusing a few moments ago, but it's starting to lose its charm."

She'd just bet it was. He hated when she had a valid point. "You're quitting because I'm not jumping up and down over your generosity?"

"Now *that* I wouldn't mind seeing." He looked her over slowly, in a completely different light.

She outright refused to tingle. "How unfortunate for you because I wouldn't jump up and down for the Dalai Lama, much less for you and a car."

"I believe you're the one in the unfortunate position, because if you don't take the car, you're stuck riding home with me again." He smiled. He didn't know how to do it without looking like he'd just won something, either.

She curled her fingers into her palms. "I can walk."

Raven rose to his feet, using his slow grace to unnerve her. He rounded his desk, resting a hip on the front edge to study her. Crossing his arms over his chest, he skewed his silver tie slightly to the left. He must have bit the inside of his cheek because it indented while he studied her legs.

"Pretty as they are, those heels won't get you five blocks. As for the rest of you..."

Vanessa looked down at herself. She was wearing a black, mid-calf skirt, high-collared black blouse and fitted vest. Decent enough, if monochromatic. "I'm fine."

"You'd be attacked before those pretty shoes gave way."

"I can take care of myself, Mr. Remington. I've been doing it all my life."

He scoffed. Why did he find it so impossible to believe anything anyone said? "Show me."

A disbelieving laugh escaped her. "What?"

"Show me. You don't want to drive with me, you won't take the car I've provided for you. If you can show me you're capable of protecting yourself, you're free to walk however many miles it is to your quaint little apartment."

*Quaint? Little?* No wonder she found new things to hate about him every day.

“Fine.” She turned toward the door of his office, prepared to get the pepper spray canister from her purse, even considering pushing the button as part of her demonstration.

She got two steps before finding herself crushed against him, her arm behind her back. She gasped at the press of his hard body to hers, then blew the air out in a whoosh when she couldn’t shake free. He had one solid arm around her middle, squeezing her backside into him. She struggled to pull away, but achieved nothing.

“This isn’t fair.” She tried to keep her voice normal, but it squeaked nonetheless.

Raven brushed his bristly chin against the sensitive skin at the base of her neck. Skin she hadn’t realized was so sensitive. “Do you think anyone out *there* will be fair? Do you really believe men on the streets will see you slinking along in this outfit, all alone, and won’t take advantage? Hell, even I can’t help but do that.”

She closed her eyes, wishing the sound of his rough voice didn’t thrum in her blood. Every nerve ending tingled, awaiting his touch, his mouth, his skin...

She leaned into him, helpless to her body’s desires. He stiffened, his intake of breath at the tiny brush of her hips into the cradle of his both thrilling and terrifying. His arm tightened around her waist—a warning? A request?—and a moan escaped her throat. This was why they didn’t touch. Why she never allowed herself to remember his warmth or his scent. Because less than a moment in his arms stole every shred of resistance, leaving her breathless...wanting.

“Raven—”

He spun her, making her dizzy before she even finished rotating, unerringly finding her mouth with his, cutting off her weak protest. If she even attempted to make one.

Vanessa lost herself in that kiss, the hard pressure of his lips, the demanding thrust of his tongue over hers; seeking something inside her and ravaging until he found it. His hands gripped her bottom, his fingertips biting into her hips and forcing her to acknowledge the heated arousal against her abdomen. The kiss went on and on, gaining fervency with each touch. There was only the feel of his hard chest crushing hers, the taste of him like rich brandy in her mouth, the rasp of his breath and power of something too strong for her growing around them. Too strong to ignore, too strong to fight.

Her vest flapped open and he was pulling her shirt from her skirt when his knuckles on her belly brought her to her senses. Her eyes snapped open, blind instinct giving her the strength to push away so she could take a breath that didn't include his scent as well. She jumped out of his arms like sparks from a fire, pressing herself to the office door. Even with him an arm's length away, she felt fuzzy, drunk and far too sober at the same time. She'd...they'd almost...oh God! Just like the wedding reception, when her skin had felt burned and body had ached for more. But this had gone so much further than a near kiss on a crowded dance floor. And there was no one to hide behind. No one to save her from her own stupidity. Had she lost her mind?

She looked at Raven, too late realizing her sanity was the last thing she should be worried about losing. By the look in those bright green depths, she may very well lose her life.

"Don't do this, Vanessa." It wasn't a plea, but it felt like one. "Don't do this to us again."

"You don't understand," she whispered, not sure if *she* understood anymore. The connections from her mind to her body refused to work for some reason. She should already be running, long out the door and nearly to the elevator. Why was she still here? Why was she still looking into his eyes and feeling a shaft of white hot desire in her blood? Tears of indecision stung her eyes and she willed herself not to cry in front of him.

His tie hung loose, uneven off his shoulder and his shirt was nearly half-undone. Beneath all that, his chest rose and fell as if each breath were hard for

him to take. What had been left of her lipstick was smeared across his mouth. His cheeks even had a flush of red staining across them. Had she done that?

*Oh God...*

If he hated her for being a tease, she knew she deserved it. Their first incident, he'd been willing—if not able—to forgive. A second time toying with him? No, Raven didn't bend that far. The roiling in her stomach made her gasp at what she had nearly done. Hadn't all those vows she'd made years ago meant anything?

No. Not when he kissed her, not when his hands were on her body and her mind flew out the window. But, damn it, she *had* made them and she had good reason to. Reasons she needed to remember.

"This isn't about you. I'm sorry, I am." Her hand searched out the doorknob, running definitely the only choice left. "I made choices a long time ago—things I can't undo. You don't know." She found the gold handle, turning it as quickly as she could, skittering into the outer room.

"Where are you going?"

She clawed at her desk drawer, digging into the deep file area and yanking out her purse. "I have to leave."

"Wait a minute, what's wrong?" He sounded worried, but she didn't look over her shoulder to check.

"I have to go," she repeated, hurrying out from behind the desk.

He grabbed her arm, whipping her around until she had to look at him, using his other hand to hold her in place when she tried to shake him loose. His voice was rough, anger and confusion flaring inside it, so different from his cradling hold. "You aren't going anywhere until I get some answers."

"You don't want answers, least of all this one. Let me go."

"I can't let you leave like this!"

"You can't stop me."

"Watch me." His eyes burrowed into hers without mercy. She knew better than to ask for any. "Tell me why you backed off. Why you always back away. I deserve that much."

She shook her head. He deserved far more than anything she could ever give him, but no one really got what they deserved in life. She could only give him the slimmest shadow of the truth. The rest...the rest she never let out of her heart. "Because I can't sleep with you. I can't sleep with *anyone*."

"You're not a nun, Vanessa. There's no law—"

"You don't understand. I'm cursed." She yanked away from him the moment his hands turned slack—as she'd known they would—and ran out of the office, heedless of the tears that fell before she even made it out the main door.



"Vangie, it's one in the morning!" Amy Kaye complained in a sleepy whine.

"I know Ames, I just...needed to hear you." Vanessa ran a hand through her loose hair for what felt like the thousandth time in the three hours she'd been home. Calling Amy was a last ditch attempt to quell her nerves. And her conscience. Instead, her little sister coughed a few times, creating a wet, sticky sound and making the back of Vanessa's neck twitch in fear. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, clearing my throat. What's wrong with you?"

Vanessa could just see Amy, sprawled face down in her bed, blonde curls pulled into a ponytail on top of her head, frowning. If you looked at her, you'd think she was maybe sixteen, so tiny and frail, but she was all of twenty-one and she already knew way too much about real life.

"Why does there have to be something wrong?"

"Because it's one in the morning. If you woke me up for the fun of it, I'm going to kick you."

"I kissed Raven," Vanessa blurted, clamping a still shaky hand over her eyes and wincing at Amy's roughly indrawn breath. She still couldn't tell if her problem was embarrassment or dissatisfaction, but embarrassment certainly took the lead when her younger sibling started giggling. Her face red hot, she

knew she'd have to explain what happened. Wasn't going to be hard. If she closed her eyes for even a moment, she relived every second of that tortured kiss and had to shudder a breath to shake herself out of it.

"Oh my God, this is great, tell me everything!" Vanessa heard blankets shift and the thump of something falling as Amy sat up in bed and probably killed her alarm clock in an effort to turn on the light. "So how was it? Was it good?"

*Too good.* "That's not the point!"

"Of course it is. You've been mooning over the man for two *years*. Geez, even I could have slept with him by now." Amy punctuated that sentiment with another cough.

"You're sick, aren't you?" All her worries about Raven paled compared to those Vanessa had for her youngest sister. Now her only sister.

"I told you I'm fine. I wouldn't lie to you about that." Of course she would, if it meant being independent enough to handle it on her own.

"All right." Vanessa fought the urge to keen her hearing for wheezing. She looked to the framed photos hanging on the wall. All four of the Kaye sisters, lined up and smiling back at her. Those pictures usually brought her comfort, but some nights, they only brought guilt. Tonight, they served as harsh reminder of all she had lost. All she would still lose.

"So what happened?" Amy demanded, bringing Vanessa back to the present.

"I left." She closed her eyes, turning from the physical pictures to face a mental one because she was still able to see Raven's handsome face, angry and...concerned?

"You *left*?" Amy paused to sigh with impatience. "You ran, didn't you?"

"What was I supposed to do?" she murmured, more to herself than to her sister.

"I'll tell you what you shouldn't be doing and that's calling *me*. You're looking for justification and you won't get any here."

"Amy—"

"No. You finally had another chance and you threw it away. For what? For who? And don't say me, because we both know that's not true."

"It's not like I can throw caution to the wind. I work for him," Vanessa said, falling back on her nice, safe reasons for turning Raven down.

"Oh, please, if he hasn't fired you for not sleeping with him, what are the chances he'll do it when you do?"

Vanessa opened her mouth to say something, but Amy's comment made unlikely sense. How lust drenched she must be if her little sister's sexual advice was sounding acceptable.

"If everything I've ever seen in the papers is true, then he isn't the kind to expect marriage or kids. He's got *hot affair* written all over him."

Vanessa almost laughed. He probably had it written several times. "Yes, he does give that impression."

"The next time he kisses you, do everyone a favor and don't run away any more. It won't kill you to have a sex life. Even I have one."

Vanessa whimpered. "Please don't tell me that, Ames."

Amy laughed with slightly perverse glee. "Sorry, but I do. Unlike you, I had no plans to die a virgin. Look, think of it this way, you guys are driving each other nuts like this. I say just sleep with the guy, get it over with. As long as you use precautions, there isn't anything to be afraid of. I'm not pregnant and in case you missed it, there's a whole lot of women out there who aren't pregnant either. You'll burn off all that steam and no one will be any the wiser. Well, no one but me because you know I'll want details. The good ones. I'll even be generous and wait until after your fifth orgasm."

"You're disgusting."

"At least I'm not repressed."

"Sicko."

"Virgin."

Vanessa smiled, chuckling low enough that Amy probably didn't hear it. She ran her hand through her hair again and sighed. Leave it to her sister to make her smile after a night like this. "I love you, Amy."



“Yeah, I love you too. Now go away and no calling back until you’ve got something naked to talk about.”

Vanessa said goodbye, hung up the phone and lay back on her small daybed with a sigh. Could Amy be right? Should she just go for it and put both of them out of their misery?

Horrible fears aside, she allowed herself to fantasize about actually listening to Amy. They *could* be safe about it, if they decided to actually have sex. People had been avoiding unwanted pregnancies for years. After Amy’s birth, their parents had certainly managed it. It could be done. And the beautiful part was that she would never even have to tell Raven why. All she’d have to do was insist on birth control. It wasn’t as if he’d fight her on it. Yes, it could definitely be done in a hypothetical sense.

But could *she* do it for real?

Vanessa bit her lip absently, not entirely sure. Couldn’t she give in to her body’s needs, just this once? Of course, she’d have to remember it was only about her body. It wouldn’t involve her heart and it certainly wouldn’t involve Raven’s. Afterwards, things could finally be the way they were supposed to be between a boss and his secretary. Boring. Impersonal. Dull.

God, that sounded good.

Suddenly, the idea didn’t feel so impossible. She’d just have to find a way to nail her feet to the floor and let Raven take the lead if the opportunity ever presented itself.

But therein lay the problem.

How likely was the opportunity to come again? She’d rejected Raven so often there was no way he was going to come to her now. He had barely done so in the two years they’d known each other. He would lock himself behind a cynical smile and his eyes would turn hard whenever he looked at her. He’d still want her, but a man like him would only take so much before giving up. If she wanted him, she’d have to seduce him.

She had to laugh at the thought. If she had to be the seducer, odds were she *would* die a virgin.

It was just as well. If by some miracle she did get another chance, she'd take it. But if she didn't, if she'd finally slammed that door shut too hard to reopen, she'd go on living with the ache. Nothing gained, but nothing lost, which was important. She'd lost enough, no need to go looking to lose more.

But as she fell into a restless sleep, she hoped...



*I'm a masochist.*

It was the only explanation. Raven stared at his phone and asked himself why he was bothering to make this phone call. He made it every month, like clockwork, waiting for something positive to come of it. It wouldn't. Two years hadn't changed anything in the span of his relationship with his brother. Why did he think another call would make a dent with Sky that hadn't been made before.

Because he was a masochist.

It was also why he insisted on picking Vanessa up at her apartment every morning and dropping her off every night. Aside from necessary, he didn't speak to her or acknowledge her. He could have gotten her another car so she could drive herself, but no. He couldn't seem to make himself let go. So, he punished himself by staying close to her, keeping her arm's length away so he wouldn't have to hear any kind of explanation about her strange confession. He'd rather suffer than have it end.

And he'd rather be mistrusted by his brother than not have a brother at all.

He dialed the number. Three rings later he heard an uneven voice pick up and say, "Remington House of Horrors. More screams a minute than you can shake a stick at."

Leave it to Sky's stepson to make him smile despite the knot in his gut. "Hi AJ, it's Raven. Is Catherine teething again?" Sky's baby daughter had inherited her father's grim attitude about life in general, but none of his reticence. Her first tooth had been added to Remington legend as misery on an epic scale.

Raven had certainly learned more info about babies that month than he ever planned to make use of.

“Hi Uncle Raven,” the thirteen year old chirped, his address never failing to jolt Raven’s nerves. He’d been too long out of the family loop to know how to respond when kids viewed him as a relative. “Nah, if she got any more, I’d move out. She’s just mad because Mom won’t let her in the shed with Dad. I’ll take you out to him.”

Raven sat, blinking, while the boy carried the receiver away from the squawks of a displeased one year old in the background. The best part about calling Sky was being reminded why he avoided marriage, children and suburbia. Come to think of it, all three of those things avoided him just as assiduously.

“Raven?” Sky’s voice was brisk as ever. Healthy. It would never be warm, Raven admitted, but there was a certain relief that he didn’t sound as weak as he had two years ago, when his heart had been ready to fail.

“Since when does AJ call you Dad?”

A hushed chuckle came over the line. “Since Catherine started trying to call me by my name. He read that babies learn by example, so he’s trying to keep things less confusing.” There was some shuffling and then the sounds of Sky settling into a chair in his shed. “Are you calling to ask about my kids or to talk business?”

Polite invitation to get back in his appointed place as barely tolerated family member. But what else could he expect? He’d arrived back in San Diego to take RMI over for their mother when Sky was in the hospital and earned nothing but Sky’s mistrust. He’d added fuel to the fire when he found out Sky had started a deathbed romance and Raven had his future sister-in-law investigated down to her genetic coding which, in hindsight, was probably a mistake. But how was he supposed to know she was a genuine and affectionate woman? He hadn’t been around one of those for years. He’d apologized. Evie claimed to forgive him. It didn’t matter. It had taken this long to get into something resembling a friendship with Sky, something that had only truly

happened when the two of them were standing in a hospital, staring down dumbfounded at the plastic bassinet holding the first Remington born in thirty years. Even that small truce couldn't replace trust. His own secrets and Sky's inability to think anything good about him always managed to erode whatever progress they made.

It would have been nice to have more than a surface relationship with his mother, too, but Raven knew too well his role in destroying his family. The role he still played. Once upon a time, he and Jordan had been close, but those days were so far gone it was as if their mother-son relationship belonged to someone else. Now she expected him to make ruthless and unfeeling decisions so she could think badly of him. It was the only aspect of their relationship where he never disappointed her. The solution, for the most part, was to not let his mother in on any of the decisions he had to make, especially not the ones he had to make concerning her. Something like guilt tugged at him. The private investigator's report on a photographer he'd met in Texas a few months ago was tucked neatly in his briefcase; a perfect example of the secrets he was forced to keep. If Jordan knew what he was hiding, who the annoying little paparazzi might be...he couldn't afford to finish the thought. But just because his mother would hate him if she ever found out didn't mean he didn't have a responsibility to see the job done.

He sighed, weariness from all sides pulling at him. That one thought encapsulated his entire world. He couldn't have Vanessa, his brother or his mother in his life because for twenty years he'd allowed himself to be cast in the role of the bad guy, doing what had to be done. Worse, he couldn't see changing that role anytime real soon.

"Business, of course. You're still interested in an update?"

"Beats reorganizing my screwdriver collection."

"You could always come down to the offices and pick up some R&D."

"I might do that," Sky replied, but they both knew he wouldn't. Sky was content puttering away in the carpentry shop he'd made for himself in his backyard, the way their grandfather had been perfectly happy making furniture

and fixing cars up in Eureka for pennies when he could have been designing either for real money.

For the next hour, Raven went over updates. Design, contracts, stockholders, appropriations. Sky offered few tips and fewer comments. Each call had less and less meaning.

“You don’t need to keep doing this, Raven. We’re both aware that you know what you’re doing.” Sky sounded as weary as Raven felt.

Raven wanted to feel something from the implied trust in that statement, but he knew what it really meant. Sky didn’t see the sense in the calls. He didn’t want or need contact. Raven nodded, stopping only when he remembered Sky couldn’t see him. So much for getting used to being called “Uncle Raven”.

“I understand.”

“Why don’t I think that’s true?”

“Because you suspect everyone of lying?”

“That’d be you, brother.”

*Touché.* “I’ll let you go then.”

Before Sky could get in another volley, Raven snapped the phone back onto its cradle. Yet another failure in two weeks of continued frustration. Something was bound to snap sometime and Raven had the feeling that today, it was going to be him. He’d finish his immediate schedule but tonight was definitely a night to go home and drown himself in a glass of brandy and the sound of his piano. With any luck, he’d work the knots out of his neck and get his balance back.

It wasn’t as if he had anything else to do.



Being right was not always rewarding.

Every morning for two weeks, Raven arrived to pick Vanessa up for work at six-thirty sharp. Every night, he drove her home, walked her to her door and

wordlessly waited until she locked the deadbolt before leaving again. He never said anything that wasn't required and if he looked at her even once on any of those drives, she must have missed it.

No, no chance for seducing him in that condition. Even if she had a clue how to do it in the first place.

The workday, which used to be fast and even fun despite the occasional bouts of lust, had slowed into an interminable wait. Hours felt like days. The few minutes when she was alone with him in his office were frosty, arctic excursions. The worst part was that he stopped calling her Vanessa. He called her "Miss Kaye", with the kind of formality one uses when dealing with something repellent.

She hadn't expected to lose that. He was the only one who used her given name. Everyone else called her Vangie, even here at work. She didn't give it much thought until Raven came on and set himself apart by actually asking what she preferred and sticking with it. Then again, there were a lot of things she never thought about until Raven came along.

"If you're ready, we should go."

Vanessa looked up from her keyboard guiltily, knowing her eyes were wide with fear that he somehow knew what she'd been thinking. She shouldn't have worried, he wasn't even facing her. Instead he'd crossed to the closet near the executive suite doors and was sliding his coat on. She looked to the screen, startled to see that it was only seven-fifteen. "Already?"

"Yes, I have things to do. I'm sure you'll enjoy a night off for once."

"But I don't have any appointments for you tonight." She flipped his schedule pages to double check. No, nothing there. He always told her when he—

That's when she felt it, the lifting of the small hairs on the back of her neck. It wasn't his interested gaze. It was an irritated one. Now that she had his attention, she wasn't so sure she wanted it. With a swallow, she made herself look up and face his emerald glare.

"I'm entitled to a bit of personal time without checking in with you, Miss Kaye." No trace of a question there, just a not so subtle reminder of who exactly was the boss in this situation. A reminder she admittedly needed from time to time since he normally didn't seem to tie his shoelaces without her. Apparently, this was one of those times.

"Yes, sir," she made herself say, even smiling at the end of the cracked off syllable.

"Good. Now shut down and be ready in three minutes."

Three minutes wherein which he would stare at her because she was impeding on his precious personal time? Three minutes for her to try and look competent while her hands shook? And why did he suddenly need personal time to consider so precious?

Vanessa saved her document and purposely ignored him as he'd been doing to her. She didn't care if he was standing by the door like some sort of avenging angel, his arms crossed and his overcoat adding to his already impressive height. Why should she care, it wasn't like *she* mattered to him anymore. No longer a conquest, no longer of any interest, it seemed.

As the computer made the final whirrs of its fan blades, she was flipping paper files closed and shoving them into the file drawer. Was he going on a date? Would he be dining with some beautiful, vine-like caricature of a woman? Would he take *her* to his bed while she sat at home staring at photographs of a family that was more of a memory, wishing it was her he was losing himself in?

And what did he mean he was entitled to personal time without checking in with her?

He never had a problem scheduling his dates with her before. Or asking her to order flowers for those dates the next day. Or scheduling new dates. Who was he to get high and mighty about finding some bimbo he could bed and then forget? Just because *she* wouldn't sleep with him. The jerk. If only he knew what she'd been looking for an opportunity to do.

It felt good to get angry at him. To slam her desk drawer, shove her key in and give it a vicious twist. The only care she took was with the computer cover and even that was a brisk slide of the vinyl over the console.

Pulling her purse with one hand, she kicked her chair into place, thinking all the while of the things she put up with about him. His attitude, his temper, his preferences, his damnable workaholic tendencies. If she really wanted to upset him, she could go and tell everyone that Mr. Sex God on the top floor hadn't had a date in at least six months. That would make that little muscle in his cheek twitch til it popped.

Of course, she'd get fired, but it'd be worth it. Someone else would have to put up with him. With his face and his eyes and his stare and his body—

“Problem, Vanessa?”

She looked over, startled by the sound of her name from him. Then got angry by the self-satisfied look on his face. Oh, so now he could use her name? Just flit back and forth between treating her like a leper and treating her like a professional, could he?

“I'm not ordering flowers for her, either, so you can forget about that right now!” Still mad, she stormed past him and out the main office doors. They were too heavy to slam and the carpet too thick to show how hard she was stomping, but she was pretty sure he got the point.



## Chapter Three

Raven watched her go with a mix of confusion and, oddly enough, amusement. She thought he was going on a date? She had to. Somehow he doubted getting a night off caused her little fit.

He couldn't complain. When she was mad she forgot how repressed she wanted to be, which always managed to fire his interest. Her eyes flashed, her hips swayed, her breasts rose high and fell hard with each hop of indignation she took. It wasn't any good for his libido or his control to upset her, which was why he'd been ignoring her these last two weeks. With anyone else, he could shut down. He could keep his feelings completely out of the equation. But not with Vanessa. Never with Vanessa. They couldn't have normal conversations like everyone else. They couldn't look at each other without seeing all the things they shouldn't be feeling. Without aching for something they couldn't accept. They couldn't even be in the same goddamn room without wishing everything was different. He'd be stupid to do anything other than ignore her.

But he couldn't quite tear his gaze away from the door she'd tried to slam.

He forced himself to think of all the ways she was wrong for him. She worked for him. She couldn't stand him. She was friends with his mother, for God's sake. She would never trust him, not that anyone else really did, but one couldn't choose their own family. He should be able to choose who he wanted in his bed. She said and did all the wrong things. She'd told him no. Hell, she'd said she was *cursed*. Wasn't that enough to cool his blood?

The memory of her flushed cheeks and parted lips sizzled through his brain.

Evidently not.

For days, the phrase had replayed in his mind, never making any more sense than it did the night she said it. It never changed his body's reaction to her. Any woman who claimed to be cursed should easily be avoided. Ignored. Banished from one's imagination. She didn't have the right to become more interesting.

Every day, he thought about what she said, worried it in his mind. Was she sick? Had someone hurt her? Had someone said something to damage her fragile self-confidence? He spent half his time thinking about her and the rest telling himself to stop. It never worked. Against his will, his eyes would course over every ripe curve of her, searching for some flaw to exploit so he could stop the painful wanting, which was getting to the point of needing. He detested needing.

He really *was* losing it. Being angry at her hadn't helped. Ignoring her hadn't helped. Having her was out of the question. So what the hell was he supposed to do? Other than make her crazy with some misplaced notion of a date, he didn't have a lot of options.

He paused.

He could make her crazy with some misplaced notion of a date.

Juvenile, yes, but when did he ever claim to have grown up? Raven strolled out the office doors, making sure to slow his pace when he saw her waiting at the elevator doors at the end of the hall. Her toes tapping, arms crossed under breasts, face flushed with wisps of her hair escaping that hideous bun at the base of her neck, she looked ready to implode.

He took slower steps.

Her eyes narrowed. She took in some air, but he'd know it if she let it go. Her shoulders turned his way, her whole body going still. She looked like prey. Defiant prey, maybe, but still prey.

And he felt like a hunter.

He studied his favorite parts of her, imagining what each would feel like, taste like; the curve of her neck, right where the skin met the tiny curls at her nape, the hollow of her throat, no doubt pulsing rapidly by now. If he placed

his face there, how drunk would he get on the scent of roses? The upper slope of her breast was the site of the majority of his fantasies. But his palms itched to grasp her hips, to follow the curve of her ass and separate her thighs with just his fingertips.

As if she could hear his thoughts, her color bloomed, like a boiling pot, heightening right along with his own uncontrollable response, but she never said a word.

Raven started to enjoy the game, walking as close to her as he dared, stretching out his arm and pressing the call button. His sleeve just grazed her breast, rewarding him with a shuddering gasp. He pulled his hand back but didn't step out of her personal space. He leaned closer in.

"Thanks for waiting."

The elevator dinged and he gestured for her to go first. She couldn't without brushing most of herself against him, which would hurt like hell later when he was in his apartment, alone and dissatisfied, but that would happen anyway. He wasn't so magnanimous he was willing to ache alone.

"Y-you're welcome." She put a hand on his chest and pushed him back so she could pass. Damn.

He watched her hop into the car, all the way to the back and press herself against it like a terrified virgin on a night of sacrifice.

He followed with a sigh, making sure to stay in the front portion of the car. The game lost most of its flavor when she didn't play along. Still, when he pressed the button and watched the doors close, he couldn't let it end without a parting shot.

"I suppose I'll have to see about those flowers myself, then. Which florist do you recommend?"

He didn't quite make out what she mumbled, but he clearly got the smack of something small bouncing off the back of his head.

Turning slowly, he looked down and found a blue pen laying on the carpeted floor of the elevator. "Did you just throw your pen at me?"

"No."

*Why the lying little...* “How do you explain it hitting me?”

She smirked. “Your magnetic personality?”

His irritation must have showed, because she paled and swallowed. He hit the stop button, dropped his briefcase and invaded her space as much as their clothing would allow. She shivered against him, hip to hip and breast to breast. He put his hands on either side of her, clutching the hand rail and locking her in place instead of gripping her hips and really scaring her.

“Tell me, Vanessa, how magnetic is it?”

Even without his hands on her to put her right where she'd feel the best, this was a nice place to be, flush against her warm, accepting body. It was exactly where he'd been hoping, burning to be for longer than he cared to admit. Her lips, ripe and open, right there, waiting to be tasted, parted just for him. Her breath rustled against his cheek like hummingbird wings. She shuddered against him, her belly quivering, her eyes darting to the closed doors beyond his shoulder.

*No escape this time, sweetheart.*

Had he said it aloud? Vanessa looked up into his eyes and swallowed carefully. With acceptance? It had to be, because she relaxed against him, setting his heart racing before he even realized what happened. Was this really it? His body leapt, rational thought struggling to make itself heard. He saw acquiescence in the depths of her violet eyes. There was no mistake when she lifted her hands, uncertain, shaking, and lay them on his chest. Not to push...just to touch. He looked into her eyes and saw exactly what he felt, confusion, desire, understanding, anticipation...and something murky he couldn't define in himself, much less in her. Holding in a breath, he leaned down to taste her lips, refusing to question if he was making yet another mistake.



*Oh God, this is it...*

His mouth was close, the chiseled, masculine feature she'd gotten in the habit of watching while he spoke and when daydreaming. In those dreams, she imagined kissing him while he brought roses and got down on his knees apologizing for his every autocratic behavior.

It was a dream, after all.

She hadn't expected to be so angry she could kick him. Nor did she expect to be plastered between him and a stopped elevator wall. Right now, her blood was pumping hard, making thinking difficult and her breath faint. Their thighs were pressed together, not a millimeter of give to his. He rolled his hips slightly against hers, adjusting his footing to brace her more firmly, and she forgot all about the handrail biting into her back. There was nothing to think about except his mouth, his legs and the heat of his body.

"No comments? No cutting remarks? No more pens?"

She shook her head.

His gaze turned sleepy, centering on *her* lips this time. She licked them, fighting off the dryness in her mouth, and saw the light in them flicker into an all out flame.

"Tell me what you meant about being cursed." Spoken so roughly, so hungrily, it seemed less like an order and more like a plea.

"Raven—"

"Tell me."

"I-I'm not supposed to have children."

His eyes narrowed, hardened with the suspicion she was much more at ease with. "Who said anything about children?"

"No one, it's just safer not to get involved with anyone. I promised myself I wouldn't and—" She cut herself off before she could descend into full blown ramble.

He nodded, lifting a hand off the rail. She almost breathed, until he placed his hot palm on her waist, rising carefully toward her breast. "I think we passed the uninvolved portion of this situation a long time ago."

He cupped her through her blouse, his thumb finding her already hard nipple without even looking. She made some sort of noise that made him smile. "You're coming home with me tonight."

"What about your date?"

That thumb made tantalizing circles. "What about it?"

"The...her...she'll be waiting." How could one finger render her lungs useless?

"There is no date, Vanessa."

"N-no date?" It was difficult with that hand still massaging her brain away, but what he said finally made sense. "*No date?* What do you mean no date?"

He pulled back minutely. "I never said there was a date. You said there was."

"But you—the flowers!"

"Do you really want to argue about how far off the handle you flew?"

"I did not fly off the handle. You were misleading!"

"All I said was that I wanted some personal time. You assumed I wanted sex."

She looked down at the hand still on her breast, one eyebrow raised in question.

He grinned down at her unrepentantly. "I never said I didn't."

"You're a hateful man."

"Yes, I am."

He was also going to kiss her. His hand stopped its ruthless seduction and he lowered his mouth to hers, redefining whatever she thought seduction was. His tongue swirled over hers, his earthy taste overwhelming her. She closed her eyes, willingly drowning in the fiery flow of him over her senses.

He toyed with her, his lips devouring, his body demanding. Hers felt like she had just gone up in flames. His hand ravaged her hair, pulling pins until the only thing holding it up was the wall behind her. Then both hands cupped her breasts, kneading her with a cross between gentleness and desperation. He trailed kisses down her jaw, to her neck, nibbling and tasting his way to her

collarbone. The stubble on his jaw grazed her with each pass, sending yet more tingles into a nervous system threatening overload. Before she knew it, the buttons on her blouse were open and he was making his way to her—

“Raven!”

“Hmmm?”

She bit her lip at the near purr of his voice vibrating against the upper curve of her breast, especially when he coupled it with a teasing lick. “Raven, we’re in an elevator. We can’t do this in an elevator!”

“Of course we can.”

“There are cameras in here!” she hissed.

That finally gave him pause. He looked up, eyes smoky with hunger. If there were any air in her lungs, it disintegrated.

“Come home with me.”

Come home with him. It sounded much easier than it was. Not surprisingly, her body was clamoring for him, already agreeing. Her heart seemed inclined as well. It was only her mind putting up the final argument. Until she remembered her promise to Amy. To herself.

She wouldn’t hurt anyone.

She wouldn’t get pregnant.

She could do this.

She would.

Raven closed the buttons to her blouse with a smile, already seeing her decision before she could make herself voice it. He took her hand and reached out to release the elevator. In the silence while they watched the lights descend numerically, two questions sizzled in her mind.

Was that sinking feeling coming from the downward plummet of the elevator?

Or the downward spiral of her life?



*What the hell am I doing?*

Back at the office, touching her, tasting her, Raven was ecstatic that she finally agreed to come home with him. Well, as ecstatic as he was capable. But the long ride down was silent, her face pale as if she had just agreed to pitch herself into a volcano for the benefit of the company. The drive in the car bordered on somber. And now, here in the elevator of his own building, he wondered if he had developed some sort of disease. She was as far away as she could be, arms clutched around herself so tight she would probably tear the seams of her coat soon.

He wanted to be chivalrous and offer her a way out. But two years—two long, painful years—of wanting her sucked away whatever sense of chivalry he'd ever had. So when the elevator doors finally whooshed open, he stepped out into the foyer and waited for her to follow.

She didn't.

She stared at him with wide violet eyes, colorless cheeks and what was probably a cold sweat breaking out on her forehead.

He knew if he asked her a question, said so much as a word, she'd leave. He couldn't talk her into this. He couldn't even seduce her into it, as he had in the other elevator. No matter how badly he wanted to. So he did the only thing he could.

He held out his hand.

She looked at it for a long time, then back to him.

The panic faded, little by little. He didn't blame her. He didn't have a sparkling reputation and they were out of their minds to do this. He shouldn't be involved with his assistant. He should have no emotion towards her at all, especially not desire. She'd be smart to worry about her job. Her reputation at RMI. Her ability to handle a straight-forward affair.

But when Vanessa slid her slim hand into his, Raven ceased to care about any of that. Every part of his mind locked in on her and the quiet sensation inside himself he couldn't name. Satisfaction? Triumph? No, those weren't it. Something about this moment felt...right?



Maybe it was better without a name.

They didn't talk as she followed him through his half-lit living room, up two steps on the left side of the open area to his bedroom. He led her to the edge of a massive bed, still not turning on any lights. Moonlight filtered in from the wall of glass along one side of the room, providing all the light he'd need, all the shadow he could hide his secrets in.

She stared up, the blue-white glow illuminated her face, turning her skin incandescent. She didn't have shadows tonight. No secrets, no mysteries. Tonight she was open. She was his.

He lifted his hands to her blouse, undoing the tiny buttons at her collar. Inch by inch, he revealed her throat, the smooth valley between her breasts and at last the flat muscles of her belly. He peeled the blouse open, revealing a black bra with no special adornments. He could see her trembling, the fabric in his hands vibrating with her racing heartbeat.

Or was the trembling his own?

He released the blouse, letting it drift to the floor. Reaching around her, he slipped the securing clasp of her skirt from its mate, catching the zipper just beneath and rasping it down. The skirt pooled at her feet. Taking her hand, he led her out of the clothes pile, silently motioning for her to leave her shoes behind.

Next, he unclasped her bra, removing it and tossing it to the ground with her other clothes. She shuddered, the shock of the cool air on her bare skin hardening her nipple to tiny points. He moved his hands close to her, matching the curve of his palm to the slope of her body, drawing out her response without completing the caress. He knelt before her, watched her quiver where his warm breath touched her. But she didn't pull away. Didn't hide. She stood before him and let him look his fill. On his knees was probably the only position he could take that would do her any justice.

Then again, he wasn't here for justice.

She jumped when his fingertip curled between her skin and the waist of her nylons. Slowly, slowly, slowly, he eased down the clinging fabric, snagging her

panties as he did so. He pulled them all the way to her toes, where he finally slipped them off, one foot at a time.

He rose to his feet while Vanessa watched. He looked down at her hands, then back to her face. Other than shrugging out of his jacket, he still wore his suit. It was a choice. She had to come to him, take this final step and be part of what was happening. Blame wouldn't have a place in this night. Neither would regret.

He waited for her to make the next move.



*Take what you want.*

The dare was clear on his face. The command. He wanted her to prove she wanted him enough to stay. Given her history of turning tail and running, she didn't blame him. She didn't even question how she understood him. She'd always understood him, his wordless commands, his silent challenges. For years, she'd learned his language, knew what he meant and what he needed. This night wasn't any different. Except that she'd finally be giving it to him. What they both wanted and needed.

Forcing herself not to be childish, to do what he implored, she kept her eyes trained on his, curling her fingers around his tie, sliding it apart. It came free with little argument, save the raspy whisper of cool silk. Next, she started on his buttons, her fingertips slipping on the Egyptian cotton as each one came free. He saved her from the embarrassment of figuring out his cufflinks. His shirt gaped open, leaving Vanessa to do what she'd been dreaming of for years. She placed her palms on the hair-dusted surface of his chest, running them up to his shoulders and pushing it off him.

Together, they removed his belt, his pants, briefs and socks, surrounded by a silent intimacy that comforted her. When they were done, all she could do was stare. Every muscle, every sinew and tendon had been worked to its

leanest, but most powerful potential. Wide, flat pectorals rested above a massive rib cage, leading down to rippled abdominal muscles.

She almost blushed at the way the dark line of hair led down to his heavy erection, but she wasn't embarrassed to be looking at him. There was nothing embarrassing about this riveting man or the strange, uncontrollable emotions he made her feel. Finally, he stepped close to her, bringing them skin to skin. The heat of his arousal against her abdomen singed, but at the press of his mouth to hers, she didn't care. The whole world could go up in flames and she wouldn't even notice.

She let him guide their tongues and their bodies as he slowly turned them in place before backing onto the bed. He pulled her on top of him, her legs tangling with his.

He dragged his hands up her to her breasts, cupping and kneading the swollen flesh. She tore her lips from his, arching into his hands. Grasping the headboard with one hand, she straddled his middle, gasping when his hot mouth covered a hardening nipple. The drawing suction caused a sweet sting, as well as a surge of heat to her core, leaving her slippery and aching. She clasped his head closer with her free hand, sure she wouldn't survive if he stopped.

Suddenly, she found herself rolled beneath him, her knees on either side of his ribs. He dragged his mouth down the underside of the breast he'd been suckling, over a wet path to the other aching globe. Abandoning her breasts—a move that made her whimper—he moved his body down the length of hers, licking at her waist, her ribs, her navel down to her inner thigh.

Her closed eyes snapped open with apprehension as his goal became more and more obvious. He wouldn't go there. Not like that. He wouldn't.

*Would he?*

Raven smiled at the sound she made that finally broke the silence, a cry of apprehension mixed with wanting. She thought he was headed for the wet folds that had a few seconds ago been pressed against his belly.

*Oh no, Vanessa, I intend to make the torture last much longer than that.*

For two years, he'd been fascinated by her long limbs. Every curve, every hollow, each flex of muscle was imprinted in his memory. He meted out his revenge justly, taking his time as he tasted, nibbled and sucked down one leg and up the other. Nimble, he rolled her, stretching his length on top of her, widening her legs until he could fit between them, fitting himself against her. The urge to sink into her nearly overwhelmed him, a need he almost wasn't able to pull back from. He soothed the burning ache inside himself by pressing against her wet folds, sliding between them back and forth until they were both groaning.

"Raven, please..." Vanessa whimpered when his hands moved over her arms until his fingers entwined with hers. Her body was slick and rigid, tense with the need he was heightening with each slow thrust of his hips; teasing her with what he wasn't giving. He wanted her needing as badly as he was, but the mockery cost him too much, pushing him to his limit.

He released her to reach into his night table drawer for protection. She watched him, staring over her shoulder with intense, smoldering eyes as he placed the condom. When he reached for her again, she didn't hesitate at all, rolling onto her back and wrapping her arms around him in a welcome he'd never known. Her fingers sank into his hair, her mouth hungrily drank from his. But soon, kisses weren't enough.

"Now, Vanessa," he growled, using his hands to part her legs further.

"Yes," she cried on a gasp, arching her back as he closed his eyes and lost himself inside her.

"Vanessa?" Raven held himself still, every muscle anxious to complete the joining they'd begun, but he couldn't believe what he'd just felt. A barrier, one that tore away like a veil beneath the pressure of his thrust. Looking into her eyes, those fiery dark eyes, he knew he hadn't imagined it. He should have realized, should have understood what she'd said earlier about not getting involved, but he hadn't. Hungry, desperate fool that he was, he hadn't.

"Don't be angry," she whispered, tightening her interior muscles around him, making him ache all the more.

He looked down at her, filled with disbelief and questions he knew she wasn't ready to answer. He wasn't even ready to ask them.

She splayed her fingers over his tensing jaws. "Please, don't be angry."

After what seemed an eternity, he closed his lids, dipped his head and gave in to both their needs. Taking her mouth once more, while she wrapped her arms around his neck, he began careful movements forward and back. Rocking them with the gentleness she deserved from the start. Soon, it was a gentleness neither of them could maintain. Moment by moment, they increased their pace together.

Vanessa hung on for dear life, the brief pain of her lost virginity forgotten by the upward spiraling of her body. The force of his thrust became almost violent, but exactly what she wanted, exactly what she needed. A tightening coil at her core spun her faster and faster, until she thought she might break in half from the tension.

Then she did break, shattering with a scream while bursts of light played behind her eyes and pleasure she'd never imagined poured through her like hot, flowing molasses. One explosion leading to another as each stroke took her higher and became a blur of power and need.

Moments, hours later, they had both collapsed to the mattress, holding each other as if seeking shelter. Dazed, it took her a moment to realize she had not met her release alone. She opened her eyes, finding Raven's bewildered and exhausted face above hers.

He stared at her as if he'd never seen her before, then closed his eyes and kissed her softly, sweetly. He lay his forehead against hers, his member still throbbing deep within her. "I've never known anything like that."

"Me, either," she whispered, matching his quiet tone with a smile. They held each other that way for a while, both unable and unwilling to part.

Eventually, he separated himself from her body, removing the sheath into a trash bin on the side of the bed. He tucked her spoon-fashioned against himself, his arm tightly around her middle. Together, they finally slept.

## Chapter Four

Raven awoke to bright sunlight and an empty bed. If it wasn't for the faint blood on the sheet—or the evidence in the trash can—he almost would have believed he'd dreamed the previous night. But even he didn't have a vivid enough imagination to dream the scent of roses still on his skin.

He wondered why she hadn't awakened him, but knew he wasn't about to get his answers here. He dressed quickly, more than two hours late for work. Deciding to expedite matters by showering and shaving in the office, he gathered what he would change into and hurried off to the Remington Medical Industries Complex.

Driving through the gates, he ignored the grassy lawn and the sleek design of the building. The tall trees framing a perfect scenic view of the gray-blue bay was completely lost on him. What he wanted was inside, on the top floor, most likely quaking in her heels for his arrival.

Well, not exactly.

Vanessa was sitting at her desk, efficiently rearranging his schedule for the day, all right, but quaking she was not. She was wearing her horrific glasses, her hair as slicked back as ever and in a dark blue suit jacket that covered her to the throat with no less than ninety buttons down the front; a regular Victorian torture chamber.

“Good morning, Mr. Remington,” she said, not so much as a blush on her dusky cheeks. “I rescheduled this morning's design meeting for after lunch, moved Mr. Donovan's appointment to lunch tomorrow and—”

“Vanessa.” He glared at her, holding his garment bag over one shoulder.

“Yes, Mr. Remington?” Brisk and distant. You’d never know the scratches on his back were from her blunt tipped nails.

“My office. We need to talk.”

“I’m afraid—”

“You should be.”

Finally, a flicker of emotion in her pretty, magnified eyes.

“Raven, is that you?”

They both looked over to his office door to find a tiny woman stepping out curiously. Though everything about the matron bespoke classy fragility from her size five Ferragamo pumps to the custom cut, green Dior dress suit, Jordan Remington entered a room with a powerful presence.

A presence Raven didn’t have the patience for at the moment. He hoped irritation was all she picked up on as her maternal smile fell away. Her pale blue gaze dashed from himself to Vanessa twice before settling frostily back on him.

No such luck.

“May I speak with you a moment, Raven?”

He didn’t bother to demur—his mother would certainly have none of it—instead he looked at Vanessa one last time. “Afterwards.”

She acknowledged with a small nod. He entered his office, passing the small woman without missing a step waited for her to close the door. “What can I do for you, Mother?”

“You smell like roses.”

He walked his garment bag to the bathroom, hanging it on the back of the door without reply.

“Vangie wears rose scents, did you ever notice that?”

Only every damn day of his life.

“I had the scent made specifically for her several Christmases ago. I know it quite well.”

“How thrilling for you.”

“Please tell me you didn’t do what I think you did.”

Raven finally glanced her way, finding her standing between the two chairs in front of his desk. "Think what you like."

Jordan crossed her arms, her eyes hard and disappointed. He'd earned that look unceasingly over the years. Funny how for the first time, he didn't care. "Leave her alone."

That said plenty about her opinion of him, didn't it?

"I'm hardly inclined to obey your edicts on my personal affairs." He stalked behind his desk to sit in his chair. He had things to do and thirty-four year old men simply didn't stand there being ordered about by their mothers. And look here, his efficient assistant had conveniently left him an amended schedule to peruse. He'd have to thank her when he was done throttling her.

"As if any of your affairs could be called personal," Jordan continued, unaware she'd lost his attention. "She's too innocent to play your games, Raven. She'll only end up hurt."

"To say little of myself, eh? Sometimes I forget how far down I fall on your priority list. Am I before or after the house staff this year?" He pushed the itinerary across the desktop, fixing his mother with a glare that had done wonders for intimidating others in the past.

Her eyes narrowed over twin blooms forming high on her pale cheeks. "Don't even try it. You and your brother are the most important people in my life, you *know* that. You've always known that."

He didn't acknowledge her words. Then again, he never did. What would be the point? The most important person in her life was his father's ghost, nearly two decades dead and still in the middle of their lives. *His* life, in particular.

"You don't invest yourself in relationships. You've said it yourself a thousand times, you have flings. Vangie isn't like that, she deserves better. You don't know her life, the things she's already been through."

What good would it do to argue if she was going to insist on thinking the worst of him? Raven pushed down his growing temper with effort, grating his teeth in an effort to sound calm. "This isn't remotely your business. I'm saying this as kindly as you'll ever get from me: stay out of it."



“And I’m asking you as a favor, please stay away from her.”

“No.”

Jordan blinked at him, obviously surprised.

Good, that made two of them. They might argue and spar, but even he couldn’t remember the last time he’d snapped at her.

She paused, her eyes flickering with thoughts he was glad he couldn’t fathom. “Fine,” she said, visibly pulling her poise around herself like a royal cloak. “You’re right, it’s none of my business.”

Relief flooded him. Being too smart to question why, he moved onto the next topic. “What did you need to talk to me about?”

“There’s a family dinner, at the house on Sunday.”

He groaned, relief flowing away as quickly as it came. As much as he’d like to be part of his family, experiencing them was as fun as ripping out his fingernails with a chainsaw. “We had one last month.”

“And we’ll have one next month, as well. We’ll *keep* having them until this family somewhat resembles a group that can smile together in a picture.”

He leaned back in his chair, shaking his head. “You do have the most interesting fantasies.”

“Just for that, let’s make it a family *day*. Come on the early ferry.”

“Haven’t I been disowned yet this year?”

“Not yet, no, and that’s precisely why I’m inviting you. You can’t get disowned if we never see you.”

He couldn’t help a small smile. His control of the family fortune made the typical disownment process a little more difficult, but he gave his family credit—they did make the effort.

“You *would* be lost at Christmas without something to complain about. Chase would kill himself trying to keep conversation going.” The longtime family friend was more of a brother than a buddy and there was a good chance he was going to wear himself out at Christmas doing that very thing, disownment or not. Good humor didn’t last long as he finally remembered who

he was talking to. "There had better not be someone of marriageable age there for me to conveniently meet, Mother."

Jordan laughed, disbelief in her tone. "Would I do that?"

"There are any number of the socially elite who could answer for me. Must I remind you of the Ellington woman?"

Jordan sighed, her lips pouting enough to decline any reminders. "You could have been nice to her."

"But then we'd have needed surgery to remove her claws from my—"

"Raven!" Jordan shot to her feet. "I've apologized several times for that mistake. I couldn't have known the woman was an octopus. Besides, you weren't nice to any of them."

Raven smiled. "You could give up entirely. Then again, without your constant nagging about marriage and children I might slip up and actually have something to do with either."

"Maybe both?"

Raven shuddered.

A shaky smile widened her lips. "You'll find someone someday, dear. Of course, she'll probably run for the hills at the prospect of dealing with you for the rest of her life, but I'm sure she'll eventually resign herself to her fate and marry you."

"Never let it be said mother's love is blind."

"Well, in your case it would have had to be deaf and stupid as well."

"Now you're just stroking my ego." Raven rose to his feet. "I'll be there Sunday."

"Early."

"Early," he agreed, guiding her to the door.

"Raven, about Vangie," she began, but quieted when he shook his head at her in warning. She brought her hand to his cheek, reminding him painfully of how she would do that when he was a boy. "Just be careful. Please?"

He took her hand in his, kissed it and let her go. She didn't say anything, letting him close the door behind her. It was weakness, his sickness with not

making promises he couldn't keep. He especially couldn't make them when he knew he'd already be lying.



From the moment she woke up in Raven's bed at three in the morning, Vanessa was in a state of panic.

She admitted it. How could she make any rational decisions without admitting it? Sticking with her plan to be a reasonable, knowing adult, she lifted Raven's arm and slid out from under his heavy thigh. For a man so determined to be distant, it was a little scary how tightly he held her.

Okay, more than a little scary, but she didn't allow herself to adhere any meaning to it. For all she knew, it might only mean the deepest darkest secret of the most feared man on several continents was that he was a cuddler.

She'd grabbed her clothes and told herself terror was not the reason she shimmied into her skirt and blouse without bothering to drag on anything underneath before hightailing it to the elevator. Waiting for a cab in the lobby ate precious minutes as well as earning her several curious glances from the older lobby guard who wouldn't let her out on the street until she allowed him to call her a ride. The entire time, she expected Raven to come storming down like some wronged, dark god.

The cab took her to her apartment where she took a shower, half an ear cocked for pounding on the door while she tried to wash herself free of his touch. No amount of soap removed the memory of his hands, his mouth, his tongue. It didn't rinse away the guilt of slinking away, either.

He got what he wanted and all he expected. They both did. A few hours of searing intimacy—no, sex. She had to keep thinking of it in those terms. Cathartic, forbidden, exhausting sex. She had nothing to feel guilty about. Just because he held her the way she'd always dreamed someone would or because he looked so vulnerable as he lay there in the moonlight—

"Vangie?"

“Jordan!” Vanessa nearly leapt out of her seat, grasping the keyboard on her desk with both hands before she could knock it over on accident.

*Good luck explaining this one, dope.* She’d have a hard enough time explaining the cheeks somewhat red from embarrassment about being caught dawdling. And a lot red from something else.

“I need you to come to the island on Sunday.” Jordan’s lack of preamble made Vanessa frown. She was usually much more cajoling before getting around to an invitation to the family mansion.

“I have a few personal plans—”

“Please, Vangie. Something very important for the family is happening and we’ll need you there. If only to be kept abreast of the situation.” Her eyes skittered to the closed door of Raven’s office. Vanessa knew nervousness when she saw it. Cold fear tightened its familiar grip on her, making her search for any sign of illness on her longtime friend.

“Are you all right?” If Jordan were sick, Vanessa didn’t know what she would do.

The older woman’s mood evaporated into a smile, making Vanessa wonder if she hadn’t imagined the last few moments.

“Of course, dear, I didn’t mean to worry you. Healthy as a horse, as always. Still, you probably don’t want to tell Raven you’re coming to the house. You know how he likes to believe he controls his own affairs.”

Vanessa didn’t mean to wince. Or blush further. She’d just started to fade, too.

“I’ll get around him,” she said, hoping it didn’t show that she wasn’t as sure as she used to be. “I’ll be there, I promise.”

Jordan left the office and Vanessa dreamed of going with her. Ached, really. Except she knew that wherever she went, Raven would find her. She’d been worried the night before for a good reason. If he’d been conscious, she’d never have made it out the bedroom door. She eyed the exit Jordan just used, dragged her eyes to his office door and jumped when her intercom beeped innocuously to life.

“Alone?”

Lie, her subconscious commanded and it sounded like a wonderful idea. She opened her mouth to do so, but he cut her off.

“Now, Vanessa.” Unwillingly, her mind flashed on the night before, his hands on her thighs, opening her wide just before...

“Yes, sir,” she whispered. He may have heard her, she couldn’t tell. He clicked off with another soft beep, probably expecting her to arrive promptly at his door, as usual.

*I am not afraid of him. I didn’t do anything wrong. I don’t have...much to feel guilty about...*

She eased into Raven’s office, sliding around the door and holding onto the knob. Her heart hammered in her chest; the result a roar of blood rushing in her ears, her hands shaking and her sore thighs quivering. He wasn’t anywhere to be seen. She cleared her throat before trying to speak. She squeaked anyway.

Rolling her eyes, she repeated herself more firmly. “Mr. Remington?”

The door next to her opened so quickly she didn’t have time to jolt. Oh, God, he was in his private bathroom! The sound of water shooting against the tiles in the shower warned her to hurry back where she came from. But the sound that most worried her was the rattling of the doorknob in her shaking hand.

Not that she could blame it, the man was undressed to the waist and the top closure of his black slacks hung open. There was nothing but golden brown skin and hard, rippling muscles that looked far, far better in daylight than they had the night before.

“Raven,” his deep voice corrected while he dried his jaw and neck with a black towel, fresh from a shave. “You left last night.”

“I left this morning,” she said, preferring to do the correcting between them.

“You left.” Sure, why accuse when facts were damning enough?

"I didn't think there was anything left to talk about. We both got what we wanted, it's over." While she was pleased with her poise for not stumbling over her own words, she understood too late it was the wrong thing to say.

His face tightened and a muscle spasmed in his cheek as he slowly put the towel on the counter. "Come here."

"Um...no." Getting too close to him would definitely be a mistake.

"Come *here*."

That order left no room for argument. Stiffly, she complied. When she was close enough, he wrapped his hand around her wrist, and yanked her against him.

Angry eyes locked onto hers. He wouldn't be forgiving, she could see that much. The set of his mouth said more than any words he might have sent her way. Finally, he blew a breath out and lowered his head to kiss her. She twisted her mouth away, but he found her anyway. It was a hard kiss, a battle of wills as he laid his assault to her mouth. Vanessa tried to remain cold, tried to tell herself it wasn't arousal blossoming within her while their tongues sparred, but she failed miserably. Soon she was clinging to him, wanting nothing more than the next sweep of his kiss, the taste of him, the sense of sleep and sex that pervaded his touch like a drug.

Raven pulled away, his thumb tracing the wet line of her full lower lip. He didn't look angry, not even smug. If anything, he was just as breathless and grim as she felt. "This isn't over. It's only gotten worse."

Vanessa closed her eyes. She couldn't handle worse. Anticipation had been hard enough to deal with. But now that she thought about it, standing cradled in his big arms, it *was* worse, knowing what he could do to her, for her, *with* her... She shivered at the thought, her nerves dancing right to the core of her, a steady throb stemming from his hand on her back.

"Last night was supposed to be a one time thing," she said, her voice huskier to her own ears.

“It doesn’t have to be.” He caressed her jaw, his fingertips moving in gentle circles. “I still want you, Vanessa. You know you still want me. Go ahead and lie about it, but we both know the truth.”

She stared into his enigmatic face, wishing she understood what drove him, why he could never be satisfied with what he had. There was always more for him to do, further to go, more to do. As if he’d never known what it meant to be shut out. To lose. But she knew. He might be able to afford risks, but she couldn’t. “We can’t. It’ll ruin our work.”

“We’ll ruin it anyway, if we don’t follow through. You won’t be able to ignore it the way you used to. Now you know what you’re walking away from. You know how good it can be. And it’ll only get better, Vanessa. I’ll make sure of that.”

He kissed her again, slower, softer this time, his tongue gently gliding over her lips, soothing where he’d bruised them. He caught her bottom lip between his teeth, making her gasp just enough to invite him inside. Gone was the force, the demand. Instead, he took his time, caressing, sucking, teasing before pulling away to go to work on her ear.

Could blood boil in your veins? It certainly felt like it, pressed against him and already wishing clothing simply dissolved. But could she risk it again? How long could she continue to look herself in the mirror if she did? She’d already broken her vow to herself once for him...

He wouldn’t beg. Seduce her, yes, the way he was doing by pulling up the hem of her skirt so he could slide his fingers up her thighs, but he wouldn’t beg. He studied her with desire darkened eyes, lifting her up onto the counter and pushing her knees apart to allow him between.

Breaking one vow for this man could easily become the least of her crimes.

Tentatively, she raised her hand to touch his hair. The inky black strands were like silk, slipping through her fingertips. “Just until we get it out of our systems. Here we work, afterward...”

He nodded, his gaze mesmerizing. “Afterward is whatever we want it to be. And no running away.”

“Do we shake on it?” She offered her hand, despite its fine tremble, unable to believe she was doing this. But she could and she would. As long as she remembered not to involve her heart. Never her heart.

He looked down at it, his mouth spreading into a wolfish grin that made her tremble for entirely new reasons. Instead of taking her hand, he reached his out and closed the bathroom door. “I’m sure we can think of something better.”



Raven watched Vanessa gather her clothes from the floor. He lay propped on the pillows, the sheet low on his belly. He stared at her through slitted eyes, toying with the idea of tying her in place.

Every night for nearly a week, she came to his apartment, as insatiable as he, then she’d leave, without so much as a kiss goodbye. Observing her secure her skirt as if she were merely redressing after a good work-out, he bristled with annoyance.

“We don’t work tomorrow. You don’t have to go home.”

She didn’t turn. “You know I have to leave.”

Whoever said patience was a virtue must never have had to suffer its tone.

“I’m not comfortable with you going back to your apartment at this time of night.” He congratulated himself. He didn’t sound needy, he sounded concerned.

“I would have left earlier, but *someone* was a little insistent that I stay.” Her full lips smiled at him, a tiny dimple he’d only recently noticed winking at him from the left-most corner. But her gaze never met his.

He almost smiled himself, remembering how he’d lured her back into the bed by kissing every vertebrae of her spine. By the time he reached the back of her neck, she was leaning against him and he had her breasts securely in his hands. Somehow, he didn’t think she’d let him get away with it again.

“I don’t remember you arguing,” he reminded. “For once.”



"I'm going," she said suddenly, holding on to a half-smile while she slipped her feet into her heels one at a time. Finished, she wandered away from his reach to find her blouse.

He usually enjoyed seeing her this way, her hair wildly streaming down her back, her face rosy with satisfaction, wearing her prim office wear. When she looked like this, he could see the wildness in her spirit just tearing to get out.

But she was also tearing to get out of his apartment.

His jaw tightened, frustration clawing for its own escape. Every night when she left his bed, a dark emptiness took her place. He hated that, almost as much as he hated his growing need for her. Dammit, having her was supposed to rid him of this obsession. Why wasn't it working? Why was every time he made love to her better than the last? And why the hell did she keep leaving like a clandestine lover hiding from her husband?

He was beginning to feel...used.

"I'll see you Monday at the office."

"Vanessa, wait!" Damn looking unaffected. He jumped out of the bed, scouring the ground for his robe. Scooping it up, he was still tugging it on when he caught up with her in front of the elevator. "What happened to not running away anymore?"

"I'm not running." Sure, she wasn't. Her eyes never left the lights indicating which floor the elevator was on. Her feet tapped with impatience. Aside from speaking, she had yet to admit he was even there.

"You left burn marks on the carpet." He stood in front of her, blocking not only her view of the markers, but escape to the elevator as well. *See me, damn it!*

Her uneasy gaze met his. "Why are you doing this?"

Damned if he knew.

"It would be one thing if we were having a real relationship, but we aren't. And don't start thinking I want one, because I don't. I told you already, I never want to get involved with anyone that way. This...*thing* is about physical gratification. We have sex, Raven. No matter how good it is or how often we

have it, there's no reason for me to stay here all night or to get comfortable in your surroundings. This is *your* life, I'm not a part of it."

She walked around him, stepping into the elevator that he'd been too stunned to notice had arrived and pressed the button for the lobby. He watched the doors close, unreasonably upset at the way she was hugging her arms around herself. It shouldn't have bothered him, how lost and scared she seemed when she'd just trampled his...his...hell, he didn't even know what to call the thing that drove him to her. He only knew it hurt somehow that she looked just as afraid as the first night he'd kissed her. The elevator swallowed her up and took her away while he stared dumbfounded.

Swearing a few seconds later did little to ease either his temper or the unreasonable tension in his chest. Why did she look so terrified? What wasn't she telling him? And why did he care? She was right, they agreed to have sex, nothing more. Since when was he the kind of man who *wanted* more?

Why did it bother him so damn much that she didn't?

Questions seemed all he had left these days. Though he knew standing in front of that elevator would yield him no answers, he had a feeling following her would bring him even less. Fighting every instinct telling him to drag her back and force her to tell him everything she refused to trust him with, he lay his open palm on the elevator door and wondered how long it would be before she came back on her own.

## Chapter Five

“Explain to me why you wanted these tools and all that tape.”

What Raven wanted was some time alone, which was why he stayed with the car while the rest of his brother’s family went to stroll the upper deck of the Drake Island Ferry. He’d been surprised when Sky called, offering for them to travel together since they were all headed to the house for the day. After letting Vanessa leave last night, he wasn’t in the mood for any kind of company. Only Sky decided to stay there with him, ruining his depressing view of the gray-blue sea on all sides. Worse, in a move rather unlike Sky, he wanted to talk.

Normally, this would be considered progress, but given his mood, Raven knew he was likely to shoot himself in the foot if he opened his mouth. He checked his watch. At least another twenty minutes left until docking. Goody.

“I need to make some adjustments to this car,” he eventually answered when Sky didn’t seem interested in giving up on a reply.

“With a sledgehammer?” Sky turned to eye the mint-condition vehicle they were sitting on with pity.

“It’s for someone else.”

“You’re taking a sledgehammer to someone *else’s* car? Ballsy.”

Raven shrugged.

“You all right? You’re more sullen than usual.”

Oh, *now* he wanted to be buddy-buddy? “For the most part.”

“What about the less part?” Sky asked with a damnable grin. It was much easier to dislike him when he was annoying instead of concerned. Why did the first opportunity to talk about anything other than the weather have to be at his own expense?

"I'm trying to figure that out," Raven said, the admission seeping out of him. Years and years ago, he never had a thought he didn't share with Sky. Now he had to pry the words out of himself and he only had himself to blame. "Have you ever been involved with a married woman?"

Sky sighed. "Ah, hell, Raven, I thought you knew better than that."

Raven smiled wryly. Date a few dozen mindless models and no one has any faith in your morals.

"Relax, she's not married. She just acts like she is. Never wants to stay with me longer than she has to. Always avoids conversations that have any substance other than what time to meet. It's almost..." God, he could not be saying this. But the suspicion was eating at him and he wasn't finding any answers on his own. "It's like she's using me for sex."

Sky lasted an entire five seconds before bursting out laughing. He actually had to get off the car and stand on his feet so he could hold onto his knees for support. Raven watched, waiting for his oh-so-tactful twin to get a hold of himself.

"It wasn't *that* funny."

Sky leaned his elbows on the hood of the car, wiping his eyes. "Oh, yes it was. Wait till Chase hears."

Just the mention of their lifelong friend had Raven groaning.

Sky's rumbling laughter almost overtook him again, but he quelled it. Smart plan, that, because Raven had altogether too many heavy tools within his reach.

"Let me see if I have this right. You met a woman who wants to sleep with you, but doesn't want anything else to do with you, and you're *complaining*?"

Raven would rather have taken the emotional penalization than this. How big was that sledge, anyway? "I knew I shouldn't have brought this up."

"No, no, it's just, the less they talk, usually the happier you are."

Didn't he know it? Frustration clawed at him, fruitless and overpowering. "She's not like the others."

Sky's expression immediately lost its humor. The more natural frown creased his brow. "Not like the others in what way?"

"Hell, she can read!" Raven yanked his hands out of his pockets and crossed his arms over his chest again. "She's smart, *too* smart sometimes."

"That's new."

Sky didn't know the half of it. Every rule he had about women was broken and he couldn't seem to dredge up any regret. "That's not my problem. I *like* her. I like everything about her. She fights with me, all the time. Usually about things she hasn't a prayer of winning, but she fights anyway. She almost never smiles. You'd think she was allergic. She has no sense of logic, even less sense of self-preservation. I can't tell if she honestly thinks the best of people or just thinks no one notices her. It's not as if it matters because lord knows, she's wrong in either case. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with her. When we're together, I can't stop thinking of what to do with her. She's just...different. I can't explain how."

Sky's eyes narrowed on him. For the first time Raven understood why people claimed to fear the man. Almost as if Sky could see inside him, looking for something he might not want revealed. There was a lot to choose from. But hell, if he could figure it out, Raven would take it.

Sky ceased his searching, turning his attention to the churning waters in the wake of the big boat. "I thought you didn't believe in love."

"I don't." Raven frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"How long has this been going on?"

"Two years...a week, something like that."

Sky laughed. "Which is it? One or the other?"

"It's complicated."

"I think I figured that out on my own."

Raven knew he was going to regret this, but he'd opened the box, might as well show everything in it. "It started at your wedding. She...surprised me."

Wasn't that an understatement? For a month he'd been working with the most uptight, straight-laced, unresponsive woman in ugly clothes he'd ever

met. Actually, it had been fun, trying to see what it was about her that got him going, because something did. The flickering in her eyes he could never be sure he didn't imagine. Her long skirts back then didn't do much for her legs, but they never suffered much for the insult. Always professional, always cool to the point of frigidity, Raven had been able to tuck the awareness away because it was inconvenient and unwise.

Then she arrived at Sky and Evie's wedding in a barely there burgundy dress.

Not a man's head wasn't turned by the beauty with the steaming violet eyes and body made for moaning. But those eyes had been on him.

"We danced. Things got a little out of control." Or stayed a little too in control. He'd never decided which.

She'd been seductive that day, banked desires open in her eyes as she drifted in his arms. Like a woman living a dream, unaware she was doing it in vivid reality. They didn't do anything that had captured anyone's attention, but the feel of her hips meeting his, rolling gently beneath his guiding hand, her calf brushing his, their breaths mingling when he dipped his head to hers...well, it was sexually charged enough to send her running.

"And?"

"And nothing. It wasn't smart. We worked around it, pretended it didn't happen."

"What happened in the last few weeks to change the status quo?"

Raven met his brother's eyes, daring him to find something there. "We stopped pretending."

Sky tilted his head, the breeze ruffling his hair before crashing into Raven full force. "You're in way over your head, brother."

Well, wasn't that a lot of help?

"The good news is that if she's been fighting with *you* for two years, Mother's certainly going to like her."

"Mother already does."

"Did she set you two up?"

“God, no. She told me to leave Vanessa alone—”

“Vanessa?” Sky’s eyes turned wide and disbelieving. “You mean *Vangie*? Our assistant? Are you serious?”

Raven straightened, not liking Sky’s tone. “What’s wrong with Vanessa?”

“Down, boy. Nothing’s wrong with her. Vangie’s just the last woman I imagined would have your number.”

“What number? What are you talking about?”

More amusement on Sky’s usually granite face. What a time for him to learn how to emote. “You really don’t see it, do you?”

“See what?”

“You’re in love with her, Stupid.”

Raven nearly recoiled. “You’re high, aren’t you?”

Sky shook his head, a moronic grin on his face. “I’ve been med-free for years. You look like you might need a few, though.”

If he were in love he’d need a straight-jacket, not medication. “I’ll admit to a horrific case of lust, but let’s not get carried away.”

“Love isn’t a disease,” Sky replied, calm and patient. Why did everyone think they needed to speak to him as if he had his finger on a trigger or something? He wasn’t panicked or out of control. Confused, yes. Likely to attack people? He eyed Sky carefully.

Maybe.

“If you gave it a chance—”

Raven felt the tendon in his cheek threatening to clamp his jaw closed forever. “I am *not* in love with Vanessa Kaye.”

“Sure, you aren’t.” Sky chuckled with a shrug. “I should sell tickets to this show. I could make a fortune on your ex-girlfriends alone.”

“You already have a fortune.” Why did it seem like the more miserable he was, the funnier Sky thought it was? “I never should have talked to you about this.”

“Better me than Mother. And you know Chase would have laughed you out of his office.” Sky treated himself to more laughter. One more snicker and Raven was going to make him choke on it.

“Don’t I have more confidants than that?”

“Not last I checked. You’re something of a loner.”

Almost sad how true that was. “What am I supposed to do about Vanessa?”

“You could marry her,” Sky suggested, shrugging without interest.

“Yeah, I could boil myself in acid while I’m at it, too.”

“Whatever floats your boat, little brother. Might ruin the wedding night though.”

“You’re not going to tell your wife about this, are you?” The last thing he needed was his sister-in-law laughing at him, too.

“I don’t keep secrets from Evie.”

“This isn’t exactly a secret,” Raven forced himself to remind. *He* knew what secrets were. “It’s none of her business.”

“That’s usually an engraved invitation to her interest.”

Good point. “Vanessa’s having enough trouble dealing with our situation. She doesn’t need your wife making her jumpier.”

Sky twisted his finger in his ear and leaned closer. “I’m sorry, was that the sound of chivalry coming out of you?”

“You can hear a fifty coming out of my wallet if it means you don’t mention it to her.”

“Fifty? Chivilry *and* generosity?” The bastard pretended to think about it. “I’m intrigued enough to keep quiet. For a while anyway.” Sky held out his hand.

Raven eyed it with distaste. “You’re worth two point six billion dollars and you can’t wait til we get to the island for a measly fifty bucks?”

The tiger smile that greeted Raven had way too much blackmail in it. “I’m worth two point six *because* I don’t wait.”

“Why am I talking to you again?” Raven grumbled, pulling his wallet from his jacket pocket.



“Because you have no one else and you’re in love with your assistant?”

“Go to hell.” He made sure to crumple the bill before slapping it into his brother’s open palm.

“I’ll be watching your back the whole way there,” Sky laughed, taking the money before climbing onto the hood again.

Raven watched him settle, swallowing the distinct feeling Sky probably would.



Amy wasn’t answering her phone. Vanessa sat on her daybed, her own phone pressed to her ear, listening to the ringing. She hadn’t answered the night before, either, which meant she’d shut it off and forgot to turn it back on or something was wrong. The bundle of nerves in the center of her stomach signaled the latter.

“Hello?” A girl’s voice broke onto the line.

Vanessa frowned. “Amy?” There was no way this was her sister. This voice was richer. Even on her bad days, Amy’s voice had a little girl squeak to it.

“No, this is Celia, her roommate.”

Relief loosened some of the muscles in the back of Vanessa’s neck. “Hi Celia, this is her sister. Can I speak with Amy please?”

“Um...she’s not here right now.”

On a Sunday? Where else would she be? Vanessa listened to the background sounds but couldn’t detect anything particular. No coughing, at least. Amy had once tried to hide a cold by hiding in the garage. She’d had to be rushed to the ER when she was found but more than ten years later had yet to admit it was a bad decision. It seemed the older she got, the less inclined she was to pay any attention to her condition.

“She had a date last night.” Celia’s tone implied she wasn’t entirely comfortable giving that much away.

Vanessa checked her watch. Only a few minutes after nine. She'd missed two ferries already and would have to hurry to catch the last of the morning departures. She didn't like not talking to Amy, but she *was* an adult who didn't owe anyone explanations. Rational words for irrational worries, but Vanessa tried her best to believe them.

"It's okay. I know she dates." The less said about that the better. "I'm going to be out of town today, I just wanted her to know. Her mother is going to be calling, they're probably expecting her to lunch at the house. If you can track her down and get her phone to her, I'd appreciate it."

"Shouldn't I just turn it off so her batteries don't die?"

"No!" Vanessa pinched the bridge of her nose. Patience, patience. Can't go around making Amy's friends think the entire family was crazy. They were, but her friends didn't need to know. "If you do that, her mother is going to assume the worst. She'll be in your dorm in no time."

"It's just a missed call," the girl reasoned. She must not be real clear on Amy's condition. Most likely, Amy had things that way on purpose.

"Her mother will worry anyway. Trust me."

Celia made a sound of annoyance. "I knew I shouldn't have answered. Amy said you guys freak out about everything but I thought she was exaggerating."

Only thirty minutes to get to the ferry. Vanessa shook off the worry she knew Amy wouldn't appreciate. "I know I'm asking you for a lot. I'm sorry. Just try to get Amy her phone, please. It's really important she have it on her."

"If I can't? What should I tell her mom?"

Lie. It was the first inclination and probably the best solution when dealing with Patrice Kaye. But this Celia didn't sound like the most willing soul on earth. "Anything she'll believe. Tell her Amy's sleeping and you didn't want to wake her. That ought to work." Vanessa nearly left it at that, but couldn't quite. "Whatever you do, don't say Amy's sick."

"Or she'll be in our room in no time?" the girl repeated.

Vanessa smiled. "And you'll be wishing you were somewhere else. Permanently."

“Why do I get the feeling you don’t like your mom?”

Because you’re sane and Patrice isn’t. But that wasn’t entirely fair. It wasn’t that Patrice wasn’t sane. More that she was suspicious. And cruel. To Vanessa anyway. “I’ve gotta go. If you get Amy her phone, feel free to threaten her for me about leaving it.”

“Don’t worry, I already have plans to do that.”

Vanessa grabbed her coat and her briefcase. She nearly hung up, but something still niggled. “You’re sure Amy’s all right?”

Celia paused and just when Vanessa thought the silence was going too long, she replied, “Well, I don’t like her boyfriend much, but other than that, she’s fine, I guess.”

Vanessa froze with her hand on the door handle. “What’s wrong with her boyfriend?”

Celia laughed. “He’s a geek, for one. They stay up half the night playing video games. He’s got all these plans to get married and have kids for another. The sicko. She’s twenty-one, for God’s sake. She’s got her whole life ahead of her before she ties herself down to the nerdy type.”

Vanessa couldn’t quite breathe a sigh of relief, but she knew for sure now that Celia didn’t have the first clue about Amy or her illness. She opened the door and hurried out to the curb where the cab she’d called would pick her up. “There’s worse things than geeks in love.” Like billionaires with bruised egos.

“Not where I live, honey.” Celia said her goodbyes and Vanessa closed her phone. The cab took only a few more minutes, and before she knew it, she was stepping onto the ferry. The relief at having made it was short-lived. After all, she was still going to have to spend a day with Jordan, avoiding answering questions. There was no doubt Jordan would have plenty and nearly all of them would concern Raven. As if she had any answers about anything at all.

She wanted to tell herself the last four nights had been a mistake. She should never have gone home with Raven, not for a night, not for a minute. She should have been stronger. She should have quit.

Unwillingly, she smiled. Raven would never have let her leave him. He wasn't the most trusting man she'd ever met. In fact, trust seemed a completely alien concept to him. But he gave her far more free rein than anyone else she'd seen him with. He wouldn't be willing to go back to supervising every single piece of paper another assistant produced. He would never value sex higher than work.

None of which mattered, really, since she could hardly afford to quit. Not with Amy's college tuition and health care to pay for, to say nothing of Amy's inevitable other costs. Her parents put into the fund, of course, but they couldn't take care of it all. She'd only recently been able to take care of what was left from the other girls. Had she put everything in danger for a few hours of pleasure?

No. It wouldn't be like that. He was practical, even if he wasn't acting like it last night. The weight on her shoulders doubled. Last night made her feel guilty and she knew she shouldn't be. But the look on his face. It wasn't the impassive mask he lived behind. It wasn't even the angry passion she seemed to stir in him whether sex was involved or not. No, he looked hurt. Confused. Worried...

Vanessa walked to the edge of the second level, curling her fingers around the guard rail while people milled around chatting and planning their Sunday getaways. They were all so happy and excited while she felt as excited as a limp rag. Drake Island made most of its money in the summer from tourists visiting the pristine beaches and the boardwalk lifestyle. The luxury of the island as a home to the elite probably didn't hurt any, either. But none of that ever interested Vanessa. The few times she'd been here had been to visit Jordan...and for Sky's wedding. Couldn't forget that.

The Remington mansion and grounds ate up a good eighth of the entire island. She'd loved every inch of it. Every grassy green, the sudden drop of the cliffs past the garden, the huge, ivy covered house that looked as if it could house a thousand people without a strain. And yet, the only ones who lived

there were Jordan Remington and the light staff she kept on hand. It always struck Vanessa as sad that a house built for heirs didn't have any.

It was one of the few things she and Raven had in common. Until Catherine Remington's birth, there seemed virtually no hope for the Remington line and there certainly was no future for the Kayes. Catherine might inherit the house her father grew up in, but she didn't live there now. It would never have children to bring it back to life again. Not Sky's children, because he had no intention of returning to the life he'd left behind for anything but a visit. Raven had less interest in having children than Vanessa did, a fact she could only attribute to the utter debacle his family had descended into.

She knew he wouldn't like her knowing he wasn't close to his family, but it wasn't easy to hide. Her friendship with Jordan included lamentations on what had gone wrong with her sons. When Raven had first taken over for his brother, she'd been ordered to keep minutes of his work and decisions and report them weekly, without informing her new boss. Luckily, Raven hadn't held it against her, but it hadn't been their warmest week after he found out. When she'd been ordered to stop, it had been with relief because she'd already developed a grudging respect for the man and she'd wanted to earn respect from him. She made sure he was never interrupted when his family made their occasional visits to the office and she always cleared his schedule afterward. She knew too well the look of failure that would change the glow in his eyes. How many times had she seen it in her own reflection? She knew what it cost to try and make a place for herself and never find one. Raven hadn't made any more headway than she had.

Emotionally, her family got along just fine without her and attempts to be part of them hadn't gone well in years. In fact, they'd have gotten on much better *without* her, according to her stepmother. She was never welcome, no matter what her father liked to pretend. Amy was like him, her head in the clouds. They both had the fantasy that things could be fixed. Mistakes could be mended. But they were wrong. Patrice would never forgive her and until

everyone learned to live with it, her family would be as fractured as Raven's. At least Raven had a chance, if he could hold on long enough. Or maybe let go.

As if she could give advice. She couldn't even decide to regret starting a sexual relationship with him. What would she do when they had to decide to end it?

Her hands tightened on the rail, the wind blowing on her face with a touch of cold water bite. Last night was an aberration. They'd found a boundary. They'd step back from it, that was all. He wasn't the only one who could dictate rules and demands. She had a say. With Raven, even if she didn't with anyone else, she always had a say.

She walked away from the front of the ship, heading toward the bow, where she could watch the city for as long as she could.



"I'm not in love with her."

"I heard you last time," Sky laughed. "You missed a spot on the back fender!"

Raven shook his head. He'd promised their mother he'd be there early to spend time with the family, but the idea of how to get Vanessa to accept her "company car" hit somewhere around four in the morning and he doubted he'd get another such opportunity to do the work himself any time soon. A fast change into jeans he'd cut only that morning and a pair of work boots he hadn't worn in years and he'd been ready. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to get rid of Sky. He'd rather have been alone, but Sky claimed wild horses couldn't keep him away.

Raven didn't have time to stop at the stables to find out.

He brought the hammer down on the trunk. The slide of the handle was nearly as satisfying as the screech and crunch of the head impacting the metal. Paint cracked, flecks flew everywhere. Again and again he raised the

sledgehammer, bringing it down from the highest point of his reach until the trunk was a mangled, dimpled mess. Just the way it should be.

“Whose car is that and why do you hate them?”

Raven finished his swing before looking up. Jordan must have talked their best friend into a visit as well because there stood his childhood buddy on a sand dune, looking crisply rumped and vaguely irritated. You’d think as a doctor he’d be more accustomed to little sleep.

Perry Chase circled the front of the car, eying it from behind his sunglasses before joining Sky near the water’s edge just out of the hammer’s arc.

“Welcome to the fine art of Motor Vehicle Demolition!” Sky pointed with both hands at the mangled machine.

Raven rolled his eyes, took a drink from the water bottle he’d nestled in the sand at Sky’s feet and put it back. “Ignore him, Chase, I think he got into some old RMI samples.”

“Normally, I would, but since you’re the one half-naked pounding a—” Chase tore off his sunglasses. “Oh, God, was that an AMG Coupe?” He sounded pained. He probably was. Chase was a bona fide car buff. Oh well. Raven lifted the hammer again, ready to get back to it.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Sky voice, full of pride and laughter, made Raven’s back twitch.

“You Remingtons are a sick bunch,” Chase grumbled.

“Just wait till he uses the power sander.”

“How long has he been at it?”

“Oh, an hour or two. Can you believe it, he had the forethought to stop at the shop this morning and have them disable the security alarm.”

“Am I supposed to be shocked at the forethought or the destruction?”

“Hell, you can pick. I’ve never seen him like this. I’m amazed he hasn’t broken a window, but he always was good with tools. Could never make a damn thing but handled them well.”

“As you can see,” Raven said over his shoulder to Chase, “Sky’s practicing to become a sports announcer.”

“Or a used car salesman,” Chase agreed dryly. At least someone else thought Sky was out of his mind.

“I’m allowed to be impressed,” Sky argued. Of all the damn things to finally impress him with, why did it have to be this?

“Why are you enjoying this so much? I thought you liked cars.” Chase’s voice bordered on betrayal.

“Raven’s in love.”

Raven wiped the sweat off his brow with a gloved hand, rolling his shoulders to loosen them up. He could forget the car and drag Sky into the ocean, maybe hold him under the water until he got some peace and quiet. Satisfying, maybe, but ultimately unproductive. Better to conserve his energy for what needed to be done. Still, he could request a little silence. “Kiss my ass, Sky.”

“He’s been telling me that all day,” his brother explained to their guest. Did he have to sound so happy about it? Any other day, saying that could ensure a good month of silence.

“I thought there’d have to be icicles all over the place and a little horned, red guys skating around for Raven to fall in love.”

“Thank you!” Raven spun around to tip an imaginary hat to his friend. He leaned on the upside down hammer pole and pointed to Chase for his brother’s benefit. “You see? That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you all damn morning.”

Sky nudged Chase with an elbow. “Would *Raven* expend this kind of energy destroying a seventy-thousand dollar car for anything but love?” Sky asked, nonplussed. “Take a look at the inside. He cut the leather seats to ribbons, but he’s brilliant with a roll of duct tape. That takes attention to detail. If it wasn’t for her, you think he would have bothered making sure the springs were all safely padded and sealed?”

Chase’s face skewed, his brown eyes inspecting Raven as if he were some kind of lab rat. “He’s got a point. You don’t even *wash* your own car, much less repair it. Couldn’t you have hired someone to do this?”



Raven stood there, staring at them for a few seconds. He wanted to refute them, but they'd stumbled on the hole in his logic, damn it. It still didn't mean they were right. It meant he was getting to be as much of a control freak as Sky. He didn't have time to be arguing with them when he knew what and why he was doing. "Screw both of you."

"I always figured that when Raven finally fell in love with somebody I'd have to leave the country to maintain my peace of mind. I never thought it would be this much fun." Sky waved a dismissive hand at him when Raven turned to yell. "Yeah, yeah, kiss your ass, I got it. You're still missing that spot."

Annoyed instead of stressless, Raven went back to the repetitive swing of the hammer with more fervor. Obviously, marriage had sucked dry Sky's once impressive IQ. Sure, he *looked* deliriously happy. Losing your mind had that effect on you.

Granted, Evie turned out to be a decent, kind hearted woman, galling as that was to admit. Her son did happen to be smart and interesting; he even made Sky laugh. Their daughter might redefine the phrase "cute as a button" and none of them seemed to mind being in each other's presence, but did that mean love existed?

The car boomed a negative reply.

"Didn't think so."

Still, stupid or not, Sky did have an intolerable point. Raven felt...*something* for Vanessa. Whatever it was didn't seem in a hurry to go away, either. It was like having a splinter in his mind, this indefinable feeling. Whenever he looked at her—hell, whenever he thought about her—it welled up with a fierceness that almost crippled his control. It was worse when she was walking away from him.

"You're going to love this," Sky said, just before Raven tuned him out. No doubt he'd tell Chase all about his problem with Vanessa. Great.

Something had to be done, it was getting out of control. He had to ensure he could burn out the need for her before she realized she wanted more than a casual affair and that he was the last man on earth to give it to her.

His lip curled at the thought of what happened between them being called casual. He'd done casual. This wasn't it. A woman who made love the way she did... His stomach tightened just thinking about her face, her eyes, her body, even her voice. When it ended, she'd never be able to go back to the monastic life she once led. No, eventually, she'd be casual with someone else.

The hammer came down violently, slipping from his grasp and slashing into the sand several feet away, finally quieting his brother into pensive silence while he heaved in breath after breath.

Someone *else*?

Raven didn't like the dark thing slithering through him, something alien and unwanted. It took him another breathless second to identify it and when he did, he was incredulous.

*Possessiveness? Him?* He didn't have a possessive bone in his body; never had, never thought he would. But then again, hadn't he come home after all these years—taken control of Remington Medical Industries—because he longed for something of his own? Something to put his mark on?

He eyed the car. Leaving his mark wouldn't be a problem any longer. But was he trying to mark the car or the woman? Why? He couldn't own her. He didn't want to own her. He just wanted... He didn't know what the hell he wanted, damn it. All he knew was that this wasn't it. He wanted her. All of her. He wanted to know what she was hiding. Why she was so afraid. Why she wouldn't come to him. Most of all he wanted to know why he cared. But the answers weren't coming, not from this car and not from Vanessa.

Something would have to give.

In a takeover, occasionally concessions had to be made. Unpleasant ones. Change never happened without someone changing the status quo. Vanessa said she wasn't part of his life. Maybe she wasn't. But she would be. Soon.

He wasn't about to go to Sky's extremes, of course, but he was damn sick of doing nothing at all. Making room in his life for her didn't mean he was in love with her. It definitely wouldn't involve marrying her. This was just another acquisitions battle, that's all. Nothing that would require or inspire his heart.

He smiled, secure at last. How could it?

He didn't have one.

## Chapter Six

Vanessa climbed out of the limo before Jordan's driver could get out of his side. He'd surprised her by waiting at the pier for her. It was an old game of theirs, her escaping before he could give her the full treatment. She laughed at the older man's familiar exasperation. "Thanks for the ride, George."

"Someday, you're going to stay in there and let me open the door for you, Miss Kaye."

"Maybe next time," she replied, closing the door and holding her briefcase in front of her with both hands. He gave her a quick wave and slid back into his seat. A moment later the shiny black car was rolling down the curving driveway for the garage further down the way.

Vanessa took a deep, refreshing breath of sea air, pine trees and fresh cut green grass. It really was too bad how much she loved this house and its grounds. A girl could break her own heart wanting something too good for her and too far out of her reach.

She walked up the long steps toward the oversize front doors of the mansion. Probably ten feet high, the double doors were easily wide enough to fit the very limo that dropped her off. There were a pair of heavy iron knockers but she doubted she could lift one and instead pressed the doorbell built into the wall.

She wasn't surprised to find Jordan answering her own door. "Vangie! You made it!"

"Why wouldn't I make it, you said—"

"I'm so glad you're here!" Jordan reached out a hand and pulled her by her briefcase into the grand foyer. Vanessa stumbled in, hearing the solid thump of

the door closing behind her. She caught herself before her heels could slide on the white marble floor. "Raven will be so pleased!"

"R-Raven?" Vanessa checked the immense double stairway for his domineering shadow, then the vast expanse of floor on either side of the structure. Nothing, thank God. Pleased would not be the word. *Vengeful* might. Possibly even *murderous*.

"Of course, dear, I told you it was a family issue." Jordan took her arm and began pulling her toward the first set of double doors on the right of the oversize room. "Evie and the children are here, the boys are just cleaning up from some nonsense on the beach."

"Jordan," Vanessa put all her weight down to keep her host from dragging her in to what she vaguely remembered was called the Sitting Room. "What am I doing here? If Sky's wife and kids are here, this is clearly a family *event*, not an issue. Raven is not going to be *pleased* to see me."

"Of course, he will. You *are* family, Vangie, how many times do I have to tell you? I'd have you here every weekend for family dinner if you'd let me, but you have all those excuses—"

Vanessa gaped at her. "Those are not excuses."

Jordan smiled indulgently and tugged again. "Come in, we'll sit down with Evie and I'll explain everything."

Vanessa squinted one eye at her, already knowing she was going to give in. "I'm not sure I trust you."

"You should have thought of that before you came here." Raven's silky dark voice murmured from behind her, right about the same time the hair on the back of her neck rose and his firm hand took hold of her waist. He could have come from anywhere. The office directly behind her, the conservatory or even just behind the stairs. With her luck, he'd simply come in the front door behind her, stalking her like a panther. Or, the more likely option, he'd simply materialized at the worst possible moment because he could.

He circled her, his hand sliding to her back, burning her with familiar warmth and an inescapable response from her body. As he entered her frame of view, Jordan completely disappeared from it. He was sopping wet, water dripping from his spiked black hair onto his forehead. A white towel hung from his bare neck and if he wore anything other than that, she didn't have the courage to look down to find out.

His free hand pried her fingers off her briefcase, those smoky green eyes never leaving hers. Angry, hungry, threatening green eyes. She would have swallowed, but her mouth had gone desert dry.

"Mother, why don't you take this into the sitting room. I'm going to go clean up."

"All right," Jordan's disembodied voice said, tinged with slow concern. "Vangie—"

"Is coming with me. We'll be down shortly."

"But Raven..."

"Ten minutes, Mother. She's survived two years with me, ten minutes won't kill her."

Says him. Vanessa tried to tear her gaze from his, but he took both her hands and led her to the stairs, his firm grip telegraphing nicely that he wasn't about to have a scene right there in the foyer of his mother's home. Vanessa dreaded finding out where he *would* like to have it because she didn't kid herself, one was coming. If Jordan put up any more argument, they weren't there to hear it.

Two flights up and several doors over, he finally stopped and turned a knob. Whatever she'd expected to find inside, this wasn't it. The room turned out to be a bedroom. A boy's bedroom. It had none of the dark sophistication of his penthouse. A mirror and cherry wood dressers where old sporting trophies gleamed, a desk bare of any signs of life, large matching bed with a green comforter and a door that probably led to a bathroom. Thick gray carpet masked the sounds of his boots while sheer emptiness echoed the sounds of their breathing.

He led her to the bed, suddenly spinning her off with enough speed that she ended up sitting on the soft bed with a bounce.

“Explain last night. Without the cop out this time.” He put his hands on his nonexistent hips.

Uneasiness swelled inside her. This wasn’t how she expected to discuss this. Truthfully, she’d been hoping not to discuss it at all. “Excuse me?”

“You know what I mean. Your spiel. You’re not part of my life, you don’t want a relationship, all we have is sex. That stream of crap that almost sounded believable. It was a cop out. What happened that made you run away from me and none of your half-answers, either. I won’t have them this time.”

Her jaw dropped. He wouldn’t *have* them? She might work for him but she didn’t answer to him like he was her father. She didn’t even answer to her father this way. “You walking, talking ego!”

“It’s not ego that you can’t walk away any more than I can, no matter how often you try. It’s a fact and we need to talk about it.”

“No, we don’t. There’s nothing to discuss.”

“I want to talk about things—”

“Too bad.”

“Dammit, Vanessa!”

“Well, if that’s all, I’ll just find my way back to the staircase.” She got to her feet, but he pressed his finger to her breastbone and pushed her back down with a dark scowl. She gulped.

“I want more.”

The words hit her like stones. *Already? No, damn it! No!* “You can’t have more.”

“Why?”

“Why isn’t important—”

“It is to me!” Raven yelled at her.

“Then get over it, because you aren’t finding out!” she yelled right back.

He glared at her without patience, so she had to dig deep to find some of her own. Turning this into a screaming match wasn't going to solve anything. She'd had plenty enough in her life to know.

*Be rational. Factual. Don't let him make the decisions.* "You agreed this would be about sex. You can't change the rules in the middle, Raven. It doesn't work that way."

"I never agreed to those stipulations." He crossed his arms over his chest. His sudden lack of volume threw her almost as off-balance as what he'd said.

"Yes, you did." Right before he led her into his shower and...and...

"No, I didn't," he said, tearing her from the inconvenient memory of his mouth in places that had nothing to do with work. "We only said we were going to follow this through until we get it out of our systems. We said nothing about limiting ourselves to sex."

Vanessa stared at him open-mouthed. So this is what flummoxed felt like. "It-it was implied!"

"The trouble with implications, Vanessa, is that they are unclear and often lose something in the translation." He flicked the top snap of his cutoffs, the fastener giving way with a pop.

Vanessa's eyes widened, looking down at the opened shorts and back up to his face. He had to be kidding.

He pulled at his zipper slowly and her eyes followed the little tab all the way down, revealing the black elastic of his briefs beneath the denim. He eased his way over to her, sliding his knee onto the mattress between her thighs. He reached out to graze his fingers over her cheek before slipping into her hair and pulling it gently back to expose the length of her throat.

Oh, God, he wasn't kidding. He was going to...and she was going to let him. Already she could feel her resolve slipping, her body melting into his hold. She hoped Jordan didn't keep an eye on the clock because Raven could stretch a single kiss into ten minutes when he wanted to. And nothing else he did ever took less time. Nothing.



He leaned into her, bringing his mouth close to hers. Her eyes fluttered closed, her mouth opening already for him. But instead of kissing her, he changed his angle and nibbled the lobe of her ear, the faint scruff of his jaw sending tingles dancing along her nerves.

"I'll bet you think I'm going to keep going, don't you?" He clamped his hands on her supporting arms before leaning back to face her. "That wasn't a misleading implication was it?"

Her eyes snapped open, embarrassment filling her lungs. "You just love making your point, don't you?" She tried to lift her hands to his throat. It didn't work. Now she knew why he held her arms that way, the jerk.

"Admit it, your blood's starting to roar. You thought I would take off all your clothes and lick every inch of your body—"

"Try it and I'll scream," she growled, wishing her teeth could reach *his* ear.

"You always do." He let her go, her body flopping onto the coverlet like a dumped paperweight. He sat on the bed next to her, pulling his booted foot up onto his opposite knee.

Vanessa rose up on her elbows, exasperated and more than a little mad. Not to mention unwisely aroused. But he didn't care. Before her stunned eyes, he started unlacing the boot as if he hadn't just been over her, teasing her senses with what he knew she couldn't resist. She watched him calmly pry his foot from the shoe, toss it to the ground and start on the other one.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting ready for my shower." Looking at him, she could see that he wasn't Raven, her lover, but Mr. Remington, that remote, untouchable businessman she worked for. The switch had been unnoticeable, but once completed, impossible to ignore.

"What about our conversation?"

"Were we conversing? I recall you stonewalling that particular act."

"Raven—"

"What?" He did turn to her then, his fiery green irises burning with anger and nothing else.

She jumped, unable to tear her gaze away.

“Make up your mind, Vanessa. When we’re alone, do you want me to be the man you work for or the man you sleep with? I can’t be both of them at the same time.”

That put a stopper on her temper, but she wasn’t sure why. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“When we’re alone, you have the damndest tendency to treat me like meat and I don’t like it. Yes, we’re satisfying a physical craving, but that doesn’t mean I appreciate you taking off two seconds afterwards like I’d just done you a service. There’s more to an affair than mutual orgasms.” He pried off his second boot, chucking it to the floor hard enough to make a satisfying thud.

Vanessa looked down at her hand toying with the blanket. “I wouldn’t know, I’ve never had one before.”

“I know that,” he said, sounding almost as angry with himself as he was with her. “Sometimes I wish I didn’t. If it’s any consolation, I’ve never been in a situation like this, either. Usually women leaving and not coming back is a blessing, but that’s not the case here and I don’t know why. I’m not asking you for much. I’d just like to talk to you about something other than work. Maybe even something other than sex. Is it so wrong to want to know you?”

Yes! a silent voice in her exclaimed. Why couldn’t he be happy with what they had? Just for a little longer?

One look in his eyes, though, and she knew she couldn’t ask it of him. “Just talking? Not a relationship?”

“Hell, why not? Something exclusive,” he added before she could swallow the first bout of horror. “It’s not a pledge of eternal devotion, just that we’re going to let ourselves see where this goes.” He peered at her sideways. “You don’t have to look like you’d rather be robbed at gunpoint.”

“Sorry,” she mumbled. Part of her wanted to sulk. To throw things and rail at God for the unfairness. Wasn’t this the man with “Uncomplicated Affair” written all over him? This was starting to complicate itself faster than she could handle. Lifting her gaze to him, she noticed the exhausted slope of his

shoulder. He looked just as miserable as she felt. He couldn't be finding it very palatable to need her, either. Raven Remington never needed anything, period. But right now, he needed her. Archaic to be moved by that or not, she was. Especially since she needed him the same way.

What if he wasn't asking as much as she feared? She'd yet to understand the way a single man thought. For all she knew, he was simply asking her not to sleep with anyone else, offering the same. Of the two of them, that was really only a concession for him. Maybe they could work *something* out. "Do I have to stay the night?"

"Would it be a hardship?"

More than he'd ever know. "I don't want to get comfortable there. I have to retain some distance. We both know this won't last forever. The last thing you need is memories of me in your house." *And the last thing I need is memories of being there.*

"You say that as if you'll leave RMI when this is over." He frowned, twisting to look at her, his scowl carving deep lines into his features.

Truthfully, she hadn't thought that far ahead, but she couldn't discount the possibility. "We don't know the future. I don't plan on it, but one can never say. What if it ends badly?"

"It won't." To be able to speak as if your word were law must be a wonderful experience.

Vanessa shook her head, nerves jangling. No, it was too risky. She'd start off staying the night, then she'd start to hate going home. She'd get used to being held and never be able to go back to sleeping without him. "We should leave well enough alone."

"We can't leave well enough alone." His frustration made her flinch. All or nothing. Didn't the man fear anything? "I promise you, Vanessa. No matter what happens, I won't let this end badly. I've got as much to lose as you do."

She seriously doubted his measuring. Raven could only lose his secretary, even if that obviously concerned him. She had a family to think of, no matter

what they thought of her. Then there was the obvious problem. What if she lost her heart?

He leaned into her, his mouth a whisper across hers, balm for the angry desire he'd wrought in her earlier. Gentleness, from the man long accused of having none to spare. "Take a chance," he whispered against her lips. "Give us a chance."

Us. She'd never been an us. Never in her life. And yet, hadn't they been an us for two years? Partners in the office, in the shackles of their desire?

"All right," she heard herself murmur when he moved away, leaning his forehead against hers. But where it came from, she didn't know. The decision had been made long before Raven ever met her. It was a promise even he couldn't make her undo. Why was she saying she could?

She stood up—not looking at him even once more to correct herself—and walked to the door of the room. With each step, she told herself to turn around and tell him the truth. Tell him she couldn't do it. Agreeing to it would be a step forward, one toward a destination she was never meant to reach for.

But with each step, she remained silent and took another. Another towards the door, towards escape...towards a lie.

She didn't stop until the door slid shut behind her, the loud click in the silence locking her on the path she'd chosen. She would never tell him why, when the time came to leave him. Never tell him that she'd never intended to stay, because just like today, someday he would ask her to. She'd only bought herself time in his arms, time in his life, time to remember.

She just hoped the price wouldn't be too high to bear.



Vanessa stopped at the top of the last flight of stairs, startled to see Jordan still there, waiting. Judging by the tension in the woman's small shoulders, she came to the conclusion it wasn't her that Jordan was waiting on.

"Is Raven cleaned up yet?"

Vanessa felt her brows tilt into a frown. “No, he’ll be a few more minutes.”

“Come down, Sky is helping Evie collect the children.” Jordan turned her head back to the door. “I hope they hurry, I already cleared her through the gates.”

“Cleared who?” she asked, walking down the stairs.

“That’s what we’d like to know,” Sky boomed from behind her. Vanessa jumped and turned to find her former employer descending with a pig-tailed baby in his arms, his stepson at his side and his wife smiling with twinkling eyes behind him. “She’s got you in on this mess too, or are you here for...other reasons?”

Vanessa blinked at Sky, her smile stilted on her face. He knew. *Oh, God, this just gets worse and worse.*

She tried to rein in her embarrassment at the prospect of this man knowing about her personal life. It wasn’t that Sky had ever been unkind to her, but in their three years working together, he always maintained a professional distance. They never shared knowing glances or argued over details. She’d missed that about him. Now her self-respect would miss him, too. And yet, there wasn’t a trace of negativity coming off him. If anything, his eyes only regarded her with a kind of amused curiosity.

The little girl in his arms smiled, her Remington eyes bright and friendly. Vanessa felt an ache inside her, seeing Raven’s niece. Would his daughters look like her? What about his sons? Would he even have any? She hoped she never found out, because just the thought made the ache in her burn sharper.

“Did I ever introduce you to our friend, Dr. Perry Chase?” Sky turned and gestured behind his little group to where a tall man smiled in reply. “Chase, this is Vangie Kaye.”

She knew his face, vaguely, though his name was instantly recognized. He was at Sky’s wedding, the best man actually. Jordan kept pointing him out to her, no doubt as one more matchmaking scheme, but Vanessa hadn’t been able to take her eyes off Raven in his sleek black tuxedo. She *was* pretty good

friends with Chase's receptionist, thanks to how well the three men managed to stay in contact and field their mother.

He looked at her speculatively, handsome in a nondescript kind of way, which probably explained why she hadn't noticed him descending with Sky's family. Wavy brown hair, almost pretty features and brown eyes with a healthy bit of humor causing a glitter. She had the sneaking feeling everyone in this house—most likely including the toddler—knew about her relationship with Raven.

Pushing past the suspicion, Vanessa opened her mouth to greet him when the doorbell chimes rang. They all turned to the doors, but no one moved to open them. Not even Jordan.

"Mother?" Sky asked carefully, finishing the last of the steps to reach her side. Jordan just kept staring at the door. Vanessa hurried to reach her friend.

"Vangie, would you please answer that for me," Jordan said lowly.

Vanessa looked up to Sky, his dark scowl one of concern for his mother before he nodded his approval. "Of course."

Vanessa patted her soothingly on the arm then went to the double doors. A heavy yank toward herself and the door opened to a woman holding a backpack, staring across the lawns of the property. Vanessa looked her up and down, taking in the old beaten boots, ragged-edged jeans and the colt-like length of the woman's legs. She was in the process of turning, surprised it seemed, lowering the old, highly abused bag with faded writing and patchwork sewn into the side. At her feet was a larger green canvas duffle bag, no less abused, with airline tags tied to the straps.

"Hi," the woman said, a wide smile forming on her tanned face. Her black hair was wild, shoulder length and heavy but definitely windblown. Most of her face was hidden behind a pair of oversize black sunglasses. She jutted out her hand, obviously expecting a handshake. "I'm Tara Sellers. I'm looking for Jordan Remington."

*This was who Jordan was so terrified of?*

Vanessa accepted the handshake. “Come inside, everyone is waiting to meet you.”

“They are, are they? Lined up like good little...soldiers?” Tara’s question—and expression—lost their humor as she carried her bag through the door and came face to face with the Remingtons.

Awkward silence settled around them.

“I guess that’s a yes.” Tara’s nervous joke fell flat, so she coughed and looked from one face to another. She leaned forward when she caught sight of Sky. Vanessa had the strong suspicion she narrowed her eyes. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Sky didn’t bat an eye, even if his wife did look up at him questioningly. “Do we know each other?”

“You forgot already? Houston, last year. There was a lot of press.” It didn’t sound like the good kind if the smug twist of her lips was any indication.

“I wasn’t in Houston last year,” Sky replied, looking resigned. He’d no doubt had his share of blame for Raven’s antics over the years. Vanessa thought back, trying to remember what Raven might have done. Houston...Houston...

The memory came and Vanessa wanted to cover her eyes with both hands. Not that incident. According to all reports, he’d been arguing with a woman. Tabloid speculation had run the gamut from a lover’s spat to a date-rape attempt, but all anyone knew was that Raven had ended up bottoms-up in a fountain and the woman sold the pictures of her triumph to any magazine willing to buy them. He’d been understandably touchy about it ever since. This couldn’t be her...

“You must have me confused—”

“No, I don’t,” their guest interrupted. “I don’t forget faces, especially yours.”

“Then you’d do well to spend more time memorizing, Miss Sellers.”

Vanessa tore her eyes from Tara’s almost familiar profile to the man standing like a casual shadow at the first landing. He strolled down towards them with his hands in the pockets of his black slacks, his hair still slick from what she presumed was his shower.

Her pulse skipped while he swept the foyer with his gaze until he zeroed in on her. He nodded at her, as if aware of her response to him, before returning his attention to their guest.

“As you can see,” he continued once he reached the bottom step. “Your skill is in need of work.”

The woman nearly growled as Raven walked toward her, but she flickered a glance at the kids watching with interest and said nothing.

Raven, being Raven, had to push his advantage. Vanessa could have happily shoved him into a closet. “I understand your picture secured you a position with *Intrepid*. Nice work.”

Tara trembled with...Vanessa hoped that wasn’t rage. Rage usually resulted in yelling and yelling at Raven never went well for anyone. “Almost as good as your pratfall.”

His eyes narrowed and it was all Vanessa could do to hold in a groan.

“We have more important things to do than for you two to play cat and mouse.” Jordan interrupted, stepping between Raven and their...guest? Her hand was extended, though still shaking, an offer of truce Raven certainly would never have offered. “I’m Jordan Remington. Welcome to my home.”

“I’m sorry, Mother, I thought introductions had been made. Tara Sellers, star photographer for your favorite privacy invading rag and mine, *Intrepid Magazine*. Miss Sellers, this is my mother, Jordan Remington.” His voice, frosty with cordiality, didn’t match the steely unfriendliness on his face as he gestured to his left. “This gentleman here is Dr. Perry Chase, he’s as good as family. I’m sure you can guess this is my brother Skylar, his wife, Evie, and their children, AJ and Catherine. The woman beside you is my assistant, Vanessa Kaye.”

Tara turned to scrutinize Vanessa more carefully.

Vanessa had to work not to fidget, unable to see the woman’s eyes behind the oversize sunglass lenses. Then Tara lifted a hand to shift those glasses to the top of her head, leaving Vanessa to stare at her in shock.



She was beautiful, her heart-shaped face and full lips pulled taut by a thin layer of suspicion. As usual with Raven, Vanessa could feel herself being judged guilty by association. But that didn't bother or surprise her. What unhinged her jaw were the brilliant green eyes staring back at her.

Suddenly everything familiar about her took on horrid ramifications.

"And as I'm sure you've all guessed by now," Raven's droll voice echoed in the silent hall. "Tara Sellers thinks she's our sister."

## Chapter Seven

Granted, it lacked discretion. Timing, definitely. But what it lacked in style points, his little introduction more than made up for in shock value. His new *sibling* stared at him with wide eyes and no small amount of dislike. His old sibling, however, didn't seem to appreciate the artful attack. Not if his scowl meant anything.

"AJ," Sky said, not taking his eyes off Raven and certainly not about to glance at their new guest. So damn predictable. "Take your sister back up to the playroom."

The twelve-year-old was only too willing to comply. AJ knew to get out when the getting was good. Raven ruffled his hair as he passed, an absent apology, he supposed. It wasn't the boy's fault Sky was angry. Technically, it wasn't even Raven's—for once. No, this one had a pesky little paparrazzi's name all over it.

Everyone waited in silence as the two children made their way up the stairs, some sort of silent agreement not to involve them through the group. But as soon as AJ made it past the doors enveloping him in the east wing, the peace was over.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Not quite the napalm explosion Raven expected from his brother, but enough buried rage to consider before pushing him very far.

"This woman. She's here to tell us she's our long lost relative." Raven shrugged, turning to the woman standing next to Vanessa. Her cheeks were ruddy and her eyes were already calling him countless names. He'd known the moment he met her in Houston that she'd be trouble. She'd be back. Her face

was too familiar. Her eyes. Those goddamned eyes... “I’ll grant you, the looks are passable. You’re good enough that people will second-guess the truth, of course, but in the end you’ll be found to be just as much a fraud as all the rest of them have been.”

It was what he’d been telling himself as his investigators painstakingly rebuilt her life. What little there was of it on record. Years in the foster system. The police reports. The hospital records... He’d have had some pity for her if she didn’t strike him as a woman prepared to do anything for money. Or maybe if he could just prove somehow that she wasn’t the nightmare he’d been running from most of his life...

“Stop it, Raven.” The command came from the least likely of people. His mother.

A cold shiver worked down Raven’s spine. “Excuse me?”

“She’s no fraud.” Jordan said quietly, almost apologetically. Why wouldn’t she meet his eyes? What could she possibly have to feel guilty about? “I’ve spent the last sixteen years searching for her. I made sure exactly who she was before I ever invited her here.”

“Invited?” Sky asked, incredulous. Raven would have seconded him, but right then words refused to form. Sixteen years?

Time slowed as facts began to accumulate in his head. Sixteen years. Raven felt his hands fisting, the pressure so tight his skin felt like cracking. She knew. All these years, all this time, everything he’d lost and his mother already knew. Had *always* known.

Part of him wanted to roar in anger. Screamed to tear apart everything he could touch and shatter every glass in the room. But all he could do was stand there, silent and still. Alone. Always so goddamn alone.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you people, but I’m not sticking around to find out.” Tara Sellers backedpeddled towards the door.

“Wait, please!” Jordan rushed forward, shaking off Chase’s hand to capture the girl’s.

Raven lurched toward his mother, stopping short almost as quickly as he started. *Let her go, damn it. Don't let Sky find out this way.*

But his mother didn't let go. If anything, she held on tighter. "I've been looking for you for a very long time and I have a good reason. Don't leave before you hear me out."

It was almost funny to see the skinny Amazon of a woman looking down in sheer terror at his mother, but Raven couldn't find even the most cynical part of his mind to draw any laughter from. Tara Sellers could have shaken his mother off like an annoying flea, but she seemed to be held in place by those two frail hands. A strange empathy formed in him, unwelcome and grudging, but he had to admit, his mother had certainly held onto him using far less.

"You said you wanted to meet me because of my pictures. This is not a meeting, Mrs. Remington. It's an ambush."

"I can explain, I *will* explain it. To all of you, I swear." Jordan looked around the room, her pale blue eyes beseeching. "Please."

Raven flinched, hating to see what amounted to begging from a woman who should never have to. "Give her ten minutes, Sellers. It isn't going to kill you."

Spite won out over shock. "Why should I do anything *you* say?"

Excellent question. One Raven especially wished he had an answer for.

"If you leave now, you're going to wonder for the rest of your life what she would have said." Raven turned his head to see Chase, hands in his pockets, looking serious in a way Raven hadn't seen in years. Not since the funerals.

Sellers looked from face to face, suspicion as strongly etched into her features as it probably was on his own. "Ten minutes. It'll take that long for a cab to get back up here anyway."

Vanessa risked a glance his way. Searching for what? She looked worried, but he couldn't be sure if she was worried about him or his mother. Knowing her, both. Raven wasn't sure what he thought about her brief inspection. Or why he'd noticed it, except that he was always aware of her. Normally, she'd be long gone from a situation like this, safe behind some wall or door, removed. There was no escape today, though, not for any of them. Raven returned his

attention to Tara Sellers as she allowed his mother to tug her away from the front door. He still had the inkling to wrap his hands around the girl's throat and squeeze until she popped, but he also had the sinking feeling whatever secret his mother was hinting at was going to be extremely unpleasant.

Especially if it had anything to do with his own secrets.

Jordan kept her hands on Sellers, most likely well aware that letting go would mean losing her captive audience. She led the way to the sitting room, further tightening the knot in Raven's stomach. This would take a hell of a lot longer than ten minutes.

"I knew when my investigator showed me your picture. I saw—the same way Raven probably saw when he met you—exactly who you were. Your face, it's just like hers." Jordan pulled until they were all following into the room, to the mantle where an old—ancient, truly—portrait hung, haunting them all for the last decade.

In a properly imposing leather chair sat Harper Remington, master of all he surveyed. Standing behind him, her hand gracefully on the corner of the chair's headrest stood Jordan. On their father's right, behind the armrest, Raven himself and Sky stood pretending to be comfortable and if memory served, smiling because their father was making jokes about the dog at their feet trying to lick his ankles. In front of Jordan stood Marissa, sweet, young Marissa who thought there was nothing so romantic as having a family portrait taken so they could be immortalized like royalty in grand English Castles.

He should have burned the damn thing when he had the chance.

Jordan stared up at the family that had died too long ago to matter, longing on her face for things that couldn't be undone. And now, Tara Sellers stared up with her, shocked, it seemed, to realize she was only a doppelganger. A poor one at that.

"You look like her. Like him. All of you do. The Remingtons have strong blood." This couldn't go on. Jordan was only going to embarrass herself. Or worse, give the Sellers woman ideas and that woman had more than enough ideas of her own.

"We found you when you pushed Raven into that fountain. I've learned the only way to find out what he's up to is to hire someone to get me the details."

If this were any other day, he'd be amused to hear his mother say that. God forbid anyone in this family ask a direct question.

"I've been looking for my husband's daughter for a very long time. She was untraceable. Disappeared when she was four years old. I knew her birth date, her name, her social security number and none of it meant anything. As much a ghost as my own daughter. It's taken a long time, a lot of searching. We had to work backward, looking for anyone who might fit the Remington description or a certain age, working from the Dallas area outward. There was no guarantee you'd know any of your original history, so we couldn't expect you to come out on your own. Time after time, my searches came up empty. Until now."

Sellers didn't seem to be listening. She was staring at the portrait. At Harper. He'd done that a time or two, wishing he could tear that portrait down and shred it. What was she feeling? Thinking? What would he have to do to protect them all now?

"I'm not who you think I am, Mrs. Remington," Sellers finally mumbled, tearing her gaze away to stare down at Jordan. "I know I was in the foster system for a long time, but I didn't enter it until I was eight, when social services took me away from my mother. I knew who my mother was."

Jordan didn't look convinced. If anything, she looked sad. "Are you still afraid of fire, Tara?"

Sellers yanked her hand free, stepping back as if to avoid the question.

"I'm nothing if not thorough, dear. You weren't eight, you were six. The woman you were with wasn't your mother. Police still don't know who she really was. I suspect she's the one who stole you from your adoptive parents and burned their house to the ground. My investigator seems to think she knew who your father was, but whatever she was after, she didn't get. Harper's papers don't have any notations and even he wouldn't have left you in the hands of a murderer. She relocated you to Houston and gave you a new name,

told people you were older to avoid any connection to the missing child in Dallas. You were always tall for your age, weren't you? When CPS claimed you, they supplied you with a new social security number and the change was complete. Legacy Remington was gone."

"Wh-who?" Tara asked, starting to look twitchier than a cat balancing on a wire. Her gaze swung jerkily from one face to another while she backed toward the fireplace. Raven eyed the wrought-iron pokers standing at the hearth. Would she start looking for a weapon?

"Legacy Anne Remington. It's the name you were born with."

"Look, lady. My name is Tara Sellers. It ain't much, but it's mine, okay? I understand you've been under a lot of pressure and you're probably a little confused but I'm not who you think I am. I don't fit anything about the person you're looking for. So how about I just go home and pretend we never had this meeting? Your family can take you to see a doctor and maybe get you some medicine...or a really good psychiatrist." Sellers' leg bumped the poker stand, sending the rods down with a clatter that had her jumping nearly out of her skin.

Somehow, Jordan laughed. Not her real laugh, more a frightened sound that didn't do anything for her case. "When I happened on you after your incident with Raven, I followed a hunch. The same hunch he must have played. You have to understand, we had to know for sure."

"You were in on this?" Sellers turned her angry gaze back to Raven, who sighed.

"Believe me. I wasn't in on *this*. I was sure you'd come back looking for blackmail, so I had you investigated. Simple as that."

"Haven't you people ever heard of privacy?" she demanded as if that were a realistic concern. "Why didn't any of you just fricken ask?"

"And watch you disappear again?" Jordan replied, shaking her head. "I didn't have that kind of time, Miss Sellers. So I had your DNA tested. You are who I thought you were. The only issue now is what we're going to do about it."

A test? Sellers had passed a test?

"DNA? Mother, what's going on?" Sky echoed Raven's thoughts.

"I never took any DNA tests," Sellers replied, really starting to look nervous now. Leave it to his mother to sound like the leader of her own mafia.

"Relax, Sellers," Raven made himself say, not wanting her to feel threatened enough to actually pick one of those pokers up and start making a bad situation worse. He should have been a little more concerned about his mother.

Jordan smiled. Raven stifled the urge to groan. He was well-versed with the quirk to the left of her lips when she was especially pleased with herself. This could only be bad. "Your interview with Intrepid required blood drug testing, didn't it?"

"Yes, but—"

"I own Intrepid Magazine, dear."

"What?" There were so many voices—including his own—that Raven wasn't even sure who asked.

Jordan turned and eyed them all dryly. "All of you keep telling yourselves I'm old, frail and in need of protection. The truth is that I just let you think so. It makes my life much easier."

"But—" Sky tried to interrupt, but Jordan tsked at him.

"I bought the paper years ago. Between you taking over the world and Raven traipsing all over it, *someone* had to have a source of damage control. I had her blood sample tested against the two of yours in the Trust. There's no doubt whatsoever. Tara is your sister and I've brought her home."

Surrealism swirled around Raven. On the one hand, it simply couldn't be happening. But after all these years, it somehow was. On the other hand, he knew all too well just how possible it was. So possible he'd spent half his life in fear of it. Of this...

A quick glance at Sky and Evie found his brother's granite expression firmly in place, but his wife's arms were around him in support. Chase, unusually quiet and grim, had his eyes on Jordan with that intensity that Raven recognized as reserved for possible patients. His gaze moved to the woman a few feet in front of him, her hair streaming down her back and shifting



somewhat as she inched backward and away from his mother and Tara, still beneath the portrait. Where exactly did Vanessa think she was going?

“My daughter died when she was fourteen, Miss Sellers. My husband died only a few years later. He worked himself to death, literally. He was never the same after we lost Marissa. None of us were, which is why I think he did what he did. He couldn’t allow another of his children to be lost.”

He watched his mother take Tara by the hand and led her to one of the overstuffed white couches, pulling on her hands until the other woman sat down with her. “My husband made many mistakes in his life, ones I will probably never understand. One of them was an affair he had. I suspect he probably had many, I don’t know and truthfully, I don’t want to know. I can’t change any of it and it does me no good to care now that he’s gone. I have to concern myself with the here and now. After Marissa died, Harper changed his will. He created a trust for his remaining child—you.”

Vanessa continued to slide back from the group of people, step by silent step. No one else was watching her. Either that or they were letting her remove herself, a thought process he should be having himself. But he didn’t want her to go. He didn’t want her slipping away, separating herself the way she always managed to do. He wanted her next to him and she would be. He didn’t allow himself any other considerations or questions. He watched Vanessa’s progress in the long pause while his mother searched for words. She’d be looking for a long time if she thought she was going to justify anything about this situation. So would Vanessa if she was looking for a way to get past him.

She’d just crossed him when he reached out his arm and curled it around her waist. Her gasp went unnoticed by anyone in the room because his mother finally began speaking again.

“The only ones who knew about you were his lawyer and myself—and I didn’t find out until the will was read. The financial trust was beyond him, what belongs to my sons has belonged to them from the moment they were born. Every thing in this house, the company, the financial responsibility to

pass it on to their own heirs has always and will always be theirs. Harper gave you what was left.”

Raven’s slid his hand from Vanessa’s waist until he found her arm, manacled her wrist and pulling her around to his side. For once, she didn’t fight him. Maybe to avoid any attention, but that didn’t explain why she lowered her forehead to his chest and put her hand over his heart as if she could comfort him. Or needed comfort herself. Did she expect to find something there? Would she be disappointed to learn he had nothing to offer in that respect?

His heart had stopped beating years ago, at least in that sense. It didn’t hurt, it didn’t long and it didn’t want. It could never comfort anyone, not even her. Sometimes, though, he wished it could.

She curled into him, the ends of her hair tickling the back of his hand, which he just noticed was crushing the fabric of her sweater, but he couldn’t loosen his hold. She’d leave if he did and that couldn’t happen. Not now. Not when he needed her to be here, solid and by his side. *On his side*. No one else ever was. Only the woman in his arms, caressing his back and making a soft, soothing whisper just for him.

Some of the tension went out of him. Not all—never all—but enough that he could breathe evenly. Enough that he could listen to his mother reveal every secret he’d ever tried to hide. It meant something, he knew it did, but he couldn’t process it. Not yet.

“It will happen on your thirtieth birthday, two months from now.”

“I turned thirty two years ago.”

“Not quite. You’re twenty-nine again, dear. Only, in your case it’s true. When you turn thirty, your trust will go into effect. You’ll inherit your father’s land, this house and your rightful place in international society as a member of the Remington family—both publicly and privately.”

Raven made himself talk. “What do you mean *publicly*?”

His mother’s uneasy gaze met his. “The addendum is only sealed until her trust opens. Once she inherits,” Jordan shrugged, “it becomes public domain.”

“The house? The land?” Sky demanded, his voice hoarse and strained.

Tara looked up at all of them, this family she was no part of, standing all around the room like sentinels. Her gold skin was pale, nearly green, and her eyes held a wild kind of fear. Raven had an irrational urge to apologize to her, for not finding her first. For thinking he could save them all from this disaster. He should have known Harper would have stacked the deck.

“It will all belong to Tara,” Jordan answered, so softly it made it worse.

“You—no, it’s not possible. I wouldn’t even know what to do with someplace like this!” Tara tore her hands free, scooting back off the couch. “This is insane.”

Jordan nodded. “Yes, it is. He left you no funds and the taxes alone would more than bankrupt you. You’ll have no choice but to sell it.”

“No!” Raven barked, surprising himself at his own vehemence. “This land has been Remington land practically since it was discovered. It can’t be sold.”

“Something I think your father was counting on. In order to maintain the land, Tara will have to sell it back to us. To do that, the three of you will have to come to some sort of agreement, not only on sale price, but on how to deal with the press when word gets out that Legacy Remington has been found.”

Tara covered her face with a shaking hand for a moment, taking a deep breath. When she pulled it down, she had some of her composure back, but like his own, Raven could see it was barely holding. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Protection,” his mother answered simply. “For us all.”

Tara’s eyes narrowed. “Protection from who? What are you trying to say?”

“It’s no secret what you do for a living,” his mother said on a sigh. “Nor is it a secret what will happen to you if you’re alone out there once your co-workers discover who you are. You’re a danger to us. You’re within your rights to leave, of course, to leak who you are and have the story of a lifetime. But once the press knows, you won’t have the security that we have here at the compound. They’ll be in your house like rats. In your life, in your space, in your secrets.”

Tara paled particularly at that. She should. Raven knew several of those secrets. He had no doubt there were more.

"I can offer you a sanctuary, if you will. Time to get your bearings. Time to find out who you are, who you were meant to be."

"What? *Here?* With *you?*" Tara's eyes met his, nervously.

"With me," his mother assured. "You'll have two months to make your decision."

Tara frowned. "What decision? About selling the land?"

Jordan shook her head. "About being a Remington."

"That's it, I'm done here," Sky gritted out, disengaging from his wife and storming out of the sitting room, the doors banging open as he stalked out. Evie looked a little lost, standing there alone. Her eyes met Raven's for the barest of seconds before sliding away so she could follow her husband. Was there blame there? Shouldn't there be?

Raven pried his hold off Vanessa, making her look up at him. Her, he could look in the eyes. But she had comfort in her stare. She wanted to soothe him, she thought he was in pain.

She had no idea he deserved it.

"I'll be in the office," he murmured. She made a sound of assent, possibly understanding. He didn't know. He couldn't stay to find out.

## Chapter Eight

Two hours. Two whole hours, Raven had been shut up in his father's office like a judge in his chambers, leaving Vanessa all alone to explain things to his family. And there was no doubt whatsoever that they would want answers.

After Raven left, Tara gave up all pretenses of going anywhere. She sank back into the couch, her face blank, her eyes meeting no one's as Jordan took her hands once more and explained what life as a Remington was like. The constant pressure of the photo press, the intrusive scope of the print and television media. Tara probably knew all of it better than anyone else in that room, was probably already working out how someone else might pick up the paper trail that led Jordan to her in the first place. As soon as Harper's addendum went into effect, anyway. It was like waiting for a time bomb.

Vanessa knew all too well what that was like.

Jordan had asked she and Chase to leave, to give her some time with Tara alone. Vanessa readily agreed. She'd wanted out pretty much the second she'd been ushered in. All the tension, all the anger, it was something she'd never experienced with this family. Her own, of course, but never from Jordan. And Raven... He'd felt as if he needed—desperately needed—her. She hadn't even thought to question if he was asking too much of her. She'd felt his need and responded, the same way she had for her sisters. That was going to be a disturbing thought later. By the time she realized it, though, she was alone in the foyer with Perry Chase, whose gaze was more speculative than she liked. He studied her like she was a puzzle he couldn't quite decide how to approach.

"If you'll excuse me, I have some work to attend to," she said, eager to leave the questions in his eyes behind.

“Your briefcase is in the sitting room,” he reminded, seeming amused at her ploy. He might not look like a Remington, but they’d certainly rubbed off on him.

“Then I’ll wait for Jordan in the garden. If you’ll let her know, I’d appreciate it.”

“We could eat lunch, like we were supposed to. I doubt anyone else will be interested.” He shrugged, somehow managing to indicate everyone else in the house.

She frowned, probably harsh enough to make even Raven backpedal. but it didn’t work on the doctor.

“Hey, we gotta eat. It’s better than staring at flowers or answering uncomfortable questions, isn’t it?”

Despite the charming, boyish smile, Vanessa could see his threat. One way or another, he was going to find out what she was to Raven. She acquiesced and he led the way to the conservatory, where a light lunch waited on a long table. It was Jordan’s most informal dining area, surrounded by green leaves and watercolor flowers decorating the cornices, all the furniture in classic white wicker with deep mauve pillows. Through a salad and a course of lightly flavored pasta, she managed to avoid a direct interrogation, but just barely. Chase asked if she liked working with the Remingtons, how long she’d known Jordan, if she thought Raven would share any of his thoughts on the situation with her. On and on, but she’d kept her responses short or non-existent. His brown eyes sparked with frustration, but she’d been dealing with a far more malevolent temper for the last two years. Chase was little more than a grumpy puppy compared to Raven.

Jordan eventually came in and requested that Chase take Tara up to a guest room and before Vanessa knew it, Raven’s mother picked up where Chase left off. Jordan asked her to join her in the garden. They’d been there ten minutes, long enough to admire the roses, discuss the strong fall breeze, how cold it would be in the winter and get a good look at the ocean far below the edge of the cliffs before Jordan began.

Vanessa had a serious longing to jump off and see if she could survive the fall.

“Do you know what you’re doing, Vangie?”

*No, not a clue.*

“What do you mean?” she asked, keeping her tone even and unthreatened. She hoped. It was hard to hear herself above her thundering heartbeat.

Jordan’s eyes, a soft blue that could hug as well as they could cut, crinkled with concern. “I know what’s going on between you and my son. I had more than one reason for asking you here today.”

“You mean besides answering your doorbell?”

Jordan’s smile was sheepish. “I needed you here officially, because I wasn’t sure Raven would fill you in entirely concerning Tara. He can be...secretive.”

“I think he’d use the word *protective*.”

Jordan nodded. “He tends to use many words I wouldn’t.”

“What were your other reasons?” If Jordan meant to push the two of them together, she had a funny way of showing it.

“I wanted to see if I was imagining what was happening between the two of you. I know he’s driven, that if he wants you there’s nothing either of us will be able to do to dissuade him. I wanted to be sure you were the one making the choice to be with him.”

It took a lot more work than she expected to keep the smile on her face. If Raven were that kind of man, the kind to force his desires on a woman, she could understand the worry. But she’d yet to have any experience when she didn’t have any choices, even if she made the wrong one. “I’m fine, Jordan. Truly.”

The older woman tsked and shook her head. “It’s not that I don’t love Raven, I do. I think the world of him, but I don’t want you going into this blind. He’s not the kind of man to settle down.”

“You used to think that about Sky,” Vanessa reminded her, then winced when she realized how desperate it sounded. As if she were hoping against

hope to keep Raven forever. As if *his* staying were the problem. “I know the kind of man Raven is.”

The kind she couldn’t have. Didn’t deserve. Couldn’t keep.

“I just don’t want either of you to get hurt. You’ve been through so much, Vangie—”

“I know what I’m doing.” A blatant lie, but it was better than facing the pity she knew was coming.

Jordan looked up at her, then shook her head. “I don’t know what to do with either of you, I really don’t.”

Vanessa found herself smiling. “There’s always the option of not doing anything. Letting nature take its course all by itself.”

“First you start seeing my son, then you start speaking blasphemy. You’re a lost cause, Vanessa Angel.”

Vanessa reached out to touch her friend’s hand, disconcerted to find the soft skin somewhat papery. She held a little tighter, trying to infuse warmth. “I think you have enough going on here without worrying about me and Raven.”

“A mother always worries about her children,” Jordan replied, sighing tiredly. Vanessa wouldn’t know. She’d never had a mother. Not one that cared, at any rate. “He’s a good man, behind all his cynicism and suspicion, but he’s been hurt, terribly. He doesn’t realize when he’s hurting others the same way.”

Vanessa knew she had many illusions about her lover, but she couldn’t claim that one. Raven always knew exactly what he was doing.

“Don’t let him hurt you, Vangie,” Jordan added, her voice a pained whisper. “I know what it is to love a man too much. To give him everything and not receive enough in return.”

“I don’t expect Raven to love me.” That much she could be honest about. “I don’t expect anything from him at all.”

Jordan’s gaze turned assessing. She shook her head and faced the sea. “Two fools.”

Vanessa laughed. “Don’t worry so much, Jordan. Not everything turns bad.”



“Tell me that when you see Raven’s car. That thing was new when it got here. Now look at it.”

Uh-oh. Raven had been a sweaty mess when she first saw him. Dressed in next to nothing, only those cut offs and work boots... Good lord, what had he done now? “What car?”

Now it was Jordan’s turn to smile. Why had she never noticed that the glint in Raven’s eye was inherited? And why did she have to choose now to be worried about it?



“You can only hide in here so long, you know. They’re eventually going to come looking for you.”

Raven looked up from his place behind his father’s desk to find Chase leaning in the doorway of the office. Chase never came in. Neither did anyone else in the family. Only Raven was sacrilegious enough to walk into the shrine to his father and drink the dead man’s prized brandy.

“You’d think after sixteen years, this crap would taste better.” Raven shoved the cut crystal glass across the mirror finish of the oversize mahogany desk. It stopped gliding with too much room to spare before the fatal edge.

The silence settled between them, filled to overflowing with the things they were going to say, but Raven wasn’t going to be first to say them. Chase was the one who wanted to talk or he wouldn’t have opened the door.

Finally, his friend gave in. “Tara’s upstairs in the Blue Room. She decided to stay.”

“As if she had a choice.” Raven stretched for the brandy glass. “So, why aren’t you up there practicing your bedside manner?”

“I don’t seduce the shell-shocked. No challenge.” Chase looked over his shoulder then surprised Raven not only by stepping fully into the room, but closing the door behind himself. “Speaking of seduction,” he said, dropping into a chair in front of the desk.

"I'd rather not, you're not my type."

"What are you doing with this woman, Raven?"

Somewhere in his chest, Raven felt himself bristle. "Her name is Vanessa and it's none of your damn business what we're doing."

"None of my business or you don't know?"

He wasn't even going to acknowledge hearing that.

"Why did you keep her in that room? What was said were potentially the most destructive facts this family has ever heard. She knew it wasn't appropriate to be there, but you made her stay. Sky says you're involved and I'm inclined to believe him, but you don't risk the family interests for anyone. Ever. I want to know why you did it now."

Toying with the glass one-handed, Raven stared at his lifelong friend. Sure, he looked innocent and just barely over drinking age, but Chase was a solid block of determination when he had a bone he was sniffing after. He wasn't going to leave the topic of Vanessa alone, not when it involved the security of the family he considered his own. Damn him. If roles were reversed Raven knew he'd be the one with the questions.

"If anyone left that room, Sellers would have bolted. Mother may have been skewed in her approach, but she was right to track her down. Giving Sellers an option to leave would have been a tactical error."

"Which explains why you plastered her to your side like some extra limb you didn't want anyone to see?"

"I trust her implicitly." If he didn't like the tone in which Raven explained himself—something happening with alarming frequency these days—Chase could just go throw himself off the island cliffs. "As my assistant, she's privy to the most intimate financial and personal details this family has. She'd have to have been briefed on it later anyway."

"And as your lover?"

Raven tapped the glass with his index finger.

"Oh, before I forget," Chase said, picking up that he shouldn't hold his breath for an answer. "The reason I came in here was because your mother is

having a friendly, little chat with Vanessa in the garden. Not that something like that would worry you.”

Like hell it wouldn't, but admitting that would mean admitting too much. Still, the prospect of his mother's schemes being unleashed on his...his...on Vanessa was enough to make him slightly nauseous.

“Where's Sky?”

“In the music room. You two may not do much together these days, but you still manage to act the same way. Usually you're the one hiding in the music room. I'm surprised you came in here.” Chase looked around at the book-laden shelves and the still glossy cherry wood furnishings.

“I figured the bastard owed me a drink.” Or three. Gone sixteen years and he still won. Brandy was the least he could give up.

“What about you? What do you owe Sky?”

Fire burned down his throat as he gulped the remnants in the glass. He kept his gaze on his friend, willing the other man to leave him to his brooding. “I don't owe Sky anything.”

Chase stayed in his seat. “You owe him the truth.”

“He has the truth.”

“Not all of it. Admit it, you knew, didn't you?”

The glass thumped to the desktop. He stared at the dark-stained wood, the breath all but knocked out of him.

“You knew about Harper's affair all these years. That's why you hate him so much.”

“You don't know what you're talking about.” As bluffs went, this one sounded pretty good. But Raven knew Chase wouldn't buy it. Reckoning had found him at last.

“Jordan thought losing Marissa changed you. The way Sky introverted. But that never cut it for me. We all went a little crazy for a while, especially after Harper died, too. But eventually, we came to some kind of peace with it. Everyone but you. You stayed angry. You stayed away. Jordan put the final piece into the puzzle. It all clicks together now.”

Raven pushed the glass away, this time for good.

"I'm not the only one it's going to click for, Raven. You have to tell Sky."

"Don't think you can give me orders, Chase. I don't answer to anyone."

Chase settled into the seat as if he'd been coming in for years. "Seems to me you've been answering to a guilty conscience for years."

Rather than grab hold of his friend, Raven pushed out from behind the desk and stalked to the door. Before he realized it, he'd left the sanctuary and there were only uncomfortable choices ahead—save Vanessa from the firing squad or talk to Sky. Neither had much appeal, but Chase's logic couldn't be ignored. Sky would need someone to blame. Someone to hate. Either Raven could wait for the honors or he could take the bull by the horns.

The lights were off when he opened the door to the old practice room. Only slight beams of ambient sunlight seeped past the long sheers of the double bay windows. He stepped in carefully, hearing the repeating note Sky was playing on the grand piano of their childhood. Sky didn't look up, just kept playing that middle C.

"I could never play this piano," Sky said softly, his only acknowledgement of Raven's presence. "No matter how I tried or how hard I tried. Just never had the passion for it."

Raven put his hands in his pockets and walked up to the instrument, something like fear harboring in his chest. How many years had he wished his brother could be his friend again? In a matter of minutes, his wish would go from difficult to unfathomable.

"You were the builder in the family. I played the music, Marissa danced to it. We all had our passions, they were just different."

"What about Tara?" Sky's voice sounded strained. "You think she has a passion?"

"Photography," Raven said, the answer an easy one. "She's good when she's not throwing her subjects into fountains."

Sky lifted his gaze from the piano. "You looked into her work?"

Raven nodded.

“You looked into *her*?” His brother’s brows came together as he stood up, pushing the piano stool back with his legs. Here it came. The Anger. The Blame. “Why? Because she looks something like us? Don’t you trust anyone? Even your own father?”

“Him, least of all.”

Sky shook his head, disgust evident. “Do you even *remember* when you weren’t a suspicious, faithless bastard?”

He wasn’t going to do it. He wasn’t going to fall quietly back into the position he always allowed Sky to push him into. There were no secrets left to hide anymore. Nothing left to protect. “*I’m* faithless? For almost twenty years I’ve kept *his* faith and lost my own.”

“What do you mean *kept*?” Sky asked, his expression melting away to utter blankness. Like clockwork, the walls raised. If Raven had a mind to, even pounding with his fists wouldn’t change Sky’s mind. His beliefs. His need to keep things the way he thought they were. Why couldn’t he face the truth? “What did you do?”

“That’s right, Sky,” Raven assured, resentment filling him. “Jump right to the accusations. Make this all my fault so you can go back to pretending Harper was Daddy of the Year.”

“He was a good man,” Sky insisted, his eyes shut tight. Probably because sheer will was the only thing keeping him believing the lie.

“A good man who cheated on his wife and three kids as if they meant nothing to him.”

“Who are you to judge? You don’t know anything about it, we weren’t even five yet. We couldn’t know what was happening.”

“How naive are you? Do you really think Tara’s mother was the only woman he was ever with?”

“You have no proof of that!”

"I *am* the proof!" Raven roared, silencing his brother at last. "I saw him, Sky. I was there! I helped him, damn it! I'm the only one who knows all about it—the lies, the women. Woman after woman—"

"Stop."

"I wish I could. I wish I could put it all behind me and never think about it again. But every time I see anyone who could look a little bit like him, I wonder. Is that my brother? Is that my sister? I wasn't faithless. I was terrified the next person I met was going to be the reason you lost the man you worshiped. That I'd have to rip out your heart the way he ripped out mine. When I met Tara Sellers, you're damn right I had her looked into. I knew she was going to pop up again someday and I was right, wasn't I?"

"Why didn't you say anything, if you were so sure?" Sky's voice had no fire.

"I couldn't prove Harper was her father. Not yet," he muttered. "I had her investigated, but hit a roadblock when it came to her birth. It's like Mother said. She didn't enter the system until she was eight...or so she thought. She didn't come out until she was of age. There's almost no paperwork on her except that she ran away from several homes. There was no way to be totally sure."

"What were you going to do if you could prove it?" Sky sat on the stool again, his shoulders slumped.

"Buy her silence, if I could. Give her an inheritance, make sure neither you or Mother ever heard about it."

"Lie to us," Sky surmised.

Raven nodded.

"Why would you do that?"

"I've been doing it since I was sixteen years old. What would you have done?"

The quiet between them was actually worse than the yelling.

Sky stared at him, his eyes as cold and unforgiving as they were in all Raven's nightmares of this moment. "I never would have lied in the first place."

Somehow, Raven pulled air into his lungs and pushed it out again. He shook his head, the daze refusing to let him loose. Finally, he straightened his shoulders and turned away. “That’s the difference between us, Sky. You’ve only ever been able to think with your head. Back then, I was still dumb enough to think with my heart. I didn’t know until later the damn thing was broken.”

There wasn’t anything left to say. Sky would never understand and he’d never forgive. Raven had known that when he decided years ago not to tell him the truth. His brother was simply the price he had to pay for the choices he’d made. Regrets would only make him want what he could never have back.

His soul.

## Chapter Nine

It was just after dusk when Vanessa pulled up in front of her apartment building, parking with a sigh. When she turned her head, it was to find Raven staring at her through shuttered eyelids. He'd been lying back on the mutilated passenger seat, his face pressed against a few strips of duct tape.

"Don't I rate a ride home?" he asked, his voice gravelly from sleep.

She glanced around at the zigzagging tape covering every surface, the cracked-open overhead light and the scraped dashboard. When Raven first showed her the car, she'd been speechless. Angry, she'd admit, but that faded quickly when she realized he'd done all the damage for her. He ruined a beautiful and expensive car, reduced it to its bare minimum of an engine that ran well with accurate readings from the gauges because she wouldn't take it otherwise. She didn't have to ride with him to his apartment every night anymore. She could leave as she willed, without the expense of taxis. He meant to give her that, even before asking her for a relationship of sorts. Regardless of how she intended to honor that particular request, the gesture was...sweet.

"Wait here a minute." She opened her door and stepped into the burgeoning night.

Once inside her apartment, it was rushed affair to get back out before he came looking for her. Pulling tomorrow's work clothes off the rod, she threw them over her arm and headed into the bathroom. She yanked her overnight bag from its usual place next to the naked U-shaped pipe beneath the sink. She always kept it packed, just in case there was an emergency visit to the hospital. Taking it back to her bed, she opened it and tossed in fresh



undergarments. Nylons went in next and then she reached under her bed for a pair of black heels.

Gathering everything together, she hurried to the door. Her hands shook as she reached for it, but she didn't let that stop her. For the first time in her life, she was going after what she wanted. She couldn't let anything stop her. Not even her conscience.

Raven was waiting on the other side of the door when she opened it. She gasped and he smiled sleepily. He looked soft, vulnerable even. Just the way he did when she'd slipped out of his arms each night.

He rubbed a hand at the back of his head. "Thought I'd come see if I could help you."

"No, you thought you could finally see inside my apartment." To keep it from happening, she pulled the door close to her side and blocked the view to anything but the nearest wall.

"You see my apartment all the time," he reminded.

"I never get to look around," she countered, reaching out for the light switch. "You're being nosy."

"And you're being secretive." His eyes glittered with humor. He was probably most amused by the fact that while she blocked the way in, he blocked the way out. The damn man enjoyed winning too much.

Since he wasn't moving, she rolled her eyes and pulled the door open. "Come on in, make yourself at home." She added a deep bow to her sarcasm, which he took as his due, stepping past her and even patting her head. He was lucky he didn't laugh, she'd have belted him. "One of these days, you're going to figure out that being obstinate won't always work."

"Probably," he agreed, taking a quick look around. "But it'll be fun while it lasts."

The place was clean, as spotless as she could keep it, but through his eyes, all she could see was the shabbiness of every part of her home. Aged white walls and warped floors, picture frames that wouldn't hang straight because of the minimal number of wall studs. Her mismatched pieces of furniture made

her wince. The dented dresser she'd had since childhood, the scuffed daybed that sloped to the back railing, even the little bedside table she used to hold up a coffee maker, all of it suddenly looked worn out and broken. She couldn't even guess what he was thinking when his brow furrowed at the makeshift closet, devised from industrial hooks and an old broomstick. He turned away without comment, looking to the portraits on the wall to his right and the frown disappeared.

"You look young here." He tapped the glass over her smiling face. "Hair's a bit poofy for you, though."

She hugged herself, remembering how excited the girls were that she'd let them dress her up for the portraits. "It was high school, everyone had poofy hair."

He smiled, mischievously, before returning to study the pictures. "They look like you."

Vanessa snorted. He could charm all he liked, facts were facts. "They look like their mother."

He gave her a sideways glance. "Not your mother?"

*Not even when I wanted her to be.* Vanessa shook her head.

He didn't ask anymore questions, thankfully. "This one—"

"Trisha," she bit out, wishing she could drag him out of the apartment somehow.

"She has your smile."

Vanessa started, a choked sound coming from somewhere in her throat.

"The middle one—"

"Jean," she supplied, her hackles coming down slowly.

"Jean," he repeated. "She has your cheekbones and your hair."

Vanessa eyed him, to see if he were pulling some sort of cruel joke, but he was earnestly looking at the portraits. She leaned forward to study the pictures as if they were brand new instead of ten years old and ancient, painful history. Sure enough, he was right. She hadn't noticed before. She touched the glass,

biting her lip to stave off the sting in her eyes. They'd been so young, so vibrant and even happy. All of them, even herself.

"Did I say something wrong?" Raven asked, his voice a whisper.

"No," she said back, just as softly, then cleared her throat with a cough. "No, just something I never noticed." She made herself smile. "I dare you to find something similar between me and Amy."

He'd have a heck of a time, too. While her other sisters might have some evidence of David Kaye in their faces, Amy was pretty much her own person. Petite like Patrice, Amy was nearly a foot shorter than Vanessa, as fair as she was bronzed. She looked like a grown up cherub, curly blonde hair, dancing blue eyes and a continually sweet smile. If it weren't for her affliction, Vanessa would have sworn she'd been switched at birth. When she was little, there were times Vanessa had even hoped that was the case. But it wasn't to be.

"Her hands," Raven reported, a touch of pride in his voice, startling her from her memories. "Come to think of it, you all have the same hands."

Vanessa frowned at him, then back at the portrait. The four of them had been lined up oldest to youngest, each girl with her hand on the shoulder of the girl in front. Amy's hand reached back to lace with Jean's on her own shoulder. Graceful hands, artist's hands that tapered to long, fine-boned fingers. She stared down at her hands now, older but still very much the same. Stared until they shook.

All four of them, so close, so different. Patrice used to point out their differences like a mantra. Something that would get her through the days, Vanessa decided when the accusations were too much to stand. Something to separate her daughters from the one she could blame. Vanessa came to hate what made her different. Even if it meant sharing their fates, she'd have given anything to belong. When Trisha began to slide downward, she *feared* what made them the same. What doomed them one by one; her three sisters to illness and eventual death and herself to a solitary life wishing for it.

She'd decided, one night holding Trisha's hand in the hospital yet again, that she would never put any child of hers through the pain of their disease.

She could never ask a man she loved to give up a family for her either. She couldn't ask anyone to give up what she wanted so badly. The simplest solution was to never involve herself with a man at all. It was too tempting, too frightening, to allow. But then came Raven, a temptation too strong to resist.

Soon—no matter how far away it was, it would be soon—she'd have to give him up. Kiss him good bye and hold on to every memory she had, hold them close to remember him when he was gone, when Amy was gone, when even her father was gone. By then, every aspect of her life will have been swallowed, savored slowly by a disease she didn't even have but was consumed by all the same.

She clenched her hands closed, turning from the pictures and heading to her pile of things on the bed. Cystic fibrosis may have stolen everything from her that would ever matter, but by God, she was going to have memories when they were gone.

"We should go."

Raven must have sensed that any playfulness was over because he only nodded and led the way out. She could feel him like a shadow, blocking the yellowed overhead light as she locked her door. His hand, as it had so many times before, guided her by barely touching the small of her back with his fingertips. They left the apartment behind them, her secrets still safe behind the door. She might be a fool to think she could leave them there, but she was going to try.



Raven snapped the lights on with the flick of the wall switch before stepping down into the recessed living room. He thought about her comment earlier. Looking around the living room would be a new experience for her.

"Why don't we sit out here tonight?"

She nodded and put her bag down near the end table, carefully placing her shoes on top. She inspected the bland room quietly and not for the first time he

wished there were something more personal there besides his piano. Ironically, when he wanted a comment, she didn't seem to have one to give.

"You look exhausted," he said into the silence.

She turned, the twist to her lips wry. "Today was a strain, if you'll remember."

"Was it? I hadn't noticed."

She arched her eyebrow, dropping onto his buttery leather couch, watching him stand there with his hands in his pockets instead of doing any further inspection of the room. Interesting.

He headed toward her, strolling nearer as if he'd had no part of making the visit uncomfortable with his insistence that she stay. He sat next to her, wishing he could explain to either of them why it was so important that he have someone who didn't expect the worst from him in that house. He laid his hand on her knee, sliding it down around her calf. Gingerly, he picked up her feet and brought them to rest across his lap, an idea of how to reach her forming. An uncomfortable idea, but the only thing he had.

After pulling off her ankle high boots, he ran his hands over the slim lines of her foot, rubbing at the tension that always seemed to run through her. Little by little, it ebbed away. In the quiet, he wondered what he'd said so wrong earlier. She'd all but locked herself away, despite the agreement he'd wrangled out of her. It smarted a bit, but he should have realized that agreements didn't mean trust. They meant force. That wasn't what he wanted from her. Maybe...maybe he just wanted someone to trust. If that was what he was after, he was going to have to start earning it.

"You're probably wondering why I didn't let you leave when my mother told us who Tara was." He kept rubbing her feet, waiting for her to answer.

"You had your reasons," she answered carefully. They might as well be in the office if that was as far as she was going to risk.

"It was important to me that you hear it all, if you were going to have to hear any of it. There's more to this than you know and it's important that I tell

you. I want you understand why...why I am the way I am. That you understand why we need to trust each other to make this work.”

She took a long time to agree, but she did and suddenly, it was hard to begin. A cigarette would be a good place, but getting them from the piano would snap the fragile moment, leaving him to find the words alone. Where the hell did you start when talking about single-handedly destroying everything that was ever worth a damn?

“Did my mother ever tell you how my father died?”

She nodded. “A heart attack.”

“He did,” he said, remembering that dark time reluctantly. “In the middle of a board meeting.”

“He’s a legend on the executive floor. Even you seem to revere him, going into his office after the whole thing with Tara.”

“Honestly, I could care less. I go there whenever I need a place no one else is willing to be. But what you said is true. To everyone else, Harper was a legend. To me, he was someone I had no respect for. Someone I loved that I learned to hate.”

Vanessa rolled her head to the side to look at him, questions in her gaze. “Why?”

“Because he had no morality.” It wasn’t lost on him how many people thought the same of him. “Nothing mattered to him more than what he wanted. My mother loved him with everything she had in her, he didn’t care. Harper was her entire world. She would have done anything for him. Still would...is.” Bitterness stung him. “He used people. Made them disposable so he could have what he wanted most. He made lies out of the most important vows a man can take. His promises never meant anything.

“When I was little, I didn’t know that. I believed every thing he ever told me. Swallowed it whole. Even when he broke his promises, I thought that next time would be different. Next time, he’d remember. You forgive the people important to you a lot before you start to hate them. You let them tie you in knots and

leave you stranded. You keep hoping to find the reason they are the way they are.

“When we were sixteen, Sky and our sister had a car accident. Sky spent years in surgery and therapy to walk again, but Marissa died instantly. That’s when I found out about his philandering. Sky was in the hospital for his second surgery and we were waiting for word. Mother was a mess because Sky’s first surgery was a nightmare. They didn’t expect the second one to be any easier. My father had gone off to get coffee and was gone too long. I needed to do something useful, so I went looking for him.

“I don’t remember how long I searched, but what never loses its clarity is seeing him fall out of a maintenance closet with a candy striper. A *candy striper*,” a bitter chuckle escaped as he remembered the girl blushing, straightening her skirt and trying to walk away as if nothing had happened.

“She was practically my age. I was a kid and even I could tell what they’d been doing. I was dumb enough to think it was the first time. I was easy to convince me he’d fallen apart watching Sky suffer and not being able to help. I wanted to believe him and I wasn’t about to hurt my mother at a time like that.

“Once I lied for him, I went from being his son to his accomplice. One lie led to another and another. I didn’t have to try to catch him anymore. I spent all my time making sure neither Sky or my mother found out. It was as if he were *trying* to get caught. Then he died and I was left alone with all the lies. The regrets. But I couldn’t tell them the truth then. What good would it do? It was better that they didn’t know.” He finally looked up at her, wondering what he’d see in those unique violet eyes.

Should he be surprised to find understanding?

“That’s why you left, isn’t it? Why you went to school abroad and almost never came back.”

He didn’t ask how she knew. His mother was not a soul of discretion when she considered someone her own. He nodded. “It was easier. Sky and I wouldn’t argue over things I couldn’t tell him and I’d stop lying all the time.

Only, the longer I stayed away, the less we had to say to each other. Eventually, you spend enough time alone—”

“You start wishing things in your family weren’t screwed up so bad. Wishing it wasn’t your fault,” she whispered. So she did understand. The mixed feelings of being relieved someone out there could understand warred with anger that it was Vanessa. He wasn’t stupid, he knew she had her heartaches, her secrets. He had only to think of her reaction to the portraits in her own apartment. But who could hate her? What could she have done so wrong to feel the blame?

It wouldn’t do him any good to ask.

Raven sighed. “Makes it all the more pointless that my mother has always known about his cheating. There I was ripping myself in half to keep his secrets and the whole time, she was looking for his illegitimate child. Irony, apparently, has no bounds.”

He waited for the sense he’d done something wrong, telling her all this. For naked embarrassment to fill him, for her to tell him she had no place knowing his secrets, separating herself as she always did. Instead, he felt the warm softness of her hand slipping over his, taking hold and offering something he wasn’t familiar with any longer. Comfort.

She’d drawn herself up to an awkward sitting position, her knee now up against the back of the couch, the other leg folded off the edge. He released her feet and she let one lower to the ground, leaving their hands intertwined on his lap. “You were just a boy trying to do the right thing. It’s not your fault your father took advantage.”

He shook his head. It sounded good, but wasn’t exactly true. “My father pressed every advantage he ever had. It was his philosophy. I knew that, I was just naive enough to think he wouldn’t do it to me.”

“He tried to do something right for Tara before he died. That’s something, isn’t it?”

Raven knew she was trying to make him feel better, but sugarcoating the truth wasn’t his specialty. “He tried to do something for her at the expense of



his wife and sons. And I'm not talking about money. Only my father would think it was acceptable to publicly humiliate his wife and strip his family of their birthright to clear his own dead conscience."

She didn't try to defend his father again. What could she offer? His father's selfishness couldn't be ignored. They sat in silence once again.

"You asked about my mother...before," she said softly, surprising him so much he jumped. It took every effort not to look at her. He didn't want to take a chance at scaring her. So he only made a soft agreeing sound and let her continue. "The truth is, I don't know my mother. She left when I was only a few weeks old. I don't even know what she looked like. Me, I guess.

"She was young and pretty, according to my father. She wanted to be a movie actress and he said she probably had a chance. I was an accident on her way to stardom. After she had me, she left. Just like that. Neither of us heard from her again."

That explained the disparity between the sisters.

"I was six when Dad married Patrice. She was polite and she really does love my father, but she never wanted to be saddled with some other woman's leftovers. They had Trisha right away and Patrice was nice to be around for awhile. Eventually, they had Jean and then Amy. By then, I was just in the way. Another mouth to feed and Patrice wasn't always so polite."

"Did she—" Raven couldn't quite bring himself to complete the question. It would explain too much about Vanessa, but the thought of her being hurt by someone meant to be a parent to her.

"Patrice didn't have to abuse me. She never had the time. But she made it clear that I wasn't part of her family. That I didn't belong there. Dad tried to make me feel welcome, but it never worked. If it wasn't for the girls, I think I might have run away, but they needed me, so I stayed.

"After high school, I took some clerical classes and applied for the office pool at RMI. A couple years later, I was a temp for Muriel Rodgers when she had to retire. Your brother decided to keep me because he didn't see any need for training anyone else when I was working out fine."

"That's Sky. Expedient to the last."

"Well, I wasn't about to complain. It was a step up, financially. It wasn't long before I met Jordan. She was kind and funny. Everything I fantasized a real mother was like. She was amazing when the girls died."

"Died?" Raven frowned. Suddenly, her response to the portraits made more sense. Worse sense. While he'd been trying to see more than her tense little facade, he'd been trampling her losses. He was a bigger bastard than he thought.

She smoothed his brow a gentle fingertip, a sad tilt to her lips and a forgiving shake of her head. "Trisha died five years ago of a respiratory infection out of control. We lost Jean three years ago to liver failure. They were both sick for a long time."

"What about Amy?" It was hard to imagine that impish little face being a memory as well. Those girls were all children. Two of them, already long gone. Just like Marissa, gone too damn young.

"She's well enough."

"What about you, Vanessa?" he asked, leaning down to catch her gaze. "Are you well enough?"

Her jaw tightened, her chin raising as if challenged. "I'm never sick."

He smiled. "I wouldn't judge you if you were," he murmured, leaning to catch her mouth with his. He felt her lips curve against his. Following impulse, he deepened the kiss, leading her onto her back against the couch cushions, taking advantage of her position to fit into the cradle of her hips. Her fingertips caressed his cheeks as she murmured incoherently. Incoherence was good. It meant she wasn't doing much thinking. He licked her lips and let his hand find her waist to pull her closer against him.

She dropped her head to break the kiss, shaking her head at him. "What are you doing?"

"Getting comfortable." He tugged her lower, grinning at the sensual wince crossing her face when he pressed his erection into her. Both her legs rose, her heels landing neatly on his back as he settled his body to hers. She let him kiss

her again, her arms circling his neck with a casual hold when he let his attention wander to the curve of her neck.

“This is your idea of comfortable?”

“Assuming you have no complaints.” He nibbled her collarbone.

“Keep going while I think of some.”

He felt her husky laugh against his lips. Raven lifted his head and looked down at her, at her easy smile and sensuous eyes. He liked them this way. The color deep amethyst, tiny crinkles at the corners, all the shadows chased away. Her black hair spilled around her like loose ink, wild and smooth all at once. He brought his hand to her cheek, to touch the wisp lying along her jaw and lead it back behind the shell of her ear. He liked his hand there, his thumb caressing the edge of her cheekbone, his fingers sifting through the fine ebony strands at her nape.

She coiled her fingers around his wrist, holding him there. “After everything we’ve just said to each other, you really only want to be comfortable? Don’t you feel somehow lighter, better?”

He nodded. She didn’t understand, this was exactly what he’d wanted from her. Not necessarily secrets. He wanted this peaceful, quiet intimacy when their bodies were warm and close, their words whispers meant only for each other.

“Doesn’t it make you feel...I don’t know, happy?”

He laughed before he realized it happened. “I don’t know if I can *do* happy.”

“Sure you can,” she whispered, lifting her body beneath him to brush her lips against his. “What’s the point of all this if it doesn’t make us happy? At least, for a little while.”

He had the inclination to frown, but she licked his lips and the notion faded in the rush of heat.

“Why not be happy, Raven? Why not be downright giddy while we have the chance?” Her gentle temptation became a heated invitation when she nibbled on his bottom lip, sucking it into her mouth to run the tip of her tongue across it. It wasn’t an invitation he wanted to turn down.

He met her mouth with his. Instead of the sense that they were both trying hopelessly to hold something of themselves back when they touched, he felt a whole-heartedness between them. She leaned into him, pulling him closer but not with desperation. It wasn't the white-burning hunger that had his hands easing under the hem of her sweater. Instead it was a sensual warmth, a desire to slow, to savor. He could take all night making love to her and she wouldn't mind. She wouldn't rush. She wouldn't run. She'd smile, those beautiful eyes of hers would dance and simmer and she'd even sleep, safe in his arms.

One item at a time, between long kisses and moaning sighs, their clothes were shed. Vanessa was just as different as he, wanting to touch and taste him instead of laying still in wonder at what might come next, with no hesitancy at all. Then finally, she pushed him upward, until he was sitting back on the couch.

"Are you comfortable yet?" she whispered, taking him in her hand to stroke fires already well set.

"I'm getting there," he said as she climbed onto his lap. She kissed him again, delving deep to play with his tongue while he gave himself completely to the sensations she wrought in him.

He wasn't used to the maelstrom of emotions overwhelming him while they continued their dance. Excitement he had felt before. Passion he knew quite well. Need was still new to him. But later, as he held Vanessa's hips while she slid down onto his sheathed member until she was firmly settled on his lap, he was lost in something far stronger than any of those things.

Her legs twined tightly behind his back, her hands secured behind his neck, she began rocking against him. Her pace started slow, moving faster and faster to the increasing beat of both their hearts. When her back finally arched into his hands, and they both exploded together, Raven didn't even have a word to describe how he felt.

He kept searching for it after he carried her to his bed, tucking her limp body next to his beneath the blankets and settling them both to sleep. He

closed his eyes, his arms around her and peace around him. He decided that if he needed a word, Vanessa's would do just fine.

Tonight, he had no problems at all being giddy.



Vanessa sat up, disoriented, the muted sound of her phone ringing in her ears. Someone made a sound of displeasure and given the weight of his arm around her waist, it had to be Raven. She rubbed at her eye to try to wake up. The phone. She'd heard it ringing. No...not ringing. Beeping.

Jerking the sheets and blankets back, she rolled out of Raven's hold without care. The phone. The phone. Where was the phone? Rushing naked into the living room, she nearly tripped on the steps into the sunken room. She hadn't put it next to her bed like usual. Raven hadn't known to bring it and she'd been too self-absorbed to think of it. She followed the sound to her purse, still on the floor next to his couch with her other things. She flipped it open with shaking hands. "Amy?"

"Oh, thank God, I've been calling you for an hour," a man's voice she didn't recognize sighed.

"Who is this? Where's Amy?"

"I'm Eric Abernathy, Amy's boyfriend."

"Where is Amy?"

"She's—"

"Vanessa?" Raven called from the bedroom threshold, slipping into his robe.

She glanced at him and shook her head as he turned on the lights.

"We're at Mercy Hospital," Eric Abernathy continued, sounding choked. "She's had a cold."

Vanessa closed her eyes for a brief second. She'd known. Known since that phone call, the wet cough signaling more than usual, but she'd ignored her

instincts. She wasn't sure what was worse, ignoring her instincts or allowing Amy to pretend she wasn't sick. "Has she been intubated?"

"They did it as soon as she got here, but I don't think it's helping. I thought it was maybe bronchitis or something. The doctor is saying it's pneumonia. She didn't want me to call anyone for help but I couldn't let her go on that way. She couldn't breathe."

"You did the right thing, Eric. I can be at Mercy within thirty minutes. Just stay with her."

"They won't let me in her room. I called her mother and when they got here, she told me to go home, but Amy was asking for you before the ambulance came."

Vanessa was already on her feet, grabbing her clothes from various places on the rug, yanking her underwear on, grasping wildly for her jeans. Raven's steady hand reached them first, but he said nothing before handing them to her.

"I'm on my way."

"Wait. Her...her mom didn't want me to call you. I don't think she'll let you see Amy either."

Vanessa froze, one leg in her pants, the other still working its way in. *Don't let it hurt. Patrice doesn't matter. Amy wants you there. Amy. Think about Amy.*

"Thirty minutes." She flipped the phone closed and dragged the jeans into place. After slipping it into her back pocket, she zipped and grabbed her bra. Seconds later, she had her tank top and her sweater back on. She shoved her bare feet into her ankle boots and was in the process of reaching for her overnight bag and purse when Raven stalked back into the living room. She pulled in a shaky breath, realizing she hadn't even noticed he'd left. He was already dressed in a pair of slacks and a haphazard black pullover. "Give me two minutes and I'll be ready."

"Ready?" she asked, afraid she knew what he meant.

About as well as he expected her to argue with him. He kept his head bent, his hair falling forward over his brow as he tied his laces. A strange thing to

notice, the way the short hair hung down. He usually had it combed back, sleek and gleaming. He hadn't bothered at the mansion, but it was wet and she hadn't noticed. Now it was dry, the gleam of the light purely natural, like sunlight on a raven's wing. "You're not in any state to drive."

If only he knew how many times she'd been in this very state. "I'm fine."

He lifted his head. That's it. No arguments, not even a command. Just a weariness on his face she couldn't allow to sway her.

"I can't bring you with me, Raven. It's not...it's not you."

His eyebrow rose. Good lord, the man could have a conversation without saying a single word.

"Amy won't want anyone there that doesn't have to be. Please, you have to understand."

He didn't. He didn't believe her, either. That would sting less if it weren't partially true. She shook her head and picked up her bags, stopping before turning past the wall to the elevator. "My family...they won't understand if I have someone with me."

His expression remained grim, disappointment in the depths of his eyes. "It's not *them* I want to understand."

Vanessa forced herself to straighten her shoulders. She'd disappointed everyone she'd ever known. Raven couldn't be any different. "If I can't get to work on time tomorrow, I'll call for a temp."

The elevator didn't make her wait long. She kept her back straight and refused to relax. To think about Raven and what he wanted. What *she* wanted. How comforting would it be to have someone to hold on to if Amy took a bad turn? Someone who would let her cry when she was terrified how much damage this was doing to her sister's frail system. That this would be the last call in the middle of the night.

But none of that mattered when weighed against Patrice. Raven wouldn't understand her stepmother's acrimony. He'd ask questions. He'd want to know why Patrice hated her, because there wouldn't be a way to miss it. She didn't want his pity. She'd had enough to last her a lifetime.

Vanessa made the drive nearly by rote, one by one pushing her feelings down where they'd be safe. Untouched. She could only afford to think about the situation. Be ready to make decisions. By now, Amy would be firmly entrenched in the ICU. Stable. Please, God, let her be stable. She wouldn't be happy about that tube, though...

Vanessa stepped out onto the hushed floor of the Intensive Care Unit. No matter how many times she'd been on one of these floors, no matter which hospital, they were all the same. People spoke in softer tones than the beeps and whooshes of the machines. There was always a half-dim, half-florescent glow to each room and the nurse's station in the center. Never any walls, just glass panels and wide open doors with only a curtain on a rail to provide privacy. As she walked past rooms, she made sure not to look into the rooms, where the occasional sounds of crying could be heard. She almost went to the night charge nurse, but the sound of a chair scraping back caught her attention.

Looking around the corner of the cube shaped reception, Vanessa caught sight of a young man unfolding himself from a plastic chair in front of a room. Eric Abernathy. Vanessa allowed herself a small sigh before moving forward to meet him. He looked exhausted. His short dark blonde hair was scruffed in multiple directions, pale blue eyes shadowed and red-rimmed. A large part of her wanted to call him a boy, but his size made the claim difficult. She'd never quite figured out why Amy, who couldn't clear five-foot-five on her toes, was so attracted to the tall and sporty type. This one had "football player" imprinted on his face right next to the red, pressure tattoo of his own fist on his cheek.

"Vangie?" he asked, wiping his hands on his jeans before offering his hand.

She nodded. "Any news?"

He shook his head, turning his head to the glass panel without seeing anything beyond it. He couldn't, the curtain was snugly pulled into place. "The doctor is supposed to check on her in another twenty minutes or so. Her parents aren't telling me anything. Your father said I could wait here in the chair, though. Your mom wanted me to go home."



"She's not my mother," Vanessa replied. Of course David would show some kindness. He wasn't like Patrice. He didn't blame anyone for the illness of his daughters. Other than himself, anyway. She looked to the open doorway waiting for her. They didn't know she was here yet. She could still be a coward and turn around. But Amy needed her. The way they all needed her.

"What's wrong with her?" Eric asked suddenly, surprising Vanessa.

"No one's told you?"

"They won't tell me anything at all. People keep talking around me, pretending I'm not here, but they won't say anything more than pneumonia."

She knew why. Amy didn't want anyone to know. Patrice thought feeding Amy's desire for denial couldn't hurt. But look where they were.

Vanessa indicated the chair. Eric sat down. He knew he wasn't going to hear anything good. He had that colorless look of fear and resignation on his face. He'd heard the prognosis. She could see it on his face. "Amy should be the one telling you this."

"She won't. She can't. She can't even breathe on her own."

"That's only temporary." Very temporary. "How long have you been seeing each other?"

"Since last semester."

"And she's never mentioned being sick? You've never seen her taking her pills?" Before every meal—and there were a lot of meals—Amy was required to take medications to ease her digestion.

"I've asked. She always changes the subject." His head bowed and he rubbed the back of his neck. "Is she going to die?"

There was no sugar coating this. "She will, eventually."

"Tonight?"

"I don't know. It's a possibility. Especially if she has her way."

Vanessa wished she could put her arms around the kid. His whole face reddened while he tried to form another question. Instead she crouched next to his chair and put her hand over his, but his knotted fingers felt like rocks they were squeezing together so tight.

“She has a condition called cystic fibrosis. It makes her lungs especially susceptible to infection. The smallest cold can turn into...this.” It had only happened a few times to Amy, but the other girls had much worse cases. Trisha had spent nearly half her life in a hospital. Jean not much less. They’d had so many hopes for Amy. She’d been so much healthier, so much stronger. Had more to live for than two girls who knew early on that the odds were stacked against them. But Amy knew the fate that awaited her. A slow suffocation or an internal deterioration of the most painful kind. After her eighteenth birthday, she’d decided she didn’t want to wait around for her life to extinguish. She wanted to live free and let fate take her when it came. Patrice would be the last one to tell the doctors Amy position on intubation. Amy, if she had come to, had awakened to her worst nightmare. Or she would.

“She could come out of this, Eric. It will take her a while to recover, though.”

“How long?”

“Probably a few months. CF affects more than her lungs and when they’re clear, odds are there might be some damage or scar tissue. She’s been lucky so far to have so little. She’ll be fragile. She’ll be angry.”

“Will she have to drop out?”

Vanessa shook her head. “We’ll try to work something out.”

“What are you doing here?” A voice hissed from the doorway, sending a cringe down Vanessa’s back.

“Mrs. Kaye—”

“I’m here to see Amy,” Vanessa answered, pushing herself up to her full height. Looking down on Patrice never helped in discussions, but it did make Vanessa feel better. Despite having to look up, Patrice wasn’t cowed. Nothing cowed her. Graying brown hair, cut short for ease of care, framed a squared face. Of medium height and a mostly slim build, the fifty-four year old could probably still claim “nice-looking” when she put a little effort into it. She never would, though. Deep-set brown eyes, with only a few lines at the corners, generally narrowed in on flaws. Strong cheekbones defined a face that was pale

instead of fair, worn instead of just weary from the day. Her mouth was a thin, nearly colorless feature now and was usually curved downward with disapproval or disappointment. For Vanessa, she added distaste to the mix. Her shaggy hair tucked behind her ears brought the slightly jowly cheeks to unflattering light. She didn't wear any make-up, but then again, Patrice never did. She didn't need any when her cheeks flushed with anger or her dark brown eyes flashed in rage.

Like now. "She doesn't need you here."

"She wants me here."

"What she wants doesn't matter. I'm here to take care of her. She doesn't need you confusing her."

Yes, because the other girls had been so terribly confused.

"You're not her mother."

"I never said I was," Vanessa answered, stepping past the woman who made her knees tremble and entering the room. As she expected, her father sat in the chair, sleeping. The repeating *sphrr-ha* of the respirator drowned out the faint drone of his snores. Vanessa found the chair on the other side of the bed and lowered herself into it.

Amy made the smallest lump in the bed, her slight frame not filling even half the bed. Vanessa reached down to take Amy's hand in hers, sighing at the feverish feel of her skin. Amy's hand clamped around her fingers and Vanessa finally met her sister's gaze.

Even with the respirator creating a slight jerk to her chest, Amy didn't look panicked, which was good. But she gave the machine a meaningful glance.

"Are you sure?"

Amy blinked twice, their usual sign for yes. Vanessa could hear the arguments in her head. *The respirator could make the infection worse. It could cause more scaring. Don't do this to me.*

"She's going to fight me on this, Ames."

*Please.*

"You have to tell her."

One blink.

"I've done everything I can, Amy, but you can't keep pretending—"

"What are you doing? She needs rest."

Vanessa turned her head to find Patrice glowering from the foot of the hospital bed. "I'm talking to her." Her stomach knotted. Amy knew the position she was putting Vanessa in, but did she understand what it cost? Did any of them? "She wants the tube out."

"She needs the tube." Patrice's flat tone, even in a hissed whisper, harbored no tolerance.

"We should at least check into it with the doctor."

"No." Angry bulldogs were more likely to listen.

"Patrice, please."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "If you think I'm going to stand here and let you kill another one of my daughters, you're sadly mistaken."

Vanessa stared at her stepmother, the pressure in her chest so much worse than the sting to her pride. At her fingers, she felt the tightening twist to her fingers. Instead of looking down, she looked over and as she expected, David Kaye sat in the same, slumped position, but his eyes were open. He'd heard it all. And said nothing.

Vanessa shook her head at him. "She's your daughter, Dad. Do something."

He sighed, looking worn and sad. For all that the girls' illnesses had taken something from them all, David's inability to fight for anything might have gone long before Trisha's birth. He'd lost that when Vanessa's mother had left him with a three month old daughter and no forwarding address.

"Fine." It was always fine. It had to be. She'd hate him otherwise. "I'll talk to the doctor."

"You don't have any right—" Patrice began blustering.

"And you don't have any right to keep Amy's boyfriend away if he wants to be with her." Vanessa squeezed Amy's hand back, leaning down to meet look her sister in the eyes. "He cares about you, Ames. He had a right to know what could have happened tonight."

Amy looked away and pulled her hand loose.

Vanessa felt the rejection to her bones. Just once, she wished someone could hold her hand when it mattered. When she looked up, it was only to meet Patrice's triumphant gaze. "I'll talk to the doctor. If you want the tube out, he'll take it out." Grabbing her bag, she spun on her heel and walked out.

*Must be a record*, she thought as she passed Eric Abernathy without a word. How often in one night could a girl find out how alone she really was?

How often did she know she had no one to blame but herself?

## Chapter Ten

It took nearly seven weeks to get Sky and Tara Sellers in the same room together. Between Sky barely speaking to him and Tara claiming to be taking care of private matters concerning her life in Texas, Raven considered it no small miracle that a few days after Thanksgiving, they'd all come into his apartment to talk about a sale price for the estate.

After twenty minutes, he was wishing they'd put it off another month.

He'd thought perhaps some place informal might be best. His apartment—as central a point between the island where Tara had been staying and Serra Mesa where Sky and his family lived—may have been a little too informal. Sky was tense, Tara was defensive and Chase was grim beneath a determined attempt to be jovial. And, of course, no one had any issues about expressing it.

Their mother should have been there, but she'd bowed out and reportedly sent Chase to escort Tara and keep the peace. Raven's respect for her intelligence went up a few points. He only wished he'd thought of a proxy as well. As for peace...well, he certainly wasn't getting any.

Sky made the mistake of presenting Tara with a Confidentiality Agreement two minutes after they all sat down. Tara slid it back across the table, called them all suspicious bastards and they were off to the races. Quite frankly, they were giving him a headache.

Chase must have had a similar reaction because he went off in search of food, leaving Raven sitting on the arm of the couch to stare at the sniping duo now arguing outright across the inky surface of his piano. Tara, he could actually understand. The woman didn't know how to be in a room without instigating trouble. Sky, on the other hand, wasn't usually the type to argue. In

fact, he usually only had to stare people into silence. His glare never worked on his siblings, but Raven always assumed that was always due to overexposure.

“Look, buddy, it’s not my fault your father cheated on your mom like she was last week’s crossword puzzle, okay? Stop blaming me.”

Apparently, Remingtons were just born with too much nerve.

“I never said I blamed you,” Sky snarled with fake patience. “I just want to know why you’re unwilling to answer a few simple questions about your past.”

“Because,” Tara said slowly, as if dealing with a toddler she didn’t like. “It’s *my* past.”

Raven watched his brother mottle a bit more. “You’re a member of the supposed press. What are we supposed to do when someone digs something up about you we’re not prepared to handle? Which takes us back to the original point. You being a member of the press and you living in my family home. Excuse me if I want a few guarantees you’re not going to exploit anything you find while you’re there.”

“No.”

They continued on, but Raven didn’t want to hear anymore. “Thirty-five million.”

In a heartbeat, you could hear a pin drop on the carpet.

“What?” Tara asked, though it sounded more like the air gushing out of her.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sky demanded, the red on his cheekbones only darkening. Was that all it took to finally get Sky to look him in the eyes again?

“I’m offering Miss Sellers thirty-five million for the estate.” Raven stood, sparing his brother a shrug. It wasn’t as if Sky didn’t already know what he was doing. He could add. “Forty, if she signs the confidentiality agreement. What’s in the house is *our* property. Anything she discloses leaves her open for lawsuit, so it’s a moot point.”

“The compound isn’t *worth* that much,” Sky gritted between his teeth. If he kept this up, he’d be forced to admit to emotions.

"It's worth it to me." Forty million for a taste of redemption? Who wouldn't spend it?

"You're out of your mind," Tara finally muttered, dropping onto the piano bench and sagging. "I can't take that kind of money for a *house*."

"Forty-five," Raven countered, if you could still call it that. "You sell us the property, sign the agreement and agree to allow us to handle the press concerning you and where you came from. We won't have our mother embarrassed any more than necessary."

"Stop raising the bid!" She wasn't wearing her oversize sunglasses this time. Raven could see the deep moss color her eyes had dimmed to. The sallow shade her skin was turning. Given her history of struggling to make ends meet, knowing most of the time they didn't, he didn't doubt the prospect of that much money scared her. But he knew it wasn't himself, Sky or the money putting that dull gleam in her eyes. The idea of people digging into her past, learning about those things she couldn't hide...the real nightmare lay there.

"Take it now or I'll make it fifty," he said quietly, the stunned silence in the room lessening the throbbing in his temples. Too bad throwing money around never had this effect on Vanessa. Then again, he had no idea if anything *existed* that could have this effect on her. Except maybe questions... Raven forced himself back to the point. "Every time I raise the offer, I'm going to want something more from you, Tara. Something you're not going to like."

"Why? I'm nothing to you. You don't have to buy your own house from me. I don't want anything from you. Especially you. You hate me more than he does." She looked small, sitting there on his bench, her legs at odd angles, her face slack, the fight dribbled out of her.

Not quite the way he was used to her. He decided he didn't like it.

"I don't hate you, Tara," Raven said, slipping his hands into his side pockets, moving from the couch arm to his feet. Since the windows were open and he didn't enjoy touchy-feely discussions, he took advantage of the open space before him and crossed to the window. Outside, gray clouds obscured the sunlight, refracting it into a hazy glow pouring down on the street far



below. It wouldn't last. In another hour, the bright light would be gone, leaving rolling clouds and the feeling of an oncoming storm. Normally, he'd be playing piano in this kind of weather. Reading briefs. Brooding. Anything but creating a wedge in his family he'd hate himself for making and hate himself more if he didn't.

"I dislike what you do," he added without looking at her. "I can't stand how you do it and I think you're a prickly, oversensitive, obstinate pain in the ass. But I don't hate you." Her reflection in the glass before him straightened. Good. She couldn't let Sky mow her down when she had so many others waiting to do the job. "The situation we're in isn't your fault or ours and whether any of us like it or not, you're family. You deserve what each of us received by birth. I'm simply making sure you get it. Don't expect it means you're my best friend."

"You're giving her *Marissa's* inheritance," Sky said, advancing on Raven, his fiery anger changing into a deadly quiet tone.

Raven turned to meet him, not changing his posture. With Sky, you couldn't reveal the smallest weakness or indecision.

Sky glared, accusation vibrating off him in waves. "You can't do it, I won't have it. We don't know the first thing about her."

"We know she's our sister. "

"*My* sister is dead." Tara winced at Sky's harsh pronouncement, but for the first time, she didn't challenge him. Sky wouldn't have noticed anyway. Too wrapped up in his own denial. But they all had pain in this situation and he'd allowed Sky to hold his over their heads for too long.

"What you'll have or not have isn't a concern. If you'll remember, I control the trust and the family financial interests. You don't have a choice about it." They stared at each other, a brief flash of decades old communication passing between them. Instead of the laughter or inside jokes Raven remembered, there was only betrayal and mistrust being expressed now. Hurt, somewhere under it all. How many times would he hurt his brother this way? Disappointing him by doing what needed to be done. If there were any pieces of his soul left, would

he have sold them for Sky's approval? Would he have left Tara to her colleagues, unarmed and undefended?

He didn't have answers for what should have been, though. Something Sky seemed to finally understand.

"Do what you want," he snapped, turning away with the precision of a guillotine. "As you so subtly implied, I'm not needed here."

"Wait." Raven stepped into his brother's path and gestured to Tara. "Sign it."

The pen was still on the dining room table next to the abandoned agreement. Tara followed his indicative head tilt with her eyes, but seemed unable to make herself go to it. She'd be signing more than a flimsy promise not to exploit their history and everyone knew it. From the hallway to the kitchen, Chase came out and collected the papers, delivering them to her and whispering in her ear. She shook her head once, but Chase must have kept talking because she finally took the papers and signed them on her knee. She nearly belted him shoving the sheaf at him, leaving him to bring them to Sky. He didn't say a word when he handed them over, either, but Raven still had a few.

"She was my sister, too. I loved Marissa as much as you did."

Sky didn't meet his stare this time. Strange, how disappointing that was. He just stood there, waiting for Raven to get out of his way.

"We'll bring Tara out at the Christmas Ball. You won't have to do anything but be there."

"I'm not having anything to do with this debacle." Sky might well have been talking to the wall behind Raven for all that he looked at him.

"I'm not asking." Raven could feel Chase's disapproval across the short distance. "This is the right thing to do. For all of us."

"There's nothing right about this and you know it."

"That's something you need to take up with Harper."

Sky burst past him and Raven let him go. His brother still had his demons to face and the last person he would want any help from was the brother who'd never told him the truth. All Raven could do was watch him go.

The elevator took Sky out of the penthouse and the only one left to handle was Tara. With a sigh, Raven passed Chase and tiredly sat down on the bench next to her.

She barely seemed to notice, her shining gaze aimed through the windows to the gray city and waters below. "I came here for an interview and everything in my life, everything, it all changed. I didn't even get a choice."

"None of us did." But he remembered how it felt. Losing the illusion of everything you thought you knew about yourself. Strange, if you thought about it. Both he and Tara could say the same thing. Their lives had turned on the spin of a doorknob. One second, you knew everything about yourself and the things you were capable of. Then the door opened and everything changed.

But not Sky. His life had changed in a vicious twist of metal and death. He'd never found even ground again. "You could cut Sky a little slack. "

"Oh, like he's cutting me?"

"It has to start somewhere." God, if he kept this up, he'd sound like some kind of after school special.

"Is that what you're doing? Being nice because you're the starting point?" She finally looked at him, but bitter sarcasm dripped from her. It was strange, looking into her eyes, seeing a brittle cynicism so familiar it nearly made him smile. So this was what people saw when he looked at them.

"I'm never nice. I prefer being effective."

"Great. Congratulations. How about you go effect someone else?" She went back to glaring out the window.

A quick look to Chase yielded nothing but a shrug. No help there. "I would, but I'm knee deep in your life already. No way out now but through."

Was the reflexive hitch of her shoulder a laugh or a harrumph?

"We have an annual charity event at the estate in another week or so. A Christmas Ball for Children's Charities." She had to know about it. Vanessa had been prepping the house staff for weeks on facilitating the set-up.

"So?"

"So the ball is three days before your birthday."

"Don't you mean D-Day?"

"Essentially, yes." Say what you wanted about her, Tara wasn't one to hide from the ugly things. "We'll call it your coming out party."

That won him a brilliantly demonstrative snort of disbelief. She looked him up and down with suspicion. "You're on a lot of medication, aren't you?"

That's when it happened. An odd sense of understanding the woman next to him. She was scared. Terrified out of her skin. She was trying so damn hard to look like she knew what she was doing but she was drowning in confusion.

She reminded him of Vanessa.

The thought made him swallow carefully. One look at Tara Sellers and you knew she was a woman who'd never had an easy day in her life. The strongest thing about her was the hard shell she'd constructed around herself. Inside, she was so vulnerable a sharp enough look or word and she'd shatter again and again. How many times had he pulled back from pushing Vanessa because of that same haunted, hunted look? He couldn't crush Tara any more than her.

"We're not going to hurt you," he made himself say as gently as possible. "You can trust us."

Her eyes narrowed, turned assessing. He stayed still, waiting for her to come to whatever conclusion she was looking for. It wasn't a good one. "I ran out of trust a long time ago. I don't have any left for you."

Another thing she had in common with Vanessa.

Tara stood up, gathered her coat from the back of his couch and began walking the same way Sky had gone.

"What about chances? Are you out of those, too?" he asked, rising to his feet.

She stopped, one foot on the step to the foyer.

“Sky was right about one thing. We don’t know anything about you. Nothing more than basic facts typed up on a few sheets of paper. I don’t know anything about who you are, no matter what name you’ve had. But you don’t know anything real about us, either, no matter how many stories you’ve read or pictures you’ve taken. Maybe bringing you into this family the right way is the second chance *all* of us need.”

She didn’t respond, but she didn’t move either. He watched her shoulders, waiting for the wariness to loosen from the taut lines of her body. It didn’t happen. Instead, she turned, staring at him with his own eyes, her stance somehow regal and rebellious at the same time.

“I could use a second chance,” she finally said, practically daring him to ask why.

Maybe someday, he would.

Instead he smiled. “Then let’s sit down and talk about getting one.”



Christmas shopping with Amy was a lot like running a marathon. Fast paced, supposedly good for you and torture on the feet.

Vanessa’s feet—in particular—were dragging, her eyes were dry and scratchy and these pesky white stars kept popping up on the edges of her vision. What she wouldn’t give to curl up in bed somewhere. For days.

“You’re getting old, Vangie,” Amy sing-songed. “I’m the one who’s been in bed for weeks, wasting away.”

“And you’ll be back in it if you don’t slow down. Patrice is going to kill us as it is.”

Amy fluttered her lashes. Not the wisest thing in the world while they were walking through the crowded walkway. “Not after she sees the earrings I got her.”

“You’ve got a whole month before she sees those.” Hopefully. Vanessa wouldn’t be surprised to find Patrice with an armed guard doing strip searches

as soon as they walked in the door. The last two months hadn't been particularly easy. After Amy was released from the hospital, getting into the house had been like sneaking into an armed camp. Amy had called, begging to go to the annual after Thanksgiving sales. They did it every year, their own special tradition for sisters. David had convinced his wife it was safe to go to work and the two of them made off as soon as Patrice was down the street.

"Mom never gets mad at me. I'm special."

"Spoiled, more like," Vanessa corrected, happy despite her tiredness. She blinked carefully a few times, the edges of her vision glittering with tiny white pinpoints of light. She shook her head to clear it, but that only made it spin.

"Hey, you okay?" Amy asked, her voice a little distant.

"Tired," Vanessa murmured. The cold was making her fingertips a little numb. She tightened her grip on their bags, but they didn't feel much more secure. The last few weeks were more exhausting than she expected. Between Raven's occasional broods, their usual schedule and the arrangements for the Christmas Ball and Amy's recovery, she felt pulled in every direction.

"Explains those circles under your eyes."

They separated to let a woman with a stroller through, then rejoined a few steps later. "The shadows are from lack of sleep."

"Too much sex?" Amy ventured, not bothering to consider if anyone else were in earshot of such a question.

"No!" Vanessa stopped walking, turning to make a face of indignation at her sister before realizing what she'd just admitted to. It was hard to be mad when Amy was giggling and hopping around like an excited puppy. "You've just had pneumonia and all you can think about is my sex life?"

"At least you've had one. I've been living with the vagina police for seven weeks."

"What happened to your grand plan to sneak Eric in your bedroom window?"

Amy's lit expression darkened. "He's been busy."

Vanessa frowned and she stopped walking. "Busy?" The boy who looked heartbroken after waiting hours and standing up to Patrice Kaye?

Amy shrugged as if it didn't matter.

"You've called him, though." Amy wasn't the type to make assumptions when it came to her dates. "He knows you're starting to get around again, right?"

Amy's small mouth pursed and her eyes gleamed, though she turned her face toward the walkway on the other side of the mall. "He's not interested in going out with a sick girl, Vangie."

"He said that?"

"Didn't have to. I could tell by the fact that he never came back to the hospital after the first night. I haven't heard from him at all. It's like he disappeared or something."

"What about your roommate? Did she—"

"She's seen him. She said he'd barely even look at her. Something about how I kept too important a secret from him. Like he knows what it's like to have people afraid to touch him or talk to him." She swiped off an angry tear sliding down her cheek. "I'm not contagious."

Vanessa's lethargy spiked. She'd hoped Eric Abernathy might be different. How many friends had come and gone for the same reason? In school, each of the girls was kept practically in a quarantine. Children were cruel, but at least they didn't understand. Adults...they were another story. "I'm sorry, Ames. I never meant—"

"It's okay. Celia called him an asshole for me."

Vanessa laughed despite Amy's miserable tone. "Is that all it takes for college girl revenge?"

A small grin lifted the corner of Amy's lips. "That and telling every sorority girl in three colleges that he's got a tiny pecker."

"What about a venereal disease?"

"I was thinking about waiting a few weeks before telling people I dumped him for getting syphilis."

Vanessa hugged Amy to her at the shoulders. "That's my girl."

"Yeah, well, your girl wants a coffee. It's fricken freezing out here." Amy started pushing Vanessa closer to the nearby bookstore/café.

They pulled the glass doors open together. Maybe something warm and sweet would do the trick and wake her up. At least sitting down would help. She hoped. But the blast of warmth was overwhelming after the brisk air outside. The white stars became a great white flash and Vanessa wavered on her feet.

"Vangie!" Amy's thin arms caught her before she could fall back.

Vanessa fought the oncoming blackness, struggling to leave the same way she came in. With Amy half-holding her up, they made it back outside to the railing that marked the edge of the walkway.

"What happened? You scared me!" Amy's gloved hands fluttered around as if she could flutter some answers out of thin air.

Vanessa couldn't answer, gripping the rail as if it were going to escape. While she was busy taking deep breaths, Amy rushed back into the store to pick up her fallen bag. When she came back, Vanessa felt a little better. But not much.

"Well?" Her little sister's tone was a little too maternal to ignore.

"I may have forgotten to eat." Or not forgotten. Food had never been much of a priority to Vanessa and lately, it simply didn't cross her mind much.

"When was the last time you had anything?" Amy had been eating at least six times a day all her life. A missed meal was impossible for someone with her condition because she needed the calories to maintain her weight. She might be very thin, but it wasn't for lack of trying.

"Yesterday morning," Vanessa mumbled, wincing as she braced for panic.

"What?"

"It's not that big a deal. I wasn't hungry for lunch yesterday, I worked through dinner. I went home with Raven and went right to sleep. I woke up late to pick you up, so there went breakfast—"



"It's been nearly two hours since then! Why didn't you say anything? I would have stopped to eat!"

"It didn't seem important." Or welcome. Even now her stomach rolled uneasily.

"If you're Gandhi, it's not important," Amy grumbled. "Come on, there's a restaurant over there."

Vanessa sat in a booth a short time later, looking out the window to the city outside. Far below was the circular hotel drive up and several stores in pink-orange stucco. Beyond that was Broadway street, one of San Diego's busiest strips. She watched people walking around, cars driving past. Taxies dropped people off, picked a few up. By and large, the world was continuing without her.

"Spill," Amy ordered after the waitress dropped off the mugs of hot chocolate.

"Spill what?" Vanessa asked, grateful for the soft seat and the warm drink. She sipped, the whipped cream tickling the roof of her mouth.

"Spill what's keeping you up at night. Besides the obvious."

Vanessa rolled her eyes. "Why is everything about sex with you? Raven and I do a lot more than that, you know?"

"Yeah? Like what? I can't picture the two of you vegging out in front of the TV."

"We watch the news." Raven did, anyway, in his absent-minded kind of way. She'd lay her head on his lap and read a book while he'd read reports, the TV on quietly and his hand wending through her hair. More often than not, that was how she fell asleep, with the gentle massage of his large hand easing the way. That wasn't to say they didn't still scare each other a little with the passion between them, but the peaceful times came along nearly as often. At first, she'd worried, but Raven seemed content not to question it. It was what he'd asked for, she supposed. She would never allow herself to get comfortable, but if quiet hours together was all the intimacy he was requesting, how much of a threat to her could he really be?

"Oh, don't stop there, Vangie, even my most romantic fantasies don't hold a candle to *watching the news*."

Vanessa picked up a toothpick and threw it at her sister, but Amy only batted it down with an unrepentant laugh.

"Come on, you have to do something interesting. Jet off to Milan? Spend weekends in the Caribbean? Maybe watch a few Hollywood premieres?"

Vanessa shook her head. "He's a workaholic, remember?"

"You make him sound like an old lady when I know perfectly well there's got to be something fascinating about him. You're just hiding it."

*Raven?* An old lady? "Why are you so interested?"

"Because you haven't left him yet," Amy said, no longer laughing but smiling in that gentle, too-young-to-know-so-well kind of way.

Vanessa wanted to say something, but she couldn't think of anything believable. Instead, she took a careful drink of her chocolate.

"Why don't you just admit you don't want to leave him? That you're not going to."

"Of course I am. Soon," she added for good measure, even if saying it made her throat tighten.

"Oh? And how will you explain your sudden departure to *him*?"

Vanessa shrugged. "It's not like there aren't plenty of reasons to choose from. Raven is very demanding. He smokes."

Amy's brows rose. Because of the health of the girls, Vanessa kept herself away from smokers and had very clear views on people who wasted perfectly healthy lungs.

Vanessa shrugged, stifling the sense of doing something wrong. "Only when he plays piano. He thinks I believe him when he says just keeps them on hand. He's pushy and unrelenting when he wants to be. He's overbearing, he makes unilateral decisions left and right, which he knows I can't stand, but it doesn't stop him. Trust me, when we end it, neither of us is going to be shocked."

“He sounds like a nightmare,” Amy commented as the waitress returned to take their orders. Vanessa didn’t really think about her selection, just glad to be warm and sitting there. “So when are you getting married?”

She choked, the chocolate stinging the back of her nose. She pinioned Amy with a glare. “First of all, it’s not as if he’s asking—and I can guarantee you that he won’t, so don’t even think about it.”

“Hey, no one’s going to blame me for wondering. You keep pretending you and Raven are having some kind of fling, but you two are going about it all wrong.”

“You can’t go about a fling wrong. You just...have them.”

“Like you would know.” Amy’s smug look couldn’t be argued with, dammit. Vanessa watched her sister pluck her gloves off, a sure sign she was about to make a list. Sure enough, the pinky finger pinged upward like an arrow. “First of all, flings are about down and dirty, old-fashioned boinking. Just boinking. The second you don’t feel like doing it any more, it’s generally over. But you and Raven have been seeing each other for two months.” The next finger came up. “You’ve all but moved in together and you guys are spending recreational time watching the news. You’re way beyond the point where you can pretend it’s not serious.”

“I’m not pretending anything. So what if we’re comfortable together? That doesn’t make it serious.”

“What’s his favorite food?”

“Swordfish.” Vanessa watched Amy’s eyebrow rise as if that were proof. “I knew that before I slept with him. It’s my job to know all his personal details.”

“How many of your personal details does he know?”

“Very few.” Something she intended to maintain, even if she had the sneaking suspicion he was collecting information as each day passed. He kept surprising her by knowing things, where she kept her belongings, how she liked her space. Tiny, unimportant things that shouldn’t matter, such as her liking hot chocolate more than coffee and stocking it in his sparsely appointed kitchen. As long as she kept her distance, she was safe. It bothered him, she

knew. Since the night she left him behind to see Amy in the hospital, he'd allowed her to do it. His mouth would tighten when she would lock him out, but he didn't say anything. Still, she could see him calculating the rejection, adding it to the tally. He'd back away, but he never fully withdrew. She wasn't dumb enough to call his patience a level of acceptance. More like someone testing her limits, looking for a weakness. Each time, he stayed a little closer to the topic, never let her get away without some remark, some reminder that he was still there.

In that respect, Amy was right. They were serious. Seriously circling each other, wary and waiting for the moment when they would be honest. And it would be over.

"Should I go home and dump him right now? Would that make you happy?"

"No," Amy replied, sounding as if Vanessa were a puppy instead of an irritated adult. "I want you to open your eyes and admit you're in love with him. Maybe when you do, you'll have a compelling enough reason to stop looking for escape routes and have a real life."

The waitress dropped off two bread bowls of soup and crackers, hightailing away as quickly as possible. Vanessa wondered if her aggravation could possibly be visible to everyone but her sister.

"I'm not looking for escape routes. I'm being honest. Raven has faults. So do I and as a result, so does our *relationship*." She said the word slowly, carefully, so Amy would realize that she did know what she was involved in. It just happened to be a temporary one.

"Okay, so let's look at this another way. If he's such a pain, why are you still with him?"

"Because." Vanessa sighed, hopelessness creating a vise on her shoulders. Nearly every morning, she asked herself the same question. Watching him dress, watching him shave the dark stubble that tickled her shoulder in the night. "He's as amazing as he is annoying. Being with Raven isn't like being with anyone else. He holds me at night, always checking to make sure I'm warm enough. He keeps trying to take care of me, even if I don't need him to."

It's..." Vanessa didn't want to meet Amy's gaze. It would be knowing. Accusing. "No one has ever cared about me the way he does."

When Vanessa did look up, Amy's head was down. "I didn't mean—"

"Yes you did," Amy replied, her voice sad. "We both know you got the short end of the stick, Vange. It wasn't easy taking care of three sick kids your whole life. Losing the girls almost killed you, but no one worried about you. No one asked if you were all right. Not even me or Dad. You were the strong one, even when you shouldn't have had to be and I'm sorry for that. I really am."

Vanessa reached over to take Amy's bare hand in hers, willing some of her warmth into the small bones. "I never saw you three as sick kids."

"I know that."

"I see you as my sisters and the most important people in my life. I wouldn't give up one minute with you, not for anyone."

"Even when we let Mom treat you the way she does?"

"Amy—"

"I let her get rid of you in the hospital. I let her keep me intubated, even when the doctor said the Cipro would work without it." Amy's mirthless laugh was more of a sob. She sniffed, using her free hand to swipe at her cheeks again. "Look at me, I haven't cried this much in years."

Vanessa could only tighten her hold. Amy gave her a bitter smile, but tightened her fingers too. "Can you believe I'm more afraid of disappointing her than I am of dying?"

"She's your mother," Vanessa replied. If she had a mother, she'd probably be afraid of disappointing her too. "She's been through a lot. It's not easy losing your children." *Especially when you wanted them...*

"You've been through a lot, too, Vangie. We all have."

"Which is why you and I know better than to hold grudges. You never need to apologize to me." It was the rule she'd always held with her sisters. They should never feel bad for not wanting to suffer anymore. For wanting to be happy while they could be.

"I've told her I don't want to be on a respirator again."

Vanessa could imagine how well that had gone over. “What did Dad say?”

“He said he understood. Mom said I was trying to kill myself.”

Fatalistic or not, Amy enjoyed living too much to be suicidal.

“I told her if she ever allowed it when I wasn’t conscious, I’d sign a DNR.”

A Do Not Resuscitate? Vanessa felt the jolt straight to her stomach. “Amy—”

“Don’t worry, I haven’t done it. But if I can’t trust her to act in my best interests instead of her own, I don’t want her interfering in my health. And I won’t have her blaming you if something goes wrong. It’s one thing to die young. I refuse to die with regrets.” Amy took a deep, careful breath, releasing it slow. As if she were leading up to something Vanessa wouldn’t want to hear. “You shouldn’t die with any either.”

“I don’t have any.” None that Amy needed to trouble herself with, anyway.

“You will if you walk away from the one person who cares about you the way you should be cared about.”

She wouldn’t have to walk away, necessarily, though it would certainly be smarter. No one ever stayed, not the people who mattered. Vanessa didn’t say as much, though, not to Raven and not now to Amy, who was removing her pill case from her purse.

She didn’t normally allow herself to think about the raw facts that had cost her her family, but they plagued her now. Sometime, in the next ten, maybe even twenty—if God was kind—years or so, Amy would die. Vanessa wouldn’t see those humorous blue eyes or those thick bouncy curls. Amy would eventually be unable to clear her lungs as thoroughly because of increased scar tissue, a small breath becoming a difficult chore. Her youthful body would turn against her, failing because its secretions were thick with dead white blood cells. Then, she would be only a memory, just like Trisha and Jean.

Then Vanessa would be truly alone.

“Vangie? Are you crying?”

Vanessa blinked, knocked out of her thoughts by Amy’s concern. She reached up a hand, surprised to feel the streaming wetness on her cheeks.

“Oh, God, I am.” She hurriedly grabbed a napkin, blotting at her cheeks. She swiped under her eyes, guilt at her selfish fears washing through her.

“Relax, Vange. It’s okay to cry.”

“I know, it’s just that I didn’t realize that I was.”

“You’re really starting to worry me.”

Vanessa laughed, a short, sad little sound even to herself. “If I didn’t know better, I would worry, too. I was just being maudlin, and honestly, I’m just tired. Maybe a little overstressed. The finalizations of the Charity Ball details are sitting on my desk and I still don’t have a dress. Raven’s driving me crazy because he hates my apartment. He keeps coming up with reasons why it’s unsafe to live where I do when I could just live with him.” The first time he’d brought it up, she’d been too shocked to argue. Actually, he looked too shocked to argue and they both let it drop. The idea seemed to have grown on him, though, because he’d brought it up again. And again. And again. The last time had turned into an argument they still hadn’t pretended was over.

“Maybe he’s worried about you.”

“There’s nothing to be worried about,” she scoffed. “I have locks, I use them.”

“Vangie, I’ve seen where you live. Trust me, a dead bolt and a slide chain do not reassure me. Dad doesn’t like it much, either, so I doubt Raven would be big on his girlfriend living there. The medical loans have been paid off and there’s enough in the savings now that you can move some place better. Why not do it and make everyone happy?”

“Because Raven would take over the search until he found me a cozy little padlock to call home.”

Amy giggled, picking up her spoon and starting in on her soup. “Boy, he’s really turned into that protect and shelter type.”

“I didn’t ask to be protected and sheltered and I’m not moving back home just so you and Dad will feel better, either.” She shuddered. Share a roof with Patrice again? *God forbid*. “And, Miss Know-it-all, the medical loans have only

*just* been paid off. It'll be a while before the savings is strong enough for me to feel better about making a bigger expense out of myself, okay?"

Amy nodded. "So move in with Raven."

Vanessa stared at her, then shook her head in frustration. "You don't get it."

"What's to get? A gorgeous, brilliant man who can't get enough of you is understandably worried about you living in a hole that rats abandoned years ago and wants you to live with him in his castle in the sky. Yeah, you have my pity."

"It's not a castle," Vanessa grumbled. "It's a penthouse."

"Sorry, my bad, I flunked my Architecture Of The Stinking Rich course this semester." They tried to glare at each other, but soon they were both laughing and Vanessa felt ridiculous, but in a good way. Explaining it to Amy was just so much easier than explaining it to Raven.

"There's no way I can live with him, Ames. If I moved in, I could never..."

"Walk away?" Amy finished for her.

Vanessa nodded. She closed her eyes, sighing as she pushed her bowl away, her appetite gone, if it had been there at all. A hopeless ache filled her, forcing the tears back to her eyes. Fighting them didn't help because she couldn't fight the feeling inside herself. "You're right." If she could stuff herself in a closet and never come out, it might be better than admitting the truth. But she couldn't hide from it—or what it meant—any longer. "I'm falling in love with him."

Had fallen. Maybe had always been in love with him. God, she'd been stupid. He was never supposed to be more than a fling. Never supposed to be in her heart. There were so many nevers attached to Raven Remington that she shouldn't have thought twice about denying herself or him. But she had thought twice. Three times. Four. And still she'd let him in.

Now what was she supposed to do.

She felt Amy's hand cover hers before pushing her bowl back in front of her. "If you do leave him, nothing you do or don't do is going to make it any



easier on you. So stop making things difficult on purpose. Try to enjoy what you have for as long as you have it. If the man wants you to live with him, give it a shot. Don't say no just to prove you can. Trust me, he knows you can. *Everyone* knows."

Vanessa gave an unwilling and somewhat soggy laugh. "It must be so nice to think you have all the answers."

"Sure beats looking for them." Amy winked. "So, now that I've fixed your love life, you can eat something and go home to your lovesick playboy, ready to live happily ever after."

Vanessa had the strongest urge to do just that. Go to Raven and pretend that it was all going to work out. That it *could* work out. But she was no believer in happily ever after. All Amy had proved was that she couldn't lie to herself anymore. She was in too deep. She'd run out of time.

Either she opened herself to everything or she had to set him free.

## Chapter Eleven

She should be back by now, but as the shortened winter sun's faint light stopped pushing through the heavy clouds, Raven admitted she'd gone home. To her tiny bed, tiny light and makeshift necessities. He pinched the bridge of his nose to keep from swearing.

It really wasn't her things that bothered him. It was only marginally where she lived—though that margin widened every time she decided she'd rather stay there instead of with him. No, what had him tensing was the reminder that she still hung on to all her secrets and wasn't ever going to let him in.

Normally, it would be quite a leap to say wanting to sleep in her own bed was evidence of a woman's lack of trust. But things with Vanessa were never normal. It seemed every day lately, he came face to face with the things she wouldn't say, the questions she wouldn't answer. Before, he'd let the subject go, whatever it was. Not that it mattered. Suddenly, she'd have something to take care of. Someone to meet or somewhere to be and that night she'd hide herself and all her secrets in her apartment where he was not allowed to reach.

He picked up his phone, pressing the button that speed dialed her cell phone. It rang five times before she answered.

"Hi," she said, half-breezy, half-tentative.

"Hi," he replied, relief that she picked up assuaging some of his aggravation. "Still out with Amy?"

He left the view of the bay to lean against the piano. She'd bought a fat, leafy plant to sit on the rim, its heavy vines and green leaves reaching out to tangle with his fingers.

"No, she had to get back before Patrice got home. I was tired so I figured I'd just sleep here at my place."

"Oh," he said, carefully reaching into the open leaf of the piano for the slim silver cigarette case and lighter. A quick click and he had the familiar black cigarette between his lips, the lighter flickering to life.

"How did the meeting go?" she asked while he took a deep drag.

"About as well as can be expected. Tara agreed to sell. We celebrated by arguing. She agreed to a presentation at the ball," he added, settling down on the piano stool and lifting the fall of the instrument.

"Raven, are you smoking?"

"Of course not." If she could lie, so could he. He toyed with a few keys.

"But you're playing," she said, less an accusation and more a reminder. He made a noncommittal sound but a clear high E pierced the air. He heard her sigh. "You're angry."

"What would I have to be angry about?" he asked around the cigarette, both hands now finding the proper keys. "It couldn't be the fact that you're not here and you didn't call to say you wouldn't be."

"I didn't want to interrupt," she explained calmly. It annoyed him all the more. Whenever she was wrong, she was calm. As if lying came so goddamn easy.

"Yes, I do get after you so often for that." His hands tangled on the keys. He gave up on their soothing ability. Holding the phone with one hand, he yanked the cigarette out of his mouth with the other. Neither the instrument nor the nicotine was going to salve him this time.

She seemed to realize it too. "Did you call to see if I was okay or to pick a fight?"

"Both."

"Fine. I'm fine—"

"You're always fine. Once you get over *there*."

She sighed, the sigh of the terminally ill patient. “I came *here* because I knew I was going to be lousy company if I went *there*. You didn’t need that after a tense family meeting.”

“It sounds good, but that’s not the reason you’re not here,” he said, his voice hard to use. Something about Vanessa and her evasiveness made him want to yell until he had nothing left. But his damned conscience—when the hell did it grow back?—wouldn’t allow him hurt her that way. Holding it in never got any easier. “You went there because something scared you. Again.”

She was quiet long enough for him to know she wasn’t going to argue. Long enough for him to start to feel something like guilt at being so blunt.

“I’m tired, Raven.”

*That makes two of us.* He rubbed his eye with the heel of his hand, anger gone, but not the frustration. “We keep doing this. Things go along fine and then you slam the door on me and you run as far and as fast as you possibly can. When are you going to trust me, Vanessa? When are going to have some faith in me?”

All he heard for a few seconds was the shudder of her expelled breath. “I’ve done the best I could, Raven.”

“What is so hard to tell me? Have I ever let you down? Not kept my word?”

“It’s not you.”

“Then who the hell is it?”

“We knew this relationship wasn’t permanent—”

His chest felt like she’d just hit him with that sledgehammer. “Don’t finish that sentence.”

“I have to.” She sobbed, her pain reaching him across the distance between them. She tried to start over but he couldn’t let her.

“Vanessa, stop. What are you doing?”

“I’m ending this.” So simple.

So wrong.

“Why?” Pressure seemed to be growing from within him. He shut his eyes, trying to get a grip on all the emotions vying for control, but they were moving in too fast of a spiral.

“It’s too hard, Raven. I can’t... You don’t understand.”

“So tell me. Take a deep breath and tell me.” He thought for a second she might do it, but the second passed all too quickly.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. Then she cut the line.

“Dammit!” He hit redial, but the phone only rang until her voice mail picked up. Over and over again. Finally, he threw the phone on the couch and continued the motion to the closet where he could get his coat. This time, he couldn’t let her hide.

The elevator moved too slowly, taking him down to the parking garage. He stepped out once it stopped, swearing at himself. He’d let his frustrations get the best of him and pushed her too far. But how? When? How could two minutes on the phone be the final straw? It couldn’t have been the call. She’d already been upset when she answered. Something else scared her, he knew it. Something else had her running.

It was the only hope he had.

He strained to keep the car from speeding across town. Rain had already begun falling in sheets, making visibility nearly impossible. It wouldn’t do any good to get himself killed. Nearly there, traffic slowed, then crawled to a stop at her exit. He joined the lane of basically parked cars, waiting as they inched upward every now and again. Precious minutes sped away with the water flowing down the off-ramp’s incline, but he could neither move out of the single lane or back onto the freeway. Which left him to the drum of the rain and the echo of his own thoughts. Thoughts that felt less like thinking and more like panic.

Had he really lost her? And why? Because she needed a place to run to when things got too complicated? A place he had no part of, that was only her own and beholden to no one? Why had that bothered him so much he’d thrown away everything they had in a few stupid sentences?

*Because you want the place she runs to to be you.*

Jealousy? Probably. Thanks to her, he'd already discovered some uncomfortable pockets of possessiveness inside himself. Jealousy was the obvious next step for a man who never knew where he stood. In all the time he'd known Vanessa Kaye, he'd been standing on quicksand. Every smile was a gift, her sweetness a balm to wounds so old he'd grown used to the pain. She gave him quiet moments that weren't cloaked in loneliness. But if he told her, if he ever tried to explain or worse, let it slip in any way other than his touch, her eyes became full of fear and pain. As if by loving her, he'd hurt her.

*Loving her...*

A horn honked, jarring him into realizing that the cars ahead had started streaming forward. He punched the clutch, shifted into first and pushed up the hill to an officer at the top of the ramp, but the road right was blocked off with wooden barricades. He rolled down the window, eyeing the cop in the yellow slicker.

"Hey, buddy, follow the detour—"

"I need to go right."

"Not tonight, you don't. Idiot kids thought street racing in water would be exciting. Got a six car pileup two blocks over. They're redirecting traffic all around, it's a damn mess."

"Is there any way in at all?"

The guy shrugged. "You can walk." He gestured for Raven to pull forward, withdrawing from the window.

Raven reluctantly turned the wheel to the left, cruising across the intersection. He turned in at the first residential road. The houses were dark, occasionally lit with an orange porch light and the street was lined with shadowy vehicles. He zipped up his leather jacket and took a deep breath before leaving his car to join them. He hit the alarm, raised his collar and began the walk past the blockade.

Rain pooled at his neck, the freezing wind pushing through the street as if it were a canyon. The city lights, arcing over the road, offered far less light than

the ambulance and police lights. Everything was dark, doors were either closed or filled with people watching the clearing up of cars and victims.

It was a quiet place, close and forbidding, but filled to the brim with people. Silent eyes he could feel watching him, making sure he stayed far from their doors and their families.

And Vanessa lived here.

He kept walking, eyes forward, happy to not offer so much as a twinge of defensiveness to anyone living here. He didn't have time to get himself into trouble. He had to get to her door. He only wished he knew what to say when he got there.

*I didn't mean to hurt you?*

*Keep your secrets, just don't leave me?*

His pace increased while his emotions churned. No matter what he said, she was going to ask the question he didn't have the first clue how to answer: why?

*Because my family is a wreck and you're the only one I can hold onto?*

*You're the only thing in my disaster of a life that makes any sense?*

His feet stopped first. Then his breath and finally his heart. *Because I love you.*

He wished for a second that he had kept walking. Freezing, soaked in the tangible darkness, his legs faltered and his entire body trembled so strongly he wondered if he were going to fall to his knees. He thought randomly how it would be nice to have a chair, something to lean on while his entire being cracked in half.

Love. He loved her. Loved a woman who didn't want to be loved. Or was too afraid to be loved? He began walking again, even less sure of what to say when he saw her, but all the more sure that if he didn't see her tonight, he'd never see her again. Not the Vanessa he knew so well. The one so fragile and determined not to be. Give her any time and she'd cement her resolution to tear them apart. She'd have a thousand reasons that nearly made sense and a will so fortified she'd leave her job and his life completely to prove herself right.

Driven by that thought, he broke into a run. Only a few more blocks and he'd be there. Houses blurred, people became insignificant and the rain completely disappeared from his attention.

Then, suddenly, he was there, under her sagging eaves, uncertainty assailing him. If he left now, she'd never know he was there or how he felt. There was a touch of safety there, knowing she wouldn't turn from him again, the way everyone else had time and again. No more risk. No more heartbreak. No more pain.

But he'd never be happy again either.

And neither would she if everyone always let her run away from it.

Raven banged heavily on the thin door of Vanessa's apartment. He didn't stop until it was yanked open and she stood in front of him like some kind of dream, her eyes wide, her nightgown rumpled. She'd been crying. Her eyes were puffy and her nose had red blotches that matched her cheeks. She was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen.

"Don't say anything," he said, his voice tight. "I don't want to talk, I don't want to fight. I just need to be with you."

She nodded, her eyes shimmering while he took his first taste of relief. Letting him inside, she pulled off his sodden coat and hurried to her bathtub to drape it over her circular shower rod. He wondered if the weight would warp it, but pushed the thought from his mind. The only thing that mattered was that she'd opened her door and let him in. The rest could take care of itself.

Vanessa came back into the room, hurrying to undress him, to take away the cold wet clothes he'd forgotten about completely. The worry lines on her face touched him, as did the warmth of her gaze. As if she'd never tried to close him out of her life. Or maybe just couldn't.

He barely fit onto her bed, pressing into the cold metal rods that formed the back. He didn't care about the discomfort, not when she tucked herself against him, wrapped his heavy arms around herself and sighed contentedly. She was soon asleep, careless as a kitten, completely unaware of the emotion that had him wondering if this were some kind of dream.



He touched her hair, sweeping his hand over it, through it, grazing the backs of his fingers over the silk of her cheek and the smeared tears still drying there.

God in Heaven, the thing that he'd told himself for years he didn't believe in had struck him down. He loved her, with every broken piece of his heart. Just the way his mother had loved his father. Maybe even more, a terrifying notion considering what his father had done with that love.

Fear twined itself in the relief of being with her. If she found out how he felt, no amount of banging on her door would win her back. He'd been right not to want to fall in love. As if his life were someone's idea of irony in perpetual motion, he knew he couldn't tell her. If he wanted to keep her, he could never tell her. After all, his parents had a love with too much trust. What kind of life would he and Vanessa be able to make when they didn't have enough?

The puzzle was too much to think through, his revelation too new, too raw. Tomorrow was soon enough to figure it out. For now, he was whole, he was happy and he was with her. Gathering her close, he closed his eyes and slept.



"That has to be the dumbest thing you've ever done," Amy commented philosophically over a glass of juice in Raven's kitchen three days later. She'd hitched a ride to Raven's building with their father on his way to work. "Considering how you've handled this entire relationship so far, that's saying a lot."

Vanessa rolled her eyes and took a sip of her own orange juice. She made a face and forced herself to swallow it before pushing the glass away, still half full.

"Still no appetite?" Amy raised both eyebrows.

Vanessa shrugged, adjusting the collar of Raven's silk robe tighter around herself. "Nerves. Nothing tastes good because I'm expecting the other shoe to

drop any time now. It's getting so bad just the smell of anything turns my stomach."

"Maybe you should let Dr. Alexander take a look at you." Amy's eyes were soft with worry.

That was a new one on Vanessa. Aside from concerns about where she lived, no one ever really seemed to worry about her. She pasted a smile on despite the quelling sensation in her stomach. "This is your checkup, not mine. You can't foist it off on me."

Amy made a distasteful face of her own. "Can't blame me for trying."

Vanessa led the way out of the kitchen. "You'll have your revenge finding me a dress for the ball. I'm leaving myself completely in your greedy little hands. I don't even want to think about what matches and clashes and isn't fashionable or should be burned."

That definitely brightened her sister's mood. Amy grabbed her juice and followed Vanessa into the bedroom. She whistled at the view. "You're really turning down the chance to live here?"

Vanessa opened the closet door by pressing on the paneling. It clicked open and there, next to a series of Raven's suit jackets, were the few things she brought with her to keep here. She reached in, reminding herself that for all of her sister's advice, Amy was only twenty-one and had a lot to learn.

"There's more to life than nice things," she said, removing her slacks from the wooden hanger.

"Uh huh," Amy replied absently. No doubt her attention had flitted on to something else by now. Vanessa didn't turn to find out what. "So, what happened after he followed you home?"

Maybe she should have turned... Her middle tightened and she faltered while fitting her leg into her pants. "Nothing."

Amy scoffed. "What do you mean, nothing? The guy walked a half-mile in the pouring rain for you. *Something* had to happen."

Something had, she knew as well as Amy did, but so far, Raven hadn't said what it was. "We went to sleep. The next morning, it was like normal. He asked if I'd spend the week here, I said yes, here we are."

Once they were back to his apartment, he'd devoted his entire weekend to her. He alternated between staring off into space as if weighing some momentous decision or staring at her as if she might disappear altogether. She'd been waiting for him to be angry with her. For him to demand explanations that he actually deserved, for once. Instead a fine tension of nervousness ran between them, one that only seemed to get stronger the longer they didn't talk. One she didn't know how to break.

When she told him that morning that she'd already arranged to take Amy to a doctor's appointment, he reluctantly agreed to go into the office without her. When he left, it was with a soft, intense kiss that said things to her heart she was too afraid to listen to.

"Where's your date book?" Amy asked, plummeting Vanessa back to reality, not to mention the clothes she was supposed to be putting on.

"In my bag, why?"

"I need your calendar. I scribbled a phone number back in September and I want to look the guy up." Amy found the oversize purse in the bathroom next to her make-up case and Vanessa shook her head as Amy began to comment, as usual.

"There's sociopaths less exacting than you, Vange. What, you afraid your make-up is going to escape if you don't baggie and label?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah..."

In the other room, Amy just laughed.

"So whose number did you want?"

"Remember that guy from that place?"

"No." Vanessa tugged her shirt into place, frowning at the puckering button holes. Raven's insistence on regular eating was starting to show, even with the disinterest in food.

"The Coffee Guy. Dreds. Incredible lattes."

"Oh," Vanessa said, playing along. Amy could get a phone number off a monk, so there was no point in keeping track, but her date book was often the site of record since Amy never had anything of her own to write on. She wished Coffee Guy luck and gave her blouse another tug. It didn't help, but there wasn't any more time to fuss.

With an absent pat, she followed her sister into the bathroom and ran her brush through her hair one more time so she could clip it back. Just her luck, her hair wasn't any more cooperative than her clothes. Irritated, she decided to just leave it down. With nothing else to do, she finally noticed that Amy wasn't talking. A quick glance found her sitting on the closed lid of the commode, flipping through beleaguered pages in the date book.

"What's the matter? Can't find it?"

"Hmmm?" Amy looked up, cheeks pink, and flipping the book closed like a kid caught with a toy.

Vanessa frowned. "Coffee Guy. Did you find him?"

"Oh yeah, just like I thought. October."

"You said September."

"Did I?" Amy sprang to her feet. "Well, we should get going. Dr. Alexander and all." Amy all but motored out of the bedroom. Sighing, Vanessa got her purse off the floor before following.

Amy didn't say much on the drive. Vanessa put it to some level of nervousness about her checkup. Dr. Alexander had been treating the Kaye family all their lives, but Amy never much cared for updates on her condition. After Trisha and Jean's deaths, it was all Vanessa could do to keep the usually ebullient girl from full-blown depression after each one. They were getting to the point where she only left the appointments pensive. At this stage, the best news was a lack of serious deterioration. Vanessa never asked for more.

They sat quietly in the waiting room, Amy still holding Vanessa's date book as if it had the secrets to the universe. When they were escorted into the exam room, Vanessa held out her hand for it.

"Um, Vange...have you looked at your previous months lately?"

Vanessa put her hand down. She hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary. "No," she said, drawing the word out. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

Amy's eyes looked a little pained. "You really can't tell, can you?"

"Can't tell what?" Vanessa would have gotten an answer, too, if Dr. Alexander hadn't knocked and entered the room.

"And how're my two favorite ladies?" He probably greeted all his patients that way, but Vanessa found herself genuinely smiling at him. An older man in his late fifties, his thick brown hair had grown liberally salted with silver, but his blue eyes were as friendly as they ever had been behind the lenses of his wire frame glasses. "Not changed for the exam, Amy? I'm sorry, I can give you another minute or—"

"We need a pregnancy test," Amy blurted, startling Vanessa so much she stumbled without being aware she was moving. "It's not for me," Amy added in a rush, her eyes huge as she looked at Vanessa with apology. "It's for you."

A swell of relief washed over Vanessa at the same time that a sense of foreboding rode in. She laughed nervously. "What are you talking about?"

"It's here. In your book. Unless you forgot to write it down this month—"

"What are you talking about?" Vanessa repeated, more forcefully, snatching the book from Amy's outstretched hands. She flipped through the pages, not even reading the notations.

"Would you ladies like a few moments to figure this out?"

"Yes," Vanessa said at the same time that Amy said no. Vanessa found the right page. There, in the upper right corner of the 3rd of September, the solid black dot of her menstrual cycle. She turned back the *Week At A Glance* to October and found it again, just as expected on the 9th, even if it was remarkably short. But November had yet to receive an entry. Here they were at the end of the month...and nothing. Not in the book, not in her memory.

"I'm more than a week late," she said, the words not registering despite how they echoed in her head. Her legs weakened, the feeling of a pile of bricks tumbling over her and stealing her ability to breathe.

"I guess that's my cue to see about fitting you in for a pregnancy test," the doctor announced with a smile. "You're lucky I like you, young lady. For all the years you've been coming here, I don't think I've done so much as an ear exam on you. We'll call it even if you're expecting, though, how about that?"

"But I can't...I'm not..." Vanessa looked at Amy, finding understanding in Amy's expression, but she couldn't figure out what she was supposed to do with it. Her hands began to shake, a lifetime of fears swallowing her whole. Holding Amy as a baby, crying into her hair when they discovered she, too, was sick. Holding Trisha's hand, trying so hard not to scream while her best friend died as quietly as she had lived. Unable to shed any more tears at Jean's funeral, no matter how broken she felt inside. And the horrible, horrible terror inched its icy path up her spine, leaving numbness in its place.

"Just take the test, Vange. It'll be okay, you'll see. There's no reason to panic—"

"She's a healthy woman in her prime. Why would she panic?" Dr. Alexander's confusion sounded like disdain.

"It's unexpected," Amy replied, reaching out to hug Vanessa close, her thin arms not strong enough to hold Vanessa in place when she pulled back and forced her wobbling legs to hold her up.

"It's impossible," Vanessa corrected, determined to be as strong now as she'd had to be all her life. She couldn't give into the fear because this simply wasn't happening. It wasn't. They'd never been without birth control. Not once. "It's just a side effect of the pills. My OB-Gyn said it would effect my cycle. There's no need to go bothering Dr. Alexander, Amy."

"If you don't get the test now, I know you, you'll pretend it's not happening and you won't go to your regular doctor."

Vanessa didn't like how true that probably was. "I'll handle it. Later."

Amy sent Dr. Alexander a pleading look. Vanessa turned to him, this man who had supported her as even their parents hadn't, sure he would do so one more time.

He pursed his lips, chewing the inside of his cheek thoughtfully. “How about we just see what the test says. Rule it out. When it comes out negative, Amy—to say nothing of yourself—will feel that much more relieved and you can go to your own doctor without it hanging over your head. Janine,” he said, leaning out into the corridor and gesturing to his nurse. When he came back in, he smiled gently and took Vanessa’s hand. “You go with Janine, get this squared away. You,” he said to Amy, “aren’t getting out of your checkup that easily. Don’t think I don’t know you’re good at sidetracking me by now, young lady...”

Vanessa allowed herself to be led out, Dr. Alexander’s genial voice fading away as she moved down the hallway to the patient restroom. This was all a mistake. And if it wasn’t...

Well, it was just better not to dream of things that couldn’t be and far safer not to have dreams that could only lead to agony.

## Chapter Twelve

Raven came home early hoping to find Vanessa waiting for him. Instead, the apartment was dark and cold. He called her name a few times, checking the bedroom in case she was sleeping again. She'd been sleeping like the dead lately, which was somewhat comforting. If he ever relaxed enough to sleep deeply, he knew she'd be there when he woke up. Most of the time.

She wasn't there.

Picking up the phone, he dialed her apartment number. No answer. He paged her. She didn't call back. An hour went by, then two. Despite several more pages, there was no word from her.

Was this like the other night? Had she run away again, determined to end it?

No. His instincts might have little experience dealing with relationships, but they weren't picking up on her fear. Instead, he had the sensation at the back of his neck that something was wrong. A quick check of the bathroom revealed her make-up still on the counter, the ever present overnight case still under the sink. The closet still held her clothes. It wasn't much, but if she'd meant to leave him, she wouldn't have abandoned so much as a fingerprint.

Something was definitely wrong.

He tried her phone again, but it wasn't any more helpful than before. What did people do in these situations? Call friends, he supposed, except he and Vanessa led insular lives. He didn't have friends, other than Chase, whom had been so busy with Tara lately they hadn't talked much and whom Vanessa would never call for a heart to heart of any kind. She spent her spare time with her sister, but Amy was the last person Vanessa would allow him to have



contact with. Did the girl live at home still? This would be a hell of a lot easier if Vanessa shared any other information. Had she ever said her father's name? Her stepmother's? Where they lived? Raven scoured his mind, but information streamed past too fast for him to grasp.

This must be what panic feels like.

A call to Information managed to inform him there were a sum total of 483 Kayes in the greater San Diego area. Listed. He dragged his hand down his face at the prospect of digging up the ones who weren't listed.

Could he make a call to a contact in the IRS at eight-thirty at night, demanding a list? Probably, but it would include a visit from the Secret Service or someone of that nature wondering why. Somehow, "Because I can't find my girlfriend," didn't seem like a justifiable answer.

That gave him a limited number of things he could think to do. He worried, he paced, he swore a few times, and he poured himself a drink he never touched. For a long time, he stared out the window to the street far below, but saw nothing more discernible than lights moving and vague colors of cars. All the while, he debated whether he was overreacting, if she was breaking up with him or if something wasn't right. He never came up with any definitive answers. Only one question. Where the hell was she?

The night wore on, and he grew more agitated with each passing hour. At least on Friday, he'd known she was home and safe. Now...she could be anywhere. Finally, at eleven o'clock, the shrill ring of the phone broke his silence.

He snatched the receiver off its base. "Remington."

"Mr. Remington, there's a young woman here to see you."

If it had been Vanessa, she'd have been sent up right away. "Who is it?"

"An Amy Kaye, sir."

"Amy?" he asked, a sense of dread filling him. If something had happened to Vanessa— "Send her up."

He dropped the phone onto the couch, all but running to the elevator. He watched while the small light signaled the rising of the elevator car. Finally, with a pleasant ding that almost hurt his ears, the car arrived.

The wide metal doors opened and a small young woman stood there in a thick red coat, a matching hat with flapping ears tied under her chin. She looked like a child dressed that way, all alone in the elevator.

She hadn't changed much in the years since the picture in Vanessa's apartment had been taken. He could tell she was skinny under her coat from the thinness of her face, which was fair to the point of pale. Her hair was a crop of springy, blonde, Shirley Temple curls. Blue eyes widened with a bit of awe as she looked up the entire foot and a half to his eyes.

She stepped a little closer, her brown, leather-gloved hand extended. "Hello, Raven. I'm Amy. We need to talk."

"Is Vanessa all right?" He shook it, holding on so she didn't disappear back into the elevator.

Her eyes bounced from his face to his hand, then back again. "If you'll stop trying to break my fingers, I'll tell you."

Raven let go immediately.

"She's fine, but if she finds out I came here, I won't be."

He frowned, the knots in his gut tightening. "She didn't send you?"

Amy peeled off her gloves. "No, she's busy hiding."

"Hiding?" Relief was too far away to be felt. "From who?"

She squared her small shoulders, lifting her chin in a dare. "From you."

She couldn't have shocked him more if she'd climbed up his coat and slapped him. "What are you talking about?"

She clasped her hands in front of her with a calm that chilled him. Calm and Kayes didn't go well together. "How much do you know about cystic fibrosis?"

Raven immediately searched his mind for any research briefs he'd come across at RMI. He had damn little. Genetic disease. Dead white blood cells flood the system, blocking respiration, which in turn creates scar tissue and

gradually reduces the subject's ability to breathe. Ensured mortality, depending on severity of the case. Average life expectancy varies from age two to thirty. No cure. He flashed on the terrified sound of Vanessa's voice from months ago. *I'm cursed...* God, not Vanessa. But...it couldn't be. She wasn't sick. Tired, lately, but not sick.

He stared at Amy, realization settling cold and wrong inside him. The hospital. Her colorless tone. Her tiny, frail form... "Why do I have the feeling that no matter how much I know, it isn't enough?"

"Because it most likely isn't." She gestured to the brown couch. Sick or not, she knew what was going on and hadn't said anything yet. If anything, she acted like a parent dealing with an unwanted boyfriend. "You might want to sit."

"I'll stand." Raven crossed his arms over his chest. She might have all the answers, but he'd be damned if he was cowing to a waif playing games.

She shrugged. "Vanessa's pregnant."

He was proud of himself for not flinching at the bald statement. He blinked though, several times, wondering if he'd heard her right. Pregnant. Vanessa. He knew what that meant. It meant somehow, all those nights together had created something...no, someone. Someone. He couldn't stop thinking it. Someone. He made his way to the couch and sat.

"Are you all right?"

Vanessa was gone. Pregnant. Couldn't even bear to tell him. What exactly was *all right* in this situation?

"I know it's a shock, but the baby is the least of your problems."

"This baby isn't a problem at all," he snapped, glaring up at the miniscule grim reaper.

"It is for Vanessa," she replied, making him wince. Was that why she hadn't come? Why she was hiding? Did she think he'd be angry? Was this what had made her run Friday night?

"She's terrified out of her mind and I want to help before she does something stupid."

Could your whole body shudder at once? “She wouldn’t—”

“Have an abortion?” Amy didn’t pull any punches and this time Raven did flinch. “She might have gotten it into her head if I hadn’t convinced Dr. Alexander to sedate her.”

“She took the news that badly?” It wasn’t the response one would expect from the woman you loved. Of course, neither was running from him in mortal terror, but he’d lost count of the times she’d done that.

“There *are* reasons. Ones that were there long before you came along and swept her off her feet. It’s me, my fault. Sort of.” She sighed, rubbed her face with both hands. For a moment, he could see past the unfeeling façade. This girl was worn out. Worried. Heartsick, if he didn’t miss his guess. He gestured to the other side of the couch, relieved when she took it. Finally, the truth would spill out of her. “It’s because I’m sick. I have cystic fibrosis and so did my sisters. Trisha and Jean both died from it and so will I. It’s only a matter of time.”

Both? He frowned. “She said her sisters died of respiratory and liver failure.”

“They did, complications from the disease. Jean developed pneumonia from a cold. Trisha’s liver deteriorated. Both par for the course when you have CF.”

“She lied to me.” Straight-faced lied. Well, no, not straight-faced. He’d known she had her secrets. He’d just never imagined... Raven steepled his fingers in front of his mouth, chin resting on his thumbs, forcing himself to be honest. He didn’t care that she’d lied. He cared that she simply didn’t—wouldn’t—trust him.

“She lies to everyone. Herself, mostly. It’s what she’s had to do to survive.” Amy’s bright eyes were hard.

Raven shook his head. “I’ve never given her a reason to distrust me.” Everyone else, yes, but not her.

“You think she doesn’t trust you?” Why did she sound so surprised?

He spread his hands to show the emptiness of the room. “Isn’t it obvious?”

Amy blew out a breath. "You don't get it. From the beginning, you've asked more of her than anyone. Demanded more. And she gave it to you, as best she could. She was afraid, but she trusted you to keep your promises. She let you in further than anyone has been in her entire life."

As if Amy could know how many walls he'd run into trying to get closer, trying to understand, only to be closed out.

"Vanessa was like our mother while we were growing up," she continued. "Our actual mother had to work nearly nonstop to pay for all our medical bills; so did Dad. Vanessa took care of us from the time she was ten years old. Ten. Tell me if you could have taken care of three seriously sick kids when you were that age."

He couldn't, but Amy didn't give him the chance to admit it.

"She held us through coughing fits, helped us learn the therapy to keep our lungs clear, kept our medications straight, took us to every appointment. She was there for the constant hospitalizations and eventually through the deaths. She had a right to be afraid and to make the decisions she did. You can't know what it was like watching someone die and be able to do nothing to stop it. Nothing to stop the pain."

No, he couldn't know. Couldn't imagine. Wouldn't want to. How old had she been when her first sister died? Twenty-five? She'd been caring for them for fifteen years? She knew she'd lose the other sister. Lose them both. Unlike him, she'd never turned away. Then again, no one had ever expected so much of him. No one ever expected anything at all. "Why did you?"

"Why did we what?"

"Why did you ask it of her? How could you ask it?"

Guilt clouded Amy's face. "We girls turned to her for everything. She was all we had. All we knew. My parents...they did what they could. It wasn't easy for anyone and it's not an excuse, but not everyone can afford to provide the best. Later... Well, later we just didn't see any reason to change. She was who we trusted. Who we leaned on. But she was the one who had to pay. My mother made her life at home hell. Still does."

"I know. She told me that much." But nothing more. Something Amy's knowing eyes seemed to read.

"My mother resents her for being my father's child with another woman and for having to raise her. She resents her more because Vangie was the one we turned to for every pain and ache. My mother was jealous of a relationship she thought we should have had with her. She couldn't very well blame us, so Vangie took the brunt. She handles those. The real problem is how much my mother hates her for being alive and healthy."

"You can't hate a person for that."

"Oh no? How would you feel, raising someone else's child, having to watch your own grow sicker and sicker while she flourished? I'm not excusing my mom, but it doesn't take a psychiatrist to figure it out. I knew what was going on by the time I was twelve, but it'd been going on too long. They didn't know how to change it. After all these years, it's kind of messed up both of them."

"What about your father? Why doesn't he protect her?" Someone damn well should have.

"My father couldn't protect anyone. Some people get stronger with adversity. Others just try and get through it. He loves her. He just doesn't have any fight left."

"So she can't have children because of the disease."

Amy shook her head. "Even if she is a carrier, which she doesn't know for sure, she doesn't have it. She'll never be sick like I am. She's worried about any children she might have or any man she gets involved with. She knows what it's like for CF patients and their families. She watched what happened to Trisha and Jean. She's watching it happen with me, and that's bad enough. She couldn't do it again, not with her own child.

"She decided by the time she was fifteen never to have any. But she wants them. Don't think for a minute she doesn't want a family or children of her own. The CF is just an excuse. I think she's afraid of more rejection."

"No one in their right mind would reject Vanessa." Amy's mother certainly didn't apply.

“You and I know that, but she doesn’t. We’re talking about a woman who doesn’t think she’s lovable. Her mother abandoned her, her father pawned her off on his wife, and *she’s* always treated Vangie like Cinderella or something. She had to prove her worth by what she could do for the family. She was a maid and a nurse for us girls. She didn’t go to college because she wanted to help pay for medical bills by working right away. She’s the one who paid for the bulk of it, after she started working for your brother. Everything she earns goes into the fund.”

“That explains the apartment.”

“Nothing explains that apartment,” Amy replied, rolling her eyes. “She’s become dedicated to causing as little trouble as possible and not asking anything from anyone. Especially not love.”

Amy paused, visibly gathering her courage. “She’s not the type of person who was meant to be alone. She needs someone strong, who doesn’t need her to take care of him the way she had to do with us girls. She deserves a man who needs her for who she is and what she means to him. Someone who will take care of *her*. I want to know if that man is you.”

Raven stared up at the tiny dynamo with no small amount of awe and an even greater sense of resolution. “Yes, I am. But you have to tell me where she is.”

“I can’t, I’m sorry.”

“Can’t or won’t?” He rose to his feet.

Amy’s eyes grew wide, hopefully from intimidation. She stood, scooting toward the foyer steps. Raven rose as well, causing another few steps of retreat. “I *can’t*. She’ll take off and won’t speak to either of us. I can help you, but I can’t tell you where she is.”

More games. “Then why the hell did you come here?”

“Because I knew you were worried. She wouldn’t respond to your pages. You’ve managed to change all her other decisions. She’s afraid you’ll change the one she’s made now.”

He was afraid to ask, but he had to. “Which is?”

“To spare you. She’s going away. To keep you from hating her for giving you a child you didn’t want, especially one that could be seriously ill. She was pretty out of it when she said that, but I think she meant it. She’s been crying and calling for you even in her sleep. I can’t reassure her, but I figured I could at least calm you down a little.”

He stalked to the window. The view below usually gave him something to consider, something else to concentrate on. Tonight, it was just a bunch of lights on the blackness of the night. The blackness of his life without her. Still, there was an unlikely ray of light...

Raven slipped his hands into his pockets, a small smile tipping the corners of his mouth. Could it really be true? A baby? Someone that was a part of them both? The heart he was still unfamiliar with swelled, suddenly too large for his chest.

“I know this might sound out of place, but congratulations. I think this baby is the best thing to happen to Vangie in a long time, except maybe for you. She will too, she just needs some time to accept it.” Amy’s reflection headed to the foyer to leave.

“Wait!” He spun away from the window. “Can you give her a note for me?”

Amy frowned. “I don’t know...”

“It’s important. Tell her I tracked you down, she’ll believe that.”

Amy seemed to think about it, then nodded.

“Good, wait here.” He went into the bedroom, only long enough to write two notes and impulsively pick up one item. When he returned he gave her a black velvet box and a sealed envelope. Next, he handed her a matching slip of paper. “I have one more request. Have you heard of the Remington Christmas Charity Ball?”

“Yes, Vanessa told me about it. It’s on Saturday.”

“I want you to make sure she gets there. I don’t care what you have to do or what you have to say, just get her there. This is my cell number. If you need anything or you think she’s going to do something all of us will regret, call me.”



Amy looked down at the small black box incredulously, then back up at him. Raven said nothing to the questions in her eyes. She wasn't the only one able to withhold information.

"She might be wrong about what she's doing, but there is one more reason she's hiding," she said, backing up to the elevator at the end of the short foyer while he trailed a slow step at a time. She pushed the button, causing the doors to open immediately. She probably knew he was struggling not to grab her and make her cough up Vanessa's whereabouts, hurrying before he gave in to temptation.

"She loves you. I think that scares her even more than the disease." She waved as the big metal doors closed in front of her.

Raven stared at that elevator long after she was gone.



It was a ridiculous place to find himself at two-thirty in the morning, but it was the only place Raven could think of that didn't have Vanessa in it. But he couldn't ring the doorbell at this hour. Loathe to toss rocks, the only other option was the soft, well tended grass at his feet.

Sky was going to kill him, but there was something rewarding about ripping a clump of the thick growth out of the ground and tossing it up at the large window slanting over the loft portion of the house. He waited, impatient in the moonlight, but there was no response. He had just pried free another clump when the porch light turned on and the front door opened.

"You'd better have a damn good reason for messing with my lawn, brother."

Raven dropped the earth in his hand, rubbing the dirt off on his pant leg before all but running up the walk to the porch. He knew what he looked like. A damned mess. Too frustrated, too angry, too terrified of losing everything before he had a chance to realize he wanted it. It had to show on his face—anything hurting this much had to show.

“What happened to you?” Sky asked, eyebrows high, his distrustful look wiped cleanly off his face. In that instant, all the current anger, all the years of distance between them disappeared, leaving them as they once were—brothers, best friends, the other half of each other’s heartbeat. It hurt to feel that connection again almost as much as uttering the words he couldn’t bring himself to accept.

“She’s gone.”

Sky’s eyes flickered, then he held open his screen door and let Raven inside.

He didn’t turn any lights on until they reached the kitchen in the back of the moderately sized home. Raven looked around, noting how cozy the place was compared to his own kitchen. The walls and numerous cabinets here were white, trimmed with stenciled flowers in bright primary colors. Yellow curtains with red ribbons holding them open graced the two windows as well as the small one in the back door. The table where Sky was seated was white pine, most likely made by Sky himself, with a high gloss finish. It was covered with bright yellow place mats. The centerpiece was a paper covered tin can filled with crayons. It was a warm kitchen, while his own black, cherry wood and steel counterpart alienated even him.

He could study everything, one item at a time, and still not understand how it fit together. This was a family, a true family. Sky had taken the jagged pieces of his life and made something solid out of it. Something beautiful. The carpenter in him had known better than to toss away scraps and ignore the gouges. Raven didn’t have such a bend to his nature. All he could do was take something beautiful and destroy it.

“I don’t think you came all this way at this time of night to check what color crayons we have,” Sky prodded with his usual subtlety. “Why are you here, Raven?”

His personal vow not to lie wouldn’t leave him much pride. Hell, he didn’t have any right now anyway. “I didn’t know where else to go. Being by myself made it worse.”

Sky nodded. He understood loneliness, probably better than anyone else. They'd been born together. They weren't meant to get so far apart that they could no longer see eye to eye. But they'd done it, hadn't they?

"Remember when we used to be friends?"

Sky's steady gaze locked with his own before he gave another slow nod. "Things were a lot simpler back then."

Raven shrugged. "Everything is simple when you're a kid. You don't have to make any hard choices."

"Or take the hard knocks," Sky agreed. He stood, opening a cabinet and pulling out coffee filters. "But we're not kids anymore. We're stuck with those things now."

Raven couldn't decide if that was a warning or a dismissal. There were too many emotions to juggle to decide if his instincts were any good. "Doesn't mean we can't be friends," he murmured, listening as Sky filled the coffee maker with water.

"What kind of friends would we make now?" So calm, so...unemotional. Raven worked to tamp his anger while his twin continued. "You get to be the dashing socialite executive while I'm the dedicated, grass roots father who dawdles in the wood shop. What do the two of us have in common anymore?"

Not much, he had to admit. Sky didn't care about the demands of RMI, not with any passion. He wasn't interested in traveling to other cities or countries, in making the better deal or getting the best research. He didn't want the world in his hands, not the way Raven had it. He had another world. One with tiny smiles and pigtails and soccer games and...everything Raven could ever hope to become part of. In this, Sky would understand. He would have advice. Hell, he'd probably even listen and relate.

It might be the only thing they had in common these days, but the most important. "Children."

Sky spun, shock and confusion clear in the expression he forgot to mask. "Is that why Vanessa left you? Did you—"

Raven choked back his disbelief. Here he was heartbroken and confused and Sky immediately assumed he'd cheated. *Him!* "Don't even *finish* that thought. I've let you walk around with your close-minded perceptions of me for fifteen years, but I'll be damned before I let you think I'd do to Vanessa what Harper did to our mother. No matter who I was ever with, I never cheat." The growl in his own throat made his brother's eyes widen.

Finally, Sky sighed. "You're right, I made a habit of thinking the worst of you."

"What I don't understand is why. What did I ever do to you?"

"You confused me." Sky never did do well with things he couldn't understand. Not understanding Raven must have been more than he could handle. "After the accident, you were always fighting with Father. When he died, you didn't care. You were almost happy about it. It didn't give you much of a character reference. If you couldn't even look sad at his funeral, becoming a heartless bastard in my mind wasn't a stretch of the imagination."

Raven agreed, looking back on his own unfeeling behavior back then. He'd been a mess; angry, shamed. If he could have pulled his father from his coffin, just to beat him up, he'd have done it. Without all the pieces, Sky couldn't have thought anything else of him. "Then again, you got pretty good at it, too."

Sky pulled mugs down from the cabinet. "We both made mistakes."

"Can we fix them?" Funny, he'd never asked outright. Not once.

Sky was in no hurry to answer. He let the coffee pot fill, poured the drink into the mugs and brought them to the table before sitting down again. A heavy sigh emptied out of him. "I can't accept that woman as our sister. I just...I can't. *Marissa* was our sister. I look at Tara and all I can think about is how wrong it is that she's alive and *Marissa* isn't. Don't think I don't know how crappy that thought is, either, but it's how I feel. I can't change it."

"So don't," Raven said. "Don't accept her as your sister. Accept her as someone our father hurt. Someone we need to make restitution to."

"She seemed fine when I saw her," Sky grumbled.

“You might want to read up on her, then, because she got left nearly as screwed up as we were. Harper may not have known her, but he threw her to the wolves as a newborn and he’s feeding her up to them now. If we don’t protect her, no one will, Sky. She acts tough, but she sure as hell can’t take care of herself. It’s like she was born for trouble. “

“Like Harper?”

“I never thought I’d say this, but Harper did have some judgment. Tara...” He left the remark hanging.

Sky drank deeply from his mug, then set it down on the placemat in front of him. “You didn’t come here because of Tara. You’re here because of Vanessa.”

Raven slumped in his seat.

“Something has been bothering me since you first started this thing. It finally hit me what it was.” Sky waited for Raven to meet his gaze. “You’ve never had any compunction about investigating people. You don’t know the meaning of privacy.”

“Tell me you’re coming to a compliment of some sort.”

Sky shook his head. “Why not her?”

“How do you know I didn’t?”

“Because you never would have gotten involved. I think it’s how you stay circumspect.”

Someone had to be. Their mother always jumped into situations emotions first. Sky had no emotions anyone could trace until he got married out of the blue. But Vanessa was different. She wasn’t a threat to anyone. If anything, she needed protecting. Most often from herself.

“If I’d looked into her, she never would have forgiven me.”

“That never stopped you before.”

True. But with her, he’d wanted...no, he’d *needed* it to be different. “Maybe I wanted to remember what it was like to be trusted.” Amy’s words floated in his mind. For a little while, he’d known, in tiny ways. Remembered what it was

like to feel real, normal...loved. It wasn't her fault she was as damaged as he was.

"So what happened?"

What always happened. Secrets. Mistakes. Regrets. "I was an idiot," he admitted.

"Tell me," Sky urged, a smile tugging at his mouth. "In detail."

Despite the misery, the unsettling feeling he couldn't shake, Raven laughed. It felt good to laugh, to talk to his brother. It didn't change anything, or even fix anything, but the sounds of their voices, low and quiet in the ongoing night, soothed the electric ends of his nerves.

So he talked. He started at the beginning, meeting Vanessa and falling in love with her. He told Sky everything, his fears, his hopes, his dream that if he could just find a way to reach her, that they could build something wonderful together. For the first time in years, Sky listened.

Raven didn't know what time it was when Evie peeked through the kitchen door, most likely checking to see if both of them were still alive after hours in each other's company. Satisfied the only carnage was a pot of strong coffee, she pushed the door open and strolled inside.

"Staying for breakfast, Raven?" she asked, already opening the fridge to collect ingredients. You'd never know by her behavior that he'd never been in her home longer than ten minutes.

"If it's no trouble," he said, his voice gruffer than he'd expected. He cleared it, then excused himself to the restroom and a stretch of his legs. A few moments later, after an uncomfortable glimpse in the mirror and some serious cold water splashes on his face, he opened the swinging door of the kitchen to find Sky holding his wife close, their murmured voices nearly as intimate as their gentle hold. Raven backed out, with a muttered apology, but to his surprise, Evie pulled away from Sky to call him back in.

"I'm sure your brother can keep his hands to himself long enough to make sure everyone gets fed."

“That’s up for debate,” Sky rumbled, but he smiled at her while he took his seat and gestured for Raven to return to his. It was more than a little surreal from that point on. AJ came in for a faster than light breakfast, though Raven was sure he talked twice as much as he ate. Baby Catherine—not a morning person that he could tell—woke up and demanded a bowl of oatmeal, a strip of her uncle’s bacon and half her brother’s orange juice.

“She’s all Remington,” Raven smiled at the little face that was still a little curmudgeonly, despite her full belly beneath the fuzzy pink sleeper.

Evie caressed the glossy black curls at the back of her daughter’s grumpy head. Displeased green eyes studied him over the top of a blue, two-handled sippy cup.

“It takes her an hour to stop blaming the world for waking her up. Then she’s sweetness and light.”

Raven eyed Sky, who shrugged. “More like sneaky and sly, but she *is* cute when she does it.”

Evie harrumphed him, but it was half-hearted. She turned laughing eyes, full of comfort, on Raven. It was a shock to have her looking that way at him, of all people.

He glared at his brother. “You told her.”

Sky was unrepentant. “She’s my wife.”

“I’m your brother.”

“She’s two feet away and able to kick both of you,” Evie reminded, doing a pretty good job of looking stern in a gray flannel robe with her hair in a top knot sliding down one side of her head. Suddenly, he realized the dangerous look in Catherine’s eyes had little to do with *his* family genes. “Do you know yet what you want to do?” she asked, softening.

Just at that moment, Catherine leapt forward and pounced on her mother’s hand, trying to chew on a finger, her little mouth still managing to smile with her eyes—her Remington eyes—glittering with mischief. Giggling, her gaze met his—to show off her prize—and while Evie laughed, it all became so clear.

“Yes,” he replied softly. “Yes, I do.”

He wanted his child. He wanted a grumpy little face that could turn into a smile in less than a second and change his whole world. A tiny hand that would reach for him the way Catherine reached for Sky, batting away his teasing tickles.

He'd never expected to be a father. It was never fear holding him back, never a worry he overly concerned himself with or gave much thought to, not like it must have been for Vanessa. He'd just known he'd never have what Sky and Evie had and tried to live with it. Tried to tell himself that he didn't even believe in what they had. Without the possibility for love, there just couldn't be a consideration for children.

Now he had both.

And damn if he was losing them.



## Chapter Thirteen

Vanessa awoke Tuesday morning on Amy's bed in her father's house. For a tiny moment in time, she forgot how she'd gotten there and why she wasn't with Raven. The haze cleared quickly when she saw a small, black velvet box in front of a beige envelope on Amy's nightstand. Then she remembered Amy driving her here after the disastrous appointment and guiding her inside as quietly as they could manage. She'd said any number of things after that, watching Amy grow quietly distressed, but unable to stop herself from talking until she fell asleep.

Against her better judgment, she plucked the sealed envelope from its perch, staying on her back while considering whether or not she wanted to open it. She knew who it was from; the envelope was Raven's personal stationery. She ran her fingers over the dried ink where he'd written her name in his fluid handwriting. He must have been in a hurry, the letters were pressed into the fine paper.

She didn't want to open the letter. She wanted to close her eyes and sleep, forget she'd ever met Raven Remington. Forget that she had been foolish enough to love him, opening her heart and her body to such dangerous pursuits. Unable to stop herself, she opened the seal and pulled out the thick, creamy page.

*OPEN THE BOX.*

No *Dearest Vanessa* from him. She shouldn't have expected one. He'd never been big on preamble. Sighing, because the man was as demanding and

exasperating on paper as he was in the flesh, she reached over for the box. Hoping it wasn't what she thought it was, she snapped it open.

It wasn't.

"Oh, Raven." She sighed again, this time with tears in her eyes.

On black velvet, simple and beautiful, nestled a pair of large teardrop earrings. The purple stones glittered at her. Decadent yet simplistic enough for her tastes, they were exactly what she would have chosen for herself and never have accepted from him. She snapped the box closed and turned back to the letter.

*Come to the ball. I'll be waiting.*

*If you aren't there, I'm coming to you.*

If Amy heard the scream of outrage from her perch on the arm of the overstuffed couch in the living room, it didn't show by the time Vanessa found her. The only thing preventing a thermonuclear assault was the presence of their father on the opposite end of the couch. Something Amy, no doubt, was counting on.

David Kaye lowered his newspaper, giving a measuring look at each of them in turn. He took his feet, one by one, off the coffee table, then reached for the remote to turn off the old television on the wood stand across the room. "Trouble, Ames?"

"No," she lied without a bat of her lashes. "Vanessa's excited about her big news."

No matter what Raven had ever done to aggravate her or push her buttons, she'd never wanted so badly to tackle someone and do serious harm.

Just like he was supposed to, David turned to Vanessa expectantly. "What is it, sweetheart?"

Vanessa pried her gaze from Amy's too sunny, too pleased with herself smile. She couldn't do it. One explanation would lead to another and another. She didn't have it straight enough to retell yet. "Um, well...it's...uh..."

Amy jumped to her feet, looking nearly twelve in a giant Garfield pajama shirt that came to mid-calf and socks that were desperately trying to escape her feet. Smart socks. Because the girl was about to commit suicide.

Don't do it, Amy. Don't d—

"Can you believe it, Daddy? Vanessa's having a baby!"

The air in the room evaporated, leaving Vanessa struggling to pull in enough to tell Amy the only thing she could think to say. "I'm going to kill you."

"Hey, now." David frowned.

Vanessa ignored him, holding up Raven's letter as evidence to her sister. "You told him. You went to him and you told him."

"Told who?" David asked.

"Raven!" Vanessa answered, then rolled her eyes at his blank response. He knew who she worked for, but he either forgot or couldn't fathom the connection. He'd been all but vacant the last fifteen years, she couldn't bother filling him in now. She glared at her sister and shook the letter at her. "How did this get here?"

"Who is *Raven*?" David slapped his newspaper on the couch pillow. "Will one of you please start explaining yourselves?"

Vanessa looked to him on one end of the couch, then back at Amy on the other. David looked like he expected an answer. Vanessa opened her mouth but Amy rushed to fill in the blanks.

"Raven is Raven Remington, her boss. They've been dating for months, Dad. He's the baby's father."

Vanessa brought her hand up to cover her eyes. Maybe if she kept her eyes closed tight enough, the whole scene would go away. Like some kind of dream or a special effect. It could happen. Better yet, maybe a hole could form under her feet. Or a house could fall on her.

"Well, isn't this a...surprise?" A sour voice said from the direction of the front door, which had opened without anyone noticing.

Vanessa slid her hand down her face, finding her stepmother standing in front of her, a grimness on her face that pulled the corners of her mouth so far

down it probably hurt. If a house were going to blessedly fall, she'd just been outranked for deserving it.

"Hello, Patrice."

Clearly, this wasn't an expected part of her little sister's plan. Amy tried to smile, but couldn't quite pull it off. Dread had a way of ruining even your most triumphant moments. Her mother was even better at it. Amy mouthed an apology, but Vanessa couldn't unhinge her jaw well enough to accept it.

"Hello, Vangie, come to grace the commoners with your presence again so soon?" Patrice closed the front door with her foot.

"Patrice," David said, a touch of warning—all he ever sent his wife's way—in his voice.

"What? I was merely commenting on the fact that we haven't seen her in ages. A whole weekend, wasn't it?" Patrice said on her way toward the open dining room.

Vanessa crossed her arms. Couldn't the woman even say hello without an insult? "That's probably because over the holiday you informed me that I was taking time from your busy day of complaining and drudgery."

Patrice turned around, her eyes thin with anger. "Not all of us can live the high life of a secretary, Vangie."

"Ladies," David said.

"That doesn't stop you from taking the money I earn, does it?"

Patrice advanced. "Tell me, Vangie, given your latest news, how exactly *are* you earning all that money?"

"Ladies!" David snapped loud enough to break through the animosity.

Vanessa flicked her eyes down and mumbled an apology. As usual. David crossed the room with a smile on his face and his arms extended—as if the uncomfortable moment had never happened.

"Vangie has brought us wonderful news, Patrice, and I for one couldn't be happier for her."

He hugged her tightly, as open with his affection as he always had been. Vanessa allowed herself to be embraced, but she didn't say anything to him.

She'd spent years trying to tell him that making up for his wife didn't make it okay to hurt her, didn't make it stop. It didn't change anything growing up, it wouldn't change anything now.

David pulled away, holding her shoulders and smiling so proudly even she had to admit, it was almost enough. Then he spoke. "So, when do we get to meet this young man of yours?"

"Well, uh—" Vanessa's eyes followed while Patrice sighed and took her shopping bags into the kitchen. The only thing they had in common anymore was their disappointment in their family.

Amy must have sensed her moment because she suddenly chimed, "At the Remington Christmas Charity Ball!"

"A ball? Who throws balls anymore?" Patrice asked, returning to the living room. There was a twinge of interest in her voice. Great, the one time her stepmother was interested in anything having to do with her and Vanessa couldn't let her be part of it.

"The Remingtons do, for charity. It starts with chartered cruises that run back and forth from the city to Drake Island and the ball itself is on Remington estate grounds. It lasts nearly all night long, and there's an auction and dancing. All the women wear formal dresses and the men come in tuxedos. There's even a live orchestra just like out of an old movie!" Amy couldn't try any harder to make this event sound too good to be true. Vanessa could only blame herself. She was the idiot who'd told her sister all the details.

Patrice lightly harrumphed, interest definitely piqued.

"Everyone who's anyone in the city will be there. Important people from around the state. I heard even the governor will be there. And Raven's invited us all!"

"Us?" Patrice said with a touch of shock.

"He did?" Vanessa said with a touch of dread.

"Wonderful!" David said with an arm around Vanessa's shoulders, squeezing her again. He smiled at each of the Kaye women in turn. "So when is this big shebang?"

“Saturday,” Amy said quickly, sounding like she was making it up as she went. “We’ve got to work fast. We have to find dresses, and there’s hair appointments to be made for all three of us. It’ll be just like prom! We have to get Dad a tux—”

“Why is he inviting *us*?” Patrice sucked the wind from Amy’s sails. It would take Patrice to get her sister settled down.

“He wants to get to know Vangie’s family.” Amy smiled at Vanessa again, the little traitor. “And you’ll be able to meet his. Vangie’s told me his mother is fabulous, you’ll love her. Then the two of you can get together to plan the wedding!”

“That’s *it!*” Breaking away from David, Vanessa reached for the closest part of Amy she could reach. She dragged her out of the living room and down the hall by her collar. They got to Amy’s room in record time. After tossing her in none too gently, Vanessa slammed the door so hard the windows rattled. “What the hell are you doing?”

Amy sat on the edge of her bed, laughing. “I’m helping you. What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re helping *Raven*.”

“Him, too.”

“You went to him last night after I fell asleep, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.” Amy raised her chin, her humor disappearing. “I wasn’t going to tell you, but by the time I got home last night, I decided I didn’t care how angry you got. He loves you and you’re in love with him, too.”

“You don’t know the first thing about him! You could have blown this whole thing completely out of proportion.”

“I know he was a wreck when I got there. Worried because he didn’t know where you were or if something had happened to you. After what you pulled on the weekend, he looked like someone had run him over with a truck!”

Vanessa’s mouth thinned into a flat line. “You told him about the baby.”

“And the truth about Jean and Trisha.”

“Oh, God!” Why? “He’s going to think I lied to him!”

"You *did* lie to him."

"Not...technically." The fight drained out of her as Vanessa sighed and slid down the length of the door to the ground. She dropped her face in her hands. "What am I going to do?"

"You could make things easy on everyone and go home to Raven." Amy didn't sound so smug, but she didn't have to. Vanessa knew when she was beat.

"Raven's penthouse isn't home."

"You think this place is? Mom's out there right now trying to drag any kind of excitement out of Dad about this ball and this grandchild. You're lucky she didn't hear all the horrible things you were saying last night or he'd be pounding down the door right now."

Vanessa's misery increased. If only she could remember. "What *did* I say last night?"

"You said you were going to get rid of it," Amy answered, without accusation, but so grim that Vanessa knew she'd been hurt. "Before you got attached to it. Before it got sick and died."

She opened her eyes wide, staring through parted fingers at Amy.

"You were talking about a lot of things last night, Vange. Not much of it was nice." Amy looked down at her drooping socks and Vanessa felt lower than dirt.

"Whatever I said, Ames—"

"You kept asking for Raven," Amy interrupted. She must not want an apology. "Even when you were asleep."

"I-I was dreaming..."

"He was happy about the baby. He really was."

Pain—like her heart constricting—made it hard to breathe. She'd never imagined what it would have been like to tell him she was having his child. *Couldn't* imagine it.

"I don't know what to do. This baby..." Vanessa brought her hand to her abdomen. "I'm scared." About more than she could say. But she had to try. Amy had to know it was more than the irrationality. "Raven and I, we never

talked about children because I told him I wasn't supposed to have any. I don't know if anyone in his family—"

"So you find out together. I told you, he wants this baby. He wants *you*."

The words didn't do much to make her feel better. "I need time. I need to think. I never expected I'd be in this situation in the first place, least of all with Raven. More importantly I have to get out of here before Patrice loses her good mood."

"Where will you go?"

Good question. "I don't know." Vanessa stood up.

"Don't run away, Vangie. Stay here."

"With Patrice?" Vanessa scoffed, looking around for her boots. "No thanks, I don't need to hear how immoral I am or how much of a failure I am. I've got enough to think about."

"We'll stay out of her way." Amy's desperation must be cutting off the blood supply to her brain. "She'll never even know you're here."

Sure she wouldn't. Patrice would know Vanessa was in her house if she were wearing a magical cloak and paper slippers. "It'll never work. Either I'll kill her or...I'll kill her."

Amy scrambled off the bed. "Then wherever you go, I'm going, too."

"Excuse me?" Vanessa put her hands on her hips to look imposing, but Amy couldn't have cared less.

"I told Raven I'd get you to that ball, and hell or high water, I'm getting you there."

Vanessa smiled wryly, despite the frustration of the situation. "An hour in his presence and he's got you wrapped around his finger?"

"More like ten minutes. It's no wonder your virginity went down in flames, but I tell you, he's so scary I almost wet my pants."

"He's not scary," Vanessa laughed against her will. "He's—"

"Perfect for you."

Vanessa shook her head, beyond exasperation.



“Come on, Vange. It’s only for a few days. If we keep her whirlwind shopping, Mom won’t even remember to say anything to you.”

“Patrice would remember to say something in the middle of a hurricane.”

“Trust me. I never told Raven where you are and he knows not to come looking. Take advantage of the time he’s given you. Five whole days before you see him again. Five days to get it together again and get over yourself.”

“You’re so sure that’s what I have to do? That what I’m afraid of is paltry.” If only it were so easy.

Amy’s grin turned sly. “I’m the one with all the answers, remember?”

Vanessa crossed her arms. “And who is supposed to be paying for this shopping whirlwind? I can tell you right now, it won’t be me.”

“Don’t worry, sister dear, I have connections.”



Of all the things Raven expected Amy to call him about, shopping was not on the list. Tickets, arrangements, no problem. Dresses and shoes and hair and God alone knew what else three women might need? Not his forte. But he agreed anyway. Now he just had to find someone whose forte it was.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Raven,” Jordan’s smile was genuine as she looked up from her seat in the conservatory. Had it always been genuine and he’d not noticed? How many years had he felt shame for what he’d done to her because of his father? What if his own attitude had done to her what Sky’s had done to him? Cast her as the disappointed parent, irritated her until she gave him the response he thought he deserved. God, wouldn’t that be ironic? “What are you doing here in the middle of the day?”

Frustrating the hell out of his temp. He’d ordered his entire week cleared and reorganized. The two women from the office pool looked horrified when they saw his schedule. Probably much like Vanessa must have when she’d first stumbled into Sky’s executive suite. The promise of a week off with pay if they

could arrange it was bonus enough to get started. He wondered what a raise might do to get them motivated as Vanessa's assistants.

"I came to see you." He leaned down to kiss her cheek, a move that surprised her and shocked the hell out of him. He hadn't given her that courtesy in years. He sat in the seat next to her, smiling at her stricken expression.

"Who are you and what have you done to my son?" But her blue eyes didn't look as suspicious as usual. Curious maybe.

"I've given real consideration to stuffing him in a trunk and dumping him over the cliffs."

"Be serious, Raven. You'd never fit in a trunk."

He laughed, reaching out to toy with the napkin she'd placed next to her plate of fresh fruit. "I'm in need of your help."

Her eyes widened and all playfulness disappeared. "With what? Is Sky all right?"

Raven took her hand before she could rise to her feet. "He's fine. He's at the office today, actually. I asked him to do a little supervising for me."

The small boned fingers in his hand began to tremble. "You're starting to scare me."

"Because I asked for help?"

"You have to admit, it's not something you normally do."

No, it wasn't. But he hadn't expected to bring on a coronary in his mother if he ever did so, either. "It's a small thing. For you, anyway."

"For God's sake, tell me what it is before I give myself a stroke."

He had to chuckle. She was going to shoot him for this. "I need you to go shopping, actually." Yes, if that droll look was anything to go by, he was toast. "It's for Vanessa," he added, because that much was true.

Relief flooded her face. "Why didn't you just say so? Of course I can shop for Vanessa. You didn't have to come all the way out here to ask for that."

"I know." He couldn't help wanting to surprise her. Inside he felt as if something were bubbling to escape. Excitement? Happiness? He wasn't familiar with either, but it was there all the same. "I have news."

"Such as?" She picked up her fork to resume her breakfast.

He let her spear a cube of honeydew and chew it before he allowed himself to continue. No point in making her choke. "I want to marry Vanessa."

For a second, he wondered if he misjudged the timing on her swallow. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. She didn't seem to be breathing.

"Mother?"

She shook herself. Then laughed, a nervous trill. "I'm sorry, I thought you said you wanted to marry Vanessa."

"I do."

Her laugh stopped. "If you're playing with me, son, I guarantee you, revenge will be swift and unpleasant."

"Have I ever joked about marriage before?" Good God, had he ever even said the word in her presence?

Jordan's suspicion and furrowed brow seemed to war with each other.

"Remember what you told me once? That there was some woman in the world idiotic enough to marry me?"

"I distinctly remember saying I'd make it my business to find her."

"You did."

"As a threat," she reminded.

"Does that mean you don't want me to marry Vanessa?"

She chewed her lip. "It's not that."

Sure it wasn't. He could see the wheels turning in her head. Her son's happiness or her friend's torture? Why not add another bargaining chip to the table? "If we're not married, you might not get to see the baby as often."

"Baby? What ba—" He nearly laughed at her confusion, then she reached out and smacked his shoulder. It wasn't much of a blow through his jacket, but it was enough to get him cracking a grin. "I cannot believe you did this to Vangie."

“Mother.”

“After all she’s been through, you’ve gone and—”

He rolled his eyes as her outrage rolled on. “Mother. She’s thirty years old. It’s not as if I soiled a teenager.” A virgin, yes, but he wasn’t telling her that.

“You couldn’t have married her first?” she finally asked in a small voice.

“You don’t always get to choose when.”

Now she really did look horrified. “You mean the two of you didn’t plan this?”

He sighed and shook his head.

“Raven, do you know about...about her family? Her choices?”

She obviously did. “Not until it was too late. Which is why I need you.”

Her frown returned. “To go shopping?”

He nodded. “I need you to keep her busy. Her and her stepmother.”

“Good lord, she’s with Patrice?” Given his mother’s expression and Vanessa’s description, his prized title of Satan had been bestowed on someone else. Step by step, he brought his mother up to date on his relationship. Meeting Vanessa. Caring about her. Letting her into his life, no matter how confusing it was for either of them. Right up until Amy’s visit and all the secrets she’d spilled. He’d meant to stop there. Meant to keep things simple and to the point, but it hadn’t gone that way. Instead, he found himself talking about Harper. About his secrets and his lies. Why he’d gone so far and how hard it was to come back.

All the while, Jordan listened, her head to the side, her eyes a myriad of emotions. Somewhere during it all, her hand had slipped over his, offering support the way she once had. The way he hadn’t allowed since he was a kid.

A tear sped over her cheek and she smoothed it away. “Oh Raven.”

All his words and that was all she had to say?

“I always knew you were most like me.”

He choked. “Somehow, that’s not what I was expecting you to say.”

“It’s still true.” He felt her hand on his cheek. “We love too hard. It scares people, I think. Scares us.”

“Is that what’s wrong? We love too much?” Was that the reason Vanessa was gone? Really?

“No. There’s nothing wrong with loving people. It just doesn’t leave us much room if things go wrong. You can’t love with your whole heart and then take it back. You just love and keep on loving. Even when you shouldn’t.” She meant Harper. “Your father was a bastard sometimes, Raven. He was driven and sometimes conniving and he was selfish. But I loved him. Not because of those things. In *spite* of those things. I still love him, because for all that he broke my heart, he made my life worth living, too.”

“You know I’ll never understand that.”

She nodded. “You will. When your children won’t do what you tell them. When they make mistakes and hurt themselves and hurt you. When you have to let them go before you’re ready. You’ll understand.”

He held her hand a little tighter. She’d loved him all these years, no matter how much he pushed her away.

“We’ll get her back.” Funny how reassuring it was when she said it.

“You’re sure you can keep Patrice sidetracked buying clothes?”

“Please,” she huffed, smiling as if he’d given her a present. “I could sidetrack Gandhi if I’d set my mind to it.”

“I shudder to think.”

She patted his shoulder and rose from her chair. “I know, dear, but do try anyway.”

His laughter earned him another kiss on the cheek and she was gone.

## Chapter Fourteen

Raven spent the next five days in a flurry of activity that laid waste to any workaholic records Sky might have set in his heyday. He enlisted just about anyone who could pull strings he couldn't reach on his own.

Thankfully, from all accounts, everything would go like clockwork.

He waited, standing in a tuxedo next to the window of the music room. From that vantage point, he could see the first ferry heading closer to port. The walkway from the docking point to the Remington lawns was a short length, with balloon arches and white, twinkling lights to guide the way. Manicured greens awaited the ball's attendees, as well as trees draped with nets of the same twinkling lights. The orchestra was already playing, the dance floor awaited occupants and hor d'ouerve servers were positioned in and around the party area. It wasn't the boat he was waiting for, but it meant the next one would be there shortly.

His mother quietly walked up next to him and followed his gaze through the bay window. She leaned her head against his arm, threatening the perfection of her corn silk colored hair. "She's not going to be happy when she finds out it was you who sent her this latest piece of jewelry."

"No, she'll most likely be spitting mad." Raven chuckled, crossing his right arm to cover the both of hers on his left sleeve. "Did you give her the necklace?"

"She didn't want to accept it, so I told her it was on loan."

"What will you do when she tries to give it back. She will, you know."

"I'll simply not take it. I can be just as stubborn as she is."

He'd probably have gone out of his mind if his mother hadn't been in contact with Vanessa everyday. She claimed the week of shopping created a

dent in the family coffers such as had never been seen before. Since it meant getting Vanessa back to him, he didn't miss a cent.

"Is Tara ready?" he asked, giving her hand a squeeze before turning from the window and leading the way out of the room. He hadn't had much time for Tara since their meeting at his apartment. Only enough for a few phone calls to brief her on her role in the evening's events.

"As ready as can be expected. She's nervous, though." They stopped at the door, while his mother reached up to smooth the folds of his black tuxedo shirt. Her eyes, blue and brimming with tears, narrowed on him. "What about you?"

He gave a fleeting glance to the fast approaching ferry. "I've never been more afraid in my life."

She smiled, as if that were exactly what she wanted to hear. "It's going to work out, Raven. All of it, all of *us*. We get through this night, we'll be able to look back on it as the first night The Remingtons were a family again."

She looked so hopeful, so expectant. He only hoped her long years of faith were about to be rewarded. He pulled a kerchief from his pocket, dabbing gently at her cheek where the tear struck, smoothing the soft powder of her make-up until the streak faded away. "Does that mean you've heard from Sky whether he's going to be here tonight?"

A shadow crossed her eyes before she determinedly straightened her shoulders. "He'll be here."

Raven held in a sigh. He and Sky had been talking, but Sky hadn't given him any answers either. "And Chase?"

"He's ready to escort Tara. Last I checked, he was waiting for her outside the Blue Room."

Raven tsked and started them on the path to the stairs. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were up to something with those two."

"Me?" She had the grace to temper her incredulity. "Darling son, I would *never* meddle in the lives of my children."

"There is the fact that neither one of them is your child."

“Precisely why I get to throw them together. They argue beautifully, it’s a match made in Heaven.”

They reached the bottom step just as the front door opened. Suddenly, Raven’s collar felt a little less tight, his muscles a little more relaxed. Holding open the door for his wife, Sky managed to still look rough hewn in a tuxedo cut well enough to be a second skin. He wasn’t smiling, but he was there. That was enough for Raven.

“Oh, my,” Jordan sighed, looking to the top of the stairs. Raven turned, his own eyes widening as he took in the couple walking down arm in arm. Chase looked the way most tux models did, his lean body type pretty much the reason other men had to put up with the penguin suits in the first place. It was Tara who stunned him.

A gown of floor length, raw emerald silk wrapped itself around her, the lack of straps showcasing the delicacy of her bones. Around her waist hung a thin gold cord, cinching at her center with an enameled coat of arms before the cord continued down the length of her skirt. It was a Remington family heirloom, one he’d never seen outside the glass case and obviously Jordan’s touch, proclaiming her birthright. Her hair had been pulled back into some sort of ebony twist, exposing her long neck and giving nothing to hide her face behind.

Staring at her, Raven felt a deep ache of pain and a strong dose of pride. She was what a Remington was born to become, what Marissa had never gotten the chance to be. God only knew what might wait in her future, but tonight she would finally have a family—a gift they’d all be receiving for the first time in decades.

She glanced nervously from Raven to Sky before tightening her jaw and deciding to hold onto her poise with both hands. “I wasn’t expecting you here,” she finally murmured, her tone even and calm, much to Raven’s relief.

Sky stared, expressionless. “It was the right thing to do.”

Tara considered that, then nodded. “Are we ready then?”



“As we’ll ever be,” Sky responded, looking everywhere but at her. Finally, with a cough, he offered her his arm. She started, blinking a few times before reaching to take it.

Chase caught her other hand and tucked it safely into the crook of his own arm. “Not so fast, Legs,” he said, earning three complaints from the rest of the family. He rolled his eyes. “*I’m the dream escort. You’re the evil stepfamily. It’s like this for a reason, you know.*”

“The only thing I know,” Sky grumbled after Chase had winked and walked Tara through the front door and down the veranda steps, “is that he’s an idiot doctor making a fool of himself over a pretty girl.”

Evie leaned into his side and kissed his cheek, then fussed with a lipstick smudge. “Or he could be a very smart man keeping a nervous girl from falling down some stairs because she’s too worried about her suddenly polite brother to watch where she’s stepping.”

Sky slid Raven a glance.

Raven shrugged in response. “It’s a toss up.” He eyed Sky carefully as the frown deepened on his brother’s face. “Is that really why you came tonight? Because it was the right thing to do?”

Sky peered down at his wife and sighed. “I’m never going to accept that our father was the heartless monster you remember, Raven. I can’t do that.”

Raven nodded. “I shouldn’t have expected you to. His falling off that pedestal...I don’t think I ever recovered enough to remember that he was a good man once.”

“But *only* a man,” Sky added hoarsely. “We were both guilty of forgetting that. He made his mistakes and if righting what he did wrong to Tara means accepting her into this family...I’m prepared to do it.”

“Maybe you should tell her that sometime,” Raven suggested.

“Maybe I will.”

“Tonight?”

“Don’t push it.” Sky smiled, removing any sting from his words. “Don’t you think you should be getting down to the dock. Her ferry should be arriving any time now.”

Raven resisted the urge to check his watch. “Thanks.” He slapped Sky’s shoulder casually. Then thought better of it and impulsively hugged him. More surprising, Sky hugged back. “Wish me luck.”

“You won’t need it.”

Another pat from Evie and he was gone.



Vanessa stood at the front of the boat, hoping she wasn’t turning green from the bobbing motion. The late afternoon sun cast a red-orange glow over the surface of the dark water and over the one piece of jewelry she hadn’t expected to wear. Ever.

“These weren’t necessary, Ames. It’s not like I was going to jump overboard and swim my way back to the city.” She lifted her right wrist with a clank.

“I wasn’t about to take any chances.” Amy nibbled delicately on a cracker. She looked stunning in a silver blue dress, its matching shoulder wrap giving the young woman a sophistication that Vanessa had never seen. The sides of her hair were slicked back in place by a pair of ice blue combs, decorated with tiny butterflies that changed color every time she moved her head. Glossed curls tumbled forward onto her brow.

“Come on, unlock me.” Vanessa pulled once again on the handcuff wrapped unpleasantly around her wrist, chaining her to the boat rail. When they arrived, Amy led her here to the front so they could look over and see the cresting waves as the ship cut through the water. She hadn’t seen the handcuffs dangling from the rail until Amy slapped the second loop of steel over her wrist.

“Actually, I don’t have a key.” Amy pointed upward. “Don’t Mom and Dad look happy?”

Vanessa didn't need to look up. "Patrice has been ecstatic ever since you locked me down."

"You have to admit, she'd been unnaturally nice to you this week."

"That was because of Jordan," Vanessa reminded. Even Patrice didn't see any reason to snipe in front of company.

"I'm sure I saw Mom smile a few times when Jordan wasn't there."

"Post-shopping bliss." She tugged uselessly once more. She should have guessed something was up when Jordan recommended the satin opera length gloves...

"Exactly! I don't think Mom even gets post-*orgasmic* bliss."

Vanessa choked. "Amy, some things are sacred."

"All I'm saying is that it's nice to have Mom smile again and if shopping is what does it, then hey, I'm all for it. But, I think it was having someone her own age to talk to, especially someone who knows what it's like to lose a child."

Vanessa finally turned around, her black skirt rustling around her legs. Patrice did look resplendent in the slim chocolate colored dress, her hair highlighted with gold and copper streaks. She was dancing with David, amidst many other well-dressed couples enjoying the pre-ball festivities.

"They do look happy," she admitted, but she knew better than to get her hopes up. It'd be better for Amy if she didn't either. "Patrice isn't going to change in a week. I'd be an idiot to expect her to."

She watched her father smile down at the woman he'd been married to for nearly twenty-five years. They were still a handsome couple, when Patrice forgot to be miserable,

A faded memory rose to mind, the first time she'd met Patrice. Her father had introduced them at the Wild Animal Park, in front of the elephant show. Patrice had been young and uncertain, but pleasant, while Vanessa had tried as hard as she could to be perfect so Patrice would like her. Of the two of them, Vanessa was the only one who hadn't changed.

It was a relief for both of them when Vanessa left home. There was no more trying to change the other, no more pretending for everyone else's sake that if

they tried a little harder, things would get better. That if Vanessa could work at it, Patrice would learn to love her. Amy still expected a miracle to happen, that one day her mother and sister would become friends.

It wouldn't happen.

For now, Vanessa could look at them, the parents that had brought her up for better or worse, and be glad that if she couldn't have them, they at least had each other. She ran a hand over her middle. It was time she found something else for herself.

"Vangie?"

"Hmmm?"

"The boat stopped."

Vanessa looked around, surprised to realize the engines had slowed and the pier was right there off the bow.

"I have to go." Amy added, stepping back.

"Go?" All pleasant thoughts of the baby and the future vanished. Vanessa turned panicked eyes on her sibling. "You can't *go*." She watched as, once the horn blew, people filed their way toward the exit. She yanked on the cuffs, clanging loudly. People spilled out onto the concrete pier while Amy stayed out of her reach. "Wait! Unlock me!"

"I told you, I don't have the key."

"Well, then, who does?"

Amy looked over Vanessa's shoulder, eyes widening and an impish smile taking over her face.

Vanessa felt the prickle of awareness in the back of her neck and her stomach flip-flopped with excitement. No matter the decisions she'd made once she stopped panicking, she wasn't quite ready to face the angry consequences of her actions.

"I believe, ladies, that would be me."

"And that's my cue to find the restroom." Amy nodded at her co-conspirator before sashaying toward the exit.

“No! Amy!” Vanessa made a grab for her arm, but it was a useless effort. “Don’t leave me alone like this!”

Amy spun, continuing to walk backward as she talked. “You’re *not* alone anymore, Vange. That’s the point. Have fun at the ball, I intend to get lost in some yummy guy’s arms and dance the night away!” She waved, turned back around and left the boat.

Vanessa watched her disappear into the crowd helplessly.

“Together at last,” Raven rumbled a little too close to her ear.

Her natural proximity alarms screamed that he was too close for safety, for her to get away. As if she could get very far.

“I’ve missed you, Vanessa.” The whispery roughness of his voice sent a shiver over her skin. That shiver multiplied when he slid a hand around her waist and stepped close until her back was pressed against him. She closed her eyes, concentrating on each breath instead of the heat radiating from his large browned palm. His hand slid down her middle to her abdomen, settling possessively over her.

“Is this where our baby is?” he asked so gently, so awed, that she felt a sting of tears in her eyes. If she’d had the courage, she could have seen the look in his eyes when he found out about the baby. But she hadn’t. And now she was too afraid to see for herself and only nodded.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“If I unlock you, are you going to run?”

Despite herself, she laughed. “This is an island, there isn’t anywhere to run to.”

“Why do you think I went to such extremes to get you here?” He finally stepped around her, inserting a small silver key into the loop around the boat rail.

Vanessa let her eyes devour him, her senses drowning in the sheer relief of being close to him again. The black of his tuxedo jacket molded over his broad shoulders, down his back and over slim hips. Instead of a bow tie, like nearly

every other man she saw board the boat, Raven wore a sleek collarless black shirt with an onyx stud at his throat. She drank in his dark profile, while he twisted the key to release the cuffs.

Finally, the metal albatross was removed. He clasped her hand, rubbing the wrist bones to soothe away any hurt they had caused. Didn't he realize standing here, being next to him and his not hating her was balm enough?

His eyes slid over her, from the coil upon coil of her piled hair to the amethyst earrings dangling from her ears to the matching necklace she knew was from him. His hooded eyes returned to her lips, making her want to lick them just because he'd like it.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his voice like smoke, intoxicating and smooth.

"For what?"

He twined her fingers securely with his. "For the ball."

"Oh." For a second she thought he had something else up his sleeve. Like leg shackles.

He pocketed the handcuffs and key while leading her toward the ramp where they would disembark.

She eyed the lump in his pocket suspiciously. "Why are you keeping those?"

"In case Cinderella tries to leave again."

"Cinderella had to leave the ball by midnight, remember? Or she'd lose everything."

"I'm telling the fairy tale, Vanessa," he said with an air of arrogance that was purely Raven. "In my version, midnight is when she gets everything she ever wanted."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, and in my version," he helped her with the final step off the ramp, gathering her close to him, "Cinderella never leaves at all."



They walked together, his hand at her back, reminding him of all the times they'd walked just like this, before they'd gotten involved. He'd wanted her, tormenting himself with the tiniest touch to her spine, deluding himself that he was leading her where he wanted her to go. Tonight, she wore black satin, shrouded in his color but for the violet stones at her ears and neck and the violet flowers embroidered from the hem all the way up to the strapless bodice. She was magnificent. But the same tensions between them before were between them now. His wanting, her shying away.

Tonight, all that would change.

When they reached the party, they found the dance floor laid out on the lawn, the orchestral band already playing for the growing crowd. Vanessa looked around in wonder, a smile on her face and the lights in her eyes as she looked to the stage and the array of people milling around. The last time she'd been here for an event, it was Sky's wedding. It was also the last time they'd danced. He'd have to correct that.

Raven pulled her into his arms, swaying to the music, breathing deeply the scent of her rose scented perfume. He purposely didn't bring up a single thing concerning their relationship, content for nearly an hour to have this time together. He stole a kiss here, a kiss there. It was enough to hold her close, to feel her relax in his arms. As if she found exactly what she needed in him. The way he found everything he'd ever wanted in her. Well, nearly everything...

But, of course, that time had to end.

"I have something for you," he said, aware the auction would be starting soon.

"Raven, please, don't—" Vanessa stopped talking when he brought a finger to her lips.

"This is something you'll like." He stepped back from her, reaching into his tuxedo's interior pocket. He pulled out a crisp white envelope and handed it to her.

The stark color was blinding against the shiny blackness of her gloves. Vanessa stared at it. "What is this?"

“You have to open it to find out.”

“This isn’t like your last letter, is it?”

Raven shook his head slowly side to side. “I didn’t even write this one.”

Vanessa tore open the seal and pulled out a single, folded white sheet.

Subject: Remington, R.

DF508 deletion: Negative

No anomalies detected.

Vanessa looked up at his solemn face. “What is this?” she repeated.

“You know what it is. I had myself tested for any known gene factors that contribute to cystic fibrosis. I’m negative for the primary one and there weren’t any other known signs either. There’s no history of it in the family. We checked. I’m not a carrier, Vanessa.”

She stared at the paper intently enough to set it on fire. “But these tests take weeks to get the results back. There’s more than seven hundred indicators to check!”

He smiled wryly. “I didn’t have weeks. I flew to our research facility in Washington. It’s amazing what a lot of money and a little manhandling can accomplish.”

“I would have waited for the results, Raven. There wasn’t any need to assault some innocent lab technicians.”

“Would you?” He couldn’t keep the worry from his voice. “In any event, *I* couldn’t wait. I couldn’t take that chance with our baby’s life. I wanted you to be sure it was safe to keep him.”

“Safe? Keep him?” Her eyes went from glassy to brimming with tears. “I’m not giving up our baby, Raven. Why would you thi—” She closed her eyes and sighed. “Amy told you what I said, didn’t she?”

She probably didn’t want to know. “Amy told me a lot of things.”

She concentrated on refolding the paper precisely on its creases, then reinserting it into the envelope. “What else did she tell you?”



Raven took the envelope from her, putting it back inside his pocket. He'd give it to her again later, to keep. "She said you love me."

Keeping her head down, Vanessa wiped her eyes, careful of her make-up. "Yes, well, she likes you. She'd say anything—"

He'd laugh if it weren't so damn ridiculous. "Let me try this again. *I love you.*"

Vanessa looked up at him slowly, her eyes wide and disbelieving.

He lifted a hand to her face, caressing her jaw with his thumb. Amy seemed to be right about this too. She truly didn't think it was possible. As if his love were such a prize. His throat clenched, nearly strangling him. "Having you leave like that—" He closed his eyes to get a grip on the emotions. "You hurt me."

"Raven, I—"

"Had reasons, I know. Your reasons were your secrets, the things you didn't trust me enough to tell me about." What he wouldn't give for her complete trust. All he could do was wait for it.

"I couldn't tell you!" she cried softly, her gaze noticing the people all around them, still dancing. "I wanted to, a thousand times, but I was afraid. What if you wanted me to go away? I wasn't ready to lose you."

"You were more than ready to leave me."

"No." She trembled in his hold, more tears spilling unchecked. But she didn't pull away. She'd come to stand her ground. At least it was something. "I wasn't ready to say goodbye at all, for any reason. It killed me to do it, but I had to leave. You don't understand. You don't know what it's like to be left behind."

No, he'd always done the leaving. Always cut his losses and fled. Until her. "I do now."

She bowed her head again, but he tipped her chin, forcing her to look at him.

"Don't leave me again, Vanessa. I can't do this without you."

The droplets fell freely from her eyes and wounded him. Didn't she know she could cut his heart out with her tears? "Do what?"

It was all or nothing now. He cupped her face in both his hands so she couldn't mistake his meaning, couldn't rewrite his words. He wanted her to see the truth in his eyes. "Live."

## Chapter Fifteen

Vanessa wrapped her arms around him, pressing her face to his chest. If she could stay here, never have to face the past or anything else, she would. This was where she was safest. In his arms. But before she could ask anything of him, she had to give him honesty. He deserved it.

“This entire week, all I wanted was to come back to you. Every time I picked up the phone or went to the door, I couldn’t do it. I kept thinking how horrible it would be if there was something wrong with the baby. You’d learn to hate me, like my mother. Like Patrice. I know it makes me a coward, but I couldn’t go through with it. I could lose them. I couldn’t stand it see it if you hated me, too.”

Raven put both hands on either side of her face, holding her a breath away from him and making sure she was looking into his eyes.

“I want you to listen very carefully because I don’t want you to get confused on this point ever again. I *love* you. I will for the rest of my life. Nothing you do, nothing that happens, will ever change that. I’ve been looking my entire life for you, never happy or content until the day I met you. I couldn’t hate you if I tried. Believe me, I’ve tried. But if I have to spend the rest of my life earning your trust, your love, I will, because you mean that much to me. I will never, ever, leave you, Vanessa. Ever.”

She stared at him, her heart so full, she almost couldn’t speak. She reached up to touch his face.

“You have my trust. You’ve always had it. I tried to fight you, tried to escape what I felt, but it wasn’t any use. You were always there, keeping your word and being so damned good to me, no matter how I treated you. You don’t know

how scared that made me, learning to believe in someone again. When I ran from you, it was never about you. I do trust you, too much.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me the truth? Why did you leave?” he asked softly, leaning his forehead down to hers.

“When you hold me, when you’re just *next* to me, I’m not afraid of anything. Not the cystic fibrosis, not what other people think of me. Everything just feels so...right. I didn’t know what to do with that. No one else has ever stayed by me the way you have. You made me invincible.”

“But?” He cupped her hand at his nape.

“But no matter how I tried to talk myself into confiding in you, telling you the truth, I didn’t feel safe. When you weren’t there, I was just me. The same me I’ve always been. The same me no one loved enough to stay with, to stand by or fight for. I kept waiting for you to get tired of me, tell me to go away. The longer I stayed, the more afraid I became. I never expected more than beautiful memories. It was supposed to be enough for me...but it wasn’t. The more time we were together, the more I wanted, but I’d painted myself into a corner by not telling you the truth. By going into this relationship with the intention of ending it before I got in too deep.”

“We *started* this thing too deep,” he rumbled.

She nodded. “Amy tried to tell me. Tried to show me that I was lying to myself worse than I was to you. I thought I could just take a part of you for myself, keep it in my heart and not get hurt. Not fall in love. But I was so wrong. And when I found out I was pregnant, it all blew up in my face. The lies, the truth, my feelings for you, every dream I never expected to come true.

“Every day this week, I thought about you. I couldn’t think about anyone or anything else. I was so lost without you. I would find a quiet place in the house and think about us, about this baby. Those test results mean the world to me, Raven, they really do, but I’d already decided to keep the baby. I couldn’t *not* want a miracle, even as afraid as I was. I came here tonight because I was going to tell you that no matter what happens from now on, I trust you to stand

by me and the baby. Because I love you. I love you and I don't want a life that doesn't have you in it."

She shivered, not from the cold air or even from the emotions swirling through her. No, the shiver came from the heat in his eyes, the raw, open emotion on his face. He bent to kiss her, his mouth hard and desperate, full to overflowing with love too strong for simple words.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The sound of the emcee introducing himself floated over them, some television personality she didn't really care about.

She sighed when the kiss ended too soon. Confused, she blinked up at him. His smile was faint as he turned his face from her to the stage. Reluctantly, she followed his lead.

"It's time for the first piece in the jewelry show! However, this isn't up for auction. It's part of a special request." He reached theatrically deep into his pocket before pulling out a black velvet jewelry box. Opening it, he let out long whistle. "I don't have my jeweler's loupe, not that it would do any good if I did, but this looks like a five-karat diamond solitaire engagement ring, and it's for a very special lady out there among you. That lady is..." he dragged out the word as a spotlight began sweeping through the crowd. An excited rumble moved around them, filled with expectant peeps and questions.

Raven gazed down at her and she knew. Somehow, she knew. Still, she gasped when he stepped back and dropped to one knee.

"Raven! What are you doing?" She looked around. People were already watching them. After all, it was hard to miss an announcement like that and harder not to follow the light that had settled on them.

"I'm asking you to marry me, Vanessa Angel." His voice carried on the speakers. Too late, she saw the small microphone pinned to his wrist.

The whole ball grew silent, waiting for her answer. God, why couldn't he do anything small?

"I'm asking you for the rest of your life, for all of your heart and your trust and your soul because that's what I want to give you in return. I will never get tired of you, mistreat you or make you feel forgotten or unloved. Never want or

need anyone else the way I want and need you, every day, for the rest of my life. Marry me, Vanessa.”

She faltered, not because she didn’t want him, but because he’d made sure everyone at the party had heard his promises. There wasn’t a limb further out where he could go.

“Marry me for love. For passion. And if neither of those reasons matter a damn, marry me for pity, because I’m a waste of a man without you.”

Vanessa brought a shaking hand to her mouth. She looked around, but couldn’t see anything through the light other than shapes of people who shouldn’t matter. She could see only the two of them, as it should be, but still, she knew others were there and she hesitated.

As if reading her mind, he snapped the mic off his wrist and tossed it out to the crowd. “I realized a while back that my life was empty, that I wanted something more. Something only mine. I came home and I thought I could find what I needed in RMI. But what I needed wasn’t in research reports or military supply contracts. I came to work every day for over two years because what I wanted, what I needed, was you. I realized it, that night in the rain. I couldn’t live my life without you. It wouldn’t be worth it.

“When Amy told me you were pregnant, I saw that everything I could ever need was right in front of me. I just had to open my heart enough to reach for it. For you. I should have told you before that I love you. Maybe we wouldn’t be in this place right now, if I had. We both made mistakes, Vanessa. We both had no idea what we were doing, but I know we did the right thing when we found each other. I know it in my heart, in my gut, that you’re the only person in this entire world that will ever make my life worthwhile. Marry me. Make my life mean something.”

She sighed, another tear escaping her control. Damn whoever was watching. “How about we make both our lives mean something?”

“Is that a yes?” he asked, his brows rising.

It was the one word she’d never given him. Had feared giving him. Now, it was the only word left to say. “Yes.”

“Yes!” Raven smiled triumphantly, his white teeth shining. He got to his feet in a rush, grasping her around the waist and lifting her into the air to spin her around while people applauded.

She cupped his face, leaning down to kiss him. Raven slid her down to her feet, his mouth still joined to hers, their hearts already joined forever. When they finally did come up for air, he looked down at her, his heart in those beautiful, beautiful eyes.

“We’re going to be happy together, Vanessa. I promise.” And he hadn’t made a single promise yet that he couldn’t keep.

“No, Raven,” she corrected, knowing her own eyes glittered with excitement for the future ahead. He raised his brow and she laughed, hugging him close so she could whisper in his ear. “We’re going to be giddy.”

## About the Author

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Betting Hearts  
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*A battle begins between Shane, who knows what he wants and Cassie who does everything she can tries to keep a distance between herself and the very handsome sheriff.*

*But Cassie's ex is back and he wants her dead.*

## **Taking Chase**

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Cassie Gambol is on the run. In what seems like another lifetime, her ex-husband nearly ended her life and effectively ended her successful career as a vascular surgeon. But even though the justice system found him guilty of attempted murder, he fled while awaiting sentencing and Carly Sunderland became Cassie Gambol.

Fleeing Los Angeles, she heads to small and off the map Petal, Georgia to start her life again.

Shane Chase, a man who's held himself away from commitment since his fiancée dumped him several years before knows the beautiful newcomer is hiding something. He's wildly attracted to her strength and her underlying vulnerability as well.

But the last thing Cassie wants is another big, overwhelming man who wants to control her life. A battle begins between Shane, who knows what he wants and Cassie, who knows she needs to do everything she can to keep a distance between herself and the very handsome sheriff.

But Cassie's ex is back and he wants her dead.

Book Two of the Chase Brothers

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Taking Chase*:

"I'm gonna kiss you now, Cassie Gambol."

“Why? I mean, why do you want me? I don’t understand it. I can’t lie and tell you I don’t know you’ve been regarded as a player here in Petal. I like men, yes, but I’m afraid of being a casual indulgence to a man like you.”

“There’s not a damned thing about the way I feel about you that’s casual. Now, I’ve been dying to do this for so long.” He closed the last bit of distance between them and he brushed his mouth over hers. His lips were lush and delicious, spicy and masculine, just like the rest of him. They both groaned as he moved away.

“Cassie, you fascinate me. I’m shocked by how much I want you. I think I started wanting you when you kicked my ass at pool. No, I’m a damned liar. Since you stumbled out of your wrecked car and called my momma Crash.” He put his face into her neck and inhaled deeply. “God, you smell good.”

“Shampoo, sweat and a little bit of Delice,” she breathed out, running her tongue over the lips he’d just touched with his own. A sense of unreality washed over her. The connection between them was warm and sticky. Lethargic with want, she let him hold her against his body. The heat of him blanketed her skin. Her nipples hardened against the wall of his chest and a libido that she’d thought beaten out of her roared back to life. There was a moment where she wondered if she was dreaming. Hell, if it wasn’t she sure didn’t want to wake up.

“Mmm.” He licked his lips as she’d just done and a shiver ran through her. “You taste good, too. Better than you should. I ought to be running out the door but damned if you don’t make me want things I’d thought I’d never want with a woman again.”

His hand rested at the small of her back, hot and inescapably present. The other rested on her shoulder. He held her in his orbit physically and mentally. His presence was so intense it boggled her mind. Things tightened low in her gut as her skin tingled everywhere he touched her. And yet, aside from general nervousness, she wasn’t afraid.

She caught her lip in her teeth and he groaned softly. “I know you want me too.” Leaning in, he pressed a hot, wet kiss to the hollow just below her ear. “I

can feel your nipples against my chest,” he murmured, breath stirring the wisps of hair around her ear. His tongue darted inside and then he caught the lobe between his teeth. She shivered, going weak in the knees. “But I want more than your physical need of me. Let’s have dinner. Some snuggling on your couch. A liberal smattering of smooches. Let me get to know you as a woman.”

“I...yes.” She nodded, incapable of further speech. Especially when his grin widened and he looked like a predator.

They sat down and began to dish up the food, digging in. He watched her and she laughed. “What? Do I have a bean spout between my teeth?”

“No,” he chuckled. “I just like the way you look here with me.” He shrugged. “And I like that you eat. Not like some dainty thing who wants everyone to believe she survives on air and mist, but you eat like a real person.”

“Is that your finessed way of telling me I eat like a pig?”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Oh the unwinnable guy question. Darlin’ you do not eat like a pig. You eat like a human who likes to eat. I *like* that.”

She narrowed her eyes at him for a moment and shrugged before going back to her plate. She’d only just put the weight on she lost from the hospital and afterwards in the last three months or so.

They kept a wide berth around what happened the night before but Cassie was pretty sure Maggie had told him about Terry. He didn’t seem freaked, which made her more comfortable.

After they’d eaten, he helped her clean up and get the dishes in the dishwasher before they retired to the couch.

“Let’s get comfortable here, shall we, darlin’? Because I have some serious smooching planned and we should do it right.” He winked and pulled her into his lap, her body straddling his.

The hard ridge of his cock fit up against her and she undulated, grinding herself over him without even thinking of it. Little flares of pleasure played up her spine and the muscles inside her pussy fluttered and contracted.

One of his eyebrows rose slowly and his hands slid to rest at her waist. “So that’s how it’s gonna be, huh? Mmm. You feel so damned good, Cassie. I need to kiss you again.” Arching his neck up, he brought his lips to hers with crushing intensity.

Her head swam as she drowned in him. In a myriad of ways he affected her, overwhelmed her, turned her on and turned her out. Helpless to do anything more than hang on, she slid her hands up his chest and neck and into his hair. The soft, cool silk of it flowed over her skin, his skull solid and sure beneath her palms.

Grunting in satisfaction, he slanted his mouth to get more of her. His tongue slipped in between her teeth and he tasted her, met her warmth with his own. Her elemental flavor rocked him, he couldn’t get enough. When she sucked at his tongue, he pulled her to him tighter and delighted in the moan that came from her lips. Swallowed it down with the rest of her that he took from the kiss.

God he wanted more. The luscious flesh of her bottom lip seduced him as he sucked it into his mouth. Arching into him with a breathy sigh, she traced the outline of his upper lip with the tip of her tongue. Down over the seam of his mouth where her lip was captured, the wetness of her tongue, the tentative and yet utterly carnal way she responded, drew him in.

It’d never been like this with a woman before. Intense, sure. Really good, that too. But so good, so right that it made his chest ache with want and need of *this* woman in his arms? Never.

Damn, he was falling for Cassie. Scratch that—had *fallen* for Cassie and he wasn’t running. No, he wanted more. Wanted to gorge himself on every drop of her he could get as long as he could get it. He wanted to see what kind of tomorrow he could build with this woman. Cassie Gambol wasn’t a casual indulgence at all, she was big league addiction and instead of fear, there was only joy that he’d found it at last.

It took every bit of his self control to keep his hands resting at her waist instead of sliding down to cup her ass. She was so soft against him, so warm

and pliant—everything sexy and earthy, he wanted to take her in the grass under the moon, the dew on his naked skin as he watched her in the silvery light. She was a goddess come alive in his arms.

*When all hell breaks loose, there's only one way to run.*

## Burning Reflections

© 2006 Rachel Carrington

Morgan Hennessy is a high-powered, North Carolina attorney who's spent the past five years trying to forget her failed marriage to someone she'd once considered to be her best friend. Just when she thinks she's gotten things together, the attentions of a colleague turn obsessive. Alive after one vicious attack, Morgan knows only one person can protect her now. Her ex-husband. The one man who still owns her heart.

Evan Hennessy, the small town sheriff of Skyler, North Carolina, has never forgotten the love he shared with his ex-wife and when she returns to his town, needing protection, he can't refuse her. To do so would mean denying his own heart. And when she needs him to reassure her she's as sexy as she once was despite her scars, Evan will do that, too. She walked out on him once and he's been waiting five years for her return. Hell itself won't be able to tear her out of his arms this time.

Enjoy this excerpt from *Burning Reflections*:

She was dead tired.

A hot bath beckoned her and she only wanted to go home. But the dinner date she'd made with friends earlier that week still loomed ahead. Damn. Forgot to cancel. She'd certainly meant to, but time had gotten away from her. Her options were limited now. If she didn't go, she'd get an earful from Tina, her friend from the post office, and then, of course, Tina's boyfriend, Chuck, would chime in. No, best to go and get it over with.

Shouldering her voluminous bag, she was halfway across the room when the lights went out. She came to a sudden stop, a tremor of trepidation catching her unaware. For a brief moment, her heart lurched before irritation crowded out the thoughts of her evening. As she calmed, she realized this was

just another glitch in the electrical system of an old building. Every time it stormed, the lights went out. And she'd definitely seen a few gathering clouds on her way in from the hearing.

A slight rustle caused a shiver of fear to build in the pit of her stomach. She looked around the room, desperately trying to see through the blanket of darkness. Then, trying to shake off the nerves, she took another step forward before a thump made her stop.

She caught her breath and held it. *Don't panic. Sounds are magnified in the dark.* The self-talk did little to help the weakness stealing her limbs.

The darkness carried a hint of foreboding. Of awareness. She heard footsteps and the whisper of clothing.

And suddenly, she realized, she wasn't alone.

Instincts told her to run and with a pounding heart, she took off toward the door. And collided immediately with a solid form. A body. A hand seized her arm. A scream bubbled in her throat, quickly silenced by a cold piece of metal pressed into her stomach. Shock curled in the pit of her stomach.

Hot breath bathed her face.

Then she heard his voice, a low, insidious whisper. "I've been waiting for you for a long time."

Disbelief snaked its way up her spine. This wasn't happening. Panicked, she tried to turn, to see the face of her captor, but he clucked his tongue. "You mean you don't recognize my voice?"

The words spilled into her ear and she tried to focus on the nuances, the inflections which would give her the name of the rabid man now holding her. She did know the voice, but she refused to believe the man holding her was the one she knew. "I-I'm not sure..."

"Unfortunately, Dexter, I can't join you for dinner this evening. I have other plans," he sing-songed. "Sound familiar now, bitch?"

Oh my God. Dexter Canfield. Her associate in the law firm and until now, an overall nice guy. "Dexter, what are you doing?"



He spun her around to slide the gun along her cheekbone. "You always turned me down. You know, a guy can only take so much rejection before he snaps."

She stared at the monster she had once called a trusted co-worker. "You're not thinking clearly," she began in the same voice she'd use for any of her clients who'd walked too close to the edge.

He gave her a little shove and kicked the door shut. "Don't. I don't want to hear your pathetic attempts to pacify me. It's too late." His voice raised an octave. "Don't you get it? It's too late." She heard the click of the lock as he secured them together.

Her palms damp, she clutched at the visitor's chair behind her, her nails biting into the soft leather. Night had fallen, thrusting the room into pitch black. Terror, cold and chilling, enveloped her and she began to shake.

How many times had she sat across the conference room table from Dexter in daily meetings? And how many times had she rejected him when he'd asked her to dinner? He couldn't have known her refusals had nothing to do with him. And everything to do with her ex-husband, Evan.

Her heart racing, she heard his footsteps. Was he pacing or coming toward her? A gurgle of panic lodged in her throat. "Dexter, you can't do this. Think of everything you'll lose if you go through with this. Just walk away. We'll just forget this ever happened."

The tread softened and Morgan felt his hot breath bathe her face. She tried to lean back as far as the chair would allow. "Even now, she lies. Other plans, my ass." The gun made a swishing noise as he whipped it frantically in the air. "You didn't have other plans. You just didn't want me. You couldn't see yourself on a date with a man who wasn't up to your standards. Yeah, you'll help me now when you wouldn't even give me the courtesy of a dinner date." He pushed the lower half of his body against her and panic intensified. What was he going to do to her? How could she escape? "I wonder if your kind offer of assistance has anything to do with the gun I hold in my hand?"

It had everything to do with the gun. Just the thought of it held her rapt attention and made Morgan's fingernails dip even further into the leather.

"Dex, please, listen to me. I have friends waiting for me. If I don't show up and they can't reach me, they'll call the police. You don't want that to happen. It's better to end it now." She spent her days in the courtroom convincing twelve people to free her clients. But she doubted her own abilities this time.

Because her own life depended on her powers of persuasion and not someone else's.

"Just shut up. You just shut up. You don't care for me." Dexter stomped his feet and Morgan held her breath. She should be able to negotiate her way out of this, but the words wouldn't come. She had no bargaining tool this time.

He brought the gun to his lips and kissed the barrel. "I should just kill you now. Though, that was never my original intention." He lowered the weapon only marginally. She heard him pat the front pocket of his suit coat.

For a brief moment, hysteria took over and Morgan found herself thinking about the Dexter she'd seen just this morning. They'd shared a laugh over coffee. Had he been planning this even then? Or had she catapulted the lunacy by refusing his dinner request once more?

Even now, she remembered what he was wearing. An expensive designer suit and polished loafers. And with the chiseled jaw and blond crew cut, he'd always given the impression of a more than capable opponent in the courtroom.

"You really should pay more attention to me now, Morgan."

She heard his voice, a whisper away from her ear and she tried to swallow, but a lump the size of a fist lodged in her throat. He reached out one hand and Morgan closed her eyes.

Dear God. He was going to touch her.

Tears stung the back of her eyes. Her day had begun so normally. Coffee and muffin at eight followed by an intense meeting with a client accused of armed robbery. Conference call with the judge which segued into a long lunch with one of the senior partners.

She'd come back to her office after a late hearing to grab some files to take home with her before heading out to join her friends for dinner. Would they really call the police? Dexter hadn't accepted her bluff.

An ominous click sent her mind racing back to the present. "You don't want to do this. So far, it's only kidnapping, but if you kill me, you know what could happen. My God, Dexter, you've spent the past three years defending criminals. You know the repercussions for your actions." The words tumbled over themselves and the tears began, not a rush of moisture down her cheeks. Just a drop now and again. Tiny dots of wetness she didn't bother to brush away. Her appearance mattered little now.

Dexter wasn't listening to her. He'd gone back to pacing.

"Dexter, I..."

"Shut up!" Morgan fell silent. "Just shut up. I never thought I'd say this, but I'm sick of hearing your voice. I might have known you'd be a whiner, someone who would plead for their life like a weak-kneed baby." He scrubbed the top of his head with his palm and his blond crew cut made the hair rasp against his skin. "No. Shooting you will be too easy."

He walked to the office door, but Morgan wasn't stupid enough to think she'd been granted a reprieve.

Morgan turned the chair and sank down onto the seat, not trusting her legs to keep her standing.

Dexter hitched one leg up on the bottom rung of a Queen Anne chair which matched the small sofa in the corner of Morgan's office. "You'd better hope your friends don't call the cops, Morgan. I would really hate to have to track them down. One by one. You'd hate that, too, wouldn't you?"

The promise of evil in his voice terrorized her and Morgan whispered, "Please let me go."

Silence fell for a long minute. "Why would I want to do that? You don't really think this was a spur of the moment thing, do you?" He gave a little laugh which chilled her even more. "Oh, no, Mrs. Hennessy. I've been planning

this for a long, long time. So long, in fact, that sometimes, I would lie awake in bed and dream of this moment.”

She knew then that there would be no convincing him to free her. Dear God. She was going to die. She closed her eyes and tried to recall peaceful images, visions that soothed and comforted her.

Evan’s face came to mind. With his boyish good looks and easy charm, he’d always comforted her. And now, she couldn’t even remember the reason they’d divorced. She wished he were here now. Holding her.

“You’re not listening to me,” Dexter reminded her. “And on that note, I think I’ll give you something to remember me by.” He tucked the gun into the waistband of his dress slacks and Morgan stood. She wouldn’t go down without a fight, dammit. Now that he’d put the weapon away, maybe, just maybe, she had a chance.

The glow of the moon showcased his angular features as he raised one finger. “No, no, no. No escape.” His hand dipped into the front pocket of his shirt. “Do you smoke, Morgan?”

She didn’t want to answer the question, but fear of hastening her demise forced her to respond. “No.” Sweat dripped down between her breasts, soaking the front of her dry-clean-only silk blouse.

He flicked a tiny gold lighter and the flame, a vivid orange, mesmerized her. Horror clawed its way up from the pit of her stomach as Dexter approached her. “I’ve always been a big fan of fire. It’s just one of the many things you don’t know about me because you never cared enough to learn.” He withdrew a silver flask from just inside his coat pocket. “Thirsty?” He offered her the container.

Morgan didn’t know how he wanted her to respond, but as he continued to hold out the flask, she relented and lifted her shaking hand. He pressed her back, pushing her down into the chair once more.

“You’d better sit. I wouldn’t want you to spill it.” His voice sounded cordial, almost conversational.

The silver rim touched her lips and as she tipped the small bottle back, the heat of the whiskey burned its way down her throat. She coughed and

sputtered, giving Dexter an opportunity to retrieve the flask before she dropped it.

“Excellent, excellent. Now, Morgan...” he hitched one hip on the arm of the chair, “...do you know what happens when fire comes in contact with alcohol?”

Her eyes widened. Dexter put his lips to the edge of the bottle and Morgan tried to push her way out of the chair. Terror so intense she was nauseated gave her the strength she needed to dislodge him, but Dexter rebounded quickly, snatching a handful of her long, blonde hair.

He brought her face close to his, pressing his cheek to hers. “Oh, don’t run, Morgan. You’d miss all the fun.”

He took a heart swig of the whiskey, struck the lighter and blew into the flame.

*He's never lost a bet in his life but she's playing for keeps!*

## Betting Hearts

© 2006 Dee Tenorio

Cassandra Bishop's boyfriend is back. Only problem is...she doesn't want anything to do with him. Or his new fiancée. What the confirmed tomboy would like is to wring his neck. She might have done it, too, if he hadn't filled her in on the embarrassing truth that he'd left her at the altar because she wasn't woman enough to satisfy him. Her pride nearly settled for punching him in the nose...until she thought of something better—proving him wrong.

High on Burke Hallifax's list of cataclysmic nightmares is having to look at his best friend as a real female. But when her ex-fiancé makes his wedding a personal vendetta against Cass, Burke has no choice but to bet everything on her ability to out hot-girl the competition. Unfortunately, the entire town is betting as well—on whether Burke and Cass can pull off the makeover of the century...without losing their hearts in the process.

Enjoy this excerpt from *Betting Hearts*:

Burke woke at six a.m. as usual. If he had gotten to sleep before three he might not be so bitter about it. He hadn't been able to think straight since Cass left the night before, her expression angry, her lips pouty. If he could have thrown Hayne out and kept her there he would have, but the mere fact that he wanted to was reason enough to slam the car door on her not-supposed-to-be-sexy little face.

She gunned the motor, backing out with a roar. Knowing her, she made sure to leave enough rubber on the driveway to repave it twice. Hell hath no fury, he supposed, throwing back the blankets and trudging toward the bathroom.

"Sleeping nude these days, Burke?"

He froze. Two more steps and he'd be safely in the bathroom, able to shut the door and hide. While part of him bristled at the prospect of actually hiding from the likes of Cassandra Bishop's throaty voice, lacy garters and strawberry nipples, the rest of him ached to run those few feet as fast as possible.

"What are you doing here?"

"Enjoying the view, at the moment."

He looked over his shoulder, hoping he imagined her. No, there she was, leaning against his wall, her mouth in a curve he could only describe as lascivious and her eyes trained on his bare butt.

"I'm up here, Miss Mud Pie."

Her gaze finally flicked up to his face while her brow furrowed and her lips pursed. "What did I tell you about calling me that?"

"You don't do what I tell you, why should I do what you say?"

"For a refreshing change?"

He turned his back on her. "I'm taking a bath. I don't know what you're doing here, I don't *want* to know why you're here. When I come out, I want you back home, reading. And I want my emergency key on the table."

There, that was dismissive. Strong, not weak in the slightest. He strolled into the bathroom and closed the door, proud of himself. There wasn't a sound from the hallway, so he figured she'd take a few minutes to complain to herself before doing exactly what she'd been told. He turned on the water for the tub, letting it fill while he took care of his morning necessities. When he sat inside its dark depths, water flowed over him, soothing his aggravation instantly. He closed his eyes and sighed. Finally, some peace. No Cass, no complications. With any luck at all, a long soak would massage the tension right out of him. He leaned his head back on the padded lip of the tub, giving in to the exhaustion. A few minutes of catnap and he'd be back on his game. Just ten, maybe fifteen...

The water lapped his chest, the bathroom satisfyingly filled with steam, when he heard something suspiciously like the sound of the bathroom door opening. She couldn't give him ten minutes rest. Not even five.

“Go away.” So what if he sounded frustrated? He *was* frustrated.

“You got to see me naked. Turnabout’s fair play.”

One of these days, she’d push him too far. Not today, but one day, and he’d have every right to throttle her. “I don’t want to play fair. Get out.”

“You know, Burke, I think I’m done worrying about what you want.”

He snapped his head off the padding, looking over and seeing her standing in the middle of the bathroom with her arms crossed over her breasts. Convenient, because nearly every other inch of her was bared and he didn’t think his control could take it if she put her arms down. Especially if she put them down to undo the ties of her nearly transparent scrap of panties.

She moved to the steps of the tub, climbing up and over as if she did it every day. Before he knew it, she was parked on his lap, hot water swirling over them but not between them. There was nothing between them but a miniscule pair of panties.

There wasn’t a safe place to put his gaze. If he met her bold stare, he’d see the smoky green eyes that haunted him all night long. Her mouth had some of that shiny pink gloss that tempted him to nibble it off. If he looked straight ahead, he’d be staring at a pair of perfect, creamy handfuls. And they’d be staring back.

Predictably, his body responded, right beneath the tight curves of the ass he didn’t quite remember allowing his hands to grip. She smiled down at him, pleased as punch. She rolled her hips and he knew it was over.

*I’m going to hell for this, I know it.*

She gasped, leaning down to whisper in his ear. “This is about what *I* want, Burke. And what I want is *you*.”

The loud splash of water overflowing the obsidian tub as he lurched forward was Burke’s first clue he’d been asleep. The total lack of Cass or her transparent panties was the one that he’d been dreaming. The painful erection was unfortunate proof he was a damn mess.

Still breathing hard from his shock, Burke splashed hot water over his face and tried to snap out of it. Whatever *it* was. One thing was sure, *it* was getting



out of hand. He doubted he'd be able look her in the eye next time he saw her. He *knew* he couldn't look at her anywhere else.

Frustrated, he stood up and grabbed a towel from the wall behind him. After fussing with the black terrycloth, he freed the drain and stomped out of what was supposed to be his sanctum. Come to think of it, the whole damn house was supposed to be his sanctum. Except every room was marked by Cass somehow. Thanks to the CD player, she owned his kitchen. The living areas might as well be her personal rec room. She helped him pick his couch, played poker every week on his dining room table, brought him more plants than a single man could safely explain and ate her snacks where ever the hell she pleased. She'd slept in his guest room enough times to have a side and a pillow with a dent just the size of her rock-hard head. He could even count the hallway as hers now, because it was the first place she'd ever seen him bare-assed. The only place she hadn't particularly touched was his bedroom.

He cornered into it and swore.

Cass sat at the foot of his unmade bed, her jeans clad legs crossed—elegantly?—dangling the most damning thing he'd ever seen from a manicured fingertip. One cinnamon-chocolate eyebrow arched, her glittering green eyes pinning him to his spot while her mouth twisted into a smug, plump little grin.

"And here I thought you didn't sleep in anything."

"I can explain those." No, you can't. If you can't explain to yourself why you never gave those back, how how are you gonna explain it to her?

"I didn't think this shade of blue was your color, Burke."

Intimidation would work. He didn't have anything else. He crossed his arms and tried to glare her down.

"To think I was almost going to do what you said. I would have, if I didn't have to return your sweats. They're in your drawer now, by the way, pressed and arranged by color, the way you like. Imagine my surprise when I looked in the mirror and, oh my stars and garters! *My* garters peeking from under your pillow."

"It's not like that. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

“Nope, don’t think I will.” She leaned back on her elbows, half laying across his bed, pert breasts presented like a buffet under her white, ribbed tank top. The damn girl hadn’t bothered putting a bra on. Again. The other times, she’d been well covered, under some kind of man-shaped polo or sweatshirt. Even May Belle’s dress left more to the imagination. This time, the dark little circles couldn’t be missed. They poked the fabric up to raised little points, practically waving, and set his mouth watering.

“Get. Out.”

“Nope.”

“Cass—”

She stood up, strolling to him and waving her sheers like the evidence they were. “You think you can muscle out of this one, don’t you? I caught you red-handed, Halifax. You’ve been sleeping with my stockings!”

“They were stuck between the mattress and the wall. I found them this morning on accident.” A believable lie. A damn good one, actually. He’d be proud of it if he were a liar. Hell, he’d be proud if it got him out of this mess.

For a moment, she dimmed. But only a moment. “These are silk. It they were caught on the wall, there’d be a snag. There would *only* be snags.”

*Shit.*

“I can’t believe you lied to my face.”

Burke couldn’t believe it either. This whole mess was making him insane. “I wouldn’t have to if you’d leave.”

“Why are you sleeping with my underwear?”

He closed his eyes, exasperated. “I was not sleeping with your underwear. Those are stockings and a garter belt—”

“So you admit you’re sleeping with them?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yes, you did. You—”

“Cass!” He roared, shutting her up instantly. He bent down, making sure to be right in her face so she couldn’t misunderstand. “This conversation is over.”

He was close enough to see the gold flecks at the edges of her green irises. Close enough to see her uncertainty, her worry...her resolve. Before he could pull away, she threw her arms around

# hot stuff

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