

Sandhain publishing Ltd.



*The Wedding Dress*  
BOOK 2

*Something Borrowed,*  
SOMETHING BLUE

LENA MATTHEWS

**eBooks are *not* transferable. They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.**

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.



Samhain Publishing, Ltd.  
2932 Ross Clark Circle, #384  
Dothan, AL 36301

Something Borrowed, Something Blue  
The Wedding Dress, Book 2  
Copyright © 2006 by Lena Matthews  
Cover by Anne Cain  
ISBN: 1-59998-132-7  
[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First [Samhain Publishing, Ltd.](http://www.samhainpublishing.com) electronic publication: August 2006

*Something Borrowed,*

Something Blue

*The Wedding Dress*

Book 2

*Lena Matthews*

## Dedication

To Maggie Casper and Liz Andrews because they always know exactly what to say at the precise time I need to hear it. For handholding, butt kicking, and unwavering friendship. I love you ladies.

## Chapter One

"If you let me use your bathroom I will be your slave for life," promised the dark-haired man hopping up and down in the hallway.

Azure Kerr didn't know whether to be amused or alarmed. It wasn't every day a strange white man danced in front of her door, but this was Los Angeles, so she wasn't too surprised.

She had only been in L.A. for a little over two years, but the peculiarity of the city still sometimes intrigued and astonished her. That was probably one of the reasons she kept the door open and hadn't slammed it shut in the face of the stranger. He appealed to her, much like the city itself did.

"And you think I'm in need of a slave, why?" She kept her hand on the door, not willing to be taken in by his plea. He looked adorable and all, prancing about as he was, but no way was she going to let some strange long-haired hippie use her bathroom just because he promised to indenture himself to her.

"Because it's the Christian thing to do," he begged, twitching more. "Please, I'm harmless. You can ask Jessie. I'm a friend of hers but she's not answering the door."

"Well, I guess I can't ask Jessie then," Azure pointed out, not budging from her doorway. Not as if she would have if Jessie had been home. Her neighbor was a bit out there.

Although she and Jessie lived next door to each other, they weren't exactly Lucy and Ethel. It was hard for Azure—a professional black woman about to hit thirty—to find common ground with a barely-out-of-

her-teens girl who changed her hair color as often as she changed her men. She had seen more men come out of Jessie's condo than she'd seen come out of the closet on Jerry Springer. Azure truly tried hard to be open-minded, but it was hard as hell to ignore the ho-like quality her neighbor possessed.

"If she were here, I wouldn't be asking either." Reaching in his back pocket, between jiggles, he pulled out his wallet and handed it to her. "My license, my social security card, and every credit card I own are in there. Feel free to call the law, Blockbuster Video, or my mother, whose number is on my contact in case of emergency card, while I pee. *Please!*"

Amusement won out, hands down. No self-respecting serial killer would have a contact in case of emergency card in his wallet, let alone his mother's name and number in there. He seemed more desperate than deranged.

Stepping back, Azure gestured for him to come in. "Down the hall and to your right," she called after the sprinting man.

The man shouted over his shoulder as he passed, "You're a goddess among mortals."

Azure shook her head in bemusement as she closed the door. If he ended up killing her it would be no more than she deserved. Walking back to the small kitchen, she stopped by the roll-away island where she had left the newspaper spread out over the top and waited.

The pastel yellow-painted kitchen was one of her favorite rooms in the condo. It was also equipped with sharp pointy objects and heavy heavable things she could use just in case she was wrong about hippy boy. He didn't necessarily look psychotic. A bit unkempt in his stained, frayed jeans and a metal-band T-shirt, but not crazy.

A loud groan filled the air, followed by the sound of water trickling. Azure winced as she wished, and not for the first time, for thicker walls.

She was happy he had come to do what he said, but she really could have lived with less proof.

Even though he was doing exactly what he had beseeched entrance to do, Azure couldn't resist taking a peek inside of his wallet. Surprise, surprise—Mr. Gavin Connor of 650 Traveling Way, was one of the few people in the world who actually looked good in their driver's license photo.

He was really kind of cute, in a Seattle grunge band sort of way, with long brown hair teasing his shoulder blades and a killer smile. Tracing his photo with her finger, Azure reversed her thought. He was more than kind of cute. The boy was fine. Which only went to show it had been way too long since she had gotten any.

Her self-imposed celibacy reared its ugly head, reminding her once again she should be out getting some loving instead of boarded up like a spinster. It was pathetic actually, but her career as a wedding planner revolved around helping people bring their dream weddings to life, and yet Azure couldn't remember the last time she had went on a date herself. She was no closer to walking down the aisle for her own wedding than she was to sprouting wings and flying to the moon.

Yet at this point in her life, Azure would be happier to have a man pounding into her than proposing to her. Love and weddings were great and all, but sometimes a girl needed some good ol' fashioned sex.

The sound of the door opening and the echo of footsteps on the wooden floors alerted her to his presence. Azure closed his wallet quickly, not wanting him to spot her drooling over his license.

She was horny, not deranged.

"You, my love, are a life saver." Sticking out his hand, he introduced himself. "I'm Gavin Conner."

Azure looked down at his hand causing Gavin to chuckle in return. "Don't worry princess, I washed it."

"Shouldn't you be addressing me as 'Lord and Master' seeing as how I now own you?" Azure teased as she took his hand into hers.

His hand was callused, but the rough touch didn't turn Azure off, quite the opposite in fact. She was a blue-collar loving kind of girl. To her, there was nothing sexier than a man who worked with his hands—because if he knew how to use his hands out of the bedroom, there was no limit to what he could do inside.

"A hard task master it seems."

"Hey, it was your wager, who am I to look a gift horse in the mouth? By the way, your mother said to tell you to call home more often." Azure released his hand and held out his wallet to him.

Gavin froze in the middle of taking it from her. The look of surprise on his paling face was priceless, and Azure couldn't hold back her grin any longer. "Just kidding."

Shuddering, he pocketed his wallet. "You don't know how on the money that was. My mother is a bit needy."

"All mothers are."

"So are you going to introduce yourself or do I have to keep calling you 'Lord and Master'?"

The tone of his voice was flirty, surprising Azure a bit. Only a guy could be comfortable peeing in a stranger's home and hitting on her—all within a few minutes of each other. "I don't know if we're on a first name basis yet, slave boy."

"I know that you use Caress soap and like turtles. Doesn't that warrant me a name?"

"No. You peeing in my house warrants *me* a name, but not the other way around."



"I think you just like the way I say 'Lord and Master'."

"Could be." Azure looked him over as she picked up her coffee cup. He was so damn cute. She really needed to get laid. "So what do you play?"

Gavin smiled at her comment. "What makes you think I play an instrument?"

Repressing her grin, Azure thought he had to be joking. There was no doubt in her mind that Gavin was in a band. She might not listen to rock, but she did have to pass MTV to get to BET, and everything about him screamed garage band. From his shoulder-length, curly brown hair, to his tight jeans and rocker T-shirts, Gavin was born and bred for the lost generation. "Just a hunch."

"Well I don't."

"Really," she replied, eyeing his hair.

Following her thinking, he touched his curly locks. "I have an aversion to clippers."

Azure smiled, she couldn't stop herself. He was too much. "What?"

"Actually it's not just clippers. I can't abide any noise close to my ears. Can't wear headphones either." He winced as her grin grew larger. "Did I just lose cool points with you?"

"To be truthful, you didn't have many left after the prancing you did in the hall."

Gavin frowned. "I didn't prance."

"You practically did the first act of the Nutcracker."

"No pun intended, I'm sure."

"Of course not." She smiled. "So if you're not in a band, are you one..."

Azure stopped herself from saying "one of Jessie's many men". If he didn't know about the other men, then Azure would be putting all of

Jessie's business in the street, and ho or no ho, Azure wasn't trying to blast anyone. "Are you and Jessie seeing each other?"

"No, she's the kid sister of one of my friends. He just moved away and I promised him I'd keep an eye on her."

Azure thought it would be rude to point out that so far he hadn't been doing a very good job of it. "How nice of you."

"I'm a nice guy." Gavin looked down at the open paper, and back up at her with a smile in his eyes. "So are you looking for a call out?"

If that was a line, he delivered it well. "Do I look like an actress to you?"

"I definitely think you have what it takes."

Although she had only lived in Hell A for a short time, she had already seen enough to know she would never make it in the biz—not that she wanted to. Azure relished her curves as much as she did her diversity and she was way too smart to fall for the "everyone has to be a size two" rule. Besides, she enjoyed her job as a wedding consultant to ever want to do anything else. "No, I love food way too much."

"It doesn't show."

"You haven't seen me without my clothes on." The silence followed by the slow smile spreading across his wide mouth made Azure want to kick her own ass for her comment. "Let's just pretend I didn't say that."

"You have as much of a chance of that happening as..."

"Me forgetting your little *demi-plié*?"

"I don't even know what that is." Gavin grimaced. "But I'm sure I didn't do that."

"If you say so."

"Anyone ever tell you you're a cruel woman?"

"I have a younger brother."

"Enough said."

“Well...” Azure started.

“So...” he said at the same time. They both paused and laughed.

“You can go.” Azure gestured to the door with her hand. She didn’t want to seem rude or anything but this was the weirdest conversation she’d ever engaged in with a complete stranger.

“I was just going to thank you for the use of your bathroom.”

“You’re welcome.” There didn’t seem to be much more to say. Azure hated awkward silences, so she headed back towards the front door, with Gavin traveling slowly behind her. Stopping at the door, she turned back to face him, jumping a bit when she noticed how close he was to her. Nervously, she wiped her palms on her trousers before opening the door. “I would say feel free to stop by again, but I doubt the situation will arise.”

“I hope not.” He grinned. “It was bad enough the first time.”

“I think you handled it with decorum and grace.”

Instead of leaving, Gavin moved closer to her and placed his hand a few inches from where hers lay on the door. “Are you really going to let me leave without telling me your name?”

“It’s not necessary. Lord and Master will do just fine.”

“Let’s say for the sake of argument, I want to send you a thank you gift. A roll of Charmin or what not. Who would I address it to?”

“Did you flush?”

“Yes.”

“That’s thanks enough.”

“You’re not going to make this easy for me are you?” he asked, letting go of the door.

“I let you in my house, shared my bathroom and soap with you, I think I’ve made it easy enough.”

"You know," Gavin leaned against the doorframe, seeming every bit as intent on staying as she was on him leaving. "I could just ask Jessie."

"I doubt if she knows it."

"I think you're underestimating Jessie's nosiness and my persistence."

"No, I think I have your persistence pegged down."

"You're only prolonging the inevitable, and increasing my interest in the bargain."

"Then I guess my work here is done."

All right that cinched it. It had been way too long since she had been laid. Even she saw the mixed signals she was sending.

Gavin stared at her for a few seconds longer, before stepping out of the door. "I'll see you later."

"Only if we run into each other in the parking lot."

"Oh no, there will be a later." He smiled. "Trust me."

Azure couldn't believe him. He wasn't going to just go away, and something about that was okay with her. The slamming of a door interrupted their silent stare and they both turned to see Jessie hurrying up the sidewalk. The girl paused in mid-stride when she noticed Gavin standing in front of Azure.

"Gavin," Her eyes appeared as if they were about to bug out of her head, much to Azure's amusement.

"You're being paged," Azure replied quietly, bringing his gaze back to her. "It's been real."

"You're talking like it's over."

Azure raised a brow at his audacity. "It is."

"Far from it," he assured her, giving her a wink as he turned to walk towards Jessie.

Stepping back into her condo, Azure shook her head in wonderment. There was no doubt in her mind—if it was up to him, there would definitely be a next time.

## Chapter Two

Twenty minutes before Gavin walked through the door of Something Borrowed, Something Blue he'd been convinced that he was the most clever man in the world. Now, sitting in the waiting room with a family pack of Charmin next to him, he felt like the biggest ass in the world.

It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now he wasn't so sure. Gavin tapped his nails on the plastic wrap as he looked around the posh room, impressed with what he saw.

Azure was doing well for herself. His angel of mercy obviously ran a tiptop business, if the cut of the furniture was anything to go by. The phones had been ringing off the hook since he sat down to wait for her, and the little drill sergeant behind the big marble desk had booked more appointments than he could count, all the while keeping a very astute eye on him.

The receptionist's chilly glare was enough to pucker his nipples, and not in a good way. Gavin didn't know if it was because he was trying to see Azure without an appointment or if it was the abundant package of toilet paper he brought with him that made her wary.

Gavin wasn't going to be intimidated, or persuaded, so easily. Especially after all the work he'd put in just to get her name from Jessie, who acted as if he'd asked for her first born instead of the name of her neighbor. She eventually gave it—begrudgingly—along with the little

information she had on Azure, which equaled out to a tad more than diddly squat.

Lucky for him though, Azure, although a pretty name, wasn't very common, and with help from the Google god, he'd pulled up more than enough information to get him where he was today.

Hell, part of Gavin still wasn't sure what he was doing there. It wasn't like Azure was the most stunning woman he had ever seen, or the first black woman he'd been drawn to. All women were beautiful to him, and it wasn't a novelty or a new fad for him to ask a woman of a different race out. Gavin considered himself an equal opportunist. He'd never met a woman he didn't like, but there was just *something* about Azure.

And that something was why, after the many odd looks he'd been given, he was still waiting to see her again, if only for one more moment. This was insane, but before Gavin could talk himself into leaving, a distant sexy voice traveled down the hallway and into the room, the elegant speaker not far behind it. Gavin would have recognized her voice anywhere, Lord knew it had been playing on repeat in his mind every day since they'd met three days ago.

"Cybil, has there been any word from MacDonald about scheduling a viewing of Rossi's Garden?"

"No ma'am."

"Damn it. I need to get in there before they're all booked up."

Rossi's Garden! Azure was trying to get into there. Life had never been that easy for him before. Apparently the Lord really did take care of children and fools.

"I left another message, my fifth one this week, but I keep getting the same reply. They'll call as soon as they have an opening."

"I know. You're doing a great job." Azure sighed as she glanced down at her watch. "I'm going to head out to lunch now, call me on my cell if anything comes up."

"Something already has." Cybil gestured behind Azure to Gavin who'd stood as soon as she walked into the room. "This gentleman has been waiting to speak with you."

"Really." Azure turned to greet him, a professional smile on her full lips. Her eyes widened as if she recognized him, but it was the only clue Gavin received that she remembered him. Azure was going to try to keep it professional, he could tell. In her gray power suit, she might have pulled it off—if it wasn't for the twinkle in her dark brown eyes.

"Azure Kerr." Gavin took her hand in his, completely dismissing the distrustful receptionist from his mind. "Welcome to later."

Her full lips trembled with unsuppressed amusement. "Hello again." That was all she said, but it was enough. Her smooth, sophisticated voice did things to him that porn and *Playboy* never had.

Yesterday her sable hair had been down, hanging loose and swinging playfully around her chin when she talked, yet today she had it pulled back and twisted into a bun, bringing her full exotic features into view. The dark eyes he couldn't get out of his head last night now were framed behind a set of wire-framed glasses that probably cost more than his work boots. She was just as attractive in her work wear as she was in her casual clothes, and still making his heart speed up.

"I think he's a wholesaler."

Cybil's words drew Azure's gaze down to the toilet paper still sitting on the chair where he'd left it, instantly making Gavin feel like an idiot. The feeling didn't last long though, because the second her gaze, which was brimming with amusement, connected with his again, Gavin knew she not only got the joke, she appreciated it.



“You really didn’t have to.” Her voice, filled with laughter, washed away any remaining doubt he might have had. “Really.”

“Oh, but I did.” And he wasn’t just talking about bringing the toilet paper. Gavin had felt an irrepressible urge to contact her again. He needed to see for himself if she really was as irresistible as he thought she was. Answer received. She was.

“How did you find me?”

“It wasn’t hard.” Well, not as hard as quantum physics. “Besides I told you I would.”

“That you did.” The silence of the room was overwhelming as it became more than obvious they’d attracted a crowd. “Let’s slip into my office for a second.”

Gavin was willing to slip into anything of hers. Grasping her present, Gavin followed her down the hallway. He tried without success, to keep his gaze from settling on the soft curve of her generous ass, but it was like telling his heart not to beat.

Thankful that he was walking behind her and not beside her, Gavin enjoyed the view and made a mental map of the quickest way to remove her skirt without wasting needless time or energy searching for the phantom zipper.

They reached her office way too soon for his personal enjoyment. Gavin could have spent several hours just staring at her ass. Ushering him in, Azure gestured for him to have a seat as she closed the door partially.

She stood for a moment by the entrance, as if still in shock by his presence. “I really don’t know what to say. Wait, yes I do. How did you find me?”

“You asked me that already.”

“You didn’t answer.” Azure made her way around the desk, distancing herself from him in the process.

“With a beautiful, unique name like Azure, did you really think it would be hard?” Trying to look as unimposing as possible, Gavin dropped the package of tissue on the ground next to his seat then sat casually down across from her, giving her the space she so obviously needed. “By the way, I love the connection with your name and the name of your business. It’s classic.”

“Thank you, I wish I could take all the credit for it, but it was my partner’s idea.”

“*She’s* a clever lady.” At least he hoped it was a she.

“Yes, she is.” Azure smiled, obviously catching on to his attempt at fishing for more information. “I didn’t know Jessie knew what I did for a living.”

“She didn’t but it wasn’t hard to find out after she told me your name. We do live in the century with the internet superhighway, remember?”

“That we do.” Azure shook her head, bemused. “I’m still reeling about you being here.”

He was reeling that she hadn’t called security. “I wanted to see you again and I thought this might be better than staking out your house.”

“Well, I appreciate it, I think.”

“Just think?”

“I’m still not too sure about you.”

“I bet I could change your mind.”

“Charm isn’t everything.”

She thought he was charming? That was a start. “I hear you’re having a problem getting in to tour Rossi’s. What would you say if I told you that I could get you in?”

"I'd say you're delusional as well as cute." Azure snorted. "I've been trying to get an appointment with them for the last two months, and that's just to view the grounds."

Charming and cute. Things were really looking good for him. "Wasn't impressed with the layout online?"

Eyes narrowing, Azure crossed her arms over her bountiful chest. "Why do you know so much about them?"

"I have connections."

"To what?"

"To people." Gavin grinned. "What did you think I meant?"

"I'm still not sure. You're an odd one."

"I'll take that as compliment."

"Can you really get me an appointment?"

The hint of distrust mixed with hope in her voice made him want to laugh. She was playing coy, but he had her attention. "Without a doubt."

"How?"

"Haven't you noticed how resourceful I am?"

"So far the only thing I've noticed is that you're a possible stalker."

Gavin couldn't fault her for thinking that. "Does that work for you?"

A faint smile played at the corner of her mouth. "Normally, no."

"Normally..."

Azure gave him a bemused look as she gestured towards the toilet paper. "I wouldn't exactly call this normal."

"What can I say? I like to make an impression."

"Consider me impressed. I'd be even more impressed and grateful if you got me in."

Now they were talking. "How grateful?"

"Cut the bull." Azure raised a brow haughtily. "What do you want?"

"I want you to have a drink with me."

"I don't think so." Azure shot his suggestion down as quickly as he had brought it up.

But Gavin had known she was going to say that. He just refused to be easily detoured. "A business drink," he countered. "At the Garden. Rossi's has a wine bar with an excellent menu."

"I don't know what kind of women you're used to, but I'm not the type to whore myself for my clients."

"I don't know what your idea of drinks are, but mine doesn't have anything to do with sex." Gavin was offended that Azure would think he was insinuating such a thing. "I just want to get to know you better."

Eyeing him warily, Azure studied him, much like she had when she first opened her front door. She didn't order him out of her office though, so that had to mean something.

"Seriously, no strings attached. You meet me at the Garden, I'll be on my best behavior—hell I'll even wear a tie." *If I can find one.* "It will be nice, civil and even though I'm buying, I'll give you the receipt and you can write it off on your taxes. Strictly on the up and up."

"Drinks and nothing more?"

"Drinks and nothing more," he parroted, mentally crossing his fingers. Gavin wasn't going to push her, but he wouldn't turn her down if she changed her mind either.

"Fine," Azure said, uncrossing her arms. "But if you get out of line, I won't have a problem with ramming my fist down your throat."

"Duly noted." Gavin fought hard to suppress his smile. She was a bloodthirsty little thing. "But just so you know, if you try to take advantage of me, I won't fight back too hard."

The twinkle was back. "Noted, but before we go any further," Azure leaned forward and pressed the speakerphone button on her phone. "Cybil, could you please connect me with Rossi's Garden's?"

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Ye of little faith.” Shaking his head, Gavin stood and walked over to the desk. “Don’t you trust me?”

The phone buzzed as Cybil’s voice came over the line. “The phone’s ringing.”

Azure pushed the phone towards him like a challenge. “Make the call and I will.”

Tsking, Gavin turned the speaker towards him. “You’re too young to be so cynical.”

“Rossi’s Garden. This is Rory speaking.”

“Rory, this is Gavin, is my sister there?”

The look on Azure’s face was priceless as she mouthed, “Sister?”

“Yes, Gavin, hold on.” The second the music came on, Azure smacked him in the arm.

“You’re rotten.”

“What time should I pick you up?” Now all he had to do was find a tie.

## Chapter Three

“It’s just a business meeting,” Azure mumbled for the hundredth time as she stood in front of her open closet wearing only a bra and panties.

“Then why are you having such a hard time finding something to wear?” questioned her best friend and business partner, Janae Ward. She was sitting on Azure’s bed eating chips and flipping channels. Janae looked out of place on the floral comforter dressed in all black, her normal choice of clothes coloring.

As soon as word had gotten around that Gavin had left the premises, Azure had been bombarded with questions she really didn’t have an answer for. And no one had been more persistent than Janae, who insisted on accompanying Azure back to her home while she got ready for her “not date”.

“I have absolutely no idea.” Turning around, she walked back to the bed and plopped down on it in despair. This was way harder than it should have been. Finally after months of trying, Azure was going to be able to tour the Gardens, possibly get on their list, and yet she wasn’t as thrilled as she should have been. She was petrified. “I should just call and cancel.”

“The hell you will.” Janae dropped the remote on the bed in disgust. “Get your big butt in that closet and find something halfway ho’ish to wear.”

“I’m not going to dress like a ho for a business meeting.”

“Please, if this is a business meeting then these chips are fat free, and I said half-way ho’ish. Don’t show him all the goods, just tease him.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Because you’ve been talking about him for the last three days, and bam, he shows up. With toilet paper no less, just to see little ol’ you. If that’s not a reason to show a man some goods then I don’t know any.” Janae nudged Azure in the rear with her foot. “Besides, what’s the big deal? You’re acting like you’ve never been on a date before.”

“It isn’t a date.” Okay, even she didn’t believe that. It wasn’t set up as a date, but she sure was acting like it was one. The butterflies in her stomach and her sweaty palms were a dead giveaway. Azure wasn’t fooling herself any more than she was fooling Janae. “This is your company too, you know. Maybe you should go with me.”

“Ehh no.” Janae held her hand up, blocking Azure’s words. “I’m not chaperoning two grown ass adults.”

Rolling her eyes, Azure stood and made her way back to her closet, hoping against hope something would pop out this time. Inspiration struck as she pulled out a gray dress that she normally wore to church and spun around holding it up to her, to get Janae’s reaction, which was a prompt snort. Exasperated with Janae and the situation at hand, Azure dropped the dress to the ground in a funk. “Fine then, you come pick something out.”

“Fine, I will.” Janae got off the bed and pushed Azure jokingly out of the way. In her normal bossy manner, Janae peered into the closet. In less than thirty seconds, she spun around with a black silk blouse in her hand. “Hey, isn’t this mine?”

“I’m borrowing it.”

“For three months?” Janae snorted as she turned back to the closet and began shuffling through the clothes.

"I'm still waiting on the perfect outfit to wear it with," Azure lied, knowing she had no intention of returning the pretty blouse.

"I've got it." Holding up a black, ankle-length skirt that had a thigh-high split up the side, and a red wrap-around blouse, Janae looked as if she had just struck oil. Seeing Azure's look of discontent, she sighed and leaned against the doorframe. "Girl, what is wrong with you?"

"I don't think this is a good idea." In fact, Azure knew it was a bad idea. This evening had very little to do with the Garden and more to do with spending more time with a man. Something she hadn't wanted to do in eons. For the last few years, life had been all about work for Azure, and Gavin, in the small time she'd known him, had her focusing on something else. Him.

"Why?"

"Because we shouldn't be mixing business with pleasure."

"So it is pleasure, huh?" The slow smile spreading across Janae's lips made Azure want to cringe. Of course she would pick up on that.

"You know what I'm saying."

"Look you're going, and you're going to have a good time. It's been ages since you went out on a date."

"Thanks, Mom," Azure said sarcastically as she snatched the outfit from Janae's hands.

"I'm just trying to be supportive, heifer."

"What's wrong with me? I'm acting like I'm twelve."

"Do you think it's the race thing?"

That wasn't it, not really. Azure had never gone on a date with someone of a different race, but only because the opportunity had never presented itself. "It's not the race thing. It's an 'I'm scared thing'. I would be this scared if his name was Jerome and he was as black as night, but at least then I'd know Jerome and I would have something to talk about."



“What makes you think you won’t have something to talk about with Gavin?”

“Because when I look at him, talking isn’t what I have on my mind.”

“Well, go ahead then.”

“No, because it’s not a date,” Azure declared again, as she pulled on her skirt, hoping if she said it enough times she would begin to believe it.

“Did you shave your legs?”

“Yes.” Azure chuckled, as she righted her skirt.

“Hmm.”

“What’s that about?”

“You can fool yourself, but the razor never lies. Did you trim the coochie?”

“Shut up,” Azure muttered, heat filling her face. She had made sure that everything was nice and neat when she was in the shower, hitting everything with the razor and spritzing on her perfume between her legs and the twins.

“Oh yeah,” Janae’s tone held the same hint of satisfaction that her smile did. “It’s a date.”



*It’s not a date. It’s not a date. Damn, he looks good, but it’s still not a date.* It was a mantra Azure couldn’t stop replaying in her head. For a very good reason. The man looked great. There were no two ways around it. Gavin cleaned up good. In black slacks and a tight charcoal-gray pullover, he looked like he could be a model for Abercrombie & Fitch and not like a man in desperate need of a lavatory.

When she pulled up in front of Rossi’s Gardens, Gavin was waiting outside for her, scoring points left and right with his manners and

charm. Not that he had any strikes against him. Since the moment she'd met him, Azure had been taken in by his presence and today was no exception. But this was about business. Nothing more, nothing less.

Sure it was.

"I see you made it." Gavin held his hand out to her, helping her from her car.

"I've only driven by here a dozen times. I'm sure I could find this place in my sleep."

"My sister will be pleased to hear that."

"As well she should be." Azure hadn't even gotten inside and she was already impressed. "This place is amazing."

"Wait until you've seen more of it. There's a reception taking place in the west pavilion, and an engagement party in the Tea Garden, so we have to steer clear of them, but everything else is pretty much up for show."

"I can't wait."

"Words I love to hear from a beautiful woman. I have to say," he said, turning to her, "that I half expected you to back out."

"I've been dying to get inside of here for months."

"Is that the only reason?"

"Of course."

"Hmm." Gavin didn't sound like he believed her, which was a good thing since she'd lied, but Azure simply smiled in lieu of a reply. She was going to keep this as professional as possible, at least while they were at the Gardens.

They walked in comfortable silence through a picturesque white picket fence, which led them down a path, past a miniature white chapel and a cascading waterfall.

Pad in hand, Azure quickly jotted down notes, pausing several times to take pictures. Sighing contentedly, she took a moment to take everything in. Rossi's Gardens was everything she expected and more. With its manicured lush lawn and gardens surrounded by large oak trees and man-made ponds, it was destined to make some lucky bride a wonderful setting for her dream wedding.

"I'd say from your sigh, you approve."

"Approve?" Azure turned to him wide-eyed. "I love. This place is wonderful."

"Thank you," a female voice called out, startling Azure and eliciting a growl of discontent from Gavin. "I love it, too."

"What are you doing here?"

The disgruntled tone in Gavin's voice surprised Azure, but obviously not their visitor, who just smiled at him. "Last time I checked, I owned this place."

"I told you I'd show her around."

"So does that mean I'm not allowed to come over and introduce myself?"

"Yes."

"Too bad." The woman stuck her tongue out at Gavin before turning to Azure and offering her hand. "I'm Gail Rossi, this big bully's sister, and proud owner of Rossi's Gardens."

"I'm Azure Kerr, part owner of Something Borrowed, Something Blue, and I think you have every reason to be proud. This place is amazing."

"Amazing, huh?" Gail winked at Gavin. "I like her."

"So do I, now go away."

The sibling dueling made Azure want to laugh, and oddly made her miss her own brother, the bane of her childhood. Despite Gavin's

blustering, there was a real sense of love in their banter, something only someone with siblings would see.

“Not just yet.”

“Gail.”

“Gavin,” she growled back, just as menacing. “Why don’t you offer our guest a drink and leave us to talk awhile?”

“About what?”

“Business of course. That is why you brought her.”

“Not entirely.” Fuming, Gavin turned back to Azure who was trying her best not to chuckle. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Shiraz, if you have it.”

“We do.” Gail flicked her fingers at Gavin. “Go away.”

“I’ll be back.” Gavin looked from Gail to Azure and added, “As quickly as possible.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I think he’s more worried I’ll run you off.”

Startled, Azure looked from Gavin’s retreating back to Gail who eyed her speculatively. “Why would he think that?”

“Because he’s paranoid.”

*It’s not really paranoia if someone’s out to get you,* ran through Azure’s head, but luckily not through her lips. This wasn’t exactly how she pictured the evening going. “I don’t think he has anything to worry about.”

“Not easily scared?”

“I don’t run.”

Her comment seemed to please Gail. “That’s what I like to hear. When he told me he was bringing you by, I have to say I almost had a heart attack. The first thing I did, of course, was to pull your site up on the computer and get as much information about you as I could.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to meet the woman who made my brother smile again.”

“Again.” Azure’s brows rose in confusion. “I don’t recall not seeing a smile on his face.”

“Really?”

“Honestly. He seems like to me one big ball of fun.”

“He used to be, that’s for sure.” There was a far off lilt in Gail’s voice, making Azure wonder if she even wanted to know what was going on.

“Look, I think you might have the wrong impression of what’s going on here. Gavin getting me in to see the Gardens was a favor. Actually he was returning a favor, sort of.”

“The bathroom thing, right? He’s told me about it. Countless times.”

“He has?”

“Yes.” Gail smiled. “I’m not going to bombard you with questions or anything, I just wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Now I see.”

Azure was glad someone saw, because she was confused as hell. “Okay.”

Gavin quickly made his way back towards them.

“We’ve had a few cancellations recently. I’ll email you the dates this evening, and you can let me know if any of your clients might be interested in them.” Gail offered.

It was more than she’d ever dreamt for. In fact, it was almost too good to be true. “And in return?”

“In return nothing. Consider it my way of thanking you.”

“For what?”

“For that.” Gail gestured to Gavin who stopped next to them with a smile on his face. “Now, never let it be said I don’t know when I’m not wanted.”

Gavin snorted. "It's been said, now shoo."

"It was very nice to meet you, Azure. I look forward to seeing you again."

"I as well. Thank you for allowing us to take a tour."

"It was my pleasure." With that, Gail exited as quickly as she had joined them, leaving Azure more confused than ever.

Handing her a glass, Gavin gestured after his sister with a sheepish look on his face. "Sorry about that, my sister is a bit annoying."

"All sisters are, just ask my brother." They laughed politely before lapsing into a comfortable silence, content to just stand in one another's presence.

Soft music beckoned from afar, and without speaking, they began to walk towards a veranda where couples danced under the evening sky. Azure was happy just watching, but Gavin was of a different mind.

"Let's dance." It was more of an order than a request, but since it was on a par with Azure's own desires, she gladly gave in. Being held by Gavin was not a hardship, especially because they seemed to fit together as if made from the same mold.

They danced in silence for a few minutes. Both moving as if one to the same seductive beat. His chest felt like granite under her cheek, but the steady beat of his heart comforted her like nothing else had before.

Gavin brushed his chin against the top of her hair, nudging her gently as he asked, "Did she hook you up with any dates?"

Azure pulled back, pausing in mid-step. "You didn't ask her to, did you?"

"No, but I would have if she hadn't." Gavin pulled her back to him, picking up the beat as if she had never stepped away.

“Gavin.” Azure sighed. “You really didn’t have to go through all this trouble. Don’t get me wrong, I really *really* appreciate it, but I don’t want you to think you had to.”

His chuckle resonated like a wave against her. “I don’t do things because I have to, Azure. I do them because I want to.”

“Do you always get what you want?”

“I sure as hell hope so, because I want you.”

## Chapter Four

From the looks of things, Azure was well and truly stunned by Gavin's statement. Not exactly the reaction he'd been hoping for. But hell, from the moment he pulled her into his arms, all he could think of was kissing her, touching her, making love to her.

Breathing in her sensual scent, Gavin tried his best to keep his hormones in check. "You look unbelievable, by the way."

"What, this old thing?" The teasing tone in her voice made him think there was more to that than she was saying. "You don't look so bad yourself, although I do notice the lack of a tie."

"Well, it wasn't so much the lack of tie, as much as it was the lack of a collared shirt to wear it with."

"You don't own a collared shirt?"

Gavin had the grace to look a bit embarrassed. He had hoped she wouldn't notice he wasn't wearing a tie. "Yeah, I was a bit surprised by that too."

"I'm staggered. You mean Metallica doesn't have their own business line yet?" Azure smiled.

"I'm surprised you know who Metallica is." Gavin spun her out, loving the way she laughed in surprise, before he pulled her back into his arms, where she so obviously belonged.

"Don't get too happy, I don't think I could name a song or anything."



When the dance ended, Azure made to pull out of his embrace, but was stopped short by Gavin's hand on the small of her back.

"No, not yet."

She seemed surprised and a bit amused by his actions. "We can't stay here and dance all night."

"Why not?" Gavin couldn't think of any place he'd rather be.

"Because I'm wearing heels and I have to work tomorrow."

Not good enough. "I'll make it worth your while."

"I don't doubt that at all." Azure stopped dancing and looked up at him regretfully. "Gavin..."

"I like the way you say my name."

"No," Azure whispered.

"To what?" Gavin asked, smiling.

"To everything you're saying and to everything you're not saying."

Instead of replying, Gavin chose to ask Azure a question which had intrigued him since the moment they met. "What made you let me in that day?"

"When I figure it out I'll let you know."

Gavin didn't say anything, instead he watched her, waiting for her to continue. To his utter regret Azure gave a little shrug, as if that was it. She looked as lost as he was on the matter.

"One more dance," Gavin insisted. Without waiting for her to reply, he pulled her into his arms, unwilling to believe this was it. The slow melody spun around them in a sensual haze as he caressed the small of her back, pulling her as close to him as the laws of decency would allow.

It wasn't enough. And the feel of her hardened nipples against his chest proved that it wasn't enough for her either. Gavin maneuvered them to a darkened corner, wanting just a few minutes away from the

bright lights of reality. He didn't want to think about doing the right thing.

Which was a startling first for him. Gavin didn't think it was in him to want to feel something, anything for a woman again. Outside of having sex that is. But Azure was different. She'd been on his mind since day one, and despite his stirring erection, it wasn't just sexual interest. He was interested in knowing more about her.

"Azure?" He whispered her name like a question. A question that only she had the answer to.

Her sigh spoke volumes and the look she sent him, filled with desire and need, was all the answer he needed. The heat in her eyes was nothing compared to the fire burning inside of him. Time slowed and sexual tension floated between them like a thick billowy cloud of lust. A glass shattering behind them broke their eye contact but not the mood.

"I should be going."

Gavin wasn't a fool. Should be going was a far cry from wanting to go. Her confusion was written all over her face. The tell-tale signs were there. Azure wanted to stay, she wanted to be with him, but her own personal devils wouldn't let her take the next step.

He would never understand the way of women's minds. Even after his short marriage, Gavin was still as clueless when it came to women as he had been the day he first hit puberty. The one thing he did know though, was he couldn't make this decision for her. He could only let her know what he wanted and abide by any decision she made. No matter how much he disagreed.

"All right, I'll walk you to your car."

Azure nodded her head in agreement and turned to walk away, but was brought up short by Gavin's hand on her arm. She peered up at

him, confusion marring her pretty brown eyes, until he slid his hand down her arm to take her hand into his.

Azure didn't comment, merely smiled. They walked hand in hand in blissful silence all the way to the parking lot, taking in the sights and scenes around them. The cool night breeze moved around them, filling his head with her stimulating scent. When they reached her car, Azure paused, seemingly at a loss for words.

Gavin released her hand, regretting it the instant he did. He knew the minute she got into her car and drove away he would never see her again. Her desire wasn't stronger than the walls she had barricaded around her heart, and if he didn't move fast, he would never get the chance again.

Gavin waited till she began to unlock her car, before he stepped up behind her. "Was the tour everything you expected?"

"Everything and more." Her words eased around his skin like silken fingers, caressing his feverish body, fanning his already over-inflamed desire.

"Are you happy?" he asked. Gavin moved his hand down her arm, and took the keys out of her limp hand.

"Yes, I think it will turn out great."

"I kept my end of the deal, didn't I?" Gavin turned her around so she faced him.

"What deal?" Azure's voice came out in a shaky whisper.

"Not to go over the line."

"Yes."

"The tour is over. There is no line." Pocketing her keys, Gavin stepped forward, moving her back against her car.

He could see from the look on her face that she was struggling to move past the attraction that had pulled at them from the moment they

met. Being next to her all night, breathing in her enthralling aroma and not being able to make her his, was one of the hardest things he had ever had to do. If she wanted to go, he wouldn't stop her. But she wouldn't go without him having tasted her once.

"This is a mistake." Even as she protested, Azure moved her hands around his waist. Instead of pushing him away, or saying no, she wet her dry lips with her tongue.

Principles, pride, and morals all slipped away. There was no more fighting. Azure wanted him as much as he wanted her.

"I promise to be the best damn mistake you'll ever make," Gavin whispered, sealing his words with a kiss. A deep soul-searching kiss.

The first taste of her lips against his was electrifying. It was like Christmas, birthdays and the Spice Channel all rolled up into one. Pushing against her, Gavin nudged her lips open with his tongue, drinking in the first taste of her mouth. Her warm tongue slid over his as she accepted him into her, and he kissed her like he had wanted to do from the moment he first saw her.

Yet it wasn't enough. He wanted to feel more, to taste more.

Gavin moved his hands down her body until they came to rest on the gentle swell of her hips. Gripping her tightly, he picked her up, and made the few steps to the rear of her car, depositing her on the trunk, all without breaking away from her mouth.

Her mouth. The sweet, soft fullness of her lips was going to be the death of him. Never before had he been so lost in the gentle slope of a woman's lips. And he wasn't alone. Azure kissed him back, demanding, as she urged him on, with soft mewling sounds and wandering hands.

The sexy skirt that had shown off her generous curves all night now gathered between her legs, lying like a guardian at her gate of paradise. He couldn't get close enough. Gavin slid his hand down the smooth satin

of her skirt with one goal in mind. The material was no match for his overwhelming libido, and in seconds, he had it bunched up in his fist and halfway up her thighs.

With his goal in sight, Gavin moved between her thighs, and pressed the hard, hot heat of his bulge against her covered center. The only thing separating them now was the flimsy material of her skirt, their mutual underwear and a zipper, all easily fixable in his mind. One swift move was all it would take to sink inside her hot center.

He was seconds away from ridding them both of their clothing when a bark of laughter sounded out. Azure froze in his arms as reality came crashing down.

An animalistic growl tore from his throat as he jerked away from her tempting mouth. The gentlemen in him demanded he step away and allow them both time to compose themselves, but the savage Neanderthal lurking inside him insisted that he continue with what they both so obviously wanted.

Unable to separate himself entirely one way or the other, Gavin held her to him. His pounding heart in tune with her own. A need like nothing he had ever felt before bore into his soul urging him on.

“Azure.” He lowered his mouth to her neck, his lips, his tongue, his breath, marking every inch of skin he could find. “I want...I need to taste, touch, feel every inch of you.”

Her shaky laugh was nothing compared to her tattered pulse tattooing against his lips. He wasn’t the only one who had been lost in the moment. It was impossible to reach the ripe age of thirty-three without realizing when a woman welcomed his touch.

She responded, she opened, she took him into her, all with a welcoming moan, yet still something held her back.

“You don’t believe in wasting time do you?” she teased.

“No, I don’t.”

“You move at lightning speed.”

Gavin pressed his hips forwards firmly against her. Azure’s nails tightened ever so deliciously in his side as she groaned in pleasure.

“Tell me you don’t want me, tell me that you don’t want the same thing and I’ll walk away.” *Limp away slumped over would be more like it.*

“Tell me that you don’t want to finish what we’ve started.”

“What you started.”

“That you loved.” As much as he wanted to bury his cock deep inside of her, Gavin pulled away, his body protesting with every step he took.

He needed room to breathe and she needed room to think. “We both know what I want. I think I have an inkling what you want, but I can’t make the decision for you.”

Azure slid down off the car, straightening her skirt with shaky hands in the process. A slight breeze blew through her hair, forcing the soft ebony strands to fly into her face. Gavin curled his hands into fists to resist reaching out and stroking her hair back into place. He knew if he touched her now, he would pull her back into his arms, and to hell with whoever walked by and saw. Just the thought of having her in the moonlight had him hard and aching.

Hell, who was he kidding? He’d been hard the moment he first held her in his arms.

“You know...” Azure gave a weak smile as she nervously brushed her hair behind her ear. “The right thing to do would be to shake your hand and call it an evening.”

“Right for who? Better question, says who?”

“Right for me for starters. I just met you the other day.”

Gavin tilted his head to the side and studied her. She was fighting hard to come up with a reason that this was wrong. Since he couldn’t

think of a single one, he wasn't going to be much help to her. "Does the lack of time really matter all that much to you?"

"It should." Azure smiled, answering him more completely than she probably realized.

"But it doesn't." It wasn't a question. It was a fact.

"This is going to sound cliché as hell, but I'm not the type to have a one-night stand."

"Who said anything about this being a one-night stand?" Gavin crossed his arms over his chest, doing everything in his power not to reach out and pull her into him.

"We just met..."

"I could probably break it down for you in hours and minutes how long ago we met, but it won't change how I feel, or how you feel. This is about you and me, Azure. The rest of the world be damned. Tell me what you want and worry about all that other shit another day. I want to be with you. I want to take you home and make love with you all night." Ignoring what he'd promised himself earlier, Gavin stepped forward and took her trembling hand in his. "What do you want?"

"I want you."

"Then that's all that matters."

## Chapter Five

This was a mistake. Azure hardly knew Gavin. She was being irresponsible and so utterly not like herself that it was frightening. Then again, despite knowing all of that, she couldn't help the way her body reacted around him, or the way her heart responded to him. They had only met a few days ago, but intuitively, Azure knew this was going to be more than just a one-night stand.

That thought alone boosted her morale on the drive to her house, and propelled her to the front door when her nerves would have held her prisoner in her car.

*Why the hell am I acting like this?*

"Did you change the locks?"

Startled, Azure turned around and peered into Gavin's mocking eyes. She had been so lost in her own topsy-turvy thoughts that she hadn't heard him approach. "No, of course not."

"Then why haven't you unlocked the door?"

Azure looked down at her hand in surprise. She had the key firmly gripped yet she hadn't made a move to actually unlock the door. Only God knew how long she'd been standing there. Apparently long enough for Gavin to notice in any case.

"I was just getting around to that." Azure turned to unlock the door, but once again froze.



“So I see.” Gavin stepped up behind her and took her hand in his, moving it the extra step necessary and slipped the key into the lock. Leaning forward, Gavin brushed her hair away from her neck, and whispered softly in her ear. “If you don’t want to go any further, Azure, we don’t have too.”

He was giving her the perfect opportunity to just shake his hand and tell him it was a lovely evening. No more, no less. They could end it there and everything would be fine. Azure could continue in her safe little world, where no one frightened or intrigued her. She had principles damn it, even if her body disagreed with her. Yet the only thing her principles demanded was that she didn’t allow herself to be just a one-night stand.

Shaking his hand off, Azure turned the key and pushed the door open. Azure stepped in the room, then quickly turned around and put her hand against his chest, preventing Gavin from coming in. “Before you take another step, I think there are a few things we need to get clear.”

His lips twitched like he was trying to prevent himself from smiling. “Okay.”

“I’ve never had a one-night stand before. That’s not the type of person I am.”

“I don’t care about that, Azure.”

“I do.” It was important for Gavin to know that she didn’t take her body or the giving of her body lightly. “This is an anomaly, but the one thing it won’t be is a one time thing. If we make love tonight...”

“*When* we make love tonight.”

“Fine.” Now she was having a hard time not smiling. “*When* we make love tonight, it will be under the complete understanding that we both agree it has to happen at least once more.”

“Tonight?”

“No. I mean, sure if you’re capable, but I meant another night. We have to do it again. I refuse to be a one night stand.”

“So far, I’m not finding anything about your rules I don’t like. And Azure, I can assure you, I’m capable and willing to make love to you more than once tonight.”

“Well...” Clearing her throat, Azure tried her best to get her raging hormones in check. *Damn, he’s lethal.* “Condoms are a must. And if you don’t have any...”

“I have plenty.”

“Plenty.” *Lethal isn’t the word.*

“Yes, now unless you have anything to add, I’d like to make a few rules of my own.”

Startled, Azure dropped her hand. It never occurred to her that he would want to have a say. “Of course.”

“First rule is,” Gavin stepped inside her house, forcing Azure to step back, “you have to come and come often.”

“I think...I think that’s acceptable.”

“And my second rule.”

This she couldn’t wait to hear. “Yes.”

Instead of answering her right away, Gavin took his time. He shut and locked the door, before turning back to her with a wicked gleam in his eyes. “I reserve the right to make up sexual rules as we go along.”

“That’s not exactly fair.”

“What does fairness have to do with anything?” Stepping forward, Gavin closed the final distance between them, pulling Azure into his arms in the process.

His lips moved against hers, tenderly yet hungrily at the same time. The drive over and their brief interlude at the door seemed to have done

little to curb his hunger for her, or vice versa. All it did was wet her appetite, and man, was she famished.

How they made it to her bedroom, Azure would never know. She was just thankful the condo had a simple layout, so it was easy to figure out. Because if it had been left up to her, they more than likely wouldn't have gotten past the front door.

Gavin edged her back towards the bed, never breaking their kiss in the process. His hands moved over her body as if she were already nude, cupping, caressing, familiarizing themselves with every inch of her form. Everywhere he touched he inflamed, until Azure thought she would combust from want alone.

Not one to be passive, Azure's hands roamed his body as well, but unlike Gavin, who touched her as if he had all night, Azure had a goal in mind. Getting him nude and inside of her in record time. Moving her hand between their tightly pressed bodies seemed almost a chore, but it was well worth it once she grasped the tail of his shirt in her hand and began to drag it up his rock hard frame.

She tore her mouth away from his and pushed him back so she could pull his shirt up and out of the way. Gavin laughed at her impatience, but made no move to stop her. In fact, they were of like minds.

No sooner had Azure removed his shirt, than Gavin returned the favor. Only he removed her skirt and underthings as well. In less than a minute, they were both nude and spread out on top of her bed.

His eyes heated with desire—desire for her and what she had to offer. It sent tremors through her body, as he settled at the apex of her thighs. The thick length of his cock brushed against her damp aching flesh, causing Azure to cry out with need.

A need that was echoed in Gavin's movements as he made his way down her body, leaving trails of kisses in his wake. He was as talented in

bed with his tongue as he was out of it. Gavin didn't treat oral sex like a job, with a lick here or a swipe there. He took his time discovering everything she liked and disliked, teasing her and tasting her until Azure thought she would go mad from pleasure alone.

Wrapping her hand around the silk strands of his hair, Azure writhed beneath his talented tongue. It was too much, yet not enough—all at the same time.

“Yes...right there...” The words were as jumbled as the emotions sprouting forth. Never had anything hurt so good before.

Just when Azure thought she couldn't handle a second more, she came, crying out his name.

Her orgasm had barely subsided before Gavin disappeared to the end of the bed for a second, coming back with several condoms. Gavin tossed all but one of the condoms on the nightstand next to them

“Do you always carry that many around with you?”

Gavin eyed her as he ripped into the wrapper. “Do you really want to know the answer to that?”

Azure thought about it for a second. Did she really want to bring the ghost of past lovers into bed with them? The answer came as quickly as she had. Hell no. This wasn't about the past, it was about here and now. “No.”

“Good, then I won't have to ask you why you have a scarf on your bed.”

Following his teasing gaze, Azure looked at the white scarf, draped over one side of her headboard. If memory served, she'd thrown it there in the midst of her fashion emergency earlier this evening, but she wasn't going to let Gavin know that. “It's probably best you don't.”

“For my sanity, I won’t.” Gavin settled between her spread legs, slipping one hand under her thigh and arching her body up for his. “Besides, I think we’ve done enough talking, don’t you?”

Azure couldn’t agree more. “More than enough.”

She didn’t want to talk. She just wanted to feel. Every solid, hard inch of him.

“Look at me,” Gavin ordered as he placed the head of his cock at her moist center. “I want to watch you as I take you.”

The feel of his cock, so close to sinking into her depths, had Azure arching up to him, her eyes instinctively closing. But Gavin wasn’t having that. He pulled back until he was no longer touching her, forcing Azure to focus back on him.

“That’s right, baby. Watch me.”

Unable to do anything but what he commanded, Azure kept her eyes focused on him. It took everything inside her to stay locked in his gaze, especially when he pressed against her again.

But once again, Gavin surprised her. Instead of pushing his length completely inside of her, he pressed the head of his cock just within her before easing back out. He plunged forth once more, but as before, he held back from sinking fully inside her.

“God, you feel so good,” Gavin growled as he pressed forward. He was performing a torturous tango. Keeping her on edge — primed, ready and aching for his full possession — but never quite giving her everything she needed.

Unable to stand his teasing lovemaking a second longer, Azure pushed her hips up, driving him fully into her deep warmth. The pleasure was so intense that she cried out his name. Everything around her faded away as she focused all of her energy on the all-consuming sensations he instilled inside her.

Gavin's rough chuckle danced across her neck like a whispering wave. "So impatient, love."

"Stop teasing me and fuck me."

"No." He accentuated his word with a deep thrust of his hips, which stole Azure's breath away. "We're not going to fuck, Azure. What we're going to do is make love."

"Then make love to me. Just stop torturing me." Fuck, screw, bang— Azure didn't care what he called it, as long as he did it.

"Loving you could never be torture."

"I'm going to kill you."

"If I don't die from this first." Gavin began to move slowly within her, ignoring her demands, letting Azure know, in no uncertain terms who was in charge.

"Please, please..." Azure begged. Digging her nails into his back, she took her frustration out on him the only way she could. She wanted to come, she wanted to come badly, but mostly, she wanted Gavin to power into her. To take her swiftly and as fully as she knew he could.

At this moment in time, romance was the last thing on her mind. She just wanted to be consumed by him.

"I love the sound of 'please' on your lips." Increasing his tempo, Gavin drove into her forcefully.

A low, frantic gasp tumbled from her lips, as she dug her fingers into his flesh and held on with all of her might.

"That's it baby. Take it. It's yours...I'm yours."

The exquisite pain of her desire was mind numbing. Never before had she wanted someone, or something, as completely as she wanted Gavin. If hearing "please" was what he liked, then "please" was what he would get. "Take me Gavin, please. Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me."

This time Gavin didn't take exception to her words, instead, he did just as she pleaded. He fucked her, over and over, pounding into her craving body, as Azure undulated beneath him. Her orgasm washed over her—not like a gentle wave, but like a tidal wave. It stole her breath. It robbed her of her strength. Her orgasm was so powerful it damn near vanquished her will to live.

Gavin wasn't far behind. Seconds after she moaned his name, he cried out hers, pumping his cock into her as he came. Gasping for air, Azure thanked the gods when he gently pulled out and dropped onto the bed instead of on top of her. Their combined weight, after that little work out, would have been the death of her.

Amused by the thought of death by sexual exhaustion, Azure smiled. This was one experience she'd never regret or forget no matter what the future held.

"Damn." Gavin muttered, running his hand through his disheveled hair. "That was..."

"Incredible," Azure offered.

"No, I was going to say good for the first time."

*Cocky bastard.* "Just good?"

"Just good." Gavin smiled. "I'm sure we can do much, much better than this."

"You think?" If he had the stamina, she had the willpower.

"No, baby." Rolling on his side to face her, Gavin cupped her cheek lovingly.

"I know."

## Chapter Six

“See Rory? I told you. The boy is gone.”

Startled out of his self-induced coma, Gavin glanced over his shoulder, surprised to see his sister and her assistant, Rory, standing in his doorway laughing. “What?” he asked.

His annoyance only seemed to spur the grinning duo on.

“You’re right, Gail. He’s a goner.”

“I have no idea what you two pecking hens are clucking about and I really don’t care.” Gavin pushed back from the computer and stood.

It was obvious he wasn’t going to get any work done. Especially now that his office had been invaded by Tweedledum and Tweedledee. It didn’t appear as if he was going to enjoy any peace and quiet either. Working in a family-run business had its ups and down. Today was a down, because his sister seemed intent on busting his balls.

“We’re talking about the stupid little face you’ve been making ever since you met a certain lady friend a few months ago.” Gail centered her gaze on the tip of her nose, causing Rory to giggle.

No matter how infatuated he was with Azure—and he was—Gavin knew without a doubt he hadn’t been walking around looking like the stupid face Gail was making.

And they said men were immature. “Grow up.”

“I don’t want to.” Gail nudged him, eliciting a growl from Gavin. “Admit it, you have a *thing* for her.”



"I don't have a *thing* for her." A *thing*, how stupid was that? "We've been seeing each other for a few months." Twelve weeks and four days exactly, not that he was keeping count or anything. "But it's nothing too serious. We just enjoy each other's company."

That was an understatement if there ever was one. Since the first night they'd made love, they'd been inseparable. Yet even if they'd been living together Gavin would have stuck to the same story. His love life, was just that, his. And even if he lost every last sense the good Lord gave him, he would still never, ever confide in his sister. She was like a revolving door. Anything she heard she spewed right back out.

"I don't know what all the fuss is about. I happen to think she's wonderful."

"Of course she is."

"And I think she'd make the perfect sister-in-law."

"Sister-in-law?" Rory chuckled. "He's only been seeing her for a minute."

"We're not getting married." Gavin's angry tone silenced all the laughter in the room.

Rory, shocked by his outburst, quickly tried to mend the situation. "Of course not. You've known her less than three months."

For Gavin, it had nothing to do with time, and Gail should have known better than to think that it would. "We could have been seeing each other for a millennium and my answer would still be the same. No marriage. Ever."

"Ever is a long time," Gail countered, her temper rising just as quickly as her brother's. "Are you really sure you mean that?"

"Did hell freeze over and I missed the announcement?"

"How long are you going to make all women pay for Trudy's sins?"

Now she'd gone too far. "You must have forgotten the rule, Gail. We don't talk about my ex-wife like we don't talk about the tail mom and dad had to have surgically removed when you were three."

"It wasn't a tail!" Gail bellowed, her face flushing in anger. "It was a growth."

"Right, a growth that resembled a bear's tail."

Gail looked from Rory's shocked expression to Gavin's angry one. "You are an asshole."

"And you're a busybody. Stay out of my love life, and I'll refrain from mentioning any more of our family's little secrets in front of your nearest and dearest."

Irritated, Gail crossed her arms over her chest. "You know what, you're completely right. I will stay out of your love life."

Finally, God was listening. "Thank you."

"You don't need my help anyway."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," Gavin muttered. Now if Gail would only disappear as quickly as she had entered, his day might once again resemble some sort of normality.

Gail continued as if he hadn't spoken. "You can fuck it up all by yourself. And this time, when you let that stupid ex-wife of yours ruin the one good thing you've managed to find, I'm just going to sit back and laugh."

"Don't you have some picnic baskets to steal, Yogi?"

Gail swung with all of her might and slammed her fist into Gavin's stomach before storming out of the room. The little flash of pain was worth it, just to get her to leave.

Rory though, was still frozen in her spot.

Annoyed at her wide-eyed stare, Gavin asked, "Was there something you wanted to add?"

“No...I...” Rory glanced quickly over her shoulder. “Did she really have a tail?”

The day was looking up after all. “I have pictures to prove it.”

“Oh.” Her hand clapped over her mouth, quenching any further comment. With a smothered giggle, Rory followed Gail’s retreat. To Gavin’s relief she shut the door behind her.

If only he’d learn to lock it, or better yet, work from home.

“Mr. Connor, Ms. Kerr is on line two for you.”

Better and better. “Thank you, Eryn.”

Now this was what he really needed. “Hey, pretty lady.”

“Hey yourself.” The sound of her sexy drawl had him feeling better than he had in years.

“Did I call at a bad time?” Azure asked.

“There’s no such thing with you.”

“You’re too much.”

Gavin could practically hear her smiling through the phone.

“I need to ask you a big favor.”

“As long as you know that it will come with strings attached.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“Then ask away.”

“Can you meet me at Ballard’s Antiques off of Oak and Miller? I just found the find of the century but I don’t have a truck and they can’t deliver until next Friday.”

Gavin glanced down at his watch, then back at his desk covered in paperwork. He had a lot to do today, but nothing was more important than spending time with Azure. “I can. Can you give me a half hour?”

“That’s not all I’ll give you.” She lowered her voice. “I’m all kinds of grateful, Mr. Connor. Can you ever think of a way for me to pay you back?”

Think, hell, blood was a requirement for thinking and all of his blood had rushed down to his cock at her simple turn of phrase. "I'm sure we can come up with something."

Azure laughed. "I'm sure we can. Wait till you see what I found."

"I'm hoping it's an eighteenth century sex toy."

"No such luck, pervert."

"Then what is it?"

"I've found my wedding dress."



How the day had gone so quickly down the shitter, Gavin would never know. All he was sure of was that his sister wasn't talking to him and his girl had not only gone shopping for a wedding dress—he'd somehow become an accessory to it.

The worst part was Azure had looked so happy when he picked her up, and yet Gavin could barely fling a smile in her direction. He could tell his mood was taking a damper off her day, but he couldn't help dreading the argument that was surely going to come.

They had been having such a great time. Making love non-stop, spending countless hours together, just hanging out, and somehow Azure had taken it to mean more. Not that the time spent with her didn't mean the world to Gavin, it just didn't equal marriage to him.

With a heavy heart, he carried the trunk into her condo, feeling as if the heirloom case was weighed down by the weight of the world.

Azure, on the other hand, was off the wall with excitement. She had talked non-stop since he picked her up, which was a good thing since he had little to say.

"Just sit it here." Azure cleared off coffee table. "Thanks."

“No problem.”

“So...” Rubbing her hands together like a child at Christmas, Azure looked from the trunk to Gavin’s frowning face. “What should we do first? Look at my dress or talk about what’s upsetting you?”

“I’m not upset.”

Azure raised a brow. “Talk it is.”

“Really, it’s nothing.”

“If this is any of that ‘men are from Mars and women don’t have a map there’ bullshit, you’re going to have to let me know, because I’m the type of person who’s upfront at all times. I thought you were like that too.”

“I am.” Usually, Gavin added to himself. The last thing he wanted to do was argue with Azure, especially when he knew it was going to end badly. “I just have some issues.”

“Who doesn’t?” With a sigh, Azure uncrossed her arms and ran a hand through her hair. “I’m sorry if I inconvenienced you by asking you to pick me up today. You could have just said so. It wouldn’t have been a big deal.”

“It had nothing to do with picking up the trunk.”

“Then what is it?”

“You bought a wedding dress.” The words tumbled out before he could stop them, but instead of being upset by his statement, Azure looked amused.

“Scared you, huh?”

“Of course not.” Terrified was a better word.

Azure shook her head in mirth. “Okay, this is entirely my bad. I guess any guy would be a bit freaked out if a girl he had only been seeing for awhile called him up and said, *‘Hey, I bought a wedding dress.’*”

“You think.”

"I was just so excited to finally find a dress like it." Excitement crept into her voice. "Do you want to see it?"

Hell no, was his first response, but he was able to keep it at bay. "Sure."

Gavin wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but a plum velvet dress wasn't it. Looking up from the dark dress to Azure's shining face, Gavin wondered if he was missing something. *How in the world did she look at that dress and think wedding?*

Tired of waiting for his response, Azure shook the dress, causing the material to shimmy. "What do you think?"

Was it a trick question? "It's...purple."

Azure lowered the dress with a frown. "Nothing gets by you. Isn't it wonderful?"

"I don't claim to be an expert at this sort of thing, but aren't wedding dresses normally...white...and not so...confining?"

"This dress is late nineteenth century, so confining was something of a must and back in the day most wedding dresses weren't white. Women would wear their best dress when they married." Azure pressed the material to her body and spun around. "Isn't it just divine? I'm thinking of altering it."

"If you want it to fit I think you should. I think the previous owner was a bit...husky."

"I'm just going to keep talking like you never interrupted."

"Okay." He chuckled.

"I think I'm going to shorten the sleeves a bit and open up the neckline. I want to make it more modern but still keep some of the historic feel to it."

"You really know what you want."

"Of course I do." Azure rolled her eyes. "I'm a wedding planner remember. I do this stuff in my sleep."

"And marriage, that's something you want as well."

"Well yes, someday. Doesn't everybody?"

"I don't know about everybody. I can only speak for myself."

"Very true." As if sensing the seriousness of the impending conversation, Azure gently folded the dress, carefully wrapping it back up in the paper. "So speak for yourself—do you want to get married someday, Gavin?"

"No, Azure, I don't. Not again."

Azure nodded her head as if he had just asked her if she wanted one or two lumps of sugar in her tea. "Marriage isn't for everybody."

Surprised she was taking his announcement so well held Gavin rooted to his spot. "No, it isn't. You can love someone and want to be with someone and still choose not to marry."

"That's true." She smiled. Turning away, Azure placed the dress in the trunk, pausing to rub her hand lovingly across the material. When she stood back up, she walked over to him, and hugged him. "Thanks so much for picking me up. If I recall correctly, I have an IOU to deliver."

Shocked at her easy dismissal of marriage, Gavin pushed her back until he could look down into her upturned face. Could it truly be possible that she was willing to forgo marriage and just be with him? "Did you understand what I said, Azure?"

"Of course I did. You don't want to get married again." Azure reached for the hem of his shirt. "It was pretty clear. Now let's get to the loving."

Something felt off. "Work with me a bit here."

With a sigh, Azure stepped back. "Okay."

"You know I don't want to get married and you're perfectly fine with me?"

“Of course I am. Like you said, marriage isn’t for everybody. I think it’s commendable of you to be so upfront about it.”

“I’m...amazed.” That was putting it lightly.

“Why?”

“I didn’t think you’d be willing to give it up.”

Now Azure was the one with the confused look on her face. “Give what up?”

“The idea of getting married.”

Startled, she stepped back. “Why would I give up on getting married?”

*Did he step into the twilight zone?* “You just said...”

“I just said marriage isn’t for everyone, not that marriage wasn’t for me. I have every intention of getting married someday, Gavin. All this means is it won’t be to you.”



## Chapter Seven

“You say ‘not to you’ so cavalier.”

The boy was mad. There were no two ways about it. “I think I’m a bit confused. Do you want me to be upset that you don’t want to marry me?”

“Yes.” After a second of hesitation, he added, “No.”

Azure tossed her hands in the air in frustration. “Okay, now everything’s cleared up.”

“Don’t go getting pissy with me. You’re the one who wants to see other people,” he fumed.

“I never said that.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I’m saying...” Pausing, Azure took a soothing breath, trying to find her chi. If she didn’t calm down, she was going to bash Gavin’s head in with her beautiful new trunk. “What I’m saying is, it’s okay if you don’t want to get married. I enjoy spending time with you. No, scratch that. I love spending time with you. These last three months have been three of the best months of my life, but I’m not going to put my dreams on hold, just because the idea of getting married scares you.”

“It doesn’t scare me.”

“Right.” Azure drew out the word, putting all of her disbelief and amusement in it. “What I don’t understand is, why are we fighting? I’m not the clinging type. If you say you don’t want to get married, I say okay. I didn’t go into this relationship looking to get married anyway.”

Instead of her words easing the tension between them, it only seemed to add more. "Then what were you expecting?"

"To have fun with you. Enjoy the time we've been blessed with."

"So I'm just someone for you get a few kicks with?"

"Are you being daft on purpose?" This wasn't exactly the way Azure had pictured the day going.

Truth be told, when she'd first spotted the gown, she'd envisioned herself walking down the aisle towards a smiling Gavin. He'd played guest star in all of her fantasies of late, but his words dashed away any hope of her dreams coming true.

His attitude, although disappointing, wasn't surprising. Azure had pretty much figured out that he'd either come out of a really bad break-up or marriage just from what she'd learned from Gail. She'd never asked him point blank. She figured if he wanted her to know, he'd offer, but now Azure realized she'd been mistaken. Maybe if they had talked about his little phobia beforehand, they wouldn't be in this position now.

"No, I'm not." With an animalistic growl, Gavin ran his hand through his hair as if in frustration. "I don't like the idea of you marrying someone else."

Finally, something they could agree on. "But you don't want to marry me yourself?"

Sighing, Gavin slumped down on the couch like a perturbed child. His disgruntled expression was amusing and adorable all at the same time. Unable to ignore his pouty appeal, Azure walked to him and climbed on his lap, with her knees on either side of him so she could face him.

Gavin encircled her hips with his hands, securing Azure to him. "It's not that I don't want to marry you."

"It's not?"

“No. Hell, if I were ever to marry again, it would be to you, but I just don’t see myself wanting to do that. Ever.”

Although his words broke her heart, Azure refused to allow him to see it. “I don’t know what happened in your past relationship, Gavin, but it has nothing to do with us.”

His snort showed his disbelief. “The relationship wasn’t the bad part, Azure. It wasn’t great by any means, but it was better than the divorce.”

“Was it ugly?”

“Ugly isn’t even the word for it. The only thing I’m grateful for was we didn’t have kids. I mean she fought me for a blender she never used.”

“Not all marriages end in divorcee.”

“But the majority of them do.”

Azure wanted to roll her eyes at his pessimism. Yes, marriages failed. Yes, the success rate was lower than the failure rate. Still, when it was right—like it so obviously was with them, percentages didn’t matter. When it came down to it, Azure was willing to risk it all for a chance at forever. Unfortunately, Gavin couldn’t say the same.

“If it makes you feel better, I have my own blender.”

Her attempt at humor didn’t fall on deaf ears. “That does ease the pain a bit. The way I see it, we’re at an impasse. You know what you want and I know what I want. The only question is, is there a middle ground?”

In a situation like this, Azure didn’t see how there could be. “I don’t really think there’s a middle ground on something like this.”

“We could move in together.”

Azure eased off his lap, needing to put a little space between them. Moving in together wasn’t a compromise. They would be no closer to being married than they were now. While she was fine with the state of their relationship now, Azure really couldn’t see herself moving in with

Gavin, knowing it would never go farther. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because there isn’t really a point to it.” Azure shrugged her shoulders.

“The point would be for us to be together.”

“We’re together now. Besides we’ve only known each other for three months.”

“But if I proposed to you, the three months wouldn’t matter.” The anger in Gavin’s eyes was nothing compared to the ire growing deep inside of Azure.

“This is not a competition. There is no right or wrong answer here.”

“Sure there is.” Gavin snorted. “It wouldn’t be too soon for us to get engaged but it’s too soon for us to move in with each other.”

“All of this because I needed help bringing home a trunk?”

“No, all of this because you’re not willing to compromise.”

“And how are you willing to compromise, Gavin? Moving in together—which I’d like to point out we’ve never discussed before today—will get you ass twenty-four-seven, but gives you enough space where you don’t feel suffocated. What exactly is in it for me?”

“I guess I’m not enough.”

“I could ask you the same thing.” Azure stood, and moved away from the couch, putting as much distance between them as she could without leaving her condo. “I’m not your ex-wife, I’m not any screwed up girlfriend from your past. I’m just me and I won’t let you judge me by other women’s mistakes.”

“This argument is the mistake,” he argued, standing as well. “I don’t want to fight with you. I just...”

“Just what...”

“I just don’t want to lose you.”

Damn him, just when she was getting all worked up, he had to go say something semi-nice. Asshole. “I really don’t know what to say to make you feel better and Lord knows I don’t want to fight either, especially about something as pointless as this.”

“I don’t consider you seeing other men pointless.”

“I never said anything about seeing other men.”

“But you will. One day, you’re just going to get tired of waiting around for something that’s not inside of me.”

“Or one day, you’ll realize that it is. Either way Gavin, I live for today, not for tomorrow. And today, we have something that’s really, really good. I’m happy with the way things are.”

“But for how long?”

Gazing up into his soulful eyes, so full of hurt and confusion, made Azure want to do nothing more than to kiss his pain away.

Gavin was at a crossroads, and there wasn’t anything she could do but love him and wait for him to realize just how much he loved her back.

“For as long as it takes.”



There was a lot to be said about a man who didn’t take no for an answer. Azure couldn’t help smiling as she signed for her third delivery of flowers this week. Although she was a lily girl, a dozen long stemmed roses had a way of getting a girl’s attention.

But it wasn’t just the flowers—it was the candy she dare not eat, and the cute stuffed frog she couldn’t stop caressing. Gavin was acting like a man on a mission, and damn him, it was working. If he wasn’t bowling

her over with romantic gestures, he was making himself at home in her place. Every day, a few more of his things would appear, finding themselves at home amongst her things.

Ever since their talk, Gavin had gone out of his way to make himself indispensable to Azure. He was doing everything in his power to make sure she knew how wonderful things could be, if they only lived together.

Pulling out the card, she stared long and hard at the simple message inked out across it. *Everyday like today.*

It was a hard message to ignore, just like the previous ones had been. One thing was for certain, even though she wasn't going to give in to what he wanted, she had surely given in to the man himself.

Finding an empty vase proved to be an impossible task, so Azure took her time cutting the roses short and filling a clear bowl with water before laying the buds on top. Setting her new centerpiece on her coffee table, Azure moved towards her newest obsession, her trunk.

The cedar trunk was nowhere near as old as the dress itself, but still it was just as beautiful. The workmanship told of obvious handmade master craftsmanship and a sense of pride that just wasn't as evident in today's machine-made products. The real find, of course, was the dress.

Azure inhaled deeply as she opened the trunk. She knew it was odd, but there was just something about the stale air, the smell of the old leather and cloth she adored. This was actually only the second time since she'd bought the dress she'd opened the trunk, for fear of sun damage to her find, but today was special. Her dress form had finally come in, and Azure couldn't wait to see the dress the way it was meant to be seen.

Whoever owned the dress before she did obviously cared for it very well. Not only was it encased in the trunk, it had also been wrapped in

acid-free tissue and placed inside an acid-free box to preserve its quality as much as possible.

Azure closed her blinds so direct sunlight wouldn't fall on the dress and possibly fade it, even though she knew it was a bit silly. She had bought it to wear, but still, she wanted to baby it as much as possible.

Shaking her head, she laughed at herself. "It's just a dress."

The words echoed around the empty room, making her feel even crazier than before. Not only was she babying the dress, she was talking to herself.

After unwrapping the dress, Azure placed it on the form, smoothing lines and creases as she went. The sight of the dress, filled out as it should be, actually brought tears to her eyes.

It was all Johanna Lindsey's fault. If she had never fallen in love with Lindsey's books in the eighth grade, Azure would have never become obsessed with history and historical clothing and she wouldn't be in this position now, crying over an aging dress.

While other brides yearned for Vera Wang, Azure salivated over a one-piece princess-line gown in silk taffeta with a fitted bodice. Probably made by someone's mother. Still...it was perfect, and the wedding dress of her dreams.

With a smile, Azure went back to the trunk and rewrapped the paper and placed it into the box. When she went to place the box back inside, a rip in the fabric of the trunk caught her eye.

"Doggone it," she muttered, leaning forward to see if she could possibly fix the rip. When she ran her hand over the tear, Azure was surprised to find the side bulkier than it should have been.

*How in the world did I miss that?*

Carefully tearing the fabric a bit more, Azure reached inside, letting out a cry of surprise when she felt something. With a furrowed brow, Azure gently pulled out the wrapped bundle.

The package was covered in yellowed parchment, tied with red twine. Sitting down on the floor, Azure carefully untied the package and pulled the paper back. To her amazement a dozen or more letters spilled forth.

Azure opened the first one and what she saw took her breath away.



## Chapter Eight

Gavin was a bit freaked out and the strangest part was he knew he really didn't have a reason to be. Azure hadn't seemed too upset about him not wanting to get married. In fact, she didn't appear to be bothered at all, which was why Gavin was disturbed.

Shouldn't she be upset? If she cared, really cared about him and a future with him, shouldn't she be bothered by the fact that he didn't want to get married? A better question though, was why the hell was he so upset?

Things weren't settled, not by a long shot. Gavin wanted a more permanent relationship with Azure. He wanted to move in with her, or hell, she could move in with him. What mattered most was they would be together, and together for Gavin meant living together exclusively, and more importantly, loving one another.

He already knew he loved her. Lord knew he tried to show her in a million different ways, yet he hadn't quite said the words, and growing up in a houseful of women, he knew words were important. So today, he was going to tell her. Just let her know he cared for her and loved her more than he had or thought he could love anyone.

Hopefully the words would be enough to close the door on any doubt she might have about his commitment to her.

*Besides, who needs a ring? It wasn't that important in the long run.*

As Gavin headed up the walkway to Azure's door, he instantly thought back to the very first time he came here. It would be a heck of a story to pass on to their grandkids one day, how Grandpa badgered Grandma into letting him come in to use the bathroom.

Smiling at the thought, Gavin knocked twice on her door, as had become his manner before unlocking it with his newly acquired key, and pushing the door open. The sight that greeted him had his thoughts turning from grandchildren to murder in a blink of an eye.

Azure, his woman, was in the arms of another man. A man who Gavin didn't know. Not that knowing him would have made a world of difference, because Gavin didn't like it.

The part bothering him the most, wasn't that in another life he would have thought they looked great together, both born from the same lovely dark clay of the earth, or the fact the man was clearly smitten with Azure. It was the way she was looking at him. Like he'd hung the moon. Selfish as it was, Gavin wanted Azure to look at him like that, and him alone.

Clearing his throat, Gavin pushed the door open. Surprisingly though, Azure didn't jump away from the man, instead, she looked over her shoulder, and smiled at Gavin.

"Honey, you won't believe what happened."

Gavin might be in the dark about what had her looking so happy, but he had a good idea what would make him smile, and that was ramming his fist down that grinning bastard's throat. To make matters worse, the son of a bitch still hadn't let her go. Suddenly a light dawned bright and clear. Here was a very good reason for a ring. It was the perfect calling card to warn men off. Maybe Gavin would have to rethink his position after all.

"What's going on?" *And get the hell out of his arms.*

Azure pulled away, finally, from the man's arms and rushed over to Gavin's side. "You won't believe what happened."

"First, who's this?"

"Good Lord, forgive my manners." Azure moved to go back to the other man, but was stopped by Gavin's hand on her arm. She sent him a quizzical glance before continuing, "This is Terrell Ballard, of Ballard's Antiques. Terrell, this is..."

"Gavin Connor, her *boyfriend*." *And the man who will kill you if you ever touch her again.* "Pleased to meet you."

The word "boyfriend" caused Terrell's smile to fall. Apparently he hadn't known that Azure was dating someone or that the someone was of a different race. From the way he glanced between Azure and Gavin, he wasn't too pleased by the knowledge.

Terrell recovered immediately though, but not quick enough that Gavin missed the distasteful look Terrell sent his way. It was enough to make him feel marginally better. At least he wasn't the only one unhappy with the situation taking place.

"The pleasure's mine." Terrell begrudgingly offered his hand to Gavin, who just nodded, much to Azure's displeasure.

"Anyway." Shooting Gavin a "behave yourself" look, Azure pulled out of his grasp and walked to the coffee table. She picked up a pile of papers and handed them to Gavin with a pleased look on her face. "Last night I found these in the wedding dress trunk. They're letters written from the original owner of the wedding dress to her heirs and then to their heirs and so on and so on.

The very first two were from Matilda Chandler in 1878. She wrote two letters to her unborn child, one in case she had a daughter and one in case she had a son. Her letters are basically about her life with their

father and her take on love and everything in between. She wanted her wedding dress to be passed down in the family.

Azure's eyes filled with wonder as she spoke and Gavin couldn't help but become caught up in her tale. "The next set of letters were written by her daughter, Maria Chandler Schurman, to her daughter, Mae, who later wrote one to her granddaughter, Madeline."

It was almost too much for Gavin to take in. A whole family legacy passed on through something as trivial as a purple dress, but he could tell Azure was looking for him to say something. "That's a lot of M's."

"Yes it is." She laughed, clearly happy. "I guess it was another tradition passed on, because everyone who wrote a letter or received a letter, their first name began with M."

"And you were so happy you just had to call Terry, here..."

"Terrell."

"Whatever." Gavin shrugged the man's correction off. "To tell him of your find."

"That and to get his help."

"With..."

"Terrell is a genealogy freak like I am."

There was no doubt in Gavin's mind that Terrell was a freak, but it still didn't explain dick.

"And he's helping trace the dress back to the original owners. The history of this dress is just so..." Azure inhaled deeply as if trying to take it all in, "...vast, that I want to be able to pass the story down to our...I mean my kids."

"Our" sounded a lot better to him, and the fact it made old Terry frown was a plus as well. "That's wonderful, honey."

"Isn't it?"

“Yes.” Gavin leaned down and brushed a kiss across her brow. “I think this is wonderful, and if I can help in any way...”

“I assure you, I’ve got it covered,” Terrell interrupted. “I have all the resources I need to get Azure anything she needs.”

It was on the tip of Gavin’s tongue to remind the asshole that Gavin took care of all of Azure’s needs. “My offer still stands,” Gavin reiterated.

“And it’s very much appreciated.” Azure stood on her tiptoes and pressed a soft kiss on Gavin’s lips. Not willing to let her go so easily, Gavin pulled her into his embrace and turned the thank you kiss into something a lot deeper.

Erasing everything from his mind but Azure, Gavin focused on the feel of her against him. The taste of her full lips, the gentle sway of her tongue against his. Everything about this woman worked for him. From her scent, to her flavor, to her heart. Azure was special in every way, and she was all his.

How long he held her in his arms, tasting her, drinking in the glory of her lips, Gavin didn’t know, nor did he care.

This time it was Terrell who cleared his throat to get attention. Pulling back, Azure blushed as she ran her fingers through her hair. “Forgive me, Terrell.”

“No forgiveness necessary. I’ve left Dawn at the store much longer than I intended, so I must be on my way.”

Azure walked him to the door. “You’ll let me know when you hear anything, right?”

“First thing.” Terrell glanced over his shoulder towards Gavin, who was leaning against Azure’s desk. “It was nice to meet you.”

Somehow Gavin didn’t quite believe him and since he didn’t believe in lying, he didn’t return Terrell’s sentiment. “Bye.”

"I'm just going to walk him to his car, then I'll be back." There was a bit of warning in her tone that made Gavin smile. Azure was so cute when she got riled.

Gavin sat on the couch and thumbed through the letters as he waited for Azure to return. Even he, cynic that he was, had to admit the letters and everything they represented was kind of cool.

"You weren't very nice to him." The words rang out just as loudly as the slamming door did. Azure stormed over to him, hand on hip, eyes narrowed in annoyance. *God I love this woman.*

"Was I supposed to be?" Gavin leaned forward and placed the letters on the coffee table. He wanted his hands free to deal with more important issues. "Besides, he wants you."

Azure rolled her eyes. "No he doesn't."

"Trust me, he does."

"Whether he likes me or not, the important thing is that I don't like him." Obviously irritated, Azure crossed her arms. "For the record, I'm not sure if I like you all that much right now."

"Yes, you do."

"I wouldn't count on it."

"I like you enough for the both of us." He teased, reaching out and dragging her to his lap.

"You're a big..."

"Speaking of big." Gavin pressed her down on his lap, making sure she felt every inch of his rising cock. "I like it when you get all feisty on me."

Azure's lips quivered as she tried to suppress a smile. "You're deranged."

"He was touching you. It's a caveman thing."

“Caveman, now that’s a word for it.” Azure turned and faced him, eyebrow raised. She looked so cute when she did that.

“Sit up, baby.” Gavin eased her skirt up over her hips so she could straddle him easier. “Now isn’t that better?”

“Better for who?”

“Better for me, and soon, better for you. First thing we have to do is get you out of this shirt.”

“We do, do we?”

“You just sit back, and let me do all the work.” With a patience Gavin didn’t know he possessed, he slowly unbuttoned her beige blouse, loving how her breasts came into view, one button at a time. Her full brown mounds seemed to practically burst from their fawn, laced covering.

“You should be illegal.”

“In some states I am,” she teased, slipping her shirt off her shoulders.

“I can see why.” Leaning forward, Gavin brushed his lips against the gentle swell of her breasts.

Gavin felt her nipple harden beneath his cupped hand, and leaned down to take the taut bud into his mouth, bra and all. Azure tangled her hands in his hair, pushing him harder on her breast. Gavin knew how much Azure loved having her nipples teased, almost as much as he enjoyed teasing them.

Moaning, she rocked her pelvis down on him, rubbing her hot center across his straining erection.

Gavin pulled back. “Did I say you could move?”

“You didn’t say I couldn’t.”

“Then let me make it more clear.” Gavin pushed Azure back a little so he could reach his pants buckle. After unbuckling his belt, he pulled it through the loops with one hand while grasping her wrist with the other. “Now be a good girl and hold still.”

“Your wish is my command,” Azure’s voice lowered huskily as he bound her hands behind her back with the belt. The position made her breasts thrust forward invitingly, and beg for his touch. Gavin couldn’t resist pulling them out of their lacy confines.

Azure was glorious. In all his life, Gavin had never encountered a woman who could make him hard with a smile. Her full lips instantly had him thinking of where he wanted her to kiss him next. The smooth, long brown legs of hers were made to adorn his hips, and her breasts—her breasts were what sonnets were written about.

There was one thing Gavin forgot to do when he unbuckled his belt, and that was free his straining erection. “Up on your knees, baby.”

Azure quickly obeyed, rising from his lap to kneel above him. Her new position gave Gavin all the room he needed to not only retrieve his wallet from his back pocket for the rubber, but also to take his cock out of its tight confinement.

“I still think you have too many clothes on.” Gavin gripped her thong in his hands, and ripped it clean off her body. “Now that’s better.”

Gavin couldn’t resist getting a taste of her sweet nectar. Dropping her thong, he reached between her legs and teased her damp folds. When his fingers were saturated with her essence, he brought his hand to his mouth so he could savor the flavor of her. It was an action that bore repeating.

Azure trembled above him. “Gavin...don’t tease me. Fuck me, please.”

Gavin reluctantly pulled his hand away from her tempting treasure, missing the feel of her instantly.

After slipping on a condom, Gavin placed one hand on his cock to guide it into her heated center and placed the other hand on her hip, steering her down onto his waiting cock. “Ease down, baby.”



The head of his cock slid into her hot depths, as Azure slowly sank down on his length, inch by inch. By the time she was fully seated, they both were a bit breathless.

Gripping her hips in his hands, Gavin urged her up, then down again.

"I can't...I need help..." Azure moaned as she rocked her hips forward.

"I'll set the rhythm, baby," Gavin gritted out. "You just brace yourself."

Holding on to her hips, he held them slightly up as he powered in and out of her wet pussy. With every thrust Azure moaned louder, rocking her body into his. This was supposed to be a position where Gavin had all the power, but he was powerless underneath her. Powerless to stop his hips from slamming up against hers and powerless to stop her pussy from milking him dry with every down stroke.

"Fuck, fuck baby."

"Gavin...Gavin..." His name was like a loving echo on her lips, urging him on, begging him for more. "I'm going to...so...close..."

"That's right, baby." Gavin sped up, pushing into her as hard and fast as he could. "Come for me, Azure, come for me."

Her body shook from the force of her release. Azure cried out his name as she came, her pussy quaking around his thrusting cock. It only took the first signs of her orgasm to trigger his own. Gavin gripped her hips as he erupted inside of her.

"Oh my...oh..." When words failed her, Azure buried her face in his neck and began to giggle.

"Are you laughing?" Gavin smacked her firmly on her ass. "Woman, don't you know you're never supposed to laugh at a man at a delicate time like this?"

Azure eased back to look him in the eyes. Her own were filled with laughter, her smile full of joy. "Delicate? You? Hardly."

"Stranger thing have been known to happen."

"Stranger than us?"

"Baby, this isn't strange," Gavin released her hands, massaging her wrists gently as he continued, "This is love."

## Chapter Nine

Azure eased down in front of the trunk. She knew what she had to do, just as she knew she didn't want to do it. Opening the lid, she carefully inserted the letters back into the gap from which she had taken them.

It had only taken one phone call to bring her dreams crashing down around her. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she prepared the dress box. This was a lot harder than she thought it was going to be, that was for sure.

Even though she'd only owned the trunk and all the precious cargo it had brought with it for a short while, Azure still felt as if she was saying good-bye to dear old friend.

She was doing the right thing, though, because only the right thing would hurt this badly.

A swift knock on her door was the only warning she had before Gavin came strolling into her condo. His smile instantly melted away as he took in her disheveled appearance.

In seconds he was on his knees beside her, pulling Azure into his arms. "What happened?"

Azure buried her face in the safety of his arms. "Terrell..."

"Terrell?" Gavin pushed her back so he could look down into her face. "What did that bastard do? I'll kill him."

Azure was startled at his fierceness. "No, he didn't do anything to me."

"Just tell me what he did."

"Gavin." Even though seconds before she'd been blubbering like a baby, all Azure felt like doing now was laughing. She never would have thought Gavin had such a hero complex. "He didn't do anything to me. I promise."

"Then why are you crying?" Gavin seemed so confused at the concept of her crying just for the sake of crying. It was such a guy thing and Azure couldn't help but smile a little.

"Because I'm upset." Holding her hand up to keep him silent, Azure continued, "But not because of anything he directly did, but because of something he discovered."

With a reluctant sigh, Azure moved out of Gavin's arms and stood. Walking over to the dress still hanging on the dress form, Azure caressed it, knowing this was probably going to be one of the last times she touched it.

"I'm feeling completely lost here."

"Terrell was able to track down the descendants to whom the dress originally belonged."

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"I did, but what I didn't want was for them to want the dress back."

"They want the dress back?" Gavin's gasp of surprise was almost similar to what Azure had uttered when she had talked to Meadow Lincoln on the phone early this morning.

The older woman had burst into tears when Azure had phoned her to inquire more about the history of the dress. Instead of listening to a chronicle of the dress's past, Azure listened to Meadow's tearful encounter of the last time she had seen the dress. The very dress

Meadow had worn in her wedding fifty odd years earlier and the very one she wanted her granddaughter to wear in her wedding this spring.

“Apparently the trunk was accidentally sold in an estate sale. Meadow said she would have never knowingly given it up for anything in the world.” Brushing her hand against the soft fabric, Azure could see why. “She offered to reimburse me for the fee I paid Terrell as well as handle any shipping fees if I would send the dress back to her.”

“I hope you told her what she could do with her money.”

“Kind of.” Azure smiled sadly. “I told her I would send her back the dress and she wouldn’t have to pay anything.”

“Send it back! Why would you do that?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Azure, this makes no sense.” To her surprise, Gavin looked almost more upset than she was. “You love that dress and more importantly, you own it. It’s yours, so oh-fucking-well. You bought it fair and square. No court in the world would make you give it back.”

“No one’s making me give it back, Gavin.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

Azure shrugged her shoulders, not sure how to explain to him that she just knew in her heart it was what she was supposed to do.

“I think everything happens for a reason.”

“Everything?”

“Yes.” Azure walked back over to the couch, taking his hand in hers as she sat. “Everything. For instance, if Jessie had been home that day, you would have never knocked on my door and *demi-plié*d your way into my home or my heart.”

“I still don’t know what a *demi-plié* is.” Gavin lovingly stroked her hand with his fingers. “But I know that I thank my lucky stars every day you let me in to your home and into your heart.”

“Like you would have taken no for an answer.”

“If Operation Charmin hadn’t worked, I had a back-up plan.”

“Stalker.” She laughed as she leaned forward to brush a quick kiss on his lips. “The dress is the same way though. Just think, if I hadn’t been perusing the store, I would have never had found the dress...”

“Which just goes to show you it’s meant to be.”

“It’s meant for me to return it. I love history, and only someone with a love of the past would have taken the time to get as much information on the dress as they could which led me to Meadow who had been looking for the dress herself. I think I was supposed to find the dress so I could return it to her family.”

“Azure, you love that dress.”

“That I do.” Azure glanced over at the dress. “But I need to do this.”

“I don’t agree, but if this is what you really truly feel you need to do, then I’ll support your decision, begrudgingly.”

“I appreciate it.” She smiled. “I have to say, I’m very surprised you’re this upset about it. I thought the dress being gone would make you feel better.”

“Why in the world did you think that?”

*Isn’t it obvious?* “I don’t know, out of sight out of mind.”

“Don’t you know?” Gavin pulled Azure onto his lap. “I want you to have everything your heart desires.”

“Gavin...” Azure was so touched by his words, for a moment she was speechless. When all else failed, she chose to say the one thing she’d been wanting to say for awhile. “I love you.”

Gavin’s grip around her tightened as he pulled her in closer to him and kissed her. The fierceness with which he held her told her all the feelings he had in his heart. But surprisingly, he was able to say the words as well. “I love you, too.”

A comfortable silence drifted around them and Azure eased down in his arms until her head was resting against his chest. He made her feel so cherished, so loved.

“So when are you going to ship it to her?” Gavin asked.

“Actually, I was thinking of doing it today.”

“Today!”

Azure sat up at his shocked tone. “Yes, why?”

“It’s just too...” Gavin glanced over to the dress then back to Azure with a wicked gleam in his eyes. “I have an idea.”

Azure warily asked, “What?”

“Let’s make your dream dress a reality.”

“What?”

“Let’s get married. Right now.”

“Married.” Startled, Azure moved out of his arms and stood. Was he crazy? “Are you joking?”

“I’ve never been more serious in my life.”

“But you don’t want to get married.”

“I’m allowed to change my mind.”

“I’m...” Flabbergasted, Azure began to pace. “I know you think you’re doing this because you think it’s what I want.”

“Are you saying you don’t want to get married?”

“No, I’m saying I don’t want to get married like this.”

“Like what?” Gavin stood as well, a smile like none other she’d ever seen before on his face. “Like to the man you love, who loves you back.”

“Just a few days ago we were talking about how you didn’t want to get married.”

“The other day I faced a cold, hard truth.”

“What was that?”

"If I don't wise up I might lose you to some guy who's not nervous about getting married. You're a beautiful, wonderful woman, who any man would give his right arm just to have you smile at him the way you smile at me. Terrell was ready to kill me two days ago, just because you kissed me."

"He was not."

"He was, but that's not the point. I love you and I know I want to spend my life with you."

"I hear you, I really do. But I can't say yes."

Gavin's smile faded. "Why?"

"Because right now, you're doing this to make me feel better or because you don't want to lose me. Neither is a reason to get married."

"How about because I love you?"

"I love you too, but if we're meant to be, Gavin, it'll happen. With or without this dress."

Gavin pulled her into his arms. "Just so you know, I'm just as stubborn as you are. I won't stop asking."

"You better not."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Azure turned in his embrace so she could look at the dress. Suddenly, in the comfort of his arms, she wasn't as upset as she had been earlier. She loved the dress, she would have loved to wear it in her own wedding, but she didn't need it to make her wedding dream come true. "No, but I'm sure I have to. Besides you know the old saying, if you love something set it free..."

The dress was wonderful, but the man holding her was even better. He was the thing real dreams were made of, and he was all hers.



## Epilogue

“Are you ready for bed?”

“Yes.” The jubilant voice of her four-year-old daughter, Rose, never failed to make Azure smile. Sitting down on the bed next to her wasn’t as easy as it used to be, but getting up was going to be a lot worse. It was a price she gladly paid to read to Rose before she went to sleep at night. Besides, Azure only had another three weeks with the extra weight of her unborn child in her womb to contend with anyway.

Looking down into the angelic face of her daughter, who had her mother’s eyes but her father’s wicked smile, never failed to bring tears to Azure’s eyes. Like Gavin had promised her, he didn’t relent with his marriage proposals, and one day she surprised them both by saying yes. It was a decision she’d never regretted in the wonderful six years that they’d been husband and wife. Their love had blossomed much like their ever-growing family.

“So, what do you want me to read to you tonight?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Rose’s words surprised her. Their nightly ritual had begun before her daughter had been old enough to know what a book was. “You don’t want to hear a story tonight?”

“No, I do, but I don’t want you to read me a story. I want you to tell me one.”

The light dawned bright and clear. Azure knew exactly what Rose wanted. "About the wedding dress?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Azure settled back against the wall, getting herself ready for the tale Rose loved to hear. "Once upon a time, there was a magical dress. A wedding dress that had the amazing ability to bring love and happiness wherever it was.

"The dress was so special it was passed down from generation to generation, so that love and good fortune would continue to blossom for the Chandler clan, until one day..."

"The dress was sold by mistake." Rose interrupted, knowing the story almost verbatim.

"That's right, but luckily the dress was discovered by a..."

"A beautiful maiden, who was almost as lucky in love as the dress." Azure and Rose both looked up to see Gavin standing in the doorway, reciting the story with them. He walked over and dropped a quick kiss upon Rose's upturned lips. "Pardon me, Princess, for interrupting storytime, but it's one of my favorites."

"It's okay, Daddy, I like it too."

"So when the maiden..."

"Beautiful maiden," Rose corrected, earning a wink of approval from her father.

"Excuse me, beautiful maiden found the dress, she knew instinctively there was more to the dress than met the eye. She took it back to her castle where a handsome prince was waiting for her, beseeching entrance to her kingdom."

"And the beautiful maiden felt so bad for the twitching prince, that she granted him entrance." Rose looked to her father. "Daddy, why were you twitching?"

“Umm...I was really happy to meet your mom.”

“Yes.” Azure hid her laughter behind a cough. “The prince was so happy he even did a little dance.”

“Azure...” Gavin growled.

“Anyway. The magical dress sensed that the couple, who were vastly different but so obviously destined to belong to one another, needed its help. So it wielded its enchanted spell on the unsuspecting couple. Who, of course, fell head over heels in love with each other. The only thing was, the dress didn’t rightly belong to the maiden, and much to the prince’s dismay, the kindhearted...”

“And beautiful,” Rose and Gavin echoed.

“And beautiful maiden returned the magical dress to its rightful owners. As thanks, the gracious Lady Meadow granted the prince one wish, for the kind act his lady love had performed, and come the maiden’s wedding day, the magical dress was hanging in her closet for her to wear, just like she’d dreamed it would be.

“Wearing the dress, the maiden strolled down the isle into the arms of her prince and the two were married, surrounded by love and magic. And they lived happily...”

“Ever after,” Rose finished with a smile. “I love that story.”

“I do too.” Gavin held out his hand to Azure and gently helped her to her feet. “Now it’s time for all little princesses to go to sleep. Night Rose.”

“Night Daddy. Night Mommy.”

Hand in hand, Azure and Gavin walked to the door, stopping only when Rose called out to them.

“Yes?” Azure asked, hand on the light switch.

“Do you think that one day I’ll get married in the same magical dress you were married in?”

Azure smiled at her daughter. “If it’s true love, then I can pretty much guarantee it.”

## Lena Matthews

Lena Matthews spends her days dreaming about handsome heroes and her nights with her own personal hero. Married to her college sweetheart, she is the proud mother of an extremely smart toddler, three evil dogs, and a mess of ants that she can't seem to get rid of.

When not writing she can be found reading, watching movies, lifting up the cushions on the couch to look for batteries for the remote control and plotting different ways to bring Buffy back on the air.

You can contact Lena through her website: [www.lenamatthews.com](http://www.lenamatthews.com)

*Traveling west from Boston is the adventure of a lifetime for mail order bride, Matilda Cummings—until she learns her soon-to-be husband, Dawson Chandler, has no use for a wife.*

**Something Old, Something New**  
**(c)2006 Maggie Casper**

*Available now from Samhain Publishing*

*Switching places with her twin sister to become a mail order bride seemed like the thing to do, until feisty Matilda Cummings reaches the wilds of Dodge City and finds out her soon-to-be husband hadn't seen fit to meet her train, sending his brother instead.*

*Dawson Chandler wants more than anything to strangle his younger brother when he learns he's unwittingly signed a binding marriage contract. He's got no use for a wife, especially the tiny, prissy looking woman whose picture haunts him. A lady, polished and shined, has no business living on the Rocking C Ranch, nor with a man like himself.*

*Afraid of hurting a delicate woman with his rough and tumble ways, Dawson never plans to marry. After all, why should he shackle himself to a lady when he prefers the experience of a seasoned whore in the bedroom? Much to his dismay, he finds his little lady is nothing like he'd imagines. Soon, Dawson and Matilda find themselves struggling through not only their physical but emotional relationships in search of love. Will they find it?*

*Book One in the Wedding Dress series*

*Enjoy this excerpt:*

Warm heavy breathing against her temple woke Matilda out of a dead sleep. Her eyes popped open of their own accord, taking in the prickly square chin belonging to a man, a man who surely should not be in her bed.

Before her brain engaged enough to stop the action, Matilda opened her mouth to scream. A large hand clamped firmly across her lips stopped the sound before it escaped. "Scream and everyone within earshot will be barging through the door."

His voice was rusty with sleep, rumbling up from deep in his chest. Dawson. Matilda breathed a sigh of relief, her mind finally grasping where she was and what was happening.

She mumbled incoherently behind the hand he still held across her mouth. He needed to move, to release her. Dawson's manly scent, the feel of him against her side, big and strong, was doing some serious damage to not only her nerves but her libido as well.

His closeness made her want to rub her body against his like a bitch in heat. He was far too potent to be so close this early in the morning. When he changed positions, moving until he lay atop of her, one leg thrown over her and his hard length against her thigh, Matilda thought she might spontaneously combust.

His gaze was heavy lidded, traveling over her face in a thorough inspection. "I'll let you go if you promise not to scream."

Matilda nodded and was at once released. "Thank you."

Dawson's lips curved. "Ever the polite one." After a quick kiss to the tip of her nose, he levered himself off her until he sat on the side of the bed. "Time to go back to your room."

Matilda's gaze darted to the window at his words. She breathed a sigh of relief at the darkness beyond the glass. Without a word, she crawled

from the bed, cursing the unladylike position the movement placed her in. Matilda was nearly to the door before Dawson called her back.

“We’ll be married today.” His brows creased and a strange look crossed his face. “Have you a special dress to wear?”

He didn’t sound overly enthused by the prospect of marrying her. Matilda tried not to let the knowledge upset her. She would be a good wife and hope that over time, Dawson could form some sort of affection toward her.

“Yes, my mother insisted. It was the one thing she wasn’t willing to compromise on.”

Dawson stood. After wrapping the sheet around his hips, he walked across the room toward her.

“Good. Very good. I’ve got some things to do this morning but I’ll be back for the noontime meal so there will be plenty of time to clean up before the ceremony.”

He seemed uncomfortable about something, unused to explaining himself or his whereabouts more than likely. Matilda stared up into his face for a brief moment. It was impossible to ignore the need she had to show him things would be okay.

Allowing herself no second thoughts, she stretched up on tiptoe to kiss his jaw. With his great height and evident unwillingness to lower his face for her kiss, Matilda was left no other choice of where to place her lips.

Had she been too forward or done something to anger him? Damn, being a lady all the time sure was proving to be too much to work through on a daily basis.

She opened the door and quietly fled into the darkened hallway. Too tired to go back to sleep once in her own room, Matilda opened the trunk



containing some of her belongings. Among the things still in the trunk was the wedding dress her mother had had commissioned for her.

She could hardly wait to wear it and yet it seemed almost out of place in the high prairie grasses of the public land strip, a place the Chandler family had called home for many years.

From what she'd heard, the area had no one to enforce the law. Some even referred to the public land strip as No Man's Land since it had been turned over by the state of Texas but was yet to be surveyed and allotted in a land run by the United States. And being so close to Indian Territory, Matilda wasn't quite sure just how many folks would choose the land as their home when and if it ever was split into parcels.

Jess had mentioned how Dawson's grandfather had settled the land long before the Comanche were sent to live on reservations, a time when war between the whites and Indians was prevalent. Matilda shuddered just thinking about the hardships both the whites and the Indians suffered through during that time.

No longer wanting to dwell on the bad, Matilda took her wedding dress from the bottom of the trunk, unwrapping it from the fine linen sheets it had been wrapped in.

The deep plum color of the dress did wonderful things for her pale complexion her mother had said. Matilda was just glad the one piece dress, with its fitted bodice, buttoned up the front so she wouldn't have to be too much of a bother come time to dress.

She idly ran a finger over one of the velvet-covered buttons as she held the dress to her body, eyeing herself in the mirror. The high neck and long sleeves were demure but the tightness of the garment would leave little doubt about her assets. Never one to be overly concerned about her plumpness or the over average size of her chest, Matilda felt a bit uneasy knowing Dawson would see her in the nude tonight.

Would he insist upon undressing her completely or would he settle for her merely lifting her nightdress and taking what he wanted. Somehow, Matilda didn't think so. Shaking all thoughts of her wedding night aside, she once again concentrated on the task at hand.

All the pleats and fringe would be hell to iron. Hopefully all that was needed to settle some of the wrinkles was a stiff shaking and the weight of the heavy skirts pulling at it while it hung.

By the time Matilda finished hanging the dress, as well as removing the rest of the items from the trunk, the day had broke. Sunshine spilled through the window of her room leaving in its wake warmth and comfort. Making her way down the stairs and into the kitchen, Matilda made a mental list of things she would need to do before afternoon arrived.

Several hours later, as she prepared for the ceremony, she prayed the large breakfast she'd eaten would stay down. Her stomach was in knots and had been for the past several hours but she was finally dressed and ready.

Matilda tucked the beautifully edged hankie Jess had loaned her into the top of her corset, happy she had everything she needed. Her mother's locket, her dress, the borrowed hankie and baby blue ribbon securing her chemise, not to mention the coin even now sticking to the side of her foot all made up the things Matilda needed to start her marriage off on the right foot.

*Can Melanie Parsons trust Brady Torres with her most trusted possession—her heart?*

**A Sixpence in Her Shoe**  
**(c)2006 Liz Andrews**

*Available August 15th from Samhain Publishing*

*Melanie comes from a Traditionalist family, a fundamental group of individuals who want to return to the ideals of an earlier time. Although she doesn't believe in those ideals, especially when it comes to marriage, she has two little secrets. She loves for a man to control her in the bedroom and the particular man she is longing to take that control is none other than Agent Brady Torres.*

*The UAS believes Traditionalists are behind the burglaries, but Brady is not sold on the idea and proposes they use a wedding dress from the 1800s as bait to capture the thieves. The dress, from Melanie's own family, is the one thing that keeps Brady believing he might have a chance with Melanie. He figures she wouldn't keep the dress around if she didn't secretly harbor a desire to find true love and marry for a lifetime.*

*If Brady loses the dress to the thieves will he also lose his chance with Melanie?*

*Book Three in the Wedding Dress series.*

*Enjoy this Excerpt:*

Brady headed back toward the office and Melanie. It was time to finish what he'd started earlier. Walking into the office, Brady stopped for a moment and stared at Melanie. She had gotten comfortable, kicking off her shoes and at some point while waiting for him, she had lowered the

lights and decided to lay her head down for a moment. Her hair was spread out like a halo where she had fallen asleep at her desk with her head cushioned on her arms.

Walking over to her, Brady smoothed her hair away from her face and watched as she blinked her eyes, slowly waking up. Upon seeing him standing there, Melanie smiled up at him, causing his heart to clench in his chest. He'd never thought he was ready to settle down, but watching Melanie greet him with a smile every morning upon waking was something he hadn't known he craved until just now.

"Hey baby, you should have gone home."

Melanie sat up slowly and stretched, pulling the fabric of her blouse tightly against her breasts. At some point she must have decided to take off her bra because her breasts were clearly visible under the sheer material. Brady's cock perked up in interest at the sight.

"No, I wanted to wait for you. I wanted to find out what my punishment was going to be."

Listening to Melanie refer to her punishment in such a matter of fact way made Brady's cock more than perk up—it came to attention.

"Are you looking forward to your punishment?"

Melanie paused for a moment before answering. "I don't know. If I say 'yes' am I depraved?"

Brady pulled her up from her chair and into his arms. "No baby, you're not depraved. You control almost every aspect of your life. In this one area you are ready for someone else to be in control. That's not depravity, it is intelligence. Don't let the dictates of society tell you how you are supposed to act."

Melanie laughed softly. "You're so good for my ego. I do enjoy what we've done together and I want more."

Brady lifted Melanie and sat her on the desk, pushing her skirt up until it was around her hips and then pulling her legs apart and stepping between them.

“So you want more, huh? Is that why you took off your bra?”

“I hate wearing that thing. You’d think after a couple hundred years they could come up with a better garment to hold up a woman’s breasts, but no.”

“I like seeing you without the bra, your breasts straining the buttons of this poor blouse.”

Brady pushed against a button, forcing it to slip free. The slopes of her breasts were on display for his gaze. Melanie squirmed as he watched her. Brady decided this would be the perfect opportunity to fulfill one of his fantasies.

“I want to see you touch yourself.” Stepping back, Brady sat in the chair she just vacated, relaxing as it conformed to his body. “Unbutton your blouse.”

Melanie quickly freed the rest of her buttons, allowing the blouse to fall open, exposing her breasts to his gaze.

“What should I do?”

“How do you like to touch yourself? Show me.”

Melanie licked her lips, eliciting an accompanying groan from Brady. He didn’t know why he was torturing himself, but watching her pleasure herself was too good to pass up. Cupping her breasts, Melanie gently kneaded the flesh before grazing each nipple with a thumb, teasing the hardened nubs. She moaned at the contact and then grasped each nipple between a thumb and finger, rolling back and forth before gently scraping the tips with her nails.

“More, show me more.”

It was as if Melanie could read his mind, although it probably wasn't too difficult to figure out where his mind was. She scooted to the edge of the desk and slipped her hand inside the tiny G-string, rubbing herself back and forth, her head falling back as her strokes became firmer. Unfortunately the material and her hand obstructed Brady's view. He could hold out no longer and pushed himself forward, between her legs.

"Lay back." He ordered harshly. "I've got to taste you."

Melanie complied immediately, lying back on her elbows so she could still see down the length of her body. He loved that she wanted to watch him licking her pussy. Taking her G-string, he ripped it from her body, too rushed to be gentle.

The aroma of her arousal hit him and he salivated at the thought of tasting her spicy cream. Trailing a finger up her thigh, Brady watched as she shivered in reaction to his touch. Moving his finger higher, he traced the crease of her pussy, gathering the juices collected there. Bringing his finger to his lips, he licked it clean, but the brief taste of her only left him hungry for more.

# SAMHAIN PUBLISHING, LTD.

*It's all about the story...*

Action/Adventure

Fantasy

Historical

Horror

Mainstream

Mystery/Suspense

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Red Hots!

Romance

Science Fiction

Western

Young Adult

<http://www.samhainpublishing.com>