

FELICITY
HEATON



Summer's
Secret

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Summer's Secret
Felicity Heaton

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Chapter One

There's more to life than this.

Jax Templeton couldn't help thinking it while his reflection in the mirror mocked him. He was grateful to his estranged father for giving him a summer job after he'd given up hope of finding one, but this had to be some form of cosmic joke.

It had to be.

Life just couldn't be this cruel without reason.

He sighed and smoothed down the crisp lapels of his black jacket and then pulled a face of discontent as the mirror version of himself continued to ridicule him.

There had to be more to life than this, there just had to be.

He silently slipped the coat off and hung it carefully over the hanger, making sure he didn't get any lint on it or crease it. His father would kill him if he even so much as got a spot on the damn thing.

Why was he about to spend summer working for his father, when his half-brother Simon was lazing about in Los Angeles on the college campus?

Why did he have to pay his way through college, when precious Simon got it handed to him on a plate?

He got the feeling there was favouritism at work here.

He wasn't blind to the fact that his father gave Simon everything he wanted without so much as batting an eyelid, while he was made to work for even the tiniest thing.

Holding back the sigh that wanted to push its way out of his mouth, he closed the protective plastic over the uniform where it was hanging on the back of his wardrobe door. Jax tried to shrug it off and put it down to bad parenting.

But it irked him.

He tensed his jaw, making the muscles of it show clearly. He remembered what his father had told him.

There was to be no speaking to the person he'd be responsible for looking after. There would be no smart-ass comments, no jokes. There would be no smoking or drinking while employed by his company.

No swearing.

No jewellery was to be worn, so those pathetic things you wear around your wrists were to be removed, along with the chain around your neck.

Jax wondered if he was really so desperate for money that he was going to endure such a regimented attack on his life and who he was.

He'd said yes to everything his father had told him over the phone and had then obediently gone to pick up the uniform that had been ordered for him.

He sighed.

Life sucked.

He was barely twenty, and already life sucked.

There had to be more to it than this ... please?

If it wasn't bad enough that his college was full of peppy cheerleader types and jocks who insisted on ripping into him about his accent and the fact he was a loner, now he had to drive some stuck up media types around for the entire summer.

He flopped down onto the large expanse of his bed and let his arms stretch out like wings. He stared at the ceiling.

All this suffering, all this crap to go through, in order to convince his father to put him through the last year of college.

He was determined to do it though. He'd done worse in the past to get money off his old man and this would be a walk in the park compared to those times, so long as he could swallow his pride and lose his identity for an entire summer.

He glared at the uniform as though it was the epitome of evil.

He would do as his father had instructed. He'd lose his bracelets, and his necklace. He'd be the perfect gentleman and not put one toe out of line. He'd do it all, just so he could finish college and get the hell away from him.

He listened to the night creatures outside the window. Their incessant chirping gave an eerie depth to the quiet. He still wasn't used to the sound of his old room. It had been a long time since he'd been back here but he needed to get out of the city, if only for a few weeks.

It was quieter back at his mother's house. It gave him the space he needed to think and get his projects completed in time for the new school year. It also gave him room to be himself. His mother had always loved the way he expressed himself and he wasn't going to let her down now.

He'd spend his day in the city, driving whomever it was he'd be driving around, but in his free time, he'd be himself again. He'd be back home with the one person who loved him and saw him for what he was worth.

Switching on the television, he arched a brow and watched the girl dancing around stage. He automatically hit the mute button, unable to bring himself to listen to the sultry song she was attempting to sing in order to woo the audience. He couldn't believe how everyone was so enthralled with the girl his father's company had created. Even Simon was obsessed with her.

Once upon a time, he'd had to suffer manufactured bands.

Now, the record companies had surpassed themselves and were creating artificial singers.

And everyone loved her.

He couldn't see the attraction in becoming head over heels obsessed with something that wasn't real. The girl bounced, smiled and pouted like she was human, but when it all boiled down to it, she was nothing more than advanced computer code.

Something he was all too familiar with.

He'd written bits of programs during his spare time at college, using scraps of what he'd seen in his father's development office, and had been able to create a virtual girl himself, but it was nothing compared to what the developers could do. Why couldn't his father get him a summer job there? Why couldn't he let him be a part of the development team responsible for enhancing and improving 'Summer'?

He laughed at himself for thinking that his father would give him a job he would actually enjoy. His father knew that would be what he wanted so in turn, he'd given him what he'd hate the most.

His father was an utter bastard.

When the other guys in his dorm had caught wind of the fact he was the son of the creator of 'Summer', they had immediately tried to become his best friend, as though he could get them access to the elusive hologram.

What did they plan to do with her if they got near her anyway?

She wasn't real.

She was a program, instructed to respond to situations by her enhanced emotion chip and the latest version of his father's holographic human software. She couldn't respond to people, couldn't be a real girl like they all wanted her to be. You couldn't touch her, smell her, or taste her. She was a ghost, a figment. She wasn't real.

He shook his head, pressed the power button on the remote and then stood up. Walking out of his room, he headed down the stairs and through the dark house to the kitchen.

The refrigerator bathed the small room in an eerie white glow when he opened the door and stared in at the contents. It was practically empty. He really needed to shop before his mother got back in two weeks.

Pulling a can of beer out of the fridge, he cracked it open and swigged a mouthful of it before heading out onto the back porch. He didn't bother flicking the lights on, wanting nothing more than to sit in the peaceful darkness and watch the stars.

His mother had gone out of town on business shortly after his father had called to tell him he had a job for him. He knew that she was opposed to the way his father treated him, and he surmised that the reason she'd gone away for a while was to confront his father in the New York office.

Swigging the beer, Jax lay down on one of the recliners and swung his feet up onto the nearby table. He frowned at his heavy army boots, thinking about how much he was going to hate not being allowed to wear them at work.

Now he had to wear pretty boy polished shoes, ones that perfectly matched his highly starched uniform.

He didn't even want to get started on the cap he had to wear.

He drank more of his beer, lit a cigarette and smiled at the stars. Everything seemed so much simpler out here, so much easier.

Life didn't have a hold on him in this place. There was just him and the heavens above, both moving peacefully through the night and hoping tomorrow wouldn't be as bad as it seemed.

Watching a lone satellite as it sped across the night sky, he heaved a sigh, expelling the smoke in his lungs as well as his heavy thoughts.

Maybe tomorrow wouldn't be so bad.

He hoped.

* * * *

Jax groaned and slapped his hand down onto the alarm as it continued to buzz at him. He pushed it off the side table and onto the floor, flinching when he heard it break.

Time to get a new alarm.

Running his fingers through his hair, he squinted around the bright room and tried to wake himself up. He flicked the television on and groaned when he saw that 'Summer' was conducting an interview

about her latest single. Immediately turning the television off, he slipped out of bed and scratched his head while he yawned and padded across his room to the bathroom. He threw a black look at the suit that was still hanging on his wardrobe and disappeared into the bathroom.

Shower.

Showers always made things better. It might improve his outlook.

It might.

Turning the water on hot, he stepped under the jet and closed his eyes. He raised his face to the water, letting it cascade over him as though it would wash away the feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Today wasn't going to go well.

What did his father expect of him? Did he have some ulterior motive as to why he'd chosen him for this particular job? Maybe this was a test, and he wanted to see if they really could work together?

Maybe he should stop caring.

Who was he trying to kid? His father didn't give a damn about the fact he wanted to be a developer. He just wanted someone cheap to work for him over the summer.

Chances were whoever he was going to be driving would be some complete bastard that no one else wanted to drive. That would fit his father's modus operandi perfectly—giving him the shittiest job he could think of in order to make him suffer for his education.

Biting back his desire to hit something, he brought his hands up to his face and ran them over it, letting his fingers bury themselves in his black-blue hair as he tried to shake off how negative he was feeling.

He'd live day-to-day, roll with the punches, and before he knew it, the summer would be over with and he could go back to his apartment and college.

Squeezing out a large amount of shower gel onto the palm of his hand, he rubbed them together to lather it up. He applied it to his body and continued to think about what was in store for him.

He had to report in by 8am, which in city traffic on a Monday morning was going to be some feat. He'd take his motorbike. It would be easier to park than his old car and his father would kill him on spot if that vehicle went anywhere near his precious office building. He'd have to change there because there was no way on this earth he was going to drive all the way into work in his uniform. He didn't want to be seen dead in that thing.

Rinsing the soap off his body, he looked at his wrists and the bracelets that adorned them.

Now or never.

Stepping out of the shower, he removed each of his bracelets and then his necklace, setting them down beside the sink before drying himself off.

He wiped his hand across the mirror and looked at his reflection. He preened his dark hair back as neatly as possible. He couldn't believe how far he'd let his father go, how much he'd been willing to change in order to get some money.

He felt like he'd sold out to the devil.

He was surprised his father hadn't ordered him to dye his hair, too.

Walking back into the bedroom, he dressed in his usual black jeans and a charcoal grey t-shirt. He grabbed his leather jacket off the back of his chair, picked up the suit, and sighed at it for a moment before heading out the door.

Trudging down the stairs, he stared at the pair of shiny shoes that were sitting next to his boots on the rack. He frowned, took hold of them and then walked into the kitchen to fix himself some breakfast. Something substantial so he could survive the day ahead.

He poured himself a coffee and flicked through the pages of the latest music magazine. He couldn't help rolling his eyes at the adverts for the latest 'Summer' album. Everywhere he turned, there she was, staring him in the face—his father's protégé.

He abruptly turned the page as though that show of disinterest would actually be felt by the virtual girl and grabbed the two pieces of toast as they sprang up from the toaster.

Spreading his toast with peanut butter, he sat down at the kitchen island and drank his coffee. His thoughts returned to the coming day and he silently wished it were over with already so he could just come home and work on his latest program. When his watch beeped to remind him of the time, he heaved a sigh and stood up.

Slipping his leather jacket and sunglasses on, he held the plastic suit bag over one shoulder and walked out into the early morning air.

Today was going to be hell.

There had to be more to life than this.

Chapter Two

Jax tapped the steering wheel impatiently. He was sitting in the driver seat of a massive Bentley limousine. He rolled his eyes when he caught sight of himself in the mirror. The driver's cap he was wearing made him look twice his age. He pushed it up his forehead slightly with his finger and looked at himself again.

Still not any better.

There was only one way of making this cap better—taking it outside and burning it until there was nothing left.

He heaved another sigh and then took to playing with all the buttons while he waited for the person he'd been told to pick up. Whoever it was, they were already thirty minutes late and he was starting to lose the very short amount of patience he had. He could practically see his fuse as it ignited and began to burn down. If they didn't show soon, he was going to leave and tell his father to stick the job where the sun didn't shine.

He really didn't need this shit.

Prodding each button in turn, he memorised what they did and then pulled the little rocker switch that lowered the screen in between him and the passenger compartment. He looked over his shoulder, amusing himself with the way it slid easily down, revealing the back seats to him.

He started when the door opened and hurriedly changed the direction of the tinted glass screen, trying to get it back into place before the passenger noticed.

Muffled conversation came from the back and he kept his eyes straight forwards, remembering what his father had told him about not prying into the business of the person he was responsible for.

He waited in silence when the door shut again and wondered what he was supposed to do now. He had the schedule of his passenger, was he supposed to be driving off now or did he have to wait for instructions?

He was almost tempted to lower the glass screen and ask the person himself, but got the feeling that if he did that then he wouldn't have a job tomorrow.

"What are we waiting for?" Came a crackly voice over the intercom and Jax swallowed hard.

It was a girl, a woman. He was driving a woman.

He looked at the rear view mirror and frowned when he realised that he couldn't see her through the tinted screen. He wanted to know how old she was and what she looked like. Curiosity begged him to lower the screen, but instead he put the car into gear and pulled out into the mid-morning traffic.

There was no point in risking his job. He smiled when he thought that things were looking up. Chances were she wouldn't be the evil bitch he had imagined she was going to be. She didn't sound evil.

Glancing down at the schedule, he realised that whomever he was driving, they were incredibly busy.

Coasting along the highway, he tapped the steering wheel as he drove, keeping his eyes on the road at all times. He let his thoughts wander to the person he was driving and he idly pressed the intercom switch.

He raised both his brows as a little voice cut through the silence that had been ringing in his ears.

She was singing.

He smiled and listened to her.

She didn't have a bad voice. She hit a few bum notes here and there but in general, she sang pretty good. She hummed the instrumental bits of whatever it was she was listening to on the sound system and then sang along again.

Opening the window, he let his arm rest out of it and splayed his fingers as the breeze cut through them. He let his hand on the steering wheel go lax and continued to drive down the highway towards their first destination.

All the while listening to the girl in the back seat.

Maybe this job wouldn't be so bad after all.

His phone began to ring in his pocket. He desperately tried to press the intercom switch so she wouldn't hear it and realise he was listening in on her. When the only sound left filling the car was the noise of his phone ringing, he breathed a sigh of relief, believing he'd got away with it.

A knock on the window made him swallow hard and he tried to ignore it at first. His heart beat hard against his chest. He'd just broken one of the rules his father had laid down.

He drove a little further and then pulled over when the knocking became louder and more irritated. Taking a deep breath, he pulled down on the little black rocker switch and steeled himself against whatever was waiting for him on the other side of the glass.

The first glance he caught of her made his breath catch in his throat.

The second one made his heart skip a beat and he swore it stopped when he turned to look over his shoulder at her.

He stared blankly into the twin pools of hazel-green that were looking back at him curiously. They were clearly reflecting how annoyed their owner was, but he got the feeling it was more embarrassment about being caught singing than it was anger.

Kaitlyn didn't know quite what to say when she saw her driver for the first time. His pale blue eyes bore into hers. She realised he was waiting for her to say what she'd been ready to say.

Only the words had fled her lips the second she'd laid eyes on him.

He smiled slightly.

She remembered why she had knocked on the glass.

Her eyes narrowed and her expression darkened.

"You do realise you're not supposed to use that thing to listen in on me?" She pointed at the intercom button and frowned at him.

He shrugged as an apology. "It's my first day."

She arched a brow and looked at him. He couldn't have been a day over twenty, and he didn't look like the type of person the company usually employed to drive her around.

She wanted to be angry at him, wanted to tell him to keep his nose out of her business and do his job or she'd have him fired, but something about the awkward apologetic look in his eyes made her feel as though she'd be kicking a puppy.

Kneeling on the seat that his backed onto, she looked at the beach outside the windscreen, and then at him.

There was something familiar about him that she couldn't put her finger on.

"Fine. Just don't do it again." She wanted to move, knew she should go back to her seat and make him drive her, but just looking at him made her want to stay. She told herself that she wasn't meant to talk to people. If Edward found out she was making small talk with her driver, he'd not let her out of the office.

"Is that all?" Jax asked. She stared at him and he tried to suppress the thoughts of kissing her that were rocketing around his brain. He wondered what had gotten into him. He didn't usually have thoughts like this about girls that he'd only known for five seconds. Past experience had taught him to be cautious, but there was something in her eyes that made him want to throw caution straight out of the window.

"No," She started and hesitated a moment before continuing. "Another thing..."

He swallowed hard and shifted in his seat so he was almost facing her.

She smiled at him.

God, she was beautiful.

He found himself smiling too and then his whole world dropped out from underneath him as her fingers came towards him and she twirled the hair at the back of his head around them.

"Your hair naturally that colour?" Kaitlyn smiled and hoped it didn't come off as nervous. She wanted to see how he was going to react to her, whether he had any clue about who he was driving around and if he did, she'd wrap him around her little finger to keep him quiet. Just like she'd been instructed to.

"No," he said and his smile turned wicked. "Yours?"

She couldn't stop the smile that stretched from ear to ear. She'd never had a driver that had the stomach to talk with her like this. Most of them had been too petrified of their boss to even say 'good morning'. It was refreshing. She hadn't spoken to someone like this in years.

"No," she answered honestly and ran her fingers through her long blonde hair.

He gave her a look of longing and she wondered if he was wishing they were his fingers running through her hair.

Wanting to test him a little more, she leaned over and turned the dial that switched the radio on. She breezed through the channels until she hit a station playing the song she was looking for and then sat back again, watching him for a reaction.

He frowned down at the radio as 'Summer' blared out over it, her dulcet tones trying to woo him even as he was reaching for the off switch.

She smiled and watched his long fingers silencing the radio. In one simple act, he'd told her everything she needed to know about him and why he had been chosen to drive her.

Jax couldn't believe that this beautiful girl was listening to this rubbish too, this manufactured voice, when she had such a wonderful one of her own.

"We'll be late," he said gruffly. He turned back to face the wheel and waited for the girl to resume her seat so he could start driving again.

He'd thought she was more than that, that she was above being another sheep to follow 'Summer', but she'd proven that she wasn't. And for some reason, he felt disappointed.

Kaitlyn frowned at his profile as all the warmth evaporated from the car. She wondered just what he had against 'Summer' and what she'd done. She went to move back to her seat and was barely clear of the screen before he raised it, cutting her off from him.

What was his problem?

Sitting back in her seat, she looked at the tinted glass screen and frowned. He clearly didn't like 'Summer'. Was that the reason Edward had chosen him, because he wanted nothing to do with what the company was about? She couldn't help thinking that there was something more at work. Everyone loved 'Summer', there were no exceptions—or was there?

He was the right age group for being madly in love with the fictitious girl. He was male, and judging by the way he'd looked her over, he definitely wasn't gay. Why wasn't he tumbling head over heels like everyone else? What made him so different?

She pulled out her notebook and jotted down her thoughts as the car began to move. She needed to get inside his head, needed to see what was making him so immune to the lure of 'Summer'. 'Summer' was designed to be perfect, more than perfect, she was everything a guy wanted and just that little bit extra.

Why the hell didn't he like her?

Her nose wrinkled in frustration while she tried to think of a reason. After fifteen minutes, she'd come up with nothing and all she could do was sigh and scratch her head as they pulled into the driveway of the recording studio. Putting her notebook back into her bag, she took a deep breath and prepared herself for the coming day.

Jax opened the door and stood mute, waiting for her to get out of the back. He tried not to arch a brow at her or roll his eyes over how long she was taking to get out of the car.

He didn't know what had gotten into him.

Something about the way she'd searched for that infernal song on the radio had irked him and he couldn't put his finger on why. So everyone loved his father's monster, that's what it was all about after all—duping everyone into loving her and making a billion off it before the bubble burst.

God, he wished he could burst that bubble and let the music industry get back to how it should be—real bands, with real people in them.

He plastered a smile on his face as the girl finally got out the back of the car and then found it

becoming real when she smiled at him. It was a tiny show of thanks that went straight to his heart.

Maybe he was being too hard on her. Clearly, she wanted to be a singer or she at least had something to do with bands, and he couldn't bring himself to hold her love of 'Summer' against her. Perhaps she wanted to be like her, wanted to be a singer one day. He'd looked over her schedule before beginning to drive again and she seemed to be in too many meetings to be a singer herself, so maybe it was something she secretly wanted to be and that's why she'd been so touchy about him listening in on her.

Maybe he was trying to make excuses for her, just like he made excuses for his father.

He'd known her five seconds, and she'd already disappointed him. He didn't even know her name, and he'd built up an ideal of her that she'd shattered. He really needed to learn from his previous mistakes and let the girl reveal herself to him, rather than building an illusion of who he thought she would be.

He was no better than his father.

Building illusions of girls instead of discovering the real thing.

He sighed, watched her walking up the gravel drive to the large studio and then slammed the door shut.

Kaitlyn stopped when she heard the door closing and turned to watch him as he walked around the car and got into the driver's side.

Something about him wasn't right.

When he'd closed the screen on her, she'd felt empty again. She could feel the disappointment as it hung in the air between them, could sense that something was off, and it hadn't been there before she'd turned the radio on.

He'd been sweet, talking to her as though she was real and he could see her.

He could really see her.

Then, like the screen in the car, the barriers had come up and he'd shut her out.

And weirdly...

All she wanted was to be back in.

For the first time in a long time, she wanted to be seen.

And she wanted him to be the one to do it.

Chapter Three

Jax walked into his bedroom and threw the driver's cap onto the bed. He hung the plastic covered suit back on the wardrobe and glared at it briefly before moving across the room. He ran his fingers through his hair when he came to stand in front of the full-length mirror and sighed. His eyes travelled slowly, along with his fingers, to the patch of hair she'd touched. His fingers instinctively mimicked her action of twirling it around them and he frowned at how he couldn't let it go.

All day he'd thought about that.

Everywhere he'd driven her, every time he'd opened the door for her, all he could think about was the sensation of her small, perfectly manicured hands in his hair.

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

He'd never had such a small action make such a massive impact on him.

Then she'd gone and ruined it by searching out 'Summer'. He could have killed her for shattering the peace he'd been feeling. For a moment, an infinitesimal moment, the world had seemed so real, and he'd been angry with her for taking that away.

She hadn't spoken to him for the rest of the working day, but each time he'd held the door for her she'd smiled and it had been genuine. He could spot a fake smile a mile off. He was the master of them after all. Most of the smiles he gave to others, all the smiles he gave to his father, weren't real.

He realised he was just standing in front of the mirror staring at himself as he thought about her.

The only other words she'd said to him were right at the end of the day. She'd asked him to drive her home, and even though he had wanted to be out of the irritating uniform and away from servitude, he'd agreed. He couldn't bring himself to let her find her own way back to her place.

What kind of man would he be if he let a pretty girl take herself home?

Following her directions, he'd driven her down to the beach and had been impressed by the house he'd been instructed to stop in front of. It was a white washed wooden beach house with a large deck running around the entirety of it. The sea was no more than fifty yards away from it and it was near the end of the beach where it was always going to be quiet. He'd stepped out of the car and held the door for her, drinking in her wide smile as she saw him and then looked at her house as though she was beyond happy to see it.

She'd smiled so warmly at him that he'd felt awkward, guilty over his earlier actions towards her.

Tomorrow he had to pick her up there. He'd insisted.

She'd looked so comforted by the sight of her home that he'd suddenly decided he didn't like the thought of her having to get into Los Angeles centre only for him to pick her up immediately.

She hadn't said anything to his proposition. She'd just smiled and nodded.

She didn't need to say anything. Her gratitude was right there in her hazel eyes.

He sighed and turned to walk out of the room.

Maybe this summer job wasn't going to be as bad as he'd originally thought it would be.

The phone ringing in his pocket made him grimace. Reaching in and pulling it out, he frowned at the display and then flicked it open, steeling himself against the unavoidable onslaught.

"Father," Jax greeted in the same bitter tone he always used when addressing him, one that was designed to show him just how disappointed he was over having him for a parent.

"Jackson," Edward Hampton said the word with all the warmth of an iceberg.

"Thought I told you to stop calling me that?" Jax gritted his teeth and subconsciously began to pace the bedroom, wanting nothing more than the call to be over with already.

"I gave you a perfectly good name and you seriously think I'm going to call you by that ridiculous butchered one of yours? What is it now ... jinx?"

"Jax," he corrected him, knowing all too well that his father had intentionally called him the wrong name. "What can I do for you, father?"

"The day you call me something other than that, will be the day I call you Jax." His father came back.

"Then we'll both be waiting a long time," he said sullenly but with a hateful edge to his words.

What did he care what his father thought?

"I had a message from Miss De'Winters." His father slipped the line in easily and he tried to resist biting it.

He managed to last about three seconds before he had to know if that was her name.

"Who?" he asked, trying to sound as though he hadn't a clue what his father was talking about and silently dreading what was coming.

He'd broken the rules. For all her pretty smiles, she'd probably rung his father as soon as she was in her house and told him that he'd been caught listening in on her.

All women were the same—traitorous, backstabbing...

"The young woman you're driving..." His father cut off his thoughts and he let them slip away, not wanting to even start thinking about his ex. "Miss Kaitlyn De'Winters."

"Oh, right," he said and sat down on the end of the bed, feeling a little odd in his stomach over hearing her name and the way it brought the image of her face back into his head.

Along with how her fingers had felt in his hair.

And her million-watt smile.

"Jackson? Did you hear a word I said?"

He shook his head and desperately tried to think of what his father could have been saying. His father had probably been giving him hell for having the audacity to listen to the woman singing and was about to tell him to kiss goodbye to his summer job and college.

"No," he answered flatly, not bothering to cover the fact he'd not been listening or make an excuse as to why.

"It might do you some good to listen." His father reprimanded him and he just rolled his eyes at the phone. He'd listened when he shouldn't have earlier and that's what had warranted this call from his father. "Miss De'Winters called me to tell me about her day."

"And?" He leaned forwards, waiting for the bomb to drop.

"And, apparently she was impressed with you and remarked several times about how you were the perfect gentleman, all smiles and not speaking to her unless she spoke to you."

He was floored. All he could do was stare at the far wall with his lips parted as he tried to understand what his father was telling him.

Miss De'Winters had called his father, her boss, to report on him and she'd said that he had been perfect.

He smiled as she clawed back a little of her standing in his eyes and then bit his lip as he smirked at the phone. He could picture his father's face now, the thin line of his lips as he gripped the phone tightly, clearly pained to have to give any form of praise to his son.

"That all?" he asked brazenly and stood up again. He walked towards his CD rack.

"I believe so," his father said and he waited for him to put the phone down but he didn't. His voice lowered. "Jackson, don't think you won't slip up ... I know you ... you always do."

He frowned at the phone as the line went dead. He didn't want to think about what his father had meant by that, it would just lead to an entire night of contemplation and that was exactly what his father wanted to happen. He wanted him to take it to heart.

So he made mistakes, so did the rest of the world and his were no worse than everyone else's.

Only, everyone else didn't have his father waiting to pounce the second they messed up.

Slipping the phone back into his pocket, he cocked his head to one side as he regarded his CD collection and then let his eyes wander to his two guitars. Picking up the acoustic, he carried it with him and headed out of his room and down the stairs.

He stopped briefly in the kitchen to order a pizza and then grabbed some beers before heading out onto the porch.

Inhaling deeply, he expelled his breath in a sigh and wished he could expel his thoughts as easily. He smiled up at the clear sky, relishing the way it was rapidly darkening now that the sun had finally set. The air was warm, dusty, and he could feel it relaxing him. He sat down on the recliner and placed his guitar on his knee.

He let his fingers play what they wanted while his thoughts carried him away.

Kaitlyn De'Winters.

Kaitlyn.

It had a nice ring to it.

He wondered what she'd say if she ever found out his name. Would she laugh at him like everyone else did because of what his father had chosen to call him and tell him that he was better off being plain old Jax? Or would she see the reason he needed to change that name, the reason he needed to reinvent himself. It wasn't because he hated his name. He just needed to shed anything relating to his father.

He leaned over and opened his can of beer. Swigging it, he let the impending night soothe him. He placed the can on the small table beside his chair and stared at the sky while idly playing his guitar.

She was pretty.

He frowned at how she kept invading his thoughts.

He'd barely spoken to her, didn't know anything about her, yet he couldn't stop thinking about her. Maybe that was why. Maybe he just wanted to unravel the mystery and then he'd be satisfied.

Maybe not.

He sighed and leaned his head back into the cushion that covered the chair. His eyes traced patterns in the faint stars as they began to shine through the remaining light from the sun.

Listening to the quiet melody his guitar playing and the night insects made, he tried to keep his thoughts off Kaitlyn but he couldn't let her go.

"That's a song I've not heard you play in a long time, man." A familiar voice broke into his thoughts and he smiled.

"Probably because I've not played it in a long time, you idiot," he replied and then lowered his eyes from the heavens to rest on his friend Mike where he stood on the grass. He didn't look any different. His dark hair still reached chin length and his clothing still came direct from the grunge era. "Been a while."

"Since you saw me, or since you let yourself play that?" Mike said and stepped up onto the porch. He nodded towards the guitar.

Jax frowned and listened to what he was playing. Mike was right—it had been a long time since he'd let himself play this one. The last time had been the night Ebony had left him and since then, he'd not had the heart to play it.

Since then, he'd not had a heart.

He sighed and placed the guitar down next to him, gesturing for Mike to make himself comfortable in the other recliner. Picking up one of the beers, he threw it across to his friend and then smiled wide.

"So, did you come here for a reason, or was it your pizza radar?"

"There's pizza?" Mike asked with a grin and cracked open his beer.

It had been a long time since he'd seen Jax and an even longer time since he'd seen him with a guitar in his hands. Ebony had done a real number on his friend in high school, leaving him a different man to the one he'd been before he'd met her. College had taken him away from the small town they'd grown up in together and since then, he'd only seen him during the summer.

"There will be." Jax swigged his beer.

"So, man, what's the deal? You sneak back here from the city, don't tell anyone ... takes a guy to wander past and see your car in the drive to know you're here." He didn't let it bother him that Jax had neglected to call. He knew his friend liked his privacy and he knew he would have let him know he was back in his own time. It was still fun to wind him up about it though.

"Had to get away from LA, place was driving me nuts." Jax grinned as he thought about how he'd left Los Angeles only to wind up with a summer job in the hellhole. Mike was going to laugh his ass off when he found out what he was doing for a summer job. "Speaking of driving ... you wouldn't guess what kind of job the old man is making me do just so I can finish college."

"Knowing him, and the relationship you two have, it's probably something akin to medieval torture." Mike drank down a mouthful of his beer and then shot up when the doorbell rang through the house.

He watched his friend bounce through the kitchen to the front door. There was the sound of the door opening, muffled conversation and then the door shut again. When Mike reappeared with the pizza in tow, he continued his conversation.

"So, he calls me up ... tells me that he heard I wasn't having any luck getting a summer job that would give me enough money to pay for my final year. He tells me that he'll pay enough for my tuition and some spare, on one condition." He pulled a slice free of the pizza.

"What?" Mike said through a mouthful of pizza.

He rolled his eyes at how disgusting Mike was and was rewarded by a wide grin from him.

"Driver," he said the word with contempt even though he was starting to like the idea of spending the whole summer driving Kaitlyn around.

"Driver?" Mike looked incredulous.

"As in ... shipping some girl around all day long and then taking her home at night ... all very dull. Want to know what's worse?" He leaned towards his friend and raised both his brows.

"What?"

"The prick made me remove all my jewellery and laid down an iron clad set of rules. I break even one of them and I have to say goodbye to my education."

"Son of a bitch. Is she hot?" Mike slipped seamlessly from one subject to the next.

"Who?" He gave him a look that said he didn't know who he was talking about.

"The woman."

"The woman?" He tried to think of what he could say about her. Was she hot?

Was she hell.

She was hotter than hot. She was beautiful.

"Kinda." He sniffed and laid back on the recliner, acting casual as his friend's eyes almost popped out of his head.

"Details man." Mike pushed the subject, silently hoping that Jax would spill but knowing all too well that he was going to remain tight lipped about her.

It only meant one thing.

This girl was hot.

Whenever a girl was pretty enough to pique Jax's interest, he didn't share—not even the tiniest detail. He'd been like it ever since they'd started seeing girls as something other than annoying.

"Okay. She's pretty, petite and blonde. I don't see her. I just drive her. I don't even register on her radar. She's too busy with her meetings." Jax bit his tongue as he lied to his friend. He knew he registered on the girl's radar—you didn't get those pretty smiles if you didn't register—but he just didn't know what that meant with this one. He hadn't been around her long enough to know whether she was just being friendly, or whether there was something more at work.

What was worse was that he didn't know whether he wanted there to be something more at work.

"But she makes the job more bearable?" Mike crammed another slice of pizza into his mouth and eyed him closely.

He knew his friend was judging his reaction to the question in order to get the answer he wasn't willing to tell him.

Raising his eyes to the heavens, he thought about what Mike had asked.

He smiled.

"Hell, yeah."

Chapter Four

Jax hadn't been lying to Mike when he'd admitted that Kaitlyn made the job more bearable. In fact, that was an understatement. The week had flown by, and he'd tried to watch her closely and pin her down but she still managed to slip through his grasp. He still didn't know who she was.

He didn't care what she did for a living. Working at his father's company was enough information in that area. She was clearly important enough to have her own driver since he'd been with her and her alone all week.

He just wanted to figure her out.

He pushed his cap up and watched her walking out of the beach house. He waited until she'd locked the door before stepping out of the car.

Pulling open the passenger door as she approached, he smiled and ushered her into the car. He waited until she was seated before shutting it and moving back around to the driver's side.

Sliding into the padded leather seat, he hesitated for a moment before switching the engine on. Dismissing the thought that had surfaced at the back of his mind, he put the car into gear and then found himself pausing again.

All week he'd barely said a word to her and she'd barely said a word to him.

All week he'd not done the civilised thing and thanked her for the kind words she'd given to his 'boss' about his behaviour.

His mother would kill him. Politeness was a virtue in her eyes and he was falling incredibly short on that front with this girl.

He let his finger hover over the intercom switch and pursed his lips as he considered pushing it. He'd already broken the rules once and she'd let it slide. Would she let it slide again if he broke them in order to thank her for letting him off the first time?

Glancing at the schedule that sat on the seat beside him, he frowned at it and smiled when he saw the excuse staring him right in the face.

Today wasn't going to be the day he messed up. His father would have to wait until next week for that pleasure.

Depressing the intercom button, he cleared his throat and realised he hadn't actually thought of what he was going to say. His confidence drained from him quickly while he stared at the button, searching for the right words.

"Um ... Miss De'Winters?" He started and realised it was probably best not to give her a chance to respond. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I just wanted to thank you for the kind words you said about me to my boss on Monday. And just so you know, I'm not breaking the rules again, I just wanted to mention that I noticed you have nothing in your schedule between ten and two."

Kaitlyn smiled when she realised that he was nervous about using the intercom now. She was thankful that he'd found the guts to speak to her again. She'd tried to think of things to say to him a million times over the past week and she'd failed every time. Now he was finding a way of speaking to her.

"It's fine, don't worry about it," she said breezily and then realised that he was probably trying to figure out if she meant the schedule or his thanking her. "As for the schedule, I have somewhere I need to be ... I don't suppose you'd drive me?"

Jax considered her request. Was this something outside of work? He wasn't sure if he was supposed to drive her places when it wasn't on company time, but he sure as hell wasn't about to let her disappear from him for a few hours. Besides, it would be easier if she remained with him, then he wouldn't have the hassle of dropping her off and trying to think of something to do for four hours before picking her up again.

"Sure," he said with a smile that he knew she wouldn't be able to see.

Her voice came over the intercom. "Thank you..."

He knew what she wanted. She wanted to know exactly who she was thanking. For a moment, he considered telling her his name was Jackson, just to please his father, but then he remembered that his father hadn't mentioned anything about not being 'Jax'.

He grinned.

"Jax," he answered and then almost jumped out of the seat when the little screen dividing them began to slide down.

He turned in his seat so he was almost facing her when she appeared in the window.

"Jax?" Kaitlyn queried and he nodded. She couldn't get over the name. It was so punk, so very rebellious and yet she found herself drawn to it. It had an air of bad boy about it that didn't quite fit

with her image of its owner. Maybe there was more to him that met the eye. Punk boys probably wouldn't be that interested in 'Summer'. "I take it your father and mother didn't call you that."

"No, my father didn't call me that." His tone was laced with bitterness. "I mean, it's the reason I called myself it ... because it wasn't the name he gave me."

"Oh." It was all Kaitlyn could say as he turned soulful eyes on hers. She wondered just how someone got eyes that clear and icy blue. She'd always hated hers, always wanted a colour with more depth than her dull hazel-green ones.

She realised she was just perched on the seat looking at him and not saying anything, but she felt an odd sense of comfort that made her not want to leave. All week she'd been trying to piece him together, had been hoping to figure him out, and every time she thought she was close, he changed on her.

"We'll be late," Jax said casually, not wanting to show just how flustered she was getting him by leaning in so close and staring into his eyes.

His heart was beating so fast he felt sick.

He could smell her perfume, could practically taste it.

He couldn't stop his eyes and they dropped to her mouth, taking in how shiny and red her lips were as they smiled at him. He didn't know what was driving him, why he felt so compelled to find a way to remain this close to her, even when it made his nerves go out of control.

Granted she was attractive. Any boy would be panting over her, but he wasn't any boy. Since the ordeal with Ebony, he'd not been interested in any girl, not felt anything towards anyone. She'd broken his heart into so many pieces he'd been convinced that there was no way of patching it up again.

Just one smile from this girl had made it like new.

Kaitlyn was tempted to bite her lower lip while he stared at her mouth. His look was so innocent but so devilish at the same time, as though he'd eat her up if she gave him the chance. The fiery passion she could see in his eyes would consume her.

She licked her lower lip and was fascinated when his parted slightly, his brows knitting and his eyes following the slow path of her tongue.

Pulling herself together, she glanced at the dashboard clock and realised that they were going to be late if she kept him away from driving any longer. She sat back on her heels and found his eyes moving to meet hers again as she broke the spell.

Keeping her eyes locked with his, she pushed the little switch that controlled the screen and waited until it was practically closed before finding the courage to smile at him.

"Thank you, Jax," she said just as the glass screen slid into place.

Jax felt as though she'd punched him in the stomach with what she'd said. The sound of his name on her lips made his heart skip a beat and he knew without a doubt that he was going to spend the entire weekend thinking about her because of it.

He sniffed and gripped the steering wheel tightly as he replayed the sound of it over and over in his head.

Pulling out onto the road, he kept it in his thoughts the whole time he was driving, picturing her face as she smiled at him. He glanced down at the schedule, noting that she was due in to the office in only ten minutes and now she was going to be late because she'd taken the time to speak to him.

And smile.

And say his name.

And when did he start acting like a schoolboy with a crush?

He shook his head to clear it of the thoughts that were running around it in circles. This girl, this woman, she knew what she was doing to him. She'd intentionally got his heart racing when he'd been caught looking at her mouth. He wasn't blind. He'd always been quick to pick up on things and was always the clever one in the family. If anyone was really like his father it was him, and that scared him.

He frowned at the road while he thought about that. He'd always shared his father's intelligence, his father's passion for computers and music. His mother had always thought he'd follow in his footsteps, but the day his father had walked out on them he'd sworn to himself that he never would.

He'd been seven.

It had been his birthday.

Coming out of his thoughts, he slammed his foot down on the brakes when he saw the back end of a car coming towards him quickly. He heard a muffled 'ouch' in the back of the car and stopped just an inch from the other car's bumper as it stood in a queue at traffic lights.

His finger was immediately on the intercom button.

"Shit ... I'm sorry. You okay back there?"

Kaitlyn grimaced at first as she clawed her way back onto the seat and then giggled at how panicked he'd sounded. She smiled and smoothed her hair back into place. Checking herself over, she realised that her fall hadn't done any damage that she could see. She got the feeling that the spot on her knee that was aching was going to come up in a bruise later though.

"I'm fine ... little warning wouldn't go amiss next time though."

His voice came back, its tone deadly serious. "There won't be a next time. I don't make the same mistake twice."

And Kaitlyn believed him. He'd said the words with so much conviction that she knew he never fell into the same trap twice.

She wished she could say the same for herself.

She seemed to spend the whole of her life falling into the same traps and pitfalls.

When was she ever going to learn?

Jax pulled away smoothly when the cars in front began to move and filter off towards the city centre. He followed them all slowly, not daring to drive any faster after the near miss and not wanting to risk hurting Kaitlyn again.

He looked up at the rear view mirror, wishing he could see her through the glass so he could check that she was really all right like she'd said she was. The thought of having injured her in any way by being so lost in his memories made him sick to his stomach. He wouldn't do it again.

He'd make sure he was careful from now on, concentrating on his job rather than his screwed up family.

Indicating right, he eased the car in that direction and stopped outside the office building. He gave himself a moment to gather his thoughts and his feelings and then stepped out the car.

Moving to the back of the Bentley, he gently lifted the door handle and pulled the door open, holding it patiently while Kaitlyn got out.

Kaitlyn paused as she stepped out into the shadow of the building. She looked straight into Jax's eyes and let a frown wrinkle her nose for a moment as she searched them. There was something about him, something that screamed for her to talk to him and understand him. It was as though he could do something for her, like he was going to make a difference in her life if only she let him.

She smiled, letting it tease the corners of her mouth.

"Thank you ... Jax." Her smile widened and she held his gaze for a few seconds more before walking directly towards the building.

Jax just stared at where she'd been standing.

He could feel his heart in his throat. The way she'd smiled had made his knees weak, but there had been such a depth of emotion in her eyes, such a lingering sadness hanging like storm clouds, that he'd wanted to be the one to chase them away and let the sun shine through.

He closed the door and watched her when she smiled at the doorman. It was the fakest smile he'd ever seen. How could she smile through all that sadness? He'd never be able to do it.

He sighed when she disappeared into the building.

Getting back into the car, he drove it down into the parking garage and stretched out in the seat. He thought about what he'd seen in her eyes. There was more to her than he'd thought there was. She'd shown him what was hidden behind her smile and he wondered if she'd done it on purpose. Did she want him to see? Was he supposed to be able to do something about it?

Did she know he'd want to?

He sighed out his frustration, removed his cap and rested his head against the leather seat. He didn't know what she expected, but he felt as though he was on the verge of actually seeing who she was inside. It was as though the clouds were slowly breaking apart and he was about to be given a glimpse of the sun for the first time.

Running his fingers through his hair, he stared at her schedule, noting that the next place he had to drive her was the mystery four-hour appointment with nothing.

Four hours.

What could someone do for four hours that wouldn't be on their schedule?

It was too long for lunch and it couldn't be a meeting because that would have been written down with the rest of them. Maybe she was going somewhere out of town. Maybe she was meeting up with someone.

His thoughts got stuck on that one.

She'd seemed nervous about asking him to drive her, as though she'd thought he was going to say no. She'd been uneasy ever since he'd agreed and she kept thanking him.

Was she meeting someone?

A man?

He snorted and immediately discounted it but it crept back into his head.

She was meeting someone, and she didn't want him to be upset about it. Like he'd get upset if she wanted to meet some idiot? He was just her driver. It wasn't like it would ever go any further than that.

He idly picked at the seat and glared out the window at the dank grey concrete car park, the yellow sodium lights making it look like something out of a cheap gore flick. Any moment now he expected

some girl to come screaming past with zombies limping after her. He shook his head and the car park was just a dull concrete hole again. His thoughts roamed back to Kaitlyn's mystery appointment.

It shouldn't bother him. So what if she had a boyfriend, or some illicit lover that she had to meet? It was none of his business.

So why did it feel like it was?

He tapped his foot impatiently and stared at the clock, suddenly wishing he'd told her he wouldn't drive her to her meeting with whatever jerk was awaiting her. He could tell her he'd changed his mind and he wanted nothing to do with her or the prick she was going to see.

He heaved a sigh and realised he wouldn't do that—he couldn't do that. He couldn't disappoint her.

Besides, now that he'd filled his head with stupid notions, he had to know, had to see for himself what she was going to do for all that time. Closing his eyes, he tried to shut out all thoughts of her but his stomach felt tight, wound up by his guesses of what she was going to be doing. He couldn't let it go.

Couldn't let her go.

He had to see her, had to be there when she let the sun shine through the storm clouds and revealed who she was inside.

He couldn't let her go. To do that would be like trying to stop breathing. He couldn't do it. He needed her. He laughed at himself for that notion and then stopped abruptly when he realised it was true.

She'd slipped in undetected. She'd worked her way into his heart and made it her home in such a short space of time. A blink of an eye was all it took for it to happen.

Or at least a pretty smile and her fingers in his hair.

He needed her now.

She was everything.

And he had to see with his own two eyes what she was going to do, needed to know if there was a chance for him.

He had to, even if it only hurt him.

Chapter Five

Jax toyed with the steering wheel. He was sat in the parked car watching her. His eyes remained locked on her wherever she went, following her movements closely. She walked over to a picnic table and stood up on the seat, sitting down on the table itself.

He cocked his head to one side when she leaned forwards, resting her elbows on her knees and supporting her chin on upturned palms. He blinked languidly. She just stared out into the distance.

Letting his gaze slip from her, he took in their surroundings. She had asked him to drive her up to the mountains, directing him to the place she told him she went every Friday without fail. He'd not asked her the details of why she went here. The jealous snake that was living inside him was still whispering words of lovers and boyfriends to him and he found he couldn't ignore it.

He'd followed each of her instructions in silence, obeying her commands as she told him he wasn't to mention this to his boss or anyone else he might drive.

The thought of driving someone other than her had made him frown.

He wouldn't do it. He would tell his father exactly where to stick his job if he even so much as showed a slither of an idea of taking her away from him.

He stared out at the dusty mountains surrounding them. He'd parked up in an empty car park near the top of one of them and she'd told him she would let herself out. Now she was sitting still, her eyes fixed on the horizon and he wondered if she could even see the other mountains, or the scrub that covered them.

Could she see where she was, or was she looking at something beyond her field of vision?

She had the same kind of expression he wore when he was thinking about life, thinking about all the crap it threw at him. Maybe her week had been hell, and that's why she needed this time to be alone and think. He remembered that she'd said she always came up here. Maybe every week was hell?

Kaitlyn stifled her desire to sigh and brought her fingers up to her eyes, trying to rub them discreetly. She knew he was watching her. She could feel his eyes boring into her side and she didn't want him to see her crying.

She didn't know why.

She let the others see her cry, all her previous drivers and the taxicabs she'd paid to wait while she sat here for hours on end trying to find herself.

Trying to get a hold on who she used to be.

She looked down at her hands as though she could see it visibly slipping through her grasp. She used to be able to look in the mirror and see herself. She used to know who she was, and knew in her heart who she wanted to be.

Now she just saw an unfamiliar person. She couldn't even say that she recognised herself at all. The girl staring back at her when she looked into the mirror seemed faded and lost. It didn't seem like her.

It wasn't her.

Her eyes slid across to her driver and she frowned.

Why didn't he like her?

He'd seemed genuinely annoyed at her for finding that 'Summer' tune on the radio.

Did he hate her?

She moved her gaze back to rest on the distant haze that was the horizon and then closed her eyes. She relished the feeling of the hot sun on her back, warming her to the bone.

Why didn't he like her?

The sound of a door opening startled her out of her thoughts and she immediately looked at him. He was leaning against the side of the car, his eyes narrowed as he squinted from the brightness of their surroundings. She swallowed noisily and watched his fingers slipping through his hair as he removed his cap.

A smile teased her lips.

He really wasn't cut out to be a driver. She could tell just by the way he held himself that he wasn't comfortable in the uniform and it made her feel sorry for him when she thought about how caged he looked in the front seat of the Bentley.

No one should ever be placed in a cage.

Jax idly ran his tongue over his teeth, not wanting to make a presumption that she had come here to be

alone, but making it at the same time. She had been here almost an hour and there was no sign of anyone coming to join her, and she didn't seem bothered. In fact, she seemed happy to be up here, alone.

With him.

Well, he was here wasn't he? They must have been the only two people for miles around.

He shuffled his feet when she turned her head and looked directly at him, her hand coming up to shield her eyes from the bright sun.

"You going to stay over there, or are you going to join me?" she said.

He tried to mask his disbelief but failed dismally. He'd stepped out of the car because he'd felt as though he was going to boil to death. The black paint and interior was attracting the heat of the near-noon sun and it was unbearable. He hadn't expected her to invite him over and now that she had, he didn't know what to do. He hesitated for a moment and tried to find his confidence. It had disappeared the moment she'd asked him over.

Kaitlyn was still surprised at herself for inviting him to come and sit with her. She'd decided that a little company wouldn't go amiss. Besides, she wanted to know if he really could help her and she wanted to know what made 'Summer' so repulsive to him, and the only way to get that information was to talk to him.

"You can take that off, too. You don't have to stand on ceremony here. No one will see." She nodded towards his jacket and smiled when he immediately took it off, laying it down on his seat before walking over to her.

Her nerves bubbled up in her stomach when he sat down next to her, his foot accidentally brushing against hers.

"Sorry," he mumbled and looked sheepish.

She kept silent, fixing her eyes back out on the infinitely stretching panorama and secretly enjoying having a little company for once. She could feel his gaze on her and knew he was trying to figure out why she was up here. By trying not to think about it, she only made herself think about it even more. She could feel the tears welling up and repeatedly told herself that she was fine. She wished for once she could come here and not feel this way. It always went like this. She would come up here to find herself, only to realise that during the week she'd let go of a little more of who she was and she'd never get it back.

Jax let his eyes rest on her, memorising her profile and the way her nose wrinkled when she frowned. He smiled internally when she slowly blinked. Her lips parted in a quiet sigh that grounded him along with the sight of tears in her eyes.

"You okay?" He found the words leaving his lips before he had a chance to stop them.

She nodded mutely.

He wasn't convinced by the tiny nod. The tears that remained in her eyes told him everything he needed to know. She wasn't fine. She wasn't anywhere near fine.

He sighed and leaned forwards, letting his elbows rest on his knees and his hands dangle limply in between his legs. His eyes fixed on the horizon that she seemed so fascinated with and he frowned.

Something wasn't right about this girl. In fact, something was very wrong. She seemed so familiar, but so mysterious at the same time. She had shown him that she could be genuinely happy, but she always seemed so miserable.

Kaitlyn turned to face him and inclined her head to one side while she took in the way he looked. He was staring intently at the horizon with his brows knit tightly and his jaw tensed. The light breeze that was sweeping over them didn't seem to be having an impact on the mass of preened back waves that was his hair.

When she'd touched it the other day, it had felt soft, comforting, but it looked so hard, so gelled into place.

Looks were deceiving.

She should know that.

Her eyes traced the curve of his cheeks, down to his soft lips. Running them down his body, she skipped over the crisp white shirt, knowing that wasn't him—that was work and nothing else. Her gaze came to a halt on his hands, and she noted the pale bands around his wrists where his skin had been hidden from the sun. Clearly, he usually wore something on them. On a few of his fingers were similar bands where rings had been resident until recently.

He'd changed himself.

Lost some of himself in order to do this job?

She smiled at how familiar that sounded.

He sighed and she followed suit and then decided that now was as good a time as any to try to talk to him.

"It must be nice to be young." She let her gaze return to the surrounding hills as his came to rest on her.

"What?" he said. "And you're not young?"

She smiled at his come back. She could sense in the way he'd immediately tensed that he hadn't liked her referencing his age and comparing it with hers. He didn't like her making out that he was a kid. She could understand that.

"No, I meant ... having your whole life ahead of you, being able to choose your path." She tried to explain what she had really wanted to say but he seemed to be stuck on the age issue.

"I'm not that young," Jax countered her earlier remark, completely ignoring what she'd said after it.

She giggled and looked over at him. "How old are you, seriously?"

He straightened up a little and gave her a cocky smirk. "Twenty."

She rolled her eyes and giggled again.

"Nine years from now look back and see how young twenty looks," she said and turned her attention back to the horizon, missing the satisfied but shocked look that flitted across his features.

Twenty-nine.

She was twenty-nine.

She had almost a decade on him. A decade of living. A decade of experiences. No wonder she thought he was a kid. In her eyes, he'd hardly had time to do anything so he couldn't be expected to be anything more than a rebellious teenager.

He wished he could tell her different, wished he could spill it all and tell her everything. He wanted to make her see that he wasn't a kid. You grew up fast when you had to look after your mother from the age of seven. You grew up fast when you had to be a man before you were even a boy.

He sighed and his gaze dropped to his knees, unable to find the words to make her see him for what he really was—a man who'd dealt with more than his fair share at his age.

"So what did you mean, that comment about having my whole life ahead of me? Little presumptuous." He watched her closely to see if she would react, to see if she noticed that he didn't like being made out to be a child.

Kaitlyn waited for a moment before looking over at him. Meeting his eyes, she tried to think of an answer. It was wrong of her to think of him as a kid, but she couldn't get past how young he was. He was the right age for 'Summer' but he didn't seem at all interested in her.

She realised that her comment hadn't been about finding out how old he was. She was subconsciously reaching out to him and hoping he'd reach back.

Looking down at her feet, she took a deep breath and dived into the breach.

"I guess I was trying to say that I look back and I wish I had done things differently. You don't have that. You have the most important time of your life to come, and you can make the right decisions. I guess I just didn't want you to make the wrong ones ... I don't want anyone to make the wrong ones." She turned her face away from him, not wanting him to see the hurt in her eyes but knowing he'd hear the upset in her voice.

Jax flexed the fingers of his right hand and let it hover over her back, unsure of whether he should offer her comfort or not. He remembered how much hurt he'd seen in her eyes outside the office. She'd clearly been through a lot in her short life, and to think that she had made some bad calls that had ended up with her being where she was today pained him.

He let his hand drop to his knee when she straightened up, sniffing as she did so.

"Surely it's not that bad? We all make mistakes ... we're only human after all," he said.

She turned her head to look at him. He gave her his best smile when he saw the lingering hurt in her eyes. He didn't know what to say.

The storm clouds that darkened her eyes were threatening rain and he didn't know what he would do if she started crying. Instinct would tell him to comfort her, but he was afraid that would get him a slap or would lead to things that would ruin what he felt they could have. He didn't want to be used purely as something to comfort her, didn't want her to abuse his position as her servant. He wanted her to be with him, on a level footing.

As two people—not as employer and employee.

Kaitlyn reeled in her emotions when she saw the fear flicker in his eyes and the doubt surface. She didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable, she just wanted to open up to someone at last, wanted to tell someone everything about her.

Even when she knew she couldn't.

Edward would kill her if she did.

"I'm sorry," she said as she met his eyes briefly and then looked away.

"For what? Not like you've done anything wrong." Jax offered her a smile that she didn't see because she kept her face turned away from him.

He wanted to make her look at him, wanted to show her with his eyes what he couldn't find the words to express—she didn't have to hide, she could tell him anything, everything.

"You always come up here?" he asked, knowing full well that she'd already told him she did. He hoped

she'd let it slide and see that he was just trying to get her to talk.

"For the past four years," Kaitlyn answered him straight. She wanted to be honest with him and not hold anything back.

She'd tell him everything she could.

"Why?" he said.

Her eyes widened when she thought about the real reason behind why she came here each week.

"I come here to think. To ... clear my head at the end of the week. To..." She held her breath while she considered what she was about to admit to and then let the word out in a sigh. "Sing."

"Sing?" Jax cocked his head to one side and softly narrowed his eyes on her. He could remember her singing like it had been only yesterday, her sweet voice speaking words straight into his heart. She'd seemed so real, so familiar as he'd listened to her. "You sing pretty well ... ever considered a career? I mean, you're with the right company after all."

A flicker of hurt entered her eyes and she laughed dryly, giving him a smile he knew was forced. "Me? No ... I don't sing any more, at least not like that."

He searched for the right thing to say. All the happiness disappeared from her eyes, draining away and leaving them full of sadness again.

Clearly, her singing was a sore subject. His father was a ruthless bastard when he wanted to be. She'd probably tried to become a singer and he'd cut her down to size in his usual charming way.

"So what ... a bad experience and you give up?" He couldn't stop the words, didn't want to see anyone have their dreams crushed by his father and he knew that's what had happened.

"It's not like that!" Kaitlyn snapped and then hung her head, shame engulfing her as she told herself that he didn't deserve to be made into a punch bag for her own self pity. She whispered, "You don't understand."

"Because I'm just a kid, right? Got my whole life ahead of me? Believe me, I've made bigger fuck ups than you could dream up. My life is one big fuck up ... don't sit here thinking you're alone, thinking the way your life is trying to screw you over makes you special, because there's a billion people out there just like you ... but you know what makes them different?"

"What?" She locked eyes with him and spat the word in his direction, showing him that she wasn't scared of his words or anything he could throw at her.

"They don't give up. They don't sit here mourning their losses like there's nothing they can do about it now. They get up and try to make a difference. They try. You can't live your dreams without having to pay the price, but just because that price is high, and life throws stumbling blocks at you along the way, you don't give up ... dreams don't come easy, they never do. You can't just let them go. You've got to keep trying."

"You don't know me." She stood up sharply and stepped down onto the dry dusty ground. "So don't presume you do. Don't sit there and judge me ... I try ... but I can't..." She swallowed hard and tried to brush aside his words. She wanted so badly to tell him what she dealt with every day of her life, what she saw when she looked in the mirror. She couldn't. Tears welled up in her eyes so fast that she didn't have time to hide them from him. "You don't understand ... you could never understand, because ... I live with things that no one can ever know about. *No one*. It's one thing to lose your dreams, Jax, it's another to have them stolen from you. How am I supposed to live with that?"

Jax blinked as she dashed away the tears from her eyes and walked straight past him, making a beeline

for the car. He stared blankly at the floor for a moment, trying to figure out at just what point he'd snapped.

His eyes widened as it hit him.

It had been the moment he'd seen how down on herself she was, how easily she'd given up the fight. It had made his anger boil up quicker than he'd felt it in a long time, and he hadn't been able to stop himself.

He didn't want to see her give up.

He didn't want to watch her letting go of her dreams.

He didn't want her to have to deal with whatever it was that was eating away at her all by herself like she thought she had to.

He turned his head to face the car and flinched as the passenger door slammed shut.

Glancing down at his watch, he sighed when he saw it was only twelve o'clock. Maybe his father wouldn't have to wait until next week for him to mess up after all.

Chapter Six

Kaitlyn stared in the mirror at her reflection. She felt empty, cold, and she didn't recognise the person looking back at her. Was that who she was? She didn't feel like that, didn't feel as though she looked like that.

She skimmed her hands down over her body as she stood there in her underwear. She'd lost weight. She was always losing weight. Her mother kept telling her she was losing the will to live. Every time she saw her, she was thinner.

She had to be, Edward insisted on it.

He wouldn't say it in so many words of course, but it would be there, implied in everything he said to her. She was too fat, wasn't good enough.

That's why he'd not let her sing. That's why she had to spend hours working on 'Summer's aspects rather than being up on stage herself.

She sighed and looked at herself.

Did Jax like what he saw when he looked at her? Did he think she was pretty? Prettier than 'Summer'?

He smiled at her, looked at her in a way that set her heart on fire and she felt as though she couldn't breathe. It wasn't right of her to let herself feel that way. He was far too young for her, but he did seem older than his age.

There was something about him that told her he'd been through up's and down's as bad as the ones she'd suffered, and he'd understand her if she gave him the chance.

She ran her fingers through her hair.

This wasn't who she was. She used to be happy. She used to be slim, not skinny. Maybe she was too skinny, that's why he didn't like her.

Maybe she wasn't pretty enough for him.

Maybe she was too plastic, not real enough.

Her eyes lit up as she realised that was it. 'Summer' was too plastic. She wasn't real to this man, wasn't

tangible to him, and therefore he couldn't stand her. It might have had something to do with what he'd said earlier too, about singing. Did he discount 'Summer' because she wasn't real? Did he push away from her because she was virtual?

Walking into the bathroom, she went to the bath and turned on the taps as she poured some bubble bath into it.

As she straightened up, she caught sight of herself in the mirror.

Who was she?

Why didn't she like the girl looking back at her?

Because every time she saw her, she was confronted by what she'd done, by how she'd sold out and let go of her dreams without a fight.

Picking up a pair of scissors, she grabbed a handful of her hair and set her jaw.

It was time she took back a little of who she was, time she drew the line between who she had been and what she'd become.

She took a deep breath and held it while she cut into her hair, barely restraining how desperate she felt to shed what she'd become. She hacked at it, not caring if it wasn't perfect, or straight, just wanting to get rid of it, wanting to break free in the only way she could.

She let the scissors drop into the sink with her hair as she finished. Her fingers ran through the new shortness of it, growing accustomed to how it now hung just an inch above her shoulders. She smiled at it as she looked at her reflection, no longer seeing the perfect hair she was accustomed to, but being faced with the jagged mayhem of her new cut.

Looking at the little dial of her watch, she narrowed her eyes, calculated something and then smiled again.

It was only nine. She would have a bath, eat some ice cream, and then for the first time in three years, she was going to leave the house.

Her heart skipped a beat with nerves at that thought.

Edward would kill her.

She swallowed and shut him out of her thoughts. No one would see her, no one would recognise her. Just one night wouldn't hurt.

* * * *

Jax lit the cigarette that was perched on his lips and moved through the crowd in the club searching out Mike. He'd called him an hour ago, telling him that he just had to see this new band that was in town for one night only. All he had wanted to do was crash after his day from hell, but he'd found himself agreeing to go out.

Now he was down the Silver Fish and the memories of the times he'd played here were coming back to haunt him. He nodded at the bar girls as they all waved in his direction, showing him that in the year he hadn't been here, they hadn't forgotten him.

Spying Mike, he moved towards the balcony where he was stood and ascended the stairs. He blew a cloud of smoke at his friend and grinned when he waved his hand in front of his face, pretending to choke at the same time.

"Someone's in a good mood," Mike remarked and led him over to one of the dark booths that lined the

wall.

It was quieter up here. They'd often hung around here chatting before starting their set or watching another band.

"So what's this all about? I know you, bands aren't the be all and end all in this little scheme of yours." He slouched into the chair and tried not to think about Kaitlyn or the things he'd said to her. It was pointless really. He'd thought about them every second from the moment they'd left his lips.

She hadn't helped matters by asking to be taken home the instant he'd sat in the driver's seat. She'd apparently called into work and cancelled all her appointments, telling them she had a headache.

He'd reasoned in his head that it was more like a pain in her ass—one that bore his name.

"You listening?" Mike clicked his fingers in front of his face and rolled his eyes.

"Sorry ... day from hell." He yawned, hoping to misdirect his friend's interpretation of what he'd said.

"The kind of day that your old man has been waiting for?" Mike frowned.

"It's nothing ... just opened my stupid mouth when I should have kept it shut. He'll have a fucking field day when word gets to him what I said to Kaitlyn." He really didn't want to think about the kind of phone call he was going to be receiving tomorrow, if not tonight.

"Kaitlyn?" Mike quirked an eyebrow and leant forwards, showing him that he wanted an explanation for what he'd said.

"The woman I drive. Miss Kaitlyn De'Winters. I said some out of place shit, upset her ... man," He groaned as he wiped the palms of his hands over his face and leaned his head back so he was looking at the ceiling. "He's gonna fucking kill me this time."

Mike shook his head solemnly. His friend really needed to learn when to keep his opinion to himself. In school, it had been bad enough. He'd got himself into more fights than anyone else in the whole year. He'd got himself into more fights than anyone in the history of the school.

Jax seemed to have a knack of looking for trouble, and where he couldn't find it, he made it. It gravitated towards him like it knew he was a sure bet, knew he would speak before he thought about what he was going to say, and how much trouble he was going to get into.

"She pissed?" Mike asked and judging by the grimace that settled on Jax's face, she was beyond pissed at him. "I know what'll cheer you up."

Jax got the feeling this was one of Mike's famously smooth transitions from one conversation to another. He waited in silence, knowing that he didn't need to give his friend permission to tell him what was on his mind.

Mike clapped a hand down on his shoulder.

"Hack."

He instantly shook his head. "No! No, Mike..."

"Julia and Charlie are back in town from college ... come on, man, it'll be like old times." Mike smiled winsomely.

He shook his head harder. "We've been through this, Mike. I meant it when I said it the first million times. We're not going to attempt to hack 'Summer'. It's stupid, ridiculous. What would you do if you got hold of her? You don't have the emitters you need to create her in that dingy basement hole of yours."

"So we'll play with her on screen. We don't need the full holomatrix to make her work ... come on ... old times sake?" Mike shot him a puppy dog look.

"No!" he said flatly. "I told you the first time. I'm not touching my father's stupid fucking Barbie doll. He'll know it was me ... even if we burn our path behind us, he'll come straight to my door. Mom would have a fit."

"This because you're still clinging to the hope that your old man is gonna give you a job? Get real, Jax. He isn't ever going to let you work for his company ... unless you count being a lackey to some princess."

He stood up sharply and clenched his jaw and fists, glaring down at Mike. "You say another thing about her ... I swear ... I won't hold back."

Mike looked down at Jax's fists and watched them trembling. They were tight balls of rage that he'd made by not insulting him, but by insulting the girl that he was driving around.

Something clicked in his head.

The song he'd witnessed him playing on the guitar, the anxiety Jax kept airing about his job, and the smiles he'd caught flitting across his friend's face all week.

"Shit, man ... you in love?" He watched as Jax's face became a mask of confusion and disbelief.

"No." Jax shrugged it off immediately. He'd only known the girl a week. No one fell in love over the course of just a week. If that was true, then what was love at first sight all about? His eyes widened slowly as realisation sank in. "No ... not love."

Mike stood slowly and smiled at him. "Looks like."

He watched his friend walk back towards the balcony and looked down at the band as they began to set up.

"Think about it though. One time deal. Piss your daddy off ... stick it to the man. Julia and Charlie will be around for a week. You change your mind, you know where to find me." Mike smiled before heading for the stairs.

"You're not staying?"

"I got what I came for ... said my piece. I better get back before Julia feels the need to kill my girl." Mike threw him a smile and then started down the stairs. He paused a couple of steps down and looked back at him. "Oh, enjoy the show."

He frowned at him and then turned his attention to the stage.

His heart stopped when he watched the dark haired girl blowing kisses to the audience.

Her name left his lips in a tortured whisper, "Ebony."

* * * *

Kaitlyn screwed her face up when she walked into the club, her ears hurting as they tried to adjust to how loud the music was. She could hear some girl crooning down the microphone and turned to see a dark haired bag of bones making love to the microphone stand.

Good luck to her.

She thought it bitterly and headed straight for the bar, intent on making the most of tonight. She ordered the cocktail with the most number of shots in it and then set about swallowing it down.

She needed this. Maybe it would help her find herself.

She'd been here before, years ago now, with her band and that's when he'd found her.

Edward Hampton.

He'd promised her the world and she'd believed him.

Christ, she'd been so naïve. Knowing him like she did now, she couldn't believe that she'd been so easily duped by him. She'd signed her life away without even thinking about what she was doing. It had all sounded so great at the time, so amazing, a once in a lifetime opportunity. Now it felt like a prison, one she'd built around herself in one stroke of a pen.

She swallowed down the rest of her drink and ordered another. The crowd here hadn't changed much. They were pretty much the same as she remembered them. You had the geeks who were trying to be cool, and the people who thought they were cool when they were a million miles away from it.

Then you had the rebels. The ones to whom cool came naturally.

She stopped drinking when her eyes came to rest on one particular rebel in question and a piece of her mystery revealed itself to be as she'd suspected it was.

Jax.

There he was, tight black vest top, wrists and fingers laden with jewellery and a thick chain around his neck. His hair was tousled and allowed to form itself into wild spikes.

She watched as all the girls smiled at him, but his eyes remained fixed on the stage.

Fixed on the girl.

She felt a sudden need to change that.

Swallowing down her second drink to gain some courage, she pushed away from the bar and walked straight towards him.

Jax felt as though he was being watched as his eyes followed Ebony's every move. He watched her writhe against the microphone stand, running her hands up her legs and revealing her stocking clad thighs as her skirt hitched up.

He frowned and realised she didn't do anything for him now. Three years ago, she would have set his heart on fire with such a move. His blood would have been pumping so hard he'd have thought he was going to die.

Now, there was nothing.

He just watched her, trying to get it to soak in that she meant nothing to him now.

The feeling in the back of his head grew worse and he glanced around the room. His eyes widened as they stopped on a blonde girl who was dancing her heart out in the crowd right in front of Ebony.

His breathing hitched in his throat, his heart smashing hard against his chest as he watched her. Everyone was watching her. He could see them all with their eyes on her, staring at her as she danced with her eyes closed, swaying to the hypnotic rhythm of the song.

He found his feet moving before he could think about going to her. They carried him through the crowd as though he was in some strange dream.

When he reached her, she stopped.

Her smile was warm and she looked right into his eyes.

Her body lured him into stepping closer to her.

He obeyed, just like he always would to her.

She danced slowly in front of him, her movements mesmerising him and sending all thoughts out of the window for a moment.

He reeled them back in.

What was he doing?

He couldn't dance with her.

Why couldn't he? They weren't at work now. They were just two people on a level footing.

He smiled when she danced right into his arms and he let his hands run over her waist. Clearly, she wasn't as pissed at him as he'd thought she'd been. He didn't bother asking her why he was here. He just took it in his stride, accepting that she was here with him, and nothing else mattered.

Kaitlyn felt as though she couldn't breathe when his warm fingers brushed against the bare skin of her midriff. The little deep blue top she was wearing didn't cover her stomach and her black hipster jeans ensured there was plenty of skin for his hands to course over.

She closed her eyes and told herself that she shouldn't be doing this. Edward would kill her for being out. At the bar, she'd been on the brink of going home like a good little girl.

Until she'd seen him, staring at the girl on stage.

And she wanted to be that girl.

And it hurt to remember that she had signed that all away.

She wanted him to see her.

Only him.

She let her hands course up his bare arms, relishing the way his skin felt flush under her fingertips, and then locked her hands around the back of his neck, drawing him in so close that their bodies were touching.

She wanted this and she was going to have it, no matter what the repercussions.

She smiled as she finally held him in her arms.

He smiled as he finally had her in his embrace.

Their eyes locked and they smiled in unison.

Life didn't seem so bad.

It seemed perfect.

If only for a moment.

Chapter Seven

Jax danced in silence with her, letting his eyes drink her in. He couldn't stop smiling down at her. In her gaze, he couldn't see any sign of the storm clouds. There was just glorious sunshine as though she was really happy.

He made her happy.

He suddenly realised there was something wholly different about her, and it wasn't the dark makeup

surrounding her eyes or the smile on her face. He brought his hand up and tentatively ran his fingers through her hair, following the curve of it as it flipped outwards at the ends.

"Suits you," he murmured as he leaned in close to her ear under the pretence of the music being too loud to speak over and breathed in her perfume.

"Thanks." Kaitlyn closed her eyes as their cheeks brushed against each other and she smiled.

This felt good, better than good, perfect.

She felt like she used to.

They barely moved as they stood in each other's embrace, their eyes locked on each other.

His fingers tightened around her waist and she closed her eyes slightly, enjoying the feeling of his hands on her. She danced even closer to him, wanting to get lost in his gaze and his arms as they moved to the rhythm of their hearts. She couldn't take her eyes off his, didn't want to break contact with them.

It was as though she could read everything in them, could see everything he felt, and the way he was looking at her made her feel beautiful. It was as though she was the only girl in the room with him.

His eyes left hers and he glanced up at the stage.

Up at the girl.

She masked the slight twinge of jealousy and hurt that she felt, and then avoided his eyes when he looked at her.

Jax was too blinded by how she looked to even notice the slight change in her body language. He couldn't believe how different she was. A few hours ago, she'd seemed so drained and worn down, now she looked so young and fresh.

He frowned when he looked at her hair again, watching the way it shimmered in the light and how it swayed as she moved. There was something about it that made him anxious.

He noted that the ends were uneven. It looked as though she'd cut it herself, and she'd been in a hurry when she had.

"Who did your hair?" he hollered at her above the noise. Her eyes widened and she ran her fingers down a strand of it, from root to tip.

She looked distant as she felt the shortness of it, as though she was remembering something, and he could almost feel the sadness as it weighed her down.

She gave him a forced smile. "I did it."

He felt a little sick on having his suspicions confirmed. Deep inside he felt somehow responsible for her decision to chop off her beautiful hair. He wanted to ask her why, wanted to take her into a quiet area and make her tell him just what had made her do that to herself.

"I'm sorry for what I said earlier." He tried to keep his eyes locked with hers but she dropped hers to rest on the floor, her look turning awkward.

"It's fine. You were just being honest. I don't think you meant to hurt me with what you said."

"It's not fine." He placed his fingers under her chin and brought her eyes up to meet his. "And I'm sorry for saying those things. I was out of line."

She just blinked as a response and looked uncomfortable. He could see in her eyes that she wanted to get away from their current conversation. There was an edge of pain in them and a hint of lingering

sadness. It made him want to chase away the thoughts that were weighing her down so she could be happy again like she had been a moment before he'd mentioned what had happened between them earlier.

He let his thumb brush along her cheek. He couldn't hear the club any more, didn't even know if there was a song playing or if there were even people around them.

All he could see was her.

All he could hear was his own heartbeat.

He could feel the atmosphere between them growing heavy, so dense with emotion that he could almost cut it with his movements. He let his eyes drop to her mouth, feeling lured by the inviting shine of her lips and the way she was smiling at him.

Kaitlyn felt her heart thud against her chest. If he kissed her now like she wanted him to what would happen on Monday? Was this wrong? Would she get him fired? She hesitated, unsure of how to proceed, scared that she was making another wrong move.

A frown flickered on his brow as though he'd noticed her apprehension and he removed his hand. She could almost see the moment slip through their fingers and the mood lightened as it disappeared.

He glanced up at girl on stage. Her eyes followed his and she realised the girl was watching them.

"She's very pretty." She filled the awkward silence that had descended after the aborted kiss and tried to get his attention back away from the girl

"She's my ex," Jax said absently, not hearing what he was saying.

He brought his eyes away from Ebony and found Kaitlyn backing away from him. Not relinquishing his grip on her waist, he held her firmly and raised his brows as he looked into her eyes.

"I said ex, didn't I?" He noticed that the look in her eyes didn't change and he wished he could find the words to tell her that where Ebony had made him want to die, she made him want to live. She'd mended what was broken inside of him. She made him whole.

Kaitlyn tried to relax again but she couldn't get past the idea that the girl on stage, who was now watching them with some interest as she sang, was Jax's ex-girlfriend. Finally allowing herself to look into his eyes, she noticed that there was hurt visible in them. This girl had hurt him.

She let her hands come to rest on his shoulders and began to dance with him again, letting her body brush gently against his as they swayed together. She liked how he made her feel, liked feeling as though he was seeing her for who she was.

"Do you think she's pretty?" She found the words leaving her mouth of their own volition and she kept her face straight when he turned curious eyes on her.

"Ebony? She's alright," he said with a shrug.

"Do you think 'Summer' is pretty?" She heard the tremble in her voice as she asked him and he frowned.

"Sure, she's pretty, but she isn't real," he said and then smiled broadly. "But you ... you're real ... you smile, you hurt, you live ... you're beautiful."

She blushed and ducked her head, trying to avoid the emotions she had seen in his eyes and feeling a little overwhelmed by being told she was more beautiful than 'Summer'.

Closing her eyes as the slow song continued to drift out over the crowd, she allowed her cheek to rest

against his chest, not caring if what she was doing was wrong, or whether there would be repercussions come Monday. She just wanted this night of freedom, this night away from the restraints that usually kept her at home, away from the public eye.

She just wanted to be Kaitlyn, wanted for one night to be who she had been before she'd made the worst decision of her life.

And he made her feel that way.

Jax tensed briefly as her head came to rest softly against his chest and he gave himself a few seconds to comprehend what was happening before wrapping his arms around her in a protective embrace.

It felt so natural to be holding her. It was as if she belonged in his arms. She fitted against him perfectly, her slim body moulding against his and her head resting at the just the right height with her forehead against his neck.

He sighed and danced out the last minutes of the slow song with her, not caring that Ebony was giving him looks that could kill.

It didn't matter when Kaitlyn was in his arms.

She was everything.

The last notes of the tune played out and the girl muttered something into the microphone about taking a break for a few minutes. Kaitlyn raised her head and let her eyes meet Jax's. He seemed to enjoy having her this close to him and her heart warmed to see the affection in his eyes. It had been so long since she'd been looked at like that. So very long.

She hadn't been able to be with a man since she'd signed the contract with Edward. He'd expressly forbidden her being out in public, let alone being with someone. She'd had to fight tooth and nail to be allowed to still see her mother, and even then it was within the confines of her home, her prison.

She smiled when she realised that Jax was looking at her with some concern. She wondered if he could see she was lost in her thoughts, wondered if he could read what was on her mind.

A bright flash filled the room and she stumbled into him as people began to push past them towards the stage. At first, she'd thought the picture taking and mad rush was because of the girl in the band, but as she turned her head she realised that it was worse than she could have imagined.

Jax frowned as he was blinded by the flashguns of the press, and he wasn't at all surprised to see Simon mounting the stage, his wide smile in place as he crossed it to Ebony.

He arched a brow while he watched his half-brother wrapping his arms about his ex-girlfriend and then turned his away so he didn't have to witness what would inevitably come next. It would be a replay of that winter all over again, that moment he'd found them kissing on the porch of his father's house.

He didn't need to witness that.

He had his own girl to worry about now.

Looking around, he found Kaitlyn staring wide-eyed at the stage. There was recognition written all over her face as she watched Simon and he could see she'd met him before. He shrugged it off. It had probably been at his father's office.

The next thing he knew she was turning away, away from the stage, away from himself. She tried to push through the gathering crowd. To him, it looked as though she was trying to escape. He reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Kaitlyn?" He held her fast and she turned to look at him. Her hair was falling across her face, her eyes

expressing how scared she was.

Was she scared of Simon reporting back to his father that she had been seen out in a club with her driver?

Kaitlyn tried to yank her arm free of Jax's grip. Her heart pounded painfully against her chest, the rush of her blood the only noise in her ears.

She had to get away before she was spotted.

Edward would kill her.

"Please, let me go!" She tried to prise his fingers off her but he just held on tighter.

"What's wrong?" He stepped closer to her, dipping his head so he could see into her eyes as she struggled to get free of him.

"I ... I'm not feeling so good ... I just ... I really have to go home." She smiled shakily, her body trembling with a mixture of nerves and fear. She glanced from Jax to the stage and back again.

He released her wrist, only to place his hand into hers.

"I'll take you home."

He was already starting through the crowd with her before Kaitlyn could think of a reason for him to not take her home. She just tagged along behind him, covering her face with her hair as they pushed their way past the press photographers.

Her stomach swam with nerves, her head aching and spinning. All she could do was hold on tightly to his hand and trust he would get her out of here, that he would get her through this.

Simon frowned as he watched Jax arguing with some miniscule blonde. As she glanced at him, he instantly recognised her and wondered how the hell his half-brother had come across the one thing he'd been searching for these past couple of years.

He knew his father had been lying to him.

He knew his father was hiding her.

How the hell did Jax find her?

Pressing a quick kiss to Ebony's cheek, he jumped off the stage and began to push his way through the crowd and the paparazzi, following his half-brother as he led the blonde girl towards the exit.

He had to know if it was her. He had to know how Jax had managed to find her.

"Jax!" he called out after them and then shook his head when he got no response.

Moving quicker, he was beginning to close in on them as they reached the doors.

"Jax!" he shouted even louder, knowing his half-brother had heard him this time because he got a reply.

"Piss off!" Jax yelled over his shoulder.

Seeing that Jax wasn't going to stop, he redoubled his efforts and practically ran through the crowd.

Kaitlyn felt beyond sick. Her stomach was spinning along with her head now and she was so desperate to get home safe, so desperate for all this to not turn out the way she could see it going.

She clung to Jax as they made it out into the still night air, and breathed a sigh of relief as the coolness of it washed over her flushed skin.

Too soon.

A hand grabbed her wrist. She gasped and instinctively turned to face her assailant. Her eyes widened when she saw it was her worst nightmare and she tried to hide her face from him as what seemed like a thousand cameras went off around them.

She felt Jax tug on her arm and glanced at him. He was giving the man who had her wrist a look that could kill. She looked back at the man, her body unresponsive and numb as her whole world began to crumble around her. It was over. Edward was going to kill her.

Simon was stunned into silence when he caught sight of her face. His heart tried to break its way out of his chest as his suspicions were confirmed.

She looked like a scared little rabbit caught in headlights, or at least the flashguns of twenty paparazzi.

He just stared at her for a moment, lost in the depths of her eyes as all his dreams became flesh in front of him.

Her name fell from his lips, his voice echoing his disbelief.

"Summer?"

Chapter Eight

Kaitlyn broke free of Simon's grasp and felt Jax's hand slip from hers. She turned slowly to face him, scared of seeing the look in his eyes when he realised what was happening.

When he realised who she was.

He was going to leave her now. He was going to turn his back on her and leave her to deal with the mess she'd made by coming out of her house. She wanted him to stay but knew there was no way she would be able to make him. It was over.

Jax blinked and looked from Simon down to Kaitlyn. He stared into her eyes as what was happening slowly sank in. He could see the nerves in them, the fear running through her as she stood waiting for him to react.

A second felt like an hour.

Time stretched into infinity. Everything was slowing down around him and all he could see was her.

Without stopping to think, he grabbed hold of her hand and started to run. The world seemed to go into fast-forwards, everything becoming a blur. He bolted down the street with her by his side.

Kaitlyn felt as though she couldn't breathe as it dawned on her that he wasn't leaving her behind to become the prey of the press. He was trying to protect her.

She tried to keep up with him as his heavy boots pounded the asphalt, his tight grip on her hand making her fingers ache. She followed him down each road and alley, her heart thumping against her chest as adrenaline rushed through her veins. Her feet were beginning to kill her but she pushed on, knowing that they couldn't slow down if they wanted to escape the press and Simon. Glancing around, she realised that she didn't know where she was any more. He'd led her down so many alleys, so many twists and turns, that she felt lost.

She only hoped he knew where he was going.

They turned down another alley and she stumbled as her ankle gave way. He ground to a halt and held her steady.

Jax struggled to catch his breath and looked down at her feet. She wasn't wearing the most ideal shoes

for a quick escape. He waited for a second, giving her a chance to recuperate, before beginning to run at a pace more suited to her footwear. He didn't relinquish his grip on her hand and he didn't care if he was forcing her to run. He didn't want to stop. If he stopped then he had to deal with what was happening, and he wasn't ready to do that yet.

He slowed down as they came out onto a main road.

She moved away from him, her eyes closed as she tried to breathe. He looked at the gap between them and frowned.

"You can trust me, Kaitlyn. I don't know what's going on, but I'm not about to let them catch you."

Kaitlyn looked up and felt her heart warm through when she caught sight of the sincerity in his eyes.

"Where are we going?" she breathed the words heavily, struggling to catch her breath.

"Old pier, about a mile away," he said and looked back up the alley they had just run down.

"It's too far." She thought about her feet and pulled a face of discomfort. "I won't make it."

"You will." He caught hold of her shoulders and looked her square in the eye. "You will, even if I have to carry you."

He went to move off again.

"Why?" She held firm, refusing to move until she got an answer.

"Huh?" He turned around again, a confused look on his face.

"Why are you doing this?" She needed to hear the truth, needed to know that this had nothing to do with who she'd been revealed to be. She knew Jax didn't care about 'Summer' and she knew he didn't have a clue just how involved she was, but she had to know if she could trust him.

She had to know that he wasn't doing this so he could sell the story to the papers.

Jax ran his hand over the back of his neck and tried to think of what to say. It was simple when it all boiled down to it, but he couldn't tell her what had motivated him to run. She'd think he was some stupid lovesick kid.

"I don't want to see you hurt," he answered truthfully, hiding his feelings from her when she searched his eyes.

She smiled. "Me neither."

He took it as a green light and started walking briskly with her down the road towards the ocean. They were far enough away from the Silver Fish now that they could walk in relative ease, but he wanted to keep up the pace so the possibility of someone finding them was kept to a minimum.

Kaitlyn looked down at her hand and smiled at the way his fingers were interlocked with hers, holding her tightly as though she was going to slip away from him.

Her feet were killing her by the time she caught sight of the ocean, and she suddenly realised that he hadn't told her where they were going once they got to the pier. She looked up at him as they walked, noting the way his eyes constantly scanned their surroundings. He was making sure she was safe, protecting her, helping her.

She squeezed his hand and smiled when his eyes came to rest on her. There was something in his expression that made her think of guilt but he had nothing to feel guilty about so she dismissed it as her being too highly strung.

Edward was going to kill her.

She knew who the man was at the club. She'd seen him in pictures with his father and had seen them together once at a charity function before she'd signed the contract.

How did he know Jax?

She distinctly remembered him calling Jax's name and he had responded.

A chill ran up her spine when she looked at Jax's profile, unsure of what she was looking for but searching for it all the same. She wanted answers, wanted to know exactly what was going on and how the hell he was planning to make this all better like she hoped he could.

"Where're we going?" she asked quietly as they crossed the road and headed towards the pier.

He didn't take his eyes off their destination. "My place. You'll be safe there. I just need a little time to think, and then we'll go somewhere you'll really be safe."

Warmth spread through every inch of her as he revealed the extent he was willing to go to in order to protect her from the press and Simon.

And Edward.

Could he protect her from Edward?

She slipped into the passenger seat of his car and silently prayed that he could. She couldn't even start to comprehend just how much trouble her one night of freedom was causing and just how angry Edward was going to be with her for being recognised by his son of all people.

Jax looked over at her briefly before starting the engine, revving it into life as he considered what he was doing. He'd reacted on instinct, wanting to protect the girl from the press and Simon, wanting to save her from his father.

He pulled out onto the road and turned his car towards home.

He didn't care what involvement she had with 'Summer', didn't care how deep she was into the virtual girl's life. Now that someone had pointed it out, he could see the likeness, but he still held true to what he'd said to her in the club.

'Summer' was pretty, Kaitlyn was beautiful.

Driving down the coast to his house, he realised that she did trust him. She hadn't even asked him where his place was, hadn't stopped him when he'd told her where he was taking her. She'd just followed him, trusting that he'd keep her safe.

He wondered what they were going to do once his father figured out they were at his mother's place. Would he send Simon after them? Would he send the police? Jax decided that their stop at his place would be short. They'd stay as long as it took for him to think over their options and they would be gone before anyone came looking for them.

He'd run with her forever if that's what it took to keep her safe.

Kaitlyn watched the full moon playing on the ocean and let Jax take her wherever they were going. It felt so familiar to be driven by him, but so strange at the same time.

She was no longer the passenger presiding over him in the back of a Bentley limousine. She was just a girl sitting beside him as he sped down the highway in his car taking her back to his place.

She smiled when she realised she really had shed a part of the girl she'd become and was beginning to be the girl she'd been a long time ago.

The girl she so badly wanted to be again.

She slipped her shoes off and curled up on the large bench seat. Watching him drive, she saw straight through his relaxed air to the turbulence hiding underneath. His thoughts were probably doing the same as hers, running a million miles an hour through his brain as he tried to figure out what to do.

She sat in silence for the entire journey, consumed by trying to figure out just what was happening between them and what they were going to do. She couldn't shake the feeling that things were only going to get worse. She'd set some ball in motion and it was gradually gathering speed.

Assume crash positions.

She sighed and then frowned as the sign of the town whizzed by.

She almost did a double take.

He lived in the place she'd called home for almost a decade of her life. Small world.

Jax pulled the car quickly into the drive and then straight into the garage. He switched the engine off, stepped out and went straight to the garage door, pulling it down and concealing them from the outside world.

He watched her step out of the car. She paused to look at him. He offered her a warm smile before heading over to the door that led into the house and pulling it open for her.

"Make yourself at home," he breathed the words through the nerves that were knotting his stomach.

He dreaded to think what she was going to make of the house. He hadn't tidied the place in over a week, and there was no food or drink other than beer, coffee or hot chocolate. Hospitality was a little thin on the ground. Still, it wasn't like he'd been expecting guests, and he definitely hadn't expected her to be standing in his hallway like she was right now.

Not even in his wildest dreams.

"Um..." He started and smiled sheepishly when she looked at him. "Don't have much to offer you ... well, except for a place to hide."

She smiled and he got the feeling that she appreciated his giving her a place to hide more than she could express, and far more than she would appreciate anything else he had to offer her.

Not knowing what else to do, he led the way through the dark house and up to his room. He wasn't sure what possessed him to bring her here, but it felt like as good a place as any to hide away for a few hours.

He watched her walk over to the window and draw the curtains. Something about the way she did it made his heart go out to her. It was such a sombre act, shutting out the world as she shut herself in.

Was that what her life was like? Forced to hide away all the time?

Sadness filled him while he watched her ensuring the curtain was closed, her fingers tugging at the material and smoothing it down so there weren't any gaps.

It was almost compulsive.

He stepped over to her and smiled when she looked at him, her fingers still smoothing the material. She looked as though she was barely holding on. There were tears shining in her eyes.

"You okay?" he asked softly and took hold of her hands, leading her away from the window.

Kaitlyn shook her head. It was swimming with everything that had happened and all the repercussions her desire for one night out was going to bring. She wished she'd stayed at home.

No, she didn't.

She fought back against the idea that she would have been better off at home. Eventually she would have slipped up, and she'd had years of hiding away from the world, years of being locked in a cage and playing the slave to a virtual girl.

It was about time she stood up for herself.

Jax waited quietly for her to come out of her thoughts, using the time she was giving him to consider what their options were. Now he was here, everything seemed so confused. He had a million questions that he wanted to ask her and his head ached. Trying to ignore them, he focused on the matter at hand.

Keeping her safe.

He bit back his desire to ask her why she'd let his father do that to her, why she'd lived her life in hermitage. It had become blindingly obvious to him why he'd been chosen for the role of her driver. His father knew he hated 'Summer' and that made him the ideal man to chauffeur Kaitlyn around because he'd never recognise her.

He still didn't recognise her.

Kaitlyn found Jax staring at her and bit her lower lip. She sank down onto the edge of his bed and realised that now was as good a time as any for explanations. Her eyes widened when she noticed for the first time that she was in his bedroom and a little voice at the back of her head questioned why he'd brought her here.

She slowly stood up again, glancing around the room and ignoring the whispers that said he was up to something. He'd probably brought her here instinctively. In his eyes, this was the safest room in the house because he knew it the best. It had nothing to do with wanting something from her.

Jax noted the sudden unease in her body language and the way she couldn't stop looking around the room. Clearing the path to the door, he held his arm out and motioned to it.

"We can go to the living room if it will make you feel more comfortable." He let his eyes follow her. She walked immediately towards the door, her arms wrapped around herself in a protective hug.

He hadn't been trying to push her away. He hadn't even thought that she would see his bringing her into his room as a threat. He just wanted her to feel safe.

Following her down the hall to the stairs, he said, "I don't know how long we can stay here. We should be safe a while at least ... if my father has any sense he won't tell Simon the address of this place—"

He froze mid step on the stairs at the same time as she did. He didn't need to see her face to know why she'd stopped.

He really needed to start thinking before speaking.

"Father?" Kaitlyn held her stomach as it turned. She felt cold as realisation dawned on her and she trudged down the remainder of the stairs, her footsteps heavy. She placed some distance between her and Jax, feeling as though she couldn't breathe as she thought about the implications of what he'd said.

He took a step towards her when she slowly turned to face him. Her mouth hung open, her hands trembling as they clutched her stomach. She stared at him.

"Father?" She wished it wasn't true, wished he would deny it, but his silence was all the answer she needed.

She felt nauseas as she looked up at him, pleading him with her eyes to tell her it wasn't true.

Edward couldn't be his father.

Jax took a deep breath and walked down the remaining stairs so he was level with her. She was so pale and he felt as though he'd dealt her a fatal blow with his words.

"Unfortunately," he said the word with all the resentment he was feeling and saw her brows knit for a moment before she started shaking her head as though she was refusing to believe him.

"No ... why ... why would you...?" She backed away from him and he stepped towards her, trying to keep the distance between them steady.

"This has nothing to do with him. Please, Kaitlyn? I don't want to hurt you. I don't want him to hurt you." He held his hand out to her, knowing she wouldn't take it but offering it all the same. "We've both got secrets ... both of us."

Kaitlyn just stared at him for a few seconds before conceding that what he'd said was true.

"How am I supposed to know I can trust you?" She watched him closely as she asked her next question, using his reaction as a way of answering her first one. "How do I know you haven't already called your father to tell him where I am, like a good son?"

He gritted his teeth. She could see the frustration her questions had caused in his body language.

"Because I wouldn't do that. I don't care about 'Summer', but I do care about you. You've got to believe me, Kaitlyn."

She lowered her gaze to the floor and then closed her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she held it in order to steady herself.

Walking over to the couch in the dark room, she sat down and waited, hoping, praying that he would come and sit with her so she could explain everything to him.

She needed him to know.

Needed him to see her.

The real her.

Chapter Nine

Carrying two mugs of hot chocolate in one hand and a candlestick in the other, Jax walked from the dark kitchen into the dimly lit living room. He didn't dare risk putting the lights on, didn't want to draw attention to the house in case someone had discovered where they were.

He glanced at the front door, checking that all the locks and security chains were in place.

Setting the candle down next to the other one on the little coffee table, he placed one of the mugs of hot chocolate down in front of Kaitlyn and then settled himself into the armchair opposite her.

Kaitlyn took the way he looked expectantly at her as her cue to start talking.

She picked up her mug and inhaled the sweetness of the drink before sighing out her breath.

"I'll tell you everything. Is there anything you really need to know first though? Because once I finally start telling someone this I don't think I'm going to be able to stop." She held her drink as steadily as she could but her nerves were beginning to get the better of her. She'd never told anyone. Would he notice the fact she'd told him that in not so many words?

Jax kept his expression emotionless as he got the message loud and clear. For all the years that 'Summer' had been plastered across the magazines and played endlessly on the radio, she'd been sworn to silence.

"I'm guessing it's not just your face he bought?"

She shook her head slowly, unable to meet his eyes.

He cocked his head to one side and then shut his eyes tight as it hit him like a tonne of bricks.

Her singing.

She didn't sing any more, at least not like that.

That's what she'd told him. He remembered the sadness that had filled her eyes when she'd said those words, how melancholy it had made her.

"Your voice ... you're her aren't you? You sing for her?"

Kaitlyn nodded weakly, her stomach turning as she thought about what she did.

"I'm her voice, her body, the basis of her feelings..." Now that she said the words, it all seemed so wrong. She'd given up her dream so easily, had been blind to what it would do to her to see some virtual girl get all the fame and glory for her own talents.

How could she have been so naïve?

How could she have been so blind?

Placing the mug back down on the table, she wrapped her arms around herself and stared at Jax's boots.

"He found me down the Silver Fish, promised me a glittering career, kept telling how perfect I was for the job. If I was so perfect, why is it he changed me so much? They made her taller than me, made her breasts bigger and changed her nose. I signed my life away, Jax. I sit backstage staring at a monitor as I sing my heart out ... so *she* can pretend to be real." She held herself a little tighter. Somehow saying it all aloud for the first time made it hurt all the more, as though she could have denied that's what was happening if she had kept it to herself.

Jax didn't know what he could say to that, didn't know the right words to make her feel better. He'd hated himself for changing who he was to a fraction of the degree his father had wanted him to. She'd completely altered who she was and had let him steal her dreams.

That must have hurt.

He thought it was bad enough to lose a part of his identity for a few weeks so he could keep to his father's rules, but she'd lost her identity for years. She'd signed her life away.

"So they modelled her on you, and that's why you can't be seen? What is it you do all day in those meetings?" He leaned forwards, his hands wanting nothing more than to reach out and comfort her.

"Recording studios, television studios, various satellite development companies Edward owns. Most of the time I'm at the office. The top floor is where they keep the lab. I lay there responding to questions in interviews and seeing her on the screen. I watch her smile, watch her get all the attention. Christ, you probably think it all sounds so petty—"

"No!" He interjected with a frown. "You were young and my father took advantage of that. He sold the idea to you, probably offered you a handsome wedge of cash and told you that everyone would hear your singing."

Kaitlyn just looked at him for a moment and then moved her gaze to the mug. Picking it up, she drank down half of the contents, needing the sugar rush to keep her going. The adrenaline of the chase was beginning to wear off and now she just felt tired, drained of all energy as the magnitude of what she'd done sank in.

"Edward is going to kill me ... your brother—"

"Half-brother," he corrected her in a bitter tone that belied his feelings towards his family.

"Your half-brother is going to tell him, Jax. What am I supposed to do?" She looked at him with pleading eyes as though he held all the answers to her questions, as though he'd know exactly what to do.

"I don't know, but I'll think of something. My father won't want this splashed across the papers ... this isn't what you want to hear, but I do." He visibly braced himself and she realised he was waiting for her to lash out at him again.

Instead, she just sipped her drink, letting him see that she didn't care.

"Why?" Her tone was solemn. She wanted to know what would possess him to want to tell her story to the press. Would he be doing it for her good or was it purely about getting back at his father?

She'd gathered already that they weren't on good terms. The fact that he had been working as a driver told her that much. It definitely hadn't been his choice of job.

"You tell me he's going to kill you, but he's killing you a little more everyday, Kaitlyn. He's taken everything from you and what have you got in return? You're a little songbird in a cage. You can sing but no one sees you. I can't imagine how that makes you feel, but when I look in your eyes I can see all the hurt it causes. I want to put an end to that." He held her gaze for a moment before running his fingers through his hair and sighing.

She stood slowly, moved across the room to him, and sat down on the arm of the chair. She looked down at him and he raised his eyes to meet hers. She wanted to offer him some comfort, wanted to show him that she would be fine no matter what happened, but she was captivated by how filled with sadness his eyes were.

Bringing her fingers up, she ran them lightly over his hair, enjoying the silky feel of it while she thought of something to say that would let him know that she was okay.

Only she wasn't.

No words came to her.

Jax swallowed noisily and absorbed how good it felt to have her so close to him, to have her little hands in his hair again. She looked as though she was drawing comfort from him, trying to give it but receiving it instead.

He kept his face impassive and watched her. Her lips pursed while she concentrated on stroking his hair.

His father had taken everything she had and then shut her away from the world. He couldn't imagine what that would do to someone, being kept away from things that people took for granted everyday. She couldn't shop, couldn't go to the movies, and couldn't go out with her friends.

She couldn't have friends.

Kaitlyn sighed. She continued to stroke his hair, tears beginning to well up in her eyes as her thoughts dwelled on what her life had become.

She spent every day behind glass, watching people on the street as they laughed and talked, seeing couples as they stopped to kiss. She missed spending hours staring at blue skies while chatting aimlessly with her friends in the park, missed the singing practices that had taken place in the garage of her mother's house, missed her family.

Missed the world.

He caught the tear as it cascaded down her cheek, another mirroring it as it fell from her other eye. She tried to smile at him. He wiped the tears from her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs and smiled reassuringly.

"It didn't stop there did it?" His voice was gentle and she shook her head in the negative. "Did he take your name, too? Because it would fit with the kind of thing my father would do. He wouldn't just take a little of you, he'd take you all. Letting you keep your name would have been too risky. People you knew could've looked you up."

She sniffed back the tears as she looked him in the eye and she could see he knew what the answer was before she even said it. She smiled through her hurt and took his hand, pretending to shake it but just needing the comforting feeling that his hand holding hers gave her.

"Kaitlyn Summerton." She introduced herself and it sounded alien to say it, as though it wasn't her any more.

"Much better than Kaitlyn De'Winters." He smiled and placed his other hand around hers so it was covered with both of his. "Typical of my father, taking you bit by bit, the conniving bastard."

She paused for a second.

"Like Simon did to you?" She saw the hurt surface in his eyes and felt bad for mentioning it.

Jax tried to let her comment bounce off him, but it seemed to stick to him like glue. After seeing Ebony back on stage, and then witnessing Simon with her, he couldn't help thinking about what they'd done to him.

He felt as though this was some strange form of group therapy as he looked up at her and saw how sorry she was for bringing up such a sore subject.

"Yeah, like father like son," he said in a bitter tone and let go of her hand. He reached for his hot chocolate and stared at it.

"What happened?" Kaitlyn hoped that telling her would make him feel better, make him feel more connected to her again. Her whole world had been shaken up tonight, and she knew she wasn't alone in feeling that way. Jax had seen the extent his father would go to in order to make 'Summer' work. He'd been shown just what he was capable of and she knew that it had to have an impact on him. He couldn't just shrug it off.

She wanted him to see that if he was there for her, then she'd be there for him. She'd make everything better if he just gave her the chance, if he trusted her like she was beginning to trust him.

He had so many reasons to turn her over to the press, but he seemed to be fighting against them in order to help her. She knew he wouldn't protect her, not like she wanted him to, because he couldn't just sit back and let her return to being a slave to 'Summer'.

He wanted to help her.

And she really believed that he could.

She trusted that whatever plan he was going to come up with, it was going to be one that had the express purpose of making her live again, of making her into the girl she'd lost to 'Summer'.

Jax watched her nose wrinkle in thought. He wondered just how muddled everything was becoming in her head, just where her thoughts were leading her. She seemed to be more relaxed around him, and she clearly wanted to talk to him about his past and hers.

It felt as though she was reaching out to him as she fell, her world crumbling around her as she tried to break free of her cage. If he could, he'd lift the latch and let her fly away.

Even if it meant she was flying away from him.

He couldn't bear to see the pain in her eyes and know his father was the cause of it. He had to do something to help set her free, but he didn't know what to do.

An answer would present itself if he just gave himself a little more time to think over every possible avenue they could take. Right now, he'd settle for reaching out to her in return so they would be on a level footing again. She'd told him her world of hurt, now he was going to tell her his.

"It was winter, two years ago," he said and found her eyes coming to rest on him. "I went into Los Angeles, going to see my father about college. I believed he'd do the decent thing and pay for my education like he was paying for Simon's. Guess I was just a stupid kid back then, because I didn't even consider for a moment that he'd say no. It hurt when he did. He'd left me and mom to go back to Simon's mother when I was seven. I hated him, but over the years we got back onto talking terms and he showed a little interest in me. He made it clear that night that he wasn't going to help put me through college. I went to leave and that's when I saw them, my girl and his bastard son sucking each other's faces off on the porch. Crushed doesn't cover how I felt. I thought ... I knew Ebony loved me ... I couldn't understand what was happening, didn't want to admit to myself that she'd cheated on me with my own half-brother. God, if I didn't hate the Hampton family enough already, I hated them even more after that."

Kaitlyn stroked his hair soothingly and frowned. "So what changed? I mean, you're working for your father now."

He snorted at her reference to his job. "Driver? Yeah, I couldn't get a summer job that would pay me enough to put myself through the final year of college and mom doesn't have enough money so I asked daddy dearest. He told me if I worked the whole summer by his rules and didn't put a toe out of line, he would fund my final year."

"Oh." It was the only thing Kaitlyn could say as she realised that his father would probably see his actions tonight as stepping out of line.

He'd lost his chance to finish college for her sake? She felt queasy at that thought. She didn't deserve such a sacrifice.

"Yeah ... you keep saying he's gonna kill you. He's really gonna kill me." He smirked and leaned back into the chair. She could see he was trying to act like it didn't bother him which made her suspect that it really did.

He'd thrown away his education because of her.

"So what did you expect him to give you as a job?" She let her look turn curious. He raised his brows at her question. "I mean, you don't strike me as the type who was looking to spend the whole summer driving people around."

"Programmer, developer, that kind of thing," Jax replied and she gave him an incredulous look.

"You wanted to work on 'Summer'? But you hate her—"

"As a singer ... no offence ... but not as a program. She's technology at its most cutting edge. Mike is always trying to get me to ... hold on..." He smiled wickedly as an answer presented itself.

Standing up, he bit his lip thoughtfully.

"What?" She gave him a confused look.

Blowing the candles out, he grabbed his keys and ran up the stairs to his bedroom. Walking back down with his bag, he slung it over his shoulder and then grabbed Kaitlyn's hand.

"What?" She tried again and he turned to look at her as they reached the back door. "Where are we going?"

He just smiled.

"Mike's."

Chapter Ten

Mike almost jumped out of his skin as the door to the basement burst open. He stared up the stairs at the shadowy silhouette, the slurpee in his hand held so tightly that the fruit flavoured liquid began to escape and cascade over his hand like a miniature waterfall.

"I need your help," Jax said as he took a step forwards, revealing himself.

"Holy fucking Christ, man ... I'm too young for a heart attack!" He pressed his hand against his chest for emphasis and then motioned for his friend to join them. "Come on in, always happy to help you out, you know that."

"First you have to promise me something." Jax remained standing at the top of the stairs.

"What?" He walked up the bottom three steps. It had been such a long time since he'd seen his friend looking so serious and he was itching to know what he needed help with.

"Promise me that what we talk about tonight, what you see, what you learn ... it goes no further than us. It doesn't leave this room." Jax kept his expression impassive as he stared down at his friend and then looked over at Julia and Charlie where they had paused at their computers and turned to see what all the fuss was about. He had to know they weren't going to double cross him. He knew in his heart that they wouldn't, but he couldn't risk her, not when she was placing so much trust in him. "Same goes for you Jules and Charlie."

"Cross my heart," Mike said and motioned the cross over his chest.

Charlie nodded.

"Solemnly swear." Julia beamed up at him and held her hand up by her side.

"Good," he said and then squeezed Kaitlyn's hand, letting her know that it was safe to come out of the shadows. He walked down the wooden steps with her in tow, feeling her hand trembling in his and knowing how scared she must be.

Mike didn't get the big deal at first. He just watched his friend as he came down the stairs with some blonde girl that he didn't recognise.

"So what's the problem, chief?"

"No problem. Just a job." His friend's tone was business-like and he looked him square in the eye. "Hack."

"Hack?" His eyes widened at the same time as his smile. He looked over at Charlie and Julia, seeing them smiling too as they thought about the job Jax was implying.

They were going to hack 'Summer'.

"Why? What made you change your mind?" He couldn't help questioning his friend's motive. Earlier that night he'd been adamant that this wasn't going to happen and now he was here telling them they

were about to be given the green light.

Letting the bag slip from his shoulder, Jax let go of Kaitlyn's hand and unzipped it, pulling the two portable hard disks from it and handing them to Mike.

"It's not everything we need, but it's all I've gathered over the years. It should help us. We're not going deep tonight. They'll lock down her systems and put up barriers we won't be able to crack if we go all the way. We're just doing a dry run." He watched his friend eye the drives as though they were the Holy Grail he'd been searching for all his life.

"Why not?" Mike raised his eyes and they widened when Kaitlyn moved out from behind him.

Kaitlyn frowned.

"You can't hack 'Summer'. She has a gala performance this week!" She grabbed Jax's arm and held it tightly, her words coming out through gritted teeth.

He was insane.

He'd get them all arrested and Edward would know she had something to do with it.

"Kaitlyn, it's fine." He put his hand over hers where it had a death grip on his arm. "We need to do this. You need to do this."

"No ... this is madness. You'll never be able to change her." She felt near to panicking as she thought about what he was going to attempt to do, all because of her.

"I don't want to change her. I just want to knock her offline for a bit, that's all."

She glanced at the other three occupants of the room that were staring at them and then back at Jax.

"We'll be arrested. They'll know it's us." She tried to reason but she could see in his eyes that he wasn't about to listen to her. He seemed so confident, so sure of his plan.

"You won't be arrested, I will," he said flatly.

Her eyes widened in disbelief and she shook her head. "I won't let you do it ... they'll throw you in jail. I won't let you—"

He ran his hand lightly over her hair and smiled at her. "I'll be fine. You need to do this. I'll get off somehow. Always do."

She wasn't convinced that he'd 'get off' as he put it. He planned to expose his father and 'Summer' for what they really were and she was a key instrument in his plan. She could have said no, could have told him that she was fine with things the way they were just so he wouldn't end up in trouble, but she wanted to be free and he was offering her that chance.

She didn't know what to expect once they had shown the world what was happening, but she knew it would cause enough interest in her and maybe that would lead to a career of her own.

Maybe.

"Are you what I think you are?" Mike's words cut the silence.

Jax shot him a black look. "She's not a 'what', she's a 'who', and no she isn't. Father uses her as the voice of his virtual bitch. He feeds her with Kaitlyn's feelings and stole her looks, but they aren't two and the same, Mike."

"So we hack," Julia started and smiled as all eyes came to rest on her. "Your girlfriend got shoved in a box by your father. I say we break her out ... let the world see just who they're listening to when 'Summer' sings."

He smiled. "That's the plan, Jules."

"Like 'Singing in the Rain'," Charlie said.

"Exactly like that." He sucked his cheeks into a smile as he looked at the two of them and then turned his attention back to Mike and the drives. "Boot them up, let's see what we can do about restoring order to the music industry."

Mike nodded and placed the two drives down on the table next to one of his computers, plugging them in and then booting it up while he waited impatiently. For years, he'd been after the information that was contained on these disks and Jax had always denied having it. Now here it was sitting in front of him, the Holy Grail of hacking and he was going to do it.

He was going to hack 'Summer'.

Okay, so Jax would do most of the work and he'd spend a lot of time just looking over his shoulder, but still.

He was going to hack 'Summer'.

He grinned.

He couldn't see what Jax's problem had been when he'd first walked in, insisting that he promised not to tell anyone what he witnessed. The girl was nice, she was pretty, but she wasn't 'Summer' in his eyes. Sure, they modelled his virtual girl on her, and she leant her a voice, but 'Summer' was something else.

Jax watched everyone as they set to work and felt like he was some evil genius, hands clasped behind his back as he prepared to take over the world—or at least kidnap a girl.

He raised his brows, trying to figure out if stealing 'Summer' was technically kidnapping. The whole world treated her as though she was real. The police would probably see her that way too and that meant he'd probably be up on a kidnapping charge.

He wondered which charge he would get a shorter sentence on, kidnapping or hacking.

Or murder.

Hearing a small sigh, he looked over his shoulder at Kaitlyn and then decided to give her his full attention when he noticed she looked a little uneasy.

Placing his arm about her shoulders, he smiled down at her and then began introducing her to his team, hoping it would help her feel more relaxed and at home in the dank basement.

"That's Mike. I've known him since I came over from Canada when I was fourteen. He's an idiot, but good with computers." He watched her smile as Mike turned and saluted her.

Jax turned her so she was looking towards his other two friends. They both turned at the same time to face her with near identical smiles on their faces.

"These two geniuses are Julia and Charlie, respectively. When it comes down to it, they're the brains behind the operation."

Kaitlyn smiled at them and then looked up at Jax. "What is it you do?"

He smirked. "Me, baby? I can crack anything wide open. I know what makes the girl tick. Built my own girl once, just to see if it was possible, and it taught me a lot about her. I know the code they use to make her, so I'll be able to find the right switch to flip so to speak. Plus, someone has to get into the concert."

"What?" Her voice rose an octave. She couldn't believe what he'd just said.

"I said, someone has to get into the concert. The old man won't say no, well, he might, but I have a few strings I can pull to get me a pass. I need to be inside, near the system to get all the way in. These guys back here are going to get me part of the way in, through her outer defences, and then it's all down to me ... and you."

She felt a little queasy again as she thought about what they were doing. She wanted her life back, but this seemed insane. Could he really break into her program and shut her down? Was that possible? Surely his father would have some extreme counter measures in place, walls and barriers and passwords, and whatever those things were that would stop him from getting far.

She glanced at Jax while he watched the other three working, the smile permanently etched on his lips. He seemed so confident.

It was as though this was his territory, his playground, his area of expertise and he felt at home, relaxed and safe in the knowledge that he could do this.

It seemed impossible to her, but it looked so easy to him.

Stepping closer to him, she let the back of her hand brush against his and bit her lip when she looked down at them. Her fingers toyed nervously with his, and she couldn't help but smile when he responded, his long fingers threading into hers as he held her hand.

"It'll be okay. Just wait and see." He smiled at her.

Leading her over to the armchair, he gestured for her to take a seat.

She sat down and watched him as he paced back and forth between computers as the two boys and the girl began to pull up black empty screens and type things in. She didn't have a clue what they were doing but it looked technical. The dark haired one Jax had introduced as Mike wouldn't stop swearing at the computer, as if it was going to respond.

Her eyes came back to rest on Jax and she smiled when he glanced over at her. She liked the way that he would only take his eyes off her for a few seconds before bringing them back to her and offering her a smile. It made her feel safe, loved almost, to have someone so concerned with her.

It was as though he thought she was going to disappear without a trace, or maybe he just wanted to make sure she was included in a way.

Mike swore again and she almost giggled as Jax rolled his eyes and walked towards him.

Leaning over his friend, Jax looked at the screen, his eyes trying to decipher the mass of garbled code that filled it. Picking up the keyboard, he heaved a sigh as he stared at the screen and let his fingers do the talking.

Mike bit back the snide comment that rose to his lips as his friend went straight through the defences and pulled up a login screen.

He hated it when he did that.

Jax offered Mike a wide grin in exchange for the black look he received and placed the keyboard back down in front of him.

Glancing at his watch, he stifled a yawn when he saw it was gone midnight already.

This was going to be one long night.

* * * *

Kaitlyn smiled while she watched the sun rising over the hills in the distance. She was glad to see that there were no press to greet her as they pulled into her drive and she looked at her beach house. It seemed so cold and uninviting. She had to surrender the freedom she'd felt tonight and it hurt her to do it.

Even if it was for the best.

Jax leaned his arm on the back of the seat. He watched her looking at her house and let the tips of his fingers run through her hair. He tried to smile when she looked straight into his eyes, all the hurt she was feeling visible for him to see. He wondered if a tiny part of it had anything to do with him, whether she didn't want to leave him just like he didn't want to leave her.

"You better go, before someone sees." He didn't bother to hide his feelings from her. The sombre tone of his voice would have been enough to let her know that he didn't want to have to let her go again.

"I know." She dropped her eyes to rest briefly on her knees and then brought them back up to meet his.

"You know what to do. He'll call you. He's bound to. Just lie to him, tell him whatever it takes to make him trust you again. Tell him you can't stand me, you want me fired immediately. Tell him you were stupid, you'll never do it again, you promise." He paused for a moment and then narrowed his eyes on hers. "Tell him you hate me."

Kaitlyn silently refused the last one. She would do what it took to make amends with Edward, but she wasn't going to say that she hated Jax. She could never say that.

She closed her eyes as she thought about what they were going to do. Only two days to prepare herself for her biggest ever performance, the single most important night of her life so far. She felt sick with nerves.

She felt even sicker when she remembered what she was going to do, how she was going to set herself free.

"He'll sue me you know, breach of contract. When you wreck the concert, he'll know I was involved. You can't believe you're going to fool him into thinking you're solely responsible." She stared out of the window as the first rays of the sun crept over the horizon.

"I'm kissing goodbye to my final year, that's for sure ... but we'll be free, Kaitlyn. We'll both be free of my father."

"I better go." She didn't want to leave the car, but at the same time, she had to. The longer she sat there, the harder it was getting to tear herself away from him and the more it was going to hurt. She didn't want to think about what was going to happen when the moment came, or in the aftermath. He was going to be arrested. He'd go to jail for sure, but he wouldn't be alone—she would never let him be alone.

"I'll see you soon. You can call me if you need anything, even if you just want to talk." His fingers brushed lightly against her shoulder.

"Maybe I'll do that." She gave him a warm, wholehearted smile and remembered him taking her phone and putting his number into it. She knew for sure that she would speak to him before the night. The sound of his voice was the only cure for the nerves that writhed in her stomach.

Opening the car door, she slid towards it and then stopped for a second.

He opened his mouth to say something and she pressed her lips against his in a gentle kiss. He responded immediately, his mouth playing tenderly against hers while his fingers threaded into her hair.

She closed her eyes and lost herself in his kiss, feeling overwhelmed as he held her to him as though he was never going to let her go.

She wished he wouldn't.

She bit her lower lip as they broke apart and she smiled awkwardly.

"Thanks, for doing this ... for showing me how to live again, how to love again." With that she disappeared quickly from the car, not looking back as her heart hammered hard against her chest. She could still see the stunned look on his face.

Jax just watched her go.

His mouth hung open when he ran repeatedly over what she'd said to him.

He'd shown her how to live again.

How to love again.

He smiled and gunned the engine as she slipped into her house and disappeared from view.

Love was a strange thing. It made you do all kinds of things in its name—war, peace, hacking.

Pulling out of her drive, he spun the car around and started back towards home.

He glanced at the sun as it began to creep higher into the sky, bathing the world in a warm light that made everything seem perfect.

He'd see her again.

Even if she was visiting him in prison.

He'd see her again.

Chapter Eleven

Jax watched from the shadows as his father and Simon smiled and talked with Simon's mother. They were walking from the backstage area towards the main entrance of the stadium just like he'd planned they would. His father would never sit backstage to watch the concert. He'd want to see 'Summer' in glorious full holographic mode as she danced and writhed for the audience, all the while stealing Kaitlyn's voice.

Kaitlyn.

He smiled as he thought about her and his eyes found their way to the massive flat screens that were showing the latest video by 'Summer'. All he could see was Kaitlyn now. All he could hear was her beautiful voice trapped inside a monster and desperate to get out.

He'd spoken to her every night this week, every day. His father had fired him like he'd predicted he would. His mother had thrown a complete fit about it at first but had then done her best to reassure him that they would find a way for him to finish college.

College didn't matter any more. All that mattered was what happened tonight. If it came off as he'd planned then he would be happier than he'd ever been.

He would've saved her.

His father and company disappeared from view. Slipping out of the shadows, he put his arms into the straps of his rucksack, hoping beyond hope that the security guards wouldn't notice how heavy it was. Walking towards them, he panted as best he could so it appeared as though he'd been running. When he

reached them, he doubled over, struggling to catch his breath, and then looked up at them.

"Am I late?" He did his best to look flustered. "The old man will murder me if I'm late ... I promised him I'd see his virtual whore tonight."

The guard on the left looked at the other one and then gestured towards the main doors. "They went in already."

He pulled a face at the massive queue that was forming outside the stadium. "You can't expect me to wait there, I'll never get in. I can't be late again."

The security man on the right just sighed. "You got a pass?"

He fumbled about in his pockets, doing his best to look distressed when he couldn't find one. "Come on. You know who I am ... you know my father."

The two guards exchanged a knowing looking that said they did indeed know his father and they were well aware of just how much trouble he would be in if he was late.

They held each other's gaze for a moment longer and then both visibly relaxed.

"Okay, go in through the back. Go right to the end of the corridor to the other side of the stage. There's an emergency exit. It should bring you out near your father."

He smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "Thanks. Much appreciated."

He walked straight into the building without hesitation, following the directions given to him, and didn't look back until he heard the doors behind him close. He glanced over his shoulder and pulled an earpiece out of his pocket. Slipping it into place, he dialled Mike's number on his phone.

"Give me directions," he said when the phone was picked up at the other end.

"Okay ... where are you?" Mike came back loud and clear.

"Lower section three, block D. I have three doors. One straight ahead that seems to lead into the bowels of this beast, one behind me where the security guards are and—"

"The one to your right." Mike cut him off and he headed in that direction. "You'll see doors for the green room and then locker rooms. Right down the far end of the hall is a single fire door. It leads into the techies area, the place that controls all the security, lights and has all the surveillance feeds."

He followed the instructions and smiled sweetly when he passed a security guard. Making it past the area where all the surveillance staff were, he released his breath in a sigh.

"Now?"

"Now ... hang on ... now..."

"Get a move on, Mike." He warned him and then flashed another smile at the security guards. They were everywhere, every corridor he went down. He just hoped that once 'Summer' started her act that they would disappear into the rooms that contained a television so they could see her.

"Got it. To your left is a door, don't go through it. Keep going straight, and then up two levels. There'll be a long corridor. At the end of it is your girlfriend..." Mike said and he huffed. "...So don't go down there ... unless you want to give her a good luck kiss ... the third door on the right is the main computer room. There's access panels in the janitors closet two doors back from it, near where you are. Rip those puppies open and you should have access to the network and the surveillance feeds."

It was a little closer than he wanted to be to the main computer room and Kaitlyn. He wouldn't have time to escape, but then he wasn't planning to. The technical team would be able to tell where the

breach was. They'd find him within minutes and he'd let them. Once the virus was in 'Summer' and the program was running, he had nothing more to do. It was all down to Kaitlyn at that point.

Shutting himself into the cramped closet, he moved some of the equipment around and fashioned himself a rough stool to sit on. He placed his bag down beside him and unzipped it. Removing his laptop, he set it up on the shelf he'd emptied.

He bit his lip as he took the screwdrivers out of his bag and knelt down, crawling under the shelf to the panel that Mike had mentioned. He unscrewed it and removed the grate, being careful not to make a sound. Grabbing a handful of wires, he pulled out a little handheld monitor and attached them to it. He held his breath as he clipped the end of a wire to the first lead and watched the screen flicker into life.

Basement. Not quite what he was after.

Removing the wire, he put a piece of white tape around it to show himself that he'd checked that one and then tried the next.

When he had all the feeds that he wanted on the monitor, he flicked through each channel. The screen flickered each time the scene changed. First, the stage, then the corridor that ran outside the room he was in and finally the room Kaitlyn was in.

He smiled and watched her pacing the room, her long pink dress shifting gently with each move she made.

"Hello ... you look beautiful tonight," he said to her as he allowed himself a few seconds more of watching her and then placed the monitor down by his laptop.

"I've got visual, computer is patched in ... let's do this," he said down the earpiece to Mike.

"Sure thing, captain. Charlie and Julia are on the case already. Charlie and myself will create a diversion while Julia helps you breach the main wall," Mike replied and he gave them a few seconds to get deep enough into the system to be noticed.

They were going to hack the primary system, not the one 'Summer' ran off, but the one that held information about bank accounts and clients. It was the only thing he could think of that would create a big enough diversion without forcing them to abort the concert and shut down 'Summer'.

He watched his wristwatch as he counted the seconds, not wanting to dive in too soon for fear of alerting them to his presence. There was a chance they would check the other systems to see if this was a targeted attack. The last thing he needed was for them to see another attempt on a different system.

When he was satisfied that no one was going to get wind of him and that they were all too busy monitoring the bad hacking attempt by Mike and Charlie, he flexed his fingers and stared at his laptop screen.

Punching in a chunk of code, he let his fingers dance across the keys as he went through screen after screen. It seemed too easy at first, but as he got progressively deeper into 'Summer's system, things began to take longer to break through.

He glanced at the little screen that was displaying Kaitlyn and wiped the sweat from his brow. She was already singing, her eyes fixed on a screen that was displaying the concert to her so she could see the moves that were being made by 'Summer'.

He rifled through his bag with one hand while letting the other attempt to break through the barrier keeping him out of the area that he needed access to in order to get down to the 'Summer' base program. Pulling out a disc, he opened up the CD-ROM drive on his computer.

Putting the CD in, he closed the drive and flicked the monitor so it displayed the stage. He frowned

briefly at the image of 'Summer' as she moved across it, clearly singing some slushy love song judging by the way she was looking as though she was about to die from a broken heart.

He smirked when he realised that it would probably be a fitting point to take control of her, since she looked as though she was dying anyway.

What better time to kill her?

Breaking through the last of her defences, he grinned when he tapped in the final sequence of code that would execute the program on the disc. He sat back and watched the little monitor while his computer screen told him that the execute command was successful.

* * * *

Edward Hampton frowned as the beautiful love song 'Summer' was singing was interrupted right in the final notes. His heart leapt into his throat as 'Summer' flickered for a moment, her image breaking up before coming back again.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

One that lasted all of a second—the amount of time it took her to open her mouth.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," 'Summer' addressed the crowd with a pretty smile and then shifted as though the holographic emitters weren't working properly and her signal was deteriorating. "We appear to be experience ... experi ... experiencing technical difficulties."

The crowd behind Edward began to murmur loudly, the din of their voices almost drowning out 'Summer' as she stepped forwards to the edge of the stage.

"I'm afr ... afraid daddy ... he ... he's kill ... killing me," 'Summer' stuttered and then pouted like a child. "...Daddy did a bad thing..."

He stood up sharply and pointed at the nearest security guard. "You, get in there and see what's happening. Now!"

The crowd were growing restless as 'Summer' continued on stage and he couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Daddy killed a dream to make me ... stole me a voice ... took a girl prisoner ... stole everything from her..." 'Summer' looked directly out into the crowd and pressed her hand against her chest, a tear sliding down her cheek. "I'm not real ... but she is ... I have to go now."

With that, she swan dived off the stage and disintegrated into millions of tiny pieces right in front of him.

Jax smiled as the monitors showed his father becoming frantic and he knew it wouldn't be long before he was found. He just wanted to see Kaitlyn up where she belonged, just wanted to know that she was free, and then they could take him away.

* * * *

Kaitlyn swallowed nervously as the stage lights came to rest on her and she blinked away from them. She hadn't realised they would be so bright.

Walking timidly forwards, she went over everything in her head that she'd planned to say and immediately forgot it all. She stepped up to the microphone and looked at the two massive screens flanking the stage. As the crowd began to chant 'Summer', she just gave them a wide smile.

"I'm sorry, I'm not 'Summer' ... but, weirdly, I am at the same time. You see, a few years ago I signed a contract with that man." She pointed at Edward as he stared up at her with a stunned expression. "Since

then, he's kept me shut away from the world. I've been the voice, the look, the feelings of 'Summer' but I've never been seen. One man has changed that. He's risked everything he has in order to do this for me ... to set me free ... and ironically, he'll go to prison for it. Please don't let that happen."

The crowd roared and she got the feeling that they were on her side.

"My name's Kaitlyn Summerton and I have a song I'd like to sing to you. I wrote it this week, and it's close to my heart. It's about the man who showed me how to live again." She smiled out at the crowd as they all began to chant her name, apparently not caring that the virtual girl they had come here to see had been replaced with a real one just like her.

Closing her eyes, she smiled as she thought about Jax and what he'd done for her and then opened her heart to the crowd as she sang like she'd never sung before.

With love.

Chapter Twelve

Jax lay on his back, one arm behind his head and his other hand lax on his stomach as he stared at the dull grey ceiling above him. He sighed out his breath as his eyes moved from water stain to water stain, slowly traversing the ceiling and finally reaching the little barred window high on the wall.

He sighed again.

Life officially sucked, but it had been worth it.

He'd set her free, given her wings to escape her cage, and to see that happen had been worth the princely sum he'd had to pay.

Frowning as the man in the next cell began to complain again about how unjustified it was and how he shouldn't be there, he just stared at the tiny patch of blue sky visible to him.

"Templeton." The gravelly voice of the guard roused him from his thoughts of Kaitlyn and he leaned his head backwards, looking at the upside down man. "Visitor."

His heart leapt into his throat as he sat up, his thoughts racing to imagine how it was going to feel to see her for the first time since freeing her. He knew she'd come visit him. He wasn't even in prison yet and she'd already come.

The smile dropped off his face when he saw Simon walking down the hall towards him and he quickly masked his disappointment so his half-brother wouldn't see it.

"What do you want?" He spat the words at Simon as he came to a halt outside the cell. "Come to gloat?"

Simon looked pained for a moment, uncomfortable, and then just glared at him. "You're free to go."

He arched a brow and attempted to understand what he was being told. He'd been stuck in this tiny cell for three days now and no one had come to see him, and now this?

"You mean I made bail?" he asked, not daring to believe what his half-brother had said the first time in case it was a cruel joke—something quite typical of Simon.

Simon looked uncomfortable again. "No, idiot, I mean the charges were dropped. You're free to go."

"Dropped, why?" He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Walking over to the cell door, he let his hands rest on the cool metal strip that ran horizontally across the bars.

"Because dad is going to be taking your place." Simon shifted foot-to-foot, clearly not enjoying being

the one to bring him such good news.

"Why?" He still couldn't comprehend what he was hearing. His father was going to jail?

"Turns out that little bitch of yours happens to have one of Washington's most powerful business men for a father. As soon as he saw his little girl on the TV, he went down and confronted dad about the contract he'd placed his daughter under. He called in a few favours when Kaitlyn explained to him what had been happening the past few years and dad was placed under investigation. Breach of the human rights act or something like that."

"And?" He got the feeling that Kaitlyn wasn't the only reason his father was about to go to prison for what looked like a very long time.

"And..." Simon started and visibly swallowed. "...It turns out there was some issue with a little embezzlement, and then once they found out you were his son, they talked to your mother who happened to mention the lack of child support over the past thirteen years."

He didn't know what to say. He was utterly speechless. He just grinned as the guard beside Simon came forwards and unlocked the door, pulling it open and letting him out.

"The company?" he asked as Simon turned to leave.

"Barely scraping through after the cost of charges and the amount he had to pay your mother in backdated child support." Simon looked over his shoulder at him and frowned. "But what's left is legally mine ... you go near it ... I'll find a reason to put you back in here."

He watched Simon's back as he walked away from him and then followed the lead of the guard. All he wanted to do now was get his stuff back and get out of there. He wanted to go home.

* * * *

Driving down the coastal road that cut southward towards home, Jax let his left arm lean out the open window and sang along to the song he was listening to.

He smiled at the world, feeling as though he was seeing it with different eyes now that he was free of jail and free of his father. Everything seemed bluer, brighter, and he wondered if this was how Kaitlyn felt.

Kaitlyn.

She hadn't contacted him. He'd checked his phone and there wasn't a single message from her, not even a thanks. He sighed and the smile faded away as he thought about her. Maybe she was just busy with her new life, or trying to sort out all the legal issues and deal with her parents. She had a lot to explain to people and he was sure there would be a lot of media interest in her after her performance.

He just wished he'd got to see it.

Mike had probably recorded the whole thing, not only because he adored 'Summer', but also because it was his finest hour of hacking.

The minute Kaitlyn had closed her eyes and opened her mouth to sing, the security guards had burst into the little janitors closet and it had been over. He'd had his laptop and monitor confiscated, and had been hauled outside and placed into a police car. They'd been quick to put him in a cell, his father had made sure of that by calling in and telling the police he wanted to press full charges.

Bastard.

He hadn't expected him to be lenient on him, but he hadn't expected him to want the full penalty either. It had just proven to him how compassionless his father really was, how he had never loved him.

Passing the city limits, he watched the welcome sign fly past and then turned his eyes back to the approaching buildings. He smiled, feeling relieved to see them and happy to be finally coming home.

His mother was going to kill him.

Not that it mattered any more, none of it did. He kept trying to think of all the good things that would come out of this, but he kept getting hung up on the fact that Kaitlyn had neglected to contact him.

He'd really thought there was something happening between them, something real.

Turning into his driveway, he heaved a long sigh and switched the engine off. He stared at the garage door in front of him and then stepped slowly out of the car, running his fingers over the shiny black roof and trying not to think of Kaitlyn.

All he could think about was when he'd brought her to his house to hide her. Whenever he saw his car, he imagined driving down the coastal road with her in the passenger seat and remembered her smile as she looked at him.

Closing the door and locking it, he shouldered his bag and walked up the winding path to the house. He took the porch steps two at a time and then pushed the door open.

He grinned when his mother rushed over to him, wrapping him in a hug. He closed his eyes, willing himself not to imagine that her arms were Kaitlyn's and wanting to be able to take comfort from her.

"Gonna kill me?" he asked in a serious tone.

She pulled back and gave him an unimpressed look.

"No, but I was considering killing that no good father of yours." She took the bag from his shoulder and placed it below the coat rack.

"From what I hear, he won't be around for a while, so Simon told me." He wriggled his brows and she smiled.

"I see you still love it when you get the opportunity to lord it over him. Some things never change."

"They do ... like your college educated son is going to spend the rest of his life flipping burgers and sitting in a dark room with computers, just like Mike." He tried to cover the hurt in his eyes with a smile.

"Are you dropping out?" she said with a straight face.

"No ... I mean ... I don't have the money to fund my final year. With father out of the equation, and not enough time to find another summer job that would pay me what I need—"

"You'll finish college. We have enough money."

"We do?" He looked incredulous and then smiled when he remembered Simon telling him about the backdated child support. "We do."

With that, he kissed his mother on the cheek and then headed towards the stairs, thinking only of taking a shower and getting some sleep on a comfortable mattress. That's if he could sleep with thoughts of Kaitlyn running through his mind. He wondered what had happened to her and whether he should call her.

"Oh, Jackson?" His mother started and he turned to look at her.

"What?" He frowned at her sudden use of his real name. Something about it made him feel as though he was being told off, that he wasn't off the hook after all.

"There's someone here to see you." She smiled and he just looked at her. "They're sitting on the back

porch."

Presuming it would be Mike, he walked straight through the kitchen and out onto the deck. He froze and stared at the long bronzed legs stretched out on his recliner. Following them up over the cream summer dress, his heart skipped a beat when he discovered the identity of their owner.

His lips broke apart in a wide smile when she jumped up and wrapped her arms around his neck. Lifting her off the floor, he buried his face in her neck and turned with her on the spot, listening to her sweet giggle as she held onto him tightly.

"Christ ... it's so good to see you." Kaitlyn squealed and he could feel her heart beating wildly against his chest, mimicking his own.

"I look like hell," he stated and then pressed a long kiss to her cheek. "I thought you'd forgotten about me."

Placing her gently back down on the deck, he looked deep into her eyes for an explanation.

"I'm sorry, my dad had all this legal stuff to do and as soon as I heard about Edward I came straight here. Your mom was kind enough to let me in after I'd explained who I was."

"And who would that be?" He gave her a curious look as she blushed.

"I said I was your girlfriend. She seemed all right with it." Kaitlyn dropped her eyes to rest on the wooden decking and felt her cheeks burn up. She didn't know what to expect from him, or what he was going to say. She was nearly ten years his senior, but it hadn't seemed to bother him before and it didn't seem to bother his mother. His fingers came to rest under her chin and she obeyed his command and looked up, straight into his eyes.

"Girlfriend, huh?" He arched a brow at her and then smiled. "I like the sound of that."

Dipping his head, he let his lips brush gently against hers. He kissed her ardently and pulled her flush against him. Her arms settled around his neck and she began to kiss him back, smiling against his mouth when his arms wrapped tightly around her waist.

Standing on the deck in the evening sun with her arms around the man she loved, she realised that she was finally free of everything.

She was finally free.

She was finally able to look in the mirror and see herself again.

And he'd been the one to give her back her identity.

She kissed him deeper, trying to show him how grateful she was to him for finding her and rescuing her, for showing her who she was when she'd lost her way. Over the past few days, she'd thought about life and had come to realise that it always had a plan. If it hadn't been for her years of working as the girl behind 'Summer', she never would have met Jax.

She wasn't glad she'd endured being made into a virtual girl, and being shut away from the world, but she was glad that at the end of it, she'd been given a reason to live.

A reason to love.

Jax closed his eyes and kissed her fervently, not wanting to ever let her go and wishing this could last forever. He had always felt as though he was searching for a reason for his existence, searching for something to give it more depth and meaning.

Now, he felt as though he'd found it.

Pulling back and looking deep into her eyes as the sun began to gradually sink below the horizon, he cupped her cheek and smiled wholeheartedly.

These past two weeks had been crazy.

They had given him back his passion, given him love and hope. They had given him purpose, and shown him that there was indeed more to life than what he'd had before.

But what he had now, a beautiful girl he was madly in love with, and who loved him in return.

There wasn't more to life than this.

The End

About the Author:

Felicity Heaton is a great believer in love at first sight and the romantic ideal. Having grown up reading extensively, she developed a deep love of classical literature, ranking Jane Eyre, North & South, and Persuasion amongst her all time favourite reads. The most romantic moment of her life was when her husband got down on bended knee on the steps of Sacré Coeur, Paris, at night in front of several hundred spectators and proposed. She was too drunk on love, and subsequently champagne, to care about the audience. All she could see was the man that she loved. A writer of emotion and life, she always strives to touch a chord of familiarity in her readers and give them characters they can love and a read to remember.

To see her other stories, visit:

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