



# PARTY GIRL PERFECT

By

Kathryn Anne Dubois

© copyright February 2005, Kathryn Anne Dubois  
Cover Art by Jenny Dixon, © copyright February 2005  
ISBN 1-58608-267-1  
New Concepts Publishing  
Lake Park, GA 31636  
[www.newconceptspublishing.com](http://www.newconceptspublishing.com)

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

## CHAPTER ONE

“Marriage, merger, what’s the difference,” Bill Drummond grunted. He gave a shrug and placed the rocks glass in Matt’s hand then perched the bottle of Jack Daniels on the end table beside him.

“The difference?” Matt Conner gave himself a mental shake, but there was nothing else he could think to say. Of all the scenarios that raced through his mind when Drummond summoned him to his penthouse on the Upper-East Side, marriage to Drummond’s daughter didn’t come close.

That Drummond might suggest raising the price had occurred to him. He even considered the possibility of a delay in merging their two companies. *That* would have made sense. After all, Drummond was still young. From the outset, Matt had been surprised that he was planning to retire.

Matt sucked down the rest of the liquor in one long toss before placing his glass down with a thud.

“Drummond, you’re crazy.”

“Aw now, Matt, think about it a minute--”

“I don’t need a minute.” Matt gave a laugh. “I don’t even like your

daughter.”

His friend winced. But before Matt could take it back, Drummond gave him a half smile. He shook his head. “I’ve always liked that about you. Honest. Brutally honest.” But then he sank his bulky frame into the leather wing chair opposite Matt and ran a weary hand over his face, suddenly looking every bit of his 58 years. “Okay, then how about I’m asking you as a friend.”

“A friend, huh? Kind of a lot to ask.”

Matt’s best fantasy when he took the elevator up to the sixteenth floor was that Drummond was turning the reins over to him in preparation for the merger, making him CEO of the company Drummond had built from the ground up. Although the men were competitors now, in many ways Matt considered Drummond his mentor, certainly a friend.

“Listen, I could parade a host of men before you who would jump at the chance. Allison’s beautiful--”

“Sure, I’m not blind, Bill, but I’m not crazy either. Now, what’s this about?” Matt stood abruptly, agitated by this whole turn of events and hoping Bill had some reasonable explanation for it. At the same time he pictured Allison the last time he saw her, tearing around the corner on two wheels in her flaming red Jaguar convertible, missing his meticulously restored Mercedes by a hair. He stripped off his jacket and threw it along the leather sofa. “Where did this come from? Last week things were about wrapped up.” Matt rolled back his sleeves and poured himself bourbon,

motioning to Drummond's glass.

His friend nodded. "I've been going over my papers," he said, an exhaustion in his tone that Matt had never heard before. "Personal and financial. Getting things in order."

A sense of unease stole up Matt's spine. He studied his friend for any signs of illness but could detect none. When Drummond took the glass Matt offered, his grip seemed steady and his eyes sharp. "Why personal papers?"

His friend grimaced. "There lies the problem." Drummond tilted his glass and took a long swallow. "My family lawyer seems to think I've forgotten the clause in my company's charter. He's right. The damn charter was drawn up 33 years ago. I was just a kid, what did I know?"

"What charter?" Matt was sure he wasn't going to like the answer.

"You know that I started my company mostly with my wife's family money. Well, my wife was sentimental. She made me promise that the business would always stay in the family, controlled by family. Even if it went public, a family member was to retain the controlling shares."

"Shit!" Matt dropped into the easy chair facing the large stone fireplace. Old photos in ornate gilded frames cluttered the mantle. Mostly old people, rigidly posed, chins held high with scowls probably meant to pass for smiles. "Crap," he said. It was unnecessary for Drummond to finish. He wasn't family so the merger opposed the charter on which the company was built. One solution was to buy out the family seed money, but with compounding interest that could come to millions.

“There’s got to be some way around this,” Matt said.

“There is. I turn my company over to my daughter--”

“Allison?” Matt choked. “She’d have it bankrupt and the money spent in two months flat.” When Drummond started to protest, Matt held up his hand. “Okay, sorry, continue.”

Drummond waved an impatient hand and came from around his desk. He paced before the dormant fireplace. “You marry Allison and our merged companies become marital property.”

“Jesus,” Matt groaned. “Like I said. You’re crazy.”

“You got any better ideas?”

“What about forming divisions--”

“Can’t.”

“Then a partnership, keeping shares separate--”

“No and no. I looked into that, too. Believe me, I’ve turned every stone.” He stood before Matt, hands shoved in his pockets. “I’ve had a team of lawyers on it. They’ve come up with zilch.”

“Well, I’ll find something.” Matt opened his collar and rubbed down the front of his neck. He’d missed his afternoon shave and already the itch of stubble was irritating him.

“Good luck.” Bill turned and headed toward his desk. He said over his shoulder. “When you find it, let me know.”

Matt rose. “Give it a little more time and--”

“I don’t have time.”

Matt eyed him. “Why not?”

“That’s my business.” Drummond sank down into the soft leather chair behind his desk and gave a weary sigh. He faced Matt, looking pained. “You’re just going to have to trust me on this one. There are things I can’t tell you.” He pulled out a drawer and lifted out a stack of manila files. “Look.” He glanced up. “Even I think it’s a crazy idea, but it’s all I can come up with.”

Matt didn’t like the sound of this, but he knew better than to probe too far. And he’d never had any reason not to trust Bill Drummond.

He looked at the files stacked before Drummond. “Now what are you doing?”

“These are dossiers of other candidates. You were my first choice, Matt, but I gotta tell you, these look pretty good, too.”

“Dossiers? Candidates? Jeez, Bill.” Matt began to pace. “Last week this was a straight-forward business deal, a sound one. Just the hint of it created speculation about our merged companies going public. Now it’s become a damned ‘Who’s behind Bachelor Door #1’?”

Drummond shrugged and opened the file on top.

“Okay, I’ll consider it.” Matt stopped before his desk. He flattened his hand on the stack of files. “I’ll consider it all. But I still say there’s another way. At least hold off a few days on anything else. Crap.” He pushed away from the desk. “You just now hit me with this.”

The hell of it was that Matt couldn’t afford not to consider it and

Drummond well knew it. Now was one of the worst times for Matt or anyone else to introduce a new product unless you had a sound track record which Drummond had. And while Matt had been successful, he was still a rookie in IT, even to the point of being considered a young upstart by some. The old guard would be happy to let anyone else risk their capital on Matt's innovative program first and then jump on board when all the quirks were worked out. And Matt had sunk so much of his own capital into the program that if he didn't find a partner soon he was in danger of going under. He'd be damned if he let everything he'd worked for go down the drain.

Drummond had made it clear that he trusted Matt and was willing to take a chance. With Matt's patent on the natural language program that could be adapted to any software and Drummond's capital and firm establishment in the volatile computer industry, both men stood to make millions as a result of their merger.

It was a marriage made in heaven. A *merger*, Matt reminded himself. Hell, if everything went well over the next year, *Matt* could retire.

"Like I said," Drummond grumbled. "Plenty of men wouldn't have to think about it. Frankly, I thought this would be the easy part. It's getting my daughter to consider it that's going to be hell."

Matt snorted. "Right. Marriage would cut into her party time. I forgot."

Drummond glowered at him. "What is it with you two?"

Matt backed off. "Okay, okay." While Drummond might not be happy



with some of the things his daughter did, he loved her and would always defend her.

Matt grabbed up his jacket. "I'll get back to you."

"You do that. And I can't wait forev--"

Matt slammed the door before he could finish and stalked down the marble corridor. The butler appeared from nowhere. It always irritated Matt when servants lurked in every corner, accosting you at the first hint that you might need something. Drummond's roots were no different than his. Why did he put up with it?

"Shall I summon your automobile, sir?" Burden offered.

*Christ*, the guy had to be about ninety and he sounded like he was issuing a legal directive.

"I can get my own car."

"Certainly, sir. Have a good evening."

"Right."

Just to make a point, Matt slammed the outer door, too.

\* \* \* \*

Matt pulled into one of the only spaces left in the harbor lot. Out of habit, when he exited his '62 Mercedes, he ran his hand along its polished black surface looking for scratches he had better not find. He had long since been able to afford a late model with all the amenities, but he had picked this baby up during his gas pumping days from a guy more interested in looks than quality. The car was a steal by all accounts.

It took Matt one year to get the 560 SL up and running. One year of scraping out time between three jobs and scraping out money from a budget already strained beyond its limit. But a fine precision instrument like this would last him another 100,000 miles if he treated it right.

He gave the hood a pat before he headed down the long dock in search of the *Magic Mist* tied up at Pier E. Any other evening Matt would have relished the idea of cruising the waters of the Hudson River with the damp breeze against his skin and the bridges that stretched across the water sparkling like diamond necklaces against the blackest of skies. But tonight he'd be a guest at one of Allison's parties, this one held on a 60-foot cabin cruiser she had leased.

She had to be raking in the profits tonight, because he'd discovered that you had to be well-heeled to get anywhere near the ticket that paid for the cover charge for her exclusive entertainment. Already he could tell he'd neared the vessel. A strong smell of diesel mixed with music vibrated through the still night. Female laughter rose above the deeper rumble of male voices.

When Drummond dumped the news on him last night, Matt had stayed up half the night racking his brain for any solution other than marrying Allison. He was still scrambling, but in the meantime he decided to watch her in action and remind himself why the idea would never work.

It surprised him that a ticket was still available for the midnight cruise. He glanced at his watch. Eight o'clock. Launch time.

Spotting the royal blue of the *Magic Mist's* lettering along its gleaming white bow, he hurried up the plank and onto the wide deck. He took a moment to appreciate the polished Philippine mahogany before he looked up into the gleaming white smile of a guy who could be the double for the Incredible Hulk.

The guy had about fifty pounds on Matt--all muscle. His silk T-shirt was so tight it looked like black paint poured over cement.

"Ticket, sir?"

Matt flashed the ivory engraved card. The Hulk nodded and then motioned behind Matt. Instantly, a waiter appeared, wearing a tux vest over his bare chest.

Matt took a long-stemmed glass of wine and then watched him whisk through the throng of beautiful people, silver tray held high.

Matt retreated off to the side. He was here to observe, not party.

A muffled rumble of the motor and the boat slipped easily out of the harbor and into the calm dark waters of the Hudson. Seagulls rose and squawked, fanning out with a flutter of wings above the churning water.

While his eyes searched for Allison, he hoped to steal a moment, unobserved, to watch the scene unravel. He admitted that he was a little curious about what went on at these parties. Given the expense of the evening, he'd bet most of these guests were living off Daddy's money or a trust fund. At twenty-something, they were too young to have made it on their own.

He knew Allison had a license for the gambling and he doubted anything illegal like drugs were exchanged, maybe brought on discreetly by individuals, but nothing blatant or her little socials would have been shut down long ago.

Instead they were the most popular entertainment of the young and single. And they were continuous. Just one endless bazaar for three years now, ever since her father had her dragged back from college when he found out she wasn't actually attending classes, hadn't set foot in one the entire second semester of her sophomore year.

Drummond couldn't imagine what she'd been doing. For such a smart man, he was incredibly naïve when it came to his daughter. Three guesses what a college coed with an hourglass figure was doing outside of class.

"You look a little lost."

He turned toward the female voice and faced a young woman standing so close he could feel her breath on his neck. It was a public party and the fact that he was a complete stranger seemed not to concern her. For the first time he wondered about security.

He gave her a lazy smile.

Her eyes brightened. "Oh, now that's better." She laid a friendly hand on his arm. When his eyes automatically dropped, she discreetly removed it. She was no more than twenty-five and painfully thin. Her black tube-top and matching straight skirt didn't help. It was mid-summer, for Chrissake. Didn't New York girls wear pastels anymore?

“My name’s Jessica.” She flicked the sides of her cropped hair with the tips of copper nails. He wondered what had happened to long hair, too. He knew he was probably out of touch, but he didn’t care, he still liked long flowing hair ... along with those pastels.

For more than a fleeting moment he thought about sex with this girl. When he realized it had been so long that he couldn’t even remember *how* long, he gave it further thought. Yeah, prolonged, lingering, wet sex enhanced by a full range of feminine moans and soft silky skin. He smiled to himself as he felt his groin grow heavy.

“Come dance with me.” She plucked playfully at his cotton shirt.

Too bad everything this young woman was doing was a turn off. He wasn’t so dense to have missed that male as aggressor had disappeared along with the pastels and long hair, but still he didn’t like it. What little interest he had in her died. He guessed he was just born in the wrong generation.

“I’m not much of a dancer,” he said.

“I’ll teach you.” She moved closer, pressing her tiny breasts to his chest.

“Maybe later.” He subtly eased her back by shifting his weight against the deck railing. She pouted prettily, an act he was sure she had practiced, and then turned on high-heeled sandals.

He scanned the crowd once again as sunset turned the smoky haze hovering over New Jersey to brilliant streaks of purple and pink. Was he

ever this young? He didn't think so. Not ten years ago, not ever.

A blur of long honeyed curls caught his attention. It was Allison, moving at a graceful stroll through the crowd. As though on a timer, she stopped to talk with each group of guests as she passed, touching shoulders with a delicate hand and greeting each one with a warm smile.

It surprised him, because the Allison he knew had been clumsily dumping trays on his lap or drinks on his head since he'd met her when she was a gangly thirteen-year-old. Being seated next to her at the last fundraiser had been a disaster. He'd had to throw out his jacket after that night, so stained was it with shrimp cocktail sauce and the Au Jus meant for the prime rib.

A tall guy in the required black slipped his arm around her waist. She tossed her hair and gave him a teasing warning before removing his hand and floating on. Matt's eyes dropped to her three inch heels sliding along the glossy deck. If she had risked the heels for the purpose of drawing attention to her shapely legs, it worked. Still, he'd bet anything she'd be on her ass before nightfall.

She laughed softly, a low gentle sound that carried through the air, mesmerizing the next black-clad guy who dipped down to bite her neck. She slapped at him affectionately and then gave him a firm push. He let her go, smiling with appreciation. She was a natural player.

As she pivoted on her tall heels with surprising ease and headed in his direction, he considered that it was possible she'd outgrown her clumsy

phase in the year since he'd last seen her.

He leaned back against the railing, elbows propped and legs crossed, watching her, waiting. When she was half way across the deck from him, she waved at someone to his left, blew a kiss, and then continued on with graceful strides across the polished floor. The short silky dress she wore floated around her thighs and caught on the breeze, sending the hem billowing out to reveal a long slender thigh. Another heavy throb to his groin and then she turned and spotted him.

She startled and stopped in her tracks, but her heels didn't. As if on cue, she went skidding toward him, arms flailing at her sides, blue eyes wide. He bolted up and reached out, locking his hands around her waist lest she continue overboard. She smacked into him with a thud, every soft curvy inch of her. He let out a laugh and his groin now went into full alert.

"Hello, Allison." He grinned.

She swallowed a gasp. "Matthew." She clutched at his hands, but he held her tight, allowing her breasts to press a little longer against his chest. "What are you doing here?"

"Is that how you greet all your guests?"

"Guests?"

He raised a brow. "I bought a ticket."

"You bought a ticket?" She struggled to pry his fingers from around her waist but he held her firm.

"Any law against it?"

“No, I just didn’t think you liked to have fun.” She nudged at his fingers. “You can let me go now.”

For that remark he gripped her tighter, although he knew it was true. Besides, she had enough fun for both of them and then some. If she had been through even half what he had growing up, she would understand, but as it were, she never would. She had no more respect for hard work than he had patience for mindless indulgence.

When he released her, she stepped back a distance and smoothed down her skirt. Apparently, she was saving her flirtations for more important guests.

“Well, as I said, or actually didn’t say, that is....” She took a little breath, fanning her hand across her cleavage. “This is a surprise.” She glanced around, sweeping a hand over the crowd and talking a mile a minute. “Have you sampled the Hors d’oeuvres?” She indicated the butlered trays, avoiding his gaze. “The Cajun shrimp is delicious.”

As always Allison was uncomfortable around him. He knew that she probably didn’t like him any more than he liked her. For that reason, and a million others, Drummond was crazy to suggest what he had in mind.

“No, I’m here to sample the women,” he baited her.

“Women?”

“That’s what I said.”

She blushed. A full blush that spread along fresh-looking skin and disappeared under the square neckline of her top. He doubted it was



embarrassment at the suggestion that he'd find willing women, or anger—he didn't think Allison capable of anger. She was nervous. Probably afraid he was here spying for her father.

"That doesn't happen here," she stammered, tugging up the neckline of her black top. He wondered briefly if a funeral was scheduled for some time during the night.

He feigned surprise. "Oh?" He gave a glance around at couples already in intimate embraces. "Everyone's celibate? I've stumbled into a jubilee for priests and nuns?"

"No, I mean—" She tucked an errant curl behind her ear and the rosy blush deepened. She must be near panic at what he would tell her father. She ran the tip of her tongue along her lips.

He found himself involuntarily leaning closer towards the delicate whiff of perfume that lingered between them. He reflexively breathed in the subtle scent.

She stepped back and gave him a small frown. "Well, I hope you enjoy whatever, ah, I need to get back to work, so—"

"Work?"

She chewed her lip. "Of course, Matthew. This is a legitimate business. I pay taxes, keep books."

"Uh-huh."

He was getting a sick sort of pleasure out of getting her flustered, but it was just so damned easy. Until the thick-necked hulk drew up beside her

and caressed her elbow. “Sweetheart?” He turned to Matt and gave him a quick once over.

She visibly relaxed. “Kevin.” She smiled and covered his hand. “Umm,” she said, indicating Matt, “this is Matthew Connor, a colleague of my father’s. Matthew, this is Kevin Riley.”

Matt nodded and shook a hand the size of a meat cleaver.

Kevin presented him with a full smile of the straightest white teeth. “I’ll have to take Allison now. She’s needed on the lower deck.”

“More work?” Matt challenged her.

“Come on, sweetheart.” The Incredible Hulk turned her into his arms and whisked her off before she could answer.

\* \* \* \*

When Matt returned to his apartment on the West Side, his business phone held several messages. One was from Drummond. Although he was eager to contact the other candidates and at least feel them out about a merger if not a marriage, he was waiting to hear first from Matt.

*Great. Matt was no longer a potential business partner but a candidate for Allison’s hand.*

A few other messages were recorded. One from his accountant suggesting he transfer several CD’s into Municipal Bonds before the interest killed him and another call from one of his secretaries thanking him for giving her time off with pay to care for her mother.

Matt made a mental note to call a colleague in the geriatric industry to

see what kind of support was available to her. The guy was researching new options of bringing care into the homes of the elderly.

Next came the familiar voice of his sister Janey. No doubt she called his business phone instead of his cell to avoid talking to him. As predicted, he was right. Along with a cheerful monologue about how well she was doing in her summer economics class, she slipped in that she'd decided to go to San Diego for a week before the fall session began.

*Like hell she would.* She ended with an affectionate reminder that she'd see him soon.

On impulse, he picked up the phone and punched in her cell phone. After four rings, her voice mail picked up. "Hi. It's Janey. Just leave a message." An irritating tone followed.

"Janey," he drawled into the phone. "I know you're purposely not picking up. And you're not going anywhere with a group of horny college kids, so forget it. Come for dinner this week. I miss you." As he hung up, he wondered where she was. It was one a.m. on a Saturday night. It was possible she went to a club and couldn't hear her cell ring. But in that case, she would have put it on vibrate like she did during class. He wondered about boyfriends. Not that she'd tell him if there were any. He'd just obsess about them like he was doing now. Well, somebody had to look out for her.

As he stripped off his shirt and walked into his bedroom, his thoughts returned to the women on the boat tonight that were not much older than Janey. He couldn't picture her among them in a few years. Not if he had

anything to say about it, and he'd have plenty.

But Allison had been an innocent girl when he'd first met her, sweet, too, affectionate with her father and polite to him, even though he wasn't much older than her. Nevertheless, she had turned into one of the many superficial party girls he might have met along the way. It was Drummond's fault in the way he tried to make up for her mother dying when she was ten. Drummond could have loved and cared for her without spoiling her. It was a damned shame, but it was too late now. He stepped into the tiled bathroom off his master suite.

Now Bill Drummond wanted to dump his problem on him? He splashed warm water on his face and picked up the oatmeal soap Janey had been bugging him to try. The tiny granules meant for scrubbing away skin felt unexpectedly good and the soap's clean smell was oddly familiar tonight. Like Allison's perfume. He breathed deep the pleasant scent. For a woman who exuded sex, her perfume tonight had had subtleness, a clean innocence that had surprised him.

He dried his face and went over the questions he had thought up tonight on the ride home. Drummond hadn't mentioned a pre-nuptial agreement, so perhaps Allison's mother had failed to account for any possibility of a divorce. Surely that was a loophole because the company charter couldn't supersede the law. He needed to see those personal papers.

He stretched along the California King that allowed his tall frame the room he needed. The bed was one of the few luxuries he'd indulged in when

he bought the high-rise's top floor. The apartment had been expensive enough, so he took his time acquiring the furniture that suited him.

The double skylight was dead center above the bed and reminded him of those nights he'd slept on the roof of his parents' dilapidated twin in the only poor section of Monclair--a tiny triangle on the other side of the tracks that the rest of the town avoided.

Watching the stars as a kid had calmed him, helped him forget that his father was passed out drunk on the patch of crabgrass they called their front lawn and that his mother was out partying all night. Studying the stars had given him hope for a future of possibilities.

Maybe that was why he had liked the water so much tonight and stayed longer than he had planned. A clear sky with no walls to hem him in managed to soothe the tensions associated with this current dilemma. The rest of it he could have done without, especially the gambling. Pure waste of money. He imagined that Allison raked in most of her profits on gambling and alcohol. Not that it mattered how much she made, because apparently, it was never enough. From what Drummond intimated, the profits slipped through her fingers as fast as all the money he doled out to her from her trust fund, with nothing to show for it.

Matt clasped his hands behind his neck. The trace of soap on his wrists drifted up to him as he studied the stars. It was a soothing scent, fresh and clean. He gave himself a mental shake. How could he even consider Drummond's proposal?

Before he drifted off to sleep, another thought crossed his mind. It was highly likely, given how he would cramp Allison's life-style, that if it came down to marriage in the end, any candidate would look better to Allison than him.

\* \* \* \*

"It must be bad this time." Kevin chuckled. "You've been banging your head against that center post since we came down here ten minutes ago, when I started counting the money."

"Bad?" Allison wailed. "It was awful."

"Can't be much worse than all the other times." He carefully stacked the hundreds in piles of ten along the cabin's bar.

"One year, one agonizing year, imagining the scene in my mind, when we'd see each other again and finally, after all my planning and practicing, he'd see me in a whole new light, his image of me as a frivolous lanky--"

"You're not lanky, Allison."

"In *his* eyes I am. And young, pathetically young." She fisted an unmanageable tangle of curls into a cloth tie and tugged. "I even planned the dress I'd wear."

"He'd probably rather see you without the dress," Kevin mumbled, starting on the few thousand-dollar bills.

"I was going to be so sophisticated when I walked into the company's annual Charity Ball. I had one short month to go, but he ruined everything by suddenly showing up." Allison tumbled onto the couch and covered her

face.

“Okay, what happened?”

She propped up on her elbows. “I literally, and I mean literally, tripped into his arms.”

Kevin snorted. “Oh, yeah, bet that was a hardship for him.” He started on the credit card slips now, checking first for signatures and then he’d tally them up.

“Now what am I going to do? Wait another year, hoping time will erase ten years of my bumbling?”

“I can’t believe the only guy with perpetual boredom on his face all evening is the same Prince Charming you tortured me about all during college. He looks pretty ordinary to me.”

She sat up with a start and then went over to the bar and jumped up onto the stool beside him. “How can you say that?”

He shrugged. “Here, do something useful. Start binding the piles.”

“You don’t know Matthew like I do.” She wrapped the red rubberband twice around a pile of bills. “He’s ... guarded. Something has hurt him deeply. I know I can reach him.” Her voice trailed off on a sigh.

She had loved Matthew from the moment she looked into those whiskey-colored eyes, wounded eyes that studied everything around him with cool regard, touching no one. As a thirteen-year-old, she hadn’t understood in what way she wanted to reach him, but now as a woman she knew.

She wanted those eyes burning for her, inflamed with a passion for her only. So hot, that just a look from her would set him on fire.

She stifled a tiny laugh. As though she would *know* anything about that.

Her thoughts grew dreamy. And in his desperate wanting of her, she would melt away every barrier that kept him from loving her in the way in which they were destined. She smiled at her own sense of drama even as she believed it.

Oh, she knew she was hopelessly romantic, laughably naïve at times, but that was okay with her.

Kevin stopped his counting and laid a comforting hand on hers. “Sweetheart, if anyone can warm a cold heart, it’s you.”

She gave him a grateful smile. “I hope so.”

“Now let me finish this so we can get the loot in the safe and go home.”

She nodded. “I’ll tally the cash.”

\* \* \* \*

One half hour later, they sat bleary-eyed and dumbfounded.

Allison blinked. “Should we count it again?”

“We’ve gone over it twice.” Kevin slid off the stool and walked in a slow circle around the center of the cabin. His head came up. “You know what this means.”

“I think I do. We have enough money to tell the contractors to break



ground?”

He smiled a deep drawing smile that warmed her heart.

“Now don’t start me crying,” Allison scolded, “or I’ll never stop.”

“Come here.” The raw emotion in Kevin’s expression had her in tears anyway. When she ran into his arms, he hugged her close. “My sister would be happy, Allison, real happy.”

“Yes. *The Sharon House*. We’ll dedicate it this November, on the fourth anniversary of her death.”

He brushed his lips along her forehead. “I’ve got a better idea. How about on her birthday, in January? It would be more in line with the construction schedule, anyway.”

“That’s perfect.” She ruffled his blonde hair. “Who said blondes are dumb?”

They looked at the pile of money heaped upon the bar and laughed.

“Let’s get it locked away and you home,” Kevin said.

“I can take a cab.”

“Don’t argue. Henry’s waiting up for me.” He gave her a wink. “Let’s hustle.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Burden was the first person Allison saw as she rushed through the front door late Sunday afternoon. He stood at attention by the formal dining room, looking anxious. She gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “Daddy’s not upset that I’m late?”

“No, of course not.” He made a show of wiping off her kiss with his handkerchief. “But need I remind you that you’re not to be kissing the help?”

“You might as well, you’ve been reminding me for 23 years.”

Mrs. Murphy scurried out from the kitchen. “Good, you’re here. “ She clucked her tongue as she picked up tangles of Allison’s curls and tried smoothing them into place. The cook gave an exasperated sigh. Allison took the opportunity to give her a peck, too.

“No need to butter me up,” the tiny woman scolded. “You should have been here an hour ago.” She took the corner of her apron and rubbed the tip of Allison’s chin. “Mr. Connor’s here.”

Allison started. “*Matthew* Connor?”

“Is there any other?” Burden drawled. “He was here Friday night,

too.”

Allison turned to Burden. “What did they talk about? Did they mention my name?”

“As a matter of fact--” Burden’s lips quirked. “--they did.”

“What did they say?”

“I’m sorry, Miss, but that I didn’t hear.”

Allison chewed the tip of her nail. “Matthew was at the party last night.”

“Mr. Connor?” they both said, exchanging a quick look.

Mrs. Murphy made a sour face. “I didn’t think he liked to have fun.”

Allison giggled. “That’s exactly what I said to him.”

The cook frowned. “You did?”

“I’m afraid I did.” She pressed her hands to her cheeks, still burning at the thought. “I’m always reduced to a thirteen-year-old around Matthew.”

“Ah, well....” Mrs. Murphy tugged on the hem of Allison’s T-shirt.

“The lad would have to be blind to still see you as such.”

“He might just be,” Mr. Burden muttered.

The two women looked up.

“And if you ask me,” he continued, “he needs more than his eyes checked.”

“Burden!” Allison stifled a chuckle.

“Well, no one’s askin’ you.” Mrs. Murphy’s brow arched.

“Very well then.” Burden bowed. “Shall I let your father know you’re

here, Miss?”

Allison gasped. “I can’t go in like this.” Her jeans were dusty from polishing the shelter’s oak railing, and her shirt was stained with Kool-Aid from playing with the twins.

“Nonsense, you look fine.” The cook gave her a dubious glance. “You can’t keep them waiting any longer.”

When Burden opened the door, Mrs. Murphy fairly pushed Allison through.

Matt was loosening his tie for the fourth time when Allison finally burst through the door. His first thought when he looked at her was to wonder why he’d even bothered with the tie. She looked windswept. A Hard-Rock Café T-shirt, shrunk from too many washings, stretched across her breasts and hiked up her bare midriff. Instead of being out as the servants claimed, he wondered if she’s just gotten out of bed and simply slipped on the worn jeans over her panties.

He glanced at his watch before he could linger on that image. Two o’clock. With a determined effort, he rose to greet her, intending to pave the way for what was to come. If he had his way, and he planned to, she’d be cooperating in this little merger before dessert.

“Hello, Allison,” he said warmly. He walked up close and reached for her. As he expected, she looked surprised. With the exception of last night when she had fallen into his arms, he had never touched her, not even the usual social peck on the cheek. He had a theory as to why but never allowed

his thoughts to go there for too long. He caught her waist, drawing her to him in a possessive move and then he bent, pressing his lips against her cheek. A fresh summer sweat mingling with a familiar sweet scent drifted up from her T-shirt and filled him. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

As he gazed down at her, a full enticing flush spread over her cheeks. When he guided her to her seat, Drummond glanced over and gave him a nod of approval. Matt groaned inwardly. Maybe Drummond couldn’t handle his daughter but Matt certainly could.

He took his place across from her while Drummond sat at the head of a table that accommodated sixteen. A chandelier hung from the fifteen-foot ceiling, throwing shadows along the suffocatingly formal wallpaper where ornate vines of green brocade were twisted around too many dark flowers. Why weren’t they in the breakfast room?

Years ago, when Matt was Drummond’s star employee, he had often stayed for dinner, and they had always eaten in the smaller sunlit room.

Burden had trailed behind Allison and was now standing guard at her side. Like earlier, when Matt had waited impatiently for Allison, Burden was again scrutinizing Matt. Mrs. Murphy hadn’t looked happy with Matt either.

As she bustled around now, expertly balancing small silver trays, she regularly shot Matt surreptitious glances, probably sensing Matt’s mounting irritation. Why shouldn’t he be? Twenty minutes and two courses of appetizers later, Drummond was still sustaining a monologue of small talk

that Matt found an excruciating waste of time. He finally discarded his tie as the plates were cleared for the entree, disgusted that it was taking Drummond an entire afternoon to work up the courage to confront his own daughter.

Worse, Allison had scarcely eaten anything and, unless he was imagining it, had barely looked at him, confirming again that even the pretense of a marriage, one that he'd no doubt be able to dissolve eventually, would not be easy.

"Will you excuse me a moment, Daddy?"

Matt looked up. *What now?*

She gave Matt a tentative smile and rose. "I'll just go freshen up a bit before the salmon."

*Lacking even a hint of make-up, she couldn't look any fresher.*

When she stood, she trapped her toe in the chair leg and tripped forward. Burden caught her elbow with amazing dexterity for a ninety-year-old as she struggled with the chair. He finally settled her and escorted her out.

Matt watched as the heavy door closed behind them.

Drummond threw down his napkin and shoved back his chair. "Well, you're doing lousy. You've been scowling and staring at her breasts all night."

Matt frowned. "I haven't been scowling and I haven't been staring at her breasts." He thought a minute. "Have I?"

“This whole thing is painful to watch.”

*Was he even looking at her?*

“I’ve decided after we break the news, that I’ll give her a week to mull it over. I can’t just throw you at her. For the September Ball, I’ll seat young Todd Chandler and his father at our table along with my other prospect, Eric Lake.”

*Of course he was looking at her. She had been sitting right across from him.*

“After the ball, she’ll have to decide which of you four men it’ll be.”

Matt looked up. “Have you forgotten about Bachelor Number One, me?”

“Like I said. I can’t force you on her and both companies are good prospects, not as good as your—”

“Todd Chandler hasn’t worked a day in his life,” Matt scoffed. “You want a guy like that marrying your daughter? He wouldn’t know the first thing about taking care of her.”

“Taking care? Men don’t take care of women anymore.” Drummond gave a snort. “You’ll never make headway with an attitude like that.”

“Who’s this Eric Lake? Sounds like a movie star.”

“Cottman and Company.”

“Shit.” Matt pushed aside his plate. “You hate the way they do business.”

“What do you care? If I merge with them, I’ll be in a whole different

field of software. I won't *be* your competitor anymore and you'll have a better chance of gaining the lead in the market."

Matt stood and paced slowly. "This is the most convoluted crap," he muttered, shoving his hands deep in his pockets. His chin shot up. "Who *is* Lake exactly? Another rich man's playboy son?"

"What's it to you?"

"I just think a father should be more careful about who he marries his daughter off to."

"In that case, you're out of the running too."

Matt cursed and ran a hand through his scalp.

"This whole thing is keeping me up nights," Drummond grumbled. "I can't force her—"

"Just cut off her trust fund. That'll get her to come around quick. Don't you control it until she marries?"

Drummond bolted forward. "Allison's a good girl. She'll cooperate because ... because she always has."

Before Matt could raise another objection to Drummond's reasoning, Burden ushered Allison back to the dining room, her T-shirt replaced with a soft blue sweater and dressed in black slacks that looked tailor cut to her figure. Although she'd pulled back her hair, she still looked windswept. Wisps of curl fought to surface along her hairline.

Burden guided her over to her seat as though she would have forgotten where it was in the time it took to change her clothes. The man



continually fussed over her. Matt didn't think he'd ever seen anyone more pampered, and he'd seen plenty of Daddy's girls while he was growing up. He had spent plenty of time with them in the back seat of his car and in their homes when their parents were away. As long as he came and went through the back door.

When Burden pulled out Allison's chair, she descended into it without giving Burden so much as a nod of appreciation.

Mrs. Murphy burst through the swinging doors and blustered about with plates of salmon. She paused at Allison's chair. "I put your lemon sauce on the side, just the way you like it, dear."

Matt rolled his eyes.

Allison blinked over at him.

"What?" Matt frowned. "You need someone to cut your fish for you, too?"

"What the—" Drummond barked.

"Okay." Matt held up a hand.

"Of course not," Allison bit out. "What ever are you getting at?" She picked up her knife and fork and then dropped them, sending them clattering onto the plate.

"Allison?" Her father reached over and patted her hand. "Are you okay, honey?"

"Not really."

Matt gave a laugh. "Why wouldn't she be? She keeps us hanging and

then is waited on hand and foot when she finally shows.”

Allison startled, close to tears, a ploy Matt was sure she had practiced to perfection. He could feel the heat of disapproving eyes all around him, but he kept his gaze on her, letting her know her little performance would never fool him. Her eyes misted over. She looked delicate and vulnerable, wholly in need of rescuing, and absolutely beautiful.

Mrs. Murphy patted her shoulder. “Never you mind. Just enjoy your meal.” Mrs. Murphy shot him a look that could kill.

Matt raised his hands in exasperation. He knew that Allison had no idea how spoiled she was and neither did anyone else.

She looked up at Matt suddenly with those big blue eyes. He cocked his head and waited. *Now what?*

She turned quickly to her father. “I have a headache.” She took a little breath and her skin flushed to a light pink. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can stay for supper.”

Mrs. Murphy tisked beside her and Burden rushed forward, ready to help her out of her chair.

“Honey, can’t you just take an aspirin?”

She looked a little stunned. “I don’t think so.”

“I don’t believe this,” Matt choked.

“Connor, stay out of this.”

Matt turned to him. “You’re just going to let her go?”

“What is it, Daddy?” Fear darkened her light blue eyes.

“Nothing, honey, it can wait.”

“Will you excuse me then, Daddy, Matthew?”

Matt’s own eyes narrowed. She looked on the verge of total distress. He suddenly wondered why? Could she have gotten wind of her father’s hair-brained scheme to marry and merge? His eyes dropped to her mouth. Just like the night he surprised her on the boat, she slid the tip of her tongue along her bottom lip, wetting her mouth in an anxious gesture that he found intriguing. His eyes settled on the light sheen of moisture that glistened along the curve of her bottom lip.

“Matt!” Drummond barked.

Matt’s jerked his head to him.

“Allison is excusing herself.”

“What? Oh....” Matt gave a sigh. “Well, go on then. If your headache is that bad.”

She mumbled a hasty acknowledgement and ran out the door so fast that Matt wondered if she’d feigned the illness so she could slip out for some nightlife.

“Connor,” Drummond said as Matt watched Allison disappear through the door with the servants scurrying after her. “Take your eyes off my daughter’s backside.”

“What?”

“No wonder she ran out of here so quick.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Yeah? You were looking at her like you wanted to shove aside the damned salmon and make a meal out of *her*.”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“Am I?”

“Damned right you are. I told you, I don’t even like your daughter.”

“Tell that to your dick!”

“Now wait a minute.” Matt gave a cynical chuckle. “You’ve got this all wrong. Besides, your daughter is hardly uncomfortable with male attention.”

Drummond’s eyes narrowed to slits.

Matt held up a hand. “I’m just saying that she’s no virgin.”

“How do you know?”

*Oh Jesus*. Matt choked on a laugh. “All right. Well....” Matt pushed back from the table and in a leisurely gesture reached for his drink, having no intention of taking this further. He twirled his glass lazily. “I *don’t* know, Bill. And I apologize if you thought I was ... *admiring* your daughter. Believe me, you have no worry on that count.” Matt was amazed that Drummond could be so naive.

Then he thought of Janey and his amazement faded. He frowned into his drink.

“Maybe being married to Allison won’t be as bad as you claim it would be,” Drummond said.

“Oh, for Chrissake. You mean even if I marry her, I can’t have sex

with her?”

“Why would you? You and I both know, and so will she, that this is a business alliance.”

“Right, I know that.” Matt shook his head, wondering how the conversation had gotten so off track. “Of course I won’t. Our objective couldn’t be clearer. Which reminds me. I’ve been thinking. Does anything prevent me from divorcing her? The company could still stay intact, I’d remain as CEO, and you could persuade her to turn her voting power over to you, or me, if you didn’t want it.” Matt said.

“I’m looking into that. Allison has no interest in the company. Regardless of a divorce, she’d still be half owner, or a very wealthy woman should our merged company go public, and I could rest easy.”

“Good, then this is looking better by the minute.”

\* \* \* \*

Nancy, her father’s secretary, greeted Allison with a warm smile. “How wonderful to see you, honey. It’s been far too long.”

Allison hugged the older woman. Like Burden and Mrs. Murphy, Nancy often took a much-appreciated maternal role where Allison was concerned.

Allison glanced at the closed door to her father’s office and a feeling of dread swamped her. She knew something was up and that it had to do with her father’s business, but since she’d never been involved before in any way, she couldn’t imagine how she figured into it now.

She lowered her voice. "What's going on? My father has never summoned me to his office."

"I wish I knew, honey. But don't go borrowing trouble. No father ever protected his daughter better than yours." She gave Allison a comforting smile and nudged her toward the door. "One last thing. Matthew is in there."

"Again?" Allison clutched Nancy's wrists. "What for?"

"I don't know. But you're a big girl now. Don't go fretting over that Matthew Connor. In fact, if you were smart, you'd ignore him altogether and see how he likes *that*." She swept her eyes over Allison. "You are most definitely all grown up. You look lovely, dear."

Nancy's comment reminded Allison that she was ill dressed for a business meeting. In two hours, she and Kevin were expected at several popular clubs in the SoHo district to persuade owners to advertise their upcoming beach party. She pulled up the neckline of her black tube-top, edged with shimmery glass beads. Since her loose blonde curls would have obscured jewelry, she'd decided against the large gold hoop earrings, but the strappy high-heeled sandals that Kevin always insisted she wear for important evenings were hopelessly out of place here.

She stifled a tiny groan before Nancy held open the door and ushered her in. "Good luck," Nancy said softly as she cleared the threshold.

Her father looked up and immediately came from behind his desk and greeted her with a kiss. "Allison, honey."

She embraced him with a nervous hug. "Hello, Daddy."

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Matthew relaxing on the loveseat by the large picture windows, a drink in his hand and his legs stretched out negligently before him.

When she turned casually and gave him an anxious nod, he tipped his glass. "Allison?" He rose briefly but made no move to greet her. And she could already sense by his black mood that everything she said would meet with his disapproval.

Yesterday, she'd had such hopes when he greeted her so warmly, and the feel of his lips against her skin had awakened a hunger in her that had stolen her breath away. But later, his eyes had coldly bore into hers, raking over her as though he were mad at her. He had frowned and scowled throughout the appetizers, later barking at her and making her so nervous, she couldn't stay through dinner. Mostly, she was sure he wasn't even listening, but simply disapproved on principle.

Far from succeeding in getting him to fall in love with her, she realized last night that he didn't even like her.

Even now, she fought back tears at the thought, suddenly feeling worse than that night her father and Matthew had worked beside the rooftop pool and she had managed to walk right into it while carrying a full tray of sandwiches. She had been barely sixteen and sadly underdeveloped, so her little sundress had few curves for which to cling. Completely mortified, she vowed right then to steer clear of him until she was truly a woman.

Her father motioned to the small circle of comfortable chairs where

Matthew sat. "Go sit, honey. I'll get you a drink."

"Thanks, Daddy."

She blew a wisp of hair off her forehead and tugged down the hem of her short skirt. Matthew dropped an eye down her legs, making her wish she'd worn normal stockings instead of silvery ones. It annoyed her that he made her feel like a little girl trying to play grown up.

She girded herself, drawing strength from her annoyance and headed toward him with practiced poise, until she reached the Persian carpet. It graced the sitting area. With the next step, she caught her toe on the rug and to her horror pitched forward with amazing speed.

"Oh my God!"

Matthew shot up just in time to catch her, grabbing her waist and then managing to send them both toppling onto the couch from which he had just risen.

"Crap."

She landed on top of him, stretched along his full length.

She gasped, struggling to get off him at the same time she tried to keep her skirt from inching further up her thighs.

"Stop squirming, for Chrissake," he said, his breath warming her cleavage as he tried to steady her. She fanned a hand across her breasts and lost her balance. He clutched her tighter just as she went tumbling off the couch, taking him with her. They landed on the floor, this time with him dead center on top of her, the heavy weight of him crushing her.



She let out a startled cry. “I’m sorry.” She squirmed and pushed up against his chest.

“Jesus Christ, you are an absolute menace,” he breathed, his face just inches from hers. His eyes darkened and he grew still.

“Matthew?” She held her breath. He continued to pin her so close she could feel his heart beating against her own. He felt warm and solid. His gaze locked onto hers and held.

“Matthew?” she whispered. “You’ll have to move if I’m to get up.”

“Connor!” her father shouted. He bounded toward them from across the room. “What the *hell* are you doing?”

Matthew rolled off her and onto his back. He raked his hands down his face. “Jesus, you are the clumsiest—”

“For God’s sake, Allison,” her father grumbled. “Get up. What in the hell are you two doing?”

Allison scurried up on her knees, tugging down her skirt. “I tripped, Daddy, and Matthew caught me.”

“Tripped?”

Matthew dragged himself up to the sofa as her father helped her to her feet.

“Connor—”

“Don’t start with me, Drummond.” Matthew gave a choked laugh. “I can’t help it if your daughter routinely trips on top of me and dumps drinks on my lap every time I see her.”

Allison burned with embarrassment, sinking as deep into the cushions as she could get, short of crawling under them, which she would have preferred. She twisted and tugged the hem of her skirt as though she could stretch it into a respectable length.

Matthew settled down opposite her, a curious look in his expression as he studied her. A muscle worked along his throat. Then he bounded off the couch. "I need another drink."

Her father came up beside her and handed her a tonic and lime. "Here, try to relax."

"I can't. Tell me what's wrong." She took a small sip from her drink before facing him squarely. Just in time to see him and Matthew exchange a quick glance with each other from across the room.

Her anxiety increased.

## CHAPTER THREE

“Nothing’s wrong,” Allison’s father said, sinking down adjacent to her and settling his own drink carefully on the coffee table. He ran a finger around the rim. “Nothing that can’t be solved with a little ingenuity.”

Matthew joined them, watching her closely. She wondered what he had to do with any of this. When she gave him a sideways glance, he kneaded the back of his neck with an impatient hand.

Her eyes lingered. Even despite his displeasure with her, she wanted to feel him touching her again. When he saw her looking at him, he stopped rubbing his neck and returned her gaze. His jaw went rigid as she studied him, but she couldn’t look away. She had such an urge to feel the rough texture of his jaw under her fingertips. But he hardly looked approachable.

She turned an anxious eye to her father. “What kind of ingenuity, Daddy?”

Her father let out a breath. “I hardly know where to begin.” He settled back into his chair and ran a frustrated hand through his scalp. “Your mother set up certain conditions concerning her family money that have put me in a bind, but I’m sure she felt it wise at the time. Just like the way she set up

your trust fund with conditions.”

Allison had never heard her father talk like this. “Do you need my trust fund? If things aren’t going well—”

“Me? Of course not,” he blustered. “I’d never dip into your trust fund.”

Then his tone softened. “But thank you, honey.” He patted her hand. “Your mother used to say that no child had a sweeter disposition. She’d say the same if she could see you today.” His eyes lifted heavenward. “I wish to God she *was* here.” He cleared his throat.

“Anyway, since you’re offering me your trust fund, can I assume that things are going well with your business?”

“My business?”

Matthew gave an impatient grunt. Her father shot him a warning glare before turning a tolerant eye back to her. Allison couldn’t imagine where all this was heading.

“Yes, honey. The parties. Boats, ski chalets, ranches. Young Todd Chandler told his father that you’re talking about throwing a party out near Big Sky, Montana this winter.”

“Oh ... yes, some of my regulars are getting bored with skiing in Vermont.”

Matthew muffled a snort. Allison knew he considered her parties frivolous, but she just shrugged it off, knowing the profit they had raked in last night. It was more than enough to plan a party out West. But not a dime

of the profits would be wasted on skiing. After they set aside money for the next party, everything else, like always, would go to the building fund.

If their success continued through fall, the new women's shelter would be operating by Christmas.

"That's good, Allison," her father said. "Why, you don't even need your trust fund, do you?"

"My trust fund?" Why were they back to that again?

"Yes, honey. Since you're doing so well."

"But ... I do need my trust fund."

Her father looked a little flustered. "Why? What in the world do you do with the money?"

Allison grew increasingly wary. "I ... use it, for things."

"Things?" Her father shifted in his chair, giving Matthew a self-conscious glance. "Honey, it worries me the way money slips through your fingers."

"Daddy, what's going—"

Her father sighed. "Your mother was probably right in seeing that I handle it until you marry."

"Marry?"

"Those were the provisions your mother made. You didn't know that?"

"I ... I guess I didn't. I never thought much about the money at all. It was just always there."

Matthew gave a small shake of his head before downing his drink.

She knew her explanation sounded ridiculous to him, but it was true. During college, while most of her friends were on a tight budget, Allison had more than enough money for everyone.

“Well, it’s time you did think about it. Maybe I should pull it back.”

“What?” Allison gasped in disbelief.

Matthew raised a brow, his expression smug.

Her father leaned forward and patted her hand. “You don’t need the money. Your personal expenses are minimal since you live at home, your car is paid for, and I pay your insurance. How much money could it cost to get your hair and nails done?”

“I’m ... I’m not sure.” For the first time she realized the absurdity of her situation. She had never tracked her monthly personal expenses, had no reason to, although she could account to the penny the operating costs for the women’s shelter. The total monthly expenses equaled close to the ten thousand dollars she received each month from her trust fund.

“I’m not sure what it would total.” She looked at her father as she crept near the edges of panic. “I’ve never worried about expenses like presents or eating out....” Her voice trailed off to a whisper. “Or the cost of the beautiful silk dress I bought for the Ball next month. It’s a perfect fit, which you know is hard for me,” she continued as if in a fog, “because my legs are so long and my top is way too—”

Matthew choked on a laugh.

She blushed, realizing she must sound like an idiot, but she was desperate to stop her father.

“For God’s sake, Allison. What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know how much any of it costs, because I don’t pay for any of it. I charge everything to your credit card.”

Matthew groaned aloud.

Allison was dangerously close to tears. “Why is *Matthew* here?”

Her father ran a hand over his face, not even listening to her. “You’ve got to start taking more responsibility.”

He can’t do this, was all Allison could think. Without her trust fund for the day-to-day expenses, they’d have to siphon from the building fund which would put the construction back by ... by--her mind scrambled to sort the figures running through her head. And they had to be out of the old house they were using by January 1<sup>st</sup>. It was being demolished by the city. Three years ago, even that had been near impossible to find.

“You can’t do this, Daddy, please,” she choked.

“Now Allison, listen to the rest of what I have to say—”

“I *do* know how much things cost. Gas ... gas for example is much higher in New York, but crossing over the bridges into New Jersey to fill up saves a lot of money.”

“What?”

“And bread, if you buy it at the end of the day—”

“You’ve never bought a loaf of bread in your life, especially stale

bread. Now get a hold of yourself.”

“You don’t understand—”

“I understand better than you think. I’ve spoiled you, Allison. While you’ve grown into a warm loving woman, and I’m grateful for that, you need some lessons in fiscal responsibility.”

“What is it you’re not telling me?”

Allison gazed at her father, blue eyes adoring and looking very young. The stance must serve her well, Matt thought, because to his knowledge her father had never refused his daughter anything, and right now Matthew would bet the man was about to lose the battle.

Her father sat back into his chair and loosened his tie. Allison’s eyes followed every move. And then she did it again, started with that anxious little gesture that drove Matt crazy. In a deliberate motion she parted her lips and ran just the tip of her tongue along the fullest curve of her mouth, drawing attention to lips already deep red and wet ... full.

Raw need clawed at Matt’s gut. His brain short-circuited and sent a gallon of blood to his groin. He nearly choked on his drink. Where did that come from?

Her father scooted forward. “Allison, honey....” He turned her gently to look at him. “You know I’ve considered merging with another company so I can retire early. I need to take care of some things—”

“What things?” she asked in a small voice, her anxiety evident in the high color to her cheeks. Matt was wondering himself. He knocked down



the rest of his whiskey and abandoned the glass on the table.

“That’s not important for now. Time enough for that later. I want you to listen, Allison, and try to understand what I’m proposing.” He gave her a smile. “Can you do that?”

“Of course.” She eased forward and perched on the seat’s edge. Matt’s eyes automatically drifted down her legs. They looked like slender columns of silk.

Her father heaved a sigh. “I’d like to introduce you to Eric Lake and Todd Chandler’s father, although, I suppose since you’ve known Todd, the easiest solution would involve him.”

“Solution, Daddy?”

“That is, if you marry any one of those three men or--”

Allison jumped up, sending Matt’s drink flying. She watched the ice cubes skid across the polished surface and head toward Matt’s lap before she leaned into the table, trying to scoop up the slippery ice with long tapered nails. Matt groaned. Before he could dispel the image from his mind of her scooping ice from his lap, she leaned over just enough for him to get a beautiful view of satiny cleavage. Just a little further and he could—

“Connor! Get the damned ice.” Her father jumped up to ease his daughter back down into her seat. “For God’s sake, Allison, forget about the ice.”

Allison bit her lip. “I’m marrying Kevin.”

Matthew paused in his half-hearted task of rescuing ice and looked

up.

Her father's brow quirked. "Since when?"

"Since the other day. We just decided."

"Why?"

Allison blinked, as though confused. She couldn't think they didn't realize she had just figured out what was going on and had scraped up a handy excuse.

"Because we love each other."

Her father folded his arms across his chest and frowned in fatherly concern. "You and Kevin have been friends for five years and suddenly you're in love?"

She took a little breath and then glanced at Matt. "Does Matthew have to *be* here?"

Her father frowned. "Actually, he does."

Allison gave him a sharp look, making Matt think that maybe she was finally on to them. He ran a hand over his mouth and groaned, fighting the urge to run.

"Honey, if you're thinking marrying Kevin will allow you to keep your trust fund, it's not necessary."

"But Daddy—"

"Listen, Allison. There's an easier way and I need your help. I have in mind a solution that is temporary, but will solve both our problems."

"Both?"

“Yes. You need money and I need to retire. I can’t because the family money your mother contributed for my start-up funds was conditional on the business remaining under family control. The only way I can do that is to merge my company with that of your husband.”

“A husband?” Allison choked.

Matt gave a laugh. If she had been panicked before about losing her trust fund, it was no where near the panic she looked like she was in now at the idea of a husband.

She turned soft blue eyes on Matt in a speculative gaze that soon turned to pure bewilderment. “You think this is funny?”

“Well...” He shifted in his seat. “The word comical comes to--”

“Comical? I’m not stupid, Matthew, regardless of what you think,” she said, her soft voice striving for anger she just couldn’t seem to achieve. “I just won’t marry a man I don’t love.”

Her father eased forward on his chair and reached for her, taking her two hands in his. “It’s only temporary, honey. After a year, you’ll divorce and--”

“Divorce?” Her eyes widened. She removed his hands, sinking back into her seat while both men studied her. If she looked young before, she looked fourteen now.

“Of all the things I pictured...” she murmured, twisting her hands in her lap and avoiding their gaze. She rose and walked, as if in a daze, over to the mantle in the corner of the room. She clutched its marbled edge. The

mirror above it reflected the vulnerable set to her mouth, making even Matt feel a little uncomfortable.

Her father looked pained. “Of course divorce, honey. I wouldn’t expect you to stay married. The whole enterprise is just a business arrangement.” Her father sighed and went to her. When she continued to keep her back to him, he stroked down her arms. “Try to put some perspective on this. A century ago it was common for families to merge in order to enhance their wealth and influence. They had to find love elsewhere, but you’ll be free in a year or so and everyone will have what they need. I’ll be able to retire, you’ll be a wealthy woman, and Matt will control--”

“Matt?” She whirled on him. “What’s Matthew got to do with this?”

Matt sat forward and gripped his hands between his knees, waiting for the explosion.

“Well, naturally,” her father hedged, “Matt’s company is the most logical to merge with mine.”

She blinked long thick lashes at Matt. “Marry Matthew?” She turned back to her father, her blue eyes trance-like in response to what was probably the final shock of one long horrendous day. He almost felt sorry for her.

“But what about Todd, or, or....”

“While the others would do, I prefer Matt,” her father answered. “It would mean a lot to me, Allison. And since it’s only for about a year....”

Her hand came up slowly to her throat. After a moment, she left her father and came to stand by Matt. “You agreed to this?” She seemed stunned.

He shifted uneasily. “It makes sense, Allison. More than sense. It would be a gold mine for all of us and it’s the only way around the charter that demands the company stay in family control.”

Looking completely bewildered now, she eased herself back down into the chair opposite him. Behind her chair, her father signaled for Matt to continue and then her father discreetly took his place again.

“A year goes by quick,” Matt continued. “You’d have access to your funds and nothing much would change really, other than we’d have to live together.”

She reacted to that as Matt expected. She drew up straight, a minefield of questions skittering across her expression.

“Honey, Matt just means it has to look like a real marriage, but behind closed doors it would simply be a business alliance, nothing more.”

“I see,” Allison said, still looking wide-eyed at Matt, but her expression had softened and the little worry lines along her forehead seemed to ease. “But we would have to share your apartment?”

“Not a bedroom or anything,” her father was quick to assure her. Matt wished the man would just stay out of it and let him handle the particulars.

“Look.” Matt leaned forward, locking his hands before him. “You’ve got a week to let this sink in.” He was careful not to say that she had a week

to decide, although in theory she could still insist on marrying Ted or Todd or whatever the hell the guy's name was. "Rest on it. This was a lot to take in at once." It was always good in negotiations not to appear eager and a little sympathy went a long way toward softening up the opponent.

She nodded mutely and seemed to consider it. Then she rose. Her father was at her side in an instant and escorted her toward the door with such care you'd think she was bone china. When he opened it, his secretary practically fell into the room. Her father gave her a kiss on the cheek and handed her over to Nancy. Matt shook his head. If he thought Nancy was cold to him now, she'd be throwing paperweights at him the next time he came.

As soon as they were gone, her father advanced on him. "You've got to make this week count. Woo her, for God's sake."

"What?" Matt scoffed.

"What could it hurt? Even if she agrees, you'll have to court her. You can't just suddenly marry her and effectually tip off potential investors that the marriage is a hoax, which it will be."

"Oh, for Chrissakes. I'm not wasting my time wooing anybody. I'll find a way around that." Matt dug his fingers into his scalp. "Like I said, this is the most convoluted crap."

"Yeah, but convoluted crap that just might work."

\* \* \* \*

Kevin howled when he heard the news. "What I would have *given* to

be a bug on that wall this afternoon.” He laughed as they bounced around the gaily-lit club in the trendy Soho area of Greenwich Village, greeting their party clients, and conducting business as they went.

While weaving through the dancers, they stopped to buy drinks for tables full of potential clients. They dropped calligraphy announcements of their scheduled events among the high-tops and along the bar, and placed orders with the club proprietor for cases of liquor for their next bash. And, of course, Allison made a point to flirt with the newer members of the young and restless in order to ease their way into the whirl of social intrigue.

“Tell me again the part where you say you’re going to marry me. Henry will bust a gut over that.”

“It’s not funny, Kevin. He hates me.”

“Allison, there isn’t a person on this planet who hates you.”

“Maybe hate’s too strong a word. Dislikes, then.”

“Nope, not even dislikes.”

“He thinks I’m ... stupid and, I don’t know, superficial. I went to the meeting the same way that I’m dressed now. You know how I hate these shoes.”

“I know.”

“And then I ... well, I fell on top of him.”

Kevin grabbed her arm and whirled her around. “You did *what?*”

“I tripped--”

“Oh, God!” He laughed so hard his shoulders shook. “This is better

than I thought.”

“*I’m* not laughing. Can’t you see how he upsets me? All he does is stare at me and scowl when we’re together.”

“I’ll bet.” Kevin gave a soft chuckle and then steered her away from a particularly rowdy table. “I’m going to enjoy this. Prince Charming thinks he’s got this marriage in the bag?” He bent to her ear. “Promise me, please, that you’ll keep him hanging for a week. No way he deserves such a luscious prize handed to him on a silver platter.”

She rolled her eyes. “Believe me, your take on this is entirely wrong.”

Kevin chuckled. “We’ll see.” He glanced around and gave a sigh. “As entertaining as this has been, we better get back to work.”

After three years together, she and Kevin had become adept at covering a lot of territory in a short time. This club was their fourth this evening and it was only midnight. Besides landing another contract for advertising, they’d happened upon a new band at their first club, sampled a creative twist in Hors d’oeuvres at the second, and at the last signed up a stand-up comic for the October Fest.

It had gotten so the proprietors of each place welcomed them. The owners picked up business by supplying their parties and then further benefited when Allison and Kevin advertised the club’s special food and liquor selections during their events.

Their entertainment business had become so successful that Allison and Kevin both worried that it cut into the time needed for the shelter. But



until the larger, more secure shelter was built, they could ill-afford to neglect the business. And now Allison was expected to get married, too?

Earlier, after leaving her father's office, she'd fought nerves lit to a fevered pitch at the thought of living with Matthew, sleeping in the next room from him. But Kevin's eyes had danced with excitement. He suggested she leave her bedroom door open just enough so Matthew could glimpse her undressing, having far more confidence than she did that Matthew would actually care.

Kevin took the front half of the club, while she worked her way to the bar and nudged in between Paul and Robert, new young recruits to her parties. As soon as they saw her, Paul slipped his arm around her waist as though she'd known him for years, but rather than reprimand him, she just greeted him with a smile.

"Hi Allison," Paul slurred, his eyes glassy with liquor.

She tipped her head, acknowledging both men. "Gentlemen?" She smiled.

The men had met in college, and she suspected Paul funded, or rather his father funded, most of their partying. Paul was the son of a large commercial building contractor in New Jersey while Robert was a fledgling new employee with the company. Like the majority of the shelter work, Allison and Kevin intended to use a fair share of volunteers for the construction project, too. Donations of materials wouldn't hurt either.

"Hey, gorgeous," Kip, the bartender called over. "What can I get

you?”

“Just a white wine, please, the house is fine.”

“You got it.”

At the other side of the room, Matt edged through the crowd of young people frantically dancing to the hammering beat blaring from every corner. At least the place was smoke-free, he thought, even though he could use a cigarette now. His eyes continued to follow Allison, stopped now at the bar and flirting with two guys simultaneously. At the rate Matt was moving toward her, she'd be leaving with one of them before he reached her.

As he squeezed by one enthusiastic couple, a tall redhead slammed into him, spilling enough of her drink down his shirt for him to wonder if it was deliberate.

“Oops!” She grinned.

He gave her a little glare and brushed her off.

She hiccupped and slid quickly away while he stalked over to the nearest table and grabbed some cocktail napkins out from under the drinks of people using them. Small protests followed, but Matt figured they were too drunk to really care.

If Matt had to pick an example of the kind of place he detested, it was this, but at this point, that was the least of his concerns. If he didn't wrap this up with Allison soon, he could lose his chance. He planned on keeping close tabs on her until then.

He wiped down his shirt as he walked, finally making it over to

Allison. She was facing the bar, her back to him. The first thing he did was to clamp his hand around the forearm of the guy next to her and forcefully peel his arm from around Allison's waist.

"Hey?" the bleary-eyed kid complained. "Who are you?" He made an attempt to stand, but after a few wobbly seconds dropped back down onto the stool.

Allison glanced behind her and then turned fully. "Matthew, what are you doing here?"

"Are we going to replay this same scene every time I show up?" he drawled. "To speed things up, the answer is no, I don't like to have fun, and I'm here for just one woman tonight." He leaned in closer, surprised by his desire to catch her scent.

The bartender called over. "Here's your wine, gorgeous, the house best." He dropped a glance down her body.

Matt rolled his eyes, adding the bartender to the long list of men flirting with Allison. She'd been doing it since he got here, flitting from one guy to the next, smiling and tossing her long hair and allowing them to touch her. If he was going to marry her, for however briefly, this had to stop.

"I'll take that." Matt reached over her shoulder and grabbed the wine glass. "How much?"

"Just put it on my tab," Allison said.

"Not for you, gorgeous, it's always on the house. Boss' orders."

*Figures.* Even the boss was after her. Or maybe he'd already had her.

Once again Matt cursed this stupid idea of marrying her and wondered again how Drummond had allowed her to get so out of control.

He fisted some bills in his hand and dropped them on the bar, being sure to include a hefty tip. "I'm paying for her drink." When the bartender's eyes lit on the extra twenty, he didn't argue.

"Come on." He cupped her elbow and pulled her from between the two men flanking her. All three men frowned but didn't stop him. "I've been trying to track you down all night."

"Oh?"

He glanced down. Her lush breasts moved fluidly under the flimsy fabric shaping them, making him itch to slide a hand under her top and feel their weight.

Exactly the way every other man who looks at her must feel.

"Your father told me where you were heading first," he told her, "but by the time I got there, you'd already left that place and the other two as well."

"How did you know where I went next?"

He rolled his eyes. "Everyone knows you, Allison."

"Oh." A soft blush touched her cheeks as he continued to drag her through the crowd and over to the entrance.

"Why didn't you call my cell phone?" she asked.

"I did."

"Oh. Your number must have been the one I didn't recognize, so I

erased it.”

He threw up his hands. “Then what’s the point of having a cell phone if you do that?”

She blinked, looking ridiculously young and vulnerable for such an experienced woman in such a rowdy place. It was one A.M. Matt glanced around at the couples embracing in dark corners. Others ground hips on the dance floor. A damned meat market in full swing.

“We’re getting out of here.” He encircled her waist and began guiding her out.

“Oh no you’re not,” a deep voice growled from the rock wall that loomed up to block him. The Incredible Hulk stood braced before him.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Matthew sighed. Was it Allison's fiancé barricaded before him? Or were they right in believing that she had quickly improvised?

"You okay, Allison?" The Hulk gazed down at her.

"Of course, Kevin." She laid a delicate hand on his bulging forearm in an intimate gesture that irked Matt.

"Good." He curled a meaty hand around her upper arm and drew her to him. Matt refused to relinquish her but he would not be goaded into a tug-o-war either. She ended up sandwiched between them with Matt and the Hulk going nose to nose.

Matt's eyes narrowed. "I'm taking her out of here for awhile."

"Why?"

"That's none of your business."

"I think it is." The Hulk turned to Allison. "Right, baby?"

She tripped and stammered over words but nothing discernible followed.

"Allison came with me and we're leaving together much later tonight."

It was obvious the guy was purposely baiting him. “Well, I’m just borrowing her for a minute. There are some things we need to talk about.”

“I know all about those things and you can forget it. Allison is marrying me.”

“Kevin!”

“Don’t you worry, baby,” the Hulk whispered softly, without taking his eyes off Matt.

“Look ... Kevin,” Matt said, trying to steer the encounter in a more reasonable direction. “Maybe Allison didn’t fill you in on all the details of the proposal--”

“Allison and I have no secrets.”

“Well that’s great,” Matt grumbled, “but more than two people are affected here by who Allison selects and Allison’s father is counting on her.”

Allison pressed a hand on their chests and looked up at Kevin, her eyes softly pleading. “Just give me a minute, Kevin. I won’t make any decisions. I promise.”

Kevin cupped her chin in his massive palm. “Okay, baby.” He slanted Matt an evil glare and then gazed back at her with an expression as soft as a kitten’s. “I’ll be waiting for you.” He kissed the tip of her nose, and then with a begrudging grunt stepped aside.

“Thanks.” Matt nodded, attempting to get on the Neanderthal’s good side. As much as the guy annoyed him, he didn’t need any more barriers preventing him from marrying Allison.

Once outside, with the blare of the music behind them and the crowds thinned, Matt tried to relax. The streets were far from empty, but it helped that the walkers moved at a calmer pace than the frenzied dancers inside, and the crisp hint of a September breeze replaced the stale air of the club. He tried to unwind.

“Walk with me,” he said, and then remembered her father saying you catch more bees with honey. Matt would try anything at this point. Each day the merger stalled kept him one day further from his goals.

He’d back off on ordering her around. “That is, if you’d like to.”

It must have worked, because she gave him a sweet smile and nodded.

They strolled in silence until they’d nearly circled the block, taking time to enjoy the city’s feel. It was easy for Matt to remember why he loved New York. The day never ended. Just rolled into night until the sounds of blues and jazz mixed with the early morning smells of sidewalk vendors and the evening clothes gave way to business suits that signaled the start of another day. A city that never slept peopled by New Yorkers that never stopped.

It had been a long time since Matt had noticed much of anything, but tonight he noticed renovated buildings and new gaslights that he was sure hadn’t existed years ago.

“This area has changed,” he said. “I haven’t seen a warehouse yet.”

“Oh, they’re here, just camouflaged. Now they’re studio apartment buildings, lofts, art galleries, even some theaters that show local



productions.”

“You come here often?”

“Kevin and I come at least once a week ... doing business.”

*Kevin again.* “Don’t tell me tonight was conducting business?”

Watching her flit from one guy to the next hardly seemed like business.

“Yes. We keep in touch with the clientele. And the proprietors of the clubs are our suppliers, so we leave information about our parties and they drum up interest with their new patrons.”

“I see.” He glanced away, trying to think of a way to phrase his next comment. He knew she wouldn’t like it. When he drew her under a gaslight, she looked up at him expectantly, her eyes luminous and somehow vulnerable. A wet sheen glistened on her lush mouth. His eyes moved over her face.

*He wanted to kiss her.* The thought just sprang up and then lingered, surprising him and making the silence between them heavy. Maybe it was a good idea? Another way to urge her to cooperate in the marriage. And maybe he just wanted to feel those warm lush lips on his.

Then he thought again through the haze of lust that seemed always on the edge when he was around her. Giving in to his desire would just further complicate an already thorny situation.

Without great effort, he got himself back on task and broached the subject of her partying.

“Allison, if you’re to do as your father asks, you’ll have to put things

on hold. For at least a year.”

“On hold?”

“Yes. The parties. The running around SoHo.” He swept an arm over the scene surrounding them.

“I can’t do that.”

He frowned. “Of course you can. Like your father explained, you have a considerable trust fund already, and in a few years you’ll be a wealthy woman.”

“But that’s not the point. It’s important to me ... what I do. I can’t give it up.”

“What you do,” he said calmly, “is flirt and party and make money at it.”

“You don’t understand.” Her eyes turned soft and liquid. She had the ability to fill with tears at the least provocation. There was no way the strategy wasn’t practiced and staged. Still, looking at her, he understood how easily her tears could have their intended affect.

“If you’re thinking to manipulate me with those big blue eyes like you do with your father, you can forget it.”

“What?”

“Try to keep things in perspective--”

“Perspective?” Her eyes widened. “In scarcely 24 hours I’ve been told to marry for money and right away, and now also give up my work, and you think *I’m* manipulative?” Her eyes darkened. “You don’t think much of

me, do you, Matthew?”

He let out a breath, thinking that he thought of her entirely too much.

“There is more to what I do than meets the eye.” She fisted her hands on her hips.

“More than flirt?” He lifted a brow. “How much more? Just what *are* we talking about?”

She drew in a shocked breath.

“Up until now it’s been none of my business, but--”

With a speed and strength that surprised the hell out of him, she smacked him, hard, snapping his head to the side. A sob broke from her lips before she whirled on him and ran.

“Oh, for Chrissakes, Allison. Come back here!”

By the time he made his way around couples linking arms and bypassed a night messenger who had hopped the curb on a bicycle, she was through the doors of the club.

When he finally bounded up the steps and worked his way through the crowded hall to the second door leading to the bar, the Hulk was there to greet him.

“You made her cry.” Kevin braced himself in the doorway, his massive biceps crossed over his chest.

Matt ran a hand through his hair. He had regretted his comment almost the instant he said it. It was a stupid thing to say, even if it was partly true. He couldn’t have ruined his chances with her any better than he did

tonight. “I’m sorry. Let me see her so I can apologize.”

“Not tonight you’re not.”

“Aw hell, she misunderstood what I said.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Just give me a minu--”

“No. Go home and practice your apology. And it better be good.”

Kevin slammed the door in his face.

## CHAPTER FIVE

A gleaming train of limousines stretched the length of 56<sup>th</sup> Street between Columbus and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenues and stopped at the opulent front of the Sheraton's Beaux Arts Landmark hotel.

It was the annual Ball for Z-Techs favorite charity, breast cancer research in the name of Allison's mother, Elizabeth Stanton Drummond. With the dot com industry on the rebound, tickets to the event were in high demand while everyone in IT from hardware products to website design vied for the opportunity to network. And with a new merger in the wind, everyone was on red-alert.

Tonight was Allison's last night to choose. Or so her father thought. It still hurt that Matthew thought her stupid, superficial, and now promiscuous. And she had been furious with him. Even Kevin was shocked by the extent of her rage, although in the same breath he had proclaimed that it was about time.

But after a week she knew it was hopeless. She was still in love Matthew. Despite that he was callous, cold, and rude. She was still convinced there was a vulnerable, wounded inner Matthew that only she

could reach. She was not about to give up the opportunity to marry him and make him fall in love with her. Not that she wouldn't make him work for it tonight. She was still angry enough to do that.

And, she was on edge. They hadn't seen each other since last week at the club. Kevin saw to that, taking great pleasure in letting Matthew believe that Allison was staying overnight with him, although she'd really been working nights at the shelter.

Allison smiled over at her father, sitting beside her in the limousine, and with a self-conscious tug, drew her shawl tighter around her shoulders. She had had second thoughts when she poured herself into the floor length sheath of sapphire silk. She had worried a bit about the appropriateness of such a dress at a serious fundraiser, but the shelter's director, Carla, had convinced her otherwise.

She then fussed at her hair, trying to tuck the curls into respectability at the same time she knew it was fruitless, and felt the slow unravel of her nerves at the thought of facing Matthew. Kevin insisted that even tonight she should continue to torture him, make him pay for what he'd said. Although it would be hard to be mean to him, she would, until the night's end when she would tell him that she'd marry him.

As soon as they exited the limousine, her father escorted her up the steps and through the dazzling brass turnstile. A flash of cameras followed. Allison smiled into the cameras, but they were reminders of why she couldn't tell her father what she'd been up to all these years.

The last time confidentiality had been risked by widening the circle of people who knew of the shelter's underground network that had been successfully hiding women for years, some volunteers received death threats, and a boyfriend had succeeded in tracking down his girlfriend and then attempted to run her down with his car.

If her father *had* cut off her trust fund as he first suggested, she might have explained to him what she'd been doing at college and how her trust fund had been spent all these years. But now, as before, there was no reason.

Gliding down the long center aisle on her father's arm, they stopped intermittently as people jockeyed to greet her father. Her own parties and shelter activities had absorbed the bulk of her time, leaving her little opportunity to socialize with the upper crust of New York Society or Z-Tech's top associates.

But the first person she saw upon approaching the head table near the ballroom stage was Todd. His flash of white teeth against his perfect tan was a welcome sight. Just last week he was twirling her around the deck of the *Magic Mist* as they danced to the soundtrack from "Saturday Night Live."

"Baby." He caught her waist and swooped down for a kiss. She turned her face just in time for his lips to miss hers and settle instead on her cheek.

She gave him a friendly cuff on the back as she allowed him to draw her briefly into his arms. "Todd, behave yourself," she teased. "This isn't our wild set carousing at one of our parties but a roomful of staid contributors to a worthy cause." She wasn't surprised to notice her father

look on with warm regard.

Todd chuckled in her ear. "Of course, darlin'. Anything for you. Just be sure to save the first dance for me." His long blonde hair fell seductively over one eye. He was so wonderfully out of place at this formal affair that she felt immediately relaxed with him.

Her father shook Todd's hand, before moving her around the table for introductions. Todd's father, tall, gray-blond, and fashionably dressed greeted her first.

Allison smiled. "Mr. Chandler. So nice to finally meet you." While she and Todd had partied for years, she had never met the senior Chandler.

"I can assure you," he said, his light blue eyes holding hers a moment, "the pleasure is all mine." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze before her father continued to guide her around the table.

Allison next greeted an advocate of research whom she had always admired. She congratulated the ninety-two year old matriarch on the birth of her sixth great-grandchild.

The woman patted her hand and chuckled. "How ever do you keep track?" But she whipped out the latest picture of her brood from a small beaded purse. Allison looked on with longing before giving her a hug and moving on.

When she straightened, she looked up to see Matthew leaning against a thick white column a short distance away, watching her. His black tux hung insolently on his tall frame, his cool dark eyes tracking her movement



around the table.

She drew in a steadying breath, determined not to trip or skid or fall onto anyone's lap.

Just as she was about to acknowledge him with a stiff hello, he loomed up in front of her. The nervous flutter started in her belly. She told herself to be strong. Like a mantra, Kevin's words hammered in her head. No warm smiles. He is *not* forgiven--yet. But in moments, she felt herself cave, felt her whole body yearning to be close to him.

"Allison?" he greeted her in that heavy baritone that always got her heart racing. He took her hand and drew her in closer so her dress brushed his pant legs and allowing her to breathe deep the unique smell of his skin. And he was warm, his body heat mixing with the flush that had already spread over her body. But she tugged back her hand, determined to pull this off.

He grabbed her hand again and locked it in his. Before she could stop him, he clutched her hip and bent to kiss her.

She stiffened at the feel of his hand caressing her hip, her silk gown so delicate his hand heated her whole body. He brushed his lips along her cheek and then ran his mouth back to her ear. "I'm sorry, Allison," he breathed into her ear. "I was out of line. I'll let you punch me tonight if you want, but please forgive me?"

"Matthew," she sighed. "It's not that simple."

"Why not?" He nibbled her earlobe, sending shivers down her spine.

“Because ... because you’re hateful to accuse me of those things.”

“I am.” He drew back and gazed down at her. His eyes were softer that she’d ever seen. But she couldn’t be fooled by that. That night, just minutes before she had slapped him, his eyes had turned warm and she had been so sure that he was going to kiss her. How could she be so inept at reading men?

“Let me go, Matthew. I have other guests to greet.”

“Okay. For now.” He released her. “Just make sure I get a fair share of your time.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m saying not to let these playboys charm you into making a wrong decision.”

“Naturally, that’s a mistake you would never make, since you’re incapable of charm.” She pried both of his hands off her waist.

“I can be charming. If that’s what you want.”

Her father came up beside her and nudged her gently. “I want you to meet someone, honey.”

At her father’s urging, she finally turned from Matthew and looked up into the welcoming gaze of a man almost as tall as Matthew but older. The graying temples of his stylish dark hair gave him an aura of prominence she would have detected even without the subtle clues from her father as to the man’s importance.

“Honey, this is Eric Lake.”

“Mr. Lake.” She nodded politely.

His eyes flicked over her in appreciation before he brought the back of her hand to his lips and kissed her. “You are a delight. Please, call me Eric.”

Allison was surprised by the man’s unconcealed ogling, and for one horrified moment she wondered whether her father had suggested more than a merger to the man and had disclosed the full extent of the plan. But she had confidence that her father would never have put her in that position.

Lake’s gaze melted right through her clothes.

“Sit next to my daughter, Eric. I’ll take your seat across the table.”

Allison groaned inwardly. Of course her father could still promote his plan discreetly. She was just thankful that Todd was seated at her other side.

Eric pulled out her chair and guided her to sit, placing his hand at the small of her back with a familiarity that she found odd coming from a stranger. She descended quickly next to Todd. She gave him a poke and whispered with a teasing smile should anyone be watching. “Save me from this guy. He gives me the creeps.”

Todd chuckled. “What? Tall, dark, and handsome repels you?”

“Just him. Besides,” she frowned playfully. “I prefer blondes.”

“I wish that were true.” He pecked her cheek. “You can count on me.”

She gave him a grateful smile. “My father says I have to be nice to him.”

“Allison, you’re always nice.” His brown eyes bathed her in warmth.

She frowned a little, knowing that was part of her problem. Both Kevin and Todd seemed forever to be rescuing her from unwanted attention. She was easy prey, she knew, no matter how many times they coached her in being assertive. As freshman roommates, she and Sharon had gotten themselves into jams with a few fraternity boys, the outcomes for which she shuddered to think, had Sharon's twin, Kevin, not been there to rescue them. Of course, later, Kevin was powerless to help Sharon when she needed him most. Allison knew that was why he remained so protective of her now.

She plucked her napkin off the stunning gold trimmed plate before her. It was a Lenox pattern, turn of the century, and she knew its worth. She smiled, thinking of the serving bowl in the shelter's kitchen of the same pattern, nicked and cracked, but Lenox nonetheless, and filled with scented potpourri. Just one of her mother's treasures that was scattered throughout the shelter. Somehow she knew her mother wouldn't mind.

As she spread the linen cloth across her lap she looked up to see Matthew staring at her. His gaze flicked between her companions flanking her and then back to burn through her.

Good. Let him worry that she had tossed him aside for what's his name next to her. Kevin would be proud.

She raised a disdainful brow and glared at him.

His eyes narrowed and went dead still, cold, as though challenging her to defy him. She drew in a shocked breath at the sheer intensity of his glowering.

Did he think to intimidate her into marrying him? Her gaze faltered. He *was* intimidating. And dark, and hard, and thoroughly male. She felt her insides melting and the familiar pull that always drew her to him. Damn him! Was there was nothing he could do that would keep her from wanting him? On that thought, and with great effort, she turned to Todd and smiled with an extra measure of warmth.

\* \* \* \*

Drummond had assured Matt that no one but they knew of the underlying plan to marry and merge, because in addition to it being an unsavory market strategy, any knowledge of the plan would naturally humiliate Allison. Still, Matt was disgusted with the set-up tonight at the Ball and irritated as hell that he had no choice but to participate in this demeaning charade. That Allison held his future in her hands was unbelievable. At the same time, to allow his competitors to sweep her off her feet meant he risked losing the most important milestone of his career at best, and at worst, his company. He had put his entire future in it and without Drummond it would surely go under.

For Drummond to merge with either of the other two companies made no significant financial difference to Drummond. But since Drummond deemed Matt's last two meetings with Allison a disaster, he now felt compelled to put his daughter's feelings first. As a result, he had given in to her demands and was allowing her to choose.

What Matt couldn't believe was Drummond's confidence that Allison

would agree to any of it in the end. Matt was now convinced that her little claim of marrying Kevin was just a ploy to get her father to back off, because, in Matt's opinion, a girl used to getting her way was not going to give in to marrying anyone, no matter how temporary. By the time all the legal strictures were satisfied, she could expect a year of her life to be tied up, because any hint that the marriage was a farce would cause investors to lose confidence and send stocks plummeting.

Matt was sure that the thought of playing the devoted wife and missing all those parties did not sit well with the lovely Allison. Unless of course, her father really *did* cut off her trust fund. Then she might cooperate. When Matt had once again suggested it, Drummond had nearly had an aneurysm. He continued to insist that Allison would cooperate because she loved her father and had always been a good girl. Matt nearly choked on the irony.

His good girl was being outrageously seductive tonight. While it was obvious that young Todd Chandler adored her, tonight she had even managed to cast his old man under her spell. And when Eric Lake repeatedly drooled down into the deep valley between her breasts, she didn't seem to mind a bit. He wondered which one she'd go home with tonight.

Matt rubbed the tension from his jaw. All three men were making asses out of themselves, and he was expected to do the same. There had to be another way. He hadn't made millions by kowtowing and begging, and he certainly wouldn't let a little party girl decide his fate.

With that thought, he shoved his chair back and made his way to the dance floor where she was swing-dancing with the younger Chandler. He stood and watched while he waited for a slower song to follow.

She was amazingly graceful in Todd's arms as she twirled and danced into his embrace and then spun out again. It was obvious the two had danced many times. It didn't matter. He wasn't competing on the dance floor nor would he turn into a party animal to please her. But he did need to talk to her, get some sense as to where he stood and then plan his next strategy. According to her father, tonight was her deadline.

The lights dimmed and a slow sensuous rhythm filled the air. He approached her, determined to erase his bungle of last week and make the headway he needed.

He tapped Todd's shoulder. "I'm cutting in."

The young man gave a surprised chuckle. "Okay." Then he smiled at Allison. "Okay with you, darlin'?"

She gave an impatient sigh.

Matt didn't like the proprietary way Todd had addressed Allison or the way his hands slid down over her hips before he released her. He wondered just how close their relationship was. The ramifications didn't escape him. If Matt's suspicions were right, she would insist on marrying Todd.

Matt grasped her waist before she could protest. An annoyed flush spread along her cheekbones. "I guess I have no choice?"

“Of course you do.” He gave her a half smile. “But don’t I get a turn, too?”

She gave a delicate shrug as he wrapped his arm around her waist, drawing her against him.

A jolt stripped through him under the assault of her curves, taking him by surprise. But when he shifted his weight, trying to put a safe distance between them, she just seemed to melt into him. He groaned inwardly. Under his palms, the slip of silk she wore was so delicate he could feel the heat of her skin. She pressed against his entire body. The familiar scent of her soap clung to her, jump-starting his already raging libido.

*Damn.* A strong tug pulled at his loins. In less than the time it took to draw a breath, he was hard.

He half-groaned and half-laughed to himself at his predicament. Had it not been so long, this would never have happened, but now he was faced with a full erection. He tried to remember how he had handled this in Junior High, but he was finding it difficult to think with the feel of her soft against him.

She slid against him and he groaned.

He clasped her hips and held her still.

“Matthew?” She gave him a questioning look.

He gazed down into eyes the exact sapphire color of her gown. If he could just ease her back enough so her warmth wasn’t pressing against his thighs and far enough that he couldn’t feel the erect tips of her breasts. But



they seemed to fit together so perfectly.

*Aw hell, she was probably used to the feel of an aroused man anyhow.*

“Why don’t you ever call me Matt?” he asked, grasping for some thread of normalcy.

Her lashes fluttered. “What?”

He had intended to sound conversational, but he had startled her. “You always call me Matthew, never just Matt like everyone else.”

She sighed lightly and shrugged. “Probably because Matt sounds too casual.”

“Allison, we’ve known each other a long time, why wouldn’t you be casual with me?” He realized he was frowning at her at the same time that he was trying to keep things light and feel her out rather than put her on the defensive again.

“I ... I don’t know. Maybe because you always seem mad at me.”

“Mad at you? Why would I be mad at you?” This time she wet her bottom lip and drew a soft breath. “Stop that!”

“What?” She blinked.

Hot blood coursed through him. *Jesus, he wanted to kiss her.*

“You see?” She studied him. “This is what I mean,” she said as the music slowed and a heavy bass rhythm vibrated through the air. Her skin glowed with a luster that covered every inch of her--at least the inches he could see and they were ample--and a faint blush kissed the soft swell of her breasts. When Matt started wondering what her nipples looked like, he

decided he was on dangerous ground.

“You’re mad at me now.”

“No I’m not.”

“That’s right, because *I’m* the one mad at *you*, even though you’re scowling.”

“I’m not scowling.”

“You are.” She took a deep breath. “And I don’t really understand it, Matthew. What could I be doing now to get you so irritated?”

“I have a hard time believing that you could be *that* naïve. Is this all an act or what?”

She drew in a stunned breath.

“I’m sure you’re aware of exactly what you do.” He drew her forcefully against his body.

She clutched his shoulders. “I ... oh, my.” He saw the instant his erection registered with her. She swallowed hard. “Matthew, I...” She squirmed delicately, her eyes dropping to his chest and then back up to him. Her face flushed to a soft pink.

He was bone hard and pressing the evidence of it along the soft curve of her belly, and he had no idea how that had happened.

“Jesus,” he grumbled, setting her from him. “Look. This was a mistake. I never dance.” She clutched his shirt cuffs, drawing in short breaths. “While my reaction is probably nothing to you, I’m usually more discreet.” He pried her fingers off his wrists and then took her elbow and

dragged her over to the edge of the dance floor.

He gave a quick glance around. "Come with me."

\* \* \* \*

Allison's head was spinning. One minute she and Matthew were on the dance floor and the next Matthew was pressing his arousal against her and then taking her firmly by the elbow and leading her away.

"Where are you taking me?" She couldn't help but feel exhilarated at the knowledge that Kevin had been right. Matthew was attracted to her and, as Kevin saw it, it irritated the hell out of Matthew. It was a far cry from being in love with her, but it was a start.

He drew her over to a quiet corner and leaned her against a wide column of soft lights. "The evening's almost over," he said. "Let's just stop all this and get right to it. While you know nothing of the intricacies of your father's business, he's allowing you to make a choice in this. Something I don't agree with at all--"

"My father loves me."

"He loves you too much. Allows you to get away with murder--"

"If this is supposed to win me over, you're doing a poor job."

"Look, with you and Todd running the businesses, they'll be bankrupt in a month."

"Thanks very much."

"And the other two are too damned old."

"Todd's father is only in his forties, and Eric Lake is quite an

attractive man. Besides, it won't be a *real* marriage as you well know."

"But it's got to *look* believable."

"And anyone watching us tonight would believe we're in love?"

She'd stopped him on that one. And then something in his gaze caused her to grow warm. She tried to keep her pounding heart quiet as she watched the tightness around his mouth relax.

"Matthew?"

His eyes locked with hers before he caught her waist and drew her against him.

Before she could catch her breath, he leaned toward her, his lips stopping just short of touching hers, as though quietly considering her, his breath sweet against her mouth. He made a sound in his throat. Then he was kissing her, warm nibbling tastes as though whetting his appetite for the real thing, his manner so at odds with the firm way he held her against his body. She was stunned and soon overwhelmed by the sweeping warmth filling her. She was desperate for more.

When she let out a restless whimper, he pressed the full measure of his mouth to hers and then slid impatiently against her. He strangled a groan. Heat coursed through her clear down to her toes, no longer wondering if she felt his erection again. Though she was pitifully inexperienced with men, even she hadn't missed that.

A tortured moan rumbled from his throat, and then he brushed up the sides of her breasts with his palms. Her startled cry gave him the

opportunity to slip into her mouth and caress her tongue, gently urging her to respond. Never had she been kissed like this. And while her mind had no idea what to do, her body took over, grabbing onto his shoulders and sliding against his arousal, tangling her tongue with his. His tongue teased and slipped along hers in a sensual dance, first light and wet and flirting and then rough, demanding more, setting her body on fire.

She drew up on her tip-toes, pressing against him and aching for more, when he lifted her gently and let her body slide down over his. Pleasure, like none she had imagined, stripped through her.

“Jesus,” he moaned and pulled away. “Allison.” He frowned down at her. “That’s enough.”

“Enough?”

He nudged her down until she was standing flat again and ran a quick hand through his hair. He glanced around.

“Well....” He gave a choked laugh. “I guess *that* was believable.”

She tried to steady her breath while he peeled her fingers off his shirt and eased away from her. She sighed with the loss of contact and took a moment to gather her wits.

“We’ll elope tonight.”

“Elope?” She drew in a stunned breath.

“It doesn’t make sense to drag this out. And if we do it the regular way, it means being engaged forever. A woman of your background would have a big wedding. Unless you were crazy in love or pregnant.”

“Pregnant?”

“Our elopement might be construed that way. It doesn’t matter.”

“I....” She was still reeling from his kisses and now thoughts of him getting her pregnant or *not* getting her pregnant. She swallowed. Either way, the images were the same. She sputtered out a response. “I didn’t say I’d marry you.”

“What’s wrong now?”

“I won’t marry you because you bully and intimidate me and order me--”

“Oh, for Chrissake, Allison. This is business.”

“And you haven’t asked me.”

“Asked you?”

“As in proposed.”

“Propo--” He sighed. Then he yanked on his tie and mumbled something unintelligible under his breath. He turned a reluctant gaze to her.

“Allison.” He cleared his throat. “Will you marry me?”

She tilted her chin. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.”

“You’re not getting your way with that pitiful excuse for a proposal.”

“Me? Look who’s talking. I don’t think anyone’s ever said no to you in your life.”

“That isn’t true. There have been plenty of times,” she lied.

“Look. I don’t care. But this time, you’re going to do the right thing

and marry me.”

“Yes, I am.”

“So don’t bother batting those baby blu--” His brows drew together.

“What did you say?”

“I am marrying you. But not because you order me to. Because I love my father and he needs me. I would do anything for him. Even marry you.”

He let out a slow breath and then opened the top button of his collar, loosening it with a jerk. His fingers scratched down the stubble along his neck. “Well ... that’s settled then.”

“Yes.” Her eyes traveled over the rough skin along his throat. She wanted to run her lips along the corded muscle and feel the texture of his skin, taste him with her tongue. The thought surprised her enough to turn her crimson.

He studied her for so long that she wondered suddenly if, now that she had agreed to marry him, he was reconsidering his haste.

But then he swooped down and caught her in a kiss so carnal she thought she’d faint. She collapsed against him. When he finally released her, he was breathing as hard as she was.

“Are you going to make a habit of this?” she breathed.

“Only in public,” he growled. “Get your purse. We’re getting out of here.”

“My father--”

“We’ll telegram him from Las Vegas.”

## CHAPTER SIX

By late the next morning, Matt and Allison were married.

After what he insisted should be a hasty packing, Allison had insisted on talking with the servants anyway, remorseful for having awakened them with the noise of her packing and, as a result, they missed the next available flight out of Newark. They sat at the airport instead, saying little, while they waited. Matt knew Allison was upset with him for barking at her when they missed the flight. And then she had slept the entire flight. Matt did not.

He had never planned to marry for any reason. And though this was hardly a real marriage and in most ways he could rest easier now that the merger would be settled, the thought of getting married still disturbed him.

The little chapel had been filled with fresh flowers. But while the magistrate and his wife exuded polite excitement, Allison had remained subdued. Later, when they finally got to a restaurant for breakfast, she had picked off almost all the petals from the bouquet of daisies the woman had given her. By the time they telegraphed her father and Janey, letting them know they had eloped and would return in two days, Matt was exhausted. He suggested they turn in early and she readily agreed.



With a heavy sigh and still reeling from the events of the last twelve hours, he swung open the door to a beautiful suite filled with orchids. A festive bottle of champagne rested in the center of a huge king-size bed. He had to call in some favors to get the best room on such short notice, but the sun-filled room with skylights and silk curtains fit the bill. It was almost entirely decorated in whites and creams but for a touch of rose along the edges of the upholstery and along the trim of the scalloped pillowcases. It looked ethereal, like a little bit of heaven.

“Oh.” Allison sighed on a soft breath. “It’s beautiful.” She walked slowly around the room, touching the drapes and running her hand along the smooth marbled surface of the dressing table. The plentitude of suitcases she’d brought were perched on collapsible stands by the dressers along with his one overnight bag.

She stole an uncomfortable glance at the bed. For the first time he wondered what she expected. They hadn’t discussed it. But surely she didn’t plan on being celibate for a year? Going outside the marriage for sex was fraught with potential problems. Still, he couldn’t help but think it would complicate things to get sexually involved. At any rate, he was too tired to discuss things now.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m bone tired even if it is only six o’clock. It’s nine for us and I didn’t sleep on the flight.”

Her expression turned to irritation. It was probably due to the thought of sharing a bed with him, despite her ardor with him earlier.

“That bed’s so big, we could sleep there for a week and never find each other.” He yanked on his tie and threw it across a chair.

She began unpacking, then quickly disappeared into the bathroom. He stripped off all his clothes except his pants, drew the outer drapes so the room was bathed in twilight, and then took the tray off the bed.

While he was peeling off the paper around the champagne’s rim, she emerged in a knee-length ivory nightgown that clung to her like water.

His body grew taut. She was staring at his naked chest with open admiration, and as she did, her nipples raised against the silky fabric.

He muted a groan.

He reminded himself of the conclusion he had come to during their flight. He had reluctantly come to terms with his attraction to her and decided, given their situation, it was wise to just face it. He had himself convinced that acknowledging his lust was to be in control of it, rather than the reverse. But looking at her now, he wasn’t so sure. If he didn’t get a hold of himself, he’d be tenting his pants in seconds.

The cork popped on the champagne, sending a spray of golden liquid down the front of her nightgown, plastering wet silk to creamy skin.

“Oh.” She glanced down at the clinging, making no attempt to draw it away for her skin. He was staring at rosy nipples, clearly visible through the sheer fabric. He shut his eyes tight. It was going to be a long night.

She disappeared into the bathroom again. Nothing was simple with Allison.

Although she emerged later in baggy boxer shorts and a loose sleeveless t-shirt with the emblem of the New York Yankees plastered across the front, it wasn't enough to erase the image of her breasts from his mind.

He handed her a glass and nodded. "To our new alliance." He lifted his glass to hers and clinked. Before he could dwell on her troubled expression, he downed his drink in one long swallow. The bitter liquid tasted the opposite of how she looked--all soft curls and curves, probably tasting sweeter than any.... He wiped a hand down his face. "It's been a long day. I'm bushed." He motioned toward the bed.

"I haven't finished my champagne."

"Well, hurry up."

She sipped delicately, licking her lips between sips.

"Just drink it. It's not an ice cream--"

"Why are you always so impatient with me? "

"Fine. Take all the time you need." He grabbed the bottle and headed toward a small sitting area and dropped down into the easy chair. He poured himself another drink. Maybe he'd get lucky. Alcohol was known to cause temporary impotence. At the rate she was drinking her one small glass, he'd have the bottle to himself.

She sank down into the chair beside him. "Did you arrange for this room?"

"Sure. Who else would have done it?"

She gave a shrug. "A secretary or something."

“No one knows about this, Allison. Your father and Janey will be the first to get the news.”

Her eyes lit with interest. “Tell me about Janey. How come I never knew about her?”

“I’ve kept her well-protected.”

“From what?”

“Everything. She’s a good kid. I want to keep her that way.”

“You’ve raised her?” The slender column of her throat moved with each small sip she took.

“Aren’t you finished with that yet?” He poured himself another drink.

“How old were you when your parents died?” she asked, her eyes settling on his dark chest hair.

He gave a sigh. “My father died. My mother took off with one of her boyfriends. What difference does it make? It was a long time ago and I’m tired, Allison.”

“I just thought we could talk a bit--”

“Finish your drink.”

With a resigned expression, she raised the glass to her lips, her hand unsteady, and drank the rest of her drink in little swallows until she drained her glass. She swayed when she reached out to place the empty glass on the end table.

“I’m dizzy.” She gave a little hiccup.

“You’re drunk.” He looked at her in amazement.

She gave a soft giggle. "I guess I am." She hiccupped again. "Can I have some more?"

"No." He wrapped a possessive hand around the bottle.

Her eyes were glossy and innocent, her lips glistening red. "Why not?"

"Because, you'll pass out and then I'll have to carry you to bed."

She laughed, a husky sound that went straight to his groin. "You're probably right." She smiled at him. "You're a terrible grouch, you know."

"Yeah, well, we can't be all sweetness and light."

"Why not?"

He shook his head. "Never mind."

"Sometimes reality can be pretty harsh. There's nothing wrong with looking on the bright side of things."

"And there's nothing wrong with watching your back and trusting no one until they prove worthy."

She looked a little startled. "That's pretty callous."

"It's realistic. I've seen more than enough to know."

She lifted her chin. "Maybe I have, too."

"You?" He raised a mocking brow.

She tucked a curl behind one ear. "Sure." Then her expression grew soft and inviting. "I like talking with you."

He couldn't imagine why. And he couldn't stop looking at her. She had scrubbed off every bit of make-up and still she looked beautiful. "You

like talking with me even though I've just dismissed your little philosophy on life?"

"Oh, you act fierce. But I think there's more to you--"

"Now, why doesn't that surprise me?" He emptied the last of the liquor into his glass.

"Hey." She pouted. "How come you get some more?"

"Like I said, you're already drunk." He took a comforting gulp and stared at her.

"I think I'm capable of deciding that, Matthew. Give me a sip of yours." She reached out to take the glass. He pulled it away, making her reach closer. He liked the thought of her lips where his had just been. When she took the glass from him, he inhaled her scent. She gave him a smile. "Thank you." She brought the wine to her lips.

His groin tightened, but he was beyond caring. He allowed the pleasant feel of it to envelope him as he watched her lips slide along the rim of the glass. The tip of her tongue licked up a few errant drops that trickled down the side.

When she finished the glass, he realized he had been staring at her ... and sporting a raging erection.

He gave a frustrated sigh and kneaded his temples. "I'm going to bed. You can come when you want."

He rose, careful to keep his back to her, and finally made it to the bed where he stripped down to his boxers.

The sheets felt reassuringly cool against his hot skin, and when he rested his head against the pillows, he took deep calming breaths in the hope that sleep would come quickly. Before long he felt her slide in beside him. He'd think of Janey. She would be getting the telegram soon. What in the hell would she think? He debated whether to tell her the truth when he returned, and then realized that if he didn't, he'd risk her getting attached to Allison. She'd be all excited about having a sister-in-law.

His head began to pound.

Beside him, he heard a snuffle. Followed by a muffled sob. He turned to see her laying on her back, stiff, the sheet pulled up over her gorgeous breasts and tucked up to her neck. One large tear trickled down her cheek and then down the gentle curve of her throat. It glistened along the satiny sheen of her skin.

"What's wrong, Allison?"

She shook her head and tilted her face away.

"Are you sorry you agreed to this?"

She shook her head again. "No." She swiped at a tear. "But, today was my wedding day." She sniffed. "All those years I pictured it ... today didn't come close."

"Do girls still do that?"

She turned wide disbelieving eyes to him, looking so young. *Of course girls did.* He thought of Janey, just a few years younger. She was four when he'd taken over as both mother and father to her. Although it had

been a long time since she'd taken him into her confidence, as a young girl she had dreamily described her wedding day.

"I'm sorry, Allison. This must be hard." He wanted to comfort her, even to just reach out and run a finger through a soft curl, but he didn't dare touch her.

"And tonight's my wedding night."

Now *there* he could help her. As soon as he thought it, he tamped down the treacherous idea before it took on a logic of its own. It was a dangerous notion, because he was in no condition to be noble.

"I'm sorry I'm the one in this bed with you. But you did a good thing today. Your father will be proud."

She studied him for a long moment, her eyes soft, everything about her so soft and tempting. Already her scent filled the bed. He wondered how she'd feel and smell when she grew aroused.

He swelled full and hard and then cursed himself for letting his thoughts get away from him, again.

"I don't regret it, Matthew. I'll be fine."

"Good." He smiled at her. "Hey, think how I feel. Today I had to marry a beautiful, wealthy woman. And now I'm stuck in this bed with her and she's half naked."

She gave him a funny smile and then propped up on one elbow. The sheet fell to her waist. "Oh, you're being sweet, Matthew," she said, the surprise evident in her voice. The t-shirt hung off the tips of her breasts. Her



nipples were large, much darker than her skin, a deep scarlet color that shadowed beneath the thin cotton fabric.

He closed his eyes and dropped back onto the pillows. “Go to sleep now, Allison.”

After a while, he heard her slide down into the sheets. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Matthew?”

He gritted his teeth. “What?”

“I’m not sorry it’s you beside me.”

“That’s nice, Allison. Don’t worry about it.”

“Matthew, sometimes you can be truly blind.”

“I wish to God tonight was one of those times.”

She quietly sighed. “Will you hold me?”

His head snapped around. “What?”

Her eyes pooled with tears. “I feel so lonely. Can I just fall asleep in your arms?”

“That’s not a good idea,” he said, his tone more gruff than he’d intended.

“Can’t we at least be friends?”

She ran the tip of her tongue along her bottom lip, catching the tiny tear that trailed down her cheek. He wanted to lick every inch of her.

“No,” he said, his voice hard. “Besides, friends don’t fall asleep in each other’s arms. And this is a business arrangement, Allison. The sooner

you understand that, the better off you'll be."

"I see."

"Look." He sighed. "This is ... complicated. We're going to have to figure something out. But not now, okay? Let's sleep on things and talk about where we go from here. Like how we're going to cope with things, you know?"

She let out a breath. "Not really."

He gave a long suffering sigh. "Neither do I. But let's just go to sleep, okay?"

"All right." She stared up at the ceiling.

He half turned from her and shut his eyes, refusing to look at her another minute.

After an eternity, her breathing grew even and shallow. She didn't stir. He risked a glance at her. Her face was angled toward him, her skin so fresh looking in the early evening light. Her tears had finally dried.

She seemed at rest now, peaceful.

Allison usually glowed with pure sex, but when she looked like this, it was easy to understand how difficult this must be for her. She was still a girl in many ways, her experience aside, and filled with dreams.

The sheet lightly draped her, but not enough to disguise every dangerous curve. He reached down to the foot of the bed and pulled up the comforter.

Then he laid back and again breathed deep calming breaths.

It was going to be a long torturous night.

\* \* \* \*

“Look at this.” Matthew handed her the Wall Street Journal, folded back to a small article in the “Business of the Day” section. The article reported their elopement and the interest it was bound to stir in the business community as speculation rose regarding the future of both companies. Allison hardly cared.

It had taken an hour to convince Matthew to break out his bathing suit and come relax with her by the pool. You would have thought she was asking him to sunbathe in Montana during a snowstorm. He was even less happy when she donned her bathing suit and headed for the pool without him. He had barked at her to wait right where she was and grumbled about her bathing suit barely covering her.

She was sure now that his continual irritation with her was more than bad temper. And she hadn’t imagined the heat coming from him that night when he had kissed her, even if she hadn’t been able to get him to touch her since. And she had tried.

But she also suspected that Matthew didn’t like feeling out of control. Which was funny, because that was exactly where she wanted him. At least with her.

“How did the press know?” she asked.

“I’m sure your father leaked it.” He tapped the paper. “It may be buried on the 5<sup>th</sup> page, but it’s there.”

At least he was talking to her. “This is vitally important, isn’t it, Matthew?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t understand. It’s complicated.” He held up the newspaper and snapped it open.

She purposely slapped it onto his lap. “Try me.”

She smiled when he drew in a breath before she removed her hand from his groin, but she kept stubbornly turned toward him as they sat side by side on the chaise lounges.

“I understand that your natural language program is cutting edge and that its development will cost a small fortune. Which is where my father comes in. In addition to added capital, he has an established track record, making it easier for you to find companies willing to take a chance on your program, possibly even back some of the research. If you’re successful, I imagine you’ll be responsible for jumpstarting a new era in IT, an era run through natural language rather than computer codes, making it accessible to literally anyone ... anyone who can speak.”

He stared at her with his mouth open.

“Even me.” She leaned closer, so tempted to press her mouth to his and sample the sweet warm taste of him. The memory of how he took her so eagerly at the ball, thrusting his tongue into her over and over again, tortured her. She wanted a repeat performance. She knew the passion that

she had glimpsed that night simmered just below his grumpy surface. She wanted it to explode.

His eyes moved over her face. “You’ve obviously answered your own question.”

“No I haven’t. I still want to know why.”

“Why what?”

“Why is it so important to you? Is it so you can lead the market? Make more money? Just to beat your competitors? Or is something else driving you?”

“What kind of a question is that?” Something caught his eye. She turned to see a man, built like a tank, drop himself into the lounge chair across the pool from them. He eyed Matt warily.

“Great,” Matthew said. “Of all people to show up.” He glanced at Allison. “Don’t give him any reason to believe our marriage is anything but love. Understand?”

“Perfectly.” She framed his face in her hands and pressed her lips to his. She groaned with the heated taste of him. He clamped onto her wrists but didn’t drag her away. In a bold move, so unlike her, she traced his bottom lip with the tip of her tongue and felt his jaw tighten under her palms. The sound he made at the back of his throat made her nipples tighten. Then he forced her hands down.

She smiled. “That’ll help.”

He made a disgruntled sound.

“Course, I don’t know how convincing you’ll be.”

She was still smiling at his frown and enjoying the small taste of him, a hint of maple syrup and mint, when his eyes flicked back to the man across from them.

“What’s that all about?” Allison moved back into her own chair. When she glanced over, the man was still discreetly eyeing them.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t shut me out, Matthew. If this could affect our ... alliance, I want to know.”

“What makes you think it does?”

“Matthew.”

“Well ... you’re right.”

“I’m--” She blinked. “Why do you do that?” She swung her legs around and perched on the edge of the chair.

“Do what?”

“Torture me? Challenge me?” She leaned closer.

His eyes narrowed and he sat up straighter as if readying himself against assault. She tipped her head and studied him. He eyed her warily. She knew exactly what he was readying himself against. As if to confirm it, his eyes dropped to her cleavage and then skittered away.

The awareness that he could be so attracted to her warmed her heart. While the idea had seemed unlikely at first, now she no longer doubted it, even if he was largely unaware of it. She leaned closer and stifled a smile

when his jaw tightened.

“I don’t challenge you,” he said, reaching for the paper and snapping it open between them.

She snatched it from his hands. “Yes, you do.” She moved onto his chair, purposely brushing her thigh along his. She took a guess what would come next.

“Stop it, Allison.” *Right on cue.* He inched up straighter, breaking contact. “Stop seeing things that aren’t there.”

“Like what?” She slid farther up the lounge and watched his jaw flex. “What are you talking about?”

He clamped his hands onto her shoulders and physically held her back. She stifled a triumphant laugh.

“Come in the pool with me--”

“No.”

“Why not?” She wanted to get her too-small bathing suit good and wet for him and hoped that’s what he was worried about.

“I don’t like to swim.” He snatched up the paper again and attempted to place it between them.

“Your friend is watching us.”

Matthew glanced over the top of his paper. She hoped she was right.

“Damn! The guy’s a pain in the ass.”

Allison stood and grabbed his hand, tugging on him to rise. “We’ll talk in the pool. I want to know the story behind him.”

He reluctantly followed her.

The pool was heated and felt wonderful. Matthew dove under once and then stubbornly braced his back against the wall of the pool, facing his adversary. His muscled arms, slick with water, rested along the edge of the pool. His chest and the tight dark mat of hair sprinkled across it, glistened with water.

She knew he'd be mad at what she did next. She ducked under the water and then stood waist deep on the bottom stair, her bathing suit plastered to her. She smoothed back her long hair and tilted her face to the sun, fully aware of the forward thrust of her breasts. She felt her nipples tighten at the thought that he might be watching her, hoping that he was. Her boldness surprised even her. But now that she knew how to get to him, she planned a full out assault. Because his attraction to her might be a beginning for them. A start to his falling in love with her.

When she looked over at him, his arms were still braced rigidly along the wall, but his eyes were shut tight. She swam up to him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

His eyes popped open and he growled.

"Shhh...." she murmured, pressing wet lips to his. She skimmed her fingers along the wet cords of his neck. Her breasts felt heavy against his chest. "Let's not forget your friend."

He made an annoyed sound in the back of his throat but, to her surprise, didn't push her away. Little droplets of water settled on the tips of



his dark lashes.

“Now, tell me about him.” She ran the tip of her tongue along his bottom lip, now shocking herself with her own daring. His lips softened under hers, as though he’d forgotten that he was supposed to fight her.

“Carp’s an old adversary of your father,” he said, touching his tongue to hers. His hands locked onto her waist. The feel of his tongue, lightly toying with hers as he talked was electric. “Before your mother met your father, Carp had convinced himself that he had a chance with her.” He caught her lips between his teeth. She almost didn’t register his words.

“My mother?” She stopped and drew back. “Did he?”

“No. The story goes that your mother was just too nice to set him down hard, and he was too thick-headed to get her polite hints. Then your father came along.” His breath was warm against her lips.

“Oh. And they fell in love.” In a move so natural, she was sure it was unconscious, he drew her body against his. He was erect. The shock of it sent her heart racing. “Matthew?” She ran her palms along his broad shoulders, the slick water eliminating any friction between her palms and his skin. She leaned her hips into his, enjoying the hard feel of him.

He closed his eyes. “Carp claims your father only wanted your mother’s money.”

“But that wasn’t true.”

Matthew opened his eyes and studied her, and an unexpected warmth softened the dark irises. “I didn’t know your mother, Allison.” His voice was

low. "But whenever your father talks about her, it's obvious he was in love."

She drew in a soft breath. "Thank you."

She pressed her body fully to his and kissed him. He made an answering noise and clutched her waist, pushing her hips away from him, but she wrapped her arms around his neck and refused to stop. She ran her tongue between his lips, urging him to open to her.

"Come on, Matthew," she whispered. "Make that miserable old man believe we're in love."

His fingers dug into her hips as though he'd just realized what was happening. She brushed his mouth and then ran her lips along the rigid set of his jaw and then down the strong muscles of his neck. Even this early in the day, his beard growth felt rough and wonderfully male. She breathed in his rich distinctive scent. His body remained tense and unyielding, but the pulse in his neck beat quick and heavy under her tongue.

"That's enough, Allison."

*Not for her.* She wanted to melt into him, absorb his scent into her every pore. She wanted to feel him inside her. She drew in a sharp breath, astonished by the thought.

He took advantage of her momentary confusion and set her firmly from him.

"They're leaving." He motioned toward Carp. For a stunned moment, she didn't realize what he meant, so shaken was she with thoughts so blatantly sexual.

He was studying her, wary, but he didn't move away. She shifted

subtly. He reacted immediately by clutching her waist and holding her back.

“Matthew?” She wanted to reach out to him, but wasn’t sure how. “We’ve known each other a long time, but we really don’t know each other, do we?” When she reached out to touch the rough line of his jaw, he grasped her wrist.

Then he sighed. “We know each other as well as we need to. It’s not complicated.” His eyes dropped to her mouth.

“I think we both know it is, Matthew.”

His gaze heated. “We just need to get through this next year of close scrutiny and everything will settle. Our focus needs to be in maintaining market confidence.”

“Who are you trying to convince?” she asked on a soft breath. She could see him weakening. “Let yourself go, Matthew. Just follow your instincts.”

“What are you talking about?”

She gave him a warm smile. “Don’t you ever lose control?” She stroked his jaw.

He tensed. “I can’t afford to. You probably don’t know much about that, so you wouldn’t understand.”

“So tell me. Talk to me, Matthew. Let’s get to know each other a little.”

He looked away. She wanted to shake him. What was he afraid of? She turned his face to her. “Matthew?”

“We’ll get to know each other plenty. I’ll get to know just how serious you are about helping your father. Within a day after our arrival back home, I’m expected at a cocktail party to honor the lifetime achievement of a colleague. Now that I have a wife, I’ll be expected to bring you, too.”

“Don’t sound so enthusiastic.”

“I’m not. I hate those things. And now I have to worry about you, too.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m hardly ill at ease in social situations. You needn’t worry.”

“Good, because I’ll need your considerable talent in seduction to soften up a potential manufacturer that your father and I hope to snag. The man’s married, but that’s never seemed to matter.”

“Don’t you dare start on that again.”

He grunted but dispensed with a come back.

“You *are* a grouch, you know.”

When he simply shrugged, she gazed at him quietly, trying to hide the hurt that he could still think her so loose. His eyes grew more wary, harder. Why he always spoke to her with that cynical tone, probably meant to shock her, she couldn’t understand.

She leaned closer and watched his brows draw together tightly. When her lips were a breath away she murmured without thinking. “Sometimes I don’t think I like you very much, Matthew.” She pressed her lips to his, the heat burning through her with the contact. This time, he held her tight

against him and groaned deep in his throat. He was hard, unmistakably so. The feel of it lit her nerves, stirring a knot of desire deep and low. She whimpered and ran her palms down the hard planes of his chest.

When he lifted her and slid her down over his erection, she gasped aloud. He made an angry sound and plunged his tongue between her lips, devouring her mouth and stroking relentlessly along her tongue. Her pulse pounded in her ears at the hard wet feel of him everywhere. She gave a desperate moan.

Just as abruptly, he pushed her away. He shook his head. "You don't like me," he grumbled. "That's a hell of a way to show it."

She was out of breath and too stunned, reeling from such delicious contact with him, to answer.

"I've got news for you. I don't like you either."

Without another word, he climbed out of the pool and walked away. She watched him snatch up his towel and stride toward the lobby doors. She wondered inanely if he was still erect. Was that possible?

She hated her ignorance about men. While it had often gotten her into trouble, now it frustrated her that she didn't know how to reach Matthew, couldn't figure out what he wanted.

That he could be mad at her and aroused at the same time, puzzled her. Did men get erect for other reasons? She'd heard that mornings were a problem and it had nothing to do with arousal, or did it?

She sank back against the wall, trying to understand what had just

happened. She hadn't meant to tell him that she didn't like him. She'd meant that she didn't like the way he was treating her. And she hadn't understood why. That he confirmed that he didn't like her was no surprise.

She sighed in disappointment. No matter how physically attracted he was to her, he was a man of control. Of that, she was certain. Seducing him would be near impossible.

She stifled a sad laugh. Usually, she was the one fending off attention. Because no matter how nice the men were that she met, her feelings for Matthew had always ruined her for anyone else.

Now she wondered if she really knew Matthew. If they had a future together. Or if she was hopelessly caught up in illusions and in dreams that would never come true.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Matt had been anxious to get home and tuck Allison safely away in her own room at the opposite end of the hall from his, but now sitting next to her in the airport limousine, he almost reconsidered.

She was a tease of the highest caliber. It hadn't mattered that he'd told her twice that he didn't even like her. Apparently, she was completely indiscriminate in her search for sexual gratification. He should have realized that several days of celibacy wouldn't sit well with her, but while he'd been concerned about her prowling the clubs before the ink on their marriage certificate dried, he hadn't expected her to turn her sights on him.

*So, maybe he should let her.*

As long as they kept their commitment to each other clear and uncomplicated, what would be the harm? They had already agreed it was a business arrangement and nothing more.

His eyes slid over to her long legs, crossed at the knee, her skirt too short to cover all the smooth thigh that lay just inches from his fingertips.

As the airport limo took the bridge into Manhattan, she gazed out the window, oblivious to his internal struggle.

Because they'd been in close quarters, he knew she wore black lace panties today, cut high up her thigh. At least it wasn't a thong. The thought of her smooth bottom a reach away under a flared skirt that would easily accommodate his hand slipping under to touch her would have been too much. The only thing worse would be her wearing no panties at all.

*Shit.* He was in no condition to make an unbiased decision.

He barked at the driver. "What's the hold up? An accident?"

The driver caught his eye in the rear view mirror and shrugged. He probably barely understood English.

Matt glared at his watch, relieved to feel his erection subside.

"Do you have somewhere you need to be?" Allison asked him through lips colored to a wet bronze.

"No. But it doesn't mean I want to sit in traffic for hours--"

"It's only been a half hour since we left the airport. Why don't you just relax and enjoy the way the sun is playing along the water?" She uncrossed her legs and then re-crossed them to face him. Although her skirt slid higher, it wasn't high enough to give him a glimpse of the black lace he'd been picturing most of the morning, and had made a considerable effort to glimpse since they'd settled themselves against the butter-smooth leather of the limo.

"Take the river parkway to 63<sup>rd</sup>," he ordered the driver, "before turning east."

Before he realized what she was doing, she reached up and skimmed



her palm along his jaw. He tensed but couldn't get himself to remove her hand.

"So grouchy," she murmured. "Why, Matthew? Everything is going the way you want. Can't we just relax now, maybe even talk a little?"

The driver slammed on the brakes. When Matt looked up, it was obvious the man wasn't concentrating on his driving by the smirk on his face. Matt could imagine the story the guy would tell back at dispatch, about the knock-out blonde trying to seduce some stick-up-his-ass prick. He could picture the man joking to his buddies about how tempted he was to offer to take Matt's place. And he was sure the driver would give his buddies a blow by blow description of Allison's ti--

"Matthew?"

"No." He jerked his gaze back to her and removed her hand. "I don't have the luxury of relaxing until everything is settled."

"Fine!" She folded her arms. "You are such and incredible grouch." She uncrossed her legs again to turn away from him and looked out the window.

Matt's head was pounding. He glanced up at the driver. "Go around this truck and step on it."

The driver raised a lazy brow and inched his way around the truck before swinging into the left lane.

When they pulled up before his building twenty minutes later, all Matt wanted was to get a quick bite to eat and then hide away in his room. He

unloaded the limo as soon as it stopped before his building, and as he tipped the doorman he gave him instructions to follow right away with their bags.

When they took the elevator and then finally exited onto his floor, he no sooner slipped his key into his front door lock when it swung open.

His sister stood before them, beaming with excitement, like a kid on Christmas morning.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Matt!” Janey squealed, and then jumped into his arms. “Oh my God, I’m so happy for you. Congratulations.”

“Janey....” He pried her hands from around his neck. “Stop--”

She dropped down and turned to Allison. “I’m Matt’s sister.” Her eyes shone. “You’re beautiful.”

Allison gave a gentle laugh. “Hello, Janey. I’m very happy to meet you.”

Janey threw her arms around Allison. “I’ve never had a sister.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Janey--”

“Neither have I,” Allison said.

“Janey, let us in the damned door.”

Seconds later the doorman came through the service elevator, and Matt took the carrier from him and rolled all the suitcases that Allison had insisted she needed to one of the two back bedrooms. He turned the bedside lamp on and then popped his head into the room adjacent to it. Only the few things Janey kept there regularly were apparent. No overnight case. Good. Because she wasn’t staying.

When he returned, the two of them were perched on the couch edge, their hands intertwined with each other's and Janey's eyes brimming with enthusiasm.

He stood before them. "Tell her, Allison."

Allison turned pleading eyes to his. "Can't it wait a bit?"

"It'll only make it worse."

"Just until after dinn--"

"Janey, look at me." Matt waited until he had his sister's full attention. Her light brown eyes clouded and she pulled on a stray curl. "This is not a real marriage."

Her finger stilled. The dark curl bounced back. "I don't understand." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"This marriage is a business merger. Temporary. And only you and Allison's father know that, so it's important that you keep it to yourself."

Allison laid a comforting hand on Janey's arm, but Janey snatched it away and jumped up. Allison looked in physical pain.

"I don't understand," Janey stammered.

"You don't have to. Just make sure you don't tell anyone," Matt said.

"I don't *have* to understand?"

Matt dropped into the loveseat across from Allison. "Look, I'm just tired." He ran a hand down his face. "I promise that tomorrow I'll explain--"

"But all this time," Janey wailed. "I thought, hoped--"

"It's only been two days." Matt gave a weary sigh. He looked up to

see Allison watching him closely, making no effort to hide her distress. He could feel the tension lines along his forehead pull into full blown bands of pressure. Allison looked at him with concern.

Janey wrung her hands. "How could you do this?"

From the corner of his eye, he watched her stomp over to the picture windows and then whirl back on them. She was the image of him, only very tiny, her skin pale. In her faded jeans and t-shirt and her hair pulled into a ponytail, she looked every bit the little girl he had raised. And more furious than he had ever seen her. Worse than when he walked into that party when she was fifteen and dragged her out, kicking and screaming, from among her inebriated friends.

"You married for money?" Her eyes flashed at them both. Allison looked as though she would be sick.

Matt sank further into the cushions and clasped his hands before him. "It's more complicated than that, Janey. For now I'm asking you to just trust me on this."

Janey blinked unbelieving eyes at him and then her lashes predictably brimmed over with tears. She dashed down the hall.

Allison sat rigid, watching his sister flee, her hands twisting so tight on her lap that her knuckles went white. A heavy silence hung in the air. Then the slam of a door echoed in the hollow space. Allison flinched, looking shell shocked.

Matt dropped his forehead into his hands and massaged his temples.

He had handled that all wrong. It seemed he never knew what to do with Janey anymore. She had always looked up to him, but all that was changing. She didn't talk to him the way she used to and he guessed now he shouldn't wonder why.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Allison ease down beside him. He looked up into her soft blue eyes.

"Do you want me to go talk to her?" She laid a tentative hand on his knee.

He let his eyes roam over her face. She was like an angel. Her golden hair shimmered around a face that radiated sympathy. She had been through just as much as him, maybe more, yet she was worried about Janey, and they had just met. And now she was worried about him.

He reached up and, with one finger, lifted a silky strand of her hair from off her neck. "Thank you." His voice was a hoarse whisper. When color rose to her cheeks, he dropped his hand. "I think she'd probably appreciate a woman's touch."

Allison gave him a small smile. "I'll go to her." She rose and headed down the hall.

He allowed himself the pleasure of watching her. Then, with a weary sigh, he punched numbers into the phone and ordered some Chinese.

\* \* \* \*

Allison had done her best to explain to Janey why she and Matthew had married, but still Janey's disappointment was heartbreaking.

The younger woman sat crossed-legged on the bed and sniffed back tears. "I shouldn't be surprised." She blew her nose. "Matt's whole world is his business."

"And you." Allison brushed back a curl from Janey's forehead. "That's obvious."

Janey snorted. "Yeah, lucky me. I'm the only co-ed in New York City who's never gone away during Spring Break. Matt doesn't trust me."

Allison smiled. "I'm sure it's the guys he doesn't trust."

"Same thing. He thinks I'm a little girl. Like I can't handle myself or something."

"Can you?"

Janey shrugged. "Most times. Some guys are tougher. But I've learned what kind of situations to stay clear of."

"Good for you."

"If Matt only knew. But if I tell him some of the things I've escaped, instead of applauding my common sense, he'll clamp down harder."

"You're damned if you do and you're--"

"Exactly."

"You'll just have to *show* him that you're not a little girl."

"How?"

Allison eased herself off the bed and unzipped one of her suitcases. "You could start by showing him that you understand his motives for what we've done. He's taken good care of you, Janey. His business is no small

part of that.” She lifted a lacy camisole with a sigh before folding it with care and laying it in the top dresser drawer. She had worn it last night with hopeful anticipation, but Matthew had avoided her like a bad movie.

“You’re right. I just had such high hopes when he telegrammed me.”

*That makes two of us.*

“Except for when he was a teenager, I’ve never even met any of the women he’s dated. He keeps them away from me. They never seem to last very long anyway. Have you met any?”

“Me?” Allison laughed. “I certainly wouldn’t know anyone that he’s involved with.”

Janey unwound her legs and began handing Allison her clothes from the case. “Have you known my brother long?”

Allison stopped folding and gave her a small smile. “Since I was 13 years old.” It hurt to discover how little she knew about Matthew. About his family, his social life, even his work. She began to wonder if she was kidding herself about knowing Matthew at all.

Janey gave her a puzzled frown. “That’s a long time. Do ... do you like him? A little?”

Allison sighed and took Janey’s hands in hers. She wanted so much to tell this young woman how much, how long, she had loved her brother. But she couldn’t get Janey’s hopes up again, only to risk her being hurt and disappointed later.

Matthew popped his head through the doorway. He eyed their



entangled hands. "Dinner's here."

"All right, Matthew." Allison turned to the man she was so in love with and tried again to see him for what he really was.

His full mouth was drawn down in a vulnerable turn that told her that he was worried over Janey being so upset with him. The creases bracketing his wide-set eyes had deepened and his jaw was locked in place. She realized that she had hardly ever seen him smile, or ever watched the golden flecks in his brown eyes brighten in pleasure. He always looked intense, strong and invincible. But tonight she saw more. He was exhausted. And it went bone deep. Probably a fatigue he'd felt for years, with no relief. When her gaze lingered on him, he looked uncomfortable.

His eyes flickered with anxiety, taking in the intimate scene.

Allison's heart stopped. He was probably worried about her influence on his sister. A sadness she'd been pushing back for too long welled up and threatened to consume her. How could she love a man who thought so little of her? And if that were so, why was the thought that he'd never accept her love more heartbreaking than anything?

His penetrating gaze left hers to settle on his sister. His eyes softened. "Janey, I got those spring rolls that you like."

When Allison turned to Janey, the girl's mouth had dropped open and she was staring at her.

Matthew frowned. "It's your favorite. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she whispered, turning slowly to face her brother again.

“Thank you. That is, that’s fine.”

“Okay then.” He nodded to them both. “It’s in the kitchen.”

Allison listened to his heavy footfalls retreat down the hall as she put away the last of the suitcase. Feeling Janey’s eyes on her, she turned to the girl.

Janey blinked wide. “You’re in love with him,” she said, her voice barely audible.

Allison drew in a breath.

Then Janey smiled and her eyes filled with tears. “You’re in love with my brother,” she whispered. “Oh, my God, this is wonderful.”

“Janey, I....”

“It’s all over your face.”

“Well, it’s....”

“I won’t tell him, I promise. He’s so thick-headed he never listens to me anyway and I’m sure he hasn’t a clue.”

Allison slumped down onto the bed and sighed. “I guess it hardly matters that you know.” She gave an ironic laugh. “The whole world seems to know except my own thick-headed father ... and Matthew.”

Janey gave her a warm hug. “This is going to be so wonderful. You’ll see.” She gave a little laugh. “I just know this is going to work out.”

\* \* \* \*

Matt was trying not to stare at the burgundy sheen of sauce that shimmered on Allison’s bottom lip and that forced his attention to her

mouth. At the same time he was thinking that Janey was suspiciously cheerful as they all sat at the small oak table eating Chinese take-out.

“You haven’t invited Janey to one of your parties, have you?”

“Of course not, Matthew.”

“What parties?”

Allison’s throat flushed a soft pink. “Just a little business I run.” Her tongue slid along her lips, catching up the bit of liquid that lingered. He could still feel her tongue gliding along his mouth from when they were in the pool. The urge to slip his hand under her bathing suit and run his fingers between her legs had been physical torture to resist.

No one would have seen him do it. And the suit was cut so high it would have been ridiculously easy to accomplish. He doubted she would have minded ... at the time.

But she was different now. Probably had decided to give up on him. Which, considering his own conflicting thoughts on the idea, was probably a good thing.

But even as he thought it, he sensed more. She had withdrawn from him.

“What kind of business?” Janey asked.

His sister was too damned nosy. “Dances, Janey. And boats. You stick to your studies.”

“Of course, Matt. I was just being polite. Any real social life has to be put on hold for a while. I have a tough semester coming up.”

He nearly dropped his fork. “So, that means you’ve given up on

convincing me to let you go on that trip this fall.”

She looked blank. “Oh. The trip. I’d forgotten. Yes, that can wait until I graduate.”

His eyes narrowed. He didn’t believe a word of it.

His sister looked contrite. “The fact is, Matt, I’m sorry for the way I hound you. And ... for how I acted when you told me about why you married. Allison helped me see that if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have a college to go to.”

He turned to Allison, but she avoided looking at him.

“I see.”

“Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever really thanked you.”

“You just stay on the Dean’s list. That’s plenty thanks for me.”

“I know. But thank you anyway.” She came around the table and gave him a big kiss on his cheek, her eyes filling for the third time tonight with those damnable tears.

“Yeah, okay. Well, this is enough excitement for me tonight. I’m bushed.” He started to rise with his plate.

“I’ll clean up, Matthew.” Allison touched his forearm with a gentle hand. “You go to bed.”

He nodded his thanks, his gaze lingering a moment on her smooth palm resting along his forearm and wishing for just a moment that she’d offer to go with him.

## CHAPTER NINE

The small wine and cheese reception was everything Matt hated, right down to the tiny scraps of food they were expected to pick up with toothpicks. He should have eaten something before he came. He had worked late, preparing for his contacts here, and then Allison had taken so damned long to get ready that, had they stopped to grab a bite along the way, they would have been even later than the half hour they already were.

He had reminded her again how important it was that she make an impression on Pearson. The affair was a small one. Held only for leaders in the industry to honor one of their own. About thirty men gathered tonight with their wives to honor the three men who had introduced software back in the 60's that had paved the way for the current innovations. Matt intended to be here himself, years from now, receiving an award. But tonight, he had other plans-- to convince Pearson to back his natural language program and pilot it at his company.

He felt a soft cloth dab the corner of his mouth. When he turned, Allison was gently wiping at the corner of his lips. Whenever he turned abruptly, unprepared, he was struck by how beautiful she was, and it always

threw his thoughts off track, distracting him from whatever occupied him.

She looked so warm. Tonight like melted butterscotch. From the soft honeyed waves of her hair to the shine at the tip of her perfectly shaped nose. It was her heat that continually drew him to her and sank into his weary bones. He wanted to bury himself inside her, ease the restlessness that tormented him. Take comfort in her soft lush body and, if he were honest, take comfort in her considerable warmth. He stifled an ironic laugh. The intensity of his craving for her almost shocked him. He didn't know how long he could hold out.

But, hell, they were newlyweds. That gave him leeway to take all kinds of advantages that conflicted him. He smiled to himself and let her dab his mouth, instead.

He looked into eyes the color of a calm sky at dusk. "Thank you," he said.

Her expression turned cautious, as if she was bracing herself for a cynical follow-up. He couldn't blame her. In response, he circled her wrist and ran his thumb along the inside to feel her pulse. It was quick and heavy, warm, and it sped up under his touch.

Once, just once, he'd like to let down his guard and reach out to her, feel her beneath him, alive and wanting him.

On impulse, he kissed her. A sweet kiss, pressing full against her mouth, but giving little hint of the passion he felt. He reluctantly withdrew, turning her palm into his. "Come on. We've mingled enough. Let me

introduce you to Howard Pearson.”

Her stunned expression made him smile. Whatever little theory she’d conjured up about him he was sure to have destroyed by that moment of weakness.

When Matt found Pearson, the man was encircled by three men competing for his attention while Pearson’s wife hovered close by his side. She was a pale blonde, waif thin, and draped with diamonds so large they anchored her slender neck. When Pearson spotted Matt, he nodded in acknowledgement and then all four men’s eyes devoured Allison as they approached, their gaze moving over her a moment longer than was polite. Matt should have been used to it, but it annoyed him anyway. If Allison noticed, she gave no sign, but smiled instead with her usual cordiality while she awaited an introduction.

Pearson’s lean hand caught Matt’s in a firm grip and then all four men were congratulating Matt and Allison on their marriage.

When Pearson turned to his wife and drew her forward, Matt was struck by the vacant look in her eyes when they were introduced. That is, until she looked fully at Allison. Then, there was no mistaking the apprehension that lit her eyes.

Allison turned oddly pale but stammered a greeting before quickly returning her gaze to the small group of men. No one but Matt seemed to notice, but he could feel Allison’s hand shake in his. She tightened her grip.

Before Matt could wonder about it, he was drawn into the men’s talk

of business, and he followed keenly all the subtle and not-so-subtle nuances of power. Even so, Matt noticed that Allison and Mrs. Pearson remained silent. He knew that if Allison was anything, she was impeccably at ease in social situations, but now she was clasping his hand so tight that her nails dug into his skin. None of it made sense.

Before long, it was obvious that the other three men were as anxious as Matt to get on Pearson's good side and it irritated the hell out of Matt that Pearson knew it.

Still, Matt wasn't sure if he was relieved or not when Pearson's eyes settled on Allison. He smoothed back his blonde hair, graying too perfectly at the temples to be natural, in unconscious male preening.

"I'm impressed with your program, Connor," he said, looking at Allison as he spoke. "But I need more information. Perhaps you and your wife can join Meg and me on our sailboat this weekend." His eyes lingered on Allison a moment longer before returning to Matt.

"I think we can do that." Matt turned to Allison. She had gone chalk white.

"I ... I don't think so, Matthew. My father ... is expecting us."

"Your father?"

"Yes...." She licked her lips. "That impromptu reception. Since we went and surprised him by eloping. Remember?"

Matt's eyes narrowed. There was nothing to remember and she knew it. He gave her a look of silent warning not to blow this. The fact that



Pearson had invited him and not the other three men who had now drifted away may be the only signal from Pearson he would get if he didn't rescue this.

"I remember now, honey." Matt tipped her chin up and silently ordered her to get with the program. "But that's not the entire weekend."

To his relief, the lights dimmed, signaling the hour when couples were expected to dance together and then make the rounds with each other's wives. Matt had always hated this part, but now it offered him a chance to get Allison back on track.

He drew her onto the dance floor. In past years, he'd had to fend off the attentions of more than one wife he had dutifully danced with in order to get closer to their husbands. Last year, one persistent woman, a classic trophy wife, described in detail her husband's impotency while she nudged Matt's thigh. He was glad to see the couple hadn't made it this year.

He held Allison close while they danced. "Listen. I don't plan on making the guy my best friend, but one day on his boat won't kill us. He'll want to dance with you next. Tell him you'd love for us to join him and his lovely wife on his boat sometime this weekend."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I ... I just can't, please Matthew--"

"That's not a reason. Have you met him before?"

She shook her head. He gave a quick glance around. "Look, if there's

more to this, than just tell me.”

“No.”

“No, there isn’t more to this or, no, you won’t tell me?”

“Matthew, please.”

“You’ve met his wife though.”

“No, Matthew. You’ll just have to trust me on this.”

“Where have I heard that?” She was lying about knowing Pearson’s wife, and he had no idea why she would do that. “Look at me.”

She reluctantly met his gaze.

“I thought I explained to you why this was so important. If you can just explain to me why it’s necessary that you insult him--”

“I haven’t insulted him.”

“Yet. Believe me, he’ll persist. And if you keep giving him the cold shoulder and we don’t accept his invitation, he’ll be insulted. After I get the contract, you never have to see him again.”

She bit her bottom lip so hard Matt thought she’d draw blood.

“Just dance with him and make nice. Don’t blow this, Allison. Christ, I’m not asking you to sleep with the guy.”

She gave a sigh and pressed her forehead to his shoulder. When he drew her closer, she seemed to collapse against him. He hated hounding her like this. He pressed his lips into her hair. “I’m sorry, Allison. I hate these things, too. Welcome to the corporate world.”

She nodded mutely. But when she looked up at him again, her distress

was clear.

He brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. "Can't you trust me and tell me what's going on?"

She covered his hand with hers, her eyes pleading. But then she turned away.

He was disappointed and then annoyed with himself that he should expect her to feel close enough to him to confide in. When she pushed against his chest, he reluctantly let her go.

"Excuse me, Matthew."

He watched her quickly disappear through the small throng of dancers. He almost called after her. But for what purpose? He couldn't force her to tell him anything, and he wouldn't force her to do anything she didn't want to do.

\* \* \* \*

Matt considered the night a disaster. That Pearson had extended the sailing invitation again by the evening's end was a miracle, no thanks to Allison. While she claimed she had tried her best to charm the guy who held a considerable portion of Matt's future in his hands, she hadn't tried hard enough. Pearson's impatience had made that clear.

"You're mad at me." Her voice was like a whisper as she sat beside him in the cab.

"I'm not mad. I just don't understand. You have no problem flirting with half the population of lower Manhattan. Even the bartenders are

rewarded with your favors.”

“That’s not fair, Matthew, and you know it. I danced with the creep three times. Don’t tell me I didn’t try. I just won’t go on his stupid boat with him.”

“Why the hell not?”

“That’s my business.” She eased away from him.

The cab driver shot him a look in the rear view mirror with enough fire to decimate a small village. The guy should just drive and mind his own damned business.

“I think it is. I’ve seen you in action. You didn’t come close tonight. You hardly made an effort as far as I’m concerned.”

“Stop it, Matthew. I said I was sorry that it didn’t work out. And I am, for your sake.”

The cab stopped in front of his building. The doorman opened the door and when Matt got out and turned to help her, he was taken back to see tears fill her eyes.

“Come on, Allison,” he said, more brusque than he’d intended.

She slunk back to the other side of the cab. “I don’t think I want to go with you.”

“Get out of the car.”

She caught the cabby’s eye in the mirror and before Matt knew what was happening, the guy peeled out, missing Matt’s toes by a hair. The door slammed shut with the acceleration but Matt ran after them anyway in a

useless effort to bang on the locked door. The cab raced away without him.

“God-damn-it!” he shouted along with a few choice curses as he watched the yellow hybrid race down the street. He was still fuming when it disappeared around a corner. He wrenched off his tie and headed back to his building. The doorman stood at attention but there was no mistaking the smirk on his face.

“What are you looking at?” The guy had been his doorman for five years, but Matt had barely spoken a word to him other than to issue instructions.

“Sir?”

Matt studied the man for the first time. His blue eyes were pale and his complexion the unmistakable ruddiness of the Irish. His mouth tilted up in a small quirk of amusement. “Is Mrs. Connor all right?”

“Mrs. Connor? How did you know I got married?”

“Your wife introduced herself to me today when she came for the mail.” The man spoke with a heavy brogue that Matt had never noticed before.

“I see.”

“Is she all right, sir?”

“She will be. But she’s mad as hell at me now.”

The small smirk returned before Matt turned and headed through the door.

\* \* \* \*

Allison thought she was going to be sick.

She instructed the cab driver to drop her at Kevin's and was grateful when the driver insisted on escorting her to the doors despite that Harry, the doorman, leaped forward when he saw who it was.

She glanced at the driver's badge. "Thank you, Hakim." She gave him a generous tip.

Hakim folded the bills back into her hand. "Keep it. The look on your boyfriend's face was worth it."

"He's my husband."

His mouth dropped. "Babe, I wish you luck. You'll need it."

Once she was safe in Kevin's apartment with a strong cup of black tea, she started to unwind.

"Have some more." Kevin poured another steaming cup and sank down beside her. "I can't believe you came face to face with Megan's husband."

"All I kept seeing in my mind was him dragging her across their kitchen and shoving her head in the oven. Remember how vividly she described the smell of the gas and his vise grip on her neck? The marks lasted for weeks, remember?"

"How could I forget?"

"He's so smooth, Kevin. Sophisticated, charming, in perfect control. He never once touched her throughout the evening, other than to lead her around. The jewels she wore were obscenely large, like a choke collar,

weighing more than she does. She's gotten terribly thin."

"Thinner than she was? Doesn't seem possible."

"He's a powerful man. We knew that, but until tonight I hadn't realized how powerful. He could easily make good on his threat to kill her if she leaves him."

"He'll end up killing her eventually anyway if she doesn't."

"We can't let that happen."

"Allison...." Kevin rubbed his hands down her arms and made her face him. "We've been through this. It's up to her. She knows what to do and where to go when she's ready. We can't take what little dignity she has left and force her."

"I know."

"And I won't have you shaking all night and making yourself sick."

"You're right. Can you imagine if I agreed to go on their boat? Megan and I would be together for hours, pretending we didn't know each other. I would have been terrified for her that he might figure out a connection between us. Just thinking about it was awful."

Kevin brought her cup of tea to her lips. "Enough of this. Now drink up and then tell me more about how you left Prince Charming fuming on the sidewalk."

She gave a little laugh. "He *was* furious."

Kevin let loose a deep barreled laugh. "Jesus, I miss out on all the fun."

Allison smiled. “But, you know, earlier, he was ... almost tender with me, affectionate.”

“Connor?” Kevin grunted. “I didn’t know he had it in him.”

“Neither did I.” Allison gave a wistful sigh. “Why is he so stubborn, Kevin?”

“You’re asking me to explain Matt Conner? Give me a break.”

Kevin invited her to stay the night and it took her awhile to convince him that she needed to go back home. He finally agreed and then made sure she was tucked safely into a cab with Mr. O’Reilly, Matthew’s doorman, waiting on the other end.

Home. To Matthew.



## CHAPTER TEN

Allison slipped her key into the lock and closed Matthew's door soundly behind her. The apartment was dark, black. But her bedroom door was directly ahead at the end of the hall, and he had little furniture to block her way.

She took off her heels and treaded softly across the polished Parquet floor of the foyer to the plush carpeting beyond.

Off to the right, through the wide archway to his living room, her eye caught a tiny circle of light that brightened and then dimmed. The smell of fresh tobacco drifted toward her. She heard a quiet snap before a small lamp glowed, emitting a soft circle of radiance.

He sat there, the golden light playing off his bare chest. Her eyes dropped to his flat stomach and to the cotton sweatpants that tied loosely at his hips, but what riveted her attention was the bronze skin pulled taut over muscle that glistened with a light sheen of sweat. She dragged her eyes back up to his handsome face.

He stared at her. A lock of damp hair fell over his forehead.

She stared back until the silence between them grew too heavy to

ignore.

She took a little breath. “You scared me.” Her voice sounded hollow in the stark silence.

He didn’t move, but his eyes burned through her with alarming intensity. A liquor bottle was lying on the table beside him and his hand curled around a rocks glass of melting ice. Her heart raced as she waited, something primal warning her to keep still and just wait for him to say something. He took a slow drag on his cigarette, his gaze never breaking hers, before he blew out a long cloud of smoke. He dropped the cigarette into the bottle, still studying her with deadly calm.

“Where were you?” His voice was dangerously soft.

Her voice froze in her throat, her gaze dropping inanely to his bare feet and then back up along his calves and powerful thighs. The pants hung loosely, conforming to the shape of every muscle.

He rose slowly, his glass still fisted in his left hand and the waist of his sweat pants slipping low on his hips as he advanced toward her with slow deliberate steps. When her eyes followed the dark line of hair disappearing beneath the waistband, her mouth went dry. The worn cotton hugged close the bulge with which she’d lately become so enthralled and which seemed now to be growing larger. Her eyes widened in fascination.

When she realized what she was doing, she looked up into his cynical smile. “Found something you like?”

“No ... I.” She stepped back a pace and swallowed.

Before she understood how it happened, he had her backed against the wall. “You haven’t answered my question.”

He dwarfed her, surrounding her with his heat and making her suddenly dizzy. He smelled of rich liquor and fresh sweat, dark and forbidden.

“You’re drunk.”

His eyes grew heavy-lidded. “Not drunk enough. Answer me.”

“What ... what was the question again?” She flattened herself against the wall.

His eyes moved over her face and then he threaded his fingers through the side of her hair, twisting a thick tangle around his hand.

“Answer me.”

She swallowed thickly. “I was with Kevin.”

His eyes narrowed and then hardened. “Giving away sugar again?” He gave her hair a tug so that her face tilted up to his. She gazed into eyes smoldering with a fire she didn’t understand--fury and passion somehow warped together and fighting each other. When next he spoke, his voice was a low growl. “Any sugar left?”

She didn’t dare breathe. His body, so close, vibrated with tension as though he were holding himself in tight control.

He studied her for a long moment, his eyes moving over her features, his warm breath washing over her before he finally spoke. But this time his voice was a hoarse whisper and his eyes shone. “So beautiful.” His lips

started a slow descent toward hers, his eyes now smoldering as they zeroed in on his target. When their lips met, his barely brushed hers, but just his closeness sent a heated rush through her. “Just a cube,” he murmured. “For your husband.”

His tongue slid along her bottom lip, tasting her, teasing her with his rich taste, a hint of liquor and tobacco and him, warm and strong. When her lips parted on a sigh, he plunged into the soft recesses of her mouth. His tongue tangled with hers, sliding along the length and then retreated abruptly, leaving her needy and wanting. She gripped his shoulders to pull him closer and startled at the feel of her palms meeting hard warm flesh. She gave a little whimper, filled with hunger.

She sensed his own agitation, hovering just barely under his skin and ready to explode. She was restless with anticipation of what was to come, hoped would come. She knew once he lost control there would be no stopping him. And she wanted him. Had wanted him for so long.

He eased back, his eyes dropping to her breasts. With unhurried movements, he lifted his drink and dribbled the liquor into the deep valley of her cleavage. The shock of the cold liquid on her hot skin sent her pulse racing. Then he looked into her eyes as he trailed one finger along her wet skin and dipped a finger between her breasts. She closed her eyes and moaned.

“Look at me.” He tipped her chin up to meet his eyes and then dropped bits of ice along the swell of her breasts and slid them with

precision slowness under the edge of the silk. His eyes were bright. Her heated skin melted the ice, soaking the delicate fabric and causing her nipples to rise. Her breath stopped as his finger inched closer to the peak of her breast. A contemptuous smile graced his mouth before he lazily swiped her nipple, barely grazing it and making her ache. She sucked in a breath and grabbed his wrist.

“Don’t, Matthew. Don’t make this--”

“What? Cheap?” He scraped a nail over her nipple and pure pleasure stripped through her. Then he did it again until her body burst with quick tiny flames that centered at the very heart of her and then melted her insides. With a low moan, she began sliding down the wall. He lifted her, pressing her into the wall and pouring the rest of the ice cubes down her front, soaking her dress completely and making her nipples harden like pebbles. He dropped the glass onto the carpet and pinched the tips of her breasts through the silky fabric with his thumb and forefinger, making her cry out with the jolts of desire ripping through her.

She whimpered and grabbed onto his wrists, as she stared into eyes cold with resentment and hot with desire. Then his mouth was on her, licking her lips, her jawline, down her throat, and then along the piping of her dress, his tongue hot, searing her skin. She sucked in a breath as his tongue dipped under the scalloped edge to seek one nipple. When the rough tip of his tongue flicked along the peak, she exploded.

“Matthew,” she breathed.

In one smooth sweep he shoved down her dress, stripping her to the waist, the dress' neckline pinning her arms to her side. He let out a groan and then suckled her greedily, cupping her breasts in his palms and trapping her in his arms. When he nipped with his teeth, her brain short-circuited and she began drowning in sensation.

An animal sound tore from his throat. Then his hands were smoothing down her belly, taking her dress with them. In minutes, she stood before him in nothing but black lace panties and stockings with her dress pooled at her ankles.

He muttered a curse and buried his lips in the small triangle of lace between her legs.

"No!" She dug her nails into his hair. And then her legs gave way.

He caught her up into his arms. Without breaking stride, he headed toward his bedroom with her, naked except for her panties and stockings. When she turned her face into his shoulder, her lips met hard slick muscle. She licked at the fresh salty taste of his skin.

He crossed the threshold and laid her in the center of a king-sized bed. The starlight that filtered through the skylight illuminated her body, starkly exposing her to his gaze.

"Strip off your panties." His pupils were black with desire. "We'll leave on the stockings," he said, the raw sound of his voice sending a chill down her spine.

With fluid movements, he stripped off his pants and began climbing

onto the bed. Words lodged in her throat but refused to come out.

If this were to happen in the way she understood, it would never work. He was thick and flushed a violent red that ran the full impossible length of him. She stared at him, frightened and paralyzed, and then awestruck at how wonderfully alive and powerful he looked.

He knelt beside her and for one horrified moment she wanted to clasp her hand around his width and put her mouth to him.

Before she could stop herself, she did.

A low hiss rumbled up from his throat as her tongue met with hot smooth skin. But one touch was enough to shock her back to her senses. She scooted back against the pillows and blinked up at him, wide-eyed and shaken.

His eyes softened and he ran a hand along her cheek. "It's okay. I'd never last anyway. Not tonight."

Then he smoothed his palm down her belly and slipped under her panties. The feel of his fingers sliding over her tender flesh shocked her, but when he slipped a finger into her, the sweep of pleasure that rippled through her made her sigh in wonderment. "You're soaked."

He ripped off her panties. In seconds he was covering her, making her skin burn everywhere hard muscle met soft flesh. The rough hair of his chest stirred her nipples, making her ache, and the feel of his weight pressing her into the mattress made her want to melt into him, bury him deep inside her. She arched against him, needing to get closer. He licked and bit along her

collarbone, the hard length of him throbbing against her thighs. He nudged her legs wide and she panicked.

But before she could protest, he captured her mouth in a bruising kiss and then pressed forward. A burning heat mixed together with a pleasure that bordered on pain. She cried out and arched up against him, needing him closer but afraid of the intense pressure.

He grunted and pushed, stretching her, and then he mercifully stopped. She sucked in her breath, suddenly worried that he'd tear her apart.

"Matthew--"

"Lift your knees." When she didn't respond, he lifted them for her and then thrust forward. She cried out with the shock of it.

He heaved himself up, kneeling back on his heels and staring down at where they had just moments before joined. "What the--" he said.

He bounded off the bed and did a quick turn before he whirled back on her. When she followed his gaze, she saw the small pool of blood between her legs.

His eyes burned into her. "Why?"

She trembled with the sudden loss of his heat, an uncontrollable trembling that she couldn't stop. She hugged herself tight and closed her legs, covering the source of his anger.

"Why?" he repeated, his voice choked.

"Because ... because I'm a virgin."

His body shook as he stood at the foot of the bed, his fists clenched



and his eyes darting between the evidence of her virginity and then back again at her.

She choked back a sob.

“Why didn’t you stop me?”

She just shook her head.

“I don’t understand, Allison.”

“Because I love you,” she sobbed and then burst into tears, feeling more naked and exposed than she ever had in her life. She fumbled for the sheets to cover herself but more than anything she wanted to run away from his accusing eyes and never come back.

His look of horror when she glared back at him completed her humiliation. She wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

He doubled over and then stumbled toward his bathroom door. Seconds later she heard the horrible retching and deep wracking moans.

Inside the bathroom, Matt clutched the edges of the bowl and dumped the entire contents of his stomach, which included a full bottle of Jack Daniels that he had consumed earlier, into the toilet. But still his stomach rebelled. Racking dry heaves shook his body until sweat poured off his forehead.

When his gut had no more to give, he dragged himself up and glared into the mirror at the son-of-a-bitch staring back at him.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Matt's fist shattered the bathroom mirror, sending shards of glass littering the floor.

Then he thought of Allison, hurt and shaking now in the middle of his bed, and he dry heaved all over again.

He had to get a hold of himself and do something. Now.

As he splashed cold water on his face and rinsed his mouth his mind raced through all the ineffectual things he could say to her, none of which would ever be enough to make up for what he'd done.

He dragged the towel down his face and looked to the door, still unsure what he would say but needing to go to her.

When he stepped into the moonlit room, his bed was empty, the only evidence that she'd been there, the twisted sheets and the virgin stain of blood.

He cursed and ran down the hall to the other bathroom, only to find it empty. When he searched her room, drawers hung open, and her purse that she kept on the dresser was gone, along with her car keys. He sank down onto the bed and stared at the lacy garments hanging over the corner of one

drawer. He dropped his face into his hands and felt the blood on his face. His knuckles were sliced and bleeding. He didn't care.

He pictured Allison's crumpled face, her shaking in the middle of his bed, and her crying.

He was going to be sick all over again.

\* \* \* \*

Matt hesitated before pressing the elevator button that would take him to the floor of Drummond's penthouse. He leaned against the side wall and glanced at his watch.

It had been a full two hours since Allison had run from him. A three-alarm fire had kept him trapped on the west side. He'd finally left his Mercedes parked on a side street and taken the subway down to 42<sup>nd</sup> street, changed trains, and then headed back up the east side. Too impatient to wait for a cab, he had just jogged six blocks, dodging the early risers headed for work.

It wasn't until the door started closing again that he realized he'd been stopped at the 16<sup>th</sup> floor and staring back at his reflection in the gold and chrome panels across from him. His faded jeans were a blur of blue and a dark shadow covered his jaw. He scrubbed a hand down his face and with mounting apprehension, stepped off the elevator.

After he crossed the hall, he took a breath as he stopped in front of the heavy cherry-wood door. He finally reached up and rang the bell.

A shadow flickered behind the peephole and then the door swung

open. Burden stood as stiff as a toy soldier, the slender point of his nose tipped up at Matt and his eyes flat.

Matt cleared his throat. "Good morning, Burden."

The man barely nodded.

Matt gave his T-shirt a respectable tuck into his belt. "I'd like to see Allison."

"I'm sorry, that's not possible."

Matt thought he sounded anything but sorry.

A small head appeared at his elbow. "Who is it?" Mrs. Murphy peered out. Her expression turned to stone. "Oh ... it's you."

"Mrs. Murphy." Matt nodded politely. "I'd like to see Allison."

Both brows shot up. "Oh you would, would you?"

"She doesn't want to see you," Burden said. "She hates you--"

Mrs. Murphy poked him in the side.

Matt sighed heavily. "She doesn't hate me."

"That's what she sai--"

"Hush up," Mrs. Murphy scolded the butler.

For the first time Matt really looked at the two loyal servants. They eyed him, chins high, looking more than ready to do battle if necessary for their young mistress. Matt ran a weary hand across the back of his neck. He met their gaze. "Allison's incapable of hate."

They stole a glance at each other. Mrs. Murphy straightened. She smoothed down the front of her apron, one eye trained on his face. "Be that

as it may, you'll not be getting near her today, unless Mr. Drummond instructs us otherwise."

"I see." Matt stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Then let me see Bill."

"He's not here. Left for work already."

That hardly surprised Matt. But he didn't want to leave, knowing Allison was just beyond the door. "Just let me--"

Before he could finish, the door slammed in his face.

A half hour later, he was at Drummond's office.

"What do you mean?" Drummond asked. "Allison's not home, home with me that is. She's supposed to be with you."

"You didn't know that she left me?"

"Left you? You've only been married five days."

Matt dropped down into the overstuffed chair where just two weeks ago he'd fought with himself to keep his mind off Allison's legs and back on business. His mind strayed now to the feel of her breasts in his hands and her soft heat, gloving him tight, when he had driven into her.

His stomach twisted. He doubted her memories were as good.

"She's mad at me."

"Mad at you?" Drummond looked at him as though Matt said she had sprouted two heads since they'd been married. "Allison doesn't get mad." He shook his head. "I don't think I've ever known her to be angry ... at anyone, for anything."

"Okay, fine. Hurt then. What difference does it make? She's gone."

“What did you do to her?”

“That’s between me and Allison.”

“Since when?”

Matt glared at him. “Since I made her my wife.”

Drummond looked too dumbstruck to respond. “I need a drink,” his friend grumbled to himself, heading for the bar. “What can I get you?”

“Nothing. I’ve had enough liquor to last awhile.”

Drummond uncapped a bottle of Absolut and poured it into his coffee cup. “Whatever you did, it must have been bad.”

“It was,” Matt grumbled. “You need to tell the servants to let me in.”

Drummond looked up from stirring his coffee. “She’s not there. She may have come to collect a few of her things before I got up this morning and talked with the servants then, but she’s nowhere in that house now.”

“How do you know? Maybe she was in her room when you got up.”

“No.” Drummond lifted a shoulder. “The house is lonely without her. I can always tell when Allison’s about. The ... the air is happy.” He drank his coffee in small comforting sips.

“Get me Kevin’s address.”

Drummond’s head came up. “Kevin?”

He joined Matt at the coffee table but thankfully didn’t probe further. Drummond placed his glass down gently. The worry lines around the older man’s eyes had deepened. “Yes.” He ran a hand over his mouth. “She’d be at Kevin’s.”

Before Matt left, Drummond mentioned the public announcement they were scheduled to make about their two companies merging that would coincide with a formal announcement of Matt and Allison's marriage. But Matt's interest wasn't in it, and he soon left Drummond's office with Kevin's address in hand.

He passed by Drummond's secretary's desk on the way out. Nancy called out to him. "Mr. Connor, just a minute." She glanced down into the phone and spoke. "I understand, Burden." She placed the phone back in its receiver and then picked up a glass. "I have a feeling, Matthew, that Allison would want you to have this."

With an angry toss, she threw the liquid right into his face.

When he opened his eyes, she was braced before him, hands on her wide hips and fuming.

Matt grabbed some tissues from off her desk and mopped his face. "I'm sure she would, Nancy. Thank you."

Not fifteen minutes later, he was at Kevin's door. But this time, he didn't hesitate. Allison belonged with him, despite what had happened, and he intended to make that clear. How could he make it up to her if he couldn't get near her?

Matt was lifting his hand to bang on the walnut door for the second time when it opened wide. The Incredible Hulk filled the doorway, and he hardly looked happy.

"Well, well." His eyes dropped down Matt's length and then up again.

“If it isn’t Prince Charming. You look like hell.”

Matt grunted. “Thanks. Is she here?”

“Who’s askin’?”

“Her husband.”

Kevin lifted a surprised brow and then glanced to his left. When he moved aside, another figure crowded the doorframe. The man motioned at Matt and then looked at Kevin. “This him?” he asked, turning back to study Matt.

“Yup.”

Both men braced themselves in the doorway. The wall of concrete facing Matt was thick enough to stop a stealth bomber.

Matt couldn’t believe it. One Incredible Hulk was bad enough. But he’d never get past two.

“Who’s this?” Matt asked Kevin.

Kevin nodded to the man. “Henry, this is Matthew Connor.” Henry extended his hand.

Matt took the man’s offered hand. “It’s just Matt.” He lifted his chin. “You Kevin’s brother?”

“His lover.”

*His lover.* Matt couldn’t believe it, although why he should be surprised by anything at this point, he didn’t know, but the irony was unbelievable.

“I came to see Allison.”



“What makes you think she’s here?” Henry asked.

Matt sighed. “She’s mad at me--”

“Mad at you?” Kevin barked, stepping toward Matt. Henry shot an arm out to keep Kevin back. “She’s hysterical. She’s been crying on and off all morning. I think she’s more than mad at you.”

“Okay, furious then,” Matt mumbled. “I need to see her.”

“And why would I let you do that?”

“Because I need to apologize.”

“For what?”

“None of your business.”

“She’s here with *me*. I’d say she made it my business.”

“This is between me and her.” Matt glared.

“Then you’re not getting past me. How do I know what else you’ll do to her?”

“I didn’t hurt her. Not in that way.”

“You had to have done something pretty bad--”

“I did.”

“She’s hysterical.”

Matt’s head snapped up. “I didn’t know she was a virgin, okay? I stripped her naked and ... oh, Jesus.” Matt kneaded his neck.

Kevin crossed his arms over his chest and glanced over at Henry before returning his attention to Matt. “So, in other words, Connor, you did it wrong.”

Matt grimaced and ran a hand down his face.

“Jesus, what an idiot.” Kevin and Henry exchanged a smirk.

Matt shook his head. “Look, she thinks she’s supposed to be in love with me now.”

Kevin’s eyes narrowed. “Oh yeah?”

“She’s young,” Matt said. “I’ve got to make it up to her.”

Kevin nodded. “Yeah. What are you going to do?”

Matt lifted his hands and let them drop. “Grovel?”

“Groveling’s good.” Kevin nodded. Henry nodded along with him.

“Unless you two have something better.”

“I don’t think we’re equipped to advise you in that area. I mean, we’re equipped all right, but--”

“I think I get what you mean,” Matt said. “Can I come in?”

The men looked at each other a long moment and then moved aside to let him pass.

“She just got out of a soak in the tub. She’s changing in the back bedroom.”

“Where’s the bedroom?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Kevin said. “She’s going to have my head for letting you in. There’s no way I’m sending you back to her bedroom. Just wait right here.”

Just as Kevin got to the hall, Allison emerged from the bedroom, bundled in a thick terry robe and brushing her long blonde hair.

The three men held their breaths.

When she got to the end of the hall, she looked up, straight into Matt's eyes.

She spun around to Kevin, standing directly beside her. "What's he doing here?" He went suddenly mute. She turned accusing eyes to Henry. "Did you let him in?"

"Me?" Henry stalled. "I just met him."

"How could you do this?" Her eyes burned into the two men. "I trusted you two. Get him out of here."

"Allison," Matt started, keeping his voice calm while he scrambled to think what to say next.

"I don't have anything to say to you. Just leave."

Kevin slipped past her and nudged Henry. In seconds they were at the door.

"Kevin, don't leave me."

Matt heard the door close softly behind him.

She stood there, stunned, and looking lost in the bulky robe, fresh from her bath, her nose shiny and her hair still wet.

"How do you do that?" she whispered, the vulnerability in her voice touching a need in him that was so unfamiliar.

He softened his gaze. "Do what?" he said, his voice low, careful not to break the delicate thread that hung between them.

She lifted a hand and then let it drop. "That." She motioned toward

the door. "They promised they wouldn't let you near me. This is their house and they've just run out the door."

She looked small and suddenly as young and as innocent as he now knew her to be. "I told them I needed to apologize."

She hugged herself and backed up a pace. "How did you even find me here?"

"Your father and I figured--"

Her arms dropped. "You didn't tell my father what happened?"

"No." He held up a hand. "Jesus, no. He just knows you're mad at me."

"Oh." Her shoulders drooped and she sank down into a nearby chair.

He walked slowly toward her. "Allison."

Her head came up. "Just go. I don't want you here."

Matt felt helpless, an emotion that didn't sit well with him. "I'm sorry, Allison."

"For what?" Her voice was almost a whisper. She looked up at him, blinking through thick lashes. "For treating me like a woman?" She shrugged. "Until you found out that I wasn't...." She hung her head. "I don't think I can take any more humiliation. And, by the way--" her head came up. "You can forget what I said. I had embarrassed myself enough by that point. I said it to justify my actions."

"I see." He supposed that given the drama of her first time, it wasn't a surprising thing for her to blurt out. But still, Matt was puzzled. It was as

though she was blaming herself for the fiasco. And that amazed him, considering how rough he'd been with her and the erotic way in which he'd tortured her with the ice cubes and then stripped her naked in the hall. And her a virgin. He still couldn't believe it. He tried to recall her reaction, but all he remembered were the soft moans and whimpers of what he'd been sure at the time were pleasure.

It *was* pleasure. She had been wet and hot when he'd laid her in the center of his bed.

She tipped up her chin. "Don't worry. I wasn't shocked. Well...." Her eyes dropped to his groin and then skittered away. Her high cheekbones blushed a soft pink. "Maybe a little." She met his gaze stoically. "But I'll be fine. Just go, Matthew."

He suppressed a smile, remembering her look of terror when he had climbed onto the bed and then her own shock at what she'd done. He could still feel the fleeting touch of her tongue.

Given the chance, he knew she'd be warm and responsive in bed.

He wanted to be the one to awaken her.

"I can't go."

"Why not?"

"I have an obligation." He knelt on one knee in front of her. When he attempted to take her hand, she pulled it away. He contented himself instead with fingering the ends of her long hair that hung down over the collar of her robe. "It's a matter of honor, Allison." He kept his voice low, letting his

gaze settle on hers. The blue eyes that stared back at him that had always appeared so innocent, truly were. A surge of protectiveness filled him.

“You see,” he explained, “when a man takes a woman’s virginity, he accepts a certain responsibility along with it.” The beautiful blush deepened. “I owe you, Allison.” He stroked gently with one finger along the delicate pulse at the base of her neck.

“Owe me what?”

“Pleasure.”

The tiny pulse jumped. “It’s all right, Matthew. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m afraid I can’t. My manhood is at stake.” Her skin heated deliciously under his hand as he let two fingers trail down the slender column of her throat.

She yanked his hand down and pushed at him. He sat at her feet as she sprang up to get away from him. But he suspected she was running more from herself than from him.

He wanted her.

Wanted her with a hunger that was new to him. And he knew that she wanted him, too. Despite her innocence and that he’d shown her nothing but cynicism and sarcasm, had insulted her repeatedly, and had rejected her warmth. He wondered why. Wondered why she would care at all for such a colossal son-of-a-bitch.

“I want you to go, Matthew. Why won’t you listen? For a man who came to apologize, you’re extremely rude.”

He hated what he was going to do next. But he wanted her home with him. It was the only thing that would work.

“Your father is announcing our merger in just three days at Mrs. Clifton’s birthday party--”

“So?”

“He’s going to formally introduce us as husband and wife. He’s counting on us to show the world we’re in love.”

She gave a distressed sigh and began pacing. He hated that he’d trapped her, but he wanted her back in his apartment--wanted her there more than he had wanted anything in a long time.

“I’ll agree to go to the party. But I’ll meet you there.”

“Allison--”

She folded her arms. It occurred to him that she probably had nothing on underneath. Images of her smooth curved flesh, hot against his palms, surfaced.

She clutched the neck of her robe as though she could read his mind and then her eyes dropped to his groin. He was full and heavy from just being close to her. He doubted she could miss the bulge he made in his Levis.

“Go, Matthew. I’ll stick by our bargain and play the devoted wife. No one will suspect that we’re not living together.”

“I won’t argue with you now, Allison, because I know you’re still upset about the way things happened.” He took several steps toward her.

She backed up. “But understand that I won’t give up until I’ve vindicated myself and given you what’s due.”

“Matt--”

“A night of pleasure, Allison. Make no mistake that you will get it ... and soon.”

She swallowed lightly, her eyes blinking wide.

He gave a smile at her look of shock and used the moment to place a small kiss on her cheek before he headed out the door.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Allison could still feel the press of his lips, warm on her cheek, three days later and that, she knew, would be her downfall tonight if she wasn't strong.

She had gone over in her mind all week the reasons why she needed to stay far away from Matthew. While attending this birthday party was unavoidable, it was only an evening. Regardless of his plans to give her a night of pleasure, she would not go home with him. Not tonight, not next week. It would take a year, maybe longer, to recover from her humiliation, if ever she could.

If he had thought her a girl before, he was surely convinced of it now. And worse, he'd be remorseful for taking her innocence. An innocence that only existed in her virgin state, because in her heart and mind she had given herself to Matthew long ago. She would have given him her body, too, if only he had wanted her.

Now he felt obligated to make things right. She would not be his charity case and further deepen a humiliation that she was already fearful she'd never survive.

Three hours. Given Mrs. Clifton's age, that's all the birthday party would last, and then Allison would leave. She had it planned. She would come down with a mysterious illness that would require her confinement for months. While she lived at the shelter, Matthew and her father could continue with their grand plans to go public with their companies and no one need be the wiser.

The small ballroom was filling up quickly. She glanced toward the gilded archway leading into the candlelit room, surprised and relieved that Matthew had not yet arrived. Her father had been particularly solicitous of her tonight, so much that Allison almost thought Matthew had lied to her and *had* told her father what had happened. As humiliated as she was, that would really put her over the edge.

Mrs. Clifton's large family filled the front half of the old Victorian room and the rest of it was occupied by Z-Tech associates and other philanthropists of cancer research.

A harpist plucked her instrument with gentle fingers and the tang of orange shrimp filled her senses. Allison realized that, so nervous was she, she hadn't eaten a thing all day. With the next sweep of the serving trays, she grabbed a light white wine and a small dish of shrimp, stuffed mushrooms, and brie on toast. She soon made her way to a small high-top table in a dimly lit corner and perched on a stool while she and the group of 200 or more guests awaited Mrs. Clifton's arrival.

She gave a quiet sigh and closed her eyes before she brought the

delicate gold rim of the goblet to her lips. She drank a long comforting sip, swallowing slowly, and savoring the rich taste on her tongue. It went straight to her head but it helped her relax.

“Hiding?” Matthew’s low murmur caused the hair on the back of her neck to rise.

When she opened her eyes, he came from beside her and slipped up onto the only other stool. His knee brushed with hers before he allowed his pant leg to rest against her stockings. She subtly shifted her legs and tried desperately to turn away from the wonderful masculine smell of him.

“I didn’t see you come in.” She took a casual sip of her wine and then downed all but a drop in her eagerness to avoid looking at him.

When she lowered the glass, his hand closed over hers. Before she could react, his mouth pressed full against hers. When she startled and tried to pull away, he cupped her chin and held her firm. “No kiss for your husband?” he whispered softly.

Her husband. Hearing that filled her with a sexual heat, turning her body to liquid softness. For that reason and all the others, she couldn’t trust herself with him tonight.

He ran his tongue lazily over her lips. “Open your mouth.”

She held it firmly closed and managed to pull away.

He gave a low chuckle and released her. Then he picked up her glass and drained the last drops, licking his lips along the rim before placing it down. “I can taste you on the glass.” He studied her as though he were

remembering how she looked without her clothes on. Then the image of her boldly tasting him sprung up to torment her, despite that she had tried all week to forget that she had done it.

Mortified by the memory, color filled her cheeks.

“You can save your energy, Matthew. I’m not interested. I release you of your obligation.”

He gave her a teasing smile. “It doesn’t work that way. I’ve told you that my manhood is at stake. I have no choice but to prove that I can pleasure you.”

“Stop it, Matthew. This isn’t a joke.”

His eyes grew soft. “No, it isn’t.” Amber light shimmered in his dark irises, making the whiskey color of his eyes warm. At the same time, the flickering candlelight threw shadows along the rough line of his jaw defining his hard masculinity. Visions of his urgency that night rose to taunt her. He leaned in and trailed a finger along her eyebrow and then down along her hairline. Her brain told her to push his hand away, but she loved his gentle touch and the glow in his eyes, so unlike the Matthew she had been subjected to these last few weeks. “I’m not making light of this, Allison. I want you.”

The sound of those words made her insides melt and stirred the familiar restless ache. She could have kicked herself for wanting to believe him. At this rate, she’d never make it through the night.

She nudged his hand down and looked away.

With a lazy hand, he picked up her shrimp, looking ready to chomp down. “Smells good.”

“Hey, that’s mine.”

“Hungry?” He smiled at her. “Me too.” He pressed the tangy shrimp to her lips. “Take a bite.”

She breathed in the spicy aroma and licked at the juicy glaze. She closed her eyes under the sweet assault, allowing the sharp citrus taste to linger and mix with the sweet orange flavor. She was so hungry. Encircling his wrist, she took a generous bite. When she opened her eyes, his had darkened. He watched her throat move as she swallowed.

“Give me a taste,” he said, his voice husky.

She expected him to grab the shrimp, but he wrapped his hand around her neck and drew her close. He kissed her, running his tongue along her lips. “Yes,” he murmured. “Sweet.”

She offered no protest, blaming her weakness on her jangled nerves. To her further shame, she allowed his kiss to grow insistent. She gave a little sigh. His fingers gently stroking her neck were warm as he continued to taste her with slow agonizing little wet licks and kisses.

Then his hand was on her stockinged knee. “Matthew!” In mere seconds his hand was up her thigh and touching the elastic top of her stocking.

He groaned. “Don’t you ever wear panty hose?”

She clutched at his hand as lightning licks of fire tingled her thigh.

She couldn't allow him to touch her like this.

"Do you?" he growled.

"They're too hot in the summer," she choked.

"Lucky me." He gave a soft chuckle and then lazily dragged his hand out from under her short flared skirt and motioned for a waiter. Her skin still burned where his palm had rested and her face was aflame when a waiter appeared with a tray of much needed wine. As soon as he handed her the oversized goblet, she drank half its contents. If she didn't calm her nerves soon, she'd be throwing herself at him by the night's end.

His breath was warm against her ear. "What *is* that perfume you wear?"

"It's not. Perfume makes me sneeze."

"That's impossible. You smell delicious."

"Body lotion."

He groaned audibly. "All over your body?" His hand slid back up her thigh. Vividly recalling the wonderful shock of him touching her that night made her want to spread her legs for him. "I want you, Allison. Come home with me tonight."

"I told you. It's not necessary." She tugged at his wrist, but it wouldn't budge. She gripped it, determined to keep his roving hand at bay. His fingers trailed along the lacy top of her stocking, the calloused tips just barely smoothing over her naked flesh.

"Just listen to me. I didn't plan to be so direct, but I'm not good at

playing games. The truth is ... I want you back with me.”

“Why?”

He stilled a moment and then brushed his lips along her temple.

“What do you mean?” His fingers played with the lace at her stocking tops.

“Why do you want me with you?” She held his hand in a fierce lock.

“Why?” He drew back and blinked his unreasonably thick lashes.

Lashes so out of place with the dark stubble shadowing his jaw. He looked uncomfortable. “I just do.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“What do you want me to say? Just tell me and I’ll do it, anything,” he coaxed, his mouth looking so warm and soft. What did it matter why he wanted her? She should just let him make love to her. The waiting had been torture and now he was willing to give her a night of pleasure. What was stopping her? Why did she have to make it a big deal?

She stifled a small cry and turned away from him. Of course it was a big deal. She was hopelessly in love with him, while he merely viewed it as a night of pleasure.

A low rumble filled the hall. Mrs. Clifton had apparently entered the lobby. Then the voices faded. Minutes later the crowd was singing “Happy Birthday” while a flash of bulbs surrounded the tiny woman. She was led quickly to a place of honor at the head of the room. Matthew’s hand still rested stubbornly on Allison’s thigh as though he were unaware. He couldn’t be that casual, could he? Or was she just so inexperienced that she simply

overreacted?

The toast that was offered by Allison's father was followed by a roar of applause. But when Mrs. Clifton was asked to speak, she would have none of it. She insisted that the best way to celebrate her birthday and all the birthdays to come was to eat the fine food and dance the night away.

Mrs. Clifton's suggestions were met with approving cheers and soon the guests were moved to a larger dining hall for dinner.

Matthew slipped his hand out from under Allison's skirt and then took her hand, guiding her off the stool. As soon as she stood, the two glasses of wine she had consumed took effect. A wave of dizziness rushed through her. She clutched his arm to steady herself. "I'm a little lightheaded." She hiccupped.

Matthew cupped her chin and lifted her face to his. "You're not used to drinking, are you?"

She shook her head. "Especially not two glasses in a row."

"What else don't I know about you?" His voice was like velvet, his eyes softly appealing. Her own eyes dropped to his mouth.

A small alarm sounded in her head. It was the wine that was doing this to her. She wasn't drinking another drop. She needed food.

Matt wasn't sure if she was trembling from hunger or nerves. No doubt a little of both. She'd been coiled tight from the moment he drew up beside her. So was he. But his tension was of a different kind.

He wanted to get out of here, and he counted the hours until he could



take her back to his apartment where he'd spend the rest of the night easing her tension by making love to her. At first it surprised the hell out of him. And it made him a little worried. He'd begun to suspect that he wanted more but wasn't sure what it all meant.

He wrapped a protective arm around her waist and led her into the golden-washed ballroom. "Let's get that small table." He led her to a dimly lit corner table that seated six, hoping no one would join them. Within seconds, an older couple made a beeline for them and on their heels followed a couple no older than Allison. The four of them scooped up the remaining chairs.

"Well, well. So this is your new husband." The older woman beamed at Allison. She had a warmth about her that belied the cool expensive cut of her clothes and the shimmering jewels gracing her wrists and throat. Her silver-blond hair was pulled back off a well-cared for face.

"Fine match," her husband chimed in. "You're one lucky man, Connor." The man looked like he had been a quarterback in his younger days.

"Don't I know," Matt said, to which the woman's smile widened.

"Matthew, this is Mr. and Mrs. Grace. Mrs. Grace was a close friend of my mother's."

"College roommates, too," Mrs. Grace interjected. "No sweeter woman existed than Allison's mother. A true southern lady." She descended into the chair beside Matt and her husband took the chair next to her.

Allison smiled and then turned to the young woman who was seating herself next to Mr. Grace. Allison introduced Jennifer, an associate at Z-Tech, along with her fiancé, Justin. Jennifer and Justin. Should be easy to remember, Matt thought, although he was hoping he didn't have to. He hoped both couples circulated, leaving him time to convince Allison either directly or through gentle persuasion to come home with him.

"Good to hear you understand the prize you've won, Connor," Mr. Grace said, picking up where they left off, "because there's some speculation that this marriage was more a business merger--"

"Dan." His wife elbowed him.

"I'm not saying I believed it for a minute. I'm just repeating what's going around."

Matt chuckled softly and leaned back, draping his arm across the back of Allison's chair. He turned to her and smiled. "That kind of talk will die down soon." To Allison's credit, she turned and gave him a smile filled with warmth. In a move that felt as natural as breathing, he leaned in and placed a soft kiss on her lips. While he didn't linger, his every impulse called for him to deepen the kiss. He was pleased to see her blush in response.

"I think it's so exciting that you eloped." Jennifer sighed. "What made you decide to do it? It must not have been an easy decision." She stared at Matt, clearly expecting an answer.

*Great.* Why hadn't they prepared a plausible explanation? He reached for the first thing that came to him. "Well, Allison's father and I have been

competitors for a long time. When we decided to merge, I could finally make my feelings for Allison known. By then I couldn't wait to make her my wife."

Allison kicked him under the table. He resisted the urge to rub his shins and continued to smile pleasantly. "And I know she couldn't wait either." He smiled down at her just as he felt the heel of her shoe grind into his instep. He muffled a curse.

Soon, thankfully, the couple left to greet acquaintances. Moments later Mrs. Grace excused herself to visit the ladies' room and her husband went to see a colleague.

"Why did you say that?" Allison bristled.

"Say what?"

"That you couldn't wait to make me your wife? It's one thing to perpetuate this charade of a marriage but don't add to it with lies."

"Allison...." He skimmed his palm over her cheek.

She yanked his hand down. "What will you say when we get divorced in a few months?"

"A few months?"

"Why not? If everything goes smoothly--"

"We're supposed to stay married a year."

"*About* a year."

"Look." Matt sighed. "Let's not worry about this now. Let's just concentrate on playing the happy couple."

She frowned.

“Please?” He tipped her chin. “You were doing fine up to a few minutes ago.” He ran his thumb over her bottom lip. “Besides, who’s to say that’s not how it might be ... in the end?”

A disquiet surfaced in her eyes and he could see the tiny pulse in her neck race. He trailed his finger down to feel it throb under his touch. It sped up. “Couldn’t we just pretend and see where it leads us?” He caressed her with his voice as much as with his fingers.

She was conflicted. He could see it as clear as if she had voiced it. He realized for the first time how lacking in guile she was. She had always worn her emotions on her sleeve, but he’d just been too thick to see. His mind raced to recreate all the reactions he’d witnessed in her these past weeks and frame them differently. His mind flashed back to when he accused her of buying customers with her body. He cursed his own stupidity.

“Okay.” She straightened, looking him in the eye, yet she seemed troubled. “That’s what we’ll do, Matthew.” She bit her lips. “For tonight, we’re in love. We’ll take tomorrow as it comes.”

He wasn’t sure what to make of her comment, but he had no time to consider it. As though to begin their new truce, she surprised him by pressing her lips to his.

Tension leaped to his loins. He clutched her waist instinctively, drawing her to him. He kissed her, firmly, probing. But they were in public so he had to rein himself in when what he really wanted was to slip his hand

up her thigh and feel her wet heat. He rested his hand on her knee. Why not? He broke their kiss and gazed at her. In the time it took for her to catch her breath, his hand was skimming the lacy triangle of her panties, teasing. She drew a sharp breath and tried to close her legs but he'd been too quick. One long finger rested between her thighs. It was torture knowing that the only thing separating his flesh from hers was the silky fabric of her panties. Her tight little bud strained against the smooth lace. She was deliciously wet and so warm. He groaned inwardly.

"Matthew," she choked.

"You like me touching you," he whispered.

She strangled on a gasp.

"Don't you?" He itched to slide his finger under the weak barrier of elastic that kept him from slipping into heaven. That, and the fact that she had his finger in a vise grip between her thighs.

"Remove your hand this instant, Matthew."

He leaned in closer and glimpsed a tantalizing view of full cleavage. Her nipples were indelibly etched on his brain. Full and ripe, a dusky coral color. He could still taste their tender tips on his tongue.

"Open your thighs."

"Stop it."

He gave a soft chuckle. "It's not as though we haven't done this."

Her breath caught and she looked at him in horror.

"Besides, I can't move. You've got me locked between your legs."

She looked ahead of her and then gave a panicked glance around the room. With the long tablecloth shielding them and with their backs against the corner wall, he knew she had no worry about being seen.

When she relaxed just a bit and opened her thighs, he took the opportunity to position his knee between hers.

“What are you doing?” She attempted to lock her knees but she couldn’t budge.

He anchored his other arm behind her waist. Now he had full access. He trailed his fingertips along the wet scrap of satin between her legs, lightly teasing the soft swollen folds into opening further for him.

She dug her nails into his wrist. “This is ... this is.” She swallowed and blinked her innocent blue eyes.

“Pleasurable?” he offered. He flicked his nail over the tiny aroused pebble. She closed her eyes and moaned.

“Open your eyes for me, Allison.”

She shook her head and gave a distressed little cry as he circled the hardened bud that was swelling by the seconds, and he had barely touched her.

“Open them, or I won’t stop.”

She blinked open uncertainly as he continued to stroke all but the small pleasure point with a light fleeting touch. She was throbbing beneath his fingertips and getting wetter.

“Have you never felt this?” he asked gently. “Not even to pleasure

yourself?”

She looked confused but her eyes shimmered with arousal. “Matthew,” she breathed and dug harder into his wrist. “I don’t think you realize that I really haven’t--”

In a movement meant to shock her but one that felt as natural as breathing, he slipped one finger under the elastic and slid into her heat. He groaned at the hot swollen feel of her.

“Oh!” A tortured sigh broke from her lips and she shuddered.

Matt pressed his lips to her ear. “You want me, Allison.”

She began to tremble. “Please....” Then she smothered a cry. “They’re coming back.”

Matt looked up to see the two J’s approach with beaming smiles.

Allison squirmed and gave him a frantic push. He knew he should be shot, but there wasn’t a man alive who’d be capable of removing his hand from this sweet nestling place between her thighs. He hitched his finger higher between her softness and rested his thumb on her bud.

A full flush spread up her neck just as their guests sat down.

Matt groaned.

Allison picked up her water goblet between shaking hands and gulped.

“Jason?” The girl turned to her fiancé. “Don’t you think it’s romantic that Matthew and Allison eloped?”

When her fiancé gave little response, she smiled over at Allison.

“How did your father take it? Was he disappointed that he didn’t get to give his daughter away?”

Allison looked in no condition to respond so Matt smiled at the young woman. “Well,” he began as he thrust gently with his finger and felt her tighten around him--a low moan echoed from the back of her throat--“her father was surprised, but when he saw how happy Allison was, nothing else mattered.” He slid his finger out and ran it up between her petals to slide the wetness over her bud. He turned to her. “Right, sweetheart?”

“Yes,” she choked. “Matthew?” She closed her eyes a moment and then forced them open. “I’m not feeling very well.”

“Oh?” He raised a brow and made gentle circles around the stem of her arousal, causing him to remember the vision of her golden triangle surrounding the sweetest pink lips. Then a pang of guilt followed when he remembered how she had lain on his bed, open and inviting him to take her, and his subsequent failure to recognize what he should have at the time, that her aroused state had turned to pure panic. “Can I do something for you, Allison?”

“No!” She hiccupped, her eyes feverish. “That is, you can get me an aspirin.”

“I have some,” their young seatmate piped up.

Matt smiled to himself, but then ceased his torturous stroking, feeling how inflamed she was and knowing she was on the brink of orgasm. He planned on bringing her to blissful climaxes tonight, but her first time



would not be like this. It would be when he cradled her in his arms and held her close, resting between her thighs. But for now, he'd get her so primed she would agree to leave with him.

He slipped his hand out as easily as he had settled in, skimming her smooth thighs as he did. He could feel her breathe a sigh of relief.

Although he was tempted to lick her sweetness off his fingertips, he didn't dare for fear she'd faint. He took the offered aspirin from Jennifer and touched the pill to her lips. She didn't miss the opportunity to glare at him as he did, and she practically bit off his finger before she sucked the pill between her lips.

He gave her a warm smile and then chuckled softly at her stricken expression.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Allison clutched the tall water goblet like a lifeline and vowed to kill Matthew before the party ended. And nothing, absolutely nothing, could get her to go home with him tonight. He had purposely filled her with a need that was unbearable, but this was so much more than sex to her, although, Lord, it was that, too.

All through dinner he took every opportunity to touch and kiss her, sinfully exploring every inch of her exposed flesh and some that wasn't exposed until she was burning everywhere and strung so tight she thought she'd explode. She counted the minutes until she could escape him.

Thankfully, her father announced his merger with Matthew and then formally introduced them as husband and wife. But it broke her heart to see her father's wistful expression as he watched her with Matthew and witnessed the crowd of beaming smiles that greeted them. Of course, it didn't help that Matthew bathed her with adoring eyes.

But while she knew that Matthew was attracted to her, she had no reason to believe it was anything more than that. And his fleeting infatuation would remain just that if she were to allow him to make love to her. While

she would be left devastated.

After all her years of loving him and hoping, waiting, her heart would never survive the break if she were to lose him. She needed first to make him truly see her, and then have him fall in love with her.

“I have to go, Matthew.” She shifted in his arms as they danced, flattening her palms against his chest, desperate to put some distance between them.

“Go where?” He pulled her hip to hip, trapping her against a wall of chest and hard muscled thighs. His eyes were heavy lidded. “I like dancing with you,” he said, his voice like a soft caress.

“I thought you never danced.”

“Big mistake on my part.” He pressed her closer.

“We’ve put on a great show, Matthew, very convincing, but now Mrs. Clifton is falling asleep, everyone at the party has offered us their congratulations, and my father is beaming.” She gave another useless shove. “It’s time to go.”

He moved his lips inches from hers. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were afraid of me.” The heat from his body mixed with hers and the soft gaze of his eyes melted over her.

“I’m leaving.”

“With me.”

“No.” She gave him a push, but it was like trying to move a block of concrete.

“You can’t let your father see us leave separately. He knows we’ve been having trouble. He looks so relieved now that everything went off well.”

She gave an uneasy glance in her father’s direction and, as though to confirm Matthew’s thoughts, her father smiled over at her and waved.

She touched her fingers to her lips and hesitated before returning a wave.

“Come on,” Matthew said, taking her arm. “Let him see us leaving together. We’ll share a cab.”

Seeing her father’s pleased expression took away her will to argue. They returned to the table to retrieve her purse and shawl and then she reluctantly allowed herself to be led away.

A few minutes later, tucked into a cab with Matthew, her tension mounted. He had her backed into a corner, and turning toward her, gave her his full attention. How could what she’d longed for all these years now seem so terrifying?

When he laid a palm on her knee, she jumped. “Thank you, Allison.” His gaze was filled with warmth. “Your father is lucky to have you. You really would do anything for him, wouldn’t you?”

She couldn’t look at him. Not when he was like this, so warm and sweet, gentle with her. She wanted to cry in frustration. This was everything she had thought she ever wanted from him, but now she knew it wasn’t enough.

She noticed the cab had passed 74<sup>th</sup> St. long ago and was headed toward mid-town. "Where are we going?" The cab driver glanced in the mirror at Matthew. She turned to him.

Matthew took her hand. "Please, Allison." He urged her with a smile. "If you come with me, I promise I won't touch you."

She leaned forward and spoke to the driver. "Turn around and head back uptown." The driver raised a brow at Matthew. She whirled on him. "Tell him, Matthew."

He took both her hands in his. "Allison, Janey is going to throw a fit if I come home without you."

"Janey?"

"When she found out you left me, she called me an idiot and threatened to strangle me if I didn't make things right with you." He sighed. "She's convinced I must have been horrible for you to leave me. She's not speaking to me until I bring you home." He studied her closely. "You can sleep in the other room. I won't go near you." He blinked his thick lashes.

A snort came from the front of the cab. Matthew shot the driver a glare.

But all Allison could think about was how distressed Matthew became that night when his sister had gotten so upset with him. And how hopeful Janey was for them.

"Please, Allison?" he murmured. "At least for tonight. Like you said, we'll take tomorrow as it comes."

Her stomach knotted into a tight fist. How could she be in the same apartment with him all night, knowing he was just down the hall stretched out on his huge bed all but naked except for his silk boxers? Or maybe he slept completely naked? The thought heated her entire body.

“Allison?” His voice was husky. He touched his fingertips to her cheek. “You’re all flushed.”

She gripped his wrist. “It’s hot in here.” Despite her attempt to pull his hand down, he stroked her cheek with his thumb.

“Will you stay with me? Just for tonight? At least then I can temporarily appease my sister.”

How could she refuse such a simple request? She gave a sigh of distress. The cab had yet to turn around. At this rate, they were practically at his apartment. “All right. But just for tonight. I mean it, Matthew.”

“Good.” He gave her a smile, then tipped her chin up and placed a soft kiss on her lips.

“Matthew.” She pulled away. “You said you wouldn’t touch me.”

“Oh, that’s right.” He gave her a slow grin. “Starting now,” he said, dropping his hand to his lap and settling against the seatback.

She had to look away. She had to keep her eyes from studying the long tapered fingers and corded muscle that ran along his tanned forearms. If she didn’t, she might beg him to run his palms along her skin and touch her again, like he had been touching her all night. The feel of him stroking her caused her to melt like a burning candle. She forced her mind to other

things.

Before she knew it, he was paying the driver and helping her out of the cab.

Mr. O'Reilly greeted her with a wide smile. "Wonderful to see you, Miss, I mean Mrs. Connor."

"Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly." She smiled back. He moved quickly to swing open the door and then nodded to Matthew.

During the long elevator ride up Matthew kept his distance, but still her tension mounted. But at least with Janey in the apartment with them, he'd have to behave.

When the elevator opened, he didn't even touch her elbow to guide her out, but simply inclined his head. In seconds, they were inside the dark apartment. He flicked on the hall light, flooding her with memories of that night when he had pressed her against the wall and stripped her to the waist. And the feel of hot lips on cold taut nipples. She didn't know if she wanted to run out the door or run into his arms.

She took a calming breath. "Is Janey asleep?"

"Janey?" He stripped off his jacket and hung it on the hallway hook.

"You said she'd be upset if I didn't come home with you."

"Oh. I meant when she finds out."

"What?" She glanced around. "You mean ... you mean she's not here?"

"No."

He reached to take her wrap off her shoulders, but she stepped back and clutched it to her.

This was a mistake. She could *not* do this. They would be alone. She glanced at him and then back at the door, willing herself to gather her wits. But he was too beautiful. And he wanted her. What had she decided was the reason she couldn't let him make love to her?

"Allison, let me make you a cup of tea. It'll soothe your nerves." He touched her cheek.

She jumped back as though he'd burned her.

He smiled. "I'll heat up the water."

She should tell him no and just excuse herself, flee the temptation. But she was torn between wanting to be with him just a little longer and knowing she flirted with danger. But a cup of tea in the kitchen was certainly safe. Maybe they could talk a little.

He turned on the small range hood light and leaned against the counter as she sat down at the table. The soft light shadowed his face, accentuating all the rough angles and his five o'clock shadow.

She glanced away, allowing her eyes to rove over the kitchen. Like the last time she was here, she was taken aback by its starkness. It was a study in cool smooth surfaces--white and black, not a hint of color. And she remembered thinking how sparse his furniture was for such a wealthy man.

"Does Janey stay with you a lot?" she asked.

He gave a half smile. "Not enough." He shrugged. "She thinks I



interrogate her when she's here."

"Do you?"

"Yeah." He smiled. "It's hard not to. After our so-called mother ran off with her latest boyfriend, I took over. My father was too drunk to be much good, and we don't know who Janey's father is. I doubt our mother knew who he was either. So, I'm all Janey's ever had."

"Oh." Her heart sighed at the implications and at the hurt in his eyes despite his casual attitude. "You raised her then?"

"From the time she was four. I became her legal guardian once my father died. I was eighteen."

"Eighteen?" She couldn't conceive it. "How did you do it?"

He lifted a shoulder. "I learned as I went."

He had been just a kid, she thought. And to have accomplished so much. Janey was a beautiful girl.

"That's why you're so protective of her."

He nodded. Then he came to sit beside her.

"What about you?" he said.

"Me?"

He moved his chair close to hers. "You're not much older than Janey. You lost your mother at a young age."

The sense of ease she had started to feel while he talked to her fled the moment he moved to take her hand in his. She tugged it back. He placed a hand on her knee, his eyes softening while her whole body tensed. "It

must have been hard losing your mother,” he said.

“It was,” she replied softly. “But I was lucky enough to have a wonderful father and people like Mrs. Murphy and Burden who doted on me.” She tried not to glance at his palm on her knee, but the heat generated by his touch spread right up her skirt. She spoke faster. “Even Nancy, my father’s secretary, became like a mother to me during my adolescence when I needed a mother so much.”

His gaze gentled. “You don’t have a bitter thought in your head, do you?”

She tipped her head. “What?”

“You really are sweetness and light.” He cupped her chin. The feel of his rough palm on her skin panicked her, but she couldn’t bring herself to pull away. “I see things much clearer now, Allison. And I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” She swallowed.

“For how I’ve treated you.”

She didn’t understand, but couldn’t even think with the sensual light burning in his eyes and electrifying every nerve ending along her skin. She felt a restless need to get away from him before she did something stupid. But when she tried to rise, she was paralyzed.

“I want to make it up to you, Allison.”

An alarm went off in her head. She managed to jump up. “I told you, it’s not necessary.”

“What?”

“What you’re talking about.” She backed away from him.

“My making up for being so mean to you?”

“That’s not what *you* were talking about.”

“Oh?” He blinked. “What *are* we talking about?”

“You know.” She tipped her chin.

He lifted a brow. “Are you talking about my taking your virginity?”

“You were,” she breathed, taking another step back.

He gave her an amused frown. “No, I wasn’t, but that *is* still on my mind and it needs to be settled.”

She bumped into the wall.

“I promised you, Allison. You’re a beautiful woman, and you deserve so much more than what I’ve given you.”

Her nipples tightened, rising against the silky fabric. His gaze dropped, then slowly returned to hers. There was no mistaking the male intent in his eyes. And then he kept coming. In seconds, he flattened his palms against the wall, trapping her.

“It’s not necessary,” she squeaked.

“Oh, but it is.”

His mouth was on hers, soft and warm, and then demanding. She moaned deep in her throat and then parted her lips, eager to feel his tongue touch hers. Without missing a beat, he stroked his tongue with hers, setting off a fire in her belly that threatened to consume her if she didn’t stop him, now.

She broke their kiss and gave him a push. "Matthew, you promised--"

He stilled a moment. "What was it that I promised?" Then he kissed her again, this time a soft lingering playful kiss that teased and flirted and promised heaven.

"You promised that...." she murmured, drowning in his kisses. He pressed his hips to hers. He was hard. The dress trousers he wore did little to prevent her from feeling the powerful ridge of his erection. She gave him a half-hearted push. "Promised that you wouldn't come near."

His tongue licked at the corner of her lips. "Oh, that." He gave a husky chuckle. "I don't think it's possible for me to resist you, Allison."

She started to panic, his teasing words knocking her back to her senses. "Don't make light of this, Matthew." She pulled away and anchored her palms on his chest. "It may be a game to you but--"

"It's not a game," he said, his eyes filled with concern. He cupped her face. "You know how much I want you. And you want me. Come to bed. Let me touch you."

His words filled her with erotic images against which she had no protection.

"I want to bury myself inside you."

She moaned. "I can't."

"Allison," he said, his voice soothing. "I promise I won't hurt you." He stroked his thumb along her cheek. "I'll be gentle. You'll like it this time."

Somehow she managed to tear herself from him and duck under his arm. She was trembling when she turned back to him before fleeing through the door. "You don't understand." She took a steadying breath. "I'll never survive it. Please, don't do this to me."

His eyes moved over her face. "What is it, Allison?"

"Please. Just believe me when I say that I can't do this."

"What is it that you're afraid of?"

The tender way he looked at her made her want to cry. "I'm tired, please, just leave me alone." She wrung her hands, gripping them so tight she thought she'd snap her knuckles. Then she forced herself to turn and walk quickly down the hall. She hoped he wouldn't follow and breathed a sigh of relief when she made it to the door without hearing him behind her.

She closed the door and flung herself onto the bed, her stomach in knots. But worse was the pain in her heart as she recalled his expression when she turned her back on him. She shut her eyes tight, willing the image away. His beautiful eyes had turned sad. The gentle light she had enjoyed all evening had suddenly burned out.

\* \* \* \*

Matt stretched out on his bed, stripped to his boxers, skylight open, allowing the night breeze to cool his heated skin. But the sheen of sweat covering his body had nothing to do with the room's temperature. He was burning up.

He wanted her.

More than he thought he could ever want anyone.

And he was beginning to suspect that his need for her went deeper than her undeniable beauty.

Yet he wanted that, too. Wanted to run his palms over every inch of her flesh, taste her, consume her. He wanted to make her his.

The thought brought him up short.

He propped his hands behind his head and stared up at the starlit sky.

He had no idea what to do. The feeling was unsettling, the uncertainty he felt around her completely foreign. He didn't understand how he could have been so blind all these years. She had to be the warmest woman he had ever known and anything but superficial. She took everything to heart.

Although he knew she was attracted to him, he had no idea how to reach her. How to soothe the fear that was holding her back.

Of course, he also suspected that he was at the heart of that fear. Which shouldn't surprise him since his behavior toward her had been inexcusable--impatient, abrupt, assuming things with no foundation. He still cringed at the way he had stripped her naked in the hall and taken her. *Jesus*. He ran his hands down his face.

If he blew this, he didn't have to wait for Janey to hang him, he'd do it himself.

For every reason he could think, he had no right to her anyway. He was probably the most undeserving man on the planet.

A movement caught his eye. He froze. When his vision focused, he

saw her standing in the half-light of the doorway, every voluptuous curve silhouetted through the short silky nightgown that floated around her body.

“Matthew?” She hesitated in the doorway.

He closed his eyes. *Thank you, God.*

He propped himself up slowly, not wanting even his abrupt movements to startle her. He forced himself to speak in a soothing voice while his body surged to full alert. “Come here, Allison.”

She approached him cautiously, her breasts swaying gently with each small movement as she drew up beside the bed. Her nipples were erect and visible through the sheer fabric, causing a rush of blood to pool in his groin. He patted the edge of the bed, but she shook her head and remained standing. While his disappointment was acute, he wouldn’t give up.

“Matthew I’m ... I’m sorry for the way I acted.”

His mouth dropped. “Sorry?”

“Yes.” She wrung her hands. “I was hateful to you, telling you to leave me alone. I haven’t been honest with you ... about a lot of things. And I’m sorry.”

He was speechless.

“I don’t expect you to understand.” She bit her lip. “I’m not sure *I* understand. But it’s not your fault that I’m so confused.”

He cleared his throat. “Allison.” He sat up and leaned toward her. “Sit down and talk to me,” he urged her, taking her hand and guiding her toward him. It was all he could think to say. *She* was confused? He was

dumfounded.

“I don’t want to talk, Matthew.” She eased down beside him, facing him as he reclined against the headboard. She reached up and laid her palm along his jaw.

“I want you to give me that night of pleasure.”

Now he was flabbergasted.

Her eyes were liquid innocence, her disquiet touching a tender chord in him.

He wanted to ask her if she was sure, but he couldn’t get the words out. When she wet her lips as she waited for him, all he could think was that he had to be the luckiest son-of-a-bitch.

Allison cocked her head and blinked at him. “Matthew?”

She began to wonder if he’d heard her, because he closed his eyes a moment and when he opened them he didn’t say anything. She fought to keep her eyes from traveling over his flesh and then wondered why. So she looked her fill. His skin glistened, bronze hard and smooth, hot, all at the same time, and the urge to run her lips over all that taut sinew threatened her control.

She swallowed and lifted her eyes to his handsome face. As though he knew what she was thinking, he took her hand. “Go ahead.” His eyes softened and he pressed her palm along the hard ridges of his chest and then released her hand, allowing her to explore at her own pace. He was warm and solid. Her fingertips brushed along the tight mat of dark hair sprinkling



across honed muscle and flat nipples. She heard a tiny moan and realized it had come from her. Taking her other hand, he did the same and leaned against the headboard and sighed, allowing her full access, his gloriously near-naked body hers to explore.

Her eyes dropped naturally down along his stomach, taking in the flat ridges and then the line of dark hair disappearing under his boxers.

She was surprised he was already aroused, his erection looming large and a little frightening under the silky fabric, but the way he allowed her to take control encouraged her to respond. Abandoning all shyness, she trailed her hands down to feel him. He moaned as her fingers closed around the hard hidden flesh. She had remembered the feel of him sinking deep into her, stretching her, the overwhelming feeling of him filling her, if only for a fleeting moment. She wanted to see if he was as big as she remembered but didn't know if she should.

She ran her fingers along his thighs and then shyly slipped her hands up the legs of his shorts. He was warm and smooth. When she cupped the heavy sack between his legs, his hands fisted by his side but he remained still and gave her an encouraging smile, emboldening her.

Her desire got the best of her and she hooked her fingers into the waistband of his shorts. He lifted his hips, allowing her to slide the fabric down his thighs. Her eyes widened. With a flick of his wrist, he had his boxers off and tossed over the side of the bed. He lay there, fully aroused and sinfully male, without an ounce of self-consciousness.

She drew in a breath. “You’re beautiful.”

He chuckled and then groaned when she trailed one finger down the powerful vein that ran his long length and watched him jump under her tentative touch. A small pearly drop seeped from the tip of him. She wanted to lick it up.

He took her finger and touched it to the drop and then smoothed it over the underside. He released a small moan and throbbed. The feel of him pulsing and so alive thrilled her beyond what she had always imagined. She cupped the full sack again and watched his hips rocket off the bed. He laughed and moaned at the same time, making her suddenly aware of her daring.

She sat back on her heels and blushed deeply.

He smiled. “Oh, no, you don’t.” He slipped his fingers under her shoulder straps. “I’m not letting you go shy on me now.” Her nightgown fell to her waist. He sucked in a breath. “Jesus, you are gorgeous.”

He cupped her, feeling the weight of her breasts and then running his thumbs along her nipples. She moaned at the pleasurable feel of it. Then in one smooth movement he encircled her waist and brought her down to rest on top of him.

“This is where I want you,” he murmured. “Skin to skin,” he said, playing his tongue along her throat, her collarbone. He was like solid rock beneath her, his scent so arousingly male, his skin so rough and warm that she willingly surrendered to him.

“You’re so soft,” he murmured. He spread his legs and nestled her between them, pressing his arousal against her. His hands were everywhere, smoothing a path of fire along her skin. When he eased her up, she jumped at the rough feel of his tongue on her nipples. “Mmm, delicious.” He suckled greedily, sending an ache to her loins that made her whimper with need.

“Matthew,” she choked, clutching his shoulders and looking down at the rough line of his jaw against her white skin, his cheeks hollowing out as he sucked one nipple and then the other to hard sensitive points.

He drew her gown up and molded his hands to her naked bottom, the feel of his warm palms stroking her skin heaven. Then he spread her thighs, opening her to his questing fingers. He was like magic, stroking and petting a need in her until she was burning.

“I want to feel you inside me, Matthew.” She tried to crawl up his body and impale herself on him.

He held her still and growled deep in his throat. “I want that, too, honey, but I also want to savor every inch of you. Ensure that you’re really ready for me.”

Her heart melted at his endearment, even as she writhed with frustration. She was hot and restless, aching for him. “Please, Matthew.”

She jumped when he slid two fingers up her heat and blushed deeper at how soft and wet she was. His thumb teased her mercilessly. “Please, Matthew. I couldn’t be more aroused.”

He turned her onto her back in one easy movement and spread her thighs wide, lifting her knees, his gaze dark with desire. She felt completely exposed, vulnerable and open to him, and was suddenly reminded of the quick sharp pain of him entering her last time and the way she had tightened up.

“Look at me, Allison.” He smoothed her hair off her forehead and settled between her thighs. His body felt so warm and wonderful pressing her. “I won’t hurt you this time.” He rocked gently, his shaft so hot and sliding along her slippery lips, stimulating her further and making her cry out for him.

He murmured, still gazing into her eyes, “I want this to be perfect.” He probed gently and then stopped, torturously short of entering her body.

“Matthew.” She clutched him and arched up.

“Shhhh.” He trailed kisses along her forehead. “Be patient. I have to go easy this time.” He probed deeper, the pressure both wonderful and scary, too large and powerful for her narrow girth, yet she ached for him to fill her. When she clawed at his shoulders, he finally sunk into her completely, taking her breath away and sending a hot shiver of pleasure up her spine. Her sex tingled as he remained fully impaled.

She was stunned by the sense of possession. He filled her, surrounded her, and consumed her completely, taking over her body as though he owned her.

His breathing labored, he spoke in a whisper. “Are you all right?” A

light sweat broke over his back.

“I think so,” she breathed. He hitched higher and she gasped. “Yes. Don’t ever let me go.” She clung to him, hardly able to believe that he was finally hers and at the same time mortified by her plea. But she wanted him close like this, forever, unable to distinguish where her body ended and his began. He started to move. “No,” she cried. “Stay inside me.”

He gave a muffled groan and anchored his elbows beside her head. He stroked her hair from her forehead and looked deep into her eyes. “Tell me if I hurt you.” With that he slipped out a little and then filled her again.

“Oh, my.” The shock of pleasure took her breath away.

“Shall I do that again?” He smiled at her and kissed her tenderly.

She could only nod and lose herself in his fathomless gaze. This was more than she had ever imagined and still she wanted him closer. “Promise me this will never end,” she breathed.

“This is only the beginning,” he murmured and kissed her eyelids. Then he looked at her, his gaze dark, and rocked high up into her, his eyes glazing. His face grew dark with urgency and then he withdrew fully and plunged into her. His strength and the pleasure of it overwhelmed her. She grabbed onto his arms and instinctively arched up to meet him. He moved faster, making her unable to concentrate on a single pleasuring thrust as each wave of pleasure followed and blended with the next.

“Matthew....” She was suddenly afraid as she felt herself spiraling out of control, burning so hot, she didn’t know what was happening to her, but

the pleasure was unbelievable. He hooked his knees under her thighs and spread her legs wider. He grunted, thrusting even deeper. Then she cried out as her body got swept under, surrendering to the pleasure.

His jaw tightened and sweat glistened on his forehead. "Can you feel every inch of me?" he growled. His eyes burned into hers. She held on as her body spiraled up into heaven and then drowned in the heat and pleasure of their joined bodies, nothing existing but the smell and feel of him setting every raw nerve of hers on fire. "Can you?" he demanded.

"Yes," she gasped.

They kissed fiercely, mating with their tongues as urgently as they mated with their bodies. His body vibrated with energy while hers melted into a fire of raw sensation. Her nerves tightened to a fevered pitch until she was sure that she couldn't stand anymore and she burst with pleasure. Waves of it, drowning her in pure bliss and consuming her. He moaned and buried his lips into her hair.

Then she felt him explode inside her, claiming her completely, making her his.

That's what she wanted to believe. Had to believe.

She was wrong to think she could take her night of pleasure and emerge unscathed.

Warm liquid seeped from between her thighs as he slipped slowly out of her. "Please," she pleaded, urging him back inside. He lifted his head and his eyes roamed over her face. Could he see the love in her eyes? Did this

mean anything to him but a night of pleasure?

His voice was gruff. "I didn't mean to be so rough." He ran his lips over her forehead and then down along her jaw line. He let out a deep sigh.

"You didn't hurt me, Matthew. It was wonderful. Much more than I'd even imagined." She wanted to say so much more, wanted to say everything she'd felt for years. Tell him that she loved him.

"I'm glad. Because, Allison...." He hesitated, his expression uncertain. She was sure she read no regret in his eyes but there was something else. Something troubling him.

She ran her palm over his cheek. "What is it, Matthew?"

"I...." He sighed and then looked away, burrowing into the crook of her neck and settling his lips against her skin. "Nothing."

"Tell me, Matthew. Something is wrong." Was he disappointed with what they shared tonight? She couldn't imagine anything more wonderful, but she knew nothing of men and what they wanted.

He studied her face, his eyes filled with tenderness. "Nothing could be wrong, Allison. Not with you." He smoothed his hand down her cheek in a gentle gesture.

"What are you saying, Matthew?"

He pressed his lips gently to hers. "I'm saying everything was perfect, you were perfect." He brushed his lips over her brows. "Much more than I deserve."

This time she believed him and for the first time in too long, hope

filled her heart.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The dawn light crept around the edges of the skylight awakening Matt to the alluring sight of Allison, all smooth curves and pale skin, snuggled up at his side, completely naked and touchable.

And she *was* utterly touchable.

Just the memory of her soft moans and little cries of need at the way he had touched her last night brought him now to erection.

He ran his hand over her shoulder and down her arm. She made a sleepy sound and wrapped her arm around his waist, hooking her leg over his. Her knee nudged his sex.

“Allison?”

When she didn’t answer, he told himself that he should let her sleep even as he knew he would persist until she woke up.

He loved her.

The thought was no less shocking in the light of day than it had been last night.

How could he not love her?

He had almost said as much last night. But it wasn’t the right time.

Not while they were both in the throes of a passion he wouldn't have believed was possible.

He didn't want his love wrapped around and confused with this driving sexual need between them. He wanted her to understand it was more. At least for him.

He hoped it would be for her, too.

That hope more than worried him a little.

Their lovemaking had been perfect, but everything was new for her, overwhelming. It wouldn't be the first time a young woman confused the powerful emotions of sex with love.

He'd just have to make her fall in love with him.

He smoothed his hand over her bottom and smiled when she moaned aloud.

For a virgin, she was amazingly responsive, yet still shy and a little shocked by everything. The combination enchanted him.

He trailed his fingertips along her spine, loving the smooth warm feel of her, and then slid his palm around to cup her breast. Her nipple hardened immediately. When he pinched delicately, she gave a little gasp.

The small sound was enough to undo him.

He rolled her gently onto her back and nestled himself between her legs.

"Allison, honey." He ran his lips over her forehead and then traced his tongue down to the delicate shell of her ear and sucked gently.

“Oh....” Her voice came out on a breath, sleepy and sweet. “I didn’t know that could feel so good.”

He smiled and nipped at her neck, working his way up to her chin. “There’s a lot you don’t know, but I plan to teach you.”

She cupped his face and dragged him up to look at her. “I think you’ve more than fulfilled your obligation, Matthew.” She gave him a wry grin and ran her finger along his lips. “Last night was wonderful. I had no idea a night of pleasure could be so ... perfect.”

*How about a lifetime of pleasure?*

He almost said it, half wished that he did. “Well....” He kissed the tip of her nose. “I’m not finished yet.”

She arched her hips to his and smiled. “So I see, or should I say, feel?”

She was already wet. Matt groaned at the feel of her offering herself to him and at the feel of the head of his aching cock slipping through her folds, but he turned his thoughts away from his own lust. He had more to give her first.

“We’ll continue our night of pleasure into the day,” he told her, kissing his way from her eyelids down to her lips.

“Mmm,” she purred and sifted her fingers through his hair, looking deeply into his eyes, her gaze soft and trusting.

Why she would trust him and give herself to him so completely baffled him. No man deserved her less than he did. “Allison....” Looking at

her now, he didn't think he would ever love her more, yet he hesitated.

"What is it, Matthew?" She stroked his cheek.

"I..." He allowed his eyes to linger over her perfect face and unruly hair. "Have I told you how beautiful you are?"

She pressed her finger to his lips. "More than enough."

"Good," he teased, dismissing what he really wanted to say, coward that he was. "Because I wouldn't want to forget to tell you." He set himself instead to the delightful task at hand, kissing her full on the mouth, kissing her with a depth that he felt clear to his bones. Then he was kissing her everywhere, devouring her, afraid to miss any spot as he worked his way down. He'd never get enough of her. Her soft cries and little gasps told him he was on the right track, until he curled his tongue around her navel and then licked with delicate strokes along her belly. Her shocked little cry made him smile.

As soon as his lips met the downy patch of golden curls, she dug her fingers into his hair. "Matthew!" She gulped in a breath. "I don't think--"

His mouth was on her before she could finish, her words dying on a strangled moan. He liked that no other man had touched her so intimately, that only he would possess her so completely.

In minutes he had her peaking so hard she screamed out his name and then dissolved into a liquid puddle beneath him, her fingers tangled in his hair.

"Oh, Matthew." She drew in a breathless sigh.

But he wasn't done. He licked up her sweetness and then kissed his way back up her body. He entered her swiftly, wrapping her legs around his hips and driving deep.

Her look of wonder as he stroked relentlessly against the spot he knew was so sensitive from her powerful climax filled him with satisfaction.

"Matthew, my God." She clutched at him and shuddered, arching up to meet his deep thrusting strokes, her body trembling and her breath coming in short gasps. She moaned and then tightened around his shaft until her body gave itself over to the gentle waves of pleasure that captured her. In soft little breaths she whispered his name and then convulsed beneath him. With one last thrust he exploded inside her with a power that shook him and matched his driving need to take her.

When his head cleared, she was shaking and crying against his chest.

"Allison?" He reared up and tipped her face. "Did I hurt you?" He smoothed damp hair from her forehead, suddenly afraid that he'd lost control. "Allison, look at me."

She shook her head and swiped at a tear. "Of course not, Matthew." She laid her palm on his cheek. "I just didn't understand that it would be like this."

"Neither did I, honey," he murmured. "Neither did I."

\* \* \* \*

When Matt and Allison finally emerged from bed, he cooked blueberry waffles and topped them with whipped cream. The kind he used to

make for Janey when they were kids. And he ground fresh hazelnut coffee beans that filled the kitchen with a delicious aroma. He wanted everything to be perfect.

He mapped out the day. He wanted to take her to his favorite beach at the Jersey shore. A state park with wide white beaches and rough surf. He hadn't gone there in years. Somewhere he heard a rumor that it now included a nude beach. He smiled at the thought of how shocked she'd be if he took her to that particular beach. Or maybe she wouldn't be. It wouldn't be the first time she'd surprised him.

There were so many places and things he'd neglected. He wanted now to share them with her.

When he looked up from his plate, she was closing her eyes and sipping the steaming coffee, looking like she relished every sip. He smiled now remembering her enjoyment of the wine on their wedding night and how frustrated he'd been with her for dallying. Now he saw his agitation clearly for what it was. He was drawn to her even then, but had fought his attraction at every step.

He gazed at her, enjoying her delight in the rich brew. He'd make sure things were different now. Nothing had the power to irritate him, because for the first time in his life he felt at peace.

She looked up and caught him watching her. "What?" She gave him a small smile.

"I thought we'd go to the beach today. Sandy Point is just--"

“Oh....” She blinked her large blue eyes, her smile fading. “I’d love to go Matthew, but....” She tucked a thick curl behind one ear and glanced away. “But I can’t,” she said, returning her gaze to his.

“Why?” He frowned but then quickly regrouped. He made himself smile despite his disappointment.

“I ... I have to meet Kevin and go over some business with him.”

“On Sunday? Can’t it wait?” He reached across the table, making sure to keep his annoyance with Kevin in check. Friend or not, he monopolized too much of Allison’s time. He took her hand. “Just call him and explain--”

“I...,” she stammered and cleared her throat. “That is, we have to meet a supplier in SoHo. He’s difficult to work with as it is. I can’t let Kevin go alone.”

She was a terrible liar.

He studied her quietly but said nothing. He thought he knew her well enough that whatever reason she had for deceiving him, it had to be a good one. He just wished she trusted him enough to confide in him, although so far he’d given her no reason to do so. But he vowed that that was another thing he would change.

“Oh, Matthew....” She looked truly distressed. Jumping up, she then came over and lowered herself onto his lap. She kissed him on the mouth. “I want to be with you. You don’t know how much,” she said, running her fingers through his hair. “And I would if I could.” She gave a sigh. “I just can’t today. I’m sorry.”

He nodded reluctantly. "Okay," he said, brushing his lips over hers. "When can I expect you back?"

"I don't know. I'll call you from my cell phone. Okay?"

"You mean the cell phone you never use?" he teased, trying to lighten his mood, but already dark thoughts fought to replace happier ones of just moments ago.

"I'll turn it on just for you." She gave him a tender smile and stroked his jaw.

He wanted to believe that the beautiful light shining in her eyes was love for him. He'd have to work on that, too.

\* \* \* \*

Matt hated that he was acting like an FBI agent on a stake-out but he was worried about Allison. He sat in his car now, parked at the corner under the cover of trees and watched the house into which Allison had just disappeared.

From the moment she prepared to leave this morning, nothing had made sense. But when he overheard her telling Kevin on the phone not to worry, that she'd be careful, he became alarmed. He had had no choice but to follow her.

After he had called for her Jaguar to be brought around and saw that she was safely deposited behind the wheel, he slid into the garage and followed soon after in his Mercedes. She bypassed SoHo and then in Alphabet City she did the damndest thing. She ducked into a restaurant and



when she came out her silk dress had been replaced with jeans and a t-shirt, her heels for sneakers. Her hair was pulled back in a thick ponytail. She then left her parked car and caught a bus to Brooklyn. He mentally calculated that it would take all of an hour before her gleaming red Jaguar was stripped clean, but he had better things to worry about.

He followed the bus to a relatively quiet neighborhood bordering Queens. When she alighted, she walked two blocks to a three-story brown clapboard house that had seen better days. The large Hispanic woman that answered the door greeted Allison with a hug. Just behind her, he could see two towheaded toddlers jumping around.

Matt didn't know what he had expected when he decided to follow Allison, but he didn't think he'd find her incognito in a Jewish neighborhood being greeted by a Hispanic woman old enough to be her mother. With her car and clothes ditched, her blonde hair made her look like any young gentile woman. What possible connection could any of this have with Allison?

A gypsy cab pulled up and before the passenger door opened Kevin came bounding out of the front door of the house and helped a frail-looking woman climb out. Her hair was platinum and her jacket an expensive cut. Even behind her large dark glasses Matt recognized her. Howard Pearson's wife, Megan.

So, Allison did know her. But how?

Kevin glanced around and then hustled her inside the door.

Matt didn't like the smell of any of this. He argued with himself for about fifteen minutes before finally deciding that he was taking Allison away from here before she got hurt.

As soon as he raised his hand to the old brass knocker of the peeling door, it swung open. Once again he faced down the Incredible Hulk, but this time the man had a small smile on his face.

"Kevin." Matt nodded.

"Well," he grinned. "I figured you would eventually find your way here. Come in." He opened the door wide. As soon as he did, two pre-schoolers came slipping and sliding around the corner and down the hall in their socks, one chasing the other.

"Hey, hey." Kevin crouched down and reached out an arm. "Slow down." He chuckled. The boys came to a dead halt against Kevin's arm and peered up at Matt, brown eyes wide.

"Who's this?" the smaller one asked.

Kevin smiled down at them. "This is Matt."

The older one stepped forward. "You a cop?"

"A cop?" Matt dropped down in front of them. "You expecting one?"

The boy shrugged. "Then you a lawyer?"

"No." Matt reached up to touch the boy's thick mop of hair, but the kid jerked away before Matt could touch him.

Kevin laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "It's okay, guys. This is Allison's husband."

Hearing Kevin refer to him as Allison's husband surprised him. At the same time it felt oddly reassuring.

"Allison's husband?" The boys gawked.

"Allison's beautiful," the little boy said. The older boy nodded in agreement.

Matt smiled. "Yes, she is, boys," he said softly.

Kevin beamed beside them. "Okay, you guys, go see Mrs. Hernandez. She baked cookies for you." He shooed them off with a pat to their bottoms.

Matt looked around. The large living room was filled with comfortable but threadbare furniture and the woodwork was scratched and nicked but shone with a high polish. A large braided rug covered most of the scarred wood floor and tucked into every corner were remnants of children--little Lego pieces, tiny trucks, baby doll clothes and a play carriage.

"Who lives here?" Matt asked.

"You were worried about Allison, weren't you?"

Matt nodded. "I followed her. What was Howard Pearson's wife doing here? Where is Allison?"

Before Kevin could answer flashing lights outside the window drew their attention. "Plain clothes police," Kevin murmured. "What would they be doing here?"

In minutes, Kevin opened the door to the two men coming up the walk. As soon as they approached, they flashed their badges. "Detective Bridges," the older one said and then nodded beside him. "This is my

partner, Detective Jones.”

“Detectives?” Kevin nodded.

“Either of you men know Allison Drummond?”

“Sure, what’s this about?” Kevin said.

Matt stepped forward. “Where’s Allison?” he demanded, his panic rising. “Is she alright?”

“That’s what we want to know,” one officer answered. “Anything you know, you’d be smart to tell us now.”

Kevin spoke up. “She just left in the shelter van with one of our clients.” He motioned toward the back of the house. “What’s going on? Is she in danger?”

The officer lifted his chin. “I’ll need a complete description of that van and its destination.”

For the next few minutes, Kevin explained where Allison was dropping off their client, but that even he wasn’t sure where she was going from there or where she would end up.

Matt knew that Megan Pearson was not the kind of woman to live in a shelter for long, nor would she be able to once her husband found out. It suddenly became clear to Matt what was going on. This was more than a shelter operation. This operation no doubt helped woman escape their husbands permanently, probably with their kids in tow or, in Megan Pearson’s case, with any money she was able to abscond. It certainly explained Allison’s secrecy concerning her work here.

But now Allison was missing and possibly in trouble.

While he tried to fight back his rising panic, a likely scenario raced through his head. That of Allison and Megan intercepted by Howard Pearson. The man had enough money and power to call in every marker to tail his wife and drag her back before Allison and the shelter network helped her underground. And Allison was caught in the middle.

Kevin continued to explain that one of their clients claimed her husband was acting suspicious and she was worried he'd follow her. Kevin had stayed behind to run interference in case the client's husband showed up.

Matt pulled out his cell phone and punched in Allison's number on the speed dial.

"What are doing?" Kevin said.

"Calling her to make sure she's all right."

"She never keeps on her--"

"She said she would for me." A second later he got a message saying the caller was not available.

"Damn it! I've got to find her." He took off across the lawn with Kevin at his heels.

"Matt," he called. "Where are you going? You can't just run around helter skelter."

Matt hit his remote to unlock his car but Kevin grabbed his wrist.

Matt twisted out of his grip. "Stay out of this. I can't let anything

happen to her.”

“I understand but--“

Matt dug his hands into his hair. “I can’t just stand around waiting while she could be in danger, hurt--”

Another police car came screeching around the corner and, before it could come to a complete stop in front of the shelter, Bill Drummond jumped out.

“What the hell?” Matt said. “Maybe he knows something.”

Both men went running over to where Drummond now stood on the lawn with two plain-clothes officers who identified themselves as detectives.

As soon as Drummond saw Matt and Kevin he whirled on them.

“What are you two doing here? What’s going on? What is this place?”

“Sir,” a detective said calmly, looking like he’d done this a thousand times. “Has your daughter ever mentioned two guys by the name of Skeeter-Jack and Bo Heyer?”

Drummond motioned to Kevin.

Kevin stepped forward. “We don’t know anybody by those names. Who are they?”

“Two guys we picked up in a 2004 Jaguar convertible registered to Allison.”

“That’s because she left her car on B St. in the village,” Matt said.

The detective raised a brow.

“I was following her,” Matt said.

“So, you were the last one to see her?” The detective said as he wrote in a small pad. “And you were tailing her?”

“Look,” Matt growled, “I’m her husband.” Then he stopped as all heads turned to watch the gray van with tinted windows meander down the street and come to a slow stop in front of the shelter.

Immediately, police surrounded the vehicle.

Matt held his breath.

The driver’s side door creaked open and out jumped Allison, her thick curled ponytail bouncing behind her. She looked a little stunned, her big blue eyes wide and blinking.

Matt forced himself to stay put as one officer patted her down while others swarmed inside the vehicle. “It’s clean,” they reported.

Matt ran to her and scooped her up into his arms. “Allison,” he choked, wrapping her tight to him, needing to feel her, protect her. “You scared us half to death.”

“What’s happened, Matthew?” she asked.

Kevin was beside them in an instant. “Did Howard Pearson follow you?”

Allison blinked. “Megan’s husband? I didn’t see him.”

“Where’s Megan?” Kevin said.

“She’s with Carla. You know. Safe.”

Kevin sighed and ran both hands over his cropped scalp. “I don’t get

this.”

“Miss?” The craggy-browed detective gave her a bored stare. “Did you abandon your car in the East Village?”

“Well,” Allison bit her lip. “Not exactly. I parked it there.”

The detective rolled his eyes. “How long did you expect it to last before it was ... refurbished for parts?”

“Refurbished?” Allison said.

“Well....” He gave her a grin. “Lucky for you we had those guys on our radar. But it looks like you’re in the clear.” He scribbled on his pad. “You gave your father quite a scare.” He ripped off the top page. “Here’s the number for the impound.” He motioned to his men and then walked away.

“Daddy?”

“For God’s sake, Allison. I didn’t know what to think when the police called. When you weren’t at Matt’s they traced your last call to me. Luckily you made it from here, this morning. But when they couldn’t find you here either....” He shook his head. “I’m getting too old for this.”

“Your father’s right, Allison,” Matt said, stepping between them. “This is it! You’re not running around the city anymore rescuing women from violent husbands. Leave that kind of thing to Kevin.”

“But--”

“And why didn’t you turn on your cell phone? For Chrissake, Allison, what’s the point of having a cell phone if you don’t use it?”

“I’m sorry.” She did her best to suppress a smile because he was



already so upset, but she loved that he had been so worried about her.

“It’s one thing to volunteer but today was ridiculous.” He threw up his arms. “What if Pearson did show up--”

“But he didn’t.” She gave him a small smile.

“That’s not the point. I’m telling you this has got to stop.”

Kevin looked at him. “You sound like a husband, Connor.”

“I am her husband, damnit!” He glared at him. “Stay out of this.”

“Matthew,” Allison whispered, placing a hand along his cheek.

He circled her wrist and pressed his lips into her palm. “You scared me to death, Allison. I don’t know what I would have done....” His voice broke off.

“Matthew,” she breathed, turning his face to her. Her eyes brightened with tears. “I think you’re in love with me.”

He gave a heavy sigh and traced one finger along her delicate cheekbones, looking his fill at her sweet face and cherishing what he feared he had almost lost. “Of course I’m in love with you, Allison.” He brushed her bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. “I’m completely in love with you. And I never want to lose you.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, my God. You *are* in love with me!”

Behind him he heard a soft chuckle from Kevin just as Allison leaped up and jumped into his arms.

He held her close. “Marry me, Allison.”

She drew back and smiled. “We *are* married, Matthew.”

“No, I want a real marriage, Allison. I want it done the right away. I’m going to rip up that stupid agreement and do it for real this time.” He hesitated. “That is, if you’ll say yes.”

She burst into tears. “Yes,” she said, smothering his face with kisses.

“Finally!” Bill Drummond grunted.

Matt, Allison, and Kevin all turned to look at him.

“Well, it’s true,” he grumbled. “It’s about time. That girl’s been mooning over you since she was thirteen years old.”

“Daddy?”

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes,” Allison said. “But ... but....”

“Thirteen?” Matt turned to her.

Drummond waved a hand. “Oh, for God’s sake, you’re a damned blind idiot, Connor.”

“Amen to that,” Kevin said.

Matt eyed them both. “Are you saying that whole corporate charter thing was a hoax--?”

Kevin held up his hands. “I had nothing to do with that.”

Matt turned to Drummond and waited.

“Me?” He hesitated and then guffawed. “You think I’d play around with my business like that?” He rubbed the back of his neck and then winked at Kevin.

“Matthew,” Allison said, reaching up to wrap her arms around his

neck and turning his face to hers. "I had no intention of a marriage in name only."

Matt frowned. "You didn't?"

Kevin groaned.

"Of course not. I love you, Matthew. My father's right. I've been in love with you since I was thirteen years old."

He knew by the love in her eyes that she was telling the truth, but he just couldn't believe it.

"But why?"

"I just knew. From the moment I looked into your whiskey colored eyes. You were mine." She kissed him. "I just had to convince you." Matt heard Kevin and Bill shuffle away. She smiled against his lips. "God, you are stubborn, Matthew."

He kissed her back with all tenderness that she brought out in him. "Well," he frowned. "It only took a decade. Could have been worse."

She gave him an adorable pout.

Then he grew serious, wanting her to understand exactly how he felt. He took her face in his hands. "I love you, Allison." He stroked his thumbs along her cheeks. "I love you."

"I know, Matthew," she murmured. "I finally know."

Then he kissed her again, with all the love that he felt then and would forever.

THE END