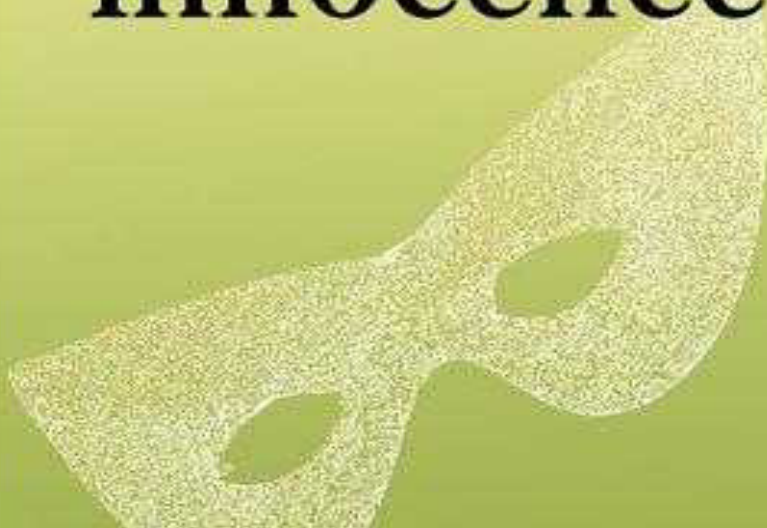


stealing innocence



The Ravishment

Sylvia Hubbard

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Stealing Innocence II: The Ravishment

Stealing Innocence II: The Ravishment © January 2005 Sylvia M. Hubbard

Assisted in Publication with [Hub Books Publisher](#)/Distributor

Cover design by Sylvia Hubbard

Word Count: 72,213

HubBook#: 1v0512001341-2v1227041452

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For information address:

Sylvia Hubbard

PO Box 27310, Detroit, MI 48227

Visit her website at:

<http://SylviaHubbard.com/>

sylviahubbard1@yahoo.com

stealing innocence II: *The Ravishment*

Synopsis:

When Michelle is dealt the ultimate blow of being taken by a dark powerful stranger against her will, she didn't know how to overcome the hurt inside. That is until Niche, her best friend, finds the stranger for her, ties him to a bed and tell Michelle to take what the stranger took from her – pride.

In his rage to get back at all the skanks in his life, his anger blinded him to the sweet innocent Michelle, but before he even made entry she had passed out. Escaping quietly, Anthony swore he would never hurt another again and to get revenge against those who really messed him up.

That is until he is knocked unconscious and then awakens to find out Michelle's been bitten by the revenge bug and what he thought was a sweet and innocent girl, turns into a lustful hateful bitch, who he will kill – if he ever gets away!

Chapter 1

Michelle looked up at Elise in pure frustration.

As the manager of Michelle's store, *UniQuity*, Elise was trying to explain how important making sure her daughter was all right during her labor was important. On top of that, Elise then explained that she would need a couple of days off to make sure the girl could handle the new baby because there was no man around. The words were like, "*blah, blah, blah,*" to Michelle. In her own frustration, she knew this was going to be one of the busiest holidays of the year, despite what Allen Greenspan said about the economy.

Elise spoke imploringly, ringing her thumbs in nervousness. "I thought I could wait the couple of weeks because she ain't due until Christmas, but she went to the hospital this morning and they said she was two centimeters. I gotta go check on her and stay by her side, Ms. Coleman." She paused for a moment, and then said passionately, "I love my job, Ms. Coleman. I need my job, and I don't mean to inconvenience anyone, especially you."

Michelle didn't want to understand. She wanted Elise to stay at the store and close, while she went home to catch up on the mountain of paperwork sitting on her desk. But this was a family thing and although Michelle didn't have a close family she concluded to herself, Elise *was* becoming a first time grandmother and this must be a momentous occasion for her and her daughter. Her own father stayed in Canada and just wanted to be left alone because Michelle reminded him too much of her mother, who died in a car crash when Michelle was eighteen. There were no siblings that she knew of. The cousins and other relatives were just too distance for her to relate to, but she had her best friend and business partner, Dominique Quatermaine, who was like a brother to her. His nickname was Niche and although he had some issues he needed to work through from the past on his own, they enjoyed spending time together as friends and remained platonic because they enjoyed and respected their friendship.

Too upset with the inconvenience Elise was throwing her way suddenly and just really wanting to end this discussion, Michelle huffed, "Fine, Elise. Go on. I'll close up and work the store for the rest of the week."

"Thank you so much, Ms. Coleman. I know day after tomorrow is going to be awful, but no one can tell when babies come," Elise said gratefully.

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"Please leave before I change my mind." She rubbed her forehead to indicate her stress as she watched Elise hurry up and leave.

Michelle usually wasn't so bitchy, but if it wasn't one thing lately it was another and Michelle just didn't need anything else to pile on top of the already too much to do list.

Amanda and Stephanie, *Uniquity's* other employees, were left in the store and it was three hours until closing.

Michelle enjoyed her store. Ever since *UniQuity* opened this summer with the *Fabulous* line, which she had exclusively picked in Milan and New York, sales had been over expectation and hiring Elise had been a Godsend. The woman gave her a lot of free time to deal with store issues and the new fall line. It was good Michelle had just come back from New York, where she had been picking out the New Year line, but the mountain of paper work she had to tackle was still on her desk screaming for attention. With Elise taking off this week and Thanksgiving hitting them tomorrow, Michelle would never get to the paper work until after Christmas. This was the busy season and in two days everyone and their grandmother would be hitting the Northland Mall where her store was positioned.

It was a good position in the Metro Detroit area. Her store was located on the outskirts of the city; yet close enough to draw the urban residence - especially the young adults. Michelle had gotten a wonderful exclusive teen line from a new and upcoming design firm in New York and she sold it exclusively in Michigan. Sales had been off the charts in that area and the back room was filled with boxes, which needed to be unpacked, checked in, and tagged. Her Thanksgiving was shot, but she wasn't a holiday person anyway.

Chuckling this all up as the life of a busy entrepreneur, she started closing procedures. An hour before she was to close, she finished the store's paperwork early and decided to cash out in the morning wanting the store to look good for her after-Thanksgiving crowd. She would drop the money in the bank when she went out to grab the afternoon lunch tomorrow. The bank's drop box was on the other end of the mall, but Michelle didn't feel like calling a guard to escort her down there right now.

Amanda and Stephanie finished quickly with the five customers left in the store and told them all to have pleasant evenings.

Amanda was a whiz at color coordinating and after counting her drawer down she finished her window displays, while Stephanie who was slower at counting finished her drawer count down.

Michelle was glad to lock up the store and leave, but before departing Amanda's company she let her know Elise couldn't help her with

the tagging and she would also be needed to assist in opening the store Friday morning. She knew Amanda was a single mother with a son and was trying to get through her second year of college with only her mother's assistance that watched her son. Stephanie was lazy and told Michelle she already had plans. Michelle had a feeling that Stephanie would make excuses because the girl barely did enough to stay hired.

Although Michelle had promised to only hire promising African-American college students, yet when no takers came to apply for the job except for Stephanie, Michelle hired Amanda who had approached her one night really needing a job and willing to work very hard to keep it. Amanda was white as they came with natural long thick blonde hair and the bluest of eyes, skinny with absolutely no figure going for herself except the few pounds she managed to keep on her waist and butt. Amanda always joked that it was the only thing from pregnancy that she didn't mind keeping.

With the popularity of her boutique on the rise, Michelle had a feeling Amanda was worried that any day some promising black girl would walk in the store and Michelle would make cuts. With Amanda having the lowest seniority and the fact that she was white, it would be assumed that she would have to go.

Amanda, with her blue eyes dancing excitedly eagerly, agreed to help Michelle set up for the after-Thanksgiving crowd.

Getting home to her West Side of Detroit apartment, with three bedrooms and a nice private balcony, Michelle plopped down on the big red fluffy chair that Niche thought was the most tasteless thing he had ever laid eyes on. Michelle loved the chair even though it didn't go with her beige leather couch and two chairs, or the dark beige rug. It was comfortable and it seemed to ease her mind whenever she sat in it. Niche, who was the only other person who had keys to her place, often teased he would come when she wasn't there and throw the chair away. Michelle thought he was serious once when she went out of town and he told her he left the chair on the curb.

Checking her phone messages, she frowned as a soft spoken, but eloquent voice came on the recorder. "Hello, my name is Mrs. Kimberly Gates, and I'm trying to locate, Belle' Michelle Coleman, daughter to Harold Coleman of Canada. Your father said I would find you at this number and it is urgent that I speak with you. Please call me as soon as you get this message, no matter the hour." She recited her number and name twice before hanging up.

She hadn't heard her first name used in a long time. Her mother had thought it would be cute to call her Bella, but spell it with a hyphenated e' at the end, but once Michelle reached high school, only a select few knew her first name.

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Picking up the cordless receiver, Michelle dialed the number.

A deep growl came over the phone and Michelle had to hold the phone away from her ear to make sure she dialed the right number.

“Hello!” the voice growled again. “Who the hell is calling this late at night, playing on my phone?”

Michelle looked at the time and flushed. Of course, the woman had not really meant one o’clock in the morning.

“I’m sorry to call so late, but the woman who called me said it was urgent,” she said quickly. “I’m looking for Ms. Gates.”

The growl corrected her. “It’s Mrs. Gates. She’s a happily married woman.”

Someone in the background giggled, “Jaelen, give me the phone!”

There was a brief pause before the soft eloquent voice came on the line. “Hello? Is this Belle’ Michelle Coleman?”

“Well actually, after my mother’s death, I took on my mother’s last name too, so I go by the name Collins-Coleman, and you may call me by Michelle, please,” she explained.

“Then I know I have the right Michelle,” the woman said after breathing a sigh of relief.

“I apologize for the lateness in the hour. I know I shouldn’t be calling so late. Please tell your husband I’m sorry.”

“Oh no, please don’t worry about Jaelen. I don’t think it would matter what time you called, he’d always be in that mood,” Kimberly said laughing. “I could really care less what hour you called, I just wanted you to call. I’ve been searching for you the past few months and it’s proved quite frustrating. I take it your family is not very close.”

“No, ma’am. When my mother died, I lost touch with her relatives, and my dad was an only child. All my grandparents had died before I was ten, so I really have no family outside of my father.” Michelle couldn’t believe how comfortable this stranger had made her feel instantly.

“I’m not one to discuss a matter like this over the phone, so I would love to meet with you to have a short meeting.”

“Should I be worried about my father, Mrs. Gates?”

“Please call me Kimberly, and no this has nothing to do with your father. It’s a matter on your mother’s side of the family that’s very dear to me, but whenever you have the time, I can make arrangements to meet you.”

“Well, I’ll be busy working all day tomorrow-“

“On a holiday, Michelle?” Kimberly asked shocked.

“Unfortunately, yes, because I own a store in Northland.”

“Oh good, then I can come out and meet with you when you have the time. I know you’ll be busy, but an early afternoon meeting of ten minutes of your time could be arranged, can you? This matter is really important and time sensitive.”

Michelle knew that she would be very busy this entire holiday until the New Year, but ten minutes would be fine. “How about this Wednesday afternoon. That shouldn’t be a problem, ma’am...I mean Kimberly.”

“Great! That’s fine. I can’t wait to meet you.”

They said good night and hung up. Before Michelle became too comfortable in the gaudy chair, she got up and turned on her computer and then sat in the ergonomic computer chair.

Leaning her head back and closing her eyes, she relaxed before her computer came out of sleep mode and began to run the daily reports downloaded from the store's computer. Since she had done the countdown, she knew the totals and was glad to see it balanced out perfectly. After reviewing all issues she may have to address tomorrow, she answered all her e-mails, and then took a shower. Tomorrow would be a longer day and the next day would be even worse. Yet, she knew she could handle it. She always had done things on her own without anyone helping her. Although Niche had loaned her the money to open up *UniQuity*, Michelle had worked very hard for her success as a boutique owner despite what other people, who she thought would be behind her, but weren’t. Instead, she received a lot of discouragement initially.

She sweated blood and tears for her business and loved every second of it. This was her year to shine and she was shining quite brightly in her business life. Her personal life was another matter.

Once she was done working, she didn’t bother to shut the computer off. Michelle adjourned to her bedroom, stripping down to nothing but the white lace panties. Laying her five-feet-two inch, dark caramel frame in the double king size bed in her room felt climatic all over. Being a pillow freak had its advantage in this bed, as each feathery soft pillow seemed to curve into her body immediately almost massaging the tensed muscles and relaxing her.

Closing her ovate chocolate brown eyes letting the long black eyelashes caress her soft high boned creamy brown cheeks, she smiled to herself at the luxury. If Niche's money had given her any pleasure, getting this bed was second and well worth the loan she needed to obtain this small luxury in life.

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Niche was disgusted by the bed's flamboyancy and equally disgusted by the two thousand dollar price tag for just the mattress and canopy frame. If money can buy a bed to make the most insomniac woman sleep it was well worth the price tag.

Her stomach growled, but she ignored the cries too tired to care. There was always the morning and a nice raisin bagel with strawberry cheesecake cream spread over the top of the warm toasted middle - her favorite morning treat.

Chapter 2

Austin ducked even further down hearing footsteps approached the broom closet door. His heart was beating rapidly in fear knowing sooner or later someone would catch him and his father hiding where they shouldn't be.

His father, Anthony, had found the closet four days ago and keys just yesterday. It was a gold mine for the homeless. He felt Anthony's large strong hand rest on his shoulder to be still and relax. When the footsteps proceeded to walk away, Austin breath a sigh of relief, but he didn't dare speak until Anthony spoke.

Anthony's cool quiet deep voice said in a whisper, "Kid, I guess you can sleep now."

Austin nodded. "Thanks, Pop. Maybe tomorrow my mom will page you about the money and we won't have to be homeless no more."

"Anymore," Anthony corrected the twelve-year-old. "Maybe she will," he said hopefully, but he knew otherwise. As bad as Claudia was though, he didn't have the heart to tell Austin the truth about the deceitful lying bitch.

"Then you can find you another girlfriend, so you won't be so irritable cause you ain't had any sex." He chuckled.

Becoming tip-lipped – not wishing to discuss his personal sexual angst - Anthony loving rustled the boy's thick black hair. "You get some sleep, Kid."

Austin smiled some more to himself. Anthony didn't like to talk about past mistakes he had made as a young greedy man, which he felt he was paying for now at twenty-seven trying to take care of a twelve-year-old son.

Anthony just recently found out about Austin less than five years ago.

The scandal behind the whole mess had changed Anthony's life completely. Yet, he couldn't right the situation, so he did what was in his nature. He turned his back on the whole mess and pretended none of the people he had known in the past existed. His only contact was a pager than his father, before dying, insisted he carry around with him.

Then suddenly six months ago, Claudia decided to send Austin to his father without a way for Austin to come back home or return to boarding

school. Anthony now had the unfortunate responsibility to take care of Austin because of his selfish mother "needing her space."

Austin didn't hate Claudia for kicking him out the house. Anthony knew the boy was highly intelligent and loved his mother very much. Yet, when he found out she also took the money Anthony's father left for Austin and Claudia wouldn't give Anthony any money to support them, Austin began to dislike her greediness. Still, Anthony kept his opinions to himself about Claudia's true nature.

With Anthony turning his back on his family and friends, he had started from the bottom of the bucket. With a child under the roof, paying bills had become difficult since he had no steady money coming in.

Two months ago, at least they had lived in an efficiency apartment in Detroit, until a crack head started a fire and burned the place down. When Anthony had turned his back on his past life choosing to become independent, or as his father preferred to say, "running the streets" since he was twenty-four, he had not planned on having the responsibility of being a father and he was still learning how to survive with a child the hard way.

An early graduate from Wayne State Law School, Anthony decided to leave his father's house in Royal Oak, Michigan and come to Detroit in hopes of trying to find himself. He left his small law practice in his ex-wife's hands because she also possessed a law degree and would be able to run the business without him.

Since childhood, Sharrisse Edmonds, Anthony's ex-wife, had been infatuated with Anthony, but Anthony never gave her the time of day let alone his affections. He never regarded her in any way other than his father's best friend's daughter.

With his own life having so many ups and downs, he barely paid scant attention to Sharrisse.

His father, Merrick Dome, who had a one of a kind of handsome distinctiveness, and a large broad build, had never been faithful a day in his life, but Claudia Maria Blackwell managed to get Merrick to marry her. She made the mistake of actually falling in love with Merrick, fully knowing his unfaithfulness and his affairs outside of marriage were just too much for her heart and Merrick was never going to be true to just her.

To get revenge she seduced her stepson, fifteen-year-old Anthony, whose magnificent face and body were already too much to resist and unfortunately Claudia became pregnant from the affair. Merrick thought the child was his own and suddenly decided to stop his own affairs to become faithful to Claudia.

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Anthony had been deposited on Merrick's doorstep when he was six. His mother was pretty much "running around the world" on Merrick's money that was paid to her just to keep her away from Michigan. Anthony had never had a real relationship with his father because all Merrick could ever see was a horrible mistake he had made with a horrible woman. So with Claudia's pregnancy, Merrick used this as a way to connect to a child because he really didn't consider Anthony a real son.

Four years passed and Claudia was able to keep the secret of her affair with Anthony concealed, along with the knowledge of the father of the child as well. She didn't even tell Anthony.

During this time, Anthony fell in love - head over heels, out of his mind - with Clarissa, Claudia's daughter from another marriage that was just as old as Anthony. For three years, they dated and planned to be married behind everyone's back. Clarissa and Anthony had planned on moving in a townhouse in the New Center Area of Detroit, since they were going to the same college. By twenty-four, Anthony just couldn't get enough of Clarissa and he knew he wanted to be with her forever.

His happiest moment with Clarissa was when after her twenty-fourth birthday, during the summer right before they were to start college; he proposed marriage to her after they made love on the patio at his father's home. He was preparing to get a doctorate in law and she was just entering her masters program in Education.

Her big dark brown eyes became so wide at the diamond he presented her and she even cried as the words of love and eternal devotion poured so easily out of his mouth.

"Oh Anthony, you have made me the happiest woman in the world," her soft voice whispered passionately, and then kissed him like there was no tomorrow.

Accepting his proposal had made him the happiest man in the world and he thought nothing could break them up.

He was wrong because twenty-four hours later, when Claudia found out about the proposal, she went ballistic and told Clarissa about their affair. She convinced Clarissa that Anthony had seduced Claudia and now was just putting another notch in his bed by seducing Clarissa.

It must have been then when Clarissa lost it, Anthony was sure of that now, but she deceptively kept it all together and continued to see Anthony despite Claudia's displeasure of them being together.

Clarissa decided to take revenge out on Anthony for what she believed the wrong he did to her mother, by leaving him standing alone at the altar in Ohio where they planned to elope. Later, he found out she had done

it on purpose to hurt him and she told him he would never have her for as long as he lived because he was nothing but a lying incestuous rotten scum. Anthony had almost choked her, but he got over the murderous inclination and drunk himself into a stupor - keeping himself that way almost every night. He had surprised himself when he had gotten into doctorate program and kept his grades up despite the fact he couldn't go to bed without a bottle of Wild Irish Rose or something close to it in his hand.

Merrick still wanted his son married despite whom he suspected about Austin's true paternity. Merrick offered Anthony a settlement if marriage was gained soon. His father had even suggested the marriage to Sharrisse, but Anthony was too busy traipsing around with everything and anything wanting nothing to do with settling down.

Merrick informed Sharrisse of his son's dwindling desire to carry on with his life sober and she took advantage of the situation along with the knowledge of the money Merrick had offered Anthony for marriage to get her hands on his father's money.

Anthony was well aware Merrick offered this money in order to get Anthony away from Claudia, who secretly still wanted Anthony.

Sharrisse had flown to his college dorm and made him even more intoxicated, then took him on a flight to Las Vegas and put a ring on his finger.

Anthony, in an intoxicated state of mind, agreed to the farce marriage because he was a greedy cold fool and just wanted to use the money to become rich and powerful. He would then show Clarissa what she would be missing, while he partied it up with Sharrisse, but after waking up in a Las Vegas hotel room fully clothed next to Sharrisse with the biggest hangover in the world, he decide his greediness would end that day. He would leave it all behind, start over without anyone and just stay alone because having it all made him miserable.

Anthony blamed everything on the gorgeous face and body, which graced his large frame. Anthony had inherited his mother's side of the family looks. Carmel flecks mixed in a pool of bluish green eyes, framed by long light brown lashes and steel cut jaw. A dark buttery brown complexion with masculine features illuminated the power in his face and frame. Standing at six feet with a brawny build, the thick powerful arms and leg muscles were an addition he knew attracted women to him. He drew many an eye when he was all cleaned up, but sometimes too many eyes and his temper and vindictive personality made a lot of people despise him.

Losing count of the jobs he had maintained because he had worked in so many places in the past six month, Anthony had a hard time keeping

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friends or associates who didn't find him a threat to have him around their women. Anthony had made himself misanthropic, to others, except his son.

Yet, Anthony knew Austin loved his real father with every fiber of his being and wished for his father to be happy in life. Even before they realized the deepness of the bond they shared and thought they were only brothers, they got along very well. Austin was able to talk to Anthony about anything and felt closer to him than Merrick, who had raised him.

In return, Anthony adored the boy and wanted the best for his son, yet trying to obtain the money he needed all of a sudden by himself was difficult. He knew Austin wasn't use to this poverty and Anthony felt very ashamed and frustrated over his circumstances because he knew if things didn't look up soon, he and Austin would be living on the streets for the rest of their lives.

Anthony's stomach growled in protest bringing his mind back to the present as he stared down at his sleeping son. Wrapping his arms around his waist, he tightened and leaned over in pain hoping the sound didn't wake up Austin, who had fallen asleep hours ago while Anthony had been reminiscing about his life.

Anthony cursed his face for his troubles, which now included Austin. He was positive if he had inherited his father's gruff looks like Austin; he would not be in the situation he was in today.

Claudia, the spiteful stingy bitch, had no intentions of sharing Merrick Dome's fortune with his legitimate son or even Austin, whom Merrick had loved even more than Anthony. Breaking up the engagement between Anthony and her daughter had been Claudia's true colors showing, but when she turned her own son, Austin, out at twelve just went to show how incredibly greedy she could be, Anthony knew he couldn't take much more of the heathen. That clearly told everyone her true personality, but it seemed as if no one was alive to care or even want to be apart of helping Austin and Anthony.

Jasmine Bellini, a family and trust issue lawyer and also a good law school friend from Chicago, told him seven-hundred was needed to file the forms to get the process going to regain Austin's rightful inheritance. Anthony would file these himself and represent himself and Austin with his own savvy legal knowledge. He knew Claudia would only run to Jordan Stanford, her current lover, she was using and get his expensive attorneys to represent her and the fool would because Jordan couldn't tell the difference between a good piece of ass and getting involved in a matter he knew nothing about.

Anthony had five years of studying family law and knew exactly what to do. He wanted to make no mistakes when he went after Claudia and

if he was to do this right, then he would get every red cent out of her hands, including the four million his father was fool enough to leave her with for Austin.

He was going crazy presently sacrificing all he had to give to Austin. With no money coming in, he was desperate. Tomorrow would be difficult because of the holidays, but hopefully Friday could be another day for looking through trash, hoping someone wanted help taking packages to their car, or even pray someone left half a plate at the food court.

Unfortunately, the days weren't getting any brighter. He would have to take this face on another journey and use it to his advantage - Getting money out of women. That seemed to be the only thing his face was good at - Very good when he used it to his advantage.

Closing his eyes he tried to go to sleep, but the rumbling in his stomach wouldn't go away. Reaching in his pocket deeply, he pulled out a toy water pistol that looked almost real. He had found it in garbage Dumpster, and decided to keep it just for safety. Maybe tomorrow he would find use for it.

Tomorrow would be another day.

Chapter 3

Awaking early the next day, Michelle took her time to dress and fix her make up. Although she would just be doing a lot of tagging and set up, she just liked to look good for everything. It was in her nature. A long time ago, she made herself believe that if she always looked good, she would always feel good.

Looking in the mirror before proceeding down to the kitchen, she made sure her outfit looked nice on her. At a size ten, Michelle kept herself in shape. Three times a week she woke up to do her Donna Richards' routine, loving the great hip-hop workout the sister put her through, but Michelle always paid back for it later that evening when she was dying to sit in a warm tub full of Warm Spirit Patchouli oil.

With her black hair graced with brown highlights to match her skin tone was drawn back in a tight French roll, the style accentuated her heart shaped face and slightly slanted eyes. During college a lot of people thought she had Oriental ancestors, but it was just the way her eyes were. She knew her maternal great grandmother was part Cherokee and Michelle's strong nose and chin signified that.

Making her way to the kitchen, Michelle hurriedly made her favorite morning bagels, laying the strawberry cream cheese on extra thick. With a nice cup of coffee covered for the car, she was ready to go. It was an hour early, but she decided to head for the store and get started on the tagging. Amanda would meet her there at seven-thirty and help her finish. With it being one of the largest pre-Christmas holidays, Michelle was eager to turn a profit in her store, so she could head back to Paris and attend the New Year buying show, plus pay off Niche as soon as possible.

Even though they were friends this loan was business between them and she wanted to pay him off as soon as possible, just so she could have the store all to herself and feel independent, which she was so use to.

The hunger gnawed into his gut like a knife. Craving for food and Austin's own needs were driving Anthony insane. He waited in the dimness of the mall already memorizing the security guard rounds in his head from his stay inside the mall's broom closet for the past three days. Thinking back, he wondered in his old life would he be in this predicament if he had gone

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with his mother when he was fourteen? It was still a toss up after all these years. Would his mother have killed herself if he had gone with her?

Damn Claudia Blackwell and her greedy conniving ways. He would curse her until the day she died. Seething silently, his bluish-green liquid eyes caught sight of the dark tangerine outfit, and then he smelled strawberries. The sweetest smell to ever grace his nostrils in the past days. The hunger monster in his stomach grew worse, growling loudly from neglect.

UniQuity. He had seen her in that shop, which had opened around the way not to long ago inside the mall.

Ducking in the hall, Anthony waited until she passed, eyeing her beauty like a diamond in a window he wanted to own. Twitching his lip, he felt disgusted within himself at his lecherous thoughts. His monk-like state started a long time ago when he had wanted love in his life so desperately and he had made opened his heart to another woman only to have it stomped out with a crushing blow. The woman passing him reminded him of Clarissa Edmond. Anthony intently watched the woman switch those voluptuous hips down the short hallway.

Licking his dry lips in disgust and anger, he started toward her with only the intention of seeing her closer. But the more he watched her, the more angrier he became remembering Claudia and Clarissa, who dressed quite similar to her - professional and clean cut. She even wore her hair up in a tight French role. The look of untouchable exuded from every pore of her, yet a strange need drew him like a magnet to her. The hallway was quite dim and obviously she paid no mind to anything around her.

Clutching the pistol in his hand tighter, he started towards her, pulling the dark hood over his head before the camera had a chance to catch his face. Pulling dark sunglasses out his pocket, he got them on his face in time just as he crept behind her and pressed the gun into the spine of her back just as she arrived at the back door of her shop. She dropped her purse terrified. She had been about to go inside of the shop when he had surprised her.

"Please don't hurt me," she whispered, frightened to death.

The sound of her fear gave him an ugly happiness Anthony wished he could cause on the others who had victimized him. Leaning close to her, he whispered, "Get inside."

Michelle opened the door, stepped over her purse and moved inside the store, giving him enough room to follow and let the door, closed leaving her purse out in the hallway.

She had a box in her other hand and a perfectly balance a cup of coffee on top of the lid.

"Where's your office?" he questioned, keeping his voice low.

"Over there." Slowing reaching over to the side, she flicked on the lights just to the office in the back of the store that was passed the storage area and she pointed to the right passed the dressing room, where they were by. Since they had come through the back entrance of the store, no one would notice he was holding her hostage because security or cameras did not patrol this area.

He nudged her in the direction she had pointed and patiently waited as she fumbled with the keys, and finally opened the door to the office. As she entered, her hand purposely lingered back and brushed his waist to size him up.

"Are there camera's in here?" he demanded to know.

"N-No. They haven't installed any in here yet," she said, very terrified for her life.

Anthony couldn't tell if she was lying or not, but he didn't care. Right now he was pondering what to do with her and what the hell was wrong with him. He knew the consequences if he went any further, but...no one would understand the stress that had led him to this point of his life.

"I can open the safe for you if you let me put down this box," she offered, when a moment of silence began to add up to minutes giving her a false sense that he really didn't want to hurt her.

"Hurry up," he ordered, looking over in the corner at the safe. "If I even see you go for your pockets at any time you'll be sorry." He pressed the muzzle harder in her back and she winced.

Michelle placed the box down carefully, so her coffee wouldn't drop. *'Give them what they wanted,'* the video she had watched on "In Case You Are Robbed" about six years ago in college. Back then she thought it was a joke, but this was no joking matter. There was a gun pressed against her back ready to kill her!

Kneeling down in front of her safe, she didn't even try to look at her attacker. When her hand had brushed up against his waist, Michelle judged his size. Being in the business of dressing people, she was an expert about sizing people up with her eyes and hands. This man was about an extra large, yet quite toned. From the direction of his voice, he was about a head taller than her, making him about five feet eleven to six feet tall, she guessed. If she remained calm, she could easily describe him to the police as best as possible. Hopefully, she could get a look at his face when he wasn't paying

attention. Michelle figured this moment would come after she gave him the money.

He stepped closer and she noted the outdated filthy Adidas and the pants were horrible. He wore a long black mackintosh fatigued and dirty. Going in the box she had set on her desk next to her coffee, he jammed the bagel into his mouth.

Michelle sighed a bit upset, then smiled to herself. There was gun aimed at her back, yet she was upset over a bagel. Well, considering she hadn't had dinner last night and she had been craving that bagel since last night. She had a right to be a bit upset,

"What's so damn funny?" he snapped.

The smile instantly disappeared as she picked up the bank bag out of the safe. Lowering her eyes not daring to make eye contact, Michelle shook her head as if to say nothing.

Angrily, he knocked the bag out her hand and grabbed her shoulders tightly. Suddenly, she felt light as air as he picked her up by gripping her shoulders and then jammed her back against the wall opposite the door. "You mocking me, bitch?" he sneered.

"N-No. I was...I-I w-w..." She couldn't breathe as terrified as she was and just shook her head frantically. *'Dear Lord save her please. Please!'* she prayed to herself.

"Then what's so damn funny?"

"M-My bagel ... you ate. I like them a lot and I was really hungry." Lawd, did she have to sound so stupid before she died. "Please just take the money. It's everything, I swear. Everything!"

He lowered her to the ground and used the back of his dirty coat to wipe his mouth from the crumbs and the cheese. "Just like that? You think getting robbed is so damn easy. Just take the money and run."

She tried not to look disgusted by his proximity, but it was extremely hard because from the smell of him, she could tell he had not bath in a while. Keeping her face lowered, she tried to ignore the stench permeating the air from him.

He was very aware of her disgust in him and he slammed the safe door in anger. The bag was still lying on the floor, but he wanted more; Something to ease his damned soul; Something to drive those demons away. They owned his heart and soul and he would sacrifice this skank to them. Grabbing her by the neck, he drove her down until she lay flat on her back across the clean desk.

Holding on to the monolithic wrist of his, Michelle fought to move his arm, but it was like steel gripping her and just before she became limp, he eased up the pressure and rejoiced at her tears of fear.

"Is it still easy, skank?" he sneered, leaning close to her face.

His breath repulsed her, mixed with cream cheese. She prayed this would be over soon. Shaking her head reluctantly, she tried to relax under his loosened grip. Looking up into dark sunglasses, she could feel the demented look glaring down at her.

Terrified, she asked in a controlled shaky voice, "What do you want from me?"

Anthony smiled lecherously. "What do *I* want?"

"I will do anything, but you have to leave soon. The guard will be around and my cashier is coming-" she tried to inform him, before he cut her off by tightening the grip around her neck.

"Shut your mouth," he derided. "You sicken me with your fancy clothes. Your prim and proper ways will get you no where," he hissed vehemently.

Michelle rudely wanted to add that his clothes were the ones sickening someone with the awful smell. Was water in his vocabulary? Yet, she didn't speak. She only pleaded with her chocolate deep eyes, hoping he didn't harm her.

His body leaned over hers, yet she felt nothing but fear, until his face started to tilt down. She could feel his eyes move over her body like a caress. Dear Lord, had she gone mad? He had on sunglasses for goodness sake. How could she possibly know where his eyes were going? This was insane!

Begging for her life again seemed to take her mind from her other depraved thoughts that were pouring through her head. Concentrating on the fear, tremors racked over her body. If his object were money, then she would give him all he would ever need. Michelle was willing to say anything to make him just go. "I've got more money in my purse...out in the hallway. On your way out, just take it. There's more money," she insisted.

"Still think it's easy, skank," he sneered, putting pressure on her chin forcing her to look up at him.

Remembering what he had done last time she beseeched him Michelle grabbed his coat pleading, "No...No. I don't. Please don't hurt me."

He snatched her wrists and yanked them above her head. Her breathing was erratic and unsteady as again the wave of panic hit her like water on the ocean crashing onto the beach. Using one arm to hold her wrist,

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his free hand pulled the gun out his pocket and placed the muzzle on her forehead. She closed her eyes wanting to scream, but fighting to die proudly.

His eyes didn't stay at her face. Again, they caressed her pert nose, small pink wet glossed lips, slim long neck, and down to her chest, voluptuous and jaunt at the same time. Why should this woman, who reminded him so much of Claudia and Clarissa; who disgusted him, also make him want to touch her? Soil her, defame her, and yet want her to enjoy it all at once? Maybe it was hunger talking or that monk-like state Anthony had taken on for too long. He didn't want to think why he was doing this to an innocent victim, because he was enjoying it so much.

With the muzzle of the gun, Anthony moved the tip slowly down her face, caressing the cold plastic-like steel against her neck. Obviously this had never happened to her before nor had she ever touched a gun before, because then she would have known it was false.

Michelle turned her face away and closed her eyes. He wanted to scare her, but she proudly would not beg anymore. Yet, she would not do anything to provoke him or to anger him again.

"What more do you want?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady, opening her eyes to look bravely into his face.

"I want your acquiesce," he sneered.

Her eyes darkened like rich dark chocolate, trying to decipher in her mind what was going on behind those sunglasses. "What do you mean, my acquiesce?"

The belittling smile he gave her was emasculating. "All of you," he jeered in a hissed timbre, leaning close to her not caring that she turned her face away trying not to feel his hot breath. "Go around thinking you're high and mighty. Skanks, you all are."

"Skanks?" Michelle had never heard of the word.

His frown was filled with disapproval. "Don't play innocent with me, skank."

"I'm not playing-" she winced, feeling the pain in her shoulder as he pulled up on her arms to make them go higher above her head. Michelle damned her pride and decided to beg, "Please just go. Money is all you wanted."

The gun came over to the other side of her face. She felt the pressure on her other cheek and allowed her face to move around until she was looking at him again.

"I thought money was all I wanted, but now I think I want more."

"What more could you want that I have?" she asked innocently.

"Prim and Proper again." This was not a compliment. "You skanks sit in bleach baths trying to clean yourselves from the scum of the world, cause you think the world's not good enough for you. You kick a man when he's down, then you make sure he never gets back up."

She wanted to speak, but hearing his disgust with "skanks," she decided against this action. He didn't see her, he saw demons and she must look like. Quickly thinking, she relaxed and pretended her best not to be repulsed by his touch. It encouraged him more when she showed her disgust.

He tore open her tangerine jacket. The buttons popped off like they had exploded from the fabric and landed on the floor around the office. She wanted to close her eyes in shame, her fear becoming greater every passing second, but she didn't want him to know of her shame and he would know that if she looked away. Underneath her jacket, he could see the beautiful black laced, wired bra, accenting the fullness of her breast.

"Clean and pristine. You like keeping yourself that way. Untouchable, like a china doll; all beautiful on the outside and empty on the inside," he continued, with abhorrence still in his tone of voice.

If Michelle didn't think about the gun, she could concentrate on her breathing. Once she accomplished this, she decided not to act "prim and proper." "I don't intend to kick you when you're down, sir. I want to help you."

A cocky grin came to that face, but he was right to think '*why on earth would she want to help him?*' which she assumed he was thinking, but with those dark glasses on, she really couldn't tell, but the idea seemed obvious.

Quickly, she read his mind, "If I hurry up and give you what you want, then you can take the money and leave. I don't think doing this for you is easy. You're stealing from me, but my life is worth more than anything to me and sacrificing anything, except my life, for your happiness is what I can give you."

He knew what game she played. Give them what they wanted and usually the attacker let the victim go. Oh ho, she was good! The relaxed breathing, the eye contact, the acquiesce. She was giving him what he wanted, but he wanted more. Putting the gun down on the desk beside her head, he watched her relax even more thinking she was winning. Oh yes! The triumph in her eyes was amusing to him, but Anthony didn't show his humor. '*She actually thinks she was winning.*' He slowly trailed his free hand down the side, enjoying her gasps and shudders as his fingers enclosed over her flat stomach. "Life is more important, huh?"

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She nodded finishing his sentence. "Than anything." Licking her lips that had suddenly gone dry, she started to concentrate on his hand that rested on her stomach. His palm was warm to feel and her fear was being encompassed by... 'Breath, Michelle!' she ordered herself. 'He's a homeless bum! He is enjoying the power too much over you!'

"You're willing to give me anything?" he questioned.

Closing her eyes, forcing herself to swallow, she nodded again. "I don't know w-what you're driving at, but I value my life greatly."

He dug his fingers into her skirt and with one swift yank tore away the tangerine silk skirt, the black-laced underwear, and pantyhose leaving her bare. Flushing in embarrassment, she pleaded again with her eyes.

"You won't mind giving me what I want." His hands went to his jacket as he threw it opened and began to undo his pants.

Tears of terrors welled in her eyes and she began to writhe in his grip. "Please, don't. Please, you can't!"

His pants dropped and he grabbed her thigh and hauled the firm leg over his shoulder.

"Nooo!" she beseeched him, trying to yank her wrist from his grip. Her hands were still over her head, and it didn't even look he was using all his strength to hold her in place. Michelle forgot about her fear and she forgot that the gun was inches from her face. Getting away from him was all that she knew to do right now.

Suddenly he went still and seemed mesmerized by what he saw between her legs. Michelle steeled in embarrassment. She knew what he was looking at and tried to move her thighs to close her legs, but he pushed her thighs open wider.

Anthony completely forgot that he was supposed to be holding her down as he moved in for a closer look. He released her wrist, removed his glasses and encircled her thighs with his hands forcing her to keep them open to her exclusive aperture. He couldn't believe what he was seeing between her legs.

Slowly his eyes came to meet hers and Michelle gasped amazed at his eye color. It was unusual for a black man to have that color eye. They were the color of tinged sea.

"It's a birthmark," she explained finding her voice at her own astonishment as his hands moved down to touch the white thatch of hair around her womanhood as if it would just wipe away. If she were any lighter than her mahogany skin tone, he would clearly see how flustered she was about now. No one, except her doctor, had looked at the albino thatch of hair

on the left side of her womanhood or paid any attention to it so much. He seemed almost afraid to touch it.

"Is it real?" he asked.

She nodded with a faint, "Y-Yes."

He looked up at her, his eyes heating to a deep blue. The fear she held for him melted away and now a wave of passion hit her, accelerating her heartbeat like an out of control train plowing down the tracks at high speed. Breathlessly, she asked, "Are your eyes?"

He frowned not at all liking her boldness. His hand moved down to her softness and plied the thick moist lips apart. She winced as his finger moved into her like a snake. The horror returned to her body. She shuddered crying out. "No, don't! You can't," she beseeched, reaching down to grasp his immovable wrist.

"You gave me your permission." He gripped her thighs pushing the tip of him close to the moistness.

Michelle sobbed in shame not wanting to even look at his own nakedness and knowing where he wanted to put himself. "Oh Jesus! Please! I promise I won't tell on you. Take the money. I don't want this." She was shaking so badly in fear. She pushed at his chest as hard as she could, but it was like trying to push away a brick wall. He was immovable!

The anxiety she emitted and showed spurred him on and he could feel his demons rejoicing at knowing he was going to hurt her. Yes, she would feed their need for revenge. For satisfaction! For... He leaned over her ready to thrust in her.

Terror gripped her as she began to fight like a wild cat. From panic to raging horrification Michelle just wanted to not be there! Nothing like this had ever happened to her in her entire life! She was going to be raped! She was going to be brutally raped and he would then use the gun and kill her so she would never ever see the light of day again. Oh Lord! Oh Lord! Her mind screamed.

The tip of him pressed against her moist entrance. Michelle's mind took over, as she conscious couldn't face reality anymore. Her vision became a blur and then faded to blackness.

Anthony had not even made entry before she released the softest whisper from her lips.

"I'm not ready."

Suddenly, her limpness caught him off guard. She had fainted. Straightening up his clothes, he took a step back to reevaluate everything.

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Running a frustrated hand through his head, he shook his head in shame. What the hell was wrong with him?

Quickly, he took a cloth out of his coat pocket and wiped the table where he would have left fingerprints. After picking up his glasses and water gun, he stepped over the bag of money and almost picked it up, then changed his mind.

Looking back at the desk where she laid, he could feel his manhood twitch and those demons in the back of his head were telling him to go finish the job. Closing his eyes in disgust, he forced himself to turn away from her hoping he would never have to see her again and hoping she would never tell.

Anthony was coming to his senses and, disgusted as he felt in his own self-control, he knew this was not a good idea. Using the cloth to open the door of the office, he picked up his pace to get out of there. Grabbing the purse on his way out, he ran down the hallway to get Austin out the broom closet. They could take the back door to get out of there and no one would be the wiser. People were already lining up around the store with it being the day after Thanksgiving and the father and son could easily blend into the crowd. No one would ever know.

Chapter 4

Michelle came to, abruptly fighting with the air, while still lying on top of the desk. Losing her balance, she fell to the floor and realized she was alone in her office. Looking down at her ripped clothes, she sobbed a little more. Standing up slowly, her legs wobbled from her unsteadiness. Moving over to the phone, she stumbled a little over something.

Looking down, she saw the bag of money was still lying in the same place. *'What kind of thief would leave the money?'* she asked herself.

Getting the extra coat in the manager's closet, she put it on quickly and went out on the sales floor. She found a nice size twelve, gray-laced outfit she had been admiring anyway and put the two-piece on. *'No one would have to know about this,'* she convinced herself, as she grabbed a pair of pantyhose behind the register.

Just as she finished putting on the clothes and redoing her hair, the back door buzzer rang.

Amanda smiled a bright good morning. "I brought you a bagel with strawberry cream cheese."

Michelle's nerves rattled a bit from the memory of seeing the attacker eat her bagel. "N-No, I'm not hungry anymore." Her stomach growled rudely. "Well, just a little bit." She would get through this day if it killed her. She would pretend there was never a man with the most extraordinary greenish-blue eyes and brown sugary skin preparing to thrust deep inside of her.

The proceeding days kept her extremely busy. This weekend of the year was one of the busiest in the country and her store made well over its quota. She was quite proud of herself for choosing her line from a small buyer in Milan and the design firm in New York that catered to one-of-a-kind outfits. Her Christmas line sold rapidly and she scheduled herself for a flight to Milan the second week of the New Year. Elise would be back by then and Michelle would be able to get more business. She already had to reschedule her appointment with the committee for the Michigan Annual Christmas Hair and Nail Show. Her January line was going to be featured and she wanted to make sure they choose acceptable models for her clothes.

Running the store was no problem. This was her baby, her dream and becoming an entrepreneur when odds said she wouldn't make it made her happy. Seeing women flock in and out her store raving about what she had to offer made her hardship to get to this point so much sweeter and memorable.

Amanda was promoted to Assistant Manager, not out of necessity, but because Michelle saw great potential in her and knew she would become something. When Elise returned a week after Thanksgiving, Michelle was glad and sad at the same time. The store kept her extremely engrossed and tired, so when she came home she didn't have to think of "him." The first day back, Elise decided to send her boss home early and straightened up the office completely.

Michelle had never had any time to thoroughly clean the office after the *incident*. She had thrown the outfit away, straightened up the desk some and had Amanda do a quick vacuum.

Before going back to her apartment, Michelle called her voicemail on her cell phone in case her plans had to change again. Craig Meadows called to wish her a late Happy Thanksgiving. "I spoke to Niche, who told me you were doing a wonderful job off of his investment. He gives you until about next year to pay him off. I'm very proud of you, Co-Co. When no one believed in you, you still went on and believed in yourself. I'd love to have lunch one day near Christmas at the Renaissance Club. I know you still have my numbers. Call me babe."

Co-Co was her name from college. Michelle had never like coffee much, but she needed caffeine seriously during mind terms and finals. So she concocted a sweet hot chocolate mixture with milk, cocoa, and several tablespoons of sugar, cinnamon and a touch of vanilla. It had been the rave and her fellow students would call her Cocoa Lady or in short, Co-Co.

Michelle immediately erased the message. Craig Meadows was a thirty-six-year-old lawyer still trying to grow up. She had met him four years ago at twenty-one through Niche at one of the nightclub's Niche had just invested in and Michelle had thought Craig was the sun, moon, earth *and* stars.

Five months later, he was proposing to her and telling her she would be the one he wanted for the rest of his life. She knew this had been a ploy to get in her pants, but she wanted to believe she was in love with him and gave up her virginity the night he proposed. How was she to know it would be the worse experience of her life? One minute he was kissing her and the next he was painfully shoving something deep in her. Yet, she didn't want him to think she was frigid, so she tried to find a way to enjoy it the next time with him.

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Niche helped her a bit with what little she could stand to hear him explain, but she couldn't take much more of it and decided to end the sham engagement with a lie. Through all this, she didn't think Craig really cared she couldn't enjoy sex or not, but just wanted to put another notch on his pole of sexual conquest.

The clock in her updated silver Infinity read almost noon and her calendar read, 'tend the store.' She had planned to work all day catching Elise up on everything, but Elise was a whiz at managing and didn't need to be told much to catch up. So, she was left to her own musings for a day.

By four, after making enough business calls to pack her schedule for the time being, she decided to call Niche to just talk. He was always open for her.

"Hey Michelle, how's the store?" He was always happy to hear from her.

"It's fine, Niche, are you busy?" she asked, worried that she was bothering him. Although she and Niche were closed, she knew he was kept just as busy as she was.

"I'm never too busy for you, Michelle. What's up?"

The odd silence made him quite alert. Without another word, Niche said, "I'll be over in thirty minutes, okay?"

"No, it's really okay." She forced the falsehood.

He knew she was lying. "Don't go anywhere or do anything, B. I'm on my way."

When he arrived, she had his coffee ready just the way he liked it. He thanked her for it, but instantly dragged her to the bedroom and they both lay down on the huge bed of hers and held her tightly. He knew she was upset about something.

Caressing his face, she smiled relieved. "You know me too well, Niche."

"You're my sunshine. Why shouldn't I?" He almost sounded insulted, as if she should have known what he would do.

Burying her face into his strong shoulder she cried so hard, her whole body shook. Niche held her tightly in his lean arms kissing her cheek waiting patiently for her to stop. When her weeping became whimpers, he told her to start from the beginning.

Taking a deep breath she relived the day she was attacked ending with, "He tore away my bottom clothing. I couldn't stop him. He took my purse, but he didn't take the bag of money."

"Oh Jesus," he moaned feeling her pain. "Then what?"

"I passed out," she answered, using the back of her wrist to wipe her eyes.

He reached over her bed to get some tissue, handing it to her to use on her entire face. "Did you tell someone else?" he asked.

Ashamed, Michelle shook her head. "I didn't call the police. I only went to my doctor, but I lied and told him I had rough sex with a stranger. The test he ran after a thorough examination came back yesterday and he said I'm fine. Matter of fact, he said that it didn't look as if I had any sex at all. No infections of any kind, not even bruising. I didn't tell anyone else," she admitted feeling foolish. "I can't let this get in the way of my store, Niche."

"I know this store means a lot to you, Michelle, but your sanity is so much important. He raped you. He tried to take your dignity away and scared you into doing what he wanted, so he could be justified in taking what you didn't want to give."

"I know, Niche and I've accepted the fact that it was never my fault. It's just..." She hesitated really confused.

"What?" he asked concerned. "What is it, B?" She knew when he called her B, he was attuned to her feelings completely and she couldn't hide anything from him.

Shrugging, she looked away too embarrassed to say it to his face. "I can't understand my reaction to the situation. Yes, I was truly afraid of him. He put a gun to my head and back. He could have killed me and not have thought twice about it as angry as he seemed, yet when he took off those glasses and looked at me with the most extraordinary greenish-blue eyes I felt a..." She was at a loss for words. "He was worshiping me or rather my birthmark."

Niche knew of the birthmark, but had never seen it.

He sounded perplexed. "Worshiped? B, maybe you're looking more into it."

Michelle shook her head. "I know what I saw, Niche, and this man was at a pure loss of words when he saw the birthmark and then looked up at me as if I were Aphrodite laying before him as a sacrifice. The more I have thought of it over the past few days, if only things were different..."

"Don't even think that way." Disgust was in Niche's tone of voice. "The man is obviously crazy with as you say demons chasing him that he won't let go. He was probably some crack addict with contacts."

"They weren't contacts. I think I would know the difference," she pouted.

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He looked exasperated. "It doesn't matter, B. You get those thoughts out of your mind, because you're better than that. A raping thief has no place in you or your mind."

She agreed and let the matter go. Niche knew what to do to make her feel better and she always wondered if he wasn't gay would their relationship be more than just platonic because she felt he was the only man she would tolerate sex with even if she would never enjoy it. "I just needed you," she assured him holding him close again. "I don't need anything else. He didn't hurt me. I've cut off my credit cards and gotten new ID and I had a spare key in my desk draw at work."

"A spare key?" Niche questioned.

She nodded. "My life is back to normal and I feel fine."

"You know he could come here," Niche pointed out.

"He won't. He probably has thrown my things away, taken the money and not thought about me ever again," Michelle said.

Niche found that hard to believe because Michelle was a rather extraordinary woman. She was beautiful, smart, and a joy to converse with. She knew what she wanted out of life and it didn't take much to please her. With her maturity peaking, she would be a gem at any man's side, which was why Niche always kept her close, but he had never liked woman sexually in a long time.

"I could get a locksmith tonight," he suggested. "I'd feel so much safer leaving you alone."

Michelle sighed knowing Niche was only being the big brother he had always been to her. She thought of him in just the same capacity since she never had a brother before in her life and the family she had come from had paid scant attention to her and was now so distanced from her she really didn't know if they were dead or alive. "I'll be fine and I can get my own locksmith."

He decided to let the matter go, but would remind her later before he left. After he insisted she take a nice warm bath, she told him up to date information about the store and how it was going.

About six that evening, someone knocked on the door while she was in the kitchen making her delicious spinach soufflé.

Amanda smiled at Niche. "Hello, Mr. Quartermaine." She flushed seeing him and not Michelle. Her stomach did flip-flops as his dark caramel eyes met hers.

He nodded returning the smile with the most beautiful teeth she thought ever graced any man. "Congratulation on your promotion. Michelle has told me the excellent job you've done," he said.

She blushed from his praises. "Thank you so much. This is mail and some things Elise thinks Ms. Coleman left at the store."

"I will make sure she gets it," he assured her. "Have a good day."

Amanda left as he closed the door wondering if what Elise said about him being gay was true. Her twin brother was bi-sexual and she accepted him like he was. Mr. Quartermaine was twelve years her senior, yet he was handsome.

"The good ones usually are or married," she remembered Elise saying.

She decided to keep her fanciful, schoolgirl crush to herself. He was part owner of the store she worked at and Amanda knew it was never good for bosses and employees to interact sexually. Working together with your lover never made a good combination as she had discovered from her last job at the bank. Giving her virginity up to the bank's manager had been a mistake at sixteen years old. Thinking he would take care of their son, was an even bigger mistake. He fired her and denied the child was his, and then he spread rumors she nearly attacked him and seduced him into having sex with her. Amanda had been hurt, but she survived. Dropping out of school, going for her GED at seventeen and now taking night classes to get her associates in marketing/management at Wayne County Community College changed her life for the good and she had Alexander.

Her one and only true love in her life right now was her son she had brought into this world who she supported and survived for.

Still, as she pressed the button to the elevator to go down, a girl could dream and want and she wanted to know Dominique Quartermaine, Michelle's best friend. No one was real sure where he received his fortune. Elise said from going into the stock in the late 90's and he also owned a financial business that catered to small business start-ups and buyouts. Wishfully she thought, if he were straight, she would have definitely tried to have a little fun with him, although, she was quite sexually educated and if given the chance change his present state of mind.

Chapter 5

Without another thought about the pretty young new assistant manager, Niche opened up the envelope filled with bills, letters, Christmas cards, and a pager. He didn't click with the pager, but decided Michelle would know what it was for.

"The soufflé is done," she announced coming from the kitchen, feeling and looking refreshed.

He pushed everything from his mind and sat down to eat. After dinner, they played cards in the living room. About six, he decided to leave instead of spending the night. She thought it best too. Tomorrow was a long day and she was eager to see a new sun.

As she walked him to the door, Niche asked, "Do you have to work these couple of days?"

"No, I serious need to catch up on paper work and Elise has everything under control while I do that, then I need to get a couple of days to clear my mind about...well you know."

He nodded and kissed her forehead. "Rest, B. I need you."

Teasingly, she said, "Yeah, to pay your money back."

"You know I could care less about paper when it comes to you, B."

Hugging him, she said, "I know." Closing her eyes, she whispered a prayer of appreciation in his ear.

Leaving the apartment, Niche greatly worried about his friend's state of mind. Michelle deserved closure to this matter in his opinion and there would be no closure if he didn't get to the heart of the crime against her.

"Speaking of hearts," he said out loud to himself as he picked up his phone. Dialing quickly, diverting his eyes between his cell phone to the road, he instantly got a familiar voice.

"Heart on the line," a deep hard voice said.

"Lethal Heart. Long time no hear from," Niche sang.

"Dominiche Quartermaine? Didn't I tell you not to fucking call me again? Or would you like me to catch a case on your ass."

Niche grimaced not very familiar with Lethal's sarcasm when everything that came out the man's mouth sounded so dead serious. "Your

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exact words were not to call you unless I was ready to call in my favors, wasn't it?"

There was a low growl on the other line and a moment of silence.

Lethal Heart was not a man who like owing favors so having the opportunity to get something off his slate would be just fine with him – as long as it was legal. He didn't do the illegal shit anymore. What probably made him hesitate was that he knew Niche all too well and being the vindictive ass Niche was, most likely he was determining the favor to be cruel to someone else.

"Call it out, but I don't kill anymore unless its personal," Lethal warned.

Niche smiled in triumph. Although, he hadn't had time to really think things through, he was sure Lethal could find a way to assist him.

* * *

"Ding...ding..ding..dinga..dinga...dinga, dinga..." her cell phone chimed at eleven that night.

"Hello?" Michelle answered groggily.

"It's Niche, Michelle. Wake your ass up. I'm coming up."

Exhausted from the holiday weekend, Michelle hung the phone up, stuck her head under the covers and fell back to sleep.

WHACK!

She heard the sound before she felt the sting to butt, which was from Niche's large thick hand.

"What the hell was that for?" she snapped, glaring up at a freshly changed Niche holding a bag and an armload of clothing.

He sat on the side of the bed. "I need you to awake, Michelle. We've got vengeance to take care of."

Becoming alarmed by his serious tone, Michelle sat up. "Did something bad happen, Niche?"

"Everything's fine," he assured her. "Except for you."

"Me?!" Looking confused, she asked, "Niche, what's going on?"

"I've had a couple of hours to think about this and all that has happened to you, B."

She didn't want to speak about the matter anymore. Her thoughts and dreams had gone from innocent to elicit and the more she talked about the stranger, the more she thought about the whole thing. Rape or not, the whole thing was driving her crazy because she had too many questions and too much hurt. Shaking her head, she said flustered, "Niche, I'm fine. I told you my doctor says I'm fine. It happened and I just want to let it go."

"But I can't and if you won't go to the police at least we can find a way to get revenge against this asshole who hurt you, Michelle."

Getting out of bed, she went to the bathroom to relieve her bladder and throw some mouthwash around all the while talking to Niche.

"Worrying about that is crazy, Niche and I won't do it." She wouldn't admit that she had been doing it because this would just provoke Niche more. "Furthermore, revenge is not my cup of tea. I'm not a vindictive person and you know this. I love that you're angry for me, but we both know there's no chance in hell the police can do anything especially now."

"But we can," he said, coming to stand at the doorway handing her a package about the length of her arm and the height of an inch, yet it was lighter than it was suppose to look.

"What is this?" she questioned.

"Just open it," he urged.

Warily, Michelle pulled the box open and gasped almost dropping the package as she peered down at the gun. "What am I suppose to do with this?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to prove to you, he not only took something from you without your permission, but he used a toy gun."

Her eyes were wide open as she realized this was the gun the man had held against her temple. She wanted to touch it, but there was still fear in her heart for the weapon he had used.

"H-How did you get this?" Michelle questioned tearing her eyes away from the weapon to look at Niche.

Niche leaned in close and whispered, "From him."

Michelle felt the room spin.

Chapter 6

Although she stared out the window, the passing scenery didn't catch her eyes at that point the Detroit cityscape could explode before her eyes and Michelle probably wouldn't have noticed it.

"We have him," were the words continually echoing in her head.

Niche's eyes have flared with vengeance and triumph.

So had had she gotten to this point? Riding in the car with Niche in the middle of the night, to a secret location?

"Vengeance can be yours," Niche's words of promise had said.

How? She did not know, but for so long she had trusted Niche like a brother and knew she would never do anything to get her into any *real* trouble.

Slowing down in front of a large home, she knew they were still in Detroit, but the house looked out of place.

With a thick black iron gate around the home along with thick bushes planted by the gate for cover, Niche drove in slow motion as if at any moment something was going to jump out of no where and get them.

The gate opened automatically and Michelle looked upon a forbidding, dark, brick home that didn't seem to fit in the urban area.

The square footage of the place was larger than the normal homes. She guessed at least an eight bedroom with an extra third floor at the top. Built as high as a two family flat, the home was constructed as a single family home.

Different, sinister, and mysterious. That was Michelle's impression as Niche stopped in front of solid double doors, which opened up, but no one stood in the doorway.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"This is an acquaintance of mine, Michelle. He owed me some favors," Niche assured her. "I called in a few of them for you."

"He's not illegal, is he?" she questioned worriedly.

"Not anymore." Niche came around and opened her door to help her out.

Michelle held Niche's hand tight as they entered the darkened hallway.

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

Looking down at her feet, she gasped. “The floor is moving.”

Niche chuckled. “No, Michelle. Just wait.” He looked around. “Turn on the lights,” he said to no one in particular.

Nothing happened.

“Um...lights, please.”

Lights came on and a soft feminine voice spoke. “Welcome, Dominiche Quartermaine. The service you requested is on the third floor.”

Michelle’s eyes were had been the floor to find out what had been moving. To her amazement, the entire hallway’s floor was one large fish tank that they stood on.

Large silvery orange fish that must have been illuminated by a black light swam around the feet ignoring what was going on above.

Surveying her surroundings, Michelle eyes were drawn to a huge open room at the end of the hall where a three-story waterfall fell. Plant growth and a spiral staircase surrounded it.

She didn’t even feel like she was in Detroit anymore.

“Who is that?” Michelle asked.

“It’s a computer,” Niche explained.

“I know that’s a computer. I was referring to the angry looking black man on the steps.”

Niche didn’t have to look in that direction to speak the strange name. “Lethal Heart.”

The angry man proceeded toward them. Although his body was relaxed, his eyes of black shot daggers of pure hatred towards, Niche.”

His height was close to six feet and a half, but his presence felt like ten feet tall. Handsome to no end, what was powerfully attractive about him was the strength he exuded and the dark swarthinness he presented.

Without knowing him, Michelle knew this man could probably kill with his bare hands.

Long dreadlocks hung over extra broad shoulders and those held up burly arms, a broad chest, flat tight stomach and colossal long legs. All of this artistic masculine beauty was clothed in black to match his eyes and hair color.

“Is Lethal Heart your real name?” she asked him.

He tore those piercing shadowy eyes off Niche and targeted her. Michelle’s chest caught in her throat wishing she had kept her mouth closed.

“Fuck, yes.”

“This is Michelle. The victim. The woman I told you about,” Niche said.

“We can just forget this shit, cut his dick off and leave it at that,” Lethal said plainly as if speaking about the weather. As if he cut dicks off every day.

“No, Lethal. Michelle and I have it all planned out,” Niche assured him.

“No plan is perfect.” Lethal spoke directly at Michelle. *“It is a revenge the devil sometimes takes upon the virtuous, that he entraps them by the force of the very passion they have suppressed and think themselves superior to.”*

She had heard the phrase before, but how this applied to her she couldn’t understand. “George Santayana,” she responded.

He was mildly impressed. “You know your quotes well, Michelle.”

“Thank you, but didn’t Scott Adams say, *‘Nothing inspires forgiveness quite like revenge?’*”

Interjecting on the word play, Niche said, “We know what we’re doing, Lethal.” Niche took her hand gently and led her towards the stairs.

Lethal only turned slightly. “You shouldn’t have any trouble out of him. He can’t fight you. Strong bastard, though. Big Lou actually sprained a wrist getting the motherfucker down.” He smirked.

Michelle only partially heard what he was saying as she stared at not only the nice ass on Lethal Heart, but the huge hand gun sticking out the back of his pants.

He continued. “I didn’t find the stuff you said he took, Niche. Most likely he dumped it somewhere after he spent the money. Sable will be done with the background check by tomorrow. She had other things on her plate.” He turned to look at Michelle. “You got twelve hours to get whatever revenge you have out your system, little lady. I’ll be back to release him properly. Leave the card on the table by the door.”

The front doors closed behind him and Michelle hoped she would never have to set eyes on Lethal Heart again.

Niche led her up the beautiful spiral staircase.

“How did the computer know you were here?” she questioned.

Niche took out a card that was in his breast pocket. “It senses for the chip in the card and knows who you are, what your purpose is and what you like and dislike.”

“Do I need a card?”

“No. Because there should be no trace of you in the house. Lethal doesn’t want it to be in case of repercussions.”

“What kind of repercussions?” she asked warily as they arrived to the third floor.

Unlike the second floor, it wasn’t just some hallway of rooms. It was just one big chestnut door that stood at the end of the stairs.

Whatever lay behind this door had to be important by the electronic locks on the door.

Niche’s face became very serious. “Michelle, what I did for you, I did because I love you every much. I ‘m tired of the whole world rolling over you. You deserve a lot more.”

She started to speak humbly, but he hushed her sharply. “Tonight, you’re going to take back your power to be happy. You’re going to walk in that room and take out the hurt and pain you felt.”

“What’s in the room, Niche?”

Him. The son of a bitch who raped you.”

Gasping, Michelle looked incredulously at the door and back at Niche several times. This was what Lethal had meant.

“You tied him down?” she questioned.

“Very securely. You can do whatever you like, but I’ve got a plan that will make him regret he ever hurt you.”

This was not her! She could never hurt anyone.

Niche read her thoughts. “You can do this, Michelle. You won’t kill him, I swear. You’ll just make him suffer.”

“It isn’t right, Niche.”

Angrily, he pelted her shoulders against the wall, forcing her to look at him. “And he was right? To rape you? To take away your pride? Your dignity? Your womanhood? How could you ever feel pity for him, Michelle, after what he did to you?”

“We could just turn him in?” she insisted, as his words sunk it making her feel like she wanted to cry long and hard.

“By this time it will be your word against his. You know this.”

Michelle sobbed harder. Niche was right. She had tried to stave off the anger she had been feeling since the incident. Yet, deep in her mind she longed for revenge.

Sylvia Hubbard

Niche released her as she wiped the tears out of her eyes and looked up at him.

“What do I do?” she asked.

Chapter 7

Straining was useless. That big motherfucker had secured him so tight the only part of him that was able to move was his spine. Yet, no matter how much he arched these bonds were not coming off.

One minute he was piling fertilizer on a truck. The next minute a big black van pulled up next to him and someone snatched him inside and drove off. He fought like the devil, but it was like fighting one brick wall. Two punches to the chest caught him off guard and that gave the kidnapper the advantage to tie him up, cover his eyes and mouth, and inject something in his system to make him paralyze.

Two hours, he had been stuck with needles – when he came to – examined every inch of him and even took hair samples. Most times his eyes were covered, yet the one time they had taken it off, he had been blinded by white light and drops had been forced in his eyes.

Aside from the crackling fire, Anthony couldn't hear anything else. He figured this was synthetic noise because it was constant and after a while he noticed a repeated cycle. He was tied down to a soft but firm mattress that seemed to be constructed just for this purpose with his face covered, he was very aware of his nudity, but the room was kept extremely comfortable.

Who the hell had done this, he didn't know, but hell if he wasn't going to rip someone a new asshole when he found out.

His son! Shit! Oh shit! Hopefully Austin remembered the plan if anything happened. Lay low in their safe place for three days and if Anthony still didn't return then take himself to the police. Austin was instructed to tell them to contact Jasmine Bellini.

Austin would follow the plan if he didn't panic.

These motherfuckers were dead. Kidnapping was a federal offense and whatever they intended to do had to be even more illegal.

Terrified and extremely angry was hardly the right mindset to be when one was trying to escape but that he was and he couldn't stop his rapid escalating fury.

With his mouth covered securely, he couldn't yell for help, but he had a feeling no one would hear him.

No one would help him.

Who could have done this to him? Who had he angered enough to do something like this?

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

A door closed. Someone was in the room. He could hear breathing. Lying still his ears perked to hear what was to come.

Damn was that his heart beating that rapidly?

Would he ever see his son again? Was it time to make peace with his life because he would never see the light of day again?

Had this face of his gotten him into more trouble that he couldn't get out of?

Soft footsteps approached the bed.

* * *

Upon entering the large door, Michelle knew the size of the room didn't take up the whole third floor.

True, it was an empiric master suite, but its size was a lie. The house was bigger than this room behind the door and she knew there were secrets to this room.

Niche helped her change after she freshened up. The bed in the middle of the room was too large for words. It looked like two full size beds put together and it needed a staircase of its own to get up on it.

There was a gigantic wooden heart carved at the foot on beautiful redwood and on the headboard was a Victorian spelling of *LETHAL*.

This was the dark man's bedchamber!

Made for a king, Michelle could just imagine women wetting their panties at the sight of that man lying naked in that bed.

She didn't dare approach it and was glad Niche didn't insist they needed to use it.

Matter of fact, Niche wouldn't go near the bed.

"How do you know Lethal Heart?" she asked as he brushed her hair straight down her back.

Changing the subject from their intended revenge against the stranger helped to calm her nerves.

"His parents died while he was serving with the government. I can't remember the reason, but once he got out, he became sort of like head of the family. His cousins were strewn all over and most didn't know who the other was except by name. I knew his old man. Crazy Joe Heart. Big as a mountain but couldn't keep a damn dime to save his life. He owed a lot of

people – not me – but just some people he didn't need to owe. Lethal didn't have that kind of payback money to just give out. His daddy's debt was his now and his security company start up had just broke even. Even if he sold off everything, he still couldn't pay all the debt off."

He could have just killed them all. The world wouldn't miss them and he'd probably be doing some law enforcements some favors if it was that bad," Michelle muttered sarcastically.

Niche chuckled. "He mentioned that too, but he was trying to go about it right and just pay them off cause Crazy Joe had borrowed the cash with intentions of paying it back.

"So since he didn't owe you and didn't know you, how did you come into the picture?"

"I knew his cousin, King Heart out of Chicago. Powerful underground boss now but back then, King didn't have a pot to piss in and let's just say although he looks kind of like Lethal, we run in the same circle."

Michelle gasped. "He's gay?"

"Well yeah...Like I said, we ran in the same circle. I like good head and I haven't just met a woman who can do it like I like it, B. King was in the same cup of tea, but you wouldn't suspect he was by looking at him. He had started up his stuff and we met because he borrowed some paper from me to get some things moving for himself and would repay me by loaning out his friends to service me."

Blushing, Michelle said, "You don't need to go into that history, Niche."

He chuckled, "Yeah, okay. When he heard about his cousin's dilemma, King brought Lethal to me."

Dreading, Michelle asked, "You didn't..." she blushed again.

"Fuck no! Lethal told me out right he wasn't giving me an inch of ass, but if I gave him what I could, not only would he repay me with interest, I'd get three unconditional favors of gratitude." He helped her on with the robe he had brought and faced Michelle to him. "Now you must understand five million wasn't pocket change for me back then like it is now. I had to put mortgages on a bunch of stuff, collect a lot of paper owed to me, and sell off some shares to get it, but I knew the reward was just something I couldn't pass up."

"What? About ten million back in your pocket? That ain't a bad chunk of change."

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“IT wasn’t the money I wanted, Michelle. When Lethal Heart gives you favors – unconditional favors – it’s like a pass into heaven. He’s connected all over the world that he could get you anything. If I wanted to touch the hand of God in Rome by nightfall, he would have made it possible. If I wanted to eat dinner with the president he could have arranged it. Do you understand the power behind an unconditional favor from Lethal Heart?”

Breathlessly, she nodded.

“I knew only Lethal could help me pull this off and keep you safe at the same time, B. So I used two favors. One to help me find the guy and the other to help you do this. Whatever happens here will stay here. Do you understand?”

Confidently, she said, “Yes, Niche.”

“Gently taking her hand, he led her over to a wall to the left of the bed.

“Lethal has some sexual vices of his own. He loves sex and often has three to four women a night, which is why he has such a large bed.”

Michelle fought the urge to look at that bed again.

“He made this entire floor to accommodate his urges and women so no matter what the woman desired he could service her.”

“How do you know so much?”

“I helped him design some of the chambers.”

That word scared her. “Why are we standing in front of a wall?” she questioned.

“Because you’re going to go through it and begin. Are you ready?” he asked.

Taking a deep breath, Michelle nodded, feeling very wicked. Whether it was the aura of the room or the detailed instructions of what Niche had said to her, she just felt like a dominatrix. Ready to control. Ready to get what she wanted.

Niche pressed the card against the wall and after a moment the wall opened like a door.

She stepped through and gasped as the wall enclosed her inside, alone with the naked man tied down to a firm bed.

His face was covered, his arms were over his head and his legs were seized at the angles slightly apart.

The room was abnormally warm and as she approached the bed the temperature seemed to rise.

Curiosity was killing her but Niche has assured her this was the man...still.

"It's your choice to remove the cover over his face, Michelle," Niche had said.

Her eyes went to his chest and her hand followed.

He tightened.

She drew her hand back. He was awake and started to strain himself. Yet other than arching his back, he couldn't break free and the bands were specially made so he couldn't hurt himself either.

Niche's voice rang in her head. *"Don't pity him! He gave you none and he deserves none!"*

Again, she returned her hand to his chest, ignoring the fight.

He was a fine specimen of man. Hard dark muscles, little to no hair on his chest and stomach. And his crotch hair was amazingly soft to touch.

He stilled suddenly.

Michelle smirked. His member was soft, yet surprisingly long and thick to be in this state. Although she had seen many males even this up close, she was fascinated at how perfect he seemed.

Her hands avoided touching that part of him. She was going to follow Niche's direction to the letter.

Moving around the bed table to his other side, she explored upward from his groin to his arms that strained to be free.

"Showing him your identity will be up to you, B. I doubt he even remembers you. He's probably hurt many, but according to Lethal he's clean. Nothing you do to him will affect you once you're done."

Would he remember her? She had thought of nothing else but him. Handsome, sexy and this time he didn't smell. He was clean, shaven and the natural scent of him made her senses stir.

Shame filled her. How dare he arouse her! This was a rapist.

Her rapist! This man had forced himself upon her, taken whatever he wanted and left her without the least bit of remorse. Despite her pleas and cries for mercy, he had prevailed in his quest to hurt her.

Now she had the power. The power to hurt him.

Niche's plan was perfect.

* * *

Soft hands caressed his skin as he they were trying to remember every grove, nook and cranny of his body. From his arms to his feet, the hands touched him, distracting him. Anthony fought as long as he could, but soon his fear and anger dissipated and lust came to the forefront.

The hands never touched his groin and the cover over his face was never removed.

This was some six hundred B.C. shit. It had to be because rape of a man couldn't dare happen in the twenty-first century. *NEVER!*

Anthony concentrated, fighting the urges that overwhelmed him.

He had felt himself become semi-hard. Swearing that was all *they* would get from him, he forced himself to think about everything from old naked nuns to dead babies.

The hands seemed skillful at massaging his body to arousal, but he maintained control.

A frustrated sign came from the directions of the hands.

They were at the foot of the bed table most likely staring down at him.

Disgusted, his anger returned along with triumph. *Their* mission to arouse him had been unsuccessful.

True, he had not had sex in a while, but control over his urges was just as strong as his self-control. He knew what he wanted and it wasn't *them*.

* * *

Michelle sighed again. It had started to work, just like Niche had said, but then nothing.

The man didn't even fight. He just lay there. Still. The only indication that he was alive was the rapid pulse she could feel all the way in the perfectly arched feet.

Moving up to his face, she slowly removed the cover. His eyes were covered, but she didn't have to see those strange eyes to know this was the man who had raped her.

She would have to resort to the *second phase*. That was what Niche had called it.

Pacing to calm her nerves, she occasionally watched between his legs. It had started to relax into his original form.

He *was* fighting. Mentally! And winning.

Dropping the robe to the floor to signify round two, Michelle approached the foot of the bed table.

Licking her lips, she mentally prepared herself for the task at hand.

'You can do this, Michelle,' she told herself. 'You've beaten critiques tougher than this man. You are not going to let this man get the better of you. Never! Vengeance shall be yours!'

Looking right below the bed, she saw the green button. She wouldn't press it right now, but when she was ready she'd most definitely use it. Hopefully, she wouldn't have to go that far.

* * *

A brief recluse of light. *She* had taken off the cover, but his eyes were shielded. How did he know it was a woman?

Smell. He could smell the sweet perfume and the feminine essence of womanhood. No man could replicate that scent. He knew women too well to know the difference immediately.

'Control! Control!' he repeated to himself. Whatever she wanted to accomplish, he wasn't going to let her just use him to get it."

His ears perked again: Frantic movement then instant quietness.

What the hell was she doing?"

Fabric moving.

Damn the darkness!

She had moved to the end of the bed. He could feel her breath on his feet. Soft, but strong breathing. She was determined.

Her palms were warm – warmer than the room they were in - as they wrapped round the arch on his foot. His heartbeat increased.

"You're nervous," her whispered voice said.

Anthony had to strain to hear her and quiet his movements after shaking his head to her statement.

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“I’m trying to figure out what does it matter? Why are you fighting me? Any guy would love to be strapped down and ravished by me. So why you, you ask?”

He nodded really wanted to know.

His face came close to his toes. He could feel her breath caress his sensitive soles. He was aware that her lips were very close to the arch of his foot.

Her breathing stopped and her soft wet tongue tickled his arch and then nibbled on the side. She replicated this movement on his other instep.

The bed table shook a little. She had pulled up on the bed. He calculated her weight to be about one forty to fifty.

She was up there and he had a feeling she was looking down on him. *Was she naked as well?* He could feel her presence and all he could do was wait, praying he could fight this to the end.

Those silky hands caressed his legs again moving up in slow motion until they came to his thighs.

Movement again from her. She had leaned down. Her breath could be felt on his right inner thigh.

“Don’t fight me. Don’t give up easily. As you can see, I love to win,” she said before suckling on a sensitive spot.

He arched his back as an unbelievable wave of eroticism shot through his body.

‘Resist!’ his brain shouted, but he couldn’t. Not as she attacked the other side and her hands moved up to cup under his shaft to the cool orbs.

He was now standing at attention and she immediately kissed the tip tenderly in praise, whispering sweet thanks for its defiance to Anthony’s will.

Concentrating again, he thought of the worst thing he could imagine. Having sex with Claudia.

The groan that came from her made him smirk in triumph.

His body had quickly responded and become flaccid

YES! Victory is mine!

“You don’t want me angry,” she threatened. “You might as well give me what I want because in the end, I’ll win.”

‘Fuck you!’ his mind sneered. *‘I’m not giving you shit, you skank!’*

Sylvia Hubbard

Her body leaned over his and pressed down. She *was* naked. With her face over his, she leaned down to his ear and savagely whispered, “You want a skank, I’ll happily obliged you.”

It was like she had read his mind.

* * *

Moving down, Michelle orally attacked a nipple. Her quest to fully arouse him was going to be fulfilled. She knew once he was there, she could get him to peak and then she would rest a moment before torturing him some more.

* * *

The contact of her body against his caught Anthony very much off his guard and his member responded in full force. This was not his stepmother, nor his wife. This was a sexually driven vixen, hell bent on getting his body to defy his will.

With her proximity right above him, he could smell her very well and was bothered that her natural womanly aroma was so familiar, very much exciting and sweet.

She rubbed her breast down his chest to his groin and back again. “You want to know my intentions, don’t you?” she questioned.

Curiosity was killing him and he nodded.

A husky chuckled escaped her lips. “My intentions are to drive you crazy and when you don’t think you’ll get relief, I’ll keep it going for hours and hours until I want you to get relief. I want you to beg for mercy. I want you to feel like all hope in this world is gone and the only entity you’ll pray to will be me. I want you to suffer, just like you made me suffer.”

Anthony felt as if his own heart had stopped as he realized who his rapist was.

Chapter 8

There was a new fight in him and Michelle had a feeling he now realized why this was happening to him. He viciously mumbled some words through his cloth muzzle, but that could not stop him from relaying some flaming hot choice words on her ears which there was no mistaking exactly what they were.

Michelle reached down and caressed him.

His movements and protest stilled instantly.

She dipped down and engulfed him deep down her throat. The velvety feel of him between her lips caused a bit of excitement for herself that surprised her. The thick taste of him thrilled her more.

Niche's directions had been explicit and Michelle was always a good student and excellent listener.

"His body will tighten when he is close. At that time make your movements slow or pull back all together. Tighten the pressure on his sack and pull down slightly until you feel his body become disappointed. Once you learn his body's language, getting revenge will be easy."

Niche was so right and Michelle teased and taunted mercilessly, lavishing him orally, but just as he was about to come, she used all her stalling tricks immediately.

A heavy layer of sweat covered his skin and she relished in triumph as he could only whimper at the torture she made him endure.

* * *

Time! Maybe if he knew how long it wouldn't be so bad. The vixen was going to kill him and his body was enjoying every sweet last minute of torture!

When he thought it would be over, she elongated the agony. She found ways to bring him to the edge until he was past reason, and then she would shake him back to reality unfulfilled, unreleased and wanton.

Yes, he wanted it; He thought he would. Anthony had to be dreaming. This couldn't be happening to him. Why would she do this to him knowing he could guess who she was? Obviously her words to him

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were not a slip of her tongue. She seemed too cunning for that. She had deliberately let him know who she was and why he was going to suffer.

Without his control he was begging for mercy, hating every inch of her glorious mouth.

* * *

Michelle had lost track of time completely as she orally lavished his member that responded to her every lick, touch, and suck. After a while, he tried to lay there and ignore her, but Michelle had learned too much from Niche in a short period of time, mixed with her own knowledge, so it was hard to resist.

When he realized her intentions of forbidding him to come, he howled in frustration for a long while until he could do nothing else but moan in defeat.

She had been actually enjoying herself with the delicious stranger. The act of pleasing a man this way for a long period of time had never occurred to her and though tortuous for him, the more she controlled him the more aroused she felt.

Her jaw had started to become sore, but hell it felt like she had been at it for hours.

Her hand had taken up the slack, but even that had begun to tire. His body was putty in her hands and his fight was more for relief than anything else.

Feeling him coming close, she didn't slack off this time.

Long groans made his body shudder and as his essence burst from his body he tensed tightly letting out a howl of relief.

In fascination, she pulled up and watched his seed spill over her hands that continued to massage him.

He convulsed emitting a long moan of pleasure.

When his body went lax and his member became immediately flaccid, she ceased her massaging and crawled down from the bed table. Using the cloth she had taken off his face, she wiped her hands and immediately replaced her robe over her body. Since she wasn't against his body, the warmth in the air wasn't enough for her anymore.

Michelle watched as he gasped for air through his cloth muzzle. Tenderly touching the arch on his foot, she could feel his heart rate was way out of control.

Someone had been kind enough to set out a pitcher of water and a glass with a straw in it beside his bed table. There was still perspiration on the pitcher, so she was sure it was still cool.

Moving to the head of the bed, she felt a little remorse. She had not meant to go for so long because she hadn't realized she would enjoy pleasing him orally. Blushing at her own wanton behavior she was glad his eyes were covered.

Carefully taking the cloth from his mouth, she watched as he breathed in large multiple lungful of air. Michelle noted perfect teeth housed by thick soft lips.

She wondered what it would feel like to kiss him, but the fear those strong teeth would bite her own lips off stopped that notion.

"B-Bitch!..." he desperately gasped for air. "S-Skank bitch!"

"Careful now, you might actually hurt my feelings," she said teasingly.

"I'll get you! You release me now!" he ordered.

"You're in no position to order anyone to do anything. You don't have the power. I do."

He looked in her direction. He couldn't see her, she was sure of that, but she could just imagine those crazy, sea green eyes shooting daggers of hatred at her.

"I know who you are!" she sneered through gritted teeth.

Niche had said he would say this once he knew her identity.

Tenderly cupping his face, she said, "Good, cause now we're even."

Chapter 9

Just as Anthony was about to utter another word, the cloth was stuffed back in his mouth. As much as he tried to protest, Anthony knew she wasn't going to take it out.

Don't tell me you aren't enjoying yourself." Although her tone was sweet, he could feel the ice. "I'm going to make sure you never want to take another person's power away."

She kissed his cheek. "I'll be back."

Those three words sent dread through him. *Be back for what?* What could she possibly want from him?

Anthony thought he was going to die, but when she had started stimulating him, he had just thought he could ejaculate and she'd leave him alone.

Yet, when her oral stimulation would back off every time he become close, he knew this was some sick bitch, who knew exactly what she was doing.

"*We're even,*" she had said.

'*Even?!*' He had not tortured her. She had passed out and he had left her alone. She must have assumed he had gone through with it.

No! She couldn't have been that naïve about whether penetration had taken place or not. A woman *that* skilled with her mouth should have some inkling of the truth. Maybe she was just really pissed about him taking her purse. It was a Louis Vitton worth about three hundred, but this was a lot to do about a purse.

"*I'll be back.*"

What was she going to do?

Anthony tried to rest his mind, but that was difficult. His brain continued to do a mental rewind and replay of every single lustful oral touch she had bestowed upon him.

'*Shit! Shit! Shit!*' He should have used the opportunity to let her know he had a son. Certainly her womanly inclinations could have been sympathetic to his son's welfare.

'*You want a skank. I'll be happy to obliged you.*'

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

A skank? Was she? If she were, there wouldn't have been any sympathy for him. They were selfish creatures and when he was released he would...

What? Go to the police? Who the hell would believe he was raped? Men don't get raped.

Then what the fuck was he doing here strapped to a bed with no control over what was done to him?

* * *

Niche stood up from a chair in the corner. He had been sleep, but the wall panel opening had awakened him.

She walked passed him and went to the bathroom to wash her face and hands

There was a guest bag she would normally see at a hotel on the sink and Michelle looked back at Niche for answers.

"Lou brought that in. He said there's a room on the second floor if we want to rest," Niche answered.

"Who's Lou?"

"He's a cousin of Lethal's. He keeps the house for Lethal. Kind of like the housekeeper, but also head of security too at the same time. Neat freak, if you ask me, but hell all the Hearts have their weird idiosyncrasies starting with their names."

Michelle didn't feel like getting into that subject right then. She cleaned her face and brushed her teeth knowing Niche was dying to know details, but how could she explain it? She enjoyed every second of it? He would think her sick!

Putting her toothbrush down she faced Niche.

His story behind his life style was strange to her. Why Niche chose the company of men had never really been explained to her and Michelle had never made him explore that part of his life wither too deeply.

He was damn handsome, but since knowing him, he had made his outlook on women every clear to her. Niche just wasn't interested in the opposite sex. He didn't have the gay demeanor though. Yes, he dressed nice and he was meticulous about his body, but other than that, if she met him on the street even she would have flirted a little with him.

“How do you know so much about giving head, Niche?” she questioned.

He blushed. A rare thing for him. “A man knows what he likes. I am a connoisseur, you could say, Michelle. Early addicted by my uncle’s best friend who came into my room one night when I was twelve and went down on me. I didn’t know it was rape until later one, but he did it every time he came over and I was hooked. When he moved away, I found others to go down. I knew what I liked and that’s all I liked. I didn’t want to do it to anyone else, so I found out that one needed money and power to get what they wanted. I accomplished that and now I can pay for my pleasures.”

Wrinkling her nose at the thought that Niche was paying, she asked, “But love Niche. Have you ever found love?”

“If I can’t find it with money, Michelle, what’s the point? Plus, I don’t want love.”

As well as Niche knew Michelle, she knew her friend very well and she knew what he just said was full of shit. “So you’ve never engaged sexually with a woman?”

“Yes, Michelle, you remember Tyra.”

Rolling her eyes heavenwards, she had forgotten about her roommate in college. That was how she and Niche had met. Tyra and Niche had gone to their high school prom together and then attended the same college. Tyra was such a sweet girl until she set foot on college grounds. Then she became a straight whore. Niche had shrugged that relationship off easily.

“She gave good head. That’s why I went with her. Almost as good as a man, but I was trying to make myself look good. After a while, I really didn’t give a fuck what anyone thought once I got to college and did whatever the hell I wanted to do. I just kept my lovers a secret. I mean I didn’t want to mess up good head.”

Michelle laughed.

“I tried it with other women, but I have yet to find a woman who would give me something better than what a man has given me, unless now that I’ve taught you what I like...” He smiled wickedly.

“No thank you, Niche,” she said through her laughter. “I love you too much as a friend to go messing it up with sex.”

“You’d pay off that debt quicker,” he goaded.

She threw the wet washcloth at him. “Shut up.”

They laughed together neither one of them taking the proposition serious.

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That was a legitimate excuse and Michelle couldn't argue with him.

"Alright, Michelle, you've put it off as long as you could. What happened?"

She shrugged. "I did it."

"And?" he asked eagerly.

"And everything you said would happen, did happen," she concluded brushing her hair, trying to pretend she was busy.

Niche turned her toward him. "So how do you feel?"

Looking seriously in his eyes, she spoke the truth in a hurt, stressed whisper. "*I want some more.*"

* * *

A large presence entered the room. Anthony was being cleaned thoroughly and the tip of his penis was gently pressed down in a cool pain so he could relieve himself. He wondered who the person was doing this, because it was much appreciated.

Anthony wanted to also ask, was it over? She had said she would be back, but he couldn't believe – or didn't want to believe that she would want to do that again.

He wasn't sure about how much time passed after he had been left alone by the 'large presence.' Sleep had come and gone and now he was too alert.

A door opened and he prepared himself. Anthony could smell her essence before she had even started walking towards him.

Would he be able to fight her off this time? Would she make him suffer even longer?

Chapter 10

Even after she left the room, he continued to spasm. This time she had not bothered to remove the cloth from his mouth. His body was still on fire from her touch.

Anthony cursed her. Damn her to hell and back! He would never imagine that he could love and hate someone, but at this point in time his body loved every minute and his will hated her for making his body betray him every time.

This time had been different. He had slept peacefully, but he was positive it had not been a full night's rest when she had entered the room quietly. She was freshly bathed in some sweet smelling hazelnut soap and her hands played his body like a piano.

She had used some mechanical device to force his legs up and open and when her hands had finished caressing him all over, her mouth started on his body, leaving no part untouched except the back of him where he lay on, his mouth and eyes, which were covered.

Anthony couldn't fight her. After a while, he didn't want to fight her. She made his body need her, crave her, want her, and desire her – nonstop.

And even after she allowed him to come, she didn't stop and his body, which had not ejaculated twice since his early days of college, continued to stay aroused at her manipulation.

His moans were pleas, but they seem to fall on deaf ears. He was a file of sensitive nerves and sweat as she brought him near the edge and back again with her thick delicious tongue, soft hands and long strong fingers. He knew her tongue's length, smoothness, and even width of her mouth because as many times and as long as she had orally manipulated him, Anthony had become quite familiar with her mouth.

Now she left him with just a pat to his stomach and a wistful sigh. His body was still craving, even though she had finally given him a second release.

It seemed as if it had took forever for him to stop the spasms and was able to stay still enough to pay attention to anything other than his body's wanton desire.

Anthony vowed to find her when this was all over and get her back! Oh, she'll definitely know she was raped when he was done with her.

Payback would be a bitch!

* * *

Michelle nudged Niche after she had showered and dressed. He sat up instantly and looked around. As he took in his surroundings, he yawned and stretched.

“I’m ready to go,” she said.

He checked the time. “Fuck! You left three hours ago. What have you been doing?”

She only blushed and put her coat on. “Do you need to let Mr. Heart know we’re done? I’m really tired, Niche.” Carefully hiding her own frustration, she picked up her purse and turned to the door.

Niche hurriedly grabbed his coat and followed her out leaving the security card on the table just as they were instructed.

“Let’s not go to my house for the rest of the night, Niche,” she said quietly as they pulled out the driveway.

Her best friend headed in the direction of his place. No questions asked. Michelle needed that.

Leaning back in the chair, she closed her eyes and tried to ignore the gnawing need between her legs.

* * *

The large form cleaned him better than before. The mechanical device pulled Anthony’s legs down after he was washed off and then the bedding under him was changed. Whoever this person was, knew exactly what he was doing when it came to taking care of someone tied down.

Something was set on his chest that felt like clothes. Soon after, Anthony heard males’ voices whispering a few feet in front of him, then movement and a door closing.

Leather. Anthony could smell it very well all of a sudden, but he didn’t hear a thing.

Suddenly his arms and legs were released. Cautiously, Anthony moved his arms, gasping only a little as the circulation returned. Stretching

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his fingers, ignoring the tingling, he made quick work out of taking off his muzzle and getting the cloth out of his mouth.

Blinking hard, he looked frantically around the room and at first he didn't see anything, but a second pass made him pinpoint a large, dark figure in the corner. He wondered if this was the same person who had been attending him, but he had a feeling it wasn't. The leather smell had never been prevalent like it was now.

"Drink!" the dark form ordered nodding over to the table by the bed.

There was some water already poured and Anthony took up the offer quickly. Whoever attended him had given him some type of shake to keep him full and also some water, but it wasn't nothing like getting it yourself.

"You'll are in a lot of trouble," Anthony growled.

"And you aren't? Did you forget you were taped holding a gun to a victim's head and forcing her inside of her store and then stealing her purse?" the voice asked calmly, but there was an underlying disgust.

Fuck! That was very incriminating and he could be put in jail, while his son put into a foster home. "Who the hell are you and where am I?"

"You're not the one who holds the control, Mr. Brooks. I am and I say you will forget what happened to you tonight and choke it up as some shitty kind of payback for what you did to her."

Angrily, Anthony defended himself, "I didn't touch!"

"I'm not here to argue your word against hers. I go wherever the money is and what she wanted from me, she got. My end of anything is complete, except for one more thing." The large form stepped into the light and Anthony beheld a man about his height and stature, but there was something deadly about him.

His pitch black eyes narrowed dangerously as he stood in front of Anthony with his arms folded over his chest. "Whether you know her identity or not, as long as I live, you will never hurt a hair on her head. If I find out that you have..." This was left open, but Anthony had no doubt that the man could probably kill him, hide the body and no one would be able to prove anything.

"Whatever you know about her, whatever you have of hers, I would suggest you destroy and forget this whole incident ever happened. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Brooks?"

Anthony reluctantly nodded.

As quietly as the dark man entered, he left out, but the door wasn't closed. Another large man entered the room. This one had to be about seven

feet tall and big as a Mack truck, with a horrible scar going up the right side of his face.

When this one spoke, his voice sounded like he was speaking through a towel – low and muffled, but very harsh. “Put the clothes on.”

Anthony did as he was told. He had to take a moment because his legs were unsteady from lying down for so long, but he quickly put the brand new clothes on. The large man dropped a bag by Anthony’s feet and tossed the now cleaned up brown coat he had been wearing when he was kidnapped along with a new pair of Timberland boots. Anthony didn’t question the gift and wondered was this supposed to be some kind of payoff?

When he had put on his coat and had the bag in hand, the large man stepped to him and held up a blindfold in front of Anthony’s face.

“Turn around,” the muffled, thick voice ordered.

Anthony did as he was told. His eyes were covered and he was roughly led out the room, down an elevator, out into the cold and shoved into the back of a car.

The door was slammed, but a few minutes later the front driver’s door opened and the car leaned down as a great weight were seated behind the wheel.

“Where to?” the thick voice said.

Anthony breathed a sigh of relief and told him a location where he could quickly be released and get to Austin, praying that his son was still safe.

* * *

She slept most of the day after checking in on the store. Her manager had everything under control. Amanda gave her a run down of what she needed to do for the New Year fashion show, but other than that, Michelle was just blessed to have great employees that didn’t mind their boss taking a few days away from the hectic holiday shopping days and getting some rest. Matter of fact, they were very happy that she had opted to stay at home and just rest.

Niche left her in the morning, but had a great lunch delivered to his place.

All morning, as much as she tried not to, she thought about the stranger. She wondered would it be inappropriate to call Mr. Heart and ask him to give her information about the stranger, but then she knew that Mr. Heart would demand to know why she wanted this. Even if she used Niche

to get the information, her best friend would want to know why she was asking for it.

So she had to remain quiet about the fact that she had wanted to do more with the stranger and that raping him had eased a curiosity about him, it had not quieted the curiosity she had about...

'No, you don't need to know about that, slut!' Michelle cursed herself.

When Niche returned home late that night, she was ready to go home and he didn't mind driving her home.

He walked her in her apartment, checking it out and then waiting for her to change into a flowing nightgown to prepare for bed.

Niche tried to make generalized conversation, but in the end he pulled her in a comforting embrace. "Are you okay, with everything?"

Nodding, Michelle relaxed. "Yes, Niche. I'm fine. It's really over and I can put the matter to rest."

"I love you, B. You know that," he said passionately.

"Thank you for being my best friend."

"No problem." He brushed his lips softly against hers.

The intimacy touched her and was very much needed. "I love you."

"I know." With one last hug, Niche departed.

Leaning against the door, she closed her eyes and wished. Wished she could really have it all. A successful career, a loving husband, and a baby with...the bluest-green eyes. Abruptly she stopped her thoughts. Yes, she was losing her mind again, but had she really thought carrying out revenge against the stranger would make everything all right? Make the thoughts and fantasies she had been having about the creamy brown stranger with the beautiful eyes go away? Yet, even now she could remember the strong dingy hands with nails caked with dirt and the lecherous grin looking down at her. Then she began to remember everything she had done with the stranger, brazenly loving the power she had over him with her hands and mouth. With a different stage in life, he would have been a very handsome catch.

Going to the kitchen to put the dishes in the dishwasher, she happened to pass the dining room and stopped dead in her tracks.

Her heart began beating like frantic African drums to a rapid beat. She was positive the muscle would jump right out of her chest from the intensity.

Sitting on the table on top of a napkin was a wheat raisin bagel with strawberry cream cheese and her purse that the stranger had taken that early morning which had changed her life. Stepping closer to the table, she initially thought she was seeing an illusion, but as reached her slim fingers out to touch the object and feeling the warm cheese on the tip of her finger, she knew this wasn't a dream. Gripping her chest in panic and feeling her nose pulsate from the severity of the breaths she was taking, a noise behind her startled her.

Michelle turned around only to have her wrists grabbed, coming face to face with those eyes she had been dreaming about the last few days.

"Your lover come to comfort you?" he sneered.

She shook her head frightened. "He's my friend." The fear started to envelop her again, piercing her soul like a knife slowly trying to kill her.

"Liar," he jerked her around, pressing her back against his chest. "I brought you a present. Your favorite."

"T-Thank you," she forced out, becoming more terrified to speak with him being so close to her again. It was very different when she didn't have the control. She was terrified all over again, just like the first time they had met.

Pressing his lips up to her ears, he murmured, "It's not as fancy as what your rich lover could give you."

She closed her eyes not liking how the fear, yet tingles were flowing over her skin. Michelle was slowing coming to the realization there wasn't disgust for him now and the fear was feeling almost like...wanton passion. "What do you want?"

"Trying to make it easy for me again?" he snarled. "You weren't making it easy for me just yesterday, were you?"

She was damn if she was going to allow him to rape her again. "I can't give you anything except more money. It's not my fault you left the bag."

He turned her around. His eyes moved from her face down her neck to her shoulders. Tonight, she wore a flowing ankle length nightgown white as the snow falling on the ground. Sitting up in that cheap hotel room only made him restless, but it kept Austin warm and that was important as the December winds and snow had come early to Motown. Anthony had unfinished business with this skank obviously because he couldn't keep her off his mind and that lovely birthmark of hers. "Did he make love to you? Did he soil you with his own juices trying to cover up the painful memories? Batch satisfied his needs, didn't you?" Before she could answer, he sneered, "It's all good. I don't mind sharing, skanks."

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The name had started to rankle her nerves and he saw he was pushing more buttons than fear. He didn't know if he liked that or not.

"What do you want?" she asked, showing the irritation in her voice.

He still had her wrist and lifted them up until he could smell the strawberry cream cheese on the tips of her beautifully manicured clean fingers.

She closed her eyes as his mouth encircled the tips of her fingers. His wet smooth strong tongue languished in the crevices of her cuticles making sure they were cleaned, then as he withdrew each finger, one at a time, tightening his lips to make sure he suckled every drop of cream off. Opening her eyes slowly to look up at him, those eyes of now deep blue-green caressed her face and rested on her lips. These emotions were so new to her.

Michelle's breath caught in her throat. Fear and passion raced through her veins. She didn't know what she should do. Yes, she should scream. There might be still time for Niche to hear it and come back up for her. Yes, she should fight and escape, but...she didn't want to.

"Did he taste your lips?" he asked, pulling her close to him.

She tried to find something to disgust her about him, but he didn't smell as he had before. Matter of fact, she could only smell Zest and after-shave. "He's only a friend."

He molded her body into his. "Skanks fuck friends, you know."

"I-I'm not a skank. I don't even know what a skank is."

He chuckled sinisterly. "You don't? All you got to do is take a good look in the mirror."

"I'm not a skank, despite what I said yesterday," she protested again. "I'm not who you think I am." She pressed her arms against his chest trying to push away, but he held her tight. "Let me go."

"Why should I? So you can run to your lover and let the world know what I did to you. All you skanks are alike. Always wanting to be the victim, but what you did to me just goes to justify what you are." He nuzzled his face behind her ear.

This caught her off guard. This was something Niche would do when he was in pain over a lover who betrayed him, she remembered, but this man was not Niche and taking comfort in the crook of her neck, differentiated from what she expected him to do. A groan escaped his throat, as his nuzzling became kisses. Long succulent wet kisses along her neck, throat, then ear. Her body willingly pressed into his, loving the feel of his

wonderful tongue as it circled the outer rim of her tiny ear, then delved deep inside sending flames down her spine.

How many times had she wanted this as her mouth and hands took pleasure in pleasing him yesterday? Millions and millions of times. He was giving her skin the physical and oral massage that she had desired yesterday.

She clutched his side tightly as his mouth explored the regions behind her ear, moving down her neck. Michelle felt beside herself as powerful waves hit her body in places she didn't know she could feel. Her body trembled, not in fear, but in wanton yearning for more of his touch.

Shoving her away suddenly, the disgust was evident in his eyes. "Told you," he said triumphantly. "Skanks fuck anything."

Ashamed, she moved her arms around herself. Never in her life had she been so brazen, yet in a moment of ecstasy this man with a delicious mouth brought out a whole new person inside of her. Angry at him for doing this to her, she ordered, "Get out! Our business is finished. You got yours, I got mine. There's no need for anymore revenge."

He leered at her. "The skank's got spunk?"

Yet again she denied his name for her. "I'm not a skank and I'm demanding you to get out. You're nothing but a big filthy bully. You're a horrible person who takes some sick pleasure in finding my weaknesses and using them to hurt me. I won't let you anymore. I won't!" She even had the gall to stomp her foot to show her protest.

He did that strange caress with his eyes over her body, possessing her with a look that made her blood warm in the veins throughout her entire body. "You think you can stop me?" he asked simply. "Your friends threats don't scare me, and you most definitely can't make me leave. I do whatever the fuck I want to do."

Slowly she began to step back encompassing the dining rooms items and combining them with her plan of escape, yet as she was formulating a way to get to her front door, he seemed to be reading her mind and every step she took, he took two.

She talked to distract him. "You need help."

He raised a caramel brown brow, which matched the naturally dry curls on his head. "Me? And how so? I didn't know psychologist worked part time as clothing store managers."

His humor only got him a very unladylike snort. "I'm not your problem. Whoever hurt you is your problem and you need to sit down with a professional and talk to them instead of bothering me."

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"All skanks are my problem. I've just decided to make your life a living hell."

"You can't appease your demons by sacrificing me."

"Demons?" he questioned, still sickly amused.

"Did I stutter?" she asked, her own sarcastic-ness coming to the surface despite her fear. She received a snort for her drollery.

He asked her, "Are demons another name for skanks?"

"That word is getting on my nerves," she gritted through clenched teeth.

"It is?" he tried to sound as if it mattered, but she knew he was only yanking her chain. He definitely didn't care. "Why should it when it's what you are? Yet, we all know skanks can't own up to their true nature. They live behind facades and deceive people into thinking that are not what they really are. I'd call you a bitch, but then that would give other bitches bad names, wouldn't it, skank? You all are in a category of your own. Predictable, prim and proper, untouchable, and deceitful conniving whores."

"Predictable?" she asked.

"Did I stutter?" he snapped, using her own words back at her.

This time she slanted her already diamond shaped eyes at him not amused by his wit. "You're only digging yourself deeper into a rut. I've seen your face. I can describe you to the police perfectly. They'll catch you and you'll be sorry."

"Ah yes, be the victim, but like your friend said, it's your word against mine."

"And you are going to say you're the victim?" she screamed hysterically. "You deserved everything I did to you!" The man's thought process was very wrong and demented causing frustration to her own nerves. "How can you be the victim in this situation? You are stalking me now! You broke into my own home!"

"I don't stalk skanks. I simply teach them a lesson."

"What kind of lesson?" She had moved around the table enough to have the dining room furniture was between them. All she had to do was turn, leap over her favorite large red velvet chair and run out the door screaming for fire. Someone had to come to her aid.

"You'll see," he promised her, taking off the long brown Macintosh and then letting the coat drop slowly to the floor. Her eyes couldn't help but admire the broad shoulders, which she thought the coat only made him look as large as he had. He was all natural and too delectable to look at.

Averting her eyes back to his handsome face, she had a feeling he knew what she was up to. He was strategizing as if they were playing a game of chess and finding it highly amusing. "You have no right! You've raped me once. You've taught me whatever lesson you thought I needed!" she implored. "Why can't we just leave it as even?"

"Raped you?" he questioned raising a brow in curiosity.

"There's that echo again," she droll sarcastically. "Yes, you raped me, or did your insanity take over your memory too!"

"I did not rape you," he protested.

"You did. I felt you."

"You imagined it, skank. I placed myself only at the tip of your opening. You fainted after you screamed as if I killed you."

In the middle of the table was a vase of fresh cut flowers. Using accurate speed, she picked it up, and hurled it at him, then she ran, not caring if the vase hit him or not. The vase distraction only allowed the few seconds she needed to hike her gown up to her thigh and prepare to leap over the chair.

Yet, instead of leaping she found herself being tackled from behind and rolled over on top of him on the other side of the chair. Fighting to scramble up was useless because he flipped her over like a rag doll and rolled on top of her trapping her under his thick body. He grabbed her wrist and again, maneuvered them over her head straining her shoulders with the pressure.

"We're back to where we started, skank," he said triumphantly, clearly amused by her useless writhing underneath him. "Checkmate!"

"I hate you!" she screamed, desperately trying to get out of his powerful hold, but she knew her fighting was only making her more debilitated.

"Good, I want you to. I want to make you suffer, just like I did."

"I didn't cause you anymore suffering than you caused me! You are hating me for something someone else did to you!"

"It doesn't matter whether it was you or another skank, you're all the same."

Michelle nerves were wearing thin. This man had other demons she couldn't even begin to comprehend and didn't want to. When she had acquiesced he hated her, when she fought he found humor and hurt her more, now she was at the point where she didn't care whether she irritated or angered him. "I hope who ever hurt you before does it again and again,

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because obviously you deserved it. Never in my life, have I ever wished harm on another person until I met you. You are the most difficult, obstinate, bully I've ever met. I am not the woman who victimized you and you need professional help in dealing with getting over her and leave me the hell alone."

Anthony's eyes gave her that caressing look, from her eyes to the fullness of her breast, then they slowly moved back up to her face. "So the skank can fight back verbally. Your tongue is just as sharp as all the other skanks I know."

She didn't want to fight anymore with him. Nothing she said or did to make him leave her alone seemed to work. "I don't care what you do to me. Niche always says whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Anthony hated another man's name gracing her lips so intimately. Since meeting her, he wondered what man was trying to make her forget the pain he had inflicted upon her and now that he had seen one of them, he hated her even more. No he hated himself for coming here with intentions of finishing what he started and getting back at her. He had seen the Garden of Eden between her thighs and was desperate to taste the nectar. "Would that be another boyfriend?"

Michelle answered as if it were obvious to him; "Niche is my friend. My only friend."

"Is that what skanks call lover's now? You use that term loosely so you can have multitudes of them? Using each one for different reasons. A sugar daddy, perhaps? No, he was too young for that. Ah ha, a love slave. What did he do to you, Belle?"

She gasped hearing her first name, which only a select few knew. "You give me back my purse while you're at it!"

His gripped tightened around her wrist leaning close to her face. "Answer my question," he demanded.

"He is just a platonic friend."

"Platonic?" Anthony frowned, noticing the more he spoke with her, the more 'innocent' she seemed, but it could be a façade. He already guessed she was well educated, which was seemed odd for just a manager at a clothing store. He just assumed thought that skanks were from all parts of society.

"Yes platonic, or should I go find a dictionary for you?" she snipped sarcastically.

He snorted at her sarcasm. "I know what platonic means, just as I know what Belle means, funny your father must have been blind at birth."

"My mother gave me that name," she defended bitterly.

"Was she blind?"

He was deliberately trying to agitate her. "Shut up!"

His laughter was coldly sinister. "Do you hate me more?"

"I despise you to the very core of your soul!" she seethed.

"There you go again sounding like a high class skank."

"You're sick. You need help."

"You've told me that, but I find making your life a living hell is much better therapy. Let's find other ways to rid me of my...what was that you called them...oh yes, demons."

"I refuse to play your games anymore. You mentally torment me to make me rile your anger. Why? So you won't see me as I am? I'm just a normal female, who hasn't harmed a hair on your head, even when I had the chance to. Yet you continuously irate me and disgust me with your vile words, your filthy touch and your horrible..." The slap high across her cheek left her stunned and breathless.

Silence filled the room as he stared hard into her eyes. Now he was seething. The madness of last time was welling up in those crystal blue green eyes of his. His hands moved down to her neck and before she could stop him, he began to squeeze the air from her throat.

Michelle turned a shade darker from the loss of air. She writhed and grind underneath him trying with what little strength to fight for life. He was going to kill her. He was killing her!!

Just as blackness was about to take over, she heaved with her last breath a fainted, "please."

He released her instantly and she breathed gulfs of air into her lungs until she started to cough hysterically. Anthony jumped up cursing her. "You make me do this to you. You stupid skank!"

She shook her head trying to catch his breath. "I-I...don't. I only...I only tell the t-truth."

Weeping in anguish, she sat up so frustrated with her attempts to escape this crazed man. The door was only five steps away, but she knew if she tried, he would try to kill her again. Her throat was screaming for water, but she was too terrified to move. "Please, let me be. I can't help you."

He dropped to his knees in front of her and she scrambled back until her back was against the side of bright red plush chair. "I don't want your help," he sneered moving inches from her face. "I don't need help from a skank."

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

Whispering so low, he barely heard her say, "Please."

"Please, what?" he prodded; needing more of the verbal play they had just shared in the dining room. Somehow, deep in his black soul, he had enjoyed mincing words with her. It brought back the time when he was a young man, full of life and love for all things. A love so unconditional inside of him, he was willing to share it with all. But Claudia and Clarissa had changed him from a man to a monster inside with a face of an angel.

"P-please, leave me alone. I-I'm...." She fought the sobs deep inside of her lowering her eyes to her lap unnerved by his proximity. "I'm sorry for all the..." It was difficult to just say that word he so often called her. "I'm sorry for all the s-skanks in the world that have hurt you. They hurt you so bad; it's been difficult for you to emotionally trust any woman. I'm sorry for the revenge I took out on you. I didn't understand how deeply hurt you had been until now." Bravely, she met his eyes with her deep brown chocolates filled with tears. "If you have any human decency left inside of what little heart you have, you'll see the wrong you have done to me and leave. I promise I won't call the police. I promise I won't tell anyone about you coming here. I promise," she beseeched him; clutching the front of his shirt and feeling the vibrant taunt muscles underneath.

Their faces were centimeters apart. She could feel the breath on his nostrils on her top lip and his intense eyes stared directly into her soul. Who moved closer to whom first, she didn't know, but those butterflies that had come to life in her stomach in the few seconds of their eye contact, were now moving all through her body as his lips molded against hers. His tongue wrapped around her own drawing the sweet nectar from her mouth and into his. Her fingers moved into his hair loving the feel of the curly strands caressing between her fingers. Every nerve in her body ached to be touched by him, and she deepened the kiss needing more of his mouth, more of his delectable tongue to enshroud her senses with pure ecstasy. He broke the kiss for a moment to draw her gown over her head and as he resumed his oral attack upon her mouth, she felt herself being laid back on the floor and his body covering hers. Gone were the fears of making love, in its place was a longing she prayed for whenever she had been with Craig. This man made her body come alive and want more of whatever he had to offer. She didn't care what he thought of her. She didn't care what she thought of herself as her hips grind against his groin feeling his hardness down his thigh.

He groaned loving her body against his own. Her passion for him surprised him - overwhelmed him. He never thought a woman could be so aroused and actually enjoy his virility.

She moaned when his mouth left hers to explore her cheek, throat, and chest. His large hands cupped her breast and before she knew it, he enveloped his hot mouth over a pert mahogany nipple and her body arched

from the contact. He could smell her arousal so evident and wanted to explore the region he had dreamed about.

"God you're beautiful, *mi Bella*," he whispered as his tongue attacked the other nipple.

She gasped, writhing, and delighted in his expertise. Her body was ablaze with passion and she didn't want him to stop - ever.

Craig had never been so attentive to her body as this man was doing right now. Usually he would slob over her chest, give her a short smack on her lips, and part her legs. Not this man. He was taking his time, enjoying the pleasure she was receiving from him. "Don't stop," she told him breathlessly.

"Never," he promised as his mouth descended placing feathery kisses on her belly as he moved downward to the passionate aching of her groin. Michelle didn't stop him, too curious as to why he was kissing on her belly. There was a tickling arousal deep in her stomach increasing when his tongue delved into her navel. He put a firm arm over her abdomen as if to hold her down and began to assault her warm crevice near her birthmark with his magical tongue. She didn't understand the arm initially until her hips tried to shoot off the floor and she began to cry out her pleasure so loud she was oblivious to the screams she made.

As he brought her to the pinnacle of pleasure, Michelle couldn't believe her body had experienced her first orgasm and when his body joined fully with her, she discovered more heights beyond anything she could ever imagine. She didn't even mind that he cursed her for feeling so good. Even that felt nice to hear.

His body collapsed upon her, but he didn't put his full weight upon her and this warmed her more than anything he had ever made her experience. He cared for her and didn't even know. She should have realized this when he brought her the bagel.

"Thank you," she mistakenly said out loud.

He moved up until he could look down into her face. "For what?"

She smiled wickedly more to herself. "For the bagel."

He almost grinned, but she didn't think it was ever in his nature but to look cruel. His eyes were intently serious as she brought her hand up to rub her knuckles against his shaven cheek.

Staring a little bit longer, Anthony could tell she was glowing for another reason other than a bagel. "Is that it?" he asked.

"Well if you want to know, I do thank you, for giving me my first orgasm," she said matter-of-factly.

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"First?" He raised an inquisitive brow.

She looked up and around. "I thought I heard that echo again. I must get maintenance in here to check the vents."

He nudged her with his hips and she gasped still feeling him very evident inside her. "What do you mean first?" he asked, "You weren't a virgin and that mouth of yours is damn experienced."

She flushed a little from his bluntness. "No, I wasn't. Well, in a sense I was. No man has ever had that much...foreplay...before with me, but if it's any of your business, I have had one long term sexual relation."

"And he never... fore played?" he asked, borrowing her word.

"Not once. Why did you do that?" she asked as an afterthought.

"Do what?" he questioned.

She looked exasperated and timorously. "You know what I mean."

He couldn't believe how much he enjoyed talking with her. She seemed so interesting and not boring like other women. "I wanted to taste you since I first saw you."

His words warmed her heart and aroused her body again. He felt her elation and those sea filled eyes danced with the knowledge she wouldn't mind feeling him again. Most women were appalled at his virility, but he knew she was more than extraordinary on the inside, but the outside as well.

Her curiosity furthered as she asked, "Did you receive pleasure when you tasted me?"

He didn't mind her probing questions and answered honestly hoping to see her blush again. "I received pleasure knowing that what I did gave you pleasure."

Again her body pulsed from his words. He would have to remember how stimulated she became by words. Her mind was her easiest arousal point.

"Did you do a lot of foreplay to him in your long term sexual relation?" he questioned.

She blushed viciously. "No. Niche is the one who helped planned the revenge and told me what to do to you. I never '*fore played*' with anyone other than you."

Michelle, seeing the intensity in his eyes, she flushed knowing he delighted in hearing this. His mouth captured her lips, enjoying the feel of her mouth against his and she enjoyed the taste of her on his lips. The flavor was erotic and arousing at the same time.

Sylvia Hubbard

He rolled her over deepening the kiss. He wanted to watch her pleasure herself. "Use me," he whispered in her ear.

"How?" she asked, wanting to feel him moving inside of her.

He pushed her body up letting his hands trail down her body fondling her breast. He guided her hips upwards then allowed her to slide back down on him.

Michelle was a fast learner and once she realized how to work her body to achieve her orgasm, she needed him no more and it wasn't long until she was moaning wantonly and gripping his chest with her long slender fingers. This time it was her turn to collapse against him and nearly pass out.

"Magnificent?" he murmured in her ear.

"You said it," she teased sleepily and as her eyes began to close, she wasn't sure, but she thought she heard him chuckle.

Chapter 11

The buzzer awakened her and she groggily stood up from the floor and pushed the release button to let whom ever was in the lobby. Realizing she was still naked, Michelle put her gown on which had been tossed across the room. Unlocking the door, she collapsed in her big red chair and waited for her guest to arrive too exhausted to care whom it was. Niche opened the door cautiously peeking in.

"Is everything fine?" he asked.

She only nodded too peaceful to really speak. *He* had left early in the morning and she had been too exhausted to really see him go.

Coming in, Niche looked at her disarrayed state of undress, her hair undone and flowing wildly on her shoulders and around her head. This was not the neat and proper Michelle he knew. "To be honest, you looked like you just got fucked over."

She giggled. "That's a new terminology." Stretching every muscle of her body, she moaned at the soreness in her back from the uncomfortable floor. "I was sexed over if you must know."

"By who pray tell, and if you tell me Craig suddenly found a way to actually get you to enjoy sex then -" He took a closer look at her. "Dear Lord, you're glowing like a night light."

She gasped. "I am not."

"Who is it?" he demanded to know eagerly.

She stood up, "I'm going to pee, and then we are going out to have the best breakfast in the world." Looking at her watch. "It's noon?" she asked.

"Yes, it's noon," he answered.

She had never slept so long in her life. "I can't believe it's noon." Shrugging, she decided to go ahead and relieve her bladder.

After washing up and donning on a matching outfit of beige khaki pants and T-shirt, she joined Niche in the kitchen, who had ordered lunch to be delivered to her apartment from a restaurant nearby.

"You are deliberately keeping me at bay, your ladyship," Niche pouted playfully. "But I'm so glad to see you're over your revenge and everything."

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"I am not keeping you at bay on purpose, there's just no way to explain it."

Niche insisted, "Start at the beginning."

"I did that last week. No need to repeat that dreadful story, but it's amazing how things change overnight," she said exasperated.

"Now you've confused me," he said bewildered.

"He came last night." The excitement was evident in her voice.

"What?!" Niche exclaimed jumping off the stool.

"Calm down, Niche, and listen objectively from the beginning," she insisted. "Obviously he snuck in either before or after we arrived last night because he assumed you were my lover."

"Oh that's new," he drawled sarcastically. "I don't suppose he was any nicer after what you did to him. Did you call the police, B? Why didn't you call me?"

"I didn't have a chance, but he was actually much nicer after we...minced words and I think I kissed him and then he kissed me all over and..." She blushed furiously. Niche had always been open with his love affairs, but Michelle had never experienced any affairs to seriously consider talking about. She never had anything of sexual interest to speak about until now.

Niche was confused and flustered when he stated, "But last time we spoke he was a sick individual. Michelle, you were angry. I helped you rape him, remember? Did you both forget that?"

"Don't read into this. I haven't and I won't. It was a one night and I'm twenty-eight years old and damn well entitled to one. He only mentioned the incident a little, and he had come hell bent on getting revenge against me again and on whomever has hurt him, but...things changed," she defended passionately.

"I am not trying to be holier than thou, but your choice in men has something to be desired."

"I don't think it'll happen again, and if it does, it does." She shrugged nonchalantly. "It's not about revenge anymore Niche, I swear. I can't explain what happened last night, but for the first time in my life I am enjoying sex and I'm not going to deny that, even if it is from a man I thought had raped me. I've always been honest with myself."

"What do you mean, you thought?"

Biting her lip, she said, "He said he never raped me in the beginning and to be honest, I don't remember if it really penetrated, but he said I passed out before it happened."

Niche looked a little guilty. "So what I helped you do was rape a man, that had not raped you?"

She nodded, but patted his hand comforting. "But that's okay, Niche. It's really all right. I apologized for what I did to him last night and he didn't seem too bothered by what did."

The food arrived, but they were too consumed with their talk to even eat and Niche just paid for it and left it on the kitchen counter.

"What about pregnancy?" he asked in an effort to deter her after the deliver guy left.

"I've been on the birth control since Craig. That trick is not going to work."

"What about his demons?" he reminded her.

"His state of mind doesn't bother me...much." She shrugged off this notion. "I'm not his psychologist."

He shook his head distrustfully. "I think you're making a bad decision in seeing this guy, but I'm just a friend. I'm putting my cards out on the table now if you must know. When will I meet this fabulous lover from last night?"

"Now!" a deep voice came from the doorway startling them both.

Standing in his brown Macintosh, with a paper bag in his hand was the man who made her glow.

"Dominiche Quartermaine," Niche introduced, standing up facing the tall dark fearsome looking stranger extending his hand.

"Anthony Brooks." He cautiously shook Niche's hand, not at all liking how the man looked him over as if he were a piece of meat. "If you don't mind, I wanted to speak to her alone." His eyes went to Michelle and never left.

She was blushing and very flustered because if she had to introduce him, she wouldn't be able to give Niche his name. This was the first time hearing it.

His eyes were intense again and she wondered why was he looking again as if he were about to choke her.

Niche felt very uncomfortable in the stranger's presence. "I should be going anyway. B, tomorrow at the store?"

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"Yes, and we'll go see the committee together," she confirmed. "I'll walk you to the elevators."

"No need," Niche said kissing her cheek, but whispered in her ear, "Be careful please and call me tomorrow."

When the door closed, Anthony stepped up so close to her she had to crane her neck to look up at him. "What was he doing here?" he demanded to know.

Standing akimbo, she snipped, "Niche is gay if you must know. He would rather fuck you than me any day." She knew bluntness only worked on him to rouse him out of his anger.

Anthony stared hard into her eyes, then looked away feeling like an ass. Every time his intentions changed each time he came here. Mumbling, he apologized, "I just get so jealous. It's me, not you."

She saw a man deeply troubled, but knew to care was to love and she couldn't allow her heart into this relationship. "Would you like something to eat?"

"No." He hardened again. "I have someone I want you to meet." Gently taking her hand, he guided her into the living room. After ordering her to sit, he went to her intercom/buzzer and told someone to come up. "I did a lot of thinking last night," he announced.

"You did a lot of other things too," she teased. No such luck because he did not smile taking her bait, instead he continued on in his course of thought.

"We need to discuss where this is going, but before we do that, we need to know at least the basis of each other."

"True, but I just think we should keep it at sex. Love and caring has no place in either one of our lives," she stated quite serious.

He looked quite baffled at this. A knock on the door interrupted his look. Opening it, a boy about thirteen walked in looking a bit frightened. "This is my son, Austin Dome. Austin, say hello to Ms. Coleman."

Taking off his hat to reveal a very unkempt Afro, he smiled timidly, yet with the best of manners and articulation, said, "Good afternoon, Ms. Coleman."

"Ms. Michelle if you please," she said, shaking his offered hand. "I may be your elder, but I'm not that old. Would you like something to eat? Niche ordered Italian for lunch and I'll just throw it out."

Austin looked up to Anthony to see if it was all right to accept.

"Yes, please," Anthony said, for him still watching Michelle to see what her reaction was to Austin. She seemed fine, but he couldn't tell. He could usually read people like a book, but this woman couldn't make it past the cover page. Either she kept her emotions under wraps very well, or she was really being honest with him.

"You stay here," she ordered Anthony giving him a pointed look of *'yes-we-do-have-to-speak-now.'*

'I knew it would come sooner or later,' he told himself as she led Austin to the kitchen. She was definitely pissed off and she would come in here screaming like a banshee.

When she returned a few minutes later, he was prepared to hear something like, *"why the hell didn't you tell me you had a son?"*

Instead she tugged him to follow her. Michelle led him to a back large bedroom, which would be why the entire apartment was so small. This room took up most of the living space and the bed was enormous! He couldn't believe such a little woman slept in a bed to hold five giants.

Closing the door after he came in the room, she turned to him, "Before we even begin to discuss anything, I want it a paramount in our dealings with each other, that leaving and greeting we kiss. Your mouth is just too delicious by far to waste it on just words."

This caught him completely off guard and he stood there stunned.

Standing akimbo impatiently, she said, "I'm waiting,"

Moving against her, drawing her body close, his lips overtook hers and her response was immediate and just as passionate.

"That's much better," she said, when he pulled away from an extremely long breathless kiss.

He couldn't believe how much his own state of mind was affected by this. No longer were he expecting the obvious, but ready to accept the inevitable.

"Now," she wiggled away from him and sat on the bed. Patting the space beside her, she began to speak as he sat down next to her. "You should have that boy in school."

"I know. He's only been out for a month and a half. His mother gave him to me because..." It was hard to explain. There was so much to say and opening up was so difficult after being reserved for so long.

"I'll go first," she soothed. "I'm a store owner. I borrowed the money from Niche to open my own store at the mall and it's been quite successful. My last relation was a flop and I've been single for about a year

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staying clear away from men since the first and only relationship in my life was the worse. In any case, I live alone, no children, my family has so much distance between each other, I truly think they don't know or really care if I'm alive or not. There's not much else I can tell you about me except I hate potato salad, I don't eat greasy food and I love bagels with strawberry cream cheese, as you've noted. I'm open and honest and I don't bullshit. I will let you know how I feel instantly, unless we're in some public place or around kids, which is why we're back here and not out there where Austin can hear us. Now about Austin." She took a deep breath before she continued and he prepared for the worse. "I love children, Anthony, and you're more than welcome to bring him here when we are together. I do despise he's not in school, but I don't think our relationship is that deep I should be giving you parental advice."

"That's it?" he asked, after a moment of her silence.

"Yes. What else could there be?" she wondered.

"My objection to my lifestyle, my having a son at a young age, and so forth."

"That's in the past, why should it matter now? You're trying to live and I can see you aren't a very good thief so I'm hoping you have some other talents that would improve your lifestyle. I assume you stole from me in a fit of last hope and that you were probably at the end of your rope. Am I correct to assume?" She wanted to make light of everything, feeling mad guilty about what she had done to him yesterday and hoping he didn't get angry with that anymore. On top of that, he had a son, meaning that for almost twenty-four hours, Austin had been on the street alone, without a guardian and she would have really been tore up if anything had happened to the boy in her own anger at something Anthony had not even done.

He nodded solemnly. "I was hungry that day and worried about what I was going to do with Austin." Anthony looked ashamed. "I don't want the state to get him, but the life I live now is not good at all for a twelve year old. I'm use to getting by with just me as a responsibility, not a son. Not another mouth to feed."

"Well for twelve years you had time to prepare for some sort of responsibility, didn't you?"

"I didn't know about Austin until five years ago on my father's deathbed. He told me Claudia, his wife told him of her pregnancy after the affair she and I had and he wanted another son real bad since he and I had really never been on good terms, so the brother I thought Austin was, turned out to be my son. He left his fortune to Austin, but named Claudia as the guardian and trustee. I received nothing, which I never expected any in the

first place considering the falling out my father and I had, concerning my step mother."

"You seduced her?"

"She seduced me. I was young and I thought I was in love, but she was just bent on hurting my dad for the many affairs he was having. I didn't know."

"How could you? You were fifteen," Michelle comforted him putting a slender hand on top of his large palm.

He continued, "I left the house shortly after not even bothering to see my father before he died. I had put my way through college and even law school with the money my mother left in a trust for me." Anthony left off his marriage, not wanting to complicate things.

"You have a law degree?!" she exclaimed.

He shrugged. "Family law is my specialty. I worked as a law clerk at a law firm downtown."

"Then?" she insisted on knowing.

It had been a while since Anthony had spoken to anyone about his past, and speaking with her seemed to sooth his restless soul. "My father died. I was devastated and I felt it was my fault. On top of that, Claudia oldest daughter Clarissa really messed my mind up." He buried his face in his hands and pondered all his life's mistakes. "I've tried to make it better for Austin. I worked temporary and the money I borrowed from you gave us a nice hotel room in Cass Corridor, but I know that's no life for a boy his age, yet it's been hard to get back into the swing of things - To get over my demons."

She didn't want to tell him it was time he did, because that would mean she cared and if she cared she loved. No, her heart would not be apart of this mess. "If there is anything I can do to assist you in anything, Anthony, please let me know." She placed her hand over his and pulled them away from his face.

"I don't want your help."

This hurt a bit, but she understood. He was too proud for all of that, yet pride be damned when it concerned another life as young as Austin's.

"I understand your decision to not deepen our relationship." He pulled her towards him until he maneuvered her to straddling his thighs. The position was intimate and arousing for her.

"How about we take a nice long shower?" he suggested, nuzzling in her neck.

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Closing her eyes delighting in the kisses on her neck and ears all over again, Michelle said, "What about Austin?"

"He can take his own shower," Anthony growled.

She giggled. "After the shower?"

"A nice romp in this big ass bed would seem appropriate, unless you want to go back to the floor again."

"Then what?"

"I was going to cook a magnificent stew for dinner. I use to be a good cook at one time."

"I like that, but while you're cooking I have to go to a couple of appointments this afternoon," she suggested. "I can leave you here and when I come back we'll have the best dinner together."

Anthony agreed by kissing her intensely leaving her panting for more. He was touched by her generosity and couldn't believe the woman who had "raped" him and him woman were one in the same.

* * *

Michelle wasn't nervous. Curious was more like it as she waited for her appointment with Mrs. Gates. Amelia was on the floor, while Elise wasn't scheduled to come in until four. Amelia was making a fine assistant manager and she could run the store almost by herself during the day, get all the paperwork done, and make sure the stock was kept up.

Just as they had planned, Amelia knocked on the door quietly to let Michelle know someone was there for her.

Michelle straightened her dress out and took a deep breath. Whatever she was in store for, she wanted to be mentally prepared for anything.

Upon first seeing Kimberly Gate, Michelle felt very much at eased. Kimberly gave her a bright smile and had a glow in her eyes that Michelle envied. It was as if she were pronouncing to the world that she was extremely loved, but didn't need to say it.

From being in the clothing business so long, Michelle assessed her as a firm size twelve, a great after mother figure, and a size eight in shoes. She dressed quite nice in a formal, dark green, three-piece with low matching pumps. Her dark natural hair was twisted up in fancy ponytail with complimented her dark caramel skin and sensual dark eyes.

Her handshake was strong as she greeted Michelle in a melodic pleasant voice. “Hello, Ms. Coleman.”

“Hi.”

“Thanks for taking the time out of your busy schedule to meet with me. Mind if we just walk around the store and I look around while we talk?”

“That’s fine,” Michelle said following her out on the floor.

“Let me get right to the matter – as my husband tells me – your mother had a half-sister, who had a daughter. Do you follow me?”

Michelle crinkled her nose quickly deciphering the information. Which makes her my first half cousin, somehow?”

Kimberly nodded picking up a nice dress off the rack. “Yes. Her name’s Pamela and right now, the state has awarded me only temporary custody of her, but if I don’t find a relative that could release full custody to me, she’ll become a ward of the state and they’ll put her in a mental home for the rest of her life.”

“Where’s her mother?”

A hurt look crossed Kimberly’s face. “She’s dead. She was killed, but before all that, Elizabeth – your aunt – was good friends with me and Pamela is a wonderful young lady.”

“How old is Pamela?” Michelle inquired.

“She’s nineteen. Would you like to meet her?” Kimberly asked eagerly.

Michelle wasn’t sure if she really wanted to meet her, but Kimberly seemed so eager about it and for some reason Michelle found herself actually liking Kimberly a lot. “Yes, I wouldn’t mind, but why are you speaking to me? Shouldn’t you speak to someone else, like Pamela’s father?”

“He’s dead. I found that out six months ago as I researched Elizabeth’s family. He joined the army shortly after Elizabeth gave birth to Pamela and they never kept in contact, but he died in the war over in Iraq a year ago. He had no family either except a father in an elderly home with prostate cancer. Elizabeth’s family – well you should know – your mother was just the only relative and there are no others. Trust me, I’ve hired the best private investigator on the planet. Nothing turned up, except you.”

“So in truth, I’m Pamela’s guardian? But she’s nineteen, why should she need a guardian?”

Kimberly sighed wistfully. “Pamela has special needs. She was denied oxygen for fifteen minutes when she was born, which lead to certain birth defects. One is the slow speed of learning. She’s at a fifth grade

education. The state determined that she needed to have more training before being left to her own vices. I don't mind doing what I can to help make her independent. I love her to death."

"And you take care of her? I mean is she happy where she is?"

"Yes!" Kimberly said exuberantly.

Michelle felt relieved. Out of everything that Kimberly could have presented her with, this was quite all right. "How long do I have to decide on this?"

"A couple of weeks, if you must know. The day after the New Year is the day they've given me before the state steps in. I could arrange for you to come over for dinner and meet Pamela."

Nervously, Michelle asked, "Will your husband be there?"

Kimberly laughed, "Unfortunately. Pamela has become near and dear to both of us, and he's quite protective about who Pamela comes around. She's a very sensitive girl and Elizabeth kept her quite sheltered."

"Well, then let's make arrangements for a nice dinner one night to meet Pamela," Michelle said. "If I'm pleased by her environment and speaking with her personally about how she feels, I shouldn't have any problems with holding off your custody of her."

They spoke more about everything as Kimberly shopped. Kimberly was quite wonderful to speak with and Michelle had a pleasant meeting with her until Niche showed up to pick up Michelle for her second meeting.

He was introduced to Kimberly and informed about the situation. Kimberly even invited him to the dinner she was planning.

"That would be wonderful," Niche said pleasantly.

Kimberly checked her watch. "Oh Lawd, I've rattled my head off. My husband and I were meeting a real estate agent for some property in an hour. I'll give you a call to let you know about the dinner party and we'll work around your busy schedule."

Handing the handful of clothes in her arms to Michelle, Kimberly said, "I've given the girl my credit information for your private accounts. Can you have this shipped to my home address?"

Michelle was one of the few boutiques that had this kind of service. "No problem." It was about eight hundred dollars worth of clothes. "Thank you so much, Mrs. Gates...I mean Kimberly."

Kimberly waved good-bye and hurried out the store.

"Nice woman," Niche said as Michelle called Amelia over.

“Yes, she was,” Michelle agreed handing the clothes to Amelia and noticing how the employee kept sneaking looks at Niche. “Mrs. Gates said to put this on her account. Did you process her forms already?”

“Yes, Ms. Coleman. I did. Everything’s approved. Would you like me to express it?”

“Of course,” Michelle said. “Thanks so much.” She looked over at Niche, who was picking up a beautiful negligee and perusing it. “That’s not your size, Niche,” she teased.

Amelia went to the counter to ring everything up.

He flushed. “Shut up. I love the color. Do you think Mr. Man would like to see you in it?”

Rolling her eyes heavenwards, she said, “I’m not discussing him with you, right now, Niche. Not until I can get a better grasp on the way things went and curse myself for my anger. I feel guilty you know, but he’s acting like it’s okay.”

“Well in a way, you needed to get back at him, because he did scare the fuck out of you. Maybe he really liked your revenge. Hell, I would. Can’t be mad for long when you’ve gotten good head, no matter how torturously it was given.”

Michelle blushed. “Let’s go, silly.”

He put the negligee back on the rack and followed her out. Just as he was stepping out the store, he could feel eyes boring into his back. Looking back at Amelia, he noticed how she rushed to turn around and give him her back.

Frowning, he shrugged it off only wondering a little why Amelia had been staring at him so hard.

Chapter 12

When Anthony awoke the next morning by himself, he realized he was alone and she was gone. Going out to the living room, his son was intently trying to figure out the computer program Michelle had brought for Austin last night, along with a nice outfit for Anthony and him. She appreciated the delectable dinner he made for everyone and their lovemaking was so overpowering, he couldn't believe the emotions he had experienced with the physical pleasure of joining with her. Michelle was an encourager without saying a word. She made a man want to change.

"Are we about to leave?" Austin asked disappointedly. "I really like being here, Tony."

"I know, and not yet." He started to look around the apartment until he found the envelope on the front counter near the door. Inside was the pager he had dropped at her office. He was surprised it had gotten to her, but he was glad and a message was received. Calling back the number, Sharrisse picked up instantly.

"Where the hell have you been?" she yelled upset.

"Calm down, okay. I've been busy and I lost the pager. Have you heard anything?" he asked.

"Yes, the judge will be making a decision on the appeal in two days. Where are you? The number on my caller ID says Michelle Coleman. Who is that? Another whore?" Sharrisse interrogated.

He heard the jealousy in her voice. "Jealous?"

"Of course. You'll sleep with everyone except me, Jake."

"Yeah, well I got better things to do than mess up our marriage. What has *she* been up to?" he reluctantly asked.

"*She's* planning to spend the holidays on the Rivera with this new beau she's been seeing for about a year. Mr. Meadows is the one who really ousted Austin from the house, you know. Anyone can tell she still has her sights set on you, Jake."

"Get back to the point, Sharrisse," he ordered, exasperated with her jabbering.

"Soon as the judge gets wind of her not in possession of him then I'm sure the money will be yours, Jake," she encouraged him.

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"I don't want the money for me, I want it for Austin. It's his and I'm not doing this for anyone but him. Has Austin's school inquired about him?" he questioned.

"Yes. Master Edward called and asked if he would be returning before or after the holidays. I told him to send his lessons over and Austin would complete them. I forwarded them to the post office box for you. Make sure he does that," she ordered.

"I will," he promised. "What about the money?"

She hesitated just a little before speaking. "I spoke with your mother's attorney. Karen said there is still a hundred thousand left, but she figured you wouldn't be asking for it seeing that your practice is going fine."

"Well, let Karen know the practice isn't going fine and you're in my proxy to remove the funds and put them towards Austin's education," he ordered.

"All of it?" she asked nervously.

He assumed her nervousness was because he was using the money to pay for something she had nothing to do with. "Pay Master Edward however much it's going to cost to get Austin back in his school, then put some aside for Austin's spending expense. After that, delegate a college trust for the rest," he ordered firmly, which brook no refusal.

Disappointment filled her voice as she said, "I thought you would say that. So when are you coming back?"

"When I'm over my grief and not a second sooner. Page me if you need me."

"And what about Michelle Coleman? Another broken-hearted whore?" she snorted.

"Don't worry about her and don't call me here," he growled.

"No sense of humor still, huh, Jake? Fine, I thought you would have changed back to the old Jake by now, but you obviously have forgotten your duty as a husband," she said in a pout.

"You and I both know this marriage is a sham and the only reason I did it was to get my father's money because he wanted me to be miserable with you. You can bet your ass when and if I feel like it, I'll get a divorce so don't push my buttons, Sharrisse."

She was quiet not at all wanting him to go ahead with a separation. He knew Sharrisse loved him, but he made it quite obvious he had no intentions of returning her feelings and he made no bones about his true feelings for Sharrisse. The only reason he kept in touch with Sharrisse

because she was the only link to his former life he had turned his back on and he blatantly used her affections for him in order to find out information about Claudia and Clarissa.

"Western Union me some money to the usual address." He hung up and looked over at Austin, who had heard everything, but didn't say a word and turned back to the screen.

Quietly Austin said, not looking at his father, "I still like Michelle. She's good for you."

Anthony went over to Austin. He knew Austin was speaking of Michelle. He and his son had bonded closely in this past few months and most times nothing needed explaining in order for them to understand each other. "I like her too." It was his first admission of his feeling for anyone or anything in a long time. "I don't intend to use her like the others. Soon as Sharrisse gives us the money though, we're leaving. We can't stay here. I don't want to hurt her like the others."

Austin completely stopped his game and looked up at his father. "But you said you liked her. You'll hurt her by just leaving."

"I'm not prepared to make a commitment," he said honestly.

"She doesn't want a commitment. She just wants you as a lover. I heard the two of you yesterday. Come on, Tony. She's cool. She makes your eyes dance. I saw it at dinner. I saw the way you looked at her all-serious and stuff. She ain't like the others. I know it and so do you." He stood up ready to do battle with his father. "You're a fool if you do this."

Anthony ran a frustrated hand through his hair. He didn't know if he could explain the ins and outs of relationships to a twelve-year-old. "I won't just leave, but this isn't going to go any further."

"I don't want you to hurt her."

"I won't," he promised.

Austin sat back down because Anthony never broke a promise. "I don't want to go back to the school either. I like spending time with you. I like knowing you're my dad and that you're working hard to do the best for me. I can't see you there."

He sighed tiredly. They had discussed this subject before. "I can't keep you here on the streets, Austin. It's not good."

"Then use that money on a place. A house here in the city and public school. Even a charter school. I don't want to be away from you."

Anthony wasn't ready to be a father so instantly. "This is harder than what you think, Austin. You don't see the hardships of being a single father."

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"If I finish up this year there, then can I come home? By June you should be able to get your life together, right?"

Frustrated, he sat down on the gaudy red chair and thought for a moment before speaking. "I'll try, but if not, then you know what will happen."

"I know, I stay in school." Austin came over to his father. "I'm not trying to pressure you, Tony, but these are important years for me and my outlook on life. You always said I was wise beyond my years and I'm just saying, we have to stick together."

Anthony agreed. Austin was his sanity for now. "I'll do my best," he promised looking at his watch then at the front door.

Austin knew what he was looking for. "She left real early this morning. She told me to give you this." He passed Anthony a letter. "I thought we should talk before I gave it to you. She distracts you." Austin went back to the computer giving Anthony time to himself.

Dear Anthony,

I've gone to some appointments concerning the store. I would be honored if you would join me for a private candlelight dinner tonight on the balcony in my room. Chef Peterson will be by to bring the arrangements.

Austin is already taken care of so don't worry about him. He and I had a wonderful talk this morning.

Yours only, Belle'

The letter was touching and satisfied his possessive nature with "*yours truly*." She knew the right thing to say all the time. Sometimes he thought his Belle was too good to be true. She accepted him for who he was and that was it. She didn't expect anything, but deserved everything.

How had he stumbled across such a magnificent woman when it seemed his luck had all run out? How was he going to tell her he was married and if he divorced Sharrisse, he would lose all the money his father left him, which was part of a condition when he married Sharrisse? How was he going to explain to her he could not risk losing the money or he would also lose his practice as well?

Hell, even though he had turned his back on his old world, he didn't want to outright give it up. And although he was out struggling on the streets when he could at least live decently, he just didn't want to accept things the way they should be right now. Even though he loved Austin, Anthony couldn't bring himself out of the depression he found himself in.

Demons. Michelle had called them that and he was coming to realize that was exactly right. He needed to heal. He needed to get over all of the hate and hurt that had affected him.

Sighing deeply, he tried to think of other thoughts, but knew he would not be able to give his Belle what she rightfully deserved and that made it hard for him to think of anything else.

Chapter 13

Michelle stretched as soon as she sat down in her car behind the driver's wheel. "It was a good day," she said to Niche, who looked equally pleased.

Niche smiled quite proud of Michelle. "Prosperous. Quite prosperous. I especially savored the best deal yet, by Ms. Johnson concerning the Glamour Fashion Expo. Your line will be the featured item because of your fast talking."

"Can I help it if I have the gift of gab," she teased.

"You are extraordinary. Too bad Mr. Brooks doesn't see that."

She cut her eyes seriously at him. "Don't start."

When they arrived at the store, Elise let her know a gentleman was waiting in her office.

Niche shrugged in an "I-don't-know."

Opening the office door, she was surprised to see Craig Meadows sitting in a chair looking rather handsome in a custom made suit.

Craig was lean built, light skinned, with soft black eyes. He was naturally good looking with a sort of youthful aura that attracted many women, but the more Michelle thought about it, the more she wondered had she been attracted to him, because his looks were similar to Niche's.

Soon as he noticed her he stood up and tried to kiss her on the lips, but she turned her face quickly to receive his kiss on her cheek.

"How have you been?" she asked, with her best faux smile of '*so-very-not-happy-to-see-you*.' Although in the past, she had convinced herself she had feelings for Craig, once she realized she didn't the dissatisfaction she had with the relationship had turned into annoyance whenever she had to see Craig no matter what it was for. She knew he still wanted to keep in contact with her because he wanted to get back in her pants, but she had no intentions of ever letting that happen again - Even if she wasn't with Anthony now.

"Busy as usual and I see so have you been. I didn't think I would have such a hard time trying to catch up with you, but I can see you've been very busy with the store and a lovely store it is." He held on to her hands just a little bit too long and Michelle began to feel uncomfortable.

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"Thank you." She used Niche as a distraction and politely moved away from Craig putting Niche between them. "You remember Niche, don't you Craig?"

Craig's smile tightened a bit. "You and he are just the people I was looking for. Are you two free for a couple of hours? I would love to take you two to lunch."

"I never pass up a meal," Niche said. "How about you, B?"

Remembering she had really wanted to speak to Anthony, she said, "Neither do I, Niche, but why don't you two go on down to Craig's car and meet me out front. I want to make a phone call."

"Will do." Niche waited for Craig to leave out before he said, "Don't be long, B."

She winked as she picked up the receiver and dialed her home number. After the second ring she was greeted with Austin's polite voice of greeting.

"I just want to say hi," she said cheerily.

Austin recognized her voice. "Hey, Ms. Michelle. How's it going?"

"Fine. Did the chef get there yet?" she asked, deciding to give him some attention.

"Yeah, he's got the kitchen off limits, but it sure smells good."

"He's is a good friend of mine. If you get hungry just let him know."

"That cook of yours already took care of us for lunch. He's the best. I can't wait for dinner," he said excitedly.

She decided enough chitchat with Austin. "Is your father there?"

"Yeah, he's trying to get the phone from me, cause he's eager to speak to you."

She blushed, as the next voice she heard was Anthony's wonderful deep voice. "When are you coming home?" he demanded to know.

Michelle giggled. "I miss you too."

He flushed. "When are you coming home?"

"Soon. Tell me," she demanded.

"Tell you what?" he pretended innocence.

Exasperated, she insisted, "You know what I want to hear."

He almost chuckled at her silliness. "I missed you."

"That wasn't so hard now was it?" She didn't expect an answer. "I should be home no later than six."

"I'll be waiting."

"I hope so." She hung up and smiled to herself. Could anything be more perfect than what she felt right now? There were consequences for feeling this way and she understood them. She was going into this relationship with Anthony with her eyes open, so if there was hurt it wouldn't be so bad, she hoped.

Craig's limousine awaited her. Niche was discussing his favorite subject, money.

"Good," Craig said, once the limousine began to take off towards La'Shish on the outskirts of Detroit in Dearborn. "Now that we're all together, we can get down to business."

"Please, let's do," she insisted, wanting to be out of his company as soon as possible.

"I need to place a large investment with someone other than myself and I need someone who I trust to take this investment and guard it," he explained.

"What sort of investment?" Niche questioned suspiciously.

"It's a trust. In a couple of days a trust will be audited and determined, but before this time, I need to take the money from this trust, invest it wisely and when everything is all done, return the money to another trust in a new name."

"You want us to help you hide money?" Michelle figured.

"By George, I think she's got it!" Niche exclaimed, doing his Henry Wiggins impression.

Michelle giggled at his silliness. "I was born at night not last night, Niche. Who are you trying to hide this money from, Craig?"

Through gritted teeth, giving Niche an annoyed look because neither one of them was taking him seriously. "Some people who don't deserve to get one cent of it."

"And you do?" Niche asked.

The limousine stopped in front of the restaurant and they didn't speak more of the subject until after the waitress had taken their order. Michelle was never fond of Arab food, but Craig loved garlic, which the Arab food restaurant adored to put over everything. She had seen Craig eat an entire pint of humus with crackers in one sitting.

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"The money was not meant for me," Craig said pointedly picking up the conversation exactly where Niche had left off. "I don't mean to sound possessive about it."

"You never were a possessive person," Niche cruelly remarked.

Michelle gave him a *"take-it-easy"* look. "Craig, we don't seem to be suspicious about your intentions, but we would like more details. I know we are still friends, but you can't just expect us to take a large amount of money, which we are assuming, hide it for you, and not ask questions."

"I can make it legal and what I'm doing doesn't involve any government agency like the IRS or anything like that. I would never jeopardize you like that. Nor does this money belong to any illegal transaction. It was given to me to do with it as I deem necessary and make use of it in a positive way."

Niche asked, "Just as soon as the heat of the gift is over with?"

"Correct," Craig said, not getting Niche's cynicism.

Niche gave Michelle a distrusting look. He didn't believe one word coming out of Craig's mouth, but he never believed anything Craig said.

Michelle, wanting to see past this edginess she felt for the entire situation of being here with Craig and not with whom she wanted to be with, decided she was not going to dissuade Craig that choosing them was not a bad idea. "Niche and I will need time to think this over with. Why don't you hit me on the cell tomorrow."

"What about late tonight? We could have a nice dinner together - alone at your place."

"Well, what fun will that be when Michelle's planning to fuck her brains out with her new beau," Niche blurted out and Michelle knew this was on purpose.

"What?!" Craig exclaimed in disbelief.

"Niche!" she cried, at the same time Craig spoke.

"New beau?" Craig's black eyes looked deeply in hers as if she were cheating on him.

"He's new yes." She gave Niche an *"I-going-to-kill-you-later"* look harshly, not amused by his big mouth.

Niche looked innocent and even had the audacity to cover his mouth as if he really did make a mistake. "Did I let the cat out the bag?"

She wanted to seriously pop him one time across the head. "My love life doesn't need to be explained nor told to anyone, Niche."

"You tell me all the time." He knew this was a thorn in Craig's side at how close they were. Niche knew how to throw salt on wounds severely.

"I'll be much careful what I tell my friends." She stressed on the word "*friends*" looking straight at Niche, who still gave her his favorite innocent look. "Just call me on the cell and we'll talk," she said to Craig trying to change the subject back to what they had been talking about.

Craig nodded as the food arrived. He was at a loss for words.

She figured he was souring over the fact that his innocent Michelle had been with another man was devastating and she seemed so ... happy. From the way he looked at her, he seemed to never remember her looking this ecstatic. She knew he was probably eager to find out exactly who this man was and if he could dissuade her from being with him.

To keep conversation going, Craig began to speak on his favorite subject – himself.

Seeing Craig again didn't bring up any special feelings, Michelle realized as she sat across from him watching him speak. She used to wonder about why she couldn't have deeper feelings for him and why she didn't feel as wonderful as Niche felt when he was with someone. Now she knew and understood her feelings for Craig from being with Anthony and nothing Craig could do could make her see him in a different light - she never loved Craig as she thought she did, physically or mentally. She had no real intimacy with him like Anthony had created for them. Even though she had only known Anthony in a short time, she felt so connected to him.

She insisted they leave at four to give her time to pick out a nice outfit at her store and get her hair and nails done. Both men were a little jealous at how distracted she seemed by her new beau, but neither said anything. Michelle was a nice person and neither wanted to see her hurt.

Once they were at the store, Craig watched as Michelle hurried out the car and told Niche she would meet him back at the store, since Craig wanted to speak with Niche some more.

"Who is he?" Craig demanded to know, once they were alone.

Niche explained, "First, I thought he would be a one night stand, but I'm realizing he is becoming a more permanent fixture in her life."

"A one night stand?" he asked appalled.

Niche sighed as if there was no hope. "She lost her mind and...I think her heart in one night, but she won't admit it. I've met him. Dangerously handsome young man and fiercely protective although he does understand our relationship - unlike some people." He shot Craig a guilty look. "He's the sort that don't like to share, at all, but Michelle says she's got

him under control. I think the minx does. She has a way to make a man feel like a heel, you know." This was said more to Craig.

Craig didn't question Niche anymore feeling like the heel Niche was talking about and Michelle was nowhere around.

When Niche joined Michelle in the store in very good spirits, he assisted her in picking out a nice outfit and even went into the private back room with her to watch her try it on as they talked about Craig and his investment.

"Aren't you at least curious?" she asked him.

"Nope. There's always more to what he tells you, B. I don't trust him as far as I can throw him."

"I'm too curious."

"I don't think you should be," Niche said distrustfully.

She huffed. "Oh, come on, Niche. You never let me have any fun and I won't involve the store. I promise. He can hide the money under my name and I'll find out where it belongs. If I don't like it, then poof, I'm out."

"You will do whatever you want. I've never been able to stop you, but you will hear my mouth when I say I told you so."

"And a lovely mouth you have," she teased.

He tapped her behind for her sauciness. "Not another moment will I sit here and listen to this."

"None at all? Even if I ask my best friend about sex?"

His interest was clearly piqued. "What about sex that I know I could tell you?"

"Well, I'm sure you are fully in tuned to your needs and how to fully please a lover – as you've explained to me before."

He frowned his dark brown brows closing in together. "What the hell are you getting at, B? It's not like you to beat around the bush."

"Well you've already instructed me on how to please with your mouth, but I know you know a few tricks up your sleeve on how to make a man go crazy."

Niche took a deep breath. "You don't know any tricks and you want me to tell you, so you can pull some magic out your sleeve for Mr. Wonderful? What? He's not doing enough?"

"It's not that. It's doing it all and you know how much I like to be in control, but when I'm with him, he has all the power although I don't mind." Her eyes rolled heavenward. "Believe me I really don't mind, he's wonderful

to me and we have so much more in common other than sex it's just amazing how we clicked. I just need your expert advice on how to please him more."

Niche just stared blankly at her not sure how to start off. As open as he'd been about his experiences, he never really thought she was not receiving just as much happiness in bed. Until she told him after she broke up with Craig and she had been against dating after that, Niche just assumed not to discuss how to please men at all with her.

But in just a couple of days, things had changed. He had instructed her perfectly how to please a man and now she wanted more. She was a great student and Niche probably could make her into some kind of sex fiend given the chance and blow Mr. Wonderful brains out his skull.

Niche would like that.

Michelle being with someone, Niche didn't even liked, but could tolerate as long as Michelle was happy. This was most important for him.

The silence was depressing for Michelle. "Fine Niche," she said disgruntled. "If you don't want to tell me then that's alright. I'll buy a book."

"It's not that, it's just that since this is your first time ever asking advice of this intimate nature, I don't know how to explain it to you, without disgusting you," he explained sincerely.

Her chocolate expressive eyes went wide as saucers. "Is it disgusting?"

"That just depends on how far you want to go to bring some magic to him."

She blushed profusely. Niche had never really been detailed in this description of what actually happened when he was with someone. Instructing her on how to oral please a man had not been disgusting, so she was sure anything else he could instruct her on would not turn her stomach. "So you really don't do it to a man? They do all the work?"

"Like I told you before, Michelle, I like to receive oral pleasure. My lovers have been male since early college, but I've only received pleasure from them, not given it," he explained.

Disappointedly she asked, "So you don't know how?"

"Hell yeah. I can tell you how to make the man scream your name," he said quite imperiously.

"Then tell me," she begged.

"Alright, but if I see that nose of yours wrinkle in disgust I will stop immediately. No point in telling you how to do something if you don't want to have an open mind about it, okay?"

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She nodded eagerly, her eyes perking up to catch every word he said. “While we’re at it, can you ad a refresher course to what you instructed me on the other night, with him?”

Niche chuckled not minding at all. Sex was his favorite subject.

* * *

Outside of the storage room door, Amanda paused hearing the voices and listened a little. Sighing at the deepness of Mr. Quatermaine's voice and wondering how could she possibly get closer to him.

Chapter 14

When Niche was done, he looked at his watch and noted he was running late. Leaning over, his lips brushed hers gently. "I'm out of here. Have fun and if you see the chef remind him of the dinner party I'm having next Saturday. He never confirmed. Oh, will you be bringing *him*?"

With a wicked glimmer in her eyes, she said, "Maybe."

"This should be a riot. Are you sure he has that much social class?" he asked.

"You're showing your nails, Niche," she said taunting him.

Niche left out without another word.

When Michelle arrived home, Austin greeted her and told her she looked very beautiful. She thanked him and asked where Anthony was.

"He ran some errands and said he'd be right back, but that was an hour ago," Austin answered.

"Is the chef still here?" she asked.

"Yeah, he is finishing up everything in your room. I like your bed."

"Thank you. Have you eaten?"

He answered, "Yes."

She pulled out an Xbox system with two latest games. "I thought you'd like to be entertained in your room with this for the rest of the night if you don't mind giving Anthony and I time alone, Austin."

His eyes went wide in shock as he slowly took the gift from her as if he were in a dream. A moment later, Michelle felt the breath being squeezed out of her in his youthful strong arms. "Thank you so much!" He ran to the back room and Michelle knew that was the last she would see of him tonight.

His eagerness made her giggle and she noted Austin wasn't such a bad kid and despite Anthony's living situation, he had done a pretty good job at getting the boy to understand and adjust to what was happening to their lives. Anthony was a pretty good dad when Michelle really thought about it and he must of cared something deeply for the boy to have taken such good care of him thus far. She also noted that Anthony must trust her in some kind of way to leave Austin here and not think she would do harm to the boy.

The past few days in her interaction with Austin brought a motherly need in her she didn't know she possessed. Why she hadn't had or thought

about having children before now was a mystery, but with her approaching thirty and enjoying Austin's look of affection, she was beginning to have a longing.

"Penny for your thoughts," a deep familiar voice said softly behind her in her ear, sending warm shudders down her back.

Turning around, Michelle propped herself up on her tiptoes and threw her arms around Anthony's neck. "I would prefer a kiss."

He almost smiled, but quelled it as his lips pressed against her inviting ones, which he was quite eager to savor. "I must say, Ms. Coleman, I never thought I would actually have a hard time concentrating today without you around."

"Did you really miss me?" she asked so full of expectations. Her heart was swelling even before he spoke. "Well, just a little," he said modestly.

She knew he teased even if he looked too serious. "I missed you a little too." She kissed his cheek and took his hand leading him into the bedroom, where the chef was just finishing up.

Anthony didn't mind that she had a private word with the chef, before she handed the man a check. The chef said goodbye and let himself out of the apartment.

Moving to the beautifully set table situated out on the enclosed balcony, Anthony noted the warmer set out to keep them warm and the screens were enclosed by glass and locked so they could still enjoy the feeling of being outside without feeling the wintery Detroit weather.

Snow had not fallen yet, but Anthony suspected with the approaching holidays, Mother Nature would disappoint Detroiters by giving them a good white Christmas.

It was a beautiful setting and with the evening approaching and the candlelight illuminating the room, creating a romantic atmosphere, he found himself enamored immediately.

When Michelle stood beside him, she smiled proudly at the mood the chef managed to create. Lifting the pans, which covered both plates to reveal a beautiful steak, rice, and corn entree, she licked her lips hungrily. Anthony turned to her and swept her up in his arms.

She giggled as he placed kisses over her face and neck in thanks. "I take it you like it?" she asked. For that she received even more kisses. Pushing everything out her mind, she reveled in his lips and her body reacted becoming instantly aroused. At that moment, she knew no other man would

be able to do to her what Anthony could make her feel and she didn't want anyone else. She wanted to give him her mind, body, and soul.

Before they got out of hand, she reminded him, "The food will get cold."

He groaned setting her away from him and running tormented fingers through his scalp roughly. His look was quite baffling and she almost understood him. With both of them being new to these emotions they were confused together, but in a way, knowing this made her more enamored of him.

"You keep this up, Anthony and I will definitely fall for you," Michelle whispered.

A light brush of her lips against his gave him so much warmth he wanted to drag her over to the bed and show her what she meant to him. It amazed him how she could express so much with a touch, a look, and a simple action, which swept him up in a bevy of zealously.

Austin was right, she didn't need to be hurt, but Anthony had so much to do and to let her know he was already married, albeit deceitfully, would tear her apart. Seating her, then sitting across from her, he let her know, "I've been busy today."

"With what?" she asked, very interested in his day.

"I found a new partner," he announced.

She frowned not understanding what he meant.

"I have a small law practice, but with me being... unemotionally attached from the world of late it's gone into debt and my clients have gone too, but there were still some people quite interested in me continuing to represent them. I found two friends who were trying to start up their practice out of Chicago and wanted to move it here to Detroit because of some family situation, but they didn't want to go into a lot of problems I encountered. We agreed to share office space if they helped me pay off some expenses. So, I won't need outside help, which I don't want to get in order to rebuild, you could say, my practice."

She smiled with encouragement.

"I was meeting with them today." He pulled out his wallet and placed a bundle of bills down on the table. "This is for you."

She started to protest, but he stopped her with a sharp wave of his finger. "Not another word. I am doing this because I stole the money from your purse and I'm replacing it, which was why I came here the other day to let you know. I never meant to hurt you or scare you, but I did want to see you again. I know my behavior was..." he hesitated, then spoke,

"...Unforgivable but in no way am I giving you this money to make up for it just to replace what I took. What I did to you was unforgettable, Michelle. I knew my actions would reap some kind of repercussions, although I wasn't expecting that kind of repercussion." He paused slightly and smirked a little, which was a first to be seen by Michelle. "I'm not mad about it though...well at the time, I wanted to wring your little neck, but I kind of deserved what you did to me, because I had no right to scare you like that in the first place or even threaten to take what you thought I took." Adjusting his napkin on his lap, he took a brief pause, before continuing. "I still have more to pay back, which I will in time, but right now, I needed some of the money to find me a nice loft near downtown. I just wanted you to know, the changes I have made in my life is because you are in it and you've made me see I am a better man than what I think I am. You make a man want to be his best, so that he can give you everything. I thank you for all the wonderful things you've give Austin and I in just these past days and want to thank you for being the phenomenal person you naturally are."

By now her lips were so raw from biting on them to keep from screaming her joy.

Anthony took her hand in his and kissed the knuckle of each finger tenderly.

"You mean more to me than any woman I've ever met, Belle, and whatever happens in the future, I don't ever want you to forget what I've said."

"I won't," she promised.

He breathed a sigh of relief and prayed she wouldn't forget what he had said just now, especially when things started going horrible for the two of them.

Dinner was delicious and Michelle told him about her day, omitting the lunch, but was extremely surprised he seemed so attentive with what she spoke about. Craig never paid attention to anything she did and when she had ever went into detail about it, he made it seem as if it was a hardship to sit and listen to her day to day life.

After she was done, Anthony let her know about Austin. "I have money left over from my college trust I never touched and I will be able to send him back to school."

"Back?" she questioned.

He explained, "He was at a boy's school in Ohio."

"He'll be going away?" The chagrin was relevant in her voice.

"Yes." Anthony was shocked to see her a bit upset.

Michelle quickly put her emotions in check. To express her upset about that would mean she would be expressing that she truly cared about Anthony and Austin. Hell, she had just met this guy not to long ago and then had tied him to a bed just days ago. Things were moving fast for them, and she needed to put a brake on her emotions or she'd be in a tizzy over everything if it kept up like thing. Solemnly, she said, "I'll miss him."

"I will too. He's sort of become my subconscious. Amazingly, we've bonded despite the hardship and I know I'm not a very affectionate man. I've never been use to showing my feelings. I blame this a little on my parents. I never really saw a lot of affection from them and when my mother died, my father threw himself into other women, and paid very little attention to me. Yet, Austin has told me his protest about this decision."

"He doesn't want to go?" she asked.

Anthony shook his head. "He's adamant about it, because he wants to spend more time with me."

"He admitted that to me this morning at breakfast," she admitted. "When he was told you were his father and not his brother he was very ecstatic about it."

"He said that?" He looked very delighted to hear her say this.

Michelle nodded. "Austin loves you a lot and he looks up to you."

His look immediately saddened. "I feel bad that I've failed him."

"I think he understands that you're taking a break from life, right?"

He frowned and then nodded. It was an odd way to describe what he was going through, but she had kind of put her finger on the button. "We compromised though. I need time to become a man, who can support him and who can gladly be a good father to him. I have to get myself back together and I need time. So I promised him by his next year of school he can come home and go to school here. I might look into charter schools."

"That's wonderful that you compromised, but I'll miss him. Promise you'll bring him by when he comes back."

He hoped he would still be in her life by the time Austin returned. They continued to speak, but she found unemotional things to speak on and he couldn't believe how she could make the simplest thing interesting to speak about. She stimulated not only his body, but his mind as well, a region no woman had ever come close to arousing before.

Once they were done eating, she turned on soft music and invited him to a dance.

Sylvia Hubbard

Whispering in her ear, Anthony said softly, “Whatever happens, Michelle, I want you to know, you’re not like anything I’ve ever encountered.” His arms tightened around her until her body was molded against his. “Meeting you – however strange it was – was the best thing in the world.”

For a man who seemed to never feel, those words had touched Michelle deeply and she closed her eyes relishing in the closeness of this wonderful moment.

Soft kisses to her cheek, turned to long languishing kisses to her lips and neck. Her clothes seem to disappear with just a touch of his hand, and her body responded to his glorious touch.

Soon, they were on the large bed, making love until the dawn enjoying each other's bodies, and talking until sleep finally overtook them.

Chapter 15

Michelle checked her voice mail. Craig left three messages and on her way to the next appointment the following morning, she called him leaving a message for his secretary to meet her for lunch at the mall. Amanda was just getting off of work and Michelle asked her for her assistance in getting her apartment ready for Christmas. Amanda was happy to help her by taking a shopping list and Michelle's credit cards while Michelle sat in the food court with Craig eating bourbon chicken, which was her favorite and shrimp fried rice.

"I have mixed feelings about all of this, Craig. Maybe I need a little bit more details. I feel you're being too evasive about this whole thing," she told him.

"A friend needs a favor of me. She was given executor position of her son's trust and she doesn't want his brother to get his hands on the money because she knows he won't take care of the child," he explained.

"Shouldn't the best interest of the child be up to the judge?"

"True, but not when this brother has judges close to him and lawyers who can work the court in his favor. What kind of justice is that? She pleaded with me for help and we decided if the money isn't there then the brother will have no interest in the trust anymore and the child's money is safe where it belongs."

"With this friend I suppose?" she asked warily.

"Michelle, I would never lead you wrong. I care very deeply about you and I trust you completely. Do you actually think I would ask this of you if it was wrong?" He covered her hands with his beseeching her pity for him. "She is the mother of this child, why wouldn't she want the best for her son?"

This point was true, Michelle thought. "Why couldn't she just let the courts know this?"

"You know when there is money involved it clouds people's judgment. I can personally take the money from the trust and place it in a retirement fund for you, since my company oversees the trust. I have duties to assign the trust money out and it will just look like the mother squandered the money. When the heat of it all dies and no one is interested in the funds anymore, we'll simply take the money and put it back where it belongs."

"Who has custody of the child?" she questioned.

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

The question seemed to throw him off a bit, but he answered matter-of-factly, "The mother, of course, Michelle."

She took a moment to think, then inquired, "How long do I have to make this decision?"

His watch read ten thirty. "The audit of the trust takes place at noon." He went into his briefcase and pulled out a stack of papers and opened up his other suitcase where his laptop, portable scanner, and printer/fax were in. "If you agree, we can have it all done before then."

"Alright," she agreed narrowing her eyes cruelly. "But if I get any flack about this, Craig, I'll make sure you pay for it all."

"You have my word, that I would never lead you wrong."

He started to log on to his server at work.

Amanda choose this time come over there with some of the things she was indecisive about and also give Michelle some messages she was waiting for, which had come to the store instead of her cell phone. Michelle glanced at the child's name of the trust as Craig worked. Haadred Jacoby Austin Dome. Even though the middle names were familiar to her, she had never heard of a Haadred. The mother was named Claudia Maria Blackwell.

"The father's," Craig explained "Great great great grandparents were from Greenland and owned slaves in the past. I'm told the names have been passed down so much, they don't even keep up with the numbers anymore."

"And the child is black? He must be teased in school with a name like that," she mentioned, after signing the papers. He immediately began to scan and transmit the information for an immediate update on the trust. She watched him change some dates around to make it look as if the money left out the trust on various dates and she had to wonder why was he trying to cover up when the money was actually taken out, but she kept the question to herself.

"I didn't ask about the child's name," he said simply. "Ah yes, you wouldn't care about little things like that." Her sarcasm had a way of coming to the surface at the most inopportune times.

Amanda snickered quietly, trying to pretend she didn't hear Michelle's comment to Craig.

"Are you saying Mr. Wonderful would?" he asked, a hint of jealousy coming into play.

She reveled in seeing him envy another man. Niche told her a long time ago Craig was losing a good thing when he allowed her to walk out on the relationship and assumed she would come back just because she would get lonely. Michelle was much too proud to allow herself to become

involved with Craig again. Now she had Anthony and she didn't feel as guilty as she thought she would feel.

"He would. He's very attentive to my needs. I don't see why he wouldn't be attentive to others he cared about."

"I was attentive." He almost stopped typing. "I bought you anything you wanted."

"That is not being attentive, Craig. You don't buy things to appease people's feelings. I needed a lover *and* a friend. A real lover, who wanted me to enjoy in having sex, not a man bent on getting his and getting off."

Craig looked up annoyed Amanda was standing there, but the girl kept a straight face as if Michelle and he were just discussing the weather. He stated matter-of fact without thought, "Who says women are suppose to enjoy it?"

Michelle snorted quite loudly at this question. "Obviously my choosing you in the beginning was quite wrong. How can you say that?" she asked offended. "Women have every right to enjoy sex."

Amanda bit her lip to fight not joining in this conversation and stayed motionless, so she wouldn't draw attention to herself.

"No woman I've met has said she enjoyed having sex like men do. They enjoy allowing men to take pleasure in their bodies," Craig defended himself.

Michelle was very grateful to Anthony and what he had shown her. If she had never met him, she would have thought Craig's reasoning was sound, but to hear him say this with the knowledge that she knew now... Ignorance was not bliss - not when it concerned physical happiness. "I will not even begin to argue with you about this subject. You're obviously not the sexual king you think you are." She stood up not wanting to be in his presence any longer. "Are we done? Are you through using me?"

"Yes," he grumbled, handing the papers he had scanned to her.

She took the papers and walked away. If she ever saw him again it would be too soon. Michelle thanked her blessed stars she had met Anthony. If anything, he had taught her that women are suppose to be a valuable part in the lovemaking experience and if this relationship they had didn't last, she would always know he was her first true lover.

'Don't you mean love?' her mind asked her.

She shook this thought away. Bringing love into the equation meant hurt and pain and she didn't want to feel like that; not with Anthony and she didn't want to love him unless he got rid of all his demons and loved only

her. Although with these recent changes in his life, knowing that his change was because she was with him, made her heart sing with rapturous delight.

Amanda stayed close behind her and Michelle took her back to the store.

On their way back, Michelle apologized about being so vulgar in front of Amanda.

"That's alright Ms. Coleman. I'm not as innocent as I look," Amanda said quietly. "And I'm so glad you told him off like that. I think the vulgarity was appropriate for the situation."

"Men like that give other men bad names."

Amanda giggled. "Even men like Niche?"

Michelle laughed. "I don't think Niche can be in a category with the men we're talking too."

"So he really is gay?" Amanda asked.

Michelle didn't know if Niche would appreciate being talked about behind his back about his sexual preference, but the look in Amanda's doe expression chestnut eyes clearly told Michelle the girl eagerly wanted to know. "Let's just say he hasn't preferred the fairer sex in a long time. Matter of fact, I think he told me he hasn't been with a girl since early college. It's his last time, I think, and he doesn't talk about that much."

Amanda sighed. "Don't you ever wonder what made him like that? Obviously a man that fine couldn't have been born gay."

Michelle realized the girl had a crush on Niche and immediately her heart went out to the girl. She wasn't about to tell Amanda Niche's reason for being gay. That was his business. As long as Michelle had known Niche – other than her college roommate - the man had never given a woman the time a day with any affection other than friendship. Even Michelle had never felt Niche looked at her other than as a confidant.

As gently as she possibly could, Michelle spoke, "Amanda, maybe you should turn your affections to someone who is much more deserving. I don't think Niche is the kind of guy who would be interested in what you could offer a man, and I would sure hate for him to break your heart."

Amanda sighed rolling her eyes heavenwards. "It's just like me to fall for the wrong guy. My baby's father just wanted to hit it and leave and when I told him I was pregnant, I never heard from him again. Now I have the biggest crush of my life on Mr. Quartermaine and I don't know how to get over it."

"Slowly, Amanda. Very slowly," Michelle assured her as they arrived at the store.

Michelle decided to stay at the store and get some work done at the store's office with the little time she had in the rest of her day.

Amanda hadn't mind being sent on some errands around the mall to give Michelle some time, with Michelle's credit card and a list of things.

One of the messages that Amanda had delivered was Kimberly Gates calling about the dinner party she was organizing so Michelle could meet Pamela. Kimberly wanted to know how many guest to expect and to bring as many as she wanted. The dinner party was scheduled for tomorrow night because Kimberly had spoken to Niche and that time was perfect for him too.

She caught up on work from the past few days. Elise came into the office about six as the cashiers were changing shifts. She looked rather nervous.

"There's a large man with a brown mackintosh coat up front asking for you," Elise said.

Michelle smiled, remembering her own upset when she initially saw Anthony and understood Elise's upset. "Can you show him back to the office?"

Elise was fearful and protective of Michelle. "Are you sure you want to be alone with him, Ms. Coleman?"

Michelle nodded giving Elise an amused wink. "I think I can handle myself. I've got my panic button if need be," she teased, yet Elise still looked frazzled. "He's a friend," she assured Elise, who still didn't feel comfortable about the man.

A few minutes later, Anthony stepped into the room and Elise purposely left the door cracked open, but he deliberately turned around and closed the door when she walked back over to her desk. He looked very upset and Michelle almost felt uncomfortable remembering the first time they had met.

"What's wrong?" Michelle asked, after he gave her the greeting kiss without being asked.

"I've just returned from some friends with bad news. I didn't know where else to go where I wouldn't want to kill someone," he said, looking even more upset.

Michelle noted how he now exuded his strength the angrier he became and although she didn't fear for her own life, she hoped he was able to control his voice level because she knew Elise was probably just waiting for a good excuse to call the police.

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

"So you came here to kill me?" she asked, trying to lighten his mood.

Her teasing didn't work. His scowl seemed to be molded on his face. Offering him a chair beside her desk, he plopped down opening his coat exasperated. "Want to talk about it?" she asked.

"No," he said briskly. "I want to make love to you and get it out my system."

She blushed feeling her cheeks flame at his bluntness as those beautiful eyes caressed her body sending flutters through her belly and groin. "It won't make the problem, if there is one, go away."

"It's not a problem, anymore. Other people have made the problem I had go away, yet not in my favor." He was speaking evasively and this was because he didn't want her to become involved in his life too much.

Although he knew it was an annoyance to her, Anthony deliberately kept his difficulties at bay. He knew she understood knowing there would be too many emotions involved if he allowed her to get closer than what she already was to him. Just being here was enough for her to know he thought of her as close. It wasn't that Anthony had no one to go and speak to with this problem of his. He had come here because he knew only she could quell his raging temper and he would feel much better if he were around her.

Standing up in front of him, she reached over and locked the office door smiling wickedly. "I'll just help you forget about the world for a little while." Opening the jacket with the faux collared shirt to her business suit, he pulled her to him nestling his face into her bare stomach breathing in the sweetness of her and the perfume she wore.

Murmuring he said, "Yes, just for a little while." His need was evident in his voice and she was touched by his sincerity. Cupping his face, she tilted his face back until she could grind her lips against his full ones. Slowly, his hands moved up her body and cupped her breast. His other hand moved to the middle of her red-laced bra and with a slight twist, the front hook of bra she wore, popped open. His mouth tore from hers and moved to her breast coveting them with his lips, whispering praises of her touch against her skin. Michelle became enraptured in his oral ministrations.

His hands expertly undressed her, until she was naked in front of him. Dipping his head lower and pulling her thigh over his shoulder, he steadied her by holding her waist, as his tongue tasted her readiness. She bit her lips wanting to cry out, but not wanting to alert others of what was going on inside the office. His mouth was unmercifully sweet as the talented tongue brought her to peaking. Her fingernails dug into his scalp and her body wanted to desperately collapse not caring where she fell, but his strong hands held her unrelenting until he knew she was calmed and composed.

Pulling her hands down to his waist, making her bend down over him, he encompassed his mouth to hers, and she found she loved the taste of her on his lips. An erotic thrill shot through her chest down to her toes as his mouth claimed her.

Moving her hands to his pants, he lifted up partially and allowed her to pull them off and lower them to his ankles; her hands gripped his hardened manhood as soon as she exposed the member. She triumphed in hearing his moan of tormenting delight and knew what she was about to do would be very welcomed by him.

Before he could figure out her intent, she dipped her head down and enveloped his hardness deep into her mouth, making sure she heeded Niche's warning about her teeth. Her lips and hands were attentive to all the sensitive spots in the area and being the astute student she had always been, she began to drive his temperature to a breaking point.

Just as she felt the tightening of his skin, she slowed her pace just as Niche had enlightened her, and the effect was joyous. He grabbed her shoulders, pulled her up and lifted her until she was on the desk. She giggled as he tore the coat off of him and threw his shirt away. Not at all afraid for her lips, by his wild passion, she allowed him to have his way with her.

Anthony practically turned her over on her stomach and guided himself deep inside her. The position immediately made her muscles contract and gave him access to her most sensitive spot with his hands. His lovemaking was rough, but he gave her pleasure beyond belief, with every stroke, touch, lick, and kiss. She had drove him to this point on purpose just like before, and craved his savagery, yet enamored of his gentleness at the same time he seemed to show her by the delectable kisses to her neck, shoulder and ears.

As strong and powerful as he was, he never hurt her. His fingers harshly gripped her full buttocks, but left no marks. His thrusts were potent, yet left no pain. As he neared the end, he made sure her pleasure enveloped him, raining on his manhood, suckling the life seed out of him.

When his heartbeat calmed and he was able to think straight, he leaned over her and whispered in her ear, "Thank you."

She smiled warmly pleased at her new feat in the wonderful lovemaking session they both shared. "It's much better when you freely let me do that," slipped out of her lips and then she blushed knowing that she had brought up what could be a sore subject between them.

The reminder didn't faze him. "I get a kick out of pleasing you." He moved from her and she gasped lightly still enjoying the feel of him and whining a little at his departure.

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

Turning to him, she asked as he was straightening his clothes, "Will you be pleasing me again tonight?"

He leaned close to her; their faces were inches apart. "I will please you anytime you want if you keep doing what you're doing to me."

Seductively, Michelle rubbed her body against his. "Then we are going to end up like rabbits because I want to be please by you all the time."

He choked on his humor and hid his smile as he turned around to find her clothes and his jacket. As Anthony handed her clothes to her, he noted on her frown now looking up at him.

"You hide your amusement in my teasing? Why?" Michelle asked, getting dressed quickly.

He frowned now, but even though she had annoyed him with her probing question, she was undaunted in her task to find out why he did his best not to smile. "Maybe I don't deserve to be happy."

"Everyone deserves to be happy, Anthony, even the damned who let the demons keep him from it." She graced her palm against his smooth cheek. "You allow the past to interfere with the present when you should only live for the future. You will never move ahead, if you keep remembering the past."

"If I don't remember the past, I will make the same mistakes in the future." He put his coat on after he helped her button up her jacket.

"How can you make the mistakes if you are with me? Was meeting me a mistake?" she asked.

Kissing her palm deeply. "Never," he said fiercely. Smoldering her with his dark greenish blue eyes, then his lips, he departed without another word.

Sitting down, she took a deep thought-filled breath. He was going to continue to fight his demons on his own. Looking down at the floor, she saw a pager on the floor. With Curiosity killing her, she picked up the electronic device and began to browse through the digital messages.

Suddenly the door came open and Niche stepped in the room. "Why do you have Amanda outside the door waiting for you?"

She dropped the pager in panic underneath her chair on the floor. "She's waiting?"

"Yes, she was doing some shopping for you and didn't want to leave without returning your card to you." He handed her the credit card Michelle had given Amanda earlier.

Michelle stood up abruptly and went out the office to find Amanda. Niche knelt and pick up the pager remembering it from the other night. Elise told Niche as soon as he came into the store, Anthony had just left and Niche put two and two together determining the pager to be his.

When Michelle returned after giving Amanda a small donation for her time and told her to wait while she gathered her things because she would give Amanda a ride home.

Walking in the office, she saw Niche in the office with the pager she had dropped and she tried to snatch the pager from Niche, but he raised it out of her reach. "Nosey, are we?"

"Give it back," she ordered.

"You were about to look through the numbers, weren't you?" he asked.

"So what?! I think I should."

"Why? When he's so wonderful," he drooled.

"Jealous?"

"Never." His kissed her cheek. "I think I should keep this until Friday when you bring Mr. Wonderful to the party."

"No," she said emphatically.

Niche raised a dark brown brow. "Yes, you will. I've already planned for his arrival and I won't have an empty setting at my function. Furthermore, I've informed Ms. Kimberly, you'll be bringing your lover to her dinner party too." He stuffed the pager in his pocket.

"Niche, this is blackmail!" she exclaimed.

Shyly, Amanda peeked her head around the corner. "Ms. Coleman, I need to be home to pick up my son. I can just catch the bus."

"Nonsense, Niche will take you home," Michelle announced.

"I will?" Niche asked incredulously. "When did I turn into a taxi service?"

"When you decided to take what belongs to someone else and blackmail me to get it back!" she exclaimed.

"That's quite alright," Amanda said, backing out the room very uncomfortable.

Niche, with a smile full of charm, gently tugged at Amanda's arm seeing the alarm in her eyes. "You are not the problem," he said assured, and then looked back at Michelle. "Your boss is." He looked at Michelle in a serious nature. "I'll take her, and see you tomorrow night at the Gates?"

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

Michelle decided to tick Niche off even further just because he was being an ass. "If he comes to your party so does Amanda." She looked over the wall to the manager's schedule she had just finished.

Using Amanda's affection to throw him off would be just the thing to keep Niche out of her affairs. Michelle was fully aware that this was wrong to Amanda, but she knew Niche would continue to stick his nose where it didn't belong if she didn't find some other drama in her life. Michelle suspected, once Niche was aware of Amanda's affection and was repulse by it, he'll definitely find a lot more reasons to stay away from the store and Michelle for awhile.

"Go where?" Amanda asked nervously.

"Mr. Quartermaine has just graciously asked you to a wonderful dinner he intends to hold at his apartment building downtown that he owns," Michelle told the frazzled girl.

"I work on Friday always," Amanda emphasized.

"Not this Friday," Michelle announced. "Elise said she wants to work Friday night and Saturday morning because the people are coming to wax the floor and you know she has a crush on the cleaners." She began to change the schedule. "And we wouldn't want to disappoint her would we?" She gave Niche a wicked look.

Amanda's heart was pounding crazily. "I-I don't think I would fit in."

"Why wouldn't you, Amy?" Niche asked, pretending his best to enjoy what Michelle was doing so he couldn't give her the satisfaction to see how pissed he was. An affair like this would have nothing to do with Amanda and she would feel so out of sorts that he would be coddling the poor child all night. Michelle knew he couldn't stand for people to be uncomfortable at any of his affairs. "Don't think you'll like my company?"

She didn't dare want him to take offense and think she didn't want to be around him because he was gay. "Oh no, Mr. Quartermaine. I just thought I wouldn't be good enough for your company." No one had ever called her Amy before and the nickname made Goosebumps come on her arms. "I don't want to embarrass you. You know some really rich people, Elise says, and I'd be in the company of them. I wouldn't know how to act."

Niche was startled that the young lady had so much insight, especially to what he was thinking. He thought that quite rare and really saw what Michelle was so fascinated with her. As young as Amanda looked, there was really some maturity and intelligence between those cute ears of her. "You'll do fine. As a matter of fact, why don't you take my card and find yourself a nice dress for the night. An after five, very tasteful,

something red or..." His eyes went from the top of her head to the tip of her toes. "...Blue is a nice color for you too, with open toe shoes. I bet you have beautiful feet."

Amanda blushed almost to death from the attention Niche was giving her. This was too much for her to experience all at once. "I-I really can't shop today."

"Shop tomorrow, the card will still be good. I trust you, plus I know where you work," he teased with a wink. He looked over at Michelle and mouthed, *"call me on the cell"* then followed the very nervous Amanda out.

Michelle hoped she wasn't putting her new assistant manager in an uncomfortable predicament, yet maybe the young lady needed to be around Niche a little more to understand he would have no interest in someone like Amanda. It wasn't that the assistant manager wasn't attractive. Amanda was cute and innocent looking in her own way, but not only did Niche like his brief beau's snotty, but wickedly deviated in some kind of way and needy. For some reason, men like that made Niche feel better about himself and that his idea of the world wasn't so twisted, but it was and he just didn't want to admit. Misery loved company and in Niche's world, he was miserable.

With this conclusion in mind, Michelle started to wonder if Amanda could actually turn the table on Niche? Two seconds later after this thought, Michelle told herself that would never happen. Niche was a stubborn man and to change him was to make miracles happen.

Elise came into the office plopping on the desk. "You let Amanda go home with Mr. Quartermaine?"

"Yes, do you think that's a problem for her?" Michelle questioned.

"Only for her fantasies. She hasn't said anything, but I think she's got the biggest crush in the world on him."

Michelle pretended innocence to this notion. "You're kidding me."

"No, serious. She's always asking questions about him and wondering if he'll come by."

"Poor dear. Does she know he doesn't like women?"

Elise's mother-like nature came to the surface as she said disappointedly, "Yes, I've let her know, but she's young and she's thinking she can change him."

Michelle bit her lip in worry. She would talk to Niche and make sure he doesn't build the girl's hopes up.

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

Hitting him up on his cell phone, he was still in route to Amanda's home on the East Side. "I should warn you Elise has told me the young lady has a crush on you."

"Big mouth told you that? She gossips like there's no tomorrow. She mentioned the same to me as well a while ago, but I fail to see any admiration my way as deep as I would think if it was as serious as big mouth says it is." Niche referred to Elise as "Big Mouth" because Elise had a tendency to gossip a bit too much and tell people's business, and he probably did this to avoid Amanda, who was sitting beside him, knowing who or what he was speaking about.

"Do you think it's true?" Michelle asked.

He paused before answering, glancing at the nice looking young lady next to him, who tried to pretend to watch the road and not him. But every time he touched the stick shift, she was paying attention to his fingers or when he spoke she looked directly at him giving him full-undaunted eye contact.

Now she feigned to be interested in the road, when he knew she was watching his leg. "Yes, quite frankly. I can imagine it may be true."

Michelle thought she actually heard excitement in Niche's voice. "You want it to be true?"

"Now you've gone mad. Some of us can't be as happy as you are right now," he sang.

"When do I get the pager back?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Tomorrow night when you arrive at the Gates. Oh, by the way, at my party, Friday, I'll be having people from my financial institution and others. I'm thinking of a merger...well, it's more of a takeover of a competitor that I've had my eye on for a while. This is a way for his top producing employees to meet me before we announce the takeover Friday because by Thursday I'll be done with going over his records with his lawyers."

She gasped. "You bought out Stanford Financials?" she asked.

He chuckled. "How'd you guess?"

"Because you've been eyeing him for a while, especially when he grabbed the five big net accounts in the city."

"He's unable to handle the cost and asked for my help. Of course, I will receive a considerable stock option for my assistance. Fifty-nine percent," he boosted.

"You dirty rat, you knew he'd break down, that's probably why you purposely over bid him."

He shrugged. "My sweet Michelle, you know me too well."

"Does Craig know you're going to be his new boss?"

"No and don't you ruin my pleasure when I tell him."

"Can you do me a favor since you know all and do all, my favorite friend?"

"Maybe, what?"

"Look into any messages that may have come on the pager. I'm not trying to be nosey, but I would like to know why it's so difficult to be...him," she said, trying not to sound too guilty about asking Niche to do what she wanted him to do, knowing it was wrong of her to even ask that of Niche, but she had a feeling Niche would just employ the services of Lethal Heart again.

"Yes," he said almost too fast to answer. "You can bet your bottom I intend to. I'm going to ask Lethal to run a detailed check on him. Mr. Wonderful is just too curious for words to explain. Now enough, Ms. Coleman," he decided to tease Amanda by placing his hand on her thigh.

The young lady gasped.

Niche teased, "Amanda and I have too much to talk about. Be at my place tomorrow morning at ten and I'll tell you what I found out about the pager."

"Leave her be," Michelle warned.

"Oh I will," he assured Michelle. He hung up and looked over at Amanda sitting quite stiff next to him. "Are you always this uptight in a car?"

"Were you always gay?" she blurted out.

Her bluntness caught him off guard, but he was quick to recover and narrowed his eyes briefly at her before returning them back to the road. "You aren't as shy as you pretend to be."

She covered her mouth thoroughly embarrassed by her gumption. "I don't pretend to be anything false, Mr. Quartermaine. I only let people go with what they assume about me. I didn't mean to startle you with my bluntness."

"So you say." He waved it away and decided to explain it to her delicately. "For your information, no I haven't. I was quite the Casanova through high school and part of college until I came home to find out the one girl I loved decided to leave me for another woman. I was devastated and resolved that the women or any kind of personal relationship wasn't worth

the heartache. She meant the world to me and I was faithful to the end. In my vulnerable innocent state, my college roommate changed my mind about women completely, along with an uncle who had molested me when I was younger. I found pleasure with him and along with others of the same gender - probably enough to count on one hand - I adjusted to knowing that my former heterosexual life would never be again. Sex is just what it is. Nothing more to look into it. I'm just interested in good head and nothing more. I don't believe in all that fancy love or romanticism that people look for all their lives. On top of that, I don't trust a woman as far as I can throw her and I decided the last thing I will ever ask from a woman is sex. Women tend to use it as a weapon."

"She used it like a weapon?" Amanda asked.

"Put it like this, she was the only twenty year old around with two cars, a townhouse and an expense account fit for a queen."

"Without sex? Good Lord, just imagine if she had given you sex."

"Who is to say she didn't?"

"You wouldn't be so hurt if she had. She dangled sex in front of you like a carrot to a rabbit. It disgusted you to know she gave it freely to your friends and associates, but not to you," Amanda concluded.

"I worked three jobs to keep her well provided for. I worked my tail off, and look where it got me? No where."

Amanda started to speak more about it, but stopped herself.

Niche saw her hesitation and drawled, "Please, don't hold back now."

She smiled at his sarcastic amusement. "I just thought you hastily made this decision. Look at you. You're successful and I bet she's probably selling herself to get back the wealth you put her in. Have you ever spoken to her since then?"

"Nope. I told myself I would never go back to Lansing, unless its on business, and I never have. That part of my life is over and I even made sure I gave my little sister a scholarship to an all girls college right past Lansing, to make sure I have no need to go home to that mess."

"You have no intentions of ever seeing her again?"

"Why should I?" He pulled up in front of her low-middle class house that she shared with her mother, who watched her son before she went to her night job at the plant. "Things seem a lot different when you retrace your steps. My mother always said you reap what you sow. She's probably doing that as we speak."

He really wanted to drop the subject. "See you Friday, Amanda," he said in his most faux happily voice, but his eyes were cold and clearly said, *'get the fuck out my car.'*

Feeling like a winter breeze had passed over her, she said stiffly, "Thank you for the ride, Mr. Quartermaine."

He watched her go into the house, full of thought, and then he decided to give Monique a call in her dormitory at her school.

"Hey big brother, how's it going in the Motor City?" Monique asked very happy to hear from her brother.

"As well as it can be, how are you?" he inquired.

She huffed angrily. "I hate this school. Do you know it's out in the middle of no where, or is that how you like it?"

"Mona, you're only sixteen. Being at a girl's school could be good for you."

"No way!" she exclaimed. "These girl's are too materialistic. I was fine in public school in Lansing."

"When you went, but when you decided to take the whole semester off without me knowing I think my decision to put you some where to make you into a fine young lady was the best decision I could have made. The streets of the capitol are no life for a teenager," Niche lectured taking off from Amanda's home and heading to a better side of town - his loft near downtown Detroit by the Fox Theatre and the two new sports stadiums.

"I was young, I learned my lesson, now can I go?" she said bitterly.

He laughed knowing how his sister hated lectures or bringing up things she had done in the past that was wrong. "It's not that easy, Monique. Penance takes a while," he told her jumping on the M-10 freeway. "As your favorite big brother, I will think about it. If I feel you've truly learned the error of your ways, maybe we'll consider a school closer to Detroit."

"But Lansing--"

"No!" he said adamantly brooking no refusal. "I won't do it, Monique and you'll do better by asking for a car for your birthday rather than going back to Lansing."

"Fine," she pouted through gritted teeth. Her tone of voice changed a bit as the thought of having a car for her upcoming birthday. "So can I get a Honda in black?"

Niche laughed at her audacity.

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

"You're really the best brother and guardian any girl could have, Dommie, and I love you very much." She laughed with him. "What are you up to?"

"I just wanted to get some gossip. I know you haven't been home in a few months, but you've always known the news around the neighborhood."

"Jeff is locked up for robbing banks, Lloyd's been pimping out his own daughter for money again and the police picked him up, and ... oh yeah, Janice got picked up for prostitution, just last week," she said.

"What?" He couldn't believe his ears.

"Yeah, she solicited to a cop in the park and they snatched her up faster than a speeding Porsche."

He was devastated to hear this and Amanda's words quickly came to mind. "You're shitting me."

"If I'm lying, I'm dying. I can believe it because the little wench was nothing but a prostitute to you, just not giving up the *pu-nanni*. You reap what you sow, big brother."

Thoughtfully, he said, "Yeah, I remember someone just telling me that."

"Aren't you going to invite your best sister to Motown this summer? Please don't make me sit around here all summer long. I'll go crazy!"

"Yeah, I'll see what I have planned in my business and we'll go from there," he promised. "Take care, Monique. I love you."

Hanging up, his mind began to swirl with a lot of ifs. What if she hadn't cheated on him? He wouldn't have become the person he was now, but he also wouldn't be this sexual orientation. Maybe he had made a hasty decision and was only sticking with this because he didn't want to take any more chances with his heart when it concerned women.

Chapter 16

Returning home, Michelle checked her computer for e-mails and dialed in the store's computer for the financial report she printed out on a daily basis to check sales, inventory, and so forth. She made some notes to discuss with Elise and Amanda at the next manager's meeting.

Anthony called about an hour later and told her not to get undressed then gave her instructions to where he wanted her to come. Strangely when she arrived she was flabbergasted to know his new loft was located at Niche's place. It was too coincidental, but convenient for her. Austin opened the door to the second floor loft, eagerly greeting her, very excited to see her.

After letting her know Anthony was getting out the shower, Austin said in a very serious tone. "He's improving a lot and I have you to thank."

She bent down to eye level to him and smiled gratefully. "He would have improved eventually, but thank you. I hope I have a lot more to do with him, in the days to come."

Austin kissed her cheek. "I hope so too."

She flushed at his praises.

"Austin, it's past your bedtime," Anthony said, closing the worn robe around his body.

Austin sighed in disappointment. "Alright, but I couldn't leave her out here alone. That would be so rude, Tony."

After Austin left to go over into his area, Anthony kissed her in greeting. "I didn't think you'd get here so fast."

"Amazingly, I found it quickly, because Niche owns this loft complex," she said, after giving him a passionate kiss.

"Seriously? I thought he was in financials."

"Well he is, but when people had loans to pay off, they would often use property as payback. He would keep some, or he would sell it. The previous owners of this place had a slight gambling problem and a horrible embezzlement made them file for bankruptcy. They came to Niche to help them out in a tough situation and Niche was glad to offer his assistance and money at a price. The loft caught his eye for some reason as drab as the outside is, but he made a home of it."

"That must be depressing for Niche," he said.

She frowned not getting his meaning. "What do you mean by that, Anthony?"

He shrugged meaning no real disrespect. "That everyone he chooses to keep in his life only wants him for money?"

Defensively she said, "Niche offered me the money for the store and I'm working my butt off to pay him back."

He pulled her close and kissed her to calm her nerves. "I wasn't making a disagreement about you or any of the other people who Niche had chosen to have around him, just about Niche himself."

"He's rich and eccentric - a little deviated and confused, but he's a great guy. He's going to make a great landlord and a great neighbor."

"Neighbor?" he inquired with a raise of one brow making him even more devilishly handsome.

"He lives on the top two floors," she told him. It amazed her how her body reacted sexually to him even when they weren't even discussing making love. She could feel her heart quickening just by his proximity and her blood rushing through her veins by just knowing soon he would touch her, kiss her, and take her to heights no one could possibly imagine.

"Two floors?" Anthony asked.

"He lives on the first level, and the second level he entertains. Which reminds me, he's invited you to a small gathering he has going on in two days and tomorrow night I would like you to escort me to a dinner party where I'm to meet my cousin."

Anthony frowned caught off guard by her double invitations. Was she asking or telling him? "And if I had plans?"

"Then I understand," she said honestly, but there was a plea in her eyes.

"So what time should I come over to your place tomorrow?"

Michelle hugged him in thanks, but then moved away from him to calm her body down. Should he know how sexually attractive she was to him? Or did he already sense her wantonness and was just teasing her with inane talk. "Now what did you say about bringing my sweet tooth with me?" she questioned, bringing up their previous conversation over the phone.

He smirked wickedly and she delighted in seeing those beautiful eyes dance over her face and body. "Let me show you around first, then, we'll take care of your sweet tooth," he promised.

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

She noted how he had erected a wall to give them privacy for his bedroom area and was installing a private bathroom shower area as well to go along.

Anthony let her know the manager, Niche employed approved of all the changes after Anthony told him he had remodeled before.

"You have?" she asked amazed when he told her this.

He nodded. "I use to make extra money helping some guy, who did home and church remodeling. I learned quickly and he knew a lot. Educating myself with home and business improvements helped me forget the life I had walked away from. I would work until I was exhausted; taking little to no pay from him just to make myself sleep at night." "Was this because of Clarissa?" she asked, remembering what he had told her of his past love.

He nodded again, and then became tight lipped and she knew this meant he didn't want to speak of it anymore.

* * *

Awaking the next morning, she found a note and key on the bed beside her, but he was gone.

Belle',

En route to train station with Austin so he can start school, then I will be having a meeting with some legal friends.

Would like to have lunch at my place if you get a moment in your busy day about two. I would like to discuss something important with you. Leave a note with your intentions or be here at two.

Anthony

Michelle took the key, washed up, and left going straight upstairs. Niche told her to meet him at ten at his place. He was surprised to see her on time. She told him about his new tenants and he frowned. "You sure?"

"Yes, they moved in yesterday," she said assuredly coming in and sitting on the tan leather couch that went excellent with Niche's beautiful sense of taste and style around the loft.

He went over to a file cabinet and pulled out some paper work. "Well look-ah here. I should have known he'd use his real name."

"What do you mean his real name?" she asked coming over to the file cabinet. Standing beside Niche, she was able to see the file he had pulled out.

Niche passed her the pager, and ordered her to have a seat on the love seat next to him. "His name is Jacoby Anthony Austin Brooks and yes he does have a Harvard Law Degree because my building manager checked all his credentials. He attended Wayne State for four years studying pre-law until he went away. Before he left, though he was seeing a Clarissa Edmonds according to a lot of classmates. I found this out on my own when I was looking up some of the numbers on his pager. He was head over heels in love with the girl. Do you know who she is?"

"I know a little bit about her. Is that a problem?" she asked worriedly.

"Yes and no. Edmonds Industries use to be very well known suppliers for the big three until Clarissa's father decided to use his company in a high stakes poker game in Traverse City. He lost it all and his wife, Claudia Blackwell, divorced the husband, taking the children."

"Clarissa broke Anthony's heart."

"The girl trampled all over it according to Jasmine Bellini, a friend of mine, and a schoolmate of Mr. Brooks. Her number was on the pager and I knew it as soon as I saw it that we knew someone in common. According to Jasmine, Clarissa was using him, like some other women I've known, but then so did her mother who seduced him too. What's truly sick about all this is that his son, is also his stepbrother. His stepmother married his father and Clarissa is his stepsister. His father, who disowned Mr. Brooks and turned his back on his son and fought to keep the scandal quiet. He's been hurt pretty badly about that too, especially because his father never forgave him. Not even on his death bed."

"That's tragic," Michelle said, instantly feeling a lot more pity for Anthony.

Niche was sympathetic to this knowledge as well. "True and I do feel like an ass for not understanding him, until now. I can see why he has that rather cold exterior."

"I understand it so much better. Did you find out anymore?" Michelle asked.

"Isn't that enough?"

"I guess," she shrugged. "I just thought it could be something out there I could do to make him feel better."

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

"I think you're doing it," Niche assured her. "Sometimes a man just needs to find the right woman to make the demons go away. With time and a lot of love, you will."

Honestly, she admitted, "I don't want him. Not with the past still haunting him."

"If being with him, made the past just memories and not demons, would you allow yourself to love him?" Niche asked.

She seriously thought this through and finally nodded. "It would allow me to explore the option of love with him, but you know I have my own hang-ups, Niche. I can't be with a man, who really doesn't want to be with me. I want to know that I'm needed and loved in a relationship and not just anyone could be there because after a while, he's just going to wish he never got involved with me and want to move on, but he'll think I'm too sweet to leave. I don't want another Craig. I don't need another Craig."

"But this one is different, Michelle. He really seems like he cares a lot about you."

Yet, in Michelle's mind, Anthony had never told her if she was special in her life. He had too much stuff going on. How would she ever know if she was special to him? How would she ever know when she could care about him and not feel like she was in competition with Clarissa? Anthony had been hurt too much and to feel anything other than caring for him was a risk to Michelle's heart and piece of mind. He would probably never get over the hurt Clarissa had done to him, but he was not trying to forget it or even try to move on.

Michelle didn't mind being used as a bandage to soothe Anthony's demons, but she understood that she was just a temporary fix to his wounds, which would be up to him to want to heal. No love from another could ever fix what he was allowing to torment himself with.

Niche was a little jealous, but he didn't want Michelle to be anything other than a friend to him. She reminded him of Monique so much and seeing she was never hurt or being there for her emotionally gave him brotherly pleasure. Holding her close, he wished her all the happiness in the world.

Chapter 17

Seeing Austin off was a major step. He'd grown quite fond of the young boy as a true son. Knowing the truth about his relationship to the boy, made Anthony want even better for Austin. In truth, Austin had been his only reason for going on with his life – even before he knew about him as a son. That Michelle pushed him to get up off his butt to make a better man of himself, Anthony knew it was really Austin that kept him on this earth and hope that something good would come of Anthony's existence.

These past few days of his life reflections made Anthony understand how it must of pained his father to know Austin wasn't his son, but want him to take the place of the son who had betrayed him. He also understood how pain could cause a man to go to his grave never forgiving the only child for a wrong, but hating oneself for being stubborn enough to take it that far.

His father had other demons chasing him to his grave as well, and no matter what Anthony felt, his father's demon's were because of him. Yet, life was what one made of it, and if Anthony allowed these demons to continue to possess him, there would be nothing to live for despite the love he felt for Austin and the emotions that were surfacing for Michelle, which was what happened to his mother. When she knew Anthony had made his final decision to live with his father, she didn't want to live anymore, and killed herself.

Anthony had made the decision to live with his father because he felt it was his fault his parents were broken apart. If he had not found out his father was sleeping with other women, his mother never would have demanded a divorce. How was he supposed to know what his mother would do to herself when the same women who were throwing themselves at his father were also throwing themselves at Anthony?

He decided to physically go find Sharrisse, since he was free of Austin and didn't have any plans until two, which he had already prepared for. His old law school associate, Jasmine Bellini, informed him of the audit results Monday, because Sharrisse could not be found. Jasmine also reported not only had all the money had been dwindled from the trust, and excused as for the child's benefit in bad investments by Claudia, but the business he left tethering into oblivion in Sharrisse's hands had been dismantled only a month after his departure. Yet, Sharrisse had never spoken of this in the many times he had talked with her.

He would have killed her if she were standing in front of him. All these years she had lied to him telling him the business was still in good shape.

Jasmine also told him, Sharrisse had not received her law degree nor passed the bar as she had told Anthony and sold off his business to just get it off her hands. The money she had been sending him was from his mother's trust fund, which now had just enough to get Austin through one more year of school before it was depleted as well.

He didn't think things could get much worse for him, but Jasmine assured him she was still willing to open a law practice with him. The offices where he had his law practice was still in his hands at least because the lease had been paid for in advance for up to ten years. Anthony would still need the money to front his side of the partnership. He had someone in mind to assist with this endeavor, but first he wanted to find Sharrisse and have her give him her side of the story. He blamed himself for all of this. How could he trust a woman related to Claudia and think she would just become scared to do right? No, women weren't like that. They were deceitful creatures that thrived on tearing a man down.

All except his Michelle. She was made for him and she would make all things better for him emotionally. Anthony knew he needed her in his life and if no man was ever fortunate to see the goodness in her then be damned them because he had no intentions of ever letting her go. Once all this was over, he would pay off his past debts, get whatever he could from this ridiculous marriage and get a divorce. He wanted to be free to marry Michelle when she felt she could be with him. He understood her hesitation with her feelings. He was fortunate to have a woman in his life that gave him the time he needed to get rid of his *demons*. She was a woman who demanded she is the only one involved in his life and this was what he wanted to give her.

Retracing one of his business accounts still open, he found a recent address on Sharrisse in Lansing, Michigan. She wasn't home when he drove up in Jasmine's borrowed Honda, so he drove to a view where he could see the small townhouse. About seven at night, a dark brown Cadillac Catera drove in the driveway and a skinny figure bounced out. He could tell by the flash of long synthetic hair that it was Sharrisse from afar, even if she did resemble Clarissa, but he knew Clarissa to be more full figured.

Going up to the door after the small figure bounced in the house with a package full of bags, he rang the doorbell. She opened the door smiling. Realizing whom it was, the smile slowly faded, replaced by a look of horror and she tried to slam the door with terror surfacing in her black doe eyes. He stuck his foot in the way, stopping the door in its track and she turned around and ran, but with the quickness, he shoved the door open, caught up with her,

and tripped her. As angry as Anthony was he didn't bother to catch her as she fell.

Sharrisse screamed as her lithe body hit the ground hard, sliding on the large Oriental rug in the foyer. Quickly, she turned on her back to shield herself with her arms, while cowering to brace if he tried to hit her. Anthony jumped on top of her, covering her mouth with his hand after slamming the door shut.

Fighting with her small form against his large one was useless, but she tried; yet when her body tired out, she lay helpless looking ready to die.

"I ought to kill you," he growled.

She shook her head frantically terrified and he took his hand away ready to hear her lies.

"I didn't do anything, Anthony. When Auntie found out I was giving you information, she said she'd make sure I didn't touch any of the money. She said I wouldn't get a dime and she'd get the marriage annulled or she'd let everyone find out about how our marriage is a sham by threatening to go public and embarrass us."

"You should have let her, since you were stupid to believe that crock of shit!" He stood up wanting to get away from her. Sharrisse disgusted him. "I don't care about the money anymore. I thought it was important to me in the past, but in this last year I've changed and I've found someone."

He knew Sharrisse couldn't believe what she was hearing. The old Anthony Brooks not caring about money? To live without it for him in the past was to live without air. She probably assumed this was impossible and he had to be up to something. The old Anthony Brooks just didn't walk away from a marriage without a dime, especially from a wife who had literally drove herself into bankruptcy all on her own without him being there with his money.

"What about your son?" she asked, in an effort to stump him.

"I intended to get his trust, but only for him. I don't want it for myself. I can survive, I always have," he calmly explained.

Anthony could tell she was still not believing her ears by the disbelief in her voice.

"A couple of hard years on the street could not have changed a cold ruthless greedy bastard like you, Anthony. Before you left on some silly homeless tangent you were the epitome of greed," Sharrisse said.

Standing up, he moved away from her to allow her to get up too. Her words about his past sunk in slowly. He had been a man bent on only

money and power. "You're right, but I'm not that person anymore, Sharrisse," he disagreed.

"And this person you met won't care you're penniless." She was trying to draw blood.

"Not one bit." He smirked to himself just remembering how wonderful Michelle made him feel. It was amazing how someone could change his life and how he wanted his life to change because of it. Prior to this he was under the misconception women always tried to change men. Michelle had never told him to change anything and he loved her more for this. She accepted him for who he was and that endeared her to him more.

Narrowing her eyes in skepticism, she said, "Anthony, I don't believe a word you're saying. I know you're up to something." She used a hallway mirror to primp her hair back in place. When he said nothing of this allegation, she feigned indifference and shrugged "Well fine. We'll play your game." She turned around to face him steeling her features to hide the hurt of losing him. "You draw up the papers and I will sign them."

Anthony had the feeling, she was just telling him what she wanted him to hear so he wouldn't kill her. Yet, just by looking at her, he knew Sharrisse still thought of him as the old Anthony Brooks set on one course of road in life and that was to get money. She probably also thought she could have him back, but Anthony had stayed sober while he was on the streets so what wicked intentions Sharrisse had for him, he would love to see her try so he could watch her fall flat on her desperate pathetic face.

Deciding to get off the subject of himself, he asked, "Where's the money, Sharrisse?"

Fear returned in her eyes. She wasn't so confident anymore. "What do you mean?" she asked as innocently as her skank ass could feign, which wasn't much. Her eyes were so wide that she looked like a deer caught in the taillights.

This was a stalling façade, but Anthony had no time for silly skanky games. His money and business were nothing like he had left them.

"What happened to all that money, Sharrisse?" he demanded to know. "All you had to do was maintain this business. That's it!"

"Oh Anthony!" she cried dramatically as if he should have known. "You expected me to do all that work by myself!"

"You were capable—"

She cut him off in a snit. "It was too much all by myself. Just told you I could because it was a chance to do with the money whatever I wanted to. I know if you stayed around you'd put me on an allowance."

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

“I had done that! How did you get the money out?”

“As your wife and proxy of your business I was able to withdraw what I needed in order to get what I wanted,” she explained sheepishly.

He wanted to wring her scrawny neck. “You embezzled money through my practice? Was this before or after you were disbarred?”

This caught her off guard. “You knew about that?!”

Anthony was so angry he slammed his fist in the nearest wall and dented the plaster. “Answer the fucking question, bitch!”

“It was my money!” she defended vehemently. “And you had not right treating like a child with an allowance!”

“Why not?” he raged. “You would have had more in the long run, you stupid skank! Now look! You’ve got nothing to show for it.” Anthony really looked around the place. In all its décor, there were sparse pieces of furniture around, and a table near the door piled high with unpaid bills.

In his fury, he knocked the table over kicking it clear across the room. “You’ve drained every damn account for your own selfishness. You needed to be treated like a child because you have no control over yourself!”

She tried to calm the situation down and say quietly. “If you had not withdrawn the funds for Austin’s education-“

He grabbed her shoulders roughly and shook her hard. Did this bitch know how close she was coming to getting knocked the fuck out!

“I don’t have anything! I don’t have a dime, Anthony!” Sharrisse sobbed ashamed.

“Start with this place and the clothes on your back, skank! And you can tell your crazy ass Auntie on me and there’ll be hell to pay,” he promised.

Releasing her and going to the door, he turned just his head to tell her, “Look bitch! You sell, pawn, or hooker whatever you have to get some money in that account or I will personally have you arrested for embezzlement. Don’t try me like a fucking sample cause you won’t like the taste of my wrath, Skank!”

* * *

Arriving back at his new place an hour before he was suppose to meet Michelle, he parked Jasmine’s car in the parking lot provided for the tenants.

Niche kept an upscale looking classy place, but made it affordable for anyone.

Anthony had extra money hidden here and there with people, but he ne4ver had a real excuse to get the money until he knew he really needed to. So he had called in a couple of I.O.U.'s and ended up with several thousand dollars to pay off the rent, get the necessary utilities put on and even get the furniture and fixtures he needed for the place.

His years on the street afforded him many contacts that he knew living his spoil rich life could have never afforded him.

Looking around the parking lot as he got out the car, he noted a large dark burgundy Expedition parked very close.

The SUV was custom made for whoever owned it, with black gold accessories – grill, footstep, rims, and so on.

That was why he was shocked when the driver's door opened and a lean woman, no more than five and a half feet got out and stood staring at him. That was a pretty big vehicle for such a small looking woman.

She was dressed in an all black leather body suit accompanied by knee high boots with three inch thick heels. Her lack hair was drawn up in a tight ponytail, but he suspected it to be about shoulder length and thick.

He nodded at her, but she didn't return the nod and she didn't stop staring at him.

An unexpectant tap on his right shoulder caught him off guard. Anthony swirled sharply, but before he could see who tapped him, he felt a large fist connect to the front of his face.

Chapter 18

He wasn't sure how long he had laid on the ground, but as soon as he came to his senses he stood up ready to defend himself.

"Aww Lethal," the woman said behind Anthony. "I thought you were going to knock him the fuck out."

"I did, Onyx," Lethal Heart said, standing akimbo at Anthony's feet.

The woman clicked her tongue in discrepancy. "I don't see fuck on the ground. And he looks like he could actually give you a run for your money. Want me to handle him?" She adjusted her pants and rolled her sleeves up as if it would be short work.

Lethal shed his black McIntosh and placed it on the hood of the nearest car.

"What the fuck was that for?" Anthony bellowed glaring up at him as if he had lost his mind. He clearly remembered the deadly looking man from the secret room and in the light of day, Lethal Heart looked even more noxious.

As Lethal preceded to undue the cuffs of his silk shit, he said, "I thought I told you to stay the fuck away from her. I don't like to repeat myself."

Anthony's heart raced. This man was about his height and weight, but that dangerous presence was stronger than ever and even though Anthony probably could give him a good fight, he had a feeling this man could rip him a new asshole.

"Now wait one damn minute. I love her!"

"Ha!" the woman said revolted. "That is the worst excuse to get out of an ass whooping."

Tired of her mouth, Anthony looked over his shoulder at her. "Shut the fuck up, bitch!" he snarled.

Lethal didn't wait for Anthony to turn around. This time his fist connected to Anthony's jaw sending him across several car hoods. "You'd better watch your damn mouth when you're talking to my sister, bastard!" Lethal warned.

Anthony wiped the blood from his lip that had seeped from the cut inside his mouth.

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

This Lethal guy was looking for a fight, Anthony surmised. And if he didn't put up his dukes, the woman would be right; He was going to get his ass whooped.

Lethal shed his silk black shirt and this gave Anthony time to collect his equilibrium, get off the floor again, and prepare to give the man a real run for his money.

* * *

Michelle left Niche's penthouse in enough time to get down to Anthony's place. Niche said he had given the pager to Lethal's sister, Onyx Heart, who would find out more info on Anthony.

She didn't feel as if she was being nosey, but now she was just curious about him.

Playboy rich guy decides to all of a sudden shun the life and go to the street? What had happened so traumatically to make a man turn his back on money? Lots of money, according to Niche.

Had this Clarissa really screwed him to a point where he wanted no identity, no life? Michelle craved to find out more about Anthony.

A man who looked like a food delivery guy was standing at Anthony's door knocking.

"I'm looking for Mr. Brooks. He instructed me to bring the good over hot and fresh at this time," the man said.

Michelle figured this was for their lunch so she let the man in to set everything in the kitchen, but when she offered to pay him, he shook his head insulted.

"My boss can't ever repay, Mr. Brooks for what he did, ma'am. This was no problem."

She put her wallet away. "What did Mr. Brooks do?"

"Some pro-bono legal work for my boss. It was like he moved mountains in the legal system to get what had to be done," the man explained still in awe of whatever Anthony had done. He had genuine respect for Anthony and Michelle sighed enjoying the fact that she wasn't the only one that felt Anthony was a good person despite the rough exterior he tried to make people perceive of him.

Checking her watch, she saw it was a couple of minutes after two o'clock and it didn't feel like Anthony's character to be late for his own lunch, nor forget it.

Thirty minutes after, Michelle really began to worry and started to pace. After forty-five minutes, there was scratching heard on the door and she rushed to open it.

Anthony almost fell in because he had been leaning against the door. She didn't know if she should have been grateful to have caught him because he was almost like dead weight.

"Oh my God! Are you okay?"

He mumbled something incoherently as she helped him to the couch where he laid down. There were large bruises on his face and he had a black eye.

"Who did this to you?!" she asked as he groaned while trying to take off his shirt and jacket.

"W-Water," he mumbled. "P-Please, Michelle, some water."

Running to the kitchen, she frantically got him water and found a first aid kit in the cabinet. "I'll call nine-one-one," she said as she came back to the couch, but stopped instantly in horror as she saw the black and blue marks all over his chest, side and back. "Sweet Jesus!" she cried dropping the kit.

"No calls," he ordered reaching for the water.

She picked up the kit and handed him the glass. "Who did this, Anthony?" she now demanded to know tearing the first aid kit open and getting alcohol swabs out. There was a cut on the edge of his scalp that was bleeding. Blood had started running down the side of his face and behind his ear.

There was a knock on the door and Michelle ran to answer it hoping it was Niche or someone who could give her answers.

A dark dressed exotic looking African American woman stood there with indifference in her face. They stared at each other for a moment. "You're Michelle, aren't you?" the woman asked raising a black brow in curiosity.

"Yes," Michelle admitted and then warily asked, "Who are you?"

"Onyx Heart." She pulled the familiar looking pager out her inside leather jacket pocket. "Your boyfriend forgot this."

Michelle took the pager as Onyx slipped past her coming in the loft uninvited and going straight to the couch to look down at Anthony.

“You don’t look so good,” Onyx surmised.

“You bitch!” Anthony grumbled.

Onyx took a close look at the cut.

“Who did this to him?” Michelle demanded to know to the aggravating women.

“My brother beat up your boyfriend,” Onyx explained, pulling out the kit some swabs and liquid bandages.

“Why?” Michelle asked, as Onyx handed the first aid items to her.

Again Onyx reached in her inside pocket and pulled out a bottle of pills. Opening the bottle, she put one in Anthony’s hand. “That’ll help with the pain.” Facing Michelle, her look was imperial, as if she were surmising on whether to allow Michelle to live or die. “Lethal doesn’t like to repeat himself.”

Michelle interrupted her. “Lethal Heart? That’s your brother? He did this?”

“Your boyfriend disobeyed a direct order from Lethal - That was to stay away from you.”

“But it was consensual. Why didn’t Lethal come to me?”

Onyx waved that away. “We got the whole story from Dommie. I don’t need your side of the story.”

Remembering that Onyx had the pager, Michelle knew “Dommie” was Dominique. This was how Lethal probably found out about what happened with Anthony.

“What I do is none of your business or your brother’s!” Michelle vehemently raged.

“And what Lethal decrees won’t be ignored. Your boy had to pay the piper and trust me, he’s paid his debt.” Onyx smirked in amusement. “Gave Lethal a real nice workout, but if it had been me, I’d have killed him.”

Anthony mumbled again, “Bitch.”

Onyx shrugged. “There are no bones broken,” she assured Michelle disappointedly. “Treat the cut and he’ll be good as new in two or three days...or weeks, depending on how fast he heals.”

Michelle was almost tempted to agree with Anthony’s sentiments as she watched Onyx leave. Rushing over to Anthony, she helped him take the pill Onyx left and then tended the scratch in his head with the first aid items Onyx had picked out.

Sylvia Hubbard

Anthony winced as she applied T.L.C., but he looked extremely grateful for her care. The pill was lessening the pain, but making him sleepy.

He had resolved to speak with Michelle about *everything*. That's why he had called the date with her, but how could he explain anything when his jaw felt like fire and his body felt like a brick wall had fallen on him.

Michelle heard him mumbling something.

"Wanna...something...about...past..."

Frowning, she interrupted him with a soft kiss to his lips. "Rest, Anthony," she ordered.

In a very clear drowsy voice, he said, "I need you, Michelle, and I never want to hurt you."

Chapter 19

Nervously, she knocked at the beautiful townhouse of the Gates. An hour before this, Niche had managed to elude her and leave a message on her voicemail to let her know there was some business he needed to take care of.

He let her know that he had called Mrs. Gates and let her know he couldn't make it and she had been fine with that.

The door opened to a very striking childlike version of Kimberly. She smiled humbly and said proudly, "My mother told me to open the door because Pamela's cousin was here. Are you Pammie's cousin?"

Her eyes were wide with innocence and enthusiasm as she awaited Michelle's answer to her question.

"Yes, I am. I'm Michelle."

"Good. Did you park on the front or the side?"

"On the side. Is that fine?"

"Yes, ma'am. Leroy's not around to pull the car to the side so if it snows it won't be difficult to get to the car. Please enter our humble abode."

The townhouse she stepped into was more than humble. It spoke of a simple exquisite design, but the house itself spoke of order.

"I'm Janae Gates. Would you like some hot chocolate?" she asked politely after introducing herself.

The child couldn't have been more than eight, but her mannerism was much more mature.

"No, I'm fine," Michelle said.

"All right, then my mother will be down soon. I have to attend to Jacob and the others. Do you need anything else?"

Michelle shook her head. "I'm good. Thank you."

When she was left alone, she moved to the fireplace and looked over the pictures of the Gates family life.

Kimberly was hugging a very formidable man that looked a bit too serious. Never would Michelle say they made a very happy couple, but looks were definitely deceiving by the peace in the house.

"Ms. Coleman...I mean Michelle!" Kimberly exclaimed at the doorway dressed in a simple black dress and walking eloquently towards Michelle.

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Michelle could immediately tell that the woman had either just had kids or was expecting because the swell of her bosom in the dress was abnormal and the dress must have been bought before pregnancy.

They shook hands as Kimberly said, “The baby fed longer than expected and took forever to relax and go to sleep.”

“You just had a baby?” Michelle asked.

“Yes, Jacob’s six months old and quite a handful compared to my others.”

“How many do you have?”

“Five in all. Jaenae’s my oldest.”

Michelle frowned. Maybe the order she thought the household had was a lie. Four small children and a baby? Plus, Pamela, who was more like a child herself according to Kimberly.

Could this woman actually raise her cousin right, along with devoting her time to her own children as well?

Putting these doubts to the back of her head as she complimented, “I love your home, Kimberly.”

“Thank you, although getting it ready for the holiday as been hectic. Jaelen wants a real Christmas. You should have seen him yesterday trying to put the lights up on the house.”

Frowning, Michelle noted, “I didn’t see any lights when I came up.”

“That’s because when he fell off the ladder the third time, he decided to wait for Leroy to return to put them up.”

“Leroy?”

Kimberly explained, “That’s my brother. He’s been helping Jaelen with a new ordering system. I’m amazed at his abilities. Leroy’s extremely intelligent when it comes to addition and subtraction.”

Two young boys about five ran into the room, happily calling for “Momma,” but when they noticed there was a guest, they immediately settled down.

Michelle was amazed by their respectful behavior as the identical twins nosily cleared their throats for their mother’s attention.

“Yes, Thor? Yes, Wesley?” Kimberly answered pleasantly.

“Da says Leroy’s on the phone. He’s stuck in Chicago,” one of the twins responded.

“Can you excuse me, Michelle? I must take this call.” She turned to the twins and said, “Thor, tell Jaelen to please hurry with that business and stop being rude to our company. Wesley, please entertain, Ms. Michelle.”

“Can I do my backward flips?” Wesley asked excitedly.

Kimberly just gave him a sharp motherly glare and left the room.

“Nice try, nosebleed,” Thor said, before following his mother out the room.

When they were gone, Wesley went over to Michelle. He looked her over and then said, “You look a little like Pammie’s mother. She tried to kill us.”

Michelle gasped, but before she could say anything a deep growl said, “Rudeness is the weak man’s imitation of strength.”

A young man with the meanest expression on his face had spoken near the doorway. He couldn’t have been more than six, but he was tall.

“Eric Hoffer?” Wesley guessed. “But I wasn’t being rude.”

“Talking about family business is rude,” The young man snapped.

“Family business?” Wesley questioned. “We weren’t talking about hair care.”

Jaenae returned to the room and Wesley repeated what the young man said.

Clicking her tongue, Jaenae said in a mock southern tone, “Why Jason, I do declare.” She put on an Oscar worthy performance of Scarlett O’Hare from *Gone with the Wind*. “I believe that would be the wrong quote to lay out.”

“Anything was needed to shut his mouth. Especially anything about being rude. He gabs like there’s no tomorrow,” Jason grumbled.

Despite the pure anger and frustration in his voice, Jaenae giggled again. “A mistake in judgment isn’t fatal, but too much anxiety about judgment is...Paulene Kael.”

Jason grimaced hard. “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance...Derek Bok.”

“Touché, Brother,” Jaenae said, bowing in defeat.

Wesley leaned over to Michelle to whisper, “Jaenae hardly ever loses the quote game lately. You must be something special.”

“Quote game?” Michelle asked flustered.

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Jason moved over to a stack of books and flipped through them as if no one had spoken.

Jaenae answered, “As a way to curb Jason’s inner fury, my mother challenged his intellect – what little he has- at three, she gave us a book of quotes. Now, I use it as a way to irk my brother, but it still controls his temper.”

“Temper?” Michelle questioned nervously.

“His tongue,” Wesley said before breaking out in cackling laughter.

Jason looked over in disgust.

Jaenae explained noticing the evident confusion on Michelle’s face. “My brother has a...sharp tongue. He would never strike with his fist because not only would he disappoint Mom, but Daddy would...tear him a new one...whatever that means.”

Michelle almost giggled. Despite her initial misgivings about the children they were uniquely well behaved – even Jason.

A voice cleared at the door and even Michelle was drawn to sharp attention as an older meaner looking version of Jason stepped in the room.

Immediately, Michelle was reminded of D’Angelo the R&B singer, even down to the corn rolls, but with the cruelest expression.

“Michelle Coleman? I’m Jaelen Gates,” he said, extending his hand in greeting.

“Yes, Mr. Gates.”

“My wife believes you were intimidated by our initial conversation.” He raised an inquisitive dark brow.

Warily, she shook his hand and lied, “N-No, sir. I wasn’t.”

With a serious face, he said, “Good, cause Kimberly hates when I intimidate her friends.”

“I don’t think they’d tell you if they were, Daddy,” Jaenae said matter-of-factly.

He turned that glare at her, but unlike Michelle, Jaenae smiled widely and threw her arms around his waist.

“You’re still not getting allowance,” Jaelen snipped.

Jaenae huffed.

Tenderly, he touched her cheek and Michelle watched as the mean man turned into a gentle giant.

“You may be disappointed if you fail, but you are doomed if you don’t try.”

“Beverly Sills,” she guessed. “So if I wait an hour I can ask again and be successful?”

“Quite possibly, honey.” He gently pushed a lock o hair out the way.

“Spare the rod, spoil the child,” Jason quipped.

Everyone looked at the very bothered young man and the room went quiet until Wesley said, “You didn’t quote the source.”

Now every looked at Wesley.

“What?!” he asked.

“Momma would tear your ears up if she heard you say that,” Jaenae responded.

“I know it’s from the Bible, but the rules of the game said you or someone on your side must quote the source or it doesn’t count.”

Jason looked as if he wanted to do physical damage to Wesley.

“This is coming from someone who has never challenged Jason?” Jaenae asked.

“That’s because you and Thor do it so well,” Wesley responded.

Kimberly entered the room. “Dinner’s ready. Jason, be a dear and escort our guest to the dining room. Thor’s escorting Pamela already.”

Jason’s look instantly softened and he immediately came over to Michelle and offered her his arm.

Wesley was escorting Kimberly, and Jaelen was escorting Jaenae.

As they walked, Jason said quite honestly, “My mother says when I escort a lady I am supposed to make idle conversation, but since I know I am bad at it, my dad says to just say I am a young man of few words so pardon if I don’t indulge in generic conversation easily.”

“And what if the lady is too young to understand some of the words?” Michelle asked.

His beautiful cinnamon brown eyes looked up in high amusement that was not portrayed by the serious look on the rest of his face. “Then they aren’t ladies and don’t deserve to be escorted by me.”

They had arrived at the holiday-decorated dining room. Jason helped her take a seat and then went down to the end of the table by his mother’s left side, but continued to stand just like all the other males in the room.

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Thor entered with a young woman of nineteen, whose head was down and she looked scared. Her escort seemed to be whispering words of confidence to her even after she was seated. Thor stood beside her, still holding her hand, her eyes now were down on her lap.

Jaelen cleared his throat again and all the males sat down at the same time. After the prayer, the food was politely passed around.

“You have a large family,” Michelle commented.

“The Brady’s had more,” Thor said proudly.

“True,” Michelle agreed and looked at Pamela, who wasn’t looking up and not eating, but somehow from sitting between Thor and Jaenae her plate was fixed.

Kimberly forced conversation by asking Pamela, “So Pamela, this is your cousin Michelle. Want to say something to her or ask her something?”

Pamela didn’t speak or even acknowledge that Kimberly had spoken.

Michelle decided to say a little bit about herself. “I’m Michelle, your cousin. Your mother and my mother were half-sisters. I live in Detroit and run a clothing boutique at the mall in Fairlane.”

Still Pamela didn’t say anything. This didn’t deter Kimberly as she asked, “Why don’t you tell her a little bit about yourself?”

Pamela whispered something. Everyone leaned in the table to hear.

Thor repeated, “She said her name is Pammie and she’s twenty.”

Kimberly grimaced nervously as she met eyes with Michelle, who didn’t look particularly impressed by everything.

Maybe her assumption of a well-controlled household by the over domineering Jaelen was close to absolute power. Pamela would probably do better – or feel freer- in a nursing home that could take care of her needs and nurture her properly.

Dinner progress with the other children making amusing anecdotes and teasing each other in a very positive manner. Pamela never spoke up again and picked at her food.

When Thor made an attempt to remove Pamela’s plate, Jaelen snapped his finger.

Pamela leaned forward and quickly ate a bit of each item on her plate.

“Pamela, could you clean your own plate off and take it to the kitchen,” Kimberly said slow and clearly. “And then gather the tea and coffee and join us in the front room.”

Pamela took the plate and rushed past the other children going in the kitchen. A few minutes later, all the children came out to kissed their parents and bided Michelle a goodnight. Jaenae kissed every one on the cheek making sure her father was last and giving him a special extra long kiss.

“Did you know in some countries men pay women to kiss them, Daddy?” she asked innocently.

“Those are women you never wish to be, sweetheart,” Jaelen retorted. “Nice try.”

Jaenae looked angrily at her brother, Jason, who was at the door giggling. She growled angrily and Jason ran away. Jaenae was right after him.

Jaelen looked at his wife, who also looked highly amused.

“You need to really stop taking him around Uncle Lethal,” Kimberly reprimanded trying to sound perturbed, but unable to say it with a straight face.

Michelle gasped. It was highly improbably that there were two men who were named Lethal in Detroit. “You know Lethal Heart?” she asked excitedly.

“Unfortunately,” Kimberly said stiffly. “But if you have any children, please don’t bring them around that man.”

“That’s their godfather, Kim,” Jaelen defended.

Michelle looked a little guilty. Lethal was a bad man. He had helped her do an atrocious act of revenge to a man who had not done one thing to her.

“Let’s adjourn to the front room,” Jaelen said abruptly seeing the instant displeasure in his wife’s eyes.

As they all sat around in the first room Michelle had been shown to, she was still shaken by the guilt overwhelming her about Anthony. Maybe all this time his goal really wasn’t to fall in love with her, but to make her fall in love with him and then break her heart?

Pamela entered with the coffee tray composed like a lady but as soon as the tray was settled, her chin attached itself to her collarbone as she sat next to Kimberly.

At least sitting, Michelle was able to see soft features on the young woman’s face that reminded her a little of her mother.

“You’re beautiful, Pamela,” Michelle said. “My mother had soft dark Indian skin just like you. Lots of freckles too. Just like you. My skin turned

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out darker. Most likely from my father's side, but I have my mother's freckles, you just have to look real hard to find them."

Pamela peeked at Michelle and then looked back down.

After a moment, Pamela started to giggle. Looking back up at Michelle, she said in a very childlike voice, "You mad a funny, didn't you?"

Michelle chuckled pretending to be caught off guard and embarrassed. "Yes, Pamela. I did."

The young woman came instantly alive and laughed again. "Did you like her funny, Aunt Kimberly?"

A relieved look on Kimberly's ace showed as she answered. "Yes, Pamela. I loved the funny."

"She don't have any freckles cause her skin's too dark. Right Uncle Jaelen?"

Even his features had softened. "Yes, Pamela."

Pamela's laughter died down and her face became depressed again.

"I need more tea in my coffee, Jaelen. Can you help me get it, while I check on the children?" Kimberly asked her husband in a rather sweet voice.

He arose and followed her out the room, both promising Pamela they'd be right back.

Seconds turned to minutes as Michelle patiently waited for Pamela to say something.

In the quietness of the room, Pamela's voice was clear as she said, "Aunt Kimberly says I need to show you what a good young lady I've become, so you won't take me away from what I love the most, but I don't know how to show you. Now I'm scared cause you don't look too happy about me being here, cause I didn't do what Aunt Kimmie said. You're like my mother. She always hid her emotions so you can't tell what's wrong. Not like Uncle Jaelen."

"Do you think Uncle Jaelen is too emotional?" Michelle asked.

"Emotional? You mean is he too mean? No, Uncle Jaelen just wears his heart on his sleeve and he says that's why his hugs are so good." She blushed.

Michelle felt that was a sweet sentiment from a man who seemed like a bad person, but of course for the people who he loved a different side would show.

"Are you happy here?"

Pamela earnestly looked up at Michelle to say, "I love my family here very much and I don't want to leave, Cousin Michelle."

Michelle mentally rewind their conversation in her head just as Kimberly and Jaelen came back in the room.

"What do you love the most about your new family, Pamela?" Michelle asked.

"Leroy," Pamela said without hesitation smiling from ear to ear. "But Aunt Kimberly says I have to go to school before I think about marriage."

"Does Leroy feel the same or understand her condition?" Michelle questioned everyone.

Kimberly tightly dismissed Pamela from the room to say goodnight to the children and then prepare to go to bed.

"I told Pamela a young lady needed education before marriage," Kimberly clarified.

"And was this a way to get her away from your brother because she's not old enough mentally to see she couldn't be compatible with Leroy? What if he dates another and brings her here? How will that make Pamela feel?"

Kimberly grimaced a bit, but her expression straightened as she cleared her voice. "Your questions deserves an answer, Michelle, but we should let you know that my brother Leroy is just as in love with Pamela. They've wanted to marry for a long time because they saw how happy Jaelen and I were married, but I wanted them to explore everything before they think about settling down and that includes getting an education. And before you jump the gun again and ask more questions, I should let you know that Leroy is mentally incapable, just like Pamela, but they understand what love is. They bonded instantly, which is why her mother and I got along so well."

"So why did my aunt want to kill you?"

Jaelen and Kimberly looked shocked that she knew this information.

"It wasn't that she wanted to kill me, she had no choice," Kimberly answered.

"I'm confused," Michelle said.

"Have a seat, Ms. Michelle," Jaelen ordered gently. "It's quite a story my wife is about to tell."

Chapter 20

Sitting up from his coma, he looked around the room with Michelle immediately on his mind. His body ached in places he didn't know muscles could ache in, but he was past feeling the pain. Not when he needed to tell Michelle the truth.

Their relationship couldn't go farther until he resolved the past and letting Michelle know about that past sooner than later would help in the healing process.

He was positive she was feeling his stress and anguish because he was still hiding something about himself.

Or was she still thinking he was angry about what she had done to him for the sake of revenge against an act she thought he committed.

Although Anthony had not committed an act – all the way, he was feeling quite guilty for the scare he had put her through. She was the real victim in this whole situation and he had yet to really make it up to her.

It was Anthony who was astonished that Michelle still didn't feel animosity for what he had done. He would have, but that was what made Michelle so attractive to him. Her sense of forgiveness. She was able to forgive and forget instantly.

Why no other man had tried to appreciate her, he couldn't figure that out, but Anthony was turning his life around and Michelle was the one women he knew would make him feel better. She had done so much to his soul so far and he could never repay her for the wake up call she had given him.

Moving to a mirror hanging by the door, he opened his shirt and cursed. Black and blue marks bruised his chest completely from Lethal's beating and Anthony couldn't even begin to count how many times the man had pummeled his chest like he was kneading dough.

Sitting back on the couch and he knew Michelle was not there. Most likely she had gone to the dinner party without him and he felt very guilty for that. Checking his watch he wondered if she was still there.

* * *

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Michelle couldn't believe what she had just heard. The two people, before the story Kimberly had told, would seem like an ordinary couple. What they had in common had been beyond Michelle – until the story.

Kimberly had weaved an unbelievable tale of force sex, revenge, greed and ultimately true love into a fifteen minute story that starred herself and her husband.

“So you had to rape Jaelen in order to produce a baby?” Michelle asked to be sure.

“Yes, my uncle figured I could get pregnant by Jaelen and he'd hurry and get my first husband's fortune before anyone knew that I really wasn't pregnant by my first husband. Once I was pregnant, my uncle planned on killing Jaelen, but with Leroy's help, I set Jaelen free,” Kimberly explained. “I then ran away and Jaelen spent years trying to find me. I met your aunt at a sperm bank that housed my first husband's deposit. A fire had led my uncle and I to believe that the donation was lost, but your aunt and I kept in touch and when the deposit was found, while I was on the run, she helped impregnate me with my first husband's sperm, after I had delivered the first set of twins by Jaelen.”

“So that's why Wesley and Thor only favor you and not Jaelen?” Michelle surmised.

“But I love them like my own,” Jaelen said fiercely.

“Shouldn't you still hate her?” Michelle questioned Jaelen.

He looked as if that was the most absurd question he'd ever heard. “Why should I? Once I realized that Kimberly was forced to do what she did and then I also realized that the woman is selfless to the point of self-sacrificing, how could I hate any inch of her? She is the most beautiful woman inside and out and I am honored to have her as my wife.”

His response left both women breathless. Michelle was envious for the love of this most passionate man.

“But I wasn't forced, when I raped him,” Michelle blurted her thoughts out loud.

Now it was Jaelen and Kimberly's turn to look confused.

“Is there something I should know about?” Kimberly asked Jaelen in a tease.

“Unless someone knocked me out again without my knowledge, Love,” he spoke.

“Oh no,” Michelle blushed realizing she had spoke her thoughts out loud and embarrassed. “I meant that I can’t believe that I am in the same type of situation except that I wasn’t forced.”

“Now we’re really confused, Ms Michelle. Please elaborate,” Jaelen insisted.

Taking a deep breath, Michelle began to tell them what had happened to her.

* * *

Knocking on Niche’s door, he was disappointed when no one answered. Michelle’s phone was off because every time he called it, it immediately pushed him to voicemail. Anthony started back to the elevator, but just as the doors opened he collided with Niche and *her!*

“What the fuck are you doing with her?” Anthony demanded glaring hard at Onyx Heart.

“She happens to be a close personal friend of mine, Anthony and I won’t have you speaking to my guest that way,” Niche said insulted.

“I’ll speak to whomever I please any fucking kind of way-“

Onyx moved faster than lightening as she knocked Niche out the way in Anthony couldn’t even began to replicate the complicated move that knocked him off his feet and had Onyx crouching over his body sitting on his chest with her legs firmly locking his arms down and his back plastered to the floor.

Leaning down with a smirk, she said, “Don’t make him say please, sir.”

“Onyx, please don’t kill him!” Niche begged. “Anthony, please don’t make her.”

Anthony only glared up at her, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew when to keep his mouth shut. The dark minx was more powerful than she appeared and he swore this had to be some special skills fighting she mastered in order to take down a man twice her size.

“You’re a smart man, Anthony, but you need to control that temper of yours.” She lifted off of him and even offered her hand out to help him up.

Anthony refused her gratuity and stood up on his own. His back was killing him, but he was damn if he wasn’t going to let this vixen know about it.

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“Where is she?” Anthony demanded of Niche.

“Who?” Niche asked.

“Michelle,” he said obviously.

“Oh, she went to the party. You were supposed to go with her, but Onyx tells me you were indisposed in pain.”

“I would like to get over there now,” Anthony said. “And I need the address.”

Taking out a Palm Pilot, Niche scrolled through some items while Anthony and Onyx continued to shoot each other loathsome glares.

* * *

Kimberly sat back in her own shock. “I’ve never heard of anything so...I can’t even think of the word. And the man doesn’t hate you for the...torture you did to him?”

Michelle shrugged. “You would think, but I don’t know. I don’t know if I should trust him and his newfound ways and adoration to me, or if I should not and know that he is only garnering my trust to wallop me with heartbreak. I don’t want to fall in love with him, but...damn if I’m not doing it anyway.”

“So tell him,” Jaelen said.

“I can’t do that!” Michelle said incredulously.

“Why not?” Kimberly asked. “Just ask him about his true feelings and intentions, and then tell him how you feel. The worse he could say is no, right?”

Michelle couldn’t believe at how simple it all sounded, when it felt so complicated. “What about the guilt I feel? How do I assuage that?”

Smiling wickedly, Kimberly said, “I think you should leave that up to him to decide.”

Michelle looked at the time. It was late and the night had been quite different than what she had expected it to be. “You are a very wonderful couple,” she complimented.

“So is that your approval to keep Pamela?” Jaelen asked getting back to business.

“We love her like our own and we know she would be truly distraught if she had to go somewhere else. You’re free to visit whenever you want to check up on her,” Kimberly insisted.

“There’s no more convincing needed, Kimberly. I approve of Pamela being here,” Michelle said confidently.

“Good, then I have the guardianship papers in Jaelen’s office. Would you like to come sign them now or have a lawyer look over them?” Kimberly asked.

“I can look them over and we’ll go from there,” she insisted and then followed Kimberly to her husband’s office. “By the way, I thought you were bringing a friend other than Niche?”

“Ah...yes, but he wasn’t feeling up to par so our plans changed.”

“Was he the friend you tortured?”

Blushing furiously, Michelle admitted, “Yes.”

The doorbell rung quietly and Kimberly turned to Jaelen and asked nicely, “Love, could you get that, please?”

Jaelen headed off to the door while the women proceeded toward the back of the house.

* * *

Anthony knocked as politely as he could, wanting someone to answer the door. He didn’t see Michelle’s car parked out front, but she could have parked in the back. The townhouse looked as if it had been specially built and it was slightly different than the other homes around.

A large man with a mean grimace opened the door. “Can I help you?” he asked.

“I’m looking for Michelle Coleman,” Anthony said. “I know I’m late, but I was to join her for dinner at this residence.”

“It’s past late,” the man said rather annoyed. “You are?”

“Anthony Brooks, sir.”

“Sir? Shit, I’m as old s you, Brooks.”

“Is Michelle here?”

“Come in,” the man ordered moving out the way so Anthony could step in the home. “I’m Jaelen Gates.”

“And your wife is Kimberly?” Anthony questioned.

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“Yes. She is the one dealing with Michelle over the custody of Pamela, Michelle’s cousin.”

Anthony sized him up visually. The man was about the same height and weight of Anthony, and there was a type of aloofness about him as if he didn’t give a fuck. Would Michelle be making the right decision leaving her cousin in the hands of the likes of this man?

“Where’s Michelle?” Anthony insisted.

“Michelle was just in here, telling us about you two,” Jaelen said.

This caught Anthony by surprised. How much had Michelle told them? “What did she say?”

“Let’s just say, the girl is feeling plenty guilty about the torture she put you through,” Jaelen said.

Had Michelle lost her mind? Why would she reveal what she had done to this couple? Had they given her some mind controlling drink?

“And she’s going to make a plea to you about assuaging her guilt,” Jaelen continued. “How serious are you about her?”

“Damn serious,” Anthony said passionately. “I love her.”

“Good, cause revenge is my specialty and I’d love to show you how you can make her feel all better.”

For a moment, Anthony’s interest was piqued by the man’s offer. It would only take a moment to see what Jaelen had to show him. Only a moment.

* * *

Kimberly hugged Michelle. “Pamela will be graduating from her GED program in two months. I insist you come to the party. Leroy will be back by then permanently and finishing up his own glasses. He really wanted to get his associates, but it’s been a hard struggle since he’s ... well different.”

“I’d love to come,” Michelle insisted. “But I really must be getting home.”

“Thank you so much for all you have done for this family.”

“It really wasn’t much,” Michelle said modestly.

Sylvia Hubbard

“It’s more than you know,” Kimberly said earnestly helping Michelle on with her coat. “Did you park out front because I could have Jaelen walk you out?”

“No, I parked on the side.”

Kimberly led her to a side exit door. “Keep in touch, okay?”

Michelle smiled and thanked Kimberly for the wonderful time and talk. For the first time in weeks, she felt like there could be a future for her with Anthony. His aloofness, anguish and stress would all be resolved soon, once she expressed her own feelings to him.

Things would be alright.

Chapter 21

Anthony hadn't plan to stay that late, but once Jaelen started showing him *things* the hour grew way past late and he realized belatedly that Michelle was not there anymore.

Since he had taken a taken over there, Jaelen offered to take him home. They spoke on more things and Anthony was surprised that Jaelen offered business his way in handling the last of the matter with Pamela, and also some more issues with the trust of his children.

Too excited about having Jaelen as a client, Anthony immediately called Jasmine as soon as he walked in the door.

She was excited for him, but the hour was very late and she would speak with him tomorrow.

"What about the divorce?" he asked.

Yawning most unladylike into the phone, Jasmine said, "Anthony, I can't even think much less do business this late at night. Can't it wait?"

"This is important. I went to see Sharrisse today and she admitted to embezzling the money through the company in order to support her selfishness. Can't I do something?"

"We'll figure out something in the morning," Jasmine promised. "Call me early and we'll meet somewhere for coffee. By then I might have some good news, if you just let me go to sleep."

He immediately hung the phone up and called Michelle's cell phone, but again he went straight to voicemail. Jaelen had told him that his wife said Michelle had left hours ago and that she was most likely headed home in good spirits from the night.

No one was at his loft, so he figured she had gone to her home to handle business. He still really wanted to speak to her about *past matters*, but the hour was late and most likely she was sleep.

Damn! He hated waiting when something was important.

* * *

After working the morning shift at the store, Michelle was picked up by Niche. She had spent the morning training the two new employees.

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Business was picking up for the holiday season and Michelle figured if sales stayed the way they were going, she would most likely keep one of the women hired after the New Year.

Niche had picked her up from the store to take her to brunch, and then he followed her home.

Michelle had gotten a message from Anthony letting her know that he had tried to catch up with her last night and that she was missed. He said he would call her by tonight and he wanted to talk about some things.

Picking through her clothes to find something nice to wear when she saw Anthony tonight, Michelle languished wistfully for the hundredth time.

Niche looked up from his nail grooming a bit peeved. "You sound too happy."

She had been purposely ignoring his snit because when she had questioned it earlier, he said it was, *nothing*, which meant in Niche's language there was something, he just chose not to speak on it right then.

Too caught up with her own world, she didn't really want to go into it unless he really wanted to.

"I can't help it, Niche." She sighed again and smiled pulling out a beautiful read after five dress. "Do you like?"

"It makes you look smutty," he pouted.

"Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Does my relationship with Anthony bother you that much?" she asked worriedly.

"No. He doesn't bother me at all," he snorted in disdain.

Shrugging, Michelle disregarded his sour mood, which he'd been in since seeing her for brunch. "One day, Niche, you're going to meet someone and be happy just like I am"

"Good Lord! To know I'll be torturing others around me does well for my high hopes." He was very full of sarcasm. "You forget, Sweetie, I've met many and loved many. It always goes good in the beginning. Just wait till the sex goes away, then you're left with a person you really don't want to be around."

"That's just it, Niche. Sometimes holding one another is all we need or staying up late spending time with each other. It's not just the sex or the attraction. We really enjoy being with one another. I never thought I could ever have a loving relationship with a man and still consider him my friend."

Niche frowned hard in worry, but then it cleared away as if he were trying to convince himself of something different.

"You wouldn't consider sleeping with me?" he asked playfully.

“No, because it would mess up our friendship and even you would agree with that. You’re not going to rain on my parade, Mr. Quartermaine.”

He understood her meaning about finding a lover and a friend and he wouldn’t dare try to sleep with her because he enjoyed their friendship too much also. It was extraordinary to find someone you could talk to and make love to and either way your soul was fulfilled. Still, he wanted to be the pessimist and on top of that he was not in an agreeable mood. Onyx had been in his ear most of the night with the information she had found out about Mr. Brooks and some of it just didn’t sit right with Niche, but he didn’t know how to go about telling Michelle anything if what Onyx suspected was true.

Michelle was a fact woman. She needed to hear facts in order to come to a judgment and she most certainly didn’t like gossip, but Onyx would have proof of anything until tomorrow and by that time it could be too late. Michelle’s heart could be broken.

Yet, the only way he could assure that Michelle didn’t make some over rated confession of love to Anthony was to make sure they didn’t spend any time together. But how could he accomplish that when they were going on a serious talk date tonight?

“You know, Niche, if you’re in such a foul mood, why don’t you just go so I can get ready,” Michelle said.

“Well, if you want me out of my snit, how about you come with me some place. I need your opinion on something I want to do for a friend,” he said cajoling.

Frowning warily, Michelle never knew Niche to be a person who surprised others out the kindness of his heart. Curiosity was killing her, but she really had to get ready for her date with Anthony. “Can’t it wait till tomorrow?”

“I’ll be so busy with the party and I want your help getting out my snit. Please, Michelle. It’ll only take an hour out of your busy date. I promise I won’t make you late for your date,” he said.

Michelle conceded. “Let me change shoes and I’ll meet you at the car.”

Niche waited until she left the room to take her cell phone out her purse and put it in a drawer before he left out to bring the car around. Quickly, he had to think of someone he could focus his attention on without making it look too serious, but would play innocently enough into his hands if cornered.

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The only one he could think of was Amanda. Niche cursed himself for his thoughts of the young assistant manager. Lately, he couldn't think of anyone else and it was bothering the shit out of him to know he was *turning*.

Why he thought all of a sudden that he wanted to do anything with her was beyond him? The woman had not even made her intentions of like known to him. Maybe for some reason hearing Michelle say Amanda was interested in him got him to thinking of things he hadn't thought about in a long time.

This was silly, but for now it was a ploy that had to work. The longer he kept her away from Anthony, the longer he would be able to give Onyx more time in getting things together.

"So, who is he?" Michelle asked as she buckled herself in and Niche put the car in drive.

Quickly, thinking, he said, "What makes you think it's a he? Plus, I don't like to give names of my intended beau's but lately I've been thinking of this person and I thought I should kind of ease into getting to know them, so I want your help in picking out something not to flashy for them."

"Not the usual gift from Lord & Taylor will do, huh? Or maybe a shopping spree from Neiman Marcus?" she suggested.

"Like I said, I don't want it flashy and I'm not particularly good with subtle gifts," he admitted.

"What do *they* like?" she questioned.

"That's the problem, Michelle. I really don't know."

* * *

Anthony called her phone again. Amanda said they left the shop hours ago and he was positive she had nothing on her agenda, so why wasn't she there? Or at home? Or even answering her phone?

What the hell was going on? Going up to Niche's place, he knocked on the door after ringing the bell. There was no answer and he didn't know Niche's cell to get in touch with him.

Should he be worried? Hell, Michelle had no ties to him. She could do anything she damn well pleased.

This bothered him even more and he was determined to find her. Grabbing his jacket, he opened the door to leave, but was stopped at the five foot four and a half lithe figure standing in his way.

“Do you make a point in getting in my fucking way,” Anthony sneered.

Onyx only smiled showing a bit of amusement to Anthony’s growing agitation to her constant presence. “If I cared, those words would actually hurt my feelings.” Pushing past him, she asked, “Where’s the girlfriend?”

“That’s what I would love to know. Do you have any idea where she or her best friend might be?”

“Nope.” Onyx surveyed the room and set down a black leather gym bag she had been holding, which of course went with her black leather outfit.

“You’re not invited,” Anthony said.

“I know, but you need me about now.” She was still looking around the front room as if measuring the space.

Closing the door, he said, “Oh really? Please explain, Ms. Heart.”

Turning toward him now with an annoyed expression, she said, “You want to kick my brother’s ass, don’t you? You’d love to get him back for the ass whooping he did to you, wouldn’t you? I sure as hell would, if I were you.”

“And you’re going to help me kick his ass? You’re his sister? How do I know this isn’t another trap to get my ass whooped again for your viewing pleasure?”

She chuckled sensuously. “Because, Mr. Brooks, Lethal Heart needs to know the world don’t evolve around him, plus I’m pissed as hell at my brother about now for accepting an account I didn’t want him to accept.”

“So you’re going to help me beat up your brother? What makes you think I can do that?”

She sauntered over to him and felt on his arms and chest. Moving his arms out her way, she moved her hands around his waist and over his flank, then down his thighs and legs. “Yep, you’re physically fit enough to do it,” she said looking up from her squatting position.

As erotically appealing the picture of looking down on Onyx Heart was to Anthony, he realized that his love for Michelle was much more powerful than he knew because all he could think of was her. “And you’re going to teach me?”

Standing up opening up her jacket, she said, “Three years of Navy Seals and secret ops for the government has made my body a dangerous weapon. I’m high ranking in hand-to-hand combat and I could kill a man three times my size with my bare hands. Would you like to see?”

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Snorting in disdain, Anthony growled, “I don’t think a woman like you needs to make jokes about that, plus what makes you think I wasn’t busy?”

“You were. You were looking for your girlfriend and if she is with Niche, you shouldn’t be worried unless you’re so under-skilled about your lovemaking abilities that you’re worried Niche could entice her away.”

This was a direct hit at his manhood. Anthony realized that Onyx could hit below the belt physically and verbally quite well.

“Fine,” he said locking the door and facing her. “Teach me.”

* * *

Michelle flopped on the ugly read chair and moaned her frustrations. Three hours Niche had dragged her around the mall looking for something to give as a gift. He hadn’t been happy with anything they found and then he wanted to show her this nice house he was thinking about buying, but when they came back to the car, he mistakenly left the keys in the car and had to contact Onstar by phone, but when his cell phone was left in the vehicle and hers was no where to be found on her, they had to walk to the nearest gas station convince Onstar who they were to have roadside assistance.

It was darn cold and by ten o’clock that night, all Michelle wanted to do was get home and never speak to Niche again who continuously apologized for any inconvenience. He promised to stop by Anthony’s place on his way home and explain to him if she didn’t get to him first.

Yet, when Michelle called over there as soon as she walked in the door, there was no answer. She paged him, but there was no call back.

When Niche called her about midnight, he said he had knocked on the door, but no one answered and Michelle was quite frustration.

Which was why she was slouching in the red chair moaning. Niche had ruined her entire night with Anthony.

To tired to move, and too tired to do anything else despite her belly crying for food, Michelle fell asleep in the chair knowing she had to awake early in the morning to open the store and do more training. She probably wouldn’t see Anthony until tomorrow, but hopefully she would speak to him before then, even if it was just to say hi.

Chapter 22

Anthony groaned as he rolled out of bed at one in the afternoon. Onyx had done a lot of teaching, but it felt like he had gotten his ass kicked all over again. She was a hard master and when he messed up on any moves, she made sure he paid for it.

When he couldn't take it anymore at eleven at night, she allowed him to take a hot shower to relax his muscles, but then he was right back at it. He thought he heard the phone ring, but Onyx said it must be the ringing in his head.

That was fine, Michelle was a busy woman. He could understand she didn't have a lot of time to spend with him and she was on the verge of doing very well at her store, so she had a lot of things to do.

Halfway crawling to the bathroom again, he turned on the warm water and just let it cascade over his body. He prayed he wouldn't have to face Lethal too soon because he didn't know if his body could take another punch.

* * *

Michelle snapped, "I'm still pretty pissed at you, Niche, for yesterday and I can't get in touch with Anthony to save my life."

"I spoke with him this afternoon," Niche assured her. "He said he had been busy anyway last night and he would see you tonight at the party. He can't for the life of him know why he didn't hear the phone ring last night."

This put her mind to ease a little, but Michelle still didn't look happy. "I'll just wear the dress I picked out last night. That should do it, shouldn't it?"

"Whatever! Just put on something so we can go," he said nonchalantly, huffing for the millionth time impatiently. Looking at his watch he huffed at the time. "Are you at least trying to hurry? I have the caterer at the loft now and I still have to go down in storage and get my oriental blue vase I want to set in the middle of the table."

"If you're in such a rush, go ahead. I do remember how to get to your loft," she exasperated.

“What do you do, just smell your lover out?” he snorted. When Michelle could only giggled at his cruel remark, Niche huffed again, “I guess that means you want me to pick up Amanda?”

“You act as if she’s some kind of monster. She’s a wonderful co-worker. Insightful, funny and very perceptive. Plus, she’s plans on jumping your bones tonight,” Michelle teased.

“She does?!” he exclaimed completely caught off guard.

Laughing, Michelle shook her head. “I was just teasing. What has your underwear in a bunch?”

“Nothing,” he lied. “That wasn’t funny.”

“I’ll call and tell her you’re on your way,” Michelle said.

Niche grabbed his coat and calmed down hoping he would not have to admit to Michelle how he had been thinking about Amanda for the past couple of days just a little bit too much and how his lie seemed different since her own insightfulness into his soul. He didn’t want to confess, but the little chit had him actually contemplating about going straight forever.

He hadn’t even told Michelle of his past heartbreak that had drove him completely away from women. He didn’t want anyone to know what a fool he had been for love. So much heartache entailed his life; he didn’t want to take any chances...yet.

* * *

Amanda carefully put on the black opal studded middle of the thigh length gown. Dorie, her mother, had put her hair in a beautiful twist with side bangs beautifully curled to bring out the ravishing hazel in her eyes.

“You look fine,” Dorie said, seeing the worried expression in the young woman’s face.

“I look like poor trash all dressed up,” she snapped, hitting her thighs in frustration. “He’s going to see me and that look of nonchalance will just color his face.”

“Amanda, you told me he’s gay. Why would he look at you any differently,” Dorie asked confused.

Desperately, Amanda answered, “Because I want him to, Momma. This is very important to me.”

Amanda’s four-year-old son, Alex, came in the room, jumping around her. “You look pretty to me, Momma.”

“See even Jordy like you and he’s your son,” Dorie said, using the boy’s nickname.

“The boy would think I looked good with two tons of rollers and a dirty smelly bathrobe on. A four-year-old’s opinion of his mother, doesn’t count.” Amanda hugged him closely. “It’s very much appreciated though. Thank you, Alex.” She kissed his cheek. “I want you to be good with Grandmamma, okay?”

He nodded earnestly then ran off to his room to play with his Legos.

Amanda looked at her mother. “I’m not crazy, I swear. He’s handsome and very sweet and he’s been with women before so there’s some hope of turning him around. Some girl just broke his heart real bad and a man was there to comfort him. It messed him up in my opinion and he doesn’t trust women. I believe it’s really up to me to help him pick up the pieces.”

“Have you prayed about his?” Dorie asked.

“Yes, Momma. I’ve prayed long and hard and the Lord’s only giving me good signs,” Amanda said earnestly. And then explained to her mother why she was so insistent. “When Alex’s father left me, I was really down in the dumps and I prayed to show me a better way for my heart to be happy. Every since meeting Mr. Quartermaine, I’ve found a better happiness. I’m not depressed and he makes my heart sing, Momma.”

“It could be any man who could do that to you, Amanda. What makes you think it’s him?”

“I’m not saying I’m physic or anything, but I feel Mr. Quartermaine and I were meant to be together. It’s as if God has given me a book about this man and I was destined to make him happy.”

Dorie gave her strong willed daughter a hard look. “I know your faith in the Lord is strong, Amanda, but you sound as nutty as a Payday bar. I won’t interfere with what you plan to do, but do I get this right, you intend to change his mind about his sexual orientation?”

“Not only change his mind, but I plan to make sure he thinks I’m the best thing since apple pie,” she replied saucily.

Her mother snorted looking her daughter over from head to toe. “What have you got between your legs, I don’t know, child, because the only way you’re going to change a gay man’s mind is I whip him so good with your stuff he will never look back.”

“Alex’s father taught me a few tricks of the trade,” Amanda said quite cockily. “I’ve always been a good student. I’ve grown and learned a lot since then. I plan to keep Niche for a very long time...I think I love him

already, Momma.” She wasn’t going to add that she had over heard that conversation Niche had with Michelle in the stock room weeks ago either.

“Good Lord, child, you’ve lost it. That man’s got you all tied up and confused. It’s probably his pretty face, is all,” Dorie tried to explain to her daughter.

Amanda’s heart sung, as she said, “It’s more than that. He’s generous, wonderful and very intellectual.”

“And you think you can hold on to this man? Last time I checked you just barely got your GED,” Dorie pointed out.

Amanda knew her mother was not trying to be mean, but trying to protect her daughter from gating her heart broken again by another man, but Amanda knew in her heart this was not a lost cause.

Niche was different from other men, besides his sexual orientation, but his whole way of looking at life, and his own spirit for living. She knew she could be the one to take him to new heights. He depended so much on outside materials to make him happy when all he needed was a woman like Amanda to find out his true feelings of joy.

With disgruntlement at being reminded of those past bad memories, she was sourly, “I was working two jobs and trying to be a new mom. It was pretty difficult, Momma. That’s beside the point. I think I have enough smarts to entertain him. Maybe other women were too smart for him. He just needs to find the right one, Momma. That’s all and he’ll be happy for the rest of his life.”

“And you think you’re the one?” Dorie asked, not believing a word her daughter said.

Amanda finished applying her make-up and smiled. “It is not a matter of thinking, Momma. I have faith and believe it.”

When she reached up in the closet to the top shelf to find her black shawl, her mother gasped. “What?” Amanda asked, impatiently very tired of her mother’s negativity.

“Do you know you can see the bottom of your butt when you bend down and reach up?” Dorie exclaimed.

“I will keep that in mind when I get him alone,” she teased wickedly.

The doorbell rung and Dorie went to open for Niche. “Hello, Mr. Quartermaine. I’m Amanda’s mother, Dorie Hutchison. She’s putting on her shawl and will be right out.” She gave him a quick perusal and showed him in the front room of their apartment, which consisted of the living room and dining room. The bedrooms were down the hall and the small kitchen was off the front room. “Amanda tells me you’re the owner where she works.”

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“Ah...yes, well, part owner for now,” he corrected, looking at the rinky-dink surroundings not understanding how anyone could live in such cramp quarters. The place was no bigger than his bedroom area alone. He was glad the woman had given her whole name. In this day and age with so many women having babies out of wedlock, it was had to know if the children had the same last name as the mother. In this case, Amanda did, although he wondered where her father was and had he ever been in the picture.

“Let me see how long she will be.” Dorie excused herself leaving Niche in the room alone to look over the photos of Alex and Amanda. He was a very handsome son and Niche could tell his father definitely wasn’t Caucasian like his mother. Did the thought of knowing Amanda wouldn’t mind a brother in her life really appeal to him as much as the thought? He suppressed his feelings of delight.

Amanda stared at the strong back of his slim frame. He had cropped his dark hair short and stood extremely handsome in the black tuxedo. Clearing her throat to get his attention, she asked, “Is this acceptable, Mr. Quartermaine?”

Niche turned ready to see the dowdy Amanda, but was impressed to see a very beautiful young lady standing in the doorway of the hall. “Ms. Hutchinson? I must say you have knocked me almost speechless.” He took her hand and pressed his lips to the back of her palm. “Your taste is impeccable.”

“Thank you.” She handed him his credit card. “And thank you for the dress.”

“You’re quite welcome. It was well used.” His eyes skimmed over her, honestly enjoying what he saw.

She had gotten the necessary response from him and blushed. He helped her with her shawl and escorted her out the door. When they were seated in his car and on their way, he asked as nonchalantly as possible, “Where is your son’s father?”

“Not involved in his life, thank God. He decided he wanted to be a great financial institution of his own and I decided not to have an abortion and become a sixteen year old mother,” she said simply.

“Bad choice?” he guessed.

She shook her head. “Not in my mind. It wasn’t just because of that. I don’t believe in abortion, but I felt my son had a right to live. He was a gift of life. A blessing.”

He liked her reasoning and enjoyed her thought process. “Do you have any contact with the father, much?”

“No,” she answered. “I never expected him either. He’s never offered any financial support and he hides his money well from the Friend of the Court. He’s listed as unemployed and he has his company to pay all his living expenses.”

“He owns his company and he can’t afford to send you a couple of bucks a month to support his child?” he asked incredulously. “Is this his only child?”

“Yes, as far as I know,” she answered simply. “He was worried from the start of getting me pregnant.” I think I didn’t care. I just thought I was in love, but I grew out of that real fast. Reality slapped me awake when the pregnancy test came up positive and he showed what a true man he was.”

“No much of a man in my opinion.”

“I concur,” Amanda agreed.

Chapter 23

Michelle tightened the curls in the back of her hair with the hot iron humming a Jill Scott tune, and then finished applying the lipstick. She had just finished talking to Anthony, who said he would wait for her to come to the loft before going upstairs to Niche's apartment. His tone sounded very serious and he wanted to speak with her about some things in private.

"I've been thinking a lot lately and handling issues of the past that I want you to know about," he said.

"Well, I'll be over just as soon as I finished with my hair," she promised. "Because there are some things I want to express to you too, Anthony."

Michelle had every intention to get over there and confess her love for him and find a way to mend from the revenge she had selfishly done to him. Tonight would be a new beginning for their relationship, which she hoped would last forever.

Opening up her heart to him would be the best thing she had done since opening up her store. Her life was finally falling into place and Niche was right, she deserved this happiness. She deserved a good man like Anthony Brooks in her life.

Taking a moment to touch her belly, she wondered what their children would look like and what Anthony would look like when they grew old together. She knew their passion would still be strong because she loved him that much. These past couple of days without him increased her feelings for him because it gave her time to really miss him and know she could not live without him.

Wanting to look good for him since she hadn't seen him in a couple of days, she added the finishing touches here and there to her face and body and then prepared to walk out the door.

Just as she opened the door, she was startled to see a young lady about to knock. "How may I help you?" she asked thinking the woman was lost.

The lady looked her over with dark brown skeptical eyes and then looked over her shoulder as if looking for someone else. "Are you Michelle Coleman?" she asked as if she couldn't believe her eyes.

"How may I help you?" Michelle was leery of the young lady. Although she was dressed in a very expensive suit, she looked as if she was

trying to be something she would never be – “a lady.” Her movements were stiff and unrefined and she had this sort of mock forced sophistication. As if she was trying too hard.

“I’m looking for my husband. I’m Sharrisse Brooks.”

“Your husband? Who may your husband be?”

Sharrisse dug in her purse for her wedding photo Anthony had taken with her intoxicated in Las Vegas. His clothes were three days old in the photo, but no one could tell and he looked almost aware in the photo. “Jacoby came by just yesterday to do his husband duty and left without letting me know a phone number to reach him at. He usually has everyone refer to him as Anthony. Am I correct to assume you are Michelle Coleman?”

“Yes, I am,” Michelle said stiffly trying not to let the woman know how truly upset she really was. “But your...husband,” she said rather distastefully, “is not here right now.”

“Well, you’ll let him know I’m looking for him, won’t you? I just have something for him, but I really wasn’t expecting...well, you know. He tired me out so much yesterday.” She stretched, yawning loud and hard, and then cackled. “I’m still recovering, if you know what I mean.”

Michelle tried to force a pleasant smile, but her lips looked more like a grimace. “C-Can I see your marriage license?”

“Oh sure. No problem. I carry it around with me because I handle most of his business affairs when he decides to go out in the world and be a man. When he’s not running the streets, he’s trying to convince some poor needy woman she’s the love of his life and he’s changing because of her.” She cackled again as she dug in her purse and pulled out an official sealed paper from Las Vegas, Nevada.

Sure enough, Jacoby Anthony Austin Brooks was named on the contract and so was his signature by the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, although he didn’t sign all the way on the line. It was rather slanted.

Sharrisse let her fully peruse the document before she said, “I assumed he was here because he made several phone calls from this place and I needed to give him something. Well, it’s more like good news.” She rubbed her belly. “If you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I’ll be sure to tell him his...wife is looking for him. Now if you’ll excuse me, I was on my way out.” Michelle nudged the woman out her place and closed her door.

She waited a moment praying the woman left before she made her way out of her apartment. When Michelle reached her car, she bit her lip so hard she felt blood on the inside of her mouth. Taking off, she decided she

would definitely get to the bottom of this before the night was over and if it meant not having Anthony in her life, then so be it. She wouldn't dare date a *married man*.

Michelle refused to be the other woman.

* * *

Arriving at his loft, Niche was mildly upset to see Michelle had not gotten there yet and wondered what was taking her so long. Niche spoke to the Chef Peterson to see if anything was needed, but the man was a culinary genius at dinner parties and told him not to worry about a thing. Chef Peterson had everything under control.

"I can help with anything if you need me to," Amanda said graciously.

He decided to take her downstairs to the basement to the storage area where he kept the precious vase he wanted to display. The manager had stored it on a neck high shelf in the back. Niche could tell it was there, but he was too big to get to it.

"I can squeeze through without messing up my dress," Amanda told him. "Plus, you'll get that wonderful suit all dirty with dust. Please let me," she insisted.

Niche allowed her to try. With the relaxing conversation they had in the car, he felt comfortable as long as he didn't look directly at her or the gorgeous dress she was wearing. She seemed quite relaxed with him and didn't mind being in the loft with him alone.

With the chef secluded in the kitchen and none of the guest around, they had complete privacy to do whatever they wanted to do.

The strange thought occurred to Niche, no one would notice if he tried to do anything with Amanda, which was why he decided to get out of the loft so he wouldn't be tempted. Michelle's words that he enamored the young lady kept repeating in his head and was affecting him libido immensely.

"Please be careful and let me know if it's too heavy," he said as she bent down to move a heavy box out of her way instead of stepping over it.

Amanda had to hike her dress up in order to accomplish this feat and Niche's legs were drawn to the supple smooth thighs she reveals. His eyes widened as she bent down to reveal she wore absolutely no underwear. He looked away before she glanced back at him.

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

“I’ll let you know,” she promised and kept moving through the maze of items until she reached the shelves. As she reached up to get the vase she heard him from behind heave a sharp breathe again and she smiled wickedly, but covered it up before turning around to ace him. “This one?”

Niche nodded too tongue tied to speak. When she brought the vase to him, he placed it on the floor and fumbled with the keys to lock to storage door back. After locking it, he turned to her where she was standing near the gate. “Did I tell you how good you looked tonight?” he blurted out. This was his sorry attempt to use conversation as a way to mellow the high he was feeling.

She nodded, moving slightly towards him using a shoulder brush as a chance to steal a touch of him. “Thank you again, and might I add that you look quite debonair.”

“I haven’t heard that one in a while,” he smirked.

She touched the lapel of his coat and trailed her finger down to his stomach feeling his heart rate increased. “I’ve never seen a man up close in a tuxedo. I didn’t have the honor of going to my prom.”

He moved close as her finger started an upward motion, this time inside his jacket. “How do you do that?” he asked, staring into her crystal blue eyes.

“Do what?” she asked innocently.

“Every time you talk to me, you become more and more attractive,” he noticed, practically mesmerized by her.

Amanda tilted her head every so slightly as she blushed, but forced herself to keep eye contact with his beautiful brown eyes. “I don’t know, but if it bothers you I’ll try to stop whatever I’m doing, if you feel its wrong. I wouldn’t want-“ She was cut off as his lips meshed against hers. She thrilled as his arms wrapped around her waist pulling her close. Her hands moved back to grip the cage, not wanting to be accused of seducing him. He was doing everything, but the harder he kissed her, the harder she responded with her mouth. The spaghetti straps of her dress were pulled down to reveal a hardened dark pink tip, which he drew deeply in his mouth. Amanda could feel her juices flowing and wanted more, but allowed him to take charge as one of his hands moved down to his own pants and he quickly unbuckled himself. His mouth came back to take over as his other hand found her moist love nest and he inserted a finger deep inside, enjoying the arousal surrounding his hand with a groan of pleasure. Amanda nipped at his neck trying to suppress her cry of passion.

Niche was mindless to what he was doing and the unexplainable magnitude of trouble he was getting himself in. Her gyrations were

unmistakably arousing him to great heights and soon as his mind sunk into an oblivion of bliss, his body only cared about fulfilling a need so deep inside of him, Niche could not stop if he wanted to. Cupping a hand to her apple bottom, he lifted her slightly, turned her around so her back pressed against the storage gate, then he raised a thigh to give him full access to her heaven. He embedded himself deep inside of her wetness with his first thrust; filling her with his heat and basking in every moment of gratification. Her thighs locked around his waist as he supported her weight on his hips.

Just as Amanda felt herself about to explode, she felt his body become rigid and an extraordinary completeness pervaded her body, sending gentle palpitations throughout every inch of her body. Suddenly, his movements became irregular and sluggish. She opened her eyes to see his eyes squeezed so tight and his face scrunched as if in pain yet with heavenly gratification, but she knew he was letting go before her. She could have screamed. This wasn't how her first time with him was supposed to be. This wasn't what she had imagined, but this was happening. It was over with and when the pressure of him inside of her decreased, he slowly moved away looking like a guilty little boy, who had touched something he shouldn't have.

Amanda had to wonder did Adam look like this when he bit into the apple Eve had given him?

Quietly, Amanda straightened her clothes watching him as he did everything to avoid her eyes. Turning away from her to fix himself, and then picking up the vase, he mumbled, "Sorry."

The more the seconds passed and Niche didn't look at her, the angrier she became. When he did look at her to see why she wasn't saying anything, he received a sharp slap to the face almost making him drop the vase.

"What the hell was that for?!" he snapped.

"For being a fucking coward. How could you feel guilty? Because you think screwing a woman is hypocritical or because you didn't give me pleasure," she yelled.

His eyes grew wide incredulous from her stark honesty. "I didn't what?"

"You didn't give me pleasure. I didn't like it." Her temper had started to come down as she recognized a bit of confusion on his face. "I didn't orgasm."

Niche knew he hadn't done it with a woman in a while, but he didn't think he had forgotten *how* to do it right. "I haven't...well you know, had a woman and you should find that a compliment to what you can do to me."

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She gave him a moment of pointless staring. “You could have kept that one to yourself then,” she snorted in disdain. Amanda was angry because it felt as if he was trying to make to make it seem as if she had driven him to do what *they* had done.

Too offended by his horrendous remark, Amanda began to stomp away in a huff.

Niche caught up with her and gently took her arm and turned her around to face him. “I’m sorry. I really am. I shouldn’t have done that. I’m your boss, sort of, and I shouldn’t have relationships with my employees.”

“You’re sorry for what?” she asked, her voice was getting higher and higher after each word.

And I’m sorry I... I did it in general.” Niche was searching for anything to say to make her feel better. He couldn’t have her leave him like this. Not after what she had just made him feel. Not after he knew this day would forever change his life. “I shouldn’t have, but I couldn’t stop it and you felt so good. You really did, Amanda. All I could feel was your heartbeat squeezing me tighter and tighter and...” He stopped feeling ashamed and surprisingly found himself slightly aroused again at the thought of what he had experienced with her. No one had affected him like that before. He had never wanted more of something once he had *taken* it. The thought of not being able to have it again was what bothered him the most. Usually he didn’t care that his nonchalance would bother others, but now with Amanda, it was very different.

Amanda moved closer to him, cupping his face and forcing his eyes to meet her. “Go on, please,” she urged.

Niche could see she earnestly needed him to tell her his true feelings of the encounter they shared together and he wanted to please her. He sincerely poured his soul to her. “It felt so good and when I couldn’t stand it anymore I let myself go. I know I should have waited for you or been concentrating on you, but I felt it coming and it’s been so long since anyone has made me feel the way you did. It’s not just your body, it’s everything. I’ve been dreaming about you all week since I first took you home. You’ve done something to me, Amanda that just makes me want to be with you all the time and I can’t explain it. You don’t know how much you’ve made me feel that there are women in this world who are honest and pure in soul, which I know is a rare commodity in this squalid world. Next time, I promise I will make it better for you. If you give me that chance, I promise you’ll enjoy every minute of it.”

She kissed him deeply, loving this man even more.

Sylvia Hubbard

He gently jerked away from her to look deep in her eyes and said the words that made her dreams come true. "I'm yours, Amanda. I want only you."

Chapter 24

Michelle knocked at the door before entering the loft, knowing he had left the door unlocked for her. She wondered if his “wife” had been over or was coming over. It didn’t matter. By the time Sharrisse arrived, Michelle would have her answers and would have made her decision.

Anthony came out of his bedroom area dressed handsomely in a black Versace tuxedo. She almost forgot her purpose of coming because he was even more devastatingly gorgeous wearing the suit, but the biting words of his “wife” came to her sharply and she dropped his keys he’d given her on the table.

He came over ready to have a pleasant evening with her, but instantly could tell something was gnawing at her gut like rotten meat. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said furiously. “Only your wife decided to stop by to look for you to give you a message. Sharrisse Brooks? Sounds familiar?” she asked, her tone of voice filled with sarcasm. “She knows you. I had the pleasure of being showed your lovely wedding photo and marriage certificate.”

As soon as she began to speak, Anthony felt his heart sinking. He knew this moment would have come sooner or later. He just wished it had been later and on his terms. Going over to his desk, he picked up an envelope and handed it to Michelle. “It’s a divorce decree for Sharrisse. My lawyer friend delivered it to me early this morning. We only married because it was the only way to get my father’s money. He only gave us the money to bribe me away from his wife, who still desired me after our affair. My father disowned me from the real family money for sleeping with his wife. I was a greedy man at that pint in my life and I was stinking drunk for about three days before I awoke one morning to see her lying next to me fully clothed in Las Vegas. We had not done anything. She didn’t know too much liquor makes me impotent. I almost killed her when I found out she dragged me to Las Vegas to marry for the same reason I needed to get married – only for my father’s money. I needed the money to keep my law practice going, but she squandered all of it in my absence. I’m not the selfish greedy bastard I was back then anymore, Michelle. I’m different because I decided to walk out on it all and then I met you. You changed my soul, Michelle, and I don’t know why I didn’t tell you about my marriage. I didn’t hide it, but it was a pertinent piece of information, which I should have informed you about earlier. Things just kept getting in the way,” he admitted.

“Go to hell,” she seethed not believing a word he was saying. “You deliberately didn’t want me to find out. You drew these up for show! She’s pregnant by you.”

Tight lipped and insulted, he said stiffly, “No, I didn’t. Look at them. I’m divorced from that deceitful bitch. I never slept with her any day we were married and I will do anything for you to prove this. If she is pregnant, it isn’t mine.” He had thought once he showed her the papers, Michelle would understand and forgive him, but he never once thought she would think he was trying to deceive her. That was the old Anthony.

Michelle didn’t know whom to believe, but she knew she couldn’t be near him and make a justified decision. She was too upset and frazzled to listen to him anymore. Whether he slept with her or not, he was still a married man and he deliberately kept something like this from her. The deception hurt worse than whatever the truth could be. “I would have never involved so much of myself in this farce of a relationship if I had known you were a married man, Anthony.”

He paused for a moment, and then slowly said, “I don’t want to lose you, Michelle.”

When he said things like that, she couldn’t think straight. She needed to get away. Backing out the room, she shook her head. “Just stay away from me, Anthony. Not until I can sort out my feelings.”

“What about the dinner party?” he asked. “I was expected, wasn’t I?”

Tears were welled up in her eyes. “What about it?” She turned her back to him to hide the tears as they freely streamed down her cheek. “You’re not invited anymore.” Amazingly, despite her grief welling up inside of her like a damned river, she was able to make her voice sound steady and confident, so he couldn’t know the immense pain she was in. She didn’t want him to know, not like this.

Obdurately, he said, “That’s not for you to decide. Niche invited me.”

“Well, I’m uninviting you. I don’t want to be near you.”

“I intend to come.” A coldness overcame him. “Deal with it, Michelle.”

She huffed and stormed out the loft onto the elevator, grateful he didn’t follow her at this time. Before stepping off the elevator, she reapplied some of her make-up and composed herself. She knew Niche would seethe hurt on her face and would notice the upset in her eyes and then probably go ballistic. In no way was Michelle going to ruin his party just because Anthony had broken her heart.

'So our heart was involved?' she asked herself.

Michelle tried to convince herself she couldn't have been in love with him. Leaning her forehead against the wall of the elevators, she took long deep breaths, trying to force the fresh tears welling up inside of her at the mental anguish she was suffering. How and when her heart had gotten involved in this so serious, she didn't know, but she was regretting ever meeting Anthony Brooks.

Going into Niche's apartment, she recognized a few of the visitors had already arrived from Craig's financial firm. Karen, Craig's assistant immediately recognized her and was glad to see her.

"I just finished processing those papers you signed just the other day. I was shocked Craig asked you to do that for him. He never involves personal friends on those types of dealings." She spoke as if Michelle knew exactly what she was speaking about when she said, 'those types of dealings.' As if Craig did this all the time and it was special...or illegal to be involved.

Michelle began to worry if she had done the right thing involving herself in what Craig had asked her to do. Maybe she should have listened to Niche about not signing anything. Giving Karen a weird smile, she moved away graciously to find Niche.

Four other financial advisors and their assistants were there too. The guest of honor, their boss Jordan Stanford had not arrived yet, because it was in his nature as Craig had told her in the past to be fashionably late. Craig had not arrived either, which she was glad because she really needed time to gather her wits and with him around she wouldn't be able to because he easily irritated her and he was looking for some excuse to get back in her pants.

When she asked several of the guests where Niche was hiding, no one knew for sure. Finally, Chef Peterson told her the last time he had saw Niche was when he went down to storage to retrieve a vase.

The bell rung for the elevator and she saw Niche and Amanda get off. Neither really made eye contact with Michelle as if they were guilty of something, but Michelle didn't make a big deal about this. Niche was probably uncomfortable around Amanda because of the young woman's infatuation with him and Amanda was probably just lovesick, yet unable to express it, Michelle assumed. They did look as if they would make a cute couple, if Niche liked Amanda's type.

Amanda immediately went to the bathroom, while Niche greeted his guest. Michelle moved up to him to help him unwrap the vase and set it on the dining room table. "What is wrong with Amanda?"

“Nothing,” he was quick to say and looked a bit unnerved towards the bathroom.

Michelle noticed a really guilty look in his eyes. Despite her own misery, the realization that Niche could have devastated innocent Amanda with his verbal cutlery was almost just as upsetting as her own heartbreak. Her eyes grew wide in suspicion that something was very wrong between those two. “Niche!” she hissed.

“What?! I didn’t do anything!” he denied skittishly.

She kept her voice low. “You confronted her about the crush, didn’t you?”

He shrugged and an anguish expression encompassed his features. “I don’t know what the hell I did.”

Michelle knew how glib and debauching Niche could be when he wanted to dissuade women about coming on to him. She had seen it at his clubs and even when they went out together for social engagements. “Is she in there crying?” she asked, noting Amanda was still in the bathroom.

“She said she had to fix her make-up,” he answered with that same guilty tone.

Gasping, Michelle questioned, “You made her cry?”

Contritely, he shrugged, “I may have upset her.”

Now she was confused by Niche’s weird behavior, but someone covering her eyes distracted her.

“Hello lovely,” Craig whispered seductively in her ear.

A nauseating feeling enveloped her as she turned and looked not at all too pleased to see Craig had interrupted them. She had important things to discuss with Niche. Stiffly, she said, “Nice to see you again, Craig.”

“It’s a good thing you’re here early. I have the papers for you to sign over the trust. I told you I only needed you for a few days, lovely.”

“About that money, Craig. You said that it wasn’t illegal, but were you lying to me?” she asked suspiciously.

“Of course he was, lovely,” Niche snipped using Craig’s pet name. “When doesn’t the man lie to get what he wants?”

Craig looked peeved at Niche, but tried not to show it. Stiffly, he took her hand to reassure her. “I would never involve you in something illegal, Belle.”

“Don’t call me that, Craig,” she snapped. “Your assistant just didn’t sound as if what I was doing was right and I want to know the truth.”

“Why don’t we go into the kitchen and sign these papers right now and you’ll be done with the matter?”

Snorting, Niche said, “That is, until the IRS comes a-knocking at your door, Michelle.”

The elevator bell rung to signify someone had arrived.

Niche looked around glad for the distraction. “Ah, Mr. Stanford is here.” He walked over to a plain looking young man about thirty-five with an older lady hanging on his arm. For some reason, she looked familiar to Michelle, but she couldn’t fathom where she had seen her face before. Beside the woman was a younger version of her, looking rather decadent in the clothing they wore. They reminded Michelle of... Sharrisse. They both wore expensive clothes, but there was something disreputable about them. Yet, why would Michelle think of Sharrisse at this very moment?

Maybe because the situation with Anthony was still bothering her.

Niche came over to drag her over to them. “Where is Mr. Wonderful?” he whispered in her ear before they got over to the threesome.

“He’s not Mr. Wonderful anymore,” she seethed under her breath, yet before Niche could inquire more, they had reached them and he had to make introductions, but he gave her a look to say he was definitely going to pull her to the side to find out more.

“This is Claudia Blackwell and her lovely daughter, Clarissa,” Niche introduced.

The name even sounded familiar, but she pushed these annoying thoughts away as she introduced herself to these women. With large brown eyes and shoulder length hair weaves, they were going for twin-ship, but the mother seemed too old to try to look any younger than what she already was attempting and Michelle even noticed the woman had surgery in the past – badly done. Even the tight red dress was too much for the older woman and she would probably do well going for a visit in Michelle’s store to pick out clothes that would suit her best.

“You own that great boutique in the mall, don’t you?” Clarissa asked. “Unique or something?”

“Uniquity,” Michelle clarified. “Have you been there?”

“To the mall? Oh no, that would be too uncouth for me.” She sounded as if she were trying to mock her betters by using large words that sounded foreign from her mouth. Her false persona had Michelle fighting the urge to look disgusted.

The young woman continued. “I don’t go to the mall to shop for clothes, but a friend of mine said you have done private showings, and I

remembered your name. Mummy and I were thinking of hiring you to do some showings for us. We certainly can afford it, can't we Mummy?" Clarissa smiled as sweetly as she could as if showing all her teeth could convince Michelle to do something.

When Uniquity first opened in order to appeal to the higher class, Michelle had done private showings in the homes of wealthy socialites, but only if they were willing to buy at least a thousand or more dolls in clothing and accessories. Yet, when the store took off with regular traffic, Michelle had to stop doing this because it took up too much of her time. She just took a mailing list of these women and invited them to her spring, fall, and winter shows that she put on with other small exclusive boutiques, several beauty salons, and a cosmetology school in the neighborhood. It was a big thing and the shows had even started to draw celebrity's attention with Aretha Franklin, Mary J. Blige and even Tyra Banks attending the last one.

In answer to Clarissa's statement, Michelle said just as sweetly, "For the right price, I have been known to do a private viewing of some of my secret stash that I've got planned for the Spring showing, but trust me honey, the price has to be very right." She had no qualms in taking money from women who loved to throw it around.

"Money is no object, if you know what I mean," Claudia said excitedly. "My daughter and I will come upon some funds that we want to splurge on as soon as we get our hands on it."

Michelle handed them both a business card she always kept on her as a habit from the early networking days of business in order to get the word out. She wondered if they planned to leech off some old Sugar Daddy, or did they actually have legit money coming to them, because Michelle knew they certainly were coming from old money. "Why don't you call me and we'll see what we can arrange." She never talked money matters out loud.

Niche introduced Jordan Stanford to her and she was surprised to see the man was an inch shorter than her and looked like a gawky teenager, but she believed his true age was thirty-four despite the youngness in his face, which was probably what drew Niche to Jordan Stanford. Without the wealth, he could almost look like someone's little bitch.

Jordan had the audacity to openly flirty with Michelle, even with Claudia watching on and this disgusted her about the man even more. She was glad for the distraction of seeing Amanda come out the bathroom and proceeded to leave the company of the three people. At the same time the bell to the elevator rung again drawing Michelle's eyes to Anthony filling the doorway. How could she not look at this delectable sensual man? He was too handsome for words and dressed up as he was made him even more irresistible.

'Pull your senses together, Michelle. This could still be a married man, and you don't need your heart stomped anymore by him. He doesn't deserve the honor!' she tried desperately to convince herself. Michelle looked away from Anthony to use Amanda as a diversion blocking Amanda's view to the trio by Niche.

Michelle was quick to notice the highly confused expression on the young assistant manager's face and looked back at Niche to also notice the intense expression on his face as well. Whatever he had said or done to Amanda must have made him just as upset as Amanda was. This perplexed Michelle a bit, because Niche had always been a very selfish person when it came to other people's feeling and his cynical tongue was famous for hurting people.

Niche introduced Amanda to the trio. "I'd like you to meet, Ms. Hutchison. She's a wonderful associate of mine."

Michelle figured Niche was just doing this because Amanda was the only real stranger in the bunch and he wanted to make her feel comfortable.

Amanda looked to Niche, disregarding the fact the man in the trio looked like her baby's father from behind, perturbed Niche had referred her as an associate, and then the man looked at her and she was positive it was her son's father. Grabbing a drink off the nearby table, she tossed the liquid in Jordan's face.

The room went quiet and even Amanda gasped at her audacity. The night was not going good for her at all. She dropped the glass and ran back into the bathroom appalled by her actions.

Needing to leave the room too, since Anthony had the impudence to show up, Michelle followed Amanda into the bathroom as Niche made apologies and ordered the temporary hired help to assist with Mr. Stanford's clean up. "My friends are quite emotional."

"You bet your ass," Jordan huffed.

Clarissa nudged her mother, who was looking at the awful red wine stain on Jordan's white tuxedo shirt. Niche was helping Jordan off with his jacket and then the shirt, ordering the help to put cold water on the stain immediately.

"Look Mummy, it's Jacoby."

Niche heard her say that and followed both women's eyes to Anthony, who was looking around the room for Michelle.

Soon as Anthony spotted the two women a cold look encompassed his features reminding Niche not of the man he'd gotten to know over the past few days, but of the cold man he'd first met. What a small world?!

stealing innocence II: The Ravishment

Anthony slowly approached Niche, ignoring the two women who were drooling over him. “Where is she?”

“You aren’t ignoring me, Jake?” Clarissa asked feeling highly insulted.

“I’m doing my best,” Anthony seethed his tone of voice filled with derision and repugnance.

Niche answered his latter question, “She went to the bathroom. Amanda wasn’t feeling very well.”

“She has a leave of senses,” Jordan grumbled.

Niche narrowed his eyes at the man. He had not like Stanford when he first met him and now that Niche saw how upset the man had made Amanda and whom Stanford could possibly be with that knowledge, Niche was beginning to anathematize him more.

“Now Jake, you still don’t harbor any old feelings. Handling Austin’s trust was hard work,” Claudia admonished, feeling his hot cruel gaze on her. “How was I suppose to know you are to reinvest the funds, plus you ought to blame the stupid lawyers who oversaw the account, shouldn’t you? They were supposed to keep an eye on it.”

Anthony really wanted to tell her it must have been rather difficult to handle when she was using the money of the trust to pay off the lawyer’s cars and credit cards. According to Jasmine’s assumption, Claudia made the lawyer look the other way with money and all his heart’s desire. Yet, Anthony didn’t want to bear anyone’s dirty laundry out in public like this, although if Claudia continued to push him, he would, so he decided to give her a warning.

“You’ll know what I harbor along with everyone in this room, if you don’t stay the hell away from me.” He stomped towards the bathroom and pounded on the door as if he were the police about the break in for a bust.

“I have a feeling this is going to be a short interesting night,” Niche said and decided to draw the crowd to the dining room.

Amanda screeched startled by the loud pounding on the door. She’s been crying into Michelle’s shoulder, hoping Niche would come and comfort her, but they never discussed letting others know of their feelings they shared. Not even to his good friend, Michelle knew, so Amanda could understand she couldn’t divulge the secret she shared with Niche – it just hurt a lot more than what she thought it would.

Muffled through the door came Anthony’s voice. “Michelle, this isn’t over with.”

“Go away,” Michelle sneered holding Amanda tighter.

“You can’t avoid me,” he said, with frustration.

Michelle yelled, “I will do my damndest.”

There was a brief moment of silence before she heard on the other side of the door a sweetly toned female voice say, “Jacoby, we have so much to talk about.”

Michelle could just imagine the younger one’s large brown eyes lusting after Anthony with her look and sweet smile. A stab of jealousy ran through Michelle’s heart.

“Stay the hell away from me, Clarissa. I won’t trust myself not to choke the shit out of you,” Anthony threatened.

Amanda gathered her strength. “I won’t let him drive me away,” she told Michelle, who was trying to listen to the conversation outside the door.

When Michelle came in there initially to comfort Amanda, she had revealed who Jordan Stanford was. “Jordan expects me to run, but I won’t.” Amanda went to the door and pressed her ear against it as Michelle was doing. “What are you listening for?”

Michelle whispered, “Him. I want him to go away.”

“He seems determine to speak with you, Ms. Coleman. What did he do?” Amanda asked.

“He didn’t tell me he was married.”

Amanda gasped and swung open the door. “You’re married? You deceived her?” she asked Anthony.

He rolled his eyes heavenwards. “I didn’t deceive her.”

Niche overheard this. “You *are* married?! I thought Onyx was lying. So much for happy endings, B.”

“Shut up, Niche,” Michelle sneered and tried to close herself in the bathroom, but Anthony put his foot in the way and barraged his way in closing and locking them in alone.

“Rude, isn’t he?” Niche stated to Clarissa putting everything together. Onyx had mentioned that Anthony might be married, which was why Niche was trying to stall Michelle from being around him. “But what did you expect-” he asked Clarissa, “-after you and your mother trampled over him like an old rug? Respect?”

Clarissa snorted and walked away leaving Niche somewhat alone with Amanda, despite the crowd just over Niche’s shoulder gathering in the dining room to eat.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t expect him to be here,” Amanda said glancing in the direction of Jordan.

Niche was surprised. “You mean that wasn’t my fault?”

She kept her tone low. “I was upset you introduced me as if there wasn’t something more, but I can understand if you want to keep what we did, just between us.” Her expression clearly told of the hurt if that was true. “I can keep a secret and I don’t expect things to change at all where I work. I didn’t do it for anything other than the fact that I’m seriously attracted to you, Mr. Quartermaine. I really wanted you.”

Those words from her luscious lips brought him to full arousal and he jubilated in what Amanda could do to him with just words that no one else could do. “But you didn’t enjoy it,” he pointed out, knowing she was lying to herself about understanding privacy in their relationship. She had been hidden far too long with men and he knew in order to love her, he had to be open with her.

She moved to him until they were centimeters apart and in a hushed tone, she whispered, “I can only be honest with you, Mr. Quartermaine.”

These feelings were so new to Niche that he needed to take it slow, but he wanted Amanda to be assured that he did want her in his life. “I was serious about my intentions to be with you, Amanda and you don’t have to hide your feelings from me, but I’m going to have to take it slow.” She was about to say something, but he covered her lips with just his to quiet her protest. “But I will insist you call me Niche.”

“I don’t want to be in the dark forever,” she admitted honestly. “I don’t like office secrets. If I have to resign from my position, I will.”

“Then what will you do to make a living?” he asked.

“A certain club owner could hire me as his marketing assistant. I am an excellent public relations person,” she suggested with a slightly mischievous smile.

Niche chuckled. “Maybe I will consider it, but I will have to speak to my co-owner about stealing her employees.”

Amanda smiled with him, hugging him closely. “Thank you.”

“Now please explain to me why you threw a drink at Jordan Stanford.”

She pushed away from him slightly. “He’s my son’s father.”

“The no good bastard we were talking about in the car!” he exclaimed.

She nodded and saw he was really about to confront Jordan, but she grabbed his arm. “We’re better than that, Niche. I can fight my own battles and I will. Now please get in there with your guest. You do have a dinner party to host.”

He’d never been as rude of a host as he was tonight. His dinner parties were legendary, but this was definitely going to go down as the most memorable.

The elevator bell rung once more and Onyx stepped off and nodded to Niche. Composing himself, as Onyx handed him a file and whispered something in his ear.

Amanda looked a bit wary at the darkly dressed woman, but it seemed as if Niche was all business with her.

Strolling into the room as Chef Peterson finished serving everyone except the three empty seats close to him, Niche raised a toast. “To the food.”

Everyone agreed and sipped the wine except Onyx and Amanda who chose to stand at the doorway and watch.

“At this time, Jordan Stanford and I would like to formally announce that I have acquired Stanford Financials and I will be disbanding it immediately-“

“You dirty bastard!” Jordan exclaimed, standing up on the other side of the table. “You said you wouldn’t do this!”

“-selling all accounts to Travelers Insurance,” Niche finished, then looked at Jordan with his most cynical tone saying, “It was never written in stone, Jordan, only considered and my attorneys would love to sue you back if you even try to say I promised it. I have the majority of stock in the company and you have run it in the ground.”

Amanda came into the room and sat down next to Niche.

“So this is what you’re about?! You put pleasure before business?” Jordan sneered vulgarly looking from her to Niche.

“I’m not the one on the brink of bankruptcy, which you’ve shielded your own employees from for two years. I was only coming in to save their jobs, but now I’d rather dismantle the company seeing there have been underhanded tactics that my own accountants and spies realized just yesterday.”

“What underhanded tactics?!” Jordan exclaimed.

Niche passed Jordan the folder. “There are seven different large accounts, which have recently been depleted of money. Five immensely large trusts look as if they have been suspiciously robbed of funds. The audit staff

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did not find these, but the Heart Security Agency has one of the best embezzlement spotters around and they knew something didn't smell right in this Garden of Eden of yours, Jordan." Others began to get a little nervous around the table, especially Craig.

Chapter 25

Michelle looked Anthony dead in his eyes, so angry she wanted to scream at the top of her lungs. Since he had slammed the door, ensconcing them in the bathroom alone, a pregnant moment of silence had fallen between the two until she spoke through clenched teeth, trying to sound as calm as possible not wanting him to see how very upset she was.

“This is neither the time nor the place to discuss this matter, Anthony. I told you I needed time.”

“When is the time and place?” he persisted.

“Not now!” she exasperated. “Now please leave me alone. This dinner party is important to Niche.”

He still blocked her way. “You’re important to me, Michelle.” Relaxing a little, he conceded. “After this thing is over with, we will go down to my loft and discuss everything like rational people.” He was not asking her, but telling her. “I’m not running away from my problems and I won’t let you run away either. I won’t avoid any more problems in my life.” His cold looks and domineering personality didn’t intimidate her.

“And I’m your problem?” she snipped flippantly.

“No, Michelle. When you have a problem, it’s my problem, even if that problem has to do with me.”

Michelle huffed not believing the tender inflection in his voice. She couldn’t believe how their relationship had deepened so much in the couple of weeks they had known each other. She didn’t want to believe. Not when she hurt so much right now.

“Why should we talk about anything, Anthony, when there is nothing new to discuss. You are married and having an affair with me.”

“I was drunk when I got married and you just saw the legal divorce papers. The judge signed the annulment early this morning and my lawyer friend rushed them right over to me. I’ll take them to any lawyer you want me to and that’ll prove how binding those papers are. For the last time, Michelle, I’m divorced from Sharrisse,” he said with frustration mounting.

She shrugged nonchalantly. “It doesn’t matter, now. How do I know you aren’t keeping other things from me?”

“I’m not. I’ve told you everything.”

“Anthony, like I said before, this is neither the time nor place to discuss this and I’m not in the mood to do this right now.”

“After dinner,” he ordered emphatically.

“You are not going to brow beat me into this.”

“After dinner,” he repeated.

Tired and aggravated, she conceded if only to get him out her way. “Fine, just move!” She would agree to anything if it meant getting him out her way, but since she didn’t promise this to him, Michelle had to real intentions of doing what he was basically forcing her to do.

He stepped aside allowing her to pass and then followed her out. At first he was going to leave not wishing to sit down to dinner with Clarissa or Claudia. Yet, the fact that Onyx had showed up and was at the doorway of the dinner area and the angry voices coming from the area piqued his attention. He then caught a glimpse of Karen, which he had met over two years ago before he allowed Sharrisse to take over his fledging law practice.

He joined Michelle at the door to hear a young man screaming his head off at Niche.

“You are accusing my staff of embezzling my money?” Jordan asked highly pissed off.

Niche answered in a calm voice, “Why do you think you’re broke? Either you authorized it or they took it upon themselves to stuff their own pockets. The discrepancies the Heart Agency found were ridiculous and outlandish. I’ve already ordered the board to direct another audit on the business and there are several financial governments who are investigating the matter as well. Tonight isn’t about Amanda, Jordan. She had nothing to do with this. It was pure coincidence she was invited to this function, but I am glad she is here to witness it all. Don’t blame your lying stealing employees on your personal faults and regrets.”

“None of this is true.” Jordan insisted adamantly. “None of it!”

“Then I have no need of your company if it cannot protect my son’s trust,” Claudia said standing up in an outrage.

Onyx grinned. “Funny you should say something, Ms. Blackwell, since yours was a highly watched trust. But how can it be your son’s when you just declared the trust bankrupted in a court of law, this morning.”

“I don’t know what you mean!” she asserted.

“The hell you don’t!” Anthony growled at the doorway. “Jasmine just gave me the news this afternoon when she delivered my divorce papers about what you did.”

Claudia began to fluster. “Well, of course, it’s bankrupted.”

Onyx pulled out another piece of paper from her inside coat pocket. “Not according to the money deposited into a whole new account just last week, but it has your son as the retirement beneficiary, which was the only way the computer and state would allow the transfer to take place. True his own trust is gone that your husband set up for him, but a new trust was created to look like a retirement benefit to...” She looked at Michelle as she read the name. “Belle Coleman.”

Michelle gasped and looked at Craig. “Me?!”

“What the hell?!” Anthony said at the same time Michelle spoke. He snatched the papers from Onyx to look them over. “You bitch. You were hiding the money for them?” he asked Michelle incredulously. “And you accuse me of keeping secrets? Look who’s calling the kettle black, Michelle. I loved you.”

Michelle spoke up, completely baffled and shocked by Anthony’s admission of his feelings for her. “It was him!” She pointed at Craig. “He told me I would be helping out a good friend, who was on the brink of losing everything. I believed him.” She moved to Anthony, unlike Claudia who wanted to get out, but the only other exit that wasn’t blocked was the kitchen, but that could lead to a dead end. Michelle took the paper from him to see what Onyx had discovered.

“Good,” Onyx said. “Because you can testify against him.”

“NO!” Craig sneered. “You big mouth stupid bitch, take it back!” He jumped out the chair, but wouldn’t budge an inch as long as the man towering over Michelle was standing right by her looking quite deadly.

“I will not take it back,” Michelle said now that she fully understood what Craig had done and was more angry at herself for allowing him to fool her and trust him again. “You told me I was doing you a favor and it was just a small retirement fund for me to hold onto. That’s not the amount I assumed.”

“A favor, I bet,” Niche snipped.

Onyx agreed. “Michelle, you now have a small retirement fund for Austin in the amount of eight million dollars.”

“That’s my money!” Claudia sneered forgetting her fear of Anthony in her greed. “I want it back!”

“Not anymore, Ms. Blackwell.” Onyx pulled out another document. “You signed over custody of the retirement fund to Ms. Hamilton. You’ve lost all rights to the money and the child too. Guardian was also passed over to her.”

“That’s not what I was told,” Claudia insisted. “I was deceived by him.” She pointed to Jordan.

“Me?” he asked. “You are the one who came up with the scheme. How was I to know my man would use a slut your ex-lover was fucking?”

“What did you call me?” Michelle asked not believing the audacity of the man, but at the same time Anthony was charging over the table and before Jordan could blink, Anthony’s fist connected to the man’s jaw.

Amanda whooped with shock and laughter at the same time as Chef Peterson entered the room again.

“I guess dinner is off,” he assumed seeing the mayhem as the other men in the room was trying to drag Anthony off of Jordan.

“Oh no, it’s just beginning,” Amanda told him. “I wasn’t hungry when I sat down, but my appetite’s ravenous now. Please bring me a plate of that delicious food.”

Niche appealed to Michelle. “Call him off, Michelle.”

Michelle went over to Anthony and called his name sharply. “He’s not worth killing, Anthony.”

Anthony’s raged immediately calmed down feeling her light touch on his shoulder in comfort. Her melodious voice instantly tamed his wild fury. To Jordan, he said, “You’re the one fucking a slut. Did she tell you I was her stepson? Did she tell you she seduced me and got pregnant?” Anthony growled.

Jordan couldn’t quite comprehend what Anthony was saying because he was so disoriented, but Clarissa realized what was going on instantly.

“Austin really is your son?” she asked, her voice quivering with anger and frustration. She looked at her mother with disgust. “You told me he was lying. You really slept with him, when you knew I wanted him?”

“He seduced me!” Claudia lied.

“He was fifteen, Mummy. How could he possibly seduce you?” She was angry as she looked towards Anthony. “When you told me about Austin, I thought you were lying. She convinced me you were lying and I didn’t want to be with a man who would say those horrible things about my mother so I hurt you even more by telling you I’d never want to be with you ever.”

The room was quiet except for Amanda who was smacking on a succulent piece of ham.

“I don’t expect you to forgive me, because I don’t think I can forgive myself over the atrocity I did to you,” Clarissa said contritely.

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Claudia faced her daughter. "You're going to believe him! He has been trying to tear us apart for the longest, Clarissa!"

"Shut up, Mummy!" Clarissa slapped her mother with the back of her hand when Claudia began to protest some more with her lies. "Not another word deceitful lying word, Mummy. You made me believe it all, but not anymore. I won't listen to another word and I certainly won't agree with any of your mendacity you've shielded from everyone else." She looked at Niche. "She has a lot more money hidden from Anthony that belongs to him and Austin. She kicked Anthony out the house before he found out about the money Anthony received upon marrying my cousin. He also receives an annuity for his troubles upon his father's death of ten thousand a year, which she had funneled into a Swiss bank account from the money his mother left him. Claudia forged his name using a signature from one of his love letter's to me. The money is handled with Stanford and I know the account numbers. She's been using Mr. Stanford to embezzle money into different accounts all over the world."

The elevator bell rung again and two large men in police uniforms; along with two other men clearly government entered the room.

Niche introduced them. "These are several government financial officials who have several words for all of you who are under suspicion. This entire apartment was wired and all conversations were heard."

"Yes," the tallest man in suit spoke, flashing his badge. "Agent Gross from the IRS. I particularly have an interest in you, Ms. Blackwell." He looked directly at Claudia, who still looked frazzled from the slap her daughter had given her. "You weren't even under suspicion until tonight. You have a lot of explaining to do."

Claudia looked to her daughter for help, but Clarissa turned her back on her mother. She then looked down at the floor to Jordan who had passed out from the pain. Her deception was out in the open and she could not deny it.

"As a good friend of mine and a very lovely young lady said to me one time, you reap what you sow, Ms. Blackwell and I bet you're going to do a lot of reaping, because you did a whole bunch of sowing," Niche said.

Amanda smiled and pulled him into her arms and kissed him hard. Niche blushed, but responded lovingly to her lips.

Anthony nudged Michelle, who looked just as shocked. "I thought you said he was gay."

"I thought so too," Michelle bewildered.

Niche would have a lot of explaining to do.

Chapter 26

Christmas was four days away and Michelle had not spoken to Anthony since the night of the dinner party breaking her promise to go with him to his loft after the party. When Agent Gross took her statement, she was released and used the distraction to get home even avoiding Niche, but she knew she would have to speak with him or Amanda later. She signed a statement to assure the officials she would testify in court against Craig and anything else they needed her to testify for. She really didn't feel she was doing it out of spite or any wrong reason. Craig had deceived her and she wanted to clear her name of any wrong doings. The officials were almost drooling when she pulled out the papers she had left in her purse after Craig had scanned them. He had thought he shredded them, but she had nonchalantly put them in her purse and forgot about them. It was an oversight, but one that would definitely prove all parties involved. On an interesting note, she found out they had been watching her that day in the mall and videotaped her conversation with Craig. The IRS had been watching Craig for a long time and this was the cherry on top of the sundae for them.

Craig and the others were looking at jail sentences for a very long time. Karen testified against her boss that night feeling very guilty and she testified against Stanford Financials. For her testimony, Karen only received two-year probation, but her security license was suspended and she would not be allowed to work in the financial business again. Not even a bank or an accounting department would accept her.

The investigation did Michelle an extra favor. Onyx gave Michelle a file on Anthony that verified the judge signed the annulment. He could have divorced Sharrisse along time ago, but never had a reason to. Michelle figured she was his reason for doing it now and there were papers of separation on file dated a while ago.

Anthony had made contact with her the day after the dinner party by phone, but Michelle only told him she needed a lot of space to sort her feelings out for him.

"This was all too much for me to begin with Anthony. We were moving too fast and maybe this was just a calling to slow down."

"I should have told you in the beginning, Michelle, but we didn't exactly meet each other like regular people. I didn't think you would understand, Michelle, and my body was already committed to you by the time I realized this would be wrong." The words were sweet and ever

sweeter listening to him say them. Her heart was touched, but this frustrated her even more.”

“I’m sorry, Anthony. I need my space or I swear I’ll go crazy,” she threatened.

Anthony felt helpless and all he could do was acquiesce, yet he desired to speak with her some more, but kept this to himself and kept his distance waiting on her call.

Through Niche, she found out Anthony borrowed a hundred-grand to open up his law firm again and he seemed content. *‘Not happy, but content’* were Niche’s exact words and Niche was getting sick and tired of the young man asking how Michelle was doing.

Niche asked three days before Christmas, when they were having a bed session, “Can’t you just call him or something? I swear if he asks me one more time how you are, I’ll pull my ears off and mail them to you.”

“And do you a favor? Oh no, buddy boy. You’re still in my hot seat about taking my best assistant manager away, and then letting me know you and she were engaged. Niche, isn’t it rather drastic?” she asked worriedly.

“Nope,” he said with confidence. “I made this change in my life and I want to keep her beside me. I know a good thing in my life. I want to show her I don’t want anyone else, but she and I want to be with only her forever.”

Michelle sighed forlornly. “I always liked that about you, Niche. You always know instantly what you should do.”

“Amanda is wonderful for me. She makes me want to be a better man.”

“Well, only she can see that. You’re still snotty,” Michelle teased.

“Oh, that will never go away, but I like seeing the world through her eyes. I don’t have anymore of my own demons anymore. I’ve pushed them away and I feel like I can live the rest of my life a happy man with her no matter what life throws in my way.”

“You sound so happy, Niche.” Michelle was sincerely happy for him.

“You are jealous?” he asked concerned.

“Yes,” she playfully pouted, but in truth that was a lie. She wanted the happiness Niche was feeling, but she wanted this with Anthony.

“Good.” He lovingly kissed her cheek and pulled her closer in his arms feeling her trying to hold a sob in.

She had been miserable, but didn’t want to admit it was her guilt of her revenge against Anthony that was making her miserable. She had just

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used the excuse that he had deceived her as a tactic to stay away from him in an effort to assuage her guilt. It was difficult to sort out her feelings, but it was complicated.

Niche spoke quietly again. "Speaking of demons, Clarissa stopped by the store the other night looking for you."

"What did she want?" Pulling away from Niche slightly to look at him, the confusion was evident in her tone of voice.

"She wanted to know did you want the keys to the house in Southfield. It belongs to you as does all of Austin's inheritance according to Clarissa. Claudia signed everything over to you."

"I don't want it," she seethed disgusted. "It belongs to Austin and Anthony."

"Then why don't you give it to the person who wants to be Austin's true guardian?" Niche suggested.

"Can I use your lawyer?" she asked.

Niche frowned in disapproval. "Yes, but the process could be expensive."

"Then I'll take out another loan from my best friend," she teased.

"There is a cheaper way." His look of disapproval grew worse.

She sat up frowning down at him. "What is the cheaper way?"

"You could marry him," he suggested casually.

She laid back down in defeat. "I'll take the loan."

"Oh, come on, Michelle. You love him." He sat up frustrated at her obstinate behavior.

Closing her eyes to calm her nerve, she said, "Maybe I do, but it's so hard."

"Hard to love him?"

"No. Hard to go back. It's like I've dug myself in a rut. I didn't believe him and I didn't trust he would do the right thing. I realized now he would have told me eventually he was married and he had made steps to get a divorce when he realized our relationship was becoming serious. I know Sharrisse is a dirty rotten liar just like her aunt, but..." She was too upset to continue trying to fight from crying. Niche was there to make her feel good, not pull out what she was trying not to face.

"But what?" he insisted to know.

“But I don’t want to apologize for the fool I’ve been and what I did to him. I feel sorry, but I don’t want to say it.”

“You both owe each other an apology.”

“We do?” she asked allowing a weird hiccup sob to escape.

“Yes, and you’re both being very stubborn. Why don’t you just wipe the slate clean and start over? If you love him and he loves you, then it’s easy.”

Michelle wished she could believe that, but her pride was making it too difficult.

Niche looked at his watch. “I have some things to attend to, but I am going to trust you’ll be assistant Amanda with the New Year wedding preparations.”

She nodded, and then changed the subject slightly. “How did you plan all that the night of the dinner party, Niche?”

He shrugged. “I really didn’t. Onyx kinda threw the stuff at me a while ago and then did more research up until the night of the party. She got the officials involved after I sat down with Jordan about buying the company. Jordan’s people were so loyal to that weasel; the IRS was having a difficult time trying to get a man in. They asked if I would help them out and you bet your ass I agreed as long as they didn’t press any charges against you. From there it was simple. I knew you wouldn’t listen to me and do what you wanted in the name of what you thought was trust and still love for Craig. Jordan let my supposed account, which was really from the Heart Agency, come in and audited all his records because he thought I was going to just lay a check down to save his company. They used the dinner party to really get him.”

“So getting angry at Jordan really was all an act?” she asked.

Niche frowned remembering Jordan’s comments towards Amanda and still highly upset the son of a bitch never apologized. Yet, he had been grateful to Anthony for punching Jordan’s lights out, which was why Niche hadn’t even hesitated when Anthony asked him for a loan, until all the money Claudia stole from him was cleared up and returned to him. It was the least Niche could do. “No. If the IRS hadn’t been involved, I would have involved them just to see that son of a bitch pay for what he did to other unsuspecting people like Austin.”

He checked his watch and reluctantly got out of the massive bed straightening up his clothes. “Will this mean we won’t have any bed sessions anymore,” she asked forlornly.

“Well, by the time you need another, you’ll have Mr. Wonderful right back in it,” he said teasingly.

“How do you know that?” she asked.

“Because I know you and although you’re stubborn as hell, your heart will eventually heal and you’ll be knocking on his door. Soon enough.”

Offhandedly, Michelle asked ambiguously, “Niche, why hadn’t you made a move on me? Why Amanda?”

“You and I know we didn’t want to mess up our relationship with the good friendship we had.”

“But you and Amanda?” she asked perplexed.

He sat on the bed next to her taking her hand in his. “This past week has wonderful. It’s like we’re soul mates. We have some kind of connection that no one else in the world gets. We’re meant to be together. She knew it way before me, but once I realized it, I knew we would never be apart. You ever tell yourself you won’t eat something, then you try it once and when you take that first bite, it’s like you know instantly you’re going to like this forever and no one can tell you differently.”

“What about your past?” she questioned.

“What about it? We all make mistakes and we get over them. We’ve both been tested and I don’t have a thing to worry about.”

“You don’t think you might go back?”

“Never,” Niche said adamantly. “At this time I was searching for something that was in my face the whole time. Can you believe that?” He chuckled to himself. “I can’t believe I have missed out on being with her for so long, but I won’t allow another minute go by again.”

“And her son?”

“Is just too good for words. She has been a wonderful mother and with her mother’s emotional support, we’ll be a family. I’ve never had a mother-in-law and she’s never had a son. She’s too funny, but cooks almost better than Chef Peterson.” He chuckled too himself.

“He’ll still cater the reception, won’t he?”

“Doris didn’t want him to, but Amanda and I decided to have them work together for the reception. They’ve been bickering over the menu for the past two days.”

“That’s usual for Chef Peterson,” she said. “He’s so touchy about his food and who he allows in the kitchen while he’s cooking. You know him.”

“I think he likes bickering with Dorie.” Standing up, Niche put on his suit jacket and looked in the mirror. He saw the sadness in her face when she thought he wasn’t looking at her and to know his friend was so heartbroken tore his own heart to pieces for her. Another moment of silence passed before he said quietly. “He’s always at the Parthenon having dinner by himself at seven. He goes there to think and work about five times a week. Maybe you should drop in and just see if you can assist him in figuring some things out for the both of you. Amanda and I would like you both to be in the wedding and you need to pick out the color of your dress because Amanda’s decorating the church with white. The color is up to you and you need to let Anthony know so he can get his tuxedo’s accessories to go with your color.”

“Can’t you just tell him?” she groaned.

“Nope.” He handed her a card. “This is Jasmine Bellini’s card. She can arrange for any properties and monies become accessible to the proper accounts. Tell her to bill everything to me and I will take care of it.” He kissed her forehead before leaving out.

Michelle started at the ceiling for a good minute before she crawled out of bed. After working at the computer for about two hours she showered and dressed in a nice blue three piece business suit. She spoke the lawyer once she was fully dressed and Jasmine Bellini said she could start the paperwork immediately and would have it completed by tomorrow morning. She had most of the work and knew where to look for everything else.

“Now all you have to do is to tell me who you want to sign the trust over to,” Jasmine said.

Michelle was very aware of who deserved to be the trustee of the fund and spoke her wishes clearly with Jasmine.

Chapter 27

Anthony tried to concentrate. After the New Year, he had several cases pending and needed all the time in the world to complete his research, but his mind was on one thing...one person. He missed her, but he couldn't muster up the strength to go see her. What if she slammed the door in his face? What if she trampled his heart like Clarissa did?

After the dinner party incident, Clarissa had offered more apologies. She had even arranged for money belonging to him transferred into his accounts. She paid of Austin's tuition with her own money and she made sure Anthony received all the important document including a copy of his father's will.

The day after, Onyx came over and took him over Lethal's house – a fortress in the middle of the city. She showed him the room that he had been locked up in and even the bed table, Lou had strapped him on.

Lethal walked in on what she was showing him and Onyx goaded her brother into taking on Anthony again. This time they adjourned to Lethal's private gym, where both men went topless and tried to pummel each other to death. Anthony had a lot of animosity and anger welled up inside of him that he needed to release and Lethal was just pissed off.

After three hours, Lethal actually called a draw when he couldn't see out of his left eye. Anthony was damn near blind and barely able to stand, but he wasn't about to admit it. Once it was over, Lethal had mad respect for Anthony and even gave him a private key card to come and go as he pleased because Anthony loved the private gym Lethal had.

With it being the night before Christmas, the Parthenon wasn't filled and the restaurant was closing early. HE would leave out, but he just didn't want to go to the apartment yet. There were too many memories of her and what they shared there. He was going to move out, but he couldn't. He wanted Austin to have something to come home to and the young man loved his room area so much Anthony didn't have the heart to pack it all up and disappear. Plus, Anthony was so proud of the renovations he'd done to it.

In the distance, he heard one of the waiters say to a patron, "We're closing."

There was some low talking, and then he heard the footsteps approach him. Looking up, he couldn't believe his eyes. Michelle was standing there in a thick full-length black mink coat and heels. She had the coat closed tightly and had her hand out with an envelope in her fingers.

Taking the envelope looking very wary at her, he opened it and pulled out the documents inside. Again he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Jasmine said it's everything that rightfully belongs to Austin - All his stock options, board positions, estates, and money. Your father made wise business decisions and left the right person in charge of it. Claudia was not the beneficiary, but she was the guardian of Austin until she lost that right by putting him out and signing over his guardianship to me. She had no rights over his trust in the first place, but she did and she had every intention of taking the money and moving to a very lovely villa in South America, which Austin owns that too now. Austin would have been destitute," Michelle quietly explained watching his face intently for every emotion he was feeling.

There was a pregnable silence and when she felt she couldn't stand it anymore, she said dejectedly, "Merry Christmas, Anthony." With that she turned away and began to walk away from the table knowing this would be her last time ever trying to be with him, but he was acting as if he didn't want to be with her. Although, she had taken the chance of coming here, she was still afraid of being hurt by him, because she loved him so much.

He caught her wrist. "Michelle, don't go, please."

She faced him. At the same time, they said, "Let's start over."

Both flushed realizing their mind was on the same track.

"I missed you," he said earnestly. "I know we've been hell on each other and I deserved the animosity you've given me, but I don't care if you hate me for the rest of your life, just love me more and it will balance out. I love the fuck out of you and I don't want to ever let you out of my life."

Michelle was weirdly touched by his harsh sentiments, but Anthony had never been the mellow type of man and she was attracted to his brutal honesty. "I love you too, Anthony."

"So you don't still hate me?" he asked worriedly.

She laughed, feeling very relaxed and relieved at the same time. "I could never hate you, Anthony. I never hated you."

"Even when I called you a skank?"

Michelle stiffened. "Don't try my patience, Mr. Brooks."

He took a chance and tenderly pressed his lips against hers. She was reserved initially, but then began to let go, giving leave to her coat to come partially open.

He looked down and gasped. "Ms. Coleman, you're naked as the day you were born."

She smiled wickedly.

“Were you coming to seduce me?” he asked, holding her close, so no one else would see the surprise she had for him.

With an iniquitous hue lighting her eyes, she said determinedly, “Actually, I was going to rape you again if you didn’t follow me out.”

He chuckled quietly so they wouldn’t draw too much attention, yet his mind was in a whirlwind of excitement holding her this close to him. “Well, you can still do that,” he replied digging out the key card to Lethal’s home.

Michelle blushed furiously again, but she knew as she recognized the familiar key card, he was dead serious. Taking the card from him and letting him lead him out, she said, “If you insist, but can I go first this time.”

Anthony had no problem with that at all and couldn’t wait to strap her down on the bed table at Lethal’s house.

The End

To read more of this author’s work, please visit her website at:
<http://SylviaHubbard.com>

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Whether you make a donation or not, please let me know how much you enjoyed the book by signing the guestbook on my website and sharing your opinion with all my visitors and please continue to visit my website for more FREE books.

In 2006, my goal is to release two more free e-novels, Deceptive Nights and The Other Side of Love, plus my new tradeback, Drawing the Line, will be available by mid-July. To see an excerpt of The Other Side of Love, please visit my work in progress website at:

<http://sylviahubbard.homestead.com/working.html>

To see a novel in the making by me, you can visit my blog at:

<http://GrandDesign.blogspot.com>

I've reverted back to my serial killer instincts like I did in Stone's Revenge, with a complicated plot. I'm positive you will love the twist and turns I take you on. Read with me as I literally type the book out almost right before your very eyes.

Other paperback versions of books I've written can be purchased on Amazon.com. Those novels are called Dreams of Reality and Stone's Revenge.

Thank you for your interest in my writing endeavors.

About the author:

Detroit, MI author, Sylvia Hubbard has been a novelist for as long as she can remember. Often lying to her parents, her mother encouraged her to write the lies down in notebooks. This punishment soon turned to passion as Ms. Hubbard finished her first novel at 12 and published her first paperback suspense romance in 2000 with *Dreams of Reality*. She e-published her second book, *stealing innocence*, which she offers to her readers for free and receives about twenty downloads of the book a day. In mid-2004, she released her third book (paperback) called *Stone's Revenge*, which has been receiving rave reviews all over as a suspenseful page-turner. In 2005, Ms. Hubbard plans to release her fourth book an e-publish sequel to *stealing innocence* subtitled *The Ravishment* and another paperback erotic/suspense called *Drawing The Line*.

As a single mother of three, Ms. Hubbard is founder of Motown Writers Network, coordinator of Detroit Writers Galore, owner of Hub Books Publishing/Distributor and co-founder of The Essence of Motown Writers Alliance. She's the Detroit Literary Diva with more to come.

Other Books by Author

Paperback

Dreams of Reality

Stone's Revenge **

Ebook

Stealing Innocence **

Road to Freedom

Stealing Innocence II: The Ravishment **

Novellas

Red Heart

Baby Doll

Maniac Neighbor

Short Stories

Country Road

How to Meet & Marry In 24 Hours

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Iced Tea

Works In Progress

The Other Side of Love

The Grand Design

Upcoming Releases

Drawing the Line (Tradeback & Ebook)

Deceptive Nights (Ebook)

*** also available in tradeback & ebook*