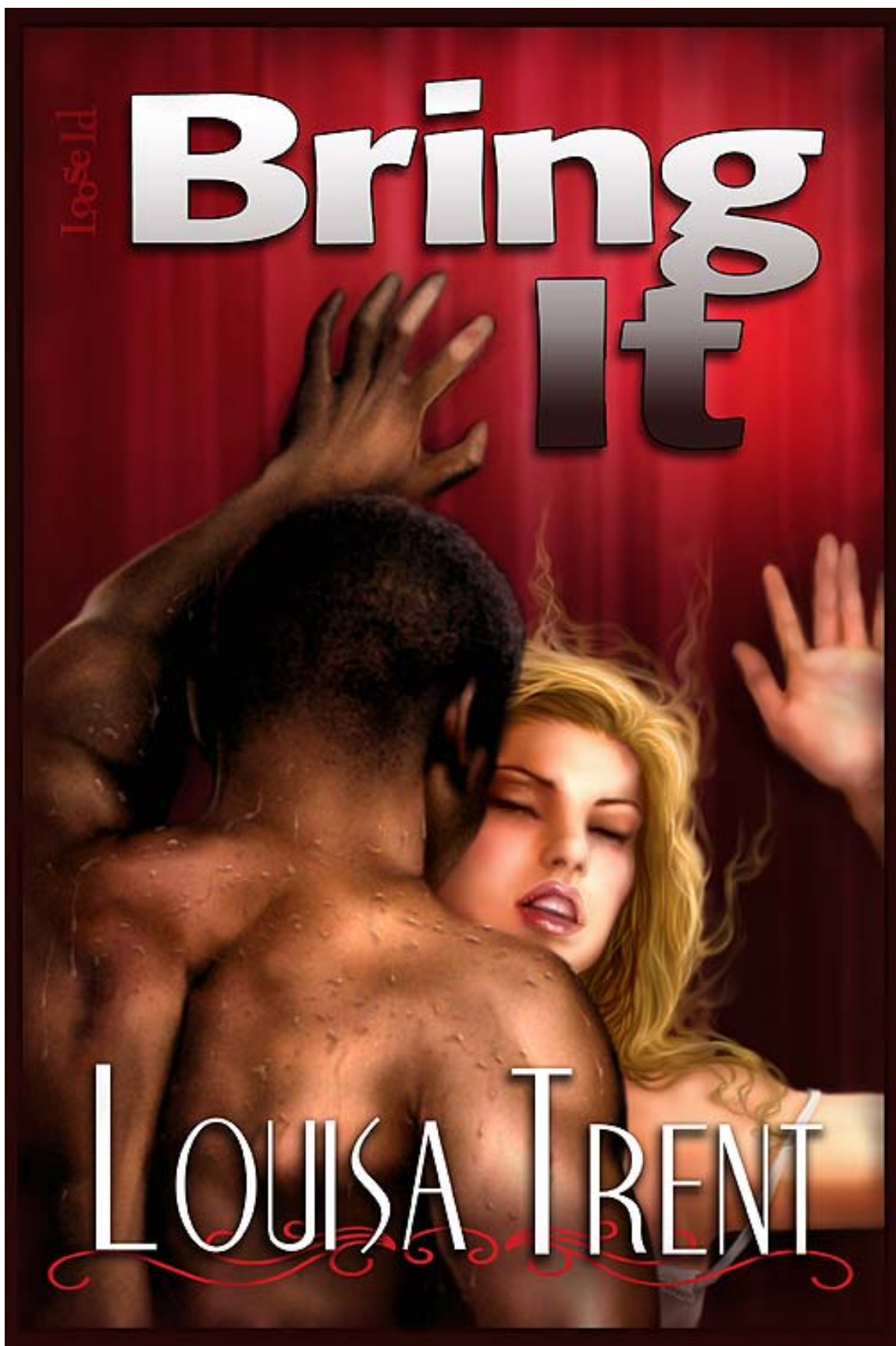


loose id

# Bring It

LOUISA TRENT



# BRING IT

Louisa Trent

LooseId®

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Louisa Trent

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# Loowis



The Loose Id

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## Prologue

*Nothing could be finer than a run in Carolina in the moooorrrrnniiiiinggg...*

James Stone hummed the slightly altered lyrics under his breath as he barreled past “Rainbow Row” on East Bay Street, an easy six-mile course that jumpstarted his morning routine without busting a nut. In downtown Charleston, his blood pumping fast, he dodged cars, zigzagged around pedestrians, narrowly avoided a few bikers hogging the road.

Man, he was stoked. Despite the heavy congestion, his size twelve feet ate up the pavement. Two seconds under his personal best time, he was flying. Soaring. Fucking invincible. No one and nothing could touch him or bring him back down to earth. What a rush! In the zone, his stride long and true, his runner’s high cresting, the mellow euphoria better than any damn street drug, he rounded the corner onto the eastern end of Broad Street...

And hit the wall. Hard. Wiped out, his sturdy legs kicked out from under him, he just about landed flat on his ass. After catching his eye, the pretty blonde tour guide then proceeded to blow him away. No intention on her part. Oblivious to her impact on him, unaware of his damn existence, she continued lecturing her group of tourists in front of the majestic façade of the Old Exchange.

Hell of a nerve. After stomping all over *his* neatly planned morning schedule, *she* kept right on keeping on, taking care of business. The woman who sucker-punched him didn’t even know he was alive. So much for his invincibility. So much for being above it all. So much for his inflated self-importance.

Love at first sight was for fools and songwriters. But horny happened. Is that what this was -- just another random hard-on?

He hoped so. But, honest to Christ, the pit of his stomach told him otherwise. The thumping drum in his chest joined in and said, *Wake up, fool! It's all over for you. Life as you knew it just came crashing to an end.*

Not without a fight, it hadn't.

He'd earned his street cred, and he wasn't going down for the last count with only a piss and a whimper. Anything or anyone pushed James Stone, and James Stone pushed back.

He battled the urge to give in. Battled the urge to cave. He was *not* sweeping her up into his arms and taking off someplace. Anyplace. Who the hell cared where? So long as they were together, that was all that mattered...

James grimaced. Fighting the urge wasn't exactly working out here. On to plan B.

Since this was all about the tour guide, he tried shaking her. But even from half a block away, she held his attention and wouldn't let go.

Her animated mouth. Lush and soft, a delicate shade of pink that matched the faint color blushing across her cheekbones.

Her trim figure. Though not full anywhere, her slight build still did it for him everywhere, from north to south. Amazing, considering his prior track record. He liked his ladies to have a little substance, and a whole lot of booty. She had neither, but what she did have was enough to keep his interest sparked.

Her pale hair fluttered around her determined pale jaw as she spoke. He couldn't figure out, though, which adjective -- pale or determined -- got the most play. And that worried him.

Her air of mystery. Then again, her dark shades might've contributed to the element of suspense. Why the hell was she wearing sunglasses, anyway? The day was overcast, and he wanted to see her eyes, dammit.

Her enthusiastic tone of voice...

What. The. Fuck. Okay, now he had gone *way* too far. Overboard, as a matter of fact. Who was he trying to smoke here? In the middle of all this honking-ass traffic and at this distance, he couldn't hear anything.

The thing was, the pretty tour guide made him *want* to hear what she had to say, and that was the whole damn point. Wanting to capture every part of her, including her words, including the color of her eyes, including everything he didn't know about her, was the deal breaker. That was when he knew the turn on wasn't entirely superficial. That was when he knew his interest had substance. That was when he knew his hard-on wasn't only a result of flash. That was when he knew he could stop struggling, because, man, he had already lost. She'd taken him out of the game.

Temporarily.

A few more days in the city, after all, and a jet would wing him back home to Boston. Besides, this was only animal magnetism. Right? An instinct no more complicated than

simple biology. At the very most, the attraction was chemistry. The spontaneous combustible kind. Philosophically speaking, his yang wanted to make sweet music with her yin...

He wouldn't object to getting some, either. Inside his boxers, his best bud had started to twitch.

Familiar territory. He'd been over this same geography once or twice before. Not recently. Not so long ago, either, that he'd forgotten the lay of the land. Or how to land the lay. The truth was, he remembered all too well what did it for him. And she did. He'd already admitted as much to himself.

So as not to lose sight of her, James circled the street. A slow back and forth pace. Hardly breaking a sweat, he jogged, his sneakers barely leaving rubber as he chased his own tail, 'round and 'round. In his thoughts, also performing a circular motion, the blonde tour guide moved under him in bed.

That sexy image broke his face into a big puppy-dog grin.

He had him a case, all right. A real bad case. And it made no damn kind of sense. He was too hardcore smart and too urban tough for a sweet Mint Julep like her. No fucking way should Miss Southern Belle be messing with the head of a Northern brutha...

Wait! Hold on. What if she was already taken? What if some lucky fuck of a white boy had already scoped her out, scooped her up, and made her his own?

Suddenly, out of nowhere, without any sort of warning, his lungs shut down on him. He couldn't breathe worth shit. Maybe if he walked it off, shook out his muscles, the stitch in his side would let up and he'd be able to catch him some air.

Cool-down stretches forgotten, he stalled, gasping, feeling the burn clean down to his soul. Coincidentally, the soles of his feet had glued themselves to the sidewalk across from the Old Exchange, the building where the tour guide just so happened to be giving her talk. Up close and personal, he could now pick up her vibe, loud and clear.

It was beautiful. She was beautiful. And sassy.

Curves played their role. Tits and ass and endless legs had their place. But sass? When a woman had all that going on plus an *almost* indescribable, *nearly* undeniable, something else, too, his dick stood up and took notice.

That something was passion.

Nothing but nothing turned him on faster than a woman all wrapped up in a passion about something. Made him wonder if she'd wrap herself around him just as passionately. Made him speculate if she'd welcome him into her body, her legs around his heaving back, holding him to her, as he pounded his hot juice into her...

That did it! Hell, he was over. Finished. Going nowhere. The shiny window of a gift shop confirmed his assessment. There he slumped, mirrored in plate glass, a black man bent at the waist, hands on knees, tongue hanging out, coveting a woman he shouldn't want, a woman destined to be very, very, inconvenient, if not downright impossible, for him to



have. There he panted, damn near seven feet of righteous ambition, slayed by the call of forbidden pussy.

*Come on, James! Put it in gear. You're bigger than this. Get your junk together, man, and leave. Just go.*

But he couldn't get it together. Couldn't run away. Couldn't walk away. Couldn't trot his ass away, no way. Couldn't crawl away, neither. Not without knowing if he stood a chance.

His pulse hammering, he turned away from his reflection in the gift store window. From somewhere deep within himself he pulled out enough guts to narrow his gaze on the tour guide's expressive storyteller's hands.

No wedding band encircled her ring finger.

Funny how fast his breathing improved.

Next, he read her Bumble Bee Tour badge.

Laura Jean Beaumont.

Even her name made him squirm. Those three names rolled off his Northern tongue, all smooth, like butter left out in the sun. Hot. Hot. Hot.

Finally, he concentrated on her words. The traffic swallowed up most of them, but what he could hear sounded like a damn love poem to historical architecture.

So, moldy old buildings were Laura Jean's passion, eh?

James had only just finished thinking that this must be his day for coincidences because, coincidentally, he happened to dig buildings from bygone eras, too, when some loudmouthed passerby planted his slick-ass self behind the tour guide and proceeded to hassle her. Catcalls. Whistles. Echoing her sentences. Generally making like an all-around nuisance so she couldn't get on with her lecture. Rude punk. What was the guy's problem, anyway?

James had to hand it to her, Laura Jean held her own. Not backing down, keeping her poise, she swiveled to face Slick. "Sir," she said notching up her voice, but only enough to be heard above the traffic, "these people are here to learn the story behind this historically relevant structure. Please stop the disruption and move on." After putting Slick politely in his place, Laura Jean directed her group of tourists up the steps into the Old Exchange and then proceeded to walk around the right-hand side of the building.

Alone.

Big mistake. She never should have done that. Why hadn't she followed her group up the stairs? Sure, Slick had disappeared into the crowd, but James was sure the guy was still around, somewhere, looking to cause her more trouble.

His bad feeling played out. Two seconds later, the loudmouthed punk reappeared. His mean and nasty expression clued James in to what was about to go down. Like a bad case of

the flu, Slick had hung back to regroup, only to return with a viral vengeance. The unwary Laura Jean was about to pick up some major contagion behind that building.

Fuck that.

Yanking up the hood on his red sweatshirt, James followed Slick at a sprint.

He caught up fast. "Hey, man. I saw what happened out front, and I don't mean to get all up in your face or nothin'," James said, slipping with ease from the language of an upscale professional to urban street, "but whatever your complaint, just let the bitch go. Ain't no cunt worth an assault rap."

"Mind your own business, asshole."

*Ahhhrighht...*

"You know what, Slick? I'm making the lady my business."

Though looking for trouble was no longer his style, James never had mastered the fine art of running away. And no one could say he hadn't tried reason first. By his own doing, Slick had landed himself in some heavy shit.

Up ahead, Laura Jean entered the ground floor service entrance of the Old Exchange. In the alley, James pounced. Without further ado, he drove his kneecap up into his new enemy's groin. As far as beat downs went, ball breaking lacked the kind of *savoir-faire* he was known for these days. Then again, unsophisticated moves often produced refined results.

And James would know all about that.

A mother lode of violence and hostility simmered right below his surface cool. No need for any deep digging to tap into his antisocial tendencies. With no way out of poverty, a young man of color learns early on he's got nothing to lose.

Except his own self-respect.

Hanging onto his by a thread, James released his hold on Slick. "Word up. Hassle the lady again, and I'll come after you and take you out. Know what I'm saying, man?"

"Yes, sir," coughed Slick, finally finding his manners.

"Good. I'm real glad we've reached us an understanding. Now get your punk-ass self outta here, before I hack off your dick and feed the puny thang to the dogs."

No questions asked, no arguments made, Slick staggered away, and James took off for the hotel. Unless he was dumber than he looked, Slick wouldn't go telling his story of woe to the cops. But why take chances? Off came the red hooded sweatshirt. A toss deposited the identifiable garment in a trashcan en route to the Crepe Myrtle Inn. In his generic running shorts and a not-so generic imported Italian polo shirt, James knew he resembled an upper-income, thirty-five-year-old, African American male. Buzzed hair. Even features. Medium dark skin shade. No piercings, tattoos, missing or gold teeth. No visible scars to give him away. Conservative in speech and manner. Even with his basketball player height and athletic build, an eyewitness would have a tough time fingering him in a police lineup. He just didn't project the stereotypical gangsta profile.

And that reassuring slice of knowledge came to him by virtue of experience. Before turning his act around, like most males from the inner city, especially from his 'hood, he'd committed his share of youthful indiscretions. Hell-raising mostly. Head banging. Petty, disturbing-the-peace kind of shit. Once, though, an appetite for fine threads and expensive high-tops, and no cash to pay the bill, had prompted him to jack a clothing store located in a swanky, Back Bay hotel.

When his mama found him out, there'd been all-hell to pay.

After whupping his ass but good, that church-going lady had dragged his whupped ass back to the scene of his crime. To apologize. To work out an arrangement of no-pay restitution for the stolen items. Funny thing was, though, no one at that fancy hotel remembered his face.

Recognizing his hunger to make something out of himself, however, the manager had taken James under his wing, mentoring him in the hospitality business. And so his journey toward self-respect had begun. No more street-doings for him. Thereafter, he'd directed his negative rage into positive action. Keeping his chin down and his nose clean, he did what he had to do to go mainstream. He'd been moving toward his objective ever since.

Until this detour today.

That afternoon, his schedule was full, but he had no appointments tomorrow. As soon as he returned to his office, he'd arrange for a Bumble Bee tour. Destination anywhere. As long as Laura Jean Beaumont was doing the leading, James didn't care where they went.

## Chapter One

“Murderess,” hissed the gawking woman. “That’s exactly what you are, Laura Jean Beaumont. You might not have done the deed with your own hands, but taking up with some no account scum like you did amounts to the same difference.”

Her sunglass-shielded gaze fixed straight ahead, Laura brushed past the heckler on the narrow sidewalk.

Broad Street always attracted tourists. But, sheesh! Today, for some reason, pedestrians swarmed everywhere. Antique shoppers hunting down politically correct Civil War memorabilia. Diners congregating outside home-style Southern restaurants featuring grits, fried green tomatoes, sweet tea, and, of course, the ubiquitous collard greens. Pedigreed poodles on rhinestone leashes dragging their frazzled owners from lamppost to curb. And they all, each and every one of them, including the pampered pooches, gawked at her.

Or was that her paranoia at work?

She just didn’t know anymore. At times, she couldn’t tell what was real and what only played out in her head.

“Your poor parents dead,” the gawking woman now screamed at Laura’s back. “Killed with an axe. And you have the almighty nerve to flaunt yourself in public. Sashaying about Charleston like some brazen hussy. Giving guided tours to tourists, no less! *Humph*. Have you no shame, gal?”

That last pierced the thick skin Laura told herself she’d grown during her four-year absence from South Carolina.

*Have you no shame, gal...*

What an idiotic question! After a killer took everything else away from her, shame was all she had left.

Stopping mid-step, Laura counted to ten, all the while thinking she'd give her last loofah sponge to haul back and smack the vicious biddy six ways 'til Sunday. Unfortunately, her mother and father had raised her up better than that. Laura Beaumont might be a murder suspect, but she was a well-bred murder suspect.

Smoothing a hand over her beige silk dress, a barely there Parisian sheath, Laura turned and confronted the windbag, a gracious smile plastered on her face. "Aft'noon, Miz Anderson. Lovely day, isn't it, ma'am? Hope y'all are doing just fine. Best regards to the family, hear?"

Turning, Laura resumed her walk to the Crepe Myrtle Inn, her steps flavored with a *brazen hussy sashay*, added for her heckler's benefit. Petty, yes, but enormously satisfying all the same. The irony was -- her parents, bless their sweet hearts, would have agreed with Miz Anderson's assessment of her new "career." They'd roll over in their graves if they knew how their spoiled only child was making ends meet. Not too long ago, the idea would have horrified Laura, too. Rub shoulders with camera-toting out-of-towners? Shoot! She might just as well sell souvenir T-shirts in the City Market as stoop so low.

Flat broke had a way of turning a girl's value system around.

Hard to believe she had once belonged to the same social circle as the screeching woman back there. That they had once been bona fide members of the same exclusive country club. My, how circumstances changed! The indulged daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Beaumont had once spent more allowance money on a single dress than she presently earned in a full week walking the streets.

Oh, not *that* kind of street walking! Although, certain folks made little distinction between her occupation and the other. According to anonymous hate mail, her tour guide job "blackened the proud Beaumont name." Laura didn't need a return address to know where those daily correspondences originated.

Charleston's country club set. The membership positively *oozed* that sort of snobbery. There was a time when her own ooze factor was every bit as snooty. After marrying the "right" perfect someone, she had assumed tennis and golf would occupy her days, while an endless round of meaningless parties, disguised as do-gooder benefits, would fill her nights.

My, my, my. Three months back in Charleston, and not one social invitation. Apart from Donna Sue, her former best friend and current real estate agent, the phone never rang.

She just guessed murder suspects never got asked anywhere.

Fine and dandy. Who had time for socializing? Giving guided tours seven days a week kept her busy. No complaints. Not about the long hours, at least. Actually, it was a wonder she had any job at all. She'd sent out plenty of applications and résumés, but what with an undergrad degree in historical architecture, limited worthwhile work experience, and a reputation that preceded her, no decent employer within a hundred-mile radius of the crime scene had seen fit to offer her as much as an interview.

Enter Bumble Bee Tourism. The company had hired her on the spot, no questions asked. Cashing in on her notoriety, BBT hawkers shouted her infamy from every street corner. Tour brochures boasted her photo. Bumble Bee ads *buzzed* her name all over local TV and radio stations. Naturally, the media blitz was disgustingly successful. Where tickets for other walking tours went unclaimed, tours led by Laura Jean Beaumont always sold out. Folks just worshipped celebrity...

With the possible exception of her fellow debts at the St. Cecilia Society Cotillion ball. Regardless that she'd "come out" with them, regardless that she'd danced the night away with them at their presentation, those stuck up ladies must want to murder her.

*Get in line*, Laura thought, allowing herself one, and only one, self-pitying sniff, done while checking her gold wristwatch.

Finding herself slightly ahead of schedule, Laura slowed her gait. The lichen-covered path looked a mite slippery.

Her days of wearing five-inch stilettos to compensate for less than model stature were long gone. But, looking on the bright side, at least she no longer needed to wear those hideous, therapeutic Velcro lace-ups. *Lordy!* How she'd hated those orthopedic monstrosities. In her comfortable and almost stylish, beige walking pumps, she didn't favor her left leg too much. Even after showing off to Miz Anderson with her exaggerated hip rolling, her limp remained hardly noticeable. Still, upon entering the walled courtyard of the Crepe Myrtle Inn, Laura immediately looked out for potential hazards. Like the leafy trees overhead. The branches cast dense green shade and turned sunglass wearing into an accident just frothing at the mouth to happen. Twist an ankle, and she'd find herself out of a job *and* back in physical therapy.

So much for anonymity, Laura mused, stowing her five-year-old Ray Bans in her shoulder bag. Goodness, but she felt naked. Totally exposed. And shaky. So shaky. Those sunglasses were her last defense. Against prying eyes. Against evil.

Her nerves, already shopworn, started to fray. Why had she ever returned to Charleston? There had been absolutely no need for her to come back home. Her lawyers could have handled selling the estate, long distance, without any personal input from her, whatsoever.

*Meow.* Her inner 'fraidy cat had returned with a vengeance.

Biting down on her trembling lower lip, Laura straightened her injured spine. No! She wasn't doing this. Not again. Not now.

But the voices inside her head continued: What if the sadistic monster who killed her parents was out there watching her, even now?

*Stop obsessing! Think of something else, Laura. Anything else. Don't dwell on your fears. Divert your mind, like the nice doctors told you to do.*

The weather. Not a terribly interesting distraction, but the subject was always available, in one form or another.

A typical early June day in the city, the morning had begun on a showery note. Now late afternoon, leftover puddles, caught in shallow bowls on the veranda's brick floor, added a sticky humidity to the air. Looking on the sunny side, the warmth had pushed out all those pretty flower blossoms --

Their sickeningly sweet scent worsened her tension headache. The accompanying nausea made her tummy roll. She never could abide cloying perfume.

Rubbing her throbbing temples, Laura made her way along the outside corner of the Crepe Myrtle Inn.

A Northern-based company, Rehabilitation Enterprises, had purchased the antique maritime warehouse and converted the dilapidated structure into a forty-room boutique hotel. Purportedly, the firm's owner, a wealthy hotelier, had funneled six-million dollars into the inn's modernization and conservation. His attention to even the smallest eighteenth-century period detail inspired awe in her. Out front, under the stylish addition of a maroon and cream striped awning, she'd meet, not the usual twelve-member tourist group, but a private party of one, in precisely --

"Ten minutes," she pronounced, after checking her watch yet again.

Great. First, an anxiety-provoked migraine and now she was talking to herself. Again. Just like a crazy person.

In the last four years, she'd had some mental health *issues*. Nothing too serious. She wasn't a threat to herself or to others, and a little pink pill taken once a day restored her lost sanity.

Her hysteria rising, Laura snickered. Obviously, her medication wasn't working nearly well enough. Ten minutes 'til her private tour? She knew exactly how to *kill* the time.

Voyeurism. A hobby for those not actively engaged in living life for real, for those poor lonely perverts who could only get their jollies vicariously.

Oh, boo. Whoever said lovemaking wasn't a spectator sport had never been a murder suspect. If not for secondhand sex, she'd have no love life at all.

Safe sex? Intimacy once removed was entirely safe. No fuss, no muss, no worrying over condoms and social diseases and babies crying for three o'clock feedings. No having to shave her legs, or wax her pubes, or figure out the appropriate time to convincingly scream.

This too warm, too fragrant, too populated courtyard supplied her fertile imagination with just oodles of raw material. Twenty or so hotel guests, some alone, some in pairs, others in small gatherings, lounged al fresco within the tropical plant ambience. What had drawn these travelers to the Crepe Myrtle Inn?

Cocktail choice might provide a clue.

Tapping her chin, Laura surveyed the drink-strewn tabletops. If she were a betting woman, rather than a crazy woman, she'd wager vacationing tourists were the ones sipping from wide-mouthed goblets with festive fruit-embellished rims, silly jewel-toned drinks sporting gaudy miniature parasols. Business travelers, on the other hand, were the ones gulping from serious, olive and onion capped glasses, tall and narrow in shape or tending toward the squat and fat. Getaway lovers were easy to guess. They were the ones exchanging long and steamy gazes over drinks containing melting ice cubes and wilted paper straws.

Laura twirled a humidity-lank strand of hair around her finger. Like *those* lovers over there. The flirting couple giggling and playing footsies at the far end of the courtyard. The two seated at the table by the Italianate fountain. Wrapped up in each other, they excluded the rest of the world. Lucky twits.

Under the cover of her lashes, Laura darted them a surreptitious glance.

*My, my, my.* They were really going at those drinks, weren't they? Her shrinks would call their noisy slurping "displacement," substituting acceptable behavior for something...well...unacceptable. Like sucking on one another in public. When they stopped mouthing their wilted straws and began talking in whispers, an occasional dirty laugh punctuating their hushed sentences, Laura cocked an ear. What on earth were they saying? Not knowing was driving her crazy.

Okay, make that crazier.

Her curiosity getting the best of her, Laura wandered over to the far end of the courtyard, where she cozied up to the gurgling fountain. Quiet! Quiet! No hiccups, no sneezes. And goodness! No pathetic, self-pitying sniffs. Getting caught would *so* spoil her fun. If she played her cards right, the cascading water should screen her presence, but not dilute her eavesdropping.

Her idea worked like a charm. Unaware of her scrutiny, the couple carried on in blissful rapture. Their risqué conversation, involving various and sundry body parts entering various and sundry orifices, forced Laura to swallow. Convulsively.

With the musky smell of rain-dampened earth filling her nostrils, she swept both palms over the swell of her bust, an ordinary woman, standing by a fountain, ironing nonexistent wrinkles from her natural linen dress jacket.

At least, that's how she looked on the outside.

On the inside, she was imagining a lover's hands fondling her breasts.

Big. Not her breasts -- they were average -- his hands. Oh, his hands were so big. Amazingly big. Alarmingly big. He was all over big. Especially his penis.

No! Penis was too prissy. His long, hard, wide, thick, *cock*.

At the dirty word, her nipples tingled, and then swelled.

To quell their ache, Laura slipped a hand beneath her unbuttoned, lightweight linen jacket. Cruelly, mercilessly, she pinched a sensitive nipple.



Her chin shot up, her throat worked; she shuddered at the clamping pain.

*Ah. So good...*

## Chapter Two

Inside the Crepe Myrtle Inn, James Stone ambled over to his office's second floor window. Whenever he had a minute to himself, he liked to chill by gazing at the profusion of pink and purple blossoms that decorated the hotel's namesake trees. This time, though, rather than mellow out his type A personality, what he saw spiked his heart rate.

*What the hell?*

Down below in the courtyard stood Laura Jean Beaumont. Obviously hiding behind a one-of-a-kind Roman fountain, she was also obviously peeping at two lovebirds seated at a table on the other side of the spray. *Whooley!* The lady tying his 'nads in a knot was not only a murder suspect, she was evidently a voyeur, as well. Did he know how to pick women to hit on, or what?

At this new kink in his plan, James ran a finger inside the starched collar of his white dress shirt. Was it only him, or was it getting hot in here?

No question, down below in the courtyard, the temperature was steamy. The sultry Laura Jean was burning up his eyes. Lord A'mighty! But the girl was working it.

*Hey, watch out there, honey! Move any closer to that fountain and you'll get all wet --*

James blew out a gusty breath. What the hell was he thinking? Considering Laura Jean's abandoned expression, her panties were probably already soaked. Little deviant.

Hello. What about that bulge forming below his own belt buckle?

Christ. She was peeping at the couple, and he was peeping at her. She was reacting to them, and he was reacting to her. His hard-on made him a deviant, too.

James winced at her harsh foreplay, then shook his head. If she hurt herself, he'd pass out, right there at the window. Some deviant.

Pain during sex was not his thing. Pleasure was more his style. It was all he could do not to march his ass down to the courtyard and handle her delicate situation himself.

Did someone just call him a fool?

Yeah, he was a fool, all right.

A fool for her.

From the beginning, from that very first sighting of her leading her group of tourists around the Old Exchange, the socialite had locked up his heart and thrown away the key --

*Whoa!* Corny alert. One thing to act the fool, another to lose his cool.

He smirked. Cool. What cool?

Straight up, he admired her. For sure, the lady had balls. There were some lurid stories circulating around the city about Laura Jean Beaumont. Nothing shocked him anymore, but this trash talk turned even him white, and that took some doing. If he'd heard the gossip, she *had* to know what was going down. Her in-your-face attitude commanded his respect. After getting a raw deal, she handled herself well. He couldn't wait to meet the "Lizzie Borden of Charleston."

*"Lizzie Borden took an axe, and gave her mother forty whacks. When she saw what she had done, she gave her father forty-one!"*

Comparisons between Laura Jean Beaumont and that other legend of American folklore were natural, he supposed. The murder suspects even shared the same first and last initials.

The similarities between the two crimes ended with the verdict.

In twentieth-century Massachusetts, a Fall River jury had acquitted Lizzie in the double homicide of her parents; while in twenty-first century Charleston, without a hearing of any kind, on circumstantial evidence alone, everyone had pronounced Laura Jean Beaumont guilty as sin.

Not him. His gut told him the lady wasn't guilty of anything -- except, maybe, making him shoot his load right there at his second-floor office window.

His mouth bone dry, his dick boner wet, James strained a chuckle through his clenched teeth, his rigid jaw a consequence of an extremely unfunny erection.

*Damnnnnnn!* But he hurt.

A familiar tap on the door, and James got himself in order. Then, all neat and adjusted, he called, "Come ahead, Paul."

"Boss, you've got a personal appointment in less than five minutes. Under the front awning. I thought I should give you a heads up."

No need. His nonthinking head was already up, and the other wasn't about to forget his private tour this afternoon. That tour was the highlight of his boring business week. "I remember. Believe me, I remember. I'll go downstairs shortly," James told his secretary, an efficient sort, though the scenery left a lot to be desired.

Unlike Laura Jean Beaumont's scenery, which he couldn't desire any more, not without jerking off, right there at his second-floor office window.

Down below in the courtyard, Laura Jean's lush lips parted, her pointed breasts rose and fell, and her tumultuous eyes, uniquely dark blue in comparison to her pale skin and light hair tones, appeared to gaze right at him.

An optical illusion. His skin tones faded into the walnut-stained woodwork.

Yanking his attention away from the courtyard, James turned to his secretary. "Uh, Paul --"

"Yeah, Boss?"

Paul's "Boss" was an inside joke. They went way back, and that counted more than blood and skin color and occupation. "I need you find out some information on someone, strictly on the quiet. Pull strings, call in favors, spare no expense, do what you gotta do, but get the job done."

"I hear ya." Now in his element, Paul flashed some teeth. "Tell me, please tell me, you want the dirt on that slimeball land developer, Todd Hugostat. I don't like that sonofabitch's attitude. You want his ass kicked, I'm volunteering --"

James cut into his secretary's wishful thinking. "No ass kicking. We're not punks anymore," he reminded his boyhood pal. "The subject of your investigation is Laura Jean Beaumont."

"The babe who murdered her parents?"

"The babe who *allegedly* murdered her parents," he corrected.

"Anything you say, Boss."

"I say she didn't do the crime. Truth is, I don't believe most of the nasty stuff that's being said about her. Someone is doing -- pardon the pun -- a hatchet job on the lady. The rumors about her are too malicious and vindictive to be otherwise."

Paul scratched his freckled temple, mostly hidden under his flopping reddish-brown hair. "You after the Beaumont mansion on the Battery? I understand the estate just went on the market. Make a nice little inn. Given the history, you could lowball the bid."

"I haven't thought about acquiring the property, but you're probably right. Blood on the premises does tend to lower the asking price. As of now, though, stick with a personal work-up. Events surrounding the crime, that sort of thing. Details ASAP."

Good instincts kept James on top of his game, but a sexy woman could pay havoc with a man's self-protective groove. With his dick tied up in knots, he couldn't trust himself to behave in a totally objective manner toward the lady. The background information would hopefully safeguard him against a bad case of the hard-on-stupids.

"About the dossier -- gimme a day to compile the info, *aight*? Will that be, like, all for now?"

“Yeah. That will be *like* all for now.”

As Paul left the office, James made a mental note to send his secretary for public speaking classes. He’d taken a few himself and they’d done him a world of good. Now people called him “articulate” -- code for a *brutha* who doesn’t talk street. That piece of bigoted condescension pissed him off, but he always smiled and said nothing when receiving that *supposed* compliment. Going mainstream meant compromising to get ahead.

He’d gotten ahead. This new project went to prove how far he’d come from his humble roots. Though, after overseeing this latest hotel restoration and then browbeating the staff and management into meeting his high standards of operation, he’d fallen into a slump. He couldn’t return to Boston, not until after the celebration party that weekend, and time on his hands made him restless. Boredom accounted for his interest in a suspected murderess. Boredom explained that day’s private tour. Boredom prompted him to amuse himself with Laura Jean Beaumont.

But not by visiting any damn historical landmarks.

He’d already gone that route. Before the architect drew up the first blueprint on his current project, James had dug up all the economic stats, concluding that, yes, Charleston tourism would support yet another hotel. Nothing if not methodical, he always did his homework before buying up property, analyzing risk vs. benefits, cost ratio vs. projected profit. Several renovation possibilities had caught his attention before he’d ultimately decided on purchasing the rundown warehouse that became the site of the Crepe Myrtle Inn. Starting that afternoon, and using the same methodical manner, he meant to satisfy his curiosity about Laura Jean Beaumont.

He’d carved out a multi-million-dollar empire from purchasing dilapidated buildings and turning them into world-class hotels. However, he only took on structures with clean lines and good bones. Searching beneath the rubble, he could tell the difference between a worthwhile investment and a money pit. The competition called him a “shrewd businessman” to his face and “an arrogant black bastard” behind his back. James figured he simply called things as he saw them, without embellishment, without sentimentality.

Without embellishment, without sentimentality, James conceded any woman could take the edge off his sexual need. The thing was, Laura Jean Beaumont interested him, as well as turned him on. A unique experience, that.

But what about her? Would she give a black man a second look?

Rather than grinding her knuckles into her pussy, where the pressure would have done her some good, Laura Jean pushed the heel of her hand against her lower belly. Her expression showed signs of strain. Signs of cracking.

What was her private story beneath the very public gossip? Why had she returned to a city that seemed hell-bent on prosecuting her without a fair trial?

He could recognize haute couture at thirty paces. The little number Laura Jean wore was undoubtedly high fashion, a dress she probably bought on a shopping spree to France.

But no matter the sass and verve...and determination...of its wearer, the style was five years, minimum, off the catwalk. Ditto for the bag. The shoes were new, but deadly practical. The hair -- as nature intended, all the way down to the root. But the cut? Strictly home-done. No manicure either, no salon anything. All signs indicated that the rich girl was down on her luck, as in flat, bottomed-out, broke, and selling the Beaumont mansion was her only sure thing. Which led him to surmise that a lack of income had driven the socialite home.

He surmised she was busted, but he *knew*, the same way he *knew* when to plunk his capital down on a property and when to walk away, that the lady of the clean lines and good bones wasn't hiding murder beneath the rubble of her past. The truth of her innocence was there in her desperate eyes, in her dilated pupils. That wasn't just sexual arousal driving her down there in the courtyard. Having been there himself, he recognized a cornered look when he saw one. More was going on down there than what met the eye.

The lady was scared. He could just about smell her fear. Oh, yeah, he'd been there. Maybe he hadn't used sex as a release valve, but he'd acted out in other ways when he felt trapped by circumstances beyond his control.

No way had she murdered her parents.

Which meant, a killer was out there walking around free, maybe even in Charleston.

Down below in the courtyard, Laura Jean Beaumont rammed a fist into her mouth.

To block her cries of sexual frustration?

Or to silence her screams of panic?

### Chapter Three

Having led private tours of one before, Laura knew exactly what to expect. Though arriving right on time, she would find her next appointment impatiently pacing the sidewalk under the stylish, maroon-and-cream-striped awning of the Crepe Myrtle Inn.

His attire? Plaid, polyester shorts. White cotton crew socks. Clunky, black sandals. The requisite camera slung over an arm. In other words, the usual middle-aged, paunchy out-of-towner salivating at the prospect of meeting the infamous Charleston axe murderess.

With a heavy heart, she approached the front of the boutique hotel, just as an African American man, of substantially greater than usual height and far from usual good looks, unhurriedly exited the hotel's polished brass door. He casually glanced at his surroundings, as an afterthought, not as though he were anxiously anticipating the arrival of someone --

*Squeeee! Her! Her! That would be her! She was that someone!*

Her salivary glands kicked into overdrive. Could drooling be far away?

Wearing a lightweight gray summer suit that did nothing to mask his hard and fit body, the business executive carried himself with calm confidence, a self-assurance that said he knew how to get what he wanted in the boardroom.

Call her shallow, but who cared about the boardroom? She was all about his performance in the boudoir. What kind of lover would he make?

In fantasy mode, she began to speculate.

Naturally, the staid suit hid the physique of a marauding barbarian. Seams bursting, he would break out of the civilized clothes, revealing his bulging leopard skin -- the real deal, not faux -- loincloth. Pounding his chest and shouting some sort of guttural Tarzanesque utterance, and with every muscle rippling, he would strip off her clothes, all her clothes, in a mad rush. With little or no foreplay, because, really, who needed preliminaries, he would mount her.

Laura gnawed at her bottom lip. Goodness! Had she really thought *mount*?

Closing in on the front of the hotel, she twittered to herself. Yes, indeedy, she had, and the very thought made her clit sting.

Or...or...perhaps, he'd have no patience for undressing her. Perhaps, he'd rip her panties, shredding them in his haste to get at her. That would be lovely, too.

Laura approached the awning, her jaw tilted to the side, her imagination whirling.

*Hmm.* The businessman still hadn't moved, not even an inch. This man obviously possessed nerves of steel.

On second thought, perhaps he wouldn't tear the clothes off her back. Perhaps, he'd remove each article tauntingly. Teasingly. Until she cried out for him to speed things up.

*Hurry, hurry. SAVAGE me.*

But no. Taking his sweet, tormenting time, he would slide -- she was *so wet* -- his enormous *COCK* into her vagina until she, until she --

Her belly clenched; excitement rolled down her leg in a hot slick.

Goodness! She was a molten river!

His fingers -- one, perhaps two -- would separate the folds of her labia. The digits -- now, three -- would glide into her.

A shame about the lack of jewelry. A gold ring hanging low from an earlobe would have suited him. Absolutely divine if he'd had a piercing. Like his cock. His lovely, thick, long cock, the plum head adorned with a tasteful stud. A stud for a stud...

Before she could take the last few remaining steps, he left the front of the hotel and met her halfway. "Hello. I'm James." The brilliance of his friendly smile practically blinded her. Good thing, she'd put her sunglasses back on!

"Your tour appointment," he said slowly, as if giving her a prompt. "Last name is Stone."

Why, of course, it was! What else would it be? The man was uber hard, as hard as a rock.

His gaze went to her nametag with its bumblebee emblem. "And you're Miss Beaumont, my nineteenth century architectural guide for this afternoon."

Flustered, she lost all powers of speech. To cover the cat running off with her tongue, she stretched out her hand, the one holding the official BBT tour member button.

He held out his hand, too.

After dropping the button into his palm, which he'd turned at last possible second to face up, like a catcher's mitt, she nervously retreated.

In her previous life of privilege, she'd met her fair share of wealthy, high-powered businessmen. None were as masculine or as dark as James Stone. Despite his polished sheen



and friendly smile, her internal radar picked up an element of raw danger. This man had walked streets she knew nothing about.

Exuding frank sexuality, he seared her with unblinking gray eyes.

Frankly, with no familiarity, sexual or otherwise, with black men, she blinked like crazy. “Mr. Stone, kindly attach that button somewhere on your person for the duration of the tour. And...and...please call me Laura.”

She paused, took a deep breath while the awkward moment passed.

Only there was no awkward moment. There was nothing. No moment. No awkwardness.

This was odd. Strange, even. Tourists didn’t sign up for her tours based on her ability to tell the difference between a Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian column. Her architectural knowledge aside, tourists paid for a ticket based on her sensationalized reputation: Laura Jean Beaumont, the vacation conversation piece. No awkward moment here could mean but one thing...

James Stone hadn’t heard of her.

Astounding. Staggering. Totally awesome. Here in the flesh was someone who actually wanted to learn about Charleston. This had never happened to her before.

All keyed-up, she started right in on her talk, a general overview found in any number of standard tourist guides. “Charleston is located near the middle of South Carolina’s coast at the point where the Ashley and Cooper Rivers meet to form the Atlantic Ocean. It’s the state’s second largest city and the county seat of Charleston County. Initially called Charles Town, in honor of King Charles II of England, its nickname remains ‘The Holy City’ due to the abundance of churches.” She caught a quick breath. “Any questions so far?”

He pinned the button to his lapel. “Here’s one: Why avoid shaking my hand back then?”

Brought up in the Southern tradition of graciousness, raised to remain poised in all circumstances, even difficult ones, she still found herself stammering at his directness, “I wasn’t avoiding y-y-our hand. Not specifically. I make it a practice never to shake hands anymore. Not with anyone.”

“Why?”

“W-why?” she repeated on a stutter.

“Yes. Why the reluctance to shake hands?”

“A private concern. Rooted in fear for my well-being.” Only a boor or a Northerner would question her further.

“What?” he questioned. “You afraid of catching a killer cold?”

*No, I’m afraid of a cold killer catching me...*

An irrational fear of germs didn't lurk anywhere among her *many* phobias. But she did have a very rational fear of the animal who had murdered her parents. The murderer could be anyone, even someone masquerading as a tourist. And so she couldn't bring herself to shake hands with strangers.

Fantasy floated her boat but poor judgment could sink her ship.

Someone was watching her, someone who might use something as innocuous as a handshake to yank her into the bushes and finish the job started four years prior.

Or, was that another symptom of her diagnosed paranoia? Or PTSD? Or any number of other labels with which the medical profession had labeled her?

At any rate, she could safely exclude James Stone as her parents' murderer. Regardless of his patina, an African American male wandering around her parents' exclusive all-white neighborhood would have stuck out like a sore thumb. A neighbor would have reported his Yankee presence -- James Stone was not a boor, but most assuredly he was an assertive Northerner -- to the police.

So -- who was this man? What was this private tour really all about?

Treading warily, she broached the subject. "Mr. Stone, at times, it seems as though everyone in the world has heard of me. At times, I feel as though my forehead must surely wear a stamped "SM."

His own forehead bunched. "SM? For sadomasochism?"

"No!" she sputtered, even as her vagina clenched in excitement. "For Suspected Murderess." She folded her hands around her shoulder bag, clasping all ten digits tight to minimize their trembling.

Plenty of police officers had interrogated her through the years. Not quite harassment, but close. Should she add James Stone's name to that list?

Dropping old Southern graciousness, she came straight to the point. "Are you a plainclothes detective?"

James Stone shook his closely trimmed head. "No, I'm not a police department employee of any type."

Of course not. How silly of her to think so. Cops flaunted their roughness; this man had taken care to polish his away.

"A reporter, then?" Or a journalist for one of those gossip magazines, sniffing around her for an exclusive interview: *Socialite murderess returns to her hometown* --

"No," he answered. "I'm in Charleston on business unrelated to you or your present difficulty."

Difficulty was a flat tire. To lose everything in the space of one night was a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions. "Forgive me, Mr. Stone. I must sound terribly conceited. It's just that...I've become a household name in the city, and not in a good way, and so I've begun to think the world revolves around me. Like everyone is looking at me. Out to get me, too. Just

now in the courtyard, I felt someone's gaze on me again..." Her voice drifted away. Why had she told him that?

And how nutso did that make her sound?

To make matters worse, she began talking, more to herself really, than to him. "Seven days a week, rain or shine, I meet my tour group exactly, to the second, on time. In the beginning, I used to arrive early, to greet everyone, just like a hostess." She snorted. "How deluded could I get? I only ended up having to field the most outrageous personal questions. And then there were the requests from early-bird tourists."

"What kind of questions, what sort of requests?"

"Well, 'Did you do it?' would be the most popular question, followed by 'Who's your secret lover?' As to requests, one tourist demanded an autograph. On my parents' obit notice. Can you believe that, Mr. Stone?"

He coughed. "Oh, I believe it, all right. But I don't like it."

"Nor do I! But I've learned to take such requests in stride now. Just a typical day on the job." She smiled wanly. "Another ghoul actually insisted I write a pleantry on a tattered newspaper clipping detailing my parents' death, right under the grizzly, blood-soaked account. Some truly scary people inhabit the planet, Mr. Stone. But I knew that already."

She loosened her death grip on her shoulder bag. "At any rate, I stopped shaking hands and switched from an early arrival for tours to arriving a smidgeon late. Unfortunately, that strategy produced lots of grumbles, but few gratuities. Grumbling tourists don't tip."

Imagine her, Laura Jean Beaumont, accepting tips! Sometimes, her altered lifestyle still threw her. Sometimes, everything that had happened seemed like a horrible nightmare. Sometimes, she thought she'd awaken and find her parents still alive. Sometimes, she laughed until tears poured down her face. She could flood the banks of the Cooper River with all her crying.

"Anyway, as I say, now I arrive right on time." She stopped for a breath. "Goodness! Would you listen to me, Mr. Stone? I'm just going on and on! I hope bringing my personal problems into the conversation hasn't soured the tour for you."

"No. Not at all. Despite the painful subject matter, your voice retains a melodic quality. A Southern voice, not a broad 'A' to be heard anywhere."

"Pardon?"

"I'm from Boston."

*Figured.* "Why, then, we're practically kin!"

He laughed. "I don't think so --"

"No, really. Beginning in colonial times, the wealthy would summer up North in Boston and winter down South here in Charleston. Welcome to our fair, sister city, Mr. Stone."

“Thank you for the cordial reception.” James Stone’s smile broadened, his already high cheekbones lifted higher. “Although, after hearing my confession, you might rescind your kind welcome --”

The other shoe dropped. “Confession?”

“I’ve been watching you.”

## Chapter Four

Laura bent her knees, ready to limp for the hills.

One faltering step later advised that approach was doomed, and she fumbled a hand inside her shoulder bag for her cell. "You've been watching me?"

"The other day, during one of your tours, someone harassed you. I liked how you handled yourself."

Okay. So, James Stone didn't actually intend to kill her. He was just another twisted celebrity fan. She should have known. Suspected murderesses were in this season. Everyone wanted to say they had a nodding acquaintance with at least one.

But this twisted fan was more persistent than most. This man had *stalked* her.

"Perhaps this isn't such a good idea." She took another backward step. "Perhaps I should leave. I'll have Bumble Bee send over another tour guide." When she finally found the darn phone! "Naturally, the agency will refund your fee --"

"Laura, part of the reason I initiated this tour today is because I wanted you to know -- that is, I wanted to tell you -- I don't believe you're guilty."

Guilt was a relative term. She was guilty of taking the cowardly way out, of not staying in Charleston to see if she could find who had killed her parents. She was guilty of vehemently arguing with her mother and father the night they died. How could she have said those terrible things to them?

She examined her feet. "I was young and spoiled rotten, but I loved my parents. They drove me nuts, but I wouldn't have harmed a hair on their heads." Her sudden announcement to break off her engagement plans had upset her mother and father, but she knew in her heart, they had wanted the best for her and would have supported her decision. Eventually. In time.

But they hadn't been given that time. Her parents had died before she'd apologized for her angry words, before she'd had chance to make up their quarrel. That last conversation still haunted her.

And why was she discussing any of this with him, a complete stranger? Why protest her innocence, when she hadn't dignified anyone else's accusations?

Perhaps because he hadn't accused her of anything.

So what? She didn't know him. He didn't know her. Why should she care what this...this...*tourist*...thought of her?

"Not only do I believe in your innocence," he softly continued, "I believe you grieve for your parents with every breath you take."

Sexual awareness, belief, and now this!

After a long and stressful day, it was too much. Her knees buckled.

James Stone reached for her, his big hand supporting her at the elbow as her wobbly legs gave way. "Let's walk. We don't want to draw spectators, now do we?"

She shook her head. "In my company, spectators are inevitable."

But she did begin to walk away from the hotel. A hand beneath her arm, he guided her, not the other way around. "As you seem to be in charge of this tour, Mr. Stone, what would you like to see first?"

"Your eyes."

"Oh, my. Are your pickup lines all that smarmy or are you using the worst on me?"

"Pure corn, eh?" He shrugged. "My cool disappeared after seeing you."

"Oh, please, spare me any more." Laura touched her sunglasses. "These stay. The dark lenses cut down on the glare."

"What glare?" He looked up at the sky. "The sun just moved behind a cloud --"

"I wasn't referring to the glare of the sun, Mr. Stone. I was referring to the hateful glare of strangers."

He squeezed her lower arm, the pressure more than companionable, his thumb subtly stroking downwards to her wrist, bare below the sleeve of her linen jacket. Or, was that slight and subtle stroking only a figment of her overactive imagination?

Her body seemed to know the difference. Her blood pounded to life. When she looked over at him, she found him scanning her face. His gaze lasted far too long for a recent acquaintance. Or, at least, it did in her limited experience. Men and women might routinely jump into bed without knowing one another's names, but that wasn't anything she'd ever done in her sheltered past. She'd given her virginity to the man she loved, her future husband. And how many different types of freak did that make her?

Perhaps if she had acquired an extensive sexual repertoire before dating Gerald Du Pointe, her *almost* fiancé, she might've known how to satisfy him in bed. As it was, she'd botched things rather badly. But why dwell on those unhappy memories now?

James Stone was *still* looking at her. Though, not like a circus oddity. He looked at her like a woman who attracted him. His look was so refreshingly normal and male that she didn't question why she would attract him. She simply went with the flow.

Courage and daring were qualities she possessed in limited quantities. Yet, she heard herself ask, "Mr. Stone, did you have an ulterior motive for saying you believed in my innocence?"

"No."

"No?" She cast him a wary glance.

"You and I both know I want to sleep with you, but I don't need to lie my way into your bedroom." He dipped closer to her head, and the scent of exotic spices quivered her nostrils. "That's what my good looks and charm are for."

"Conceit is never attractive, Mr. Stone, even when deserved."

"So, if you think I'm charming and not hard on the eyes, what's the problem?"

"Are you always this assertive, Mr. Stone?"

"When it comes to what I want, I never take no for an answer."

He would just need to learn how. "George Clooney is charming and not hard on the eyes, but if he used the same lame lines on me you're using, he'd get nowhere, too. Mr. Stone, I don't know you and I don't sleep with men I don't know."

He chuckled. "James. Call me James. And I'd like us to get better acquainted, Laura. I'd like us to be friends."

"Right. Buddies with benefits." She gasped in horror at her forthrightness.

He merely laughed. "We could be both, do both -- be lovers and friends."

"Impossible," she muttered, gazing away. "I don't have any friends anymore. And the idea that we could be lovers is laughable. I can't be seen with you."

The sidewalk swelled with foot traffic. Still leading her by the arm, he took her into a private residence's secluded drive. She didn't even think to be frightened. Irritated, perhaps. Annoyed, most assuredly. But, for some reason, not afraid.

"Because of my skin tones?" he pressed. "Is that why we can't be lovers?" Before she could answer, he sneered, "If you're strapped for cash, FYI, I'm loaded. My bank account should lower the racial barrier. And I'm always generous."

Granted, she'd once been a snob, but she'd never been a racist. And after putting up with snide comments all day long, just to keep her job, his insult was the very last straw.

She lost it.

Face slapping was for drama queens. She came out swinging. This good-looking, charming, never take no for an answer Northerner was going down. His sanctimonious nose was as good a place as any to start.

All her pent up frustration, all her stored up fury, all her seething rage, went into the punch, but ultimately, their differences worked against her.

Oh, not color differences. Height differences. The man towered over her.

A chin jab was all she managed, and she drew no blood, not even a trickle. Even so, the blow was eminently satisfying. Painful, as well. The reverberation shot up her arm, all the way to the shoulder.

"Feeling better now?" he asked quietly, not even rubbing his jaw.

She shook out her clenched fist. "No," she practically blubbered.

"Wanna go again?"

"No." But she did. She really did. She wanted to pummel James Stone.

His big hands tunneled the pockets of his expensively tailored suit pants. "Go on." Bending low, he stuck out his nose.

The truth dawned. "You let me hit you!" Her arm fell limply to her side. "Now, you've completely spoiled it for me."

"Sorry."

"Patronizing, egotistical, *BIGOTED* jerk. I don't care if you get me fired for that punch. You crossed the line."

"Yeah, the Mason-Dixon Line."

She gazed off into the distance, to the private residence's beautiful door, a typically Southern-style entrance. "Some folks in Charleston aren't treating me fairly, but that doesn't lessen my love for this city. I was born and raised here, but that doesn't blind me to South Carolina's historical shortcomings. I never whitewash or justify our past, a rich and glorious past, but one also blighted by an abundance of human imperfections and mistakes, and just plain misery. As both a tour guide and a historian, my place is to tell the facts, without emotion, without defensiveness, without any rewriting slant. My professors said spin doctoring only encouraged a repeat of the same mistakes in the present, and I agree."

She did get exasperated, though, and after her highfaluting speechifying, her temper flared all over again. "But you Northerners! Y'all come down here with your holier than thou attitudes and accuse us Southerners of just about everything."

"Oh, yeah? If I hear pre-civil war Africans called *servants* one more time, I'll bite my *slave*-descendent tongue."

"We're talking about now, not then." She threw her hands up in the air. "My refusal to become intimate with you has nothing at all to do with your being black. Your race is the very least of my concerns."



"Once again, I believe you." He yanked his hands out of his pockets. "And I stand corrected."

"Let me get this straight, Mr. Stone. You believe I'm not a murderess, but you thought so little of my character, that you assumed I could be bought."

"My anger gets the best of me at times."

"Mine, too. But I still don't understand why on earth you'd want to have sex with me given your assumption that your race and money mattered to me."

He said glumly, "I can't seem to help myself."

How refreshing. Not only brutally honest, but willing to admit his faults. Petty not to take him at face value. "Can't be my sterling reputation," she grumbled, "so the attraction must be physical."

"In part. And I have a feeling you're attracted to how I look, too."

"In part," she admitted tightly.

"Isn't that how sexual attraction generally works -- being drawn to a person's physical appearance first?"

She pondered his words. "Body odor, too. A woman has to like the way a man smells."

He dipped at the waist. "Wanna give a sniff here?"

She already had, and he smelled just right, which explained her trembling lower lip. "An association with me will bring you harm."

"Laura, see me for who I am. See me for real."

Real was not her specialty, not on the best of days, and this had not been the best of days.

And so what, she couldn't always tell fact from fantasy? In her humble opinion, real was vastly overrated. The double murder of her mother and father, now that was plenty enough real. Her inability to attend their funerals -- also real. Lying unconscious in a hospital bed, she'd missed the media circus. Real was her broken engagement to Gerald Du Pointe, the eminently suitable man she had loved, but had never really known. Real was the all-consuming fear that dogged her every lame step since leaving Charleston four years ago.

Laura brushed a strand of shoulder length hair behind an ear. *Real* had never done her any favors. These days, she'd take her real in small doses, thank you very much, and preferably filtered through dark, *sexy* sunglasses.

But, for some reason, he succeeded where others had recently tried and failed. She glanced at him, saw him for real, and still liked what she saw.

His gaze locked on hers. "Do you think I've never looked harm in the face, Laura?"

"I'd never known hate mentality. Not until four years ago. I was raised to be sweet and pretty and gracious, a social leader in my community."

"You sat at the most popular cafeteria table in high school, didn't you?"

His voice held no sarcasm, no judgment, only acceptance, and put her immediately at ease. "All four years."

"Beauty pageants?"

"Sweet Sixteen at the country club."

His lips, full and sensual, quirked. "Take home the crown?"

"Difficult to remain both humble and truthful. Yes, I took home the crown. And, I was voted Miss Congeniality."

He smiled such a sexy grin then, her heart pounded all the way down to her congenial vagina.

"College Homecoming Queen?" he asked.

"But, of course. I was the proverbial big fish in the small pond of my graduating class. Not a barracuda. A *nice* fish," she emphasized before whipping off her sunglasses. "And I'm tired of being nice. Tired of being a refined and gracious and retiring Southern lady. I think it's high time I grabbed something for myself. And since you've offered --" She hiked her chin. "How do you suggest we go about hooking up, Mr. Stone?"

## Chapter Five

“Start by calling me James,” he heard himself say aloud, while inside his head he was thinking, *Who the fuck said anything about hooking up?*

He was thinking romance. An affair of undecided, but most likely, brief duration.

What a dinosaur. Who had affairs anymore? Who dated anymore?

Romance, he snorted to himself, was the stuff of vintage black and white movies. Now, men and women *hooked up*, and then walked away afterwards, whole and unchanged, the experience having no effect on them whatsoever.

That wouldn’t describe them. After their physical relationship had run its natural and brief course, they’d remain friends.

But a doubt had wormed its way into his former resolve to get to know her. Was he ready to have this troubled woman tip his neat and orderly world on its ear?

“James,” she piped up, cutting through his uncertainty. “There! See? I said your first name.” Gleeful naughtiness went tripping across her pretty features. “Do you take me to a cheap and tawdry hotel next?”

He should have his damn head examined, that’s what he should do. This woman was a threat, and not because she’d wield a mean axe when his back was turned. He’d never met a woman so gung ho on getting herself laid and yet so clueless about the process. “Cheap and tawdry isn’t to my taste.”

“Perhaps it’s to mine.”

While doubting her tastes ran in that direction, he didn’t challenge her. He’d been there, and so understood she was rebelling against the expectations of others. Didn’t mean he had to like finding himself included in that rebellion. Didn’t mean he had to fall in line with her foolishness. Didn’t mean he would expose her to things with which she had no familiarity, but which he most certainly did. For example, cheap and tawdry hotels.

He set her straight. “When it comes to accommodations, I prefer something classier.” For example, the newly renovated Crepe Myrtle Inn.

In the hospitality field, he’d established himself as a connoisseur, a person of informed and discriminating expertise. Money was no object in his pursuit of the best life had to offer, from fine wine to fine women. For example, Laura Jean Beaumont. But, for all she knew, his taste was up his ass.

He’d better rectify that deficit but quick. “I should tell you something about myself. For example, what I’m doing in Charleston --”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Pardon?” he said, but he already knew why she didn’t think his background mattered, and the bottom dropped out of his belly.

“You told me your name.” She gave her head a toss and, like a woman in a convertible with the top down, strands of blonde hair whipped across her too-pale cheeks. “That’s enough. Considering the brevity of our association, I don’t need to know anything more about you.”

Her taking for granted that he was the type to *hook up* rankled. That she assumed he would amount to no more than a meaningless fuck dented his pride. And something else galled him, too: the brilliant diamonds shining in her eyes. He wasn’t a man to her; he was a symbol of her defiance.

Where was his self-respect? Since when did he allow anyone to pigeonhole him based on his race?

Maybe it was unconscious on her part, but from where he was standing, the color of his skin constituted an essential ingredient of her rebellion. He, a black man, was about to get himself used by a white woman with something to prove.

He didn’t like it.

But, once again, he understood where she was coming from. He identified with her fiery indignation. An inferno of rage had once burned in his belly, too. Until a hotel manager showed him, in concrete ways, how to channel that negative rage into positive action.

He supposed, to save his pride, he could look at himself as her mentor. As that hotel manager had once been his mentor, he could show her, by example, the right way out of this. Just as criminal activity hadn’t been the right way out for him as a young man, using sex was not the right way out for her now. Sure, she was angry, and with good cause, but sexing it up wouldn’t make her resentment disappear.

Only, he wasn’t nearly pure or strong enough to act as her mentor. James Stone was no plaster saint in a church. He wanted her, any way he could have her. Right from the first, he’d admired her. He’d also suspected, and right from the first, that heated passion blazed beneath her cool manners. He wanted in on that passion. He wanted that passion to sear his

naked skin. Her dignity, her poise, her class, her style...her guts...had held him glued on that damn sidewalk in front of the Old Exchange. But ever since, he'd dreamt of her cunt.

Back at the hotel that night, after beating on her would-be douche-bag assaulter, he'd had a stern talk with himself about turning into a walking cliché, a stereotype of the successful black man who lets wealth go to his head and to his value system. A brutha, who, to show off how good he had it made, walked right past beautiful and proud black women to go after a white woman. Ideally, a Scandinavian, blonde model. A living and breathing status symbol he could wear wrapped around his arm, like a damn Rolex. Just to prove to others he could.

That was not this situation. He was not that black man. And he had not a goddamn thing to prove. Not to anyone.

He didn't want just any pretty white woman. Laura wasn't some grand experiment to him. She was not another wall he needed to bust down, another impediment to burst through, another obstacle to overcome on his rise to the top. She was not an object to him, not a symbol, not a test of his wealth. She was not a fucking glass ceiling.

She did not represent.

Ditto for him.

Not to anyone, not to any group.

He wanted to get to know *her*. And he wanted her to do the same with him.

Swear to God, he wasn't in the market for any trophy woman, especially not a woman who could turn out to be a whole mess of complications. Trouble never did have any problem finding a black man, so he knew better than to seek out messy complications.

But he didn't run from messy complications, either. Or from trouble. Ditto for what he wanted.

For the past seventeen years, he'd worked damn hard for what he wanted. The question was -- did he want her enough to put himself through all this *stuff* for nothing more than a temporary fling? Was the prospect of a brief sexual encounter with a complicated lady worth the disruption to his well-organized life?

He dreamed of her cunt. But Laura was no easy, anonymous fuck.

Did the same hold true for her?

He was thinking maybe not.

James turned his gaze away from her. This personal tour thing had been a bad idea. Laura *was* right about not wanting to bother with the usual swapping of personal information; he was only in the city for a few more days. Long enough to stick his dick out for her, hell yes, but his neck, too?

And he didn't want to lie to himself. Or, to her. He'd offered her friendship, but in the final analysis, what did they have in common? He was black; she was white. She'd been born filthy rich, he dirt poor. She was Southern, he was a Yankee.

He was also a realist. They could have no easy future.

And, once again, he didn't go looking for trouble.

"Let's get out of here." He started drawing her away from the drive.

Saying nothing, but hanging close, her side bumping his, their thighs brushing, the physical contact filling the speechless void, they walked closer than strangers, but without the easy intimacy of lovers. And all the while, a livewire of sexual awareness sparked back and forth between them.

He could just about smell her cunt. She wanted him, all right. And though he had a hard time wrapping his mind around what they were doing here, he hadn't exactly packed his dick up in mothballs yet, either. He was still thinking. Angling. Weighing grief vs. orgasms. The plusses of coming in her pussy against the minuses of a lonely hand job in the shower. Considering all the pros and cons.

When they came to an area crowded with pedestrians, he felt Laura's body tense. She scuttled away from him. Like a damn tape recorder suddenly turned on, she launched into a professional tour guide recitation. "The neighborhood coming up inspired *Porgie and Bess*."

She turned to him, her face a white mask of condescension. "I'm sure that historical fact will be of particular interest you."

Damn.

As edgy as only a cornered man can be, he responded with a harsh, "Why would that fact *particularly* interest *me*?"

"Why?" Her brow furrowed. "Because the folk opera is part of your heritage."

"Which heritage is that?" he baited.

"Your African American heritage, of course."

"Thank you for thinking of me, but it's my understanding that *Porgie and Bess* dealt with the African American experience as written and composed by two Caucasian men in the 1930's. I don't find that *particularly* relevant to *me*." He smiled coolly. "But then, you wouldn't know anything about that, as you weren't interested in hearing anything about my background. By the way, if on this tour, we should happen to pass a basketball court or a bar that features rap music, I'm not a *particular* fan of those, either," he sneered. "I happen to be a season ticket holder to the ballet, and I dig opera, too."

After his outburst, he brooded and she kept quiet. Once again, they walked along silently, his much longer stride matched to her tentative steps, but with no brushing of thighs or bumping of sides.

At the corner of Church Street, she came to a stop. "Note the earthquake rods holding some of the single houses together."

Just to say something, he asked, "Single houses?"

“An architectural style adapted to the size of the narrow building lots, climate and culture of South Carolina. In the summer, single houses catch breezes off the water.” She gave a smile that stopped at her lips, a distant, professional smile. “Note the porch, which we Charlestonians call a piazza. No other architectural feature more definitively reflects our city than the covered veranda. Supported by columns or pillars, the outdoor living space attaches to the outside of a building and serves to shade south or west-facing windows from the heat of the sun.”

Her voice was so flat and lifeless he might just as well have been listening to a damn tape recorder. Where was that passionate woman who’d knocked him out the day before? The one who’d just tried to pop him one in the snout. Where had she gone? Could be his runner’s high had acted on him like a hallucination. Could be that vibrant woman had never existed, except in his mind.

Disappointment filled him.

Then relief.

He’d just found himself an out! A reason. *An excuse*. He couldn’t have let that other woman go, the enthusiastic one. But this passionless woman? This woman he could let go of easily. Officially off the hook, he had his life back.

Then, he glanced over at her face.

## Chapter Six

In one tenement apartment when he was growing up, the heating system went through periods of malfunctioning, usually in January, when the thermometer outside read five below. Just like the radiator used to do, Laura pulsated with unreleased pressure, her compact body vibrating with anger. Obviously her control valve was turned all the way off; but still, as an escape mechanism, steam sizzled from her dainty ears.

The passionate woman? Man, watch out! She'd returned with a fury. If she blew, he was ducking for cover. But he wouldn't go far. Only far enough to avoid getting maimed in the ensuing explosion.

"Proceeding down Church Street," she bit out, her chin jutting, her eyes blazing, "here we are at number 87, the Heyward-Washington House."

"Laura, wait --"

"Rice king and Declaration of Independence signer, Daniel Heywood, built this house in 1772. George Washington slept here during his 1791 visit --"

"Laura, would you hold up for a min --?"

"This neighborhood of mansions and tenements, referred to as 'Cabbage Row,' plays a central role in African American history. All my tours lead here," she hissed, and spat, and ripped him another one, "regardless if the group is all black or all white, or is made up of people with green polka dots."

James rubbed the back of his neck. His knotted muscles groaned, the bunched tendons tighter than tight. "I apologize. My prior remarks were unfair and uncalled for. You didn't deserve my antagonism."

"Apology accepted."

So, she said. But she still wasn't looking at him.



"Now up ahead is the Dock Street Theatre, housed in Charleston's last surviving hotel from the antebellum period." She pointed as she walked. "Note the wrought iron balcony, juxtaposed against the spire of Saint Philip's Church --"

"Damn!" He never lost his temper, never shouted, especially not in public, never swore in front of a woman, but she was treating him like a generic no one, a tourist, not seeing him for who he was, which was a man who was interested in her, a man who had made a mistake, for which he had apologized...

A man with an abundance of negative hostility, which he *usually* tempered into positive activity, but which he had failed to do with her. Because... Because...

Because why?

Because he was conflicted? Annoyed? On the damn fence about starting something up with her?

This getting acquainted business was not getting off to a smooth start.

All his own fucking fault. He knew better than to show his true self. That edgy self that would have gotten his ass thrown in jail, not placed in an honors grad program at Harvard Business School.

When she finally looked at him again, her reserved expression hinted at female hurt feelings. "Perhaps we should continue this conversation inside the theater, Mr. Stone."

"James," he gritted out. "Call me James. You did before."

"That was when I thought you were taking me to a cheap motel. Since you're not, I'm not. And besides, I'm angry and anger calls for formality, not familiarity."

"I apologized!"

"And I accepted. And you know what? I'm still angry. Live with it."

But he couldn't live with it. "I never make love to a woman until we know one another well enough to be on first name terms." And he really wanted to make love to this frustrating woman.

He opened the door. She preceded him through, remarking as soon as they were inside the front lobby at the grand staircase, "We appear to be the only tour present at the moment. The building is empty."

Empty suited him to a tee. He'd already been given the establishment the once over, way back when the Crepe Myrtle Inn was still only a twinkle in his eye. Because historical architecture interested him, he had familiarized himself with the layout and so knew the very spot to take her.

"Up to the balcony we go." One hand under her elbow, he propelled her to the staircase.

Her toe tottering on the first tread, she shook him off. "Let go of me!"

At her terror-laced voice, at her blanched face, he fell back, his hands raised in the air. "I apologize. I shouldn't have strong-armed you."

"You didn't. It's just that...I don't do stairs. There's...there's...a small elevator around the corner. I'll just use that and meet you on the second floor."

He hadn't noticed any public elevators during his prior visit, he thought, watching her disappear inside what looked like a closet --

With a "Handicapped" sign posted above the doorframe.

He'd guessed that Laura, strapped for cash, had returned to Charleston to put her house on the market, an estate he knew through gossip had been in her family for generations. Why else would a socialite give guided tours, unless she needed to chase down a buck? Now, for the first time, he also understood her vulnerability. Her slenderness went deeper than a slight build. She was frail. Fragile. And how had he failed to notice her unsteady walk?

As she turned into the elevator, the catch in her step hit him.

Christ! This was what came of letting his 'nads do his thinking. A killer had not only murdered Laura's parents; the motherfucker had injured her so badly, she walked with a limp. And that was only the injury he could see on the outside. What was going on with her on the inside?

Laura had called him a jerk, and she was right. Only an inconsiderate jerk would allow his dick to override his brain. This woman was in no condition for fun and games. He wasn't taking her to any bed, unless it was to tuck her in gently for the night.

James took the stairs two at a time, racing to meet Laura at the rear of the theater. Ignoring the picturesque stage and the velvet ambience, he concentrated all his attention on her. "What can I do to help you?"

At first, his question seemed to startle her. Then, confuse her. Then, piss her off royally -- the pulled back shoulders gave her animosity away. Too late, he knew she had misunderstood. Too late, he understood her sensitivity. He wasn't talking about her injury so much as he was talking about the lowlife who had caused it. That fucker and he had a date, and he wanted to learn ways to make that date happen, sooner rather than later.

"You want to help me?" she snarled. "Sure! Kiss me."

Say what?

Not exactly how he'd expected a pissed-off woman to react.

But that was not his first or second or even his tenth thought. How very much he wanted to kiss Laura, despite her present anger, and how good that bad idea would feel, monopolized his thoughts to the exclusion of just about everything else --

That no small and insignificant detail about how he'd changed his mind about starting anything up with her, on account of her being so vulnerable and all? Well, that thought still managed to sneak into his bewildered gray matter.

"Honey --"

“James --”

“Yeah?”

“James, James, James. There! You told me you don’t make love with a woman unless she calls you by your first name. You owe me four times already.”

Though good for that and more, he didn’t want to frighten her off by admitting his staying power was the stuff of bedroom legends. Instead, he put the brag away and pulled out some low-key cool. An effort, because, with Laura, his cool had definitely left for parts unknown. “That many times, huh?”

“Yes. We should probably get started. And, James --”

He groaned.

“No need for nervousness. That last didn’t count. I just needed to tell you about what happened back there with *Porgie and Bess*.” She took a deep breath. “The street had started filling up with foot traffic and so, in the name of discretion, I put my tour guide hat back on. We were walking far too close,” she explained. “You shouldn’t be seen with me like that in public. As a suspected murderess, I run into a lot of intolerance. Regardless of the reason, prejudice isn’t pretty, you know?”

If he hadn’t been afraid of hurting her feelings again, he would have thrown back his head and guffawed. *She* was lecturing *him* on prejudice. She didn’t want to be seen with *him* in fear of doing *him* harm. This fragile woman was trying to protect *him*.

Some turnaround of events. And didn’t her caring concern just beat all?

“Yeah, I know, honey, prejudice is damn ugly. But you don’t need to fret none over me.”

“Then kiss me, and I’ll put fretting on the back burner for a while.”

Even in the dark theater, her lips looked soft. Moist. Beckoning.

Dwarfing her as he did, he had to double over to taste her.

One lip. That was all he allowed himself. He sampled the bottom, and only with the tip of his tongue.

Refined white sugar, mixed with a few grains of salt.

The new flavor set his taste buds a-tingle. He could easily binge on her.

All the more reason to show restraint. So as not to frighten her.

He had just finished congratulating himself on how well he was holding back when she shivered and opened her mouth to him. Even then, he refused to take all that she offered. Contenting himself with licking her upper lip, he purred deep in his throat, like a damn domesticated cat. Which made no kind of sense. If he were a member of the feline family, he’d be a panther. A black, stealthy, panther. Not a tame house pet.

No one intimidated James Stone. The laidback persona he presented to the world was just that -- public image. Polish. Veneer. Style. In reality, he’d clawed his way up and out of

the slums. His brain had helped. His quick wits, too. The mentoring hand the hotel manager had extended, as well. But mostly perseverance, hard work, and determination had done it for him. He was no one's prey, no one's pushover. In a fight, he always drew blood.

James grasped Laura's wrists, which she'd crossed behind his neck, and put her away from him. "Enough."

"No," she cried mournfully and tugged him back.

Her arms wrapped around his shoulders, Laura plied her mouth to his mouth again in a kiss that bled his brain.

No one intimidated him?

Ha! This woman intimidated the hell out of him.

Frighten *her* with his loss of control?

Double ha! Losing control scared *him* shitless.

She was fragile?

Bull! He was the fragile one here.

As to her vulnerability -- well, that made two of them, and from where he was looking, his had hers beat.

Laura could easily turn him into a tame kitty. Her declawed, toothless pet. And where would that get him in the cutthroat business world?

Up a tree, no way to get down, except for a ladder rescue.

Fuck that. Lose his sharp edge, and the competition would eat him alive.

But then her tongue wiggled into his mouth, her hands fell from his shoulders to ride his ass, and thoughts of cannibalism flew out the window.

*Jesus!* What was Laura doing to him!

He was hers. Her sex toy. Her tame kitty. She could take him right there, and he wouldn't put up a fight.

James returned Laura's kiss. Then, took and took and took. Grinding her soft lips under his hard lips, his tongue struck out for the back of her throat, while his hands struck out for her breasts.

Tits. Laura's tits. Soft and sweet. Two cherry-topped vanilla ice cream cones in his hands, the perfectly round mounds melting him.

His well-ordered existence, his schedules and plans, tumbled around his ears. Like he was about to die, he closed his greedy palms around her breasts, no fucking expertise, whatsoever, and sank deeper into her mouth.

Her throaty groan brought him to his senses.

So, maybe she wasn't as fragile and vulnerable and as easily frightened as he had originally thought, but hadn't she been through enough already, without him mashing on her, too?

Gripping her upper arms, he broke them apart and then, hung there, all shook-up, like a limp dick. Only, his dick wasn't limp. His dick wasn't limp at all. What he thought was a minor necking session had just bought him some major turmoil.

"I've never kissed a black man before." Leaning back into him again, she smoothed a fingertip over his lips. "I liked it."

No need to say so. He could tell she'd enjoyed the kiss. He could also tell that, though her remark was straight-up, no bullshit honest, he was not a flesh and blood man to her. Laura was battling some kind of bad stuff, inner-demon bad stuff, and she was using sex -- and him -- as an escape. His skin tone was the chocolate icing on the cake.

She stroked his jaw. "Have you ever kissed a white woman?"

"No." And he shouldn't have started this up with her.

"Well, did you like it?" she asked.

Didn't the telltale bulge under his belt tell her so? "Yeah, I liked it."

Not "it" though. *Her*. He liked *her*. More than liked. He now knew why men went off the deep end over women. He now understood that his former cool meant shit. Without batting an eye, he'd kill for this woman.

Fuck! Trouble had found him.

When she nodded her head, her blonde hair caught the negligible light in the dark balcony. Under that sparse glow, he saw her reach for him once more. And what did he do? Why, he reached for an excuse to end it between them before she kissed him again.

"Careful," he whispered. "The door slammed downstairs, Laura. We should go."

"Oh."

His heart clutched at her sadness, at her forlorn little girl voice, a graceful Southern voice not used to showing ugly feelings. "Laura...wait..." He seemed to be saying "wait" a lot. He seemed to be making up his mind and then unmaking it a lot. That fence he was riding was giving him one helluva wedgie.

"No, no." She ducked out from under his arm. "You're absolutely right, of course. Whatever was I thinking?"

She walked ahead of him out of the balcony to the second floor landing, where she stopped, looked down to the lobby, and wobbled.

Before he could reach her, she'd regained her balance. Her tour guide voice in place and echoing for all below to hear, she said, "The Dock Street Theatre has seen many actors in its lengthy and illustrious career. Junius Brutus Booth, the father of John Wilkes Booth, is, by far and away, the most famous. Today, the Charleston Stage Company, a community theater group, calls the stage its home."

She smiled at him -- a tour guide's crisp and professional, *distant* smile. "That's it for the background information. I'll take the elevator and rejoin you downstairs."

They met by the exit. Before a dozen or so tourists, she said formally, "This concludes our nineteenth-century, historical tour. I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay in Charleston." She stroked a finger across her lips, a mouth he had bruised with his kiss. "Good-bye."

And with that, without giving him any method to contact her in the future, she walked away from him.

She meant to leave it go at that. To leave *them* go at that.

If he had any damn sense, he'd do the same.

## Chapter Seven

The last rehab center had insisted her continued recovery depended upon a daily program of exercise, preferably those exercises that went easy on her joints. “Walk,” the physical therapist prescribed. “Keep walking.”

In her job as a tour guide, she did that and then some.

As Laura made her way back home to the Battery on foot, she considered her progress. Her P.T. had been right about the daily walking therapy. Though her pelvis and hip still acted up from time to time, her legs really did feel stronger.

Except for today. Today, her legs felt as solid as water.

From the kiss. That soul-deep kiss had left her weak in the knees.

Smiling, Laura touched her lips again. James had an incredibly mobile mouth. A tender mouth. A torturously, seductive mouth. A mouth that had given her pleasure as well as some swelling. His mouth, his kiss, made her lose all common sense.

Which explained why she wouldn’t be seeing James Stone again.

After preaching discretion at him, a group of tourists had almost caught them making out like two hormonal teenagers in the balcony of the Dock Street Theatre. If not for his reminder to take care, she might have embroiled him in her problems.

And that would have been just so incredibly selfish.

She would not inflict herself on James. “For goodness sakes, I’m a complete and total crazy woman! Half the time, I can’t differentiate between reality and fantasy.”

And, see that? She was talking to herself yet again. A bad habit she’d acquired during those lonely years when she’d moved from place to place. Sometimes six times a year. Done to ensure her parents’ killer wouldn’t track her down and murder her, as well. Too many days and months, and finally years of living alone, afraid to make friends, afraid to speak to

anyone, just afraid, had taken their toll. Left with only her own company for companionship, she talked to herself, especially when under stress. Even good stress, like a bout of hot petting in a theater balcony, could trigger an episode of self-talk.

Though large in stature and size, James had initially kissed her lightly, as if she might break. His care and consideration hadn't inspired confidence in her. Anything but. Rather, his gentleness had caused her to worry over his safety. Not until his back muscles bunched and his arm muscles flexed had she realized his power, his strength. Both reassured her that he could take care of himself. Then again, when his kiss went from gentle to ferocious, who had the wherewithal to worry?

Not she. That selfish disregard of anything but sensation had almost gotten him caught with her. No matter his strength and power, a sexual association with her could ruin James. He knew it, too, which explained his warning upon hearing the door slam downstairs in the theater's foyer...

"Laura Jean! I can't believe my eyes. Is that really you? Imagine us running into one another on the same street!"

Gerald Du Pointe.

*Great.* Just great. Another upset in an already stressful day! The very last thing she needed was this, a confrontation with the man she had once loved, and perhaps still did.

At least, she did, according to all those know-it-all shrinks.

Every psychiatrist who'd treated her various and sundry phobias sang the same tune: she had some "unresolved issues" surrounding her first and only lover, the man she had almost married, and she needed to put them to rest before she could move on with her life. All the doctors suggested at least *telling* him the reason she'd broken off their relationship.

She agreed. But agreeing and doing were two separate things.

Especially on a city street.

Gerald searched her eyes; his own gaze held four years of accusation. "I visited you every day while you were in the hospital, Laura Jean. While you lay in that narrow white bed, unconscious, I held your hand. I told you I loved you, repeatedly. Then, when you did come out of it, you turned your face to the wall whenever I entered the room. Finally, the medical staff took me aside. They told me it might be best for you if I stayed away. That my visits made you more agitated. Staying away just about killed me, but for your sake, I took their advice and stopped visiting."

Gerald's voice turned thick with emotion. "I missed you so! What had I done wrong, I asked myself. How could I make amends if I didn't understand the reason for your anger? How could I comfort you over your loss if my presence worsened your condition?"

He tossed his blond head. "And then you disappeared. Without telling anyone your whereabouts. I tried finding you, darling. For years, I tried to find you. But it was almost as if you had deliberately gone into hiding."



She had. Money had bought her a new identity and some peace of mind. But the money had run out, and here she was, looking into the distraught eyes of the man who had hurt her worse than words could express.

A man, Laura now realized, she had hurt, too.

"We'll talk," she promised, but a little defensively. Gerald's anguished expression filled her with guilt, and she couldn't handle any more guilt or accusations. "But not now."

He flicked a hand through his longish hair. Gerald was such a handsome man! Everyone had always said they made such an attractive couple, how perfect they looked together...

"When, Laura? When will we talk?"

He had her cornered, and she didn't like it. Had never liked it. Without ever committing himself, he always put her on the spot, always turned the tables on her, and then criticized any opinion she meekly offered.

"I -- I -- I don't know." These days, she couldn't decide what to wear, never mind anything else.

"How about a cocktail at the Club?" he suggested. "Friday night. You love the atmosphere there."

She used to. At least, she *thought* she had. She definitely knew she didn't like the atmosphere there anymore. The country club had shunned her after her parents' deaths. Not one condolence card had she received from any of its members.

But -- as usual, she took the path of least resistance. Sticking up for herself took energy, agreeing required only graciousness.

She nodded her head. "Sure. It's a date --"

The sentence went uncompleted. This was not a date. Closure, like the psychiatrists prescribed, but not a date.

Gerald didn't notice her waffling. Like a bulldozer, he rolled over her. "I'll pick you up at the mansion. Seven, sharp. Same as always."

Nothing was the same as always, especially not her. "The time is fine, but not the location. I'm staying at the guesthouse."

"At the guesthouse? But why, darling?"

She had never given Gerald a reason for the breakup; neither had she shown him her hurt. Or her confusion. Especially not her devastation. Not once had she confronted him, not about anything. That night of their engagement party, like a well-bred Southern lady, she had retreated to her bedroom, leaving her parents the unpleasant task of delivering her change of mind to their guests --

From out of nowhere, four years worth of anger bubbled to the surface and boiled over. "Because I decided against staying in the mansion, that's why. Now, I must be running along.

Places to go, people to see, things to do, and all that. See you Friday at seven.” She started down the crowded sidewalk.

“I don’t blame you,” he yelled after her. “Not for one minute. I left you alone too much. That’s why you cheated on me. But we can work this all out, darling,” he shouted, his voice quivering, and then cracking with tears. “Despite everything you did, I still love you and want to marry you. I know you’ve been ill. Let me take care of you.”

Laura just wanted to die! How could Gerald air their dirty laundry in public? How could he make such a declaration of love to her, of sorrow to her, of contrition to her, in front of all these people? Some of whom were complete strangers, while others, she recognized as country club acquaintances of her parents. And how dare he, in that tearful voice, accuse her of cheating on him, when he was the one who had cheated on her!

Oh, God. Suppose, all these years, she’d had it all wrong? Suppose Gerald hadn’t been unfaithful during his business trip to Florida? Suppose, she’d misunderstood?

If that were true, then she could lay all of this, everything that had happened, including the murder of her parents, at her own feet. If she hadn’t called off the engagement, the party would have continued ’til dawn. An intruder would never have broken into the house and killed her mother and father, not with all the lights blazing and people inside celebrating.

Her head started to hurt, started to pound. She felt sick. Nauseated. Her belly roiled with anxiety. She just couldn’t deal with all this anymore, not now.

Back at the Battery, she dragged her bad leg up the drive.

Her old bedroom was located on the second floor of the mansion. A shattered pelvis and broken hip made climbing steps an effort, but there were other beds, other rooms in the main house. She could’ve taken over one of the first floor suites, located in both wings. She hadn’t done so because impaired mobility had nothing to do with avoidance of her ancestral home. Neither did her phobia about stairs. Going up them. Going down them. Sleeping in a room with a landing that abutted them. No, her staying at the guesthouse had nothing to do with any of those reasons.

Since the night of the murders, she hadn’t been able to bring herself to go back inside. Oh, she had tried. That first day back in Charleston, she’d stood, key in hand, at the mansion’s ground-level, service door.

The threshold was as far as she’d gotten before the tears began. Sobbing uncontrollably, she’d rolled her suitcases down the long, pebbly drive to the guesthouse at the rear of the property. The one-level cottage didn’t offer the mansion’s scenic views of the water with historic Fort Sumpter off in the background, but the security system was excellent, the gated entrance provided her with privacy, and she didn’t need to deal with her sad memories.

Once inside the guesthouse, Laura headed for the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and popped a sedative into her mouth. Then, just as she had done the night of her aborted

engagement party, without undressing, she curled on top of the bed with Teddy Bear and cried herself to sleep.

## Chapter Eight

The day following his guided tour of the Dock Street Theatre, James paced the interior of his office, a panther -- not a tamed kitty -- trapped in a cage.

Laura dominated his every thought. And kissing her had only worsened his obsession. He couldn't get her out of his mind.

Fixating on a woman wasn't like him. Sure, the kiss had generated some severe heat. But he was no kid! Women had turned him on sexually before, and he'd still gone about his usual everyday routine.

Not now.

He couldn't get anything done. Why couldn't he stop thinking about her?

Regardless of the reason, he had to quit. Thinking about her. Wanting her.

Through no fault of her own, she was trouble. And a Northern black man doing business down South had enough on his plate without involving himself in any local controversy.

A white woman considered a prime murder suspect in the axe murder of her parents amounted to a heaping plate load of controversy. Paint that controversy with interracial overtones, and he was looking at a whole lot of stuff he didn't need.

Yeah, he'd heard the news. Black men had been holding hands with white women for years on the streets of Charleston. But those men weren't hoteliers in the business of not rocking any damn boats. Bad press could ruin the feel-good vibe he'd worked so hard to cultivate. Bad press could bring his growing hotel empire to a screeching standstill. Bad press could cause him, a minority man making his unobtrusive way in a majority world, to crash and burn.

He'd heard all the political rhetoric, too. "See there," people said, pointing out signs of equality on the party platform. "An African American is running for president."

Yeah, politicians of all different persuasions sometimes got into bed together.

Politics wasn't sex. A black man couldn't cross racial sex lines without causing some raised brows. Without his mama giving him what for. Without the figurative lynching rope hitting the tree. In some places. Still. Even in this day and age.

On both sides of the color divide, people still commented, people still stared, people still felt uncomfortable, mothers still let their children know their preferences about who joined the family at the holidays, and who did not. No how, no way. Interracial couples still got death threats. And the Internet helped the hate along.

In business, he was equal opportunity, from bottom to top. He hired across the board, the best candidate for the job. Socially, he went out with whoever struck his fancy and got a rise out of him --

So long as their skin tones matched his skin tones on the color wheel.

And when the time came for him to get serious, to settle down, to say those "I dos" he planned on speaking the vows to a proud and beautiful black woman. Just like his mama expected him to do.

Was a kiss in a dark theater enough of an incentive to interrupt the direction of his neatly plotted life? Did a grope in a balcony warrant putting all he'd worked for on the line?

*Hold up, James.*

He was getting ahead of himself again. What was with him today? Who had asked him to put anything on the line? This was only a *temporary* fling. Or, like Laura said, "hooking up."

And didn't that phrase sound wrong coming from her ladylike lips?

He doubted she dropped propositions like that any too often. She wasn't the type. But, she had sure grabbed his ass like she was trying hard to be the type. Maybe trying a little too hard.

And he was trying too hard, as well. To justify something that didn't need justifying.

He saw a woman and lusted after her. Why shouldn't he move on it? Instead of beating himself up over thinking about her, maybe he should just relax and go with the flow, see where the attraction took them.

He was an unattached man with an erection that needed some looking after, and she needed some looking after, too. All he wanted to do was feel good and make the woman he was with feel good, too. Was that a crime?

Not anymore. But it sure as hell used to be, and not that long ago.

A knock, the office door creaking open, a voice slipping through the crack. "Wassup, cuz? Why'd you ring my chime?"

James turned to face Paul. "You left me a sticky note here in the office."

“Yeah, lately you’ve been a hard man to track down. We’ve been playing message tag an awful lot.”

“I’m here now. Get down to it.”

His secretary entered the room. “I got that info on Laura Jean Beaumont, like you asked, Boss.” Placing a folder on the shiny mahogany desk, he pushed the requested documentation across the top.

James didn’t spare the affidavit a glance. “Lay it on me.”

Paul recited the contents from memory. “According to police accounts, Laura Jean Beaumont had a shout fest with her parents the night of her engagement party to Gerald Du Pointe, son and scion of the big, friggin’ rich Charleston Du Pointes.”

“What precipitated the argument?”

“Something to do with the bride-to-be getting cold feet and wanting to cancel the announcement of said engagement.”

“Paul --”

“She’s a chick, right? Chicks don’t need reasons. They just up and change their minds.”

James shot him a look of displeasure.

“I don’t know, Boss. Could be she had PMS or somethin’.”

“Think of Mama. Drop the femme bashing.”

“You’re not snitching on me to her, are you, bruh?” His secretary laughed nervously.

Paul’s biological mother had worked the streets, staying gone overnight from the apartment. Then, two nights. Leaving her young son unattended. Upon hearing about the dire situation after Sunday service at the Mission Hill Baptist Church, James’s mother had offered the boy a safe haven, with the understanding he’d return to his real home when his natural mother had straightened herself out. Nothing formal. Just another case of it taking a whole village to raise up a child.

Paul’s mother never did straighten herself out. Consequently, except for the epidermis, they’d been raised as brothers --

Which meant he loved the guy to the bone, but they got along like oil and water. “Keep up this kind of trash talk and I’m calling the digits.”

As though he were landing a 747 on a runway at Logan, Paul, the chicken-shit, waved his arms in the air. “Let’s not get hasty here. No disrespect intended, Boss. And no reason to call Mama on me. You know I respect the ladies. The thing is -- it sucks that I didn’t come through for you like I told you I would.” Finished with his plane landing, Paul raked a hand through his already wild hair, a habit of his when he was happy. Or sad. Or just breathing. Paul’s hair was always a fucking mess.

Reddish-brown cowlicks sticking up all over his skull, Paul said, “I couldn’t ascertain the reason for the argument. According to eyewitness testimony, the raised voices of Mr. and

Mrs. Beaumont and their daughter, Laura Jean, originated in the library but came out muffled. None of the guests the cops interviewed could make out what was said."

"What happened next, after the argument?"

"Laura Jean came rushing out of the room and headed upstairs. As per her testimony, and I'm quoting chick speak here, *emotionally exhausted* from the blowout, she fell asleep, fully dressed, on her bed. When a noise in the middle of the night awakened her from a sound sleep, she went out into the hallway to investigate."

James walked to the front of his desk. Crossing his legs, he leaned his haunches against the gleaming top, his arms folded over his chest. "Go on."

"At the landing, an unseen someone gave her a push from behind."

And now Laura had to take a "handicapped" elevator.

That did it. James clenched his hands into fists. He was killing whoever pushed Laura down the stairs.

"The next morning," Paul continued, "bright and early, the catering company arrived to clean up after the party festivities. Thinking nothing of finding the front security gate and back door unlocked -- their arrival had been scheduled and expected -- they entered the mansion and went about their business. Soon into the operation, a member of the janitorial crew made the gruesome discovery: Mr. and Mrs. Beaumont's bludgeoned bodies lay side by side in the den, blood splattered everywhere."

"The murder weapon?"

"You talking the axe?"

"Right." James swallowed. "The axe." He swallowed again, more forcefully. "Where did the killer get the murder weapon?"

"Balls to the walls, here. I'm getting to that part next."

"Don't let me stop you," James said dryly. At times, Paul was a pain in the ass. This differed from being an asshole. His foster brother was no asshole.

"So, anyway, Boss, like I was saying, the police surmised the family kept the axe next to the woodpile. During questioning, the daughter -- Laura Jean -- backed up that supposition."

"And it was a member of the cleaning crew who placed the call to the police?"

"Stop friggin' rushing me! Geez! Yeah, the supervisor got on the horn and called 911. A few minutes later, the police arrived and found Laura Jean Beaumont unconscious and broken at the bottom of the stairs. If not for that call, she might have died. I gather she was in pretty rough shape."

James surveyed the sharp crease in his pinstriped trousers. The vision of Laura just lying there, like garbage, got to him. "Find out the names of all involved and do something nice for the crew."

"Money?"

"I'm not talking petunias, Paul."

"Sent anonymously?"

James nodded.

"Right, Boss. Right. Will do. I'll get on it today."

"The cops, Paul -- any inside dope on the killer's identity?"

"There was a five hundred plus guest list, but no bloodied fingerprints, no signs of forced entry, and no clues as to the murderer's ID."

"Gloves and fastidiousness equal premeditation."

"Sounds like that to me, too, but I'm no cop. Though, I do have some familiarity with how the legal system works." He grinned. "From the other side. Know what I'm saying?"

James did. Their neighborhood had been a powerful pull, and they'd both gotten themselves sucked into some stuff. But like himself, Paul had turned it around. Eventually. "You said Laura gave testimony, right?"

"Yep. She was in a coma for a while in the hospital, but when she came to, the cops were all over her. The police found no hard evidence to support her involvement in the crime. Everything boiled down to circumstantial crap. But the rumors and innuendo persist to this day."

"Yeah, I know. I keep hearing gossip about an anonymous lover whacking the parents. Supposedly, Laura was bogeying with the dude on the side."

"Yep, that's the story that stuck."

"Motive?"

"Dunno." Paul shrugged. "Could be getting her inheritance prematurely was the draw."

"But how does that jive with Laura ending up" -- James took a breath, got himself under control -- "broken at the bottom of a staircase?"

"The story goes, after the double homicide, Laura Jean tripped and fell during the getaway with the lover."

"No push?"

"Nope. Strictly an accidental header down the stairs."

"Is that theory possible, given the extent of the injuries she sustained?"

Paul scratched the end of his honker of a nose, broken three times before coming to work for him. "Anything is possible."

"Probable, then?"

"I'd say no, but the people of Charleston don't share my sentiments."

James braced himself. "What injuries did she sustain?"



"A broken everything. Pelvis, hip, assorted vertebrae. Collarbone. She had to relearn to walk. The gossip goes that, knowing she couldn't make a speedy getaway, the mystery lover panicked and left her for dead."

"Then, why not finger the guy? Why didn't Laura come forward with the lover's name, rather than protect him?"

"That would have incriminated her in the co-conspiracy, so she kept mum."

"I'm not buying any of it. I've known a few scorned women in my time, and none would have protected a lover after being left for dead at the bottom of a staircase." Nor did he believe in the co-conspiracy theory that had Laura in on the murders. His gut said, no fucking way. If the lover, whoever he was, had done the crime, he'd acted alone. Which meant, Laura Jean would have had no reason to protect the man. In which case, she would have spilled the killer lover's name to the cops.

None of this added up square. So, why did the gossip linger?

"The cops have another theory, Boss. Strictly locker room B.S., but it makes sense to me."

"Let's hear it."

"The double homicide was the tragic and coincidental result of a home invasion gone bad. Missing jewelry and cash, and the general upset condition of the house, point to robbery as the motive, and a druggy transient in need of financing a fix as the perp. In that scenario, the likelihood of apprehending the killer is remote to zilch."

"No arrest only feeds the gossip. These stories are so nasty, I wonder if they're an orchestrated smear campaign. I've heard talk questioning her mental competence." James picked up the folder, and then let the papers fall back down on his desk.

Why bother reading the information?

Laura Beaumont was innocent. No way had she done the crime. The gossip was just that -- gossip.

James let his gaze drift to the courtyard. "Thanks, Paul. Oh, and one more thing -- hold all my calls this afternoon. I'm out of the office for the remainder of the day."

Yesterday, Laura had needed sex. To combat her terror. To prove something to herself. To release some tension. Concerned with his own pride, concerned about not letting her use him, he had let her down.

He wouldn't make that same mistake again.

## Chapter Nine

Upon the conclusion of her scary talk inside Provost Dungeon, Laura smiled at her group of tourists, all of whom looked a mite green around the gills.

Excellent! The very effect she had hoped to achieve.

Sickened countenances meant she had done her job, while hopefully appeasing the ghosts who supposedly haunted the cellar of the Old Exchange, where the British had once imprisoned colonial “traitors” and pirates alike. Like her, without a fair hearing, the detainees had carried a presumption of guilt with no room in the public sentiment for the possibility of innocence. Mistreated and neglected, many of the unfairly imprisoned died ravaged by diseases caught while incarcerated. Some had gone stark, raving, mad first...

A sympathetic lump formed in her throat. Some days, many days, she also felt as though she were going mad. That only a small *push* would send her plummeting from the brink of sanity, where she hovered, shaky and frightened, downward into the abyss.

And that was enough negative thinking.

Plastering a beauty contestant smile on her face, she turned to her tour group, all of whom now wore peeved expressions.

Oh-oh. How much time had elapsed while she’d withdrawn into her mind? A minute? Five? Longer?

Occasionally, time slipped away from her, and she lost track of the here and now...

She shook her head, smiled wider, said cordially, “Unless you have further questions, please feel free to wander around and enjoy the wonderful exhibits, down here or upstairs. We’ll meet up again by the exit and proceed to the next historical stop on the itinerary, in approximately --”

She checked the diamond-studded face of her watch.

Hospital stays and a lengthy recuperation had racked up a fortune -- *her* fortune, to be precise -- in bills. She'd had no medical insurance, and hourly lawyer fees quickly add up. To pay off her mounting debt and have something for living -- and hiding -- expenses during the years she was unemployed, she'd instructed her attorneys to sell off a large portion of her inheritance. Cars, boats, furnishings, paintings, jewelry -- all gone.

Not the gold watch. She just couldn't part with it. Keeping up appearances mattered. And the heirloom piece, a sixteenth birthday present from her great-grandmother, kept excellent time.

"We'll meet back here," she repeated to her group, "in twenty minutes."

Not soon enough for her. Tourists demanded free time to explore, but the unoccupied minutes dragged for Laura. Giving talks, answering questions, kept her on her toes, anchored her in the present...pushed the sad memories into the past where they belonged.

Left to their own devices, some members of her group roamed over to the Half-Moon Bastion to take yet another look at the only visible part of the wall fortification that had once surrounded old "Charles Town." Others, evidently not caring for the dark and dim interior of the dungeon, scurried back up the stairs to the light and sunny Old Exchange.

The dungeon's vaulted brick barrel ceiling and massive column construction was not for everyone. Musty air. Tiny prison cells. Feeling trapped. Smothered. Unable to breathe...

Her claustrophobia rising along with her goose bumps, Laura shivered.

Honestly, the place gave her the creeps. If not for being one of the most popular destinations in Charleston, she'd never elect to come down here to the dungeon.

When the last straggler finally left, Laura got busy. The quicker she raced through the required lost-and-found reconnaissance, the quicker she'd get the heck out of here.

Tours filed through twice every sixty minutes, on the hour and half-past. But before the next group could descend into the bowels of the earth, she had to make sure none of her people had left stray gum wrappers, or cameras, or stuffed animals, or even a child behind. Kids liked to play hide and go seek in the cells.

Goodness only knew, there were plenty enough places for concealment. A few years back, a little boy had gotten lost, and several frantic minutes had passed before he'd been reunited with his distraught parents. That was when the "reconnaissance" rule went into effect. Although she did head counts periodically, distractions happened. And so, while the delay was a pain, the search and retrieval of misplaced items was a necessary and understandable part of her job.

Upon entering the last prison cell in need of checking, something, a feathery *something*, touched her bared nape.

A loosened strand of hair?

Or, an icky spider dangling from one of the many dusty webs overhead?

Laura usually wore her hair down. But anticipating another humid day, today she'd rolled the thick mass up into a French twist and pinned the bump high on the back of her head. So much cooler!

Evidently, the spider approved. Enough to try and build a nest in her change of hairstyle. *Ugh!*

"Shoo!" she yelled, her shout echoing in the cavernous space.

The tickling stopped. Good! She'd scared off the homesteading critter.

Hurrying deeper into the cell, she lost her already shaky balance. Her leg brushed against an exposed jagged stone low on the wall. When she bent to examine the extent of the damage -- a run in her stocking from ankle to knee -- another *something* fluttered across the back of her neck.

This was no bug. And, she didn't give much credence to ghosts. However, a vicious double murder had confirmed her belief in the presence of evil. Alone in the dark dungeon, in a tomb-like cell, Laura opened her lips to scream.

Before she could make a sound, a hand covered her mouth. "It's James."

*Now that she no longer needed him to, he identifies himself*, she thought crossly.

This close, his scent gave him away. Generic soap and the uniqueness of him.

Breathing him in deep, she forgot fear and consternation.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you, Laura. Are you all right? I heard you cry out --"

Shaken, but pathetically grateful to have human, non-homicidal company with her in the cell, she nodded.

"But you feel the need to slap me upside the head, don't you, honey?"

*Was calling her "honey" supposed to make up for nearly scaring her out of her mind?*

"I really am sorry, honey. I should've known better. I haven't been able to stop thinking about you, so I wanted to see you again, couldn't wait to see you again, wanted to surprise you, wanted so many things. Except to scare you. I didn't want to do that. Stupid move, pouncing on you like that."

The stale air in the cell circulated.

James shaking his head? Perturbed, perhaps, at himself over her upset?

"How's this?" he coaxed. "Holler at me later, but for now, just let me, just let me, just let me hold you, pretty Laura." A long extended sigh came from behind her. "Do you know you have a graceful neck, pretty Laura?"

Due to the hand covering her mouth, she couldn't answer. Irritating. Frustrating, too. Positively, she would let him have it.

Later.

Much later.

He was kissing her bare nape, and she didn't want him to stop. Not that she wasn't irritated -- his palm *still* covered her mouth and his tickling *had* nearly given her a fit back there -- but at the moment her mind was on other, more critical, matters.

James wanted her.

Enough to disregard what she'd told him yesterday, enough for him to come looking for her today.

"Mmm," he murmured. "Your skin tastes delicious. I could kiss your neck for days."

For days? Not just for minutes. Not just for hours. Whole, complete days?

*Way* over the top. Overkill, really --

She shivered again, but this time, not in fear.

Her fright over the possibility of creepy-crawlies invading her hair?

Gone.

Her stark terror over the possibility of an unseen someone murdering her in a dark and gloomy dungeon?

What a crazy thing to think!

Her shiver?

Full-scale excitement. Her nipples actually hardened in expectancy.

Just from the nearness of James.

After walking away from him at the Dock Street Theatre, Laura thought he'd forget all about her and the kiss they'd shared. But here he was back again, tickling her, kissing her, whispering absurdities in her ear.

She leaned against him, the back of her light lavender dress sealed to the front of what felt like another crisp dress shirt. His chest, a broad wall at her spine, supported her, and his hand, the one which had been clasped over her mouth, lifted and started to explore her lips, his thumb outlining the contours.

*Yes, yes, yes!*

"Laura, why did you cry out earlier?"

"Because you tickled me. I thought you were a spider." She laughed.

"I didn't tickle you, Laura."

James was behind her, so she couldn't see him, but she heard the frown of concern etching his voice. "You didn't?"

"No."

Which meant a spider *had* scuttled across her nape, and she'd overreacted, like a complete crazy woman.

Dear Lord! Now James would think she was nuts!

A distraction was called for.

“Kiss me,” she demanded.

She cringed. Now James would think her a spoiled brat.

Growing up rich and adored, her every wish had commanded others. Those days were gone. And she’d changed with them.

She rephrased her tyranny. “Please kiss me.”

James took her mouth. Not gently. Not reverently. Not at all as he had too briefly kissed her the day before in the Dock Street Theatre. He claimed her lips as if they were his by foregone conclusion. As though he already owned her, possessed her, had made her his. His dominance provoked mild trepidation within her.

And wild enthusiasm.

He shouldn’t be here doing this to her. She shouldn’t be letting him. His assertive brand of lovemaking was new to her. And...and...imagining his domination and experiencing his domination were two different things. Oh, she was just so conflicted!

But not conflicted enough to wonder how soon ’til the end of the tour, her last one of the day, so they could go get a room --

An unpleasant reality interrupted her wondering.

Her underwear. Her white, unsexy, cotton, underwear. Why hadn’t she splurged on sexy?

Primarily, because she was broke. Secondarily, because she hadn’t, not even in her hottest fantasizing, pictured something like this actually happening.

Beauty queen, homecoming queen, the belle of the ball. In her former life, men had treated her like an untouchable china doll. They had judged her like an object, using impossibly high standards.

She didn’t want James to treat her like a china doll. She didn’t want him to judge her like an object. She wanted this man to treat her like a woman. She wanted him to touch her as though he were desperate to touch her --

At that fantastical thought, she shivered.

He broke their mouths apart and put her away from him. “We can’t do this. Not here.”

Intellectually, she knew he was right. After all, anyone could see them. Selfish even to consider blowing off concerns like that. And yet...and yet...his good sense let her down. Sure, his decision got her off the underwear hook, but it also disappointed her.

“It’s too cold down here, Laura. I won’t have you getting sick.”

So -- concern for her health explained why he’d stopped?

A few impairments did not make her an invalid! After countless surgeries and hospitalizations, she’d fought her way to where she was today. She’d earned the non-orthopedic shoes she was wearing. And, who asked for his pity?

Not her. Sympathy was *so* not what she wanted from him!

She kept her back turned, but straightened her damaged spine. “We should leave. You’re absolutely right.”

“Yeah, but I wish I wasn’t right. I enjoy having you all to myself. But not here. To damn dark and dank. You need sunshine to put some color in your cheeks. Like mine.” He chuckled.

James hadn’t pulled away from her! In her selfish weakness, his response pleased her no end. Her psychiatrists prescribed finding something that would divert her mind from the past. Well, this was it. James was her something. He could take her mind off the horror. This was her chance to forget sadness and wallow in pleasure. James could make her feel something again, something other than guilt and regret.

And that would just go to prove that she hadn’t changed, that she was silly and superficial and spoiled. She would end this thing between them, here and now!

“I have a snag in my stocking.” The truth, but not one she would ordinarily have divulged to a man. “If you’ll pardon me, I’ll go make the necessary repairs in the Woman’s...er...lounge.” And how cloyingly quaint was that? What a priss! She could kiss him, but not say “restroom,” her upbringing precluding the directness she so admired in him. Sometimes, she felt like Scarlett O’Hara.

No, on second thought, not her. Scarlett had gumption. She was thinking of the other one, the secondary character from *Gone with the Wind*, the blonde, wimpy one, the supposedly noble and self-sacrificing one.

Melanie.

*Ugh.* Some role model.

In a trance, she walked to the wall and pressed “Up,” her gaze searching the shiny plate surrounding the button.

She would not look over her shoulder at him, but she needed to see James, if only to confirm in her own mind that he was real, that their kiss had been real, not a fantasy, not a figment of her imagination. Somehow, though, he managed to elude the shiny surface. No matter how she squinted, she couldn’t see his reflection on the shiny plate.

The elevator arrived, the door opened, and she entered.

James didn’t join her.

As the elevator doors closed, Laura quickly swiveled.

And found no one there.

## Chapter Ten

The ladies room, located on the upper floor of the Old Exchange, was mercifully empty when Laura stumbled through the door. Conscious of her group's impatience to tour the next historical stop, she only glanced briefly in the mirror as she headed for the stall.

That one glance told the whole story.

These days, a touch of lipstick was all she ever used for makeup. But even without cosmetics, she looked flushed. Her complexion was dewy, her dark blue-velvet eyes heavy-lidded and slumberous. And her lips! For the second day in a row, her mouth looked swollen, bruised, the plum gloss smudged. She looked like a woman who'd been soundly kissed.

A finger to her lips confirmed a distinct soreness.

She hugged the soreness to her. Never had an achy mouth pleased her more.

The blackness that had shrouded her on her trip upstairs in the elevator lifted. Any number of reasons explained smudged lip gloss. But a swollen mouth had but one explanation.

That kiss had been real. She hadn't imagined James.

All through high school, college, and grad school, she'd held herself to chaste standards, saving herself for the man she loved, for the man who would eventually become her husband. Until Gerald, she'd been a know-nothing virgin.

Though no longer a virgin, she still didn't know much.

How could she?

She'd only dated Gerald six months, only had sex with him three times, and during all three occasions, she'd experienced pain, but no pleasure. Embarrassment, but no epiphany. Intercourse, but no interaction. But, since she'd loved Gerald heart and soul, like a gently raised Southern lady of the last century, she'd put up with the discomfort, the vague sense of



dissatisfaction, confident the situation would improve with marriage. Then, after Gerald's betrayal and the deaths of her parents, she hadn't been in any shape physically or emotionally for something as frivolous as dating. Plus, she'd been in hiding. Consequently, four years after her broken engagement, her knowledge of sex was still limited to Gerald.

And she would *not* be expanding her experience with James Stone!

Deep down, he knew an association with her would be risky, otherwise he would have joined her in the elevator. Regardless of the kiss, James knew an affair with her was a bad idea.

Inside the stall, she discarded the tattered nylons, and then headed for the sink to splash cold water on her feverish face before rejoining her group.

The mirror! In pink liquid soap, squeezed from the dispenser on the wall, someone had drawn a heart on the glass and then scribbled something underneath.

The scrawled writing contained only a few runny words:

*I'll be there on your next tour stop, too.*

James!

Evil, evil, *wicked* man. Wily, as well. He must've snuck into the ladies room while she was wiggling out of her ripped pantyhose in the stall. And she hadn't even heard him!

\* \* \* \* \*

Laura had already left the building. After tipping the guide for the inconvenience of delaying the next tour by a few minutes, done so he could have the bashful lady all to himself in guaranteed privacy, James left the Old Exchange.

Conscious that she embarrassed easily, he followed at a discreet distance, staying several yards behind as she led her group of tourists to the next historically significant site on her tour guide itinerary.

At the French Huguenot Church, Laura took the handicapped access ramp inside the building. He remained outside on the sidewalk, his narrowed gaze surveying the area for anyone who might look suspicious.

Although he couldn't pinpoint anyone strange in the crowd, he knew something strange was going on and he wasn't leaving Laura out of his sight.

She was more jittery today than the day before. More on edge, too. Granted, walking up behind her in the dungeon hadn't been the world's smartest move. Blocking her scream with his palm wouldn't earn him any smart trophies, either, but it was either that or allow her cry of alarm to ricochet up the stairwell to the first floor. In his hurry to see her again, he'd left the damn dungeon door open --

He didn't care two cents about discretion, but Laura did. So while she took the elevator up, he'd gone back to the stairwell.

And discovered the door he'd left open, shut tight.

Meaning, someone lurking in the darkness had left that way. Someone who had been lying in wait for Laura. The same someone who had "tickled" her and made her cry out.

Dammit! Who? Who was stalking Laura? Was it that loud-mouthed Slick, who had hassled her before? He knew what that creep looked like, and James hadn't seen his ugly mug out front. But maybe, he'd missed him in the crowd...

She was in the middle of her architectural recitation when James slipped into a boxed pew at the rear of the church. Pretending to ignore him -- though he knew damn well she had seen him enter -- she continued speaking to the group.

"The Gothic Revival style of the church is mirrored in the nineteenth century tracker organ you see in front of you." She pointed to the instrument. "The keys produce a sound similar in tone to the Baroque organs for which Bach and Handel composed. When Charleston fell in 1865, federal soldiers dismantled the organ for transport to New York. Fortunately, a group of concerned music lovers interceded and the organ never made the trip." A smile played across her lips. "Today, we're in for a real treat! The organist, Donna Sue Clark, is allowing us to eavesdrop on her practice session. Following the performance, I'll join you outside in the courtyard to answer questions. Please relax and enjoy the music."

As if on cue, the organist entered from a side door, seated herself at the instrument and began her practice session, and Laura tiptoed down the center aisle to the rear of the church. Melodic organ notes fanned over the rows like languid summer heat as Laura joined him in the enclosed box, taking a seat beside him on the wooden bench.

Although she didn't spare him a glance, her gaze remaining fixed straight ahead, the lack of eye contact in no way hindered her from getting her message across. "Stop following me from place to place," she hissed. "People know me in this town. And those who don't know me recognize me from the million or so photos scattered through the city. Charleston might be small, but gossips have big mouths, and word will travel like wildfire that I've been seen with a man."

"Who'll see you here? We're sitting way at the back of the church," he said, he *thought*, reasonably. "Everyone is looking at the organist."

"Exactly!" she whispered. "And when she's not looking at her sheet music, Donna Sue will be staring at us. She's not only my real estate agent, she's a former friend from the country club. My former *best* friend, in fact." Her hands knotted together. "She never called after the deaths of my parents. It was only upon hearing I had returned to town to sell my family home that she got in touch with me. The house will make her a huge commission." Her lips trembled.

"I'm sorry, honey." Because that was what she wanted, for now, he would pretend they were two strangers occupying the same bench.

Following her lead, he turned his gaze away from her face.

But the sides of that bench were high, and the organist wouldn't be able to see him reach for her hand. Unclasping her clenched fingers, he entwined them with his.

His pride had flown out the window. He'd do anything to be near this woman. Breathe the same air as her. He'd take whatever crumbs Laura offered, and call himself full. Call himself lucky. Call himself grateful. It wasn't *just* about the sex. He wanted to take care of her, dammit! Protect her --

Kill the bastard who'd hurt her.

James rubbed his thumb over her wrist, picked up the beat of her pulse. Man, she was feeling the music all right, and not the melody emanating from *that* organ.

Yeah, he could feel her hankering for his non-white cock. The vibe hurt, but so what? So what, she was looking for a dark stud? Sex made for a powerful adhesive. He wanted Laura to stick to him? He could get Laura to attach herself to him. In bed. His cum. Their sweat. He could reach Laura on a physical level. Seduce her into sex before she was ready emotionally. Get her to surrender to her needs and desires, and then wield sexual power over her. It wouldn't be hard. She was physically attracted to him. He could use that attraction to bind her to him. But should he?

James weighed the pros and cons of that sneaky approach, of bending her to his will through her pussy. Sex as a tool -- is that what he wanted?

No. No. And hell, no.

But he could give her a glimpse of how it would be between them.

He ruthlessly pulled away from her fingers.

Her body went limp, deflated, as if a vacuum had sucked all the air out of her. She probably thought he had abandoned her, like everyone else in town.

Never!

He palmed her breast. Once again, James felt, rather than saw, her straighten back up, felt her spine stiffen. Above the hymn, he heard her swift intake of air. Her nipple, like a shy guppy, tried to swim away. He was having none of her bashfulness. Her rapidly hardening flesh was not evading him! He captured the peak, his thumb and forefinger manipulating the areola under the dress's slinky fabric.

And she didn't pull away.

Her nipple tightened, the sharp point poking his fingers. On the bench, her legs crossed. Uncrossed. Crossed again. Oh, yeah, she was feeling the music, and once again, not the score the organist played. These were sex notes she was dancing to. Soft mewling noises accompanied her wiggles. A quick sidelong glance told him her lips gaped. Her mouth, a little lipstick-smudged from his previous kiss, quivered.

Showing her no mercy, he dropped his hand from her breast, and tunneled all five digits under the skirt of her dress. As the organ music built to a crescendo, the volume of the passage gradually increasing in intensity, James felt his own urgency grow exponentially.

He found her warmth. Her heat. Her moistness. Her welcome. Smoothing his palm over her cotton panties, damp with need, he petted her like a kitten. Then, wedging his hand between her closed thighs, he pried her legs apart.

And he was *there*. Right there, where she needed him to be.

Yeah, she had needs, but he had needs, too. And he needed to take. He needed to take more. She wore a ladylike dress, and he needed to fling that ladylike dress up over her head and boil his eyes --

On her cunt.

But he didn't. He'd save looking at Laura for later, when they were alone. This was for her. All for his honey.

With her thighs loosened, her knees splayed wide, she whimpered. The hymn muting her breathy gasps, he inched his middle finger under her panties and made his way inside her, deep inside her, up to the knuckle inside her. The musky scent of her sex played havoc with his breathing. Her wet heat nearly burned the skin off his finger -- the finest of damn praise. Her small sobs were music to his ears, more affecting than any melody the organ could play.

He found the pinnacle of her sexual sensation, her plump clit, and her body jolted, leaving him to wonder about the extent of her experience. As the organist's fingers pressed the keys, his fingers pressed her clit, finding out what amount of pressure she preferred, what kind of touch -- heavy or light -- wondering all the while if Gerald Du Pointe had satisfied her.

He thought maybe not. He thought Laura was a virgin to sensual bliss, a virgin to orgasm. He could bring Laura to climax like this, manually. Should he?

His dick, needing in on the action, protested mightily. But now that he'd started something, what choice did he have but to continue?

Bringing her to the pinnacle, only to leave her suspended there, went against every gentlemanly part of him. Regardless of his needs, he had to trip her over the edge. No woman had ever needed release more than Laura. It was his responsibility -- no, his honor -- to see to her pleasure.

Even if it killed him to be on the outside when it happened.

He upped the action, and she bucked. Her body shook, then tightened, every muscle tensed. He continued using his hand to bring her to completion, fingers now slick with her juices, with her honey, fingers he knew would look starkly dark against the paleness of her flesh.

He refused to send his gaze there. Refused to look at his hand's placement on her body.

Looking wasn't decent, wasn't right, not like this, not until they had straightened out a few bumps in the road between them. But he would take his comfort where he could find it. The womanly sounds Laura made, the ungraceful rhythm of her writhing, the smell of her

musk, her creamy wetness -- *fuck, but she was dripping. His cock would be able to slide right into her pussy, no problem* -- coating his fingers, the feel of her body arching on the hard bench, the knowledge that he was making her soar, making her fly.

When she moaned, he raised the super-sized hymnal in front of them and caught her scream in his mouth, a kiss that shattered him as she shattered under the guiding stoke of his fingers. Not until her tremors stilled did he lower the hymnal and break them apart, not until then did he look at her.

Her eyes, large and blue-velvety, blinked and then refocused.

On him. Searching his face.

"The music is stopping," he whispered, patting her Southern Belle skirts all neatly back in place. No short skirts for, Laura. No cleavage revealing tops. No curve clinging fabrics. No bra straps showing. No hint of nothing. Her sex hidden away. But he knew. James knew now that Laura's passion was for real.

After restoring her to decency, he moved away from her on the bench.

She sat there, looking at him, not budging.

For true, Laura was out of her element in these kinds of games.

His heart turning over in his chest, he gave her a prompt to leave. "Your group will be wanting your attention outside in the courtyard, honey."

Mutely nodding in agreement, she stood.

Why wasn't she saying anything?

Something was wrong.

Had he misunderstood? Fun and games -- isn't that what Laura wanted from him?

Suddenly, he wasn't so sure. "Laura, are you all right?"

"Please don't follow me to the next tour stop, James."

Never looking back, she left the church.

And him.

Just like that, she'd dismissed him. As if he was nothing, she upped and walked away.

James brought his hand to his face, took a ragged breath against his clenched fist. The wetness and scent of her still clung to his fingers.

Regardless of what Laura *thought*, this wasn't the end for them.

## Chapter Eleven

Kicking back the quilt, Laura stretched out in the single bed. After a restful night's sleep, she was ready to take on the world --

As long as that world didn't include Charleston.

Not even a thousand restful nights' sleep would prepare her for taking on the city of her birth. As soon as she sold the house, she was *so* out of here.

But, right now, she was stuck. Which meant putting up with the gossip. And, her own terror.

Though, she had to admit, she felt much calmer today.

Laura smirked. So, calm was what an orgasm did for a girl, eh?

Incredible. Earth-shaking. Mind-boggling.

She, Laura Beaumont, had gotten off. The formerly elusive "Big O" was all hers!

Of course, she'd had a little help.

Nope. She wasn't thinking about who had extended her that help. But she couldn't help but think that climax offered many therapeutic benefits. She'd slept soundly all night without the crutch of a sleeping pill. And now, blissfully awake, she smiled. Serenely. And why not? The guesthouse was nice and quiet and early morning cool, and she planned to steal some additional playtime before getting up to start her day.

Who needed a man?

Not her. Men were vastly overrated. A girl could date herself -- if she were available and easy, and didn't mind if the sex lacked an element of romance.

Who needed romance?

Not her. Romance was highly overvalued, she thought, throwing off the percale sheet, and hiking up her PJ top. Mimicking the actions of a certain someone, whose name she

refused to utter to herself, whose darkly handsome face she refused to envision, she fondled her breasts.

See that? Sex was just reflex, a learned response to stimuli. Even without a male's input, her nipples still hardened and peaked. Though, the result was not nearly as deliciously intense as when a certain dark hand had performed the same pinching clamp.

No! None of this comparing. None of this feeling silly. Many women masturbated -- she'd read all about their growing numbers in various fashion magazines -- and still managed to bring home the goodies. Why shouldn't she?

She would not consider masturbation as settling for second best! That antiquated idea could scurry right out of her head. Self-love was a beautiful thing, she cheerily decided, slipping her hand under the waistband of her PJ bottoms and rubbing her fingers into her pubic hair --

Gerald didn't care for pubic hair on a woman. Or, at least, he hadn't cared for *her* pubic hair. Not that he'd come right out and said so. Her almost fiancé hadn't been nearly that direct, not about anything sexual. But he had pouted that first time upon seeing her naked. And then, later on, he'd hinted that she should get a wax job for their wedding night. He hadn't insisted -- Gerald hadn't been forceful that way -- but he had let it be known that hair *down there* repulsed him and that he'd prefer her "little girl" smooth.

*Icky*, she'd thought at the time and perhaps still did. Even so, despite her own aversion to baldness *down there*, to please him, she would have gone through with the bikini wax. To arouse him, she would have done whatever he asked --

Looking back, she realized she had failed miserably at arousing Gerald.

Loving him as she had, she would have done anything to see the same hot passion reflected in Gerald's eyes as she saw reflected in that certain someone's eyes, about whom she refused to think. That someone's gray eyes had singed her with his arousal. Her pubic hair hadn't fazed *him*. In fact, he had threaded his fingers through her light brown curls, as if he'd liked the feel.

And what a naughty thought *that* was!

Giggling to herself, Laura slid her hand over her mons. A tentative finger slid between the vaginal lips.

*Hmm*. Disappointing. The folds were nowhere near as moist -- make that wet -- as yesterday. Nowhere near exhilarated, she forged ahead, willing herself to feel something. A tingle, as she pushed and pulled, and prodded her clit. A spasm, as she poked. A shiver, as she found the stroke that James -- *oops, mustn't think about him* -- had used.

Meeting with only limited success, the sensation not nearly as nice as the day before, she flopped over onto her belly. Disgruntled, she pushed her pelvis into the mattress, her hand still working feverishly between her legs, her butt rising and falling, mimicking the actions of sex.

*Ah.* Now she was getting somewhere! *This* felt so much better, so much nicer. The pressure felt actually pleasurable. And that was all the pressure was -- pleasurable. Nothing more. She was stressing out, trying to make the pleasure more than what it was, until her mind started to wander, to the dark face of a man, and her fantasy kicked pleasure into a smidgeon of excitement. Panting, perspiring, her bottom pumping wildly, she allowed her thoughts to carry her away, and the spark of excitement built and built.

The excitement fizzled, when, feeling guilty, she denied herself the imagery of a certain man's face.

She started over again. This time, without the fantasy, but it was no use. A wasted exercise. Humping the bed only chafed her skin. Leading her to conclude that going solo just didn't pack the same wallop as being with someone.

Not just someone, she corrected. A *special* someone.

Yesterday, James had restored some of her lost self-confidence. Because she had enjoyed him touching her and he seemed to enjoy touching her, she had found the courage to want to touch him in the same way, something Gerald had never allowed her to do. Her almost fiancé expected her to lie there and not move.

Yesterday, on the church bench, when James sent his hand between her legs, she hadn't been able to sit still. She could tell that inability had met with his approval. He had liked her wiggling...

*That's enough, Laura! No more thinking about James Stone!*

What was the use of thinking about him? She was only torturing herself. As much as she wanted to, she wouldn't be seeing him again. To give in would prove she was still a selfish and spoiled brat.

And why? Because being with a suspected murderess would bring James down.

And why? Because most people would construe such a relationship as exhibiting a lack of sound judgment. Moral. Business. Social. You name it. Across the board, James's choice would be called into question.

Her mother had always said, "Laura Jean, you're known by the friends you keep."

In this instance, her mother had been right.

She would ruin that good man's reputation.

So, she would *not* be inflicting herself on James.

Feeling noble...and just incredibly awful...she lumbered out of bed, and headed for the shower. Later, in the guesthouse's tiny kitchen, still feeling noble and just incredibly awful, she rinsed out her lonely, breakfast teacup. The china nearly toppled from her hand at the *clunk* of the brass knocker on the front door.

Startled, she stood in the middle of the floor, wondering who could possibly be dropping in on her, unannounced. After all, she had no friends in Charleston anymore. Or, for that matter, anywhere else. No one sought out crazy murder suspects for companionship.



*Let's do lunch, Laura Jean. We can talk about what's in style for axes this season...*

When the doorknocker fell again, this time she did lose her grip, and in more ways than one. The delicate china cup that had been tottering in her hand crashed to the floor.

Who could possibly be out there?

Hugging the wall, she crept down the hall. At the window beside the front door, she lifted the corner of the dusty curtain and peeked out.

A woman stood outside on the porch, her toe impatiently tapping.

Donna Sue Clark, her former classmate and her present real estate agent.

*Uh-oh.*

In advance of the mansion's first Open House, Donna Sue had scheduled a real estate caravan to look the place over.

Today.

At least a dozen real estate agents would walk through the house to evaluate its potential salability.

Today.

How could something so important have slipped her mind?

And how could she have had that slippage in front of Donna Sue, of all people? The woman was a shark!

Laura's sole purpose in returning to Charleston was to put the mansion up for sale. To pay off all her outstanding medical bills, and still have a financial cushion remaining until she could resettle somewhere else and find a "real" job, she needed to make a killing on the property, difficult to do in a downwardly spiraling real estate market and with the house's blighted history.

At the completion of the police investigation, she'd hired workmen to remove all traces of the crime. The job had taken three coats of paint. The blood on the walls kept leaching through the oil-based enamel.

Hysteria rising within her, she laughed like a mad woman, like someone completely deranged. *Give up on making a profit, Laura! You'll do well to unload the property at a loss.*

She hadn't helped matters. Since her return to Charleston, she'd done absolutely nothing to improve the mansion's salability. Forget sprinkling fragrant potpourri everywhere. She hadn't even removed the dustcovers from the furniture, as she'd promised her real estate agent she'd do.

Her wild laughter kicked up a degree. *My, my, my. Won't Donna Sue just pitch a hissy-fit when she finds out?*

Bitch.

Laura suspected her former friend of leaking private information about her, concerns and such about her mental instability. Donna Sue could be behind the other gossip, too. Who else would have spread such horrible slanderous rumors?

Regardless, she'd stalled long enough. With a gracious smile, Laura flung open the guesthouse's door. "Donna Sue! Hi!"

Her real estate agent kept tapping her pointy toe to the same impatient beat. "You forgot about the Open House, didn't you?"

Laura's smile collapsed under the weight of its own perkiness. "I've had so much on my mind --"

James Stone. Her sexual haze explained her memory loss.

Donna Sue pursed her lips. "The front gate was also locked. Fortunately, I have almost total recall and remembered the security code from our school days' acquaintance."

Apart from her seeming inability to remember they had once been best friends, not mere acquaintances, Donna Sue's powers of recollection were indeed excellent. For instance, she'd never forgotten...or forgiven...Gerald's interest in her. Donna Sue's nose had gone so far out of joint at losing out on the Du Pointe fortune, she'd required rhinoplastic surgery --

To hide an evil smile, Laura tracked down the key to the mansion. Of course, an out-of-joint nose wouldn't explain Donna Sue's subsequent boob job and butt lift and whole-body liposuction. "We'll go over to the house right now."

"Did you get the place ready?" Donna Sue asked as they crossed the drive to the ground-level service entrance.

"Uh -- actually no. What with work and everything, I haven't had a chance. I'll just run around and fix things up now. Plenty of time. Shouldn't take me more than a few minutes, and then I'll return later to do some vacuuming. What's a little dust?" She keyed the lock, pushed open the door --

And wobbled.

This was how a monster had entered the mansion. Right here, at this woodpile, a murderer had picked up an axe, using it to kill her parents.

"You go on ahead, Donna Sue. I -- I can't do this right now." Turning on her heel, Laura limped away.

## Chapter Twelve

Paul tossed the magazine onto the blotter and looked up. "What is up, Brutha James?"

"Would you get your damn huge feet off my nice shiny desk?" James picked up the huge feet under discussion and dropped them on the floor. "What are you doing in here, in *my* office, anyway? Forget we don't have to go fifty-fifty anymore?" As kids, they'd shared just about everything. The same bedroom, sports equipment, childhood illnesses. With city apartments too cramped for personal space, and the family finances too tight to squeeze in the double cost of anything, except maybe food, the two boys -- one white, one black -- had made do with one.

This included sharing the same mother, a woman with enough love to go around.

"Mama called," his brother taunted. "Wants to know if you forgot to call home this week."

James groaned.

Paul grinned. "When she didn't hear from you last night, she got concerned and asked me to check out your personal desk calendar, seeing she digs how responsible I am and all, unlike some people I know, who will remain nameless but not blameless."

James ran a hand through his short wiry hair. *Great. Just fucking great.*

No oversight, he'd deliberately not called his mother. The woman expected a weekly telephone chat, and this week, what with Laura and all, he'd put off the conversation. Normally, he enjoyed calling, but that woman had psychic tendencies, and he had something to hide.

Laura.

His mother could voodoo him without even trying. She just *knew* things, could sense 'em. If he had talked to her, she'd be onto the fact that he'd met a woman who interested --

no, make that *fascinated*-- him. Then she'd weasel the information out of him that the woman was Caucasian, and there'd be all hell to pay.

Fine, for his mama to have Paul, a white son, but not so fine for him to have a white...

A white what?

What was Laura to him?

Not a lover. Not a girlfriend.

A fixation. Laura was his fixation. His incurable obsession.

If he told his mama that, she'd go on and on about keeping his proud black heritage alive, about the problems inherent in racially mixed relationships, about how it was hard enough on a couple to stay together without having to buck society, too. End result? He hadn't picked up the damn phone, because picking up the damn phone would have necessitated a damn white lie.

Paul patted his hip-hop inspired necktie, the professional look rapper, Sean "Diddy" Combs, of all people, had popularized.

*Someone please tell this white boy quick he ain't black.*

Paul had a real talent for believing only what he wanted to believe and denying the rest, like who stared back at him from the shaving mirror.

A frightening thought occurred to James. "You didn't tell Mama about Laura, did you?"

"Chill. I would never do you dirt like that! A bruh don't rat out a bruh. In fact, I covered your ass."

"Let's hear it. What'd you tell her?"

Paul threw up the horns, pinkie and index finger sticking the air. "I only laid the truth on her, *dawg*. That you're bringing a model from the EBONY Fashion Fair to the party this weekend."

"You did *what!*"

"No lie. You are bringing a model, and I've got the fax pictures to prove it." He slapped three glossy photos on the desk. "All three of their managers called today, and I'm here to say, these fine ladies are eager to meet you. Choose one."

"I don't want to *choose* one!"

James had already chosen the woman he wanted at his side. A pipe dream, to walk into the party with Laura on his arm, but there it was, his choice.

"This is EBONY we're talking here. All three of these ladies are date-worthy and they all want to meet you. Hell, don't choose one. Take all three."

Three women. Just what he needed. "Four-ways are more your style, man."

"True, *dat*." Grinning from ear to ear, Paul vacated the chair and headed out the door, but not before shooting another fraternal insult over his shoulder. "You always did hold dated views on dating."

“Still do.”

Here on out, James only wanted one woman in his bed, and that was how the situation would remain, despite the objections of the woman involved.

Paul turned back. “Just so you know, all three ladies are paying you a visit. When they arrive, I’ll send them right in --”

“You gotta give me some advance warning, Paul! If it’s after hours, hit the intercom in my suite and tell me they’re on their way up.”

“Will do, Boss,” he said, raising two. “Peace out.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Laura told herself she’d put James Stone out of her mind and out of her life. Sure, she’d slipped briefly this morning, and then again early in the afternoon, and then again a few minutes ago, but that had only been a minor setback on the road to recovery. One slip wasn’t bad for one, whole, entire, almost twenty-four hour, day. In light of everything, her cold turkey withdrawal had been a huge success.

And then *he* had to go and call Bumble Bee Tours to arrange another private tour, asking specifically for her as his guide again. The man was persistent, she’d give him that.

All well and good, his interest boosted her ego. All fine and dandy, she’d give anything to see him again -- and by *see him*, she meant put her hands all over him and have him put his hands all over her. But what about his best interests?

For the sake of his best interests, she was staying away from James Stone for the remainder of his stay in Charleston. So, with that self-sacrificing idea in mind, naturally, she’d tried to get out of giving him the private tour. But when she’d asked her supervisor to substitute someone else, Mr. Nelson had flatly refused, making it clear she’d be looking for other employment if she no-showed. Put to her like that, what choice did she have but to go?

No choice.

She’d dutifully gotten in her compact car and left downtown Charleston, driving forty minutes away, to Middleton Plantation.

And here she was, checking her watch for the hundredth time.

Had she gotten the instructions right? Her supervisor *had* said to meet James Stone under the ancient, Spanish moss-draped Middleton Oak at four p.m., hadn’t he?

She honestly didn’t know anymore.

Who could remember, when her temples absolutely throbbed? Tension. And the flowers! Their fragrance worsened her already horrible headache. She used to love gardens, the ones here at the plantation, in particular. Every summer, she would walk the footpaths around the expansive grounds, stopping at various points along the way to view the scenic

vistas. The china and tea roses, propagated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had once held her spellbound...

Since losing her parents, flowers made her ill.

The night of her aborted engagement party, she'd personally filled the mansion with bouquets, blossoms snipped fresh from the beds out back. She'd taken such pride in installing the vases in every room. Oh, my. What a gorgeous sight the roses had made!

Now, flowers...*all* flowers...reminded her of loss, death, her own loneliness.

Her lungs constricted. Her heart palpitated. Breathless, spots appearing before her eyes, cold and clammy, too, Laura knew fainting couldn't be far away.

*I won't pass out, I won't pass out, I will NOT pass out.*

Gulping for air, Laura shook her head back and forth, anything to ward off the encroachment of unconsciousness.

Where was James?

He couldn't have missed the Middleton Oak! The tree stood eighty-five feet tall and was thirty-seven feet in circumference. And if he couldn't find the oak, all he had to do was ask. Everyone knew the location of the "Constitution Tree!" The renowned marker designated an old Indian trial, and predated English settling in the Low Country.

The flowers. The headache. Memories! Darkness closed in on her. Not even to keep her job, could she stay. She had to leave, get in her car. Escape!

Someone was watching her. She just knew it! Felt it. Eyes bore a hole between her shoulder blades, their malevolence electrifying the fine hairs on the back of her neck. The follicles stood up, her skin prickled, her diaphragm contracted, her lungs clutched.

*Breathe.*

But she couldn't breathe, not when fear choked her.

Laura left the oak tree and headed back in the direction of the parking lot. Tight muscles reduced her already unsteady gait to a clumsy hobble. She wished she could run, rather than limp, through the Bamboo Grove! She wished she had the courage to face down those staring eyes!

She stumbled down an old shortcut to the parking lot, a neglected trail overrun with tall grass and wild weeds, where low tree branches blocked out the sun and knobby roots threatened to trip her.

Someone was following her, out *there*, hidden in the shadows.

She rushed ahead. How much longer 'til she arrived at the parking lot? Her car couldn't possibly be much farther...

Her injured hip seized up on her, and she was about to give up and turn back, when someone, an unseen someone, reached between a clump of camellias and pulled her up short.

Fingers, hard fingers, cruel fingers, closed on her upper shoulder. Those same fingers encircled her neck.

Too afraid to turn, to confront her attacker, to fight back, she stood dazed, doing nothing. As someone's malicious presence enveloped her, she mumbled a prayer, aloud.

The gritty crunch of dried leaves. The bright crack of dead twigs breaking. The sickeningly sweet plum-like scent of crushed camellias. A voice carried on the humid air.

"Laura? Is that you?"

The hard, cruel fingers retracted. Fell away. The bushes thrashed. And then James was there, saying "Laura" again, and just as quickly as it had escalated, her horrible panic receded.

He came around and stood directly in front of her. "It's me. James."

"I can see that," she snapped.

Her knees buckled and he caught her, wrapped her up in his strong arms. "I just this second arrived. Who were you talking to?" He looked around. "I don't see anyone..."

"There was someone here," she whispered over the catch in her throat.

"No one passed me on the path."

"Oh, go ahead. Say it," she yelled. "Say, I'm crazy. Say, I talk to myself." Had she *really* felt fingers encircling her neck?

Suddenly, she wasn't so sure.

He drew her close. "I believe you."

He'd uttered those same three words to her once before, and then, just as now, his confidence threatened to do her in.

Not now. She couldn't give into her weakness for him now.

"If you say someone was here, Laura, then someone was here."

She pushed away. Shook her head. She would not involve James in her problems.

"Would you listen to me? Too much coffee. Caffeine always makes me jittery," she improvised. "I overreacted." It wouldn't have been the first time. Her "delusional feelings" always came to nothing.

"I saw you take off through the bushes, honey, and went bounding after you. A trace of your dress through the trees led me here."

The dress! White cotton lace, as obvious as the tail of a hunted deer.

"Traffic was brutal. No excuse, just an explanation. I never would have intentionally kept a beautiful woman waiting, honey."

Despite the soulful rendering, the compliment had to be a consolation prize for his late arrival. Frazzled, fearful...*lame*...she couldn't possibly look beautiful. The sundress -- like all her wardrobe -- was five years old. Its natural waistline and flowing skirts featured teeny-tiny buttons that marched like miniature soldiers down the front, from scooped neckline to mid-calf hem. The fashion was so out of style!

For some reason, her thoughts went to Gerald, generous with his gifts, stingy as a miser with his praise, and quick as lightning to point out her defects. A slip showing beneath an uneven hem, her blunt-cut hair in need of a trim, fingernail polish chipped around the cuticles -- no matter how small the imperfection, nothing got past him.

"Thanks for meeting me, honey."

"No thanks necessary. I had no choice but to meet you," she seethed. Helplessness brought out the worst in her. "My supervisor would have fired me if I refused. And I need this job! All the scandal rags have me painted as an heiress, but all that's left of the Beaumont fortune is the estate. Until I sell my home, I live paycheck to paycheck, like everyone else."

James had left off his jacket, but kept on his dark tie. In acknowledgment of Charleston humidity, he had rolled up the shirtsleeves of his pristine white dress shirt, exposing his muscled forearms. He looked cool and neat, and in charge. Undauntedly powerful and unabashedly fearless. Everything she was not.

"I apologize, Laura. I placed you in a bad position."

"You don't get it, do you? I'm the one who's placing you in the bad position." He just didn't understand! "I'll show you the plantation, and then we'll part company, which is what I thought we had done two days ago. And then you showed up on my tour yesterday and started everything up, all over again. Why didn't you take my 'no' for an answer in the Dock Street Theatre?"



## Chapter Thirteen

“Because I couldn’t,” he replied. “But you’re right -- I shouldn’t have pulled this coercion routine on you. I have no excuse, except for wanting to be with you. I like you, Laura. A lot.”

Shamed, she dropped her chin. “That part about my living from paycheck to paycheck must have sounded so ‘poor little rich girl.’ Sometimes my inner spoiled brat sneaks up on me. I have no right to complain, especially not to you. I’m sorry. Let’s just walk around the plantation, okay?”

He stuck his hands in his pockets. “Sure. Fine with me. Let’s walk.”

An idea took shape. “I know. We’ll go to the Carriage House.”

“Lead the way,” he mumbled, and turned a concerned scowl on her, as if he could read her ulterior motive.

Was she so transparent then?

After the episode in the bushes, whether real or imagined, her adrenaline was pumping. All that energy spiking inside her and she had no way to defuse it.

Except on James.

She’d already vented on him -- anger was one outlet for her firing adrenaline. Now, she was thinking about another outlet, some naughty fooling around. Where was the harm? A little necking never killed anyone.

Yet.

The day was still young. And besides, she wanted to experiment. Sexually. And since, in a way, he had volunteered to be her guinea pig, she was hardly taking advantage.

Though, she was sending out mixed messages here, wasn't she? Saying no on one hand, teasing him with the other. She could rationalize a lot away, but that particular conflict was hard to sweep under the carpet.

Except to admit that she needed him. Needed to kiss him. Needed to run her hands over the solid realness of him. Needed his reassuring warmth. His masculine scent would send the sweet scent of flowers packing.

"And here we are now," she said brightly to James, as he followed her inside the Carriage House.

This late in the day, Laura wasn't surprised to find the building empty. The Plantation would close soon and most visitors had already started for the main exit gates. But even the *possibility* of discovery added to her excitement.

Voyeurism. Exhibitionism. BDSM. She wanted to try them all. Without knowing anything about James, he seemed like a man of the world, like he would know his way around a spank and a tickle. He had certainly found her clit fast enough. And there was that rough pinch on her nipple, the one that had left a swollen bruise...

She started to tingle. All over. To hide her growing arousal, she launched into her usual tour guide talk. "The Plantation maintains an outstanding collection of nineteenth century vehicles. You'll find many modes of transportation within these four walls, from a three-seated surrey to a governess cart. Just look at that wonderful broughman over there." Sending him her best beauty contestant smile, a phony smile she'd once used to dazzle the panel of all male judges, a smile that lifted the corners of her lips but never quite reached her eyes, she brought him over to the four-wheel, one-horse drawn conveyance. "Let's step inside." She opened the door to the low-slung chassis.

He thumbed his jaw. "Is that allowed?"

"Let's live dangerously, shall we? Besides, you don't strike me as a stickler for rules, James. You strike me as a rule breaker."

"Once. Not anymore. Why don't you let me tell you about that time in my past, honey..."

"Unnecessary. I didn't bring you here for any heart to heart conversations. I didn't bring you here to talk at all. Give me a hand." She tilted her chin in a hopefully, sexy pose.

He bought it. Or, at least, he helped her up inside and then climbed in after her.

His worried frown contradicted the action. She took a seat, anyway. "Close the door, James."

He did. "What's going on, Laura? You don't seem like yourself."

"How do you know what that is?" she asked flippantly. "We hardly know one another."

"Exactly! That's something I'd like us to change."

“So would I.” Leaning forward on the single interior bench, she drew a finger down the front of his suit pants, stopping at a bulge of substantial proportions. “My, my, my. What have we here?”

He shot her a cynical look. “Quit the cute routine. I have a lot of respect for you, so just tell me what it is you want from me. No need to beat around the bush.”

“Speaking of beating round the bush...” She giggled at her dirty humor. “You know, James, you have an intimate acquaintance with my body, but I have none of yours.”

He drew back on the seat. “What are you suggesting?”

“I’m suggesting we correct the inequality of that situation.” She released his zipper, gasping, and not coyly, as his cock sprang free.

“I want you,” he said bluntly. “The proof shouldn’t come as any great surprise.”

Her mouth gaped. “But there’s so *much* proof.”

“What I say about the cute routine? Knock it off, Laura.”

But she couldn’t knock off the cute routine. She’d already knocked off the snob routine, the rich routine, the beauty contestant routine, the spoiled only child routine, what would she have left if she gave up cute, too?

Only, the lame, frightened, victim routine, and that distasteful role was all too real. “James -- the fact that I want you to *come* shouldn’t surprise *you*. I really would like to reciprocate. You gave me an orgasm yesterday and I’d like to give you one today.”

“Let’s call the orgasm my pleasure and move on.”

“Oh, I intend to. Move on, that is.” Praying her knees wouldn’t fail, she sank to a kneeling position on the carriage floor. She looked up at him from under her lashes -- another routine, yes, but a role of submissive that excited her to play. “Please?”

“All right. Enough!” He clutched the edge of his seat. “You wanted to see a black man’s package, now you have. Satisfied?”

“This is about your satisfaction, not mine.” She took his erection in hand. “Amazing! Hard, yet silky, and pulsating.”

He didn’t seem to hear. “Go back and tell your country club girlfriends you got an eyeful, and we’ll call us even.”

She hooted. “You should talk! How do I know you won’t go back to the ’hood and tell your homeys you got with a white woman?”

“*Homeys?*” he choked out. “*Hood? Got with?* What the hell kind of damn talk is that?”

“Hey, you were the one who brought up the country club girlfriends, which I’ve already explained are long gone. For all I know, your attraction for me is as racially motivated as you seem to believe mine is for you.”

He looked down and away. "I admit to examining my motivations with you. From the very first glance, I admired how you handled yourself in a tough situation. Putting yourself out there takes courage. Basically, I admired your balls."

"Well, thank you. I admire your balls, as well."

He snickered, then continued, only with eye contact. "I'm trying to be up front with you here. Your passion about architecture drew me, but honestly, the superficial played its part, too. Your appearance also attracted me. Your whiteness is part of your appearance, though only an element of my overall attraction for you, and not the key part. Your race is just there, another ingredient of the attraction."

She took a deep breath. Time to confess. "Thank you for your honesty, and I'd like to be equally honest with you. I admit to using you to fill a hole in me."

That brought his startled gaze up to her. "Say what?"

"Oops." His straightforwardness always rattled her! "Geez. That didn't quite come out the way I intended." This was going *so* badly.

James pulled back. "So, you are making me your pet project for the summer. Diversity in the bedroom..."

"It's not like that." Sometimes, he utterly flustered her, so much so, she actually spoke her mind. "Your race has absolutely nothing to do with this! It just so happens that, in the past four years, you are the only man silly enough or brave enough -- I haven't quite figured out which -- to come on to me, sexually. And since you've been so insistent on following through with this...this..." She groped for the phrase. "... bad idea, I figured I'd work off my caffeine-induced jitters on you today."

Fear was what she was trying to work off on him, but volunteering that piece of information might place him in danger.

Suppose she hadn't imagined those fingers closing around her nape. Suppose someone out there really was watching her, really did mean her bodily harm -- revealing that to James would place him right in the middle of the scary disaster she called her life. The less he knew, the safer he'd remain.

On the flip side, if she revealed her fear to James, and it subsequently turned out she *had* imagined those fingers closing in on her neck, he would rightly conclude she was certifiable. She didn't want James to think she was crazy! Horrible enough, she already thought so herself. Horrible enough, she doubted her own sanity.

"Just today?" he asked.

She reached deep, found a tiny island of calm. "No, not just today. I agree to go along with having a brief sexual relationship with you, owing to the fact that I need sex."

"So, you are using me. For sex."

"Yes, the same as you're using me for sex. Where's the difference?" She thought a minute. "Okay, there is a slight difference. What I need from you is kinky sex. That's the

hole I want you to fill, amongst others.” She fluttered her lashes, flirtatiously. “A woman has to get educated somewhere.”

“What about your fiancé?”

“My *almost* fiancé. And the answer is no. Gerald didn’t do kink and wouldn’t allow me to experiment.”

“Let me get this straight, Laura. You want me to...to...”

He had difficulty phrasing the question, which made her feel infinitely better, considering her own earlier groping for words. Both trying so hard not to offend the other, they were ending up tongue-tied!

He began again, finally sputtering, “Are you saying, you’ve never gone down on a man?”

“You’re my first” -- she moved her fist from the curly haired base of his cock to the wide head and giggled, and oh yes, snorted -- “blowjob.”

“Woman,” he growled as if pained. “You’re making me crazy.”

“I’d like a taste.” She chortled. “Not of your crazy --” She already knew what that tasted like! “But, of you. And before you ask, no, I’ve never tasted precum.” She dipped her digit to the drop beading the top and then held the finger to her mouth. “May I, James?”

His head jerked once in assent.

Though their motivations were complicated, the activity itself was simple.

A sample told her that James tasted like James, and that she liked the saltiness of him, the smell of him, the rightness of his life essence on her tongue.

After a swallow, she announced, “I’m going for broke.”

Before he could tell her to knock off whatever the routine it was he thought she was presently playing, she licked him, no routine at all, from base to crown, from curls to precum. She savored the taste of him in her mouth before letting another droplet drizzle down her throat.

And then, she did it. She parted her lips and took the head of his dark cock between her lips.

He bolted upright on the carriage bench. She felt him tense, heard his breathing stall, as his cock filled her mouth and she sucked him. His hands, both of them, landed on her head, his fingers, all ten of them, threaded in her hair, his guttural grunts of male appreciation telling her she was doing this right. His appreciation bolstered her courage and she took him down deeper, until the head of his cock butted the back of her throat. And then he was gliding, pushing, growing huge in her mouth.

He tightened, thrust. Once. Again. And she tried not to gag, and didn’t.

Her experiment concluded with a heated masculine shout and a burst of ejaculate against her tongue.

He came. Exploded, really. Palming the weight of his sac, the testicles beating against her greedy hands, she gulped down her success, prouder than she had ever been with herself, and that included the beauty pageant won when she thought the world was her own personal fan club.

How egotistical and stupid and shallow she'd been back then!

And how liberating to no longer care about pleasing everyone.

She only wanted to please this man, this one man, an activity that pleased her in return.

Very pleased indeed with herself, Laura backed off and away.

And realized she couldn't get up, not without a great deal of clumsy maneuvering. Her injured knee had gimped up on her again.

## Chapter Fourteen

“Here. Allow me to --”

James had been about to say *help you*, but stopped himself. They were still finding their way around one another’s sore points, and that meant lots of uncompleted sentences.

Sometimes words only got in the way; other times there was no need to speak.

Sensing Laura would bristle at attention drawn to her injuries, a reminder of her past that showed itself whenever she overdid physically, he slid a hand under her elbow and lifted, resettling her back onto the bench. To mitigate her embarrassment over what she would perceive as an infirmity or some such nonsense, he made a big show of shaking his head. “*DAAAAMMMMMNNNN!* You’re a menace, girl.”

She didn’t blush, meaning neither the unaccustomed sex act nor her inability to rise afterwards had embarrassed her, but she did ask, “A menace? What does that mean, James?”

“It means, with that kind of skill, I’ll need to keep you under lock and key.” He put himself away and leaned forward in his seat to speak into her ear. “It means, reciprocation was unnecessary, but thank you.”

She had admitted her intent to use him as a sexual playground; he had admitted to examining his own motivations, where she was concerned. They were making some strides in the “getting to know you” department. Only mere inches, when he wanted feet, but progress, nevertheless. He could live with that.

After jumping to the ground, he reached back for her. Two hands on her waist, he lifted her down to the cement floor. She was a woman with some heavy problems, but she felt like a feather in his arms.

Saying nothing more, he placed his hand on Laura’s back, the palm resting lightly at the base of her spine, and ushered her from the carriage house, his thoughts straying to what had just happened.

And what the fuck *had* just happened?

He wished he understood. Had Laura really gotten down on her knees -- her injured knees -- and rocked his world?

Letting her go down on him had been a big mistake. He was the pursuer here, the one who had arranged their meeting, who hadn't taken her "no" for an answer. A helluva move, then, for him to turn around and take "benefits" from her. He didn't care about her supposedly needing the experience; blowing him had never been part of the plan.

Plan. Now what was the plan, again?

A first for him, but he was operating by the seat of his pants. Beyond being with her, enjoying her companionship, he didn't have a concrete plan, not anymore.

Christ, her mouth had been sweet. And hot. Seeing her tongue curled around his uncut head had driven him wild. Her lips wrapped around his meat had shot his control out from under him. Instead of holding back, when he'd felt that telltale urge, he'd rammed himself across her tongue to her throat. He hadn't meant to do that, hadn't purposefully set out to take from her. He had meant to make love to her, to give to her, but there it was, in black and white, he had taken from her.

And she'd blown him away, in more ways than one.

As she kissed his aching flesh, he'd kissed his safe and comfortable, *predictable*, future good-bye.

He wasn't even sorry. Regardless of the price, the risk, the cost to his career aspirations, he would have this woman in his life. Not only now, but when he left Charleston. He was no longer thinking in terms of temporary; he was thinking long-term, forever terms, marriage terms.

A concrete plan had just reasserted itself in his mind.

Christ, his mama would skin him alive.

Then, she'd open up her arms and take Laura into the family, accepting her like a daughter. Who wouldn't love Laura?

Not him. He loved Laura, and he was determined to protect her from the lingering results of the evil that had happened to her. Another plan.

Time to get down to it. No sneak attacks, no going behind her back to her boss to manipulate her into seeing him again. Time to tell her straight up how he wanted their relationship to go.

With love came commitment --

Bring it.

He was ready. Whatever it took. Whoever had turned her life upside down was a dead man. That was a promise he was prepared to keep. For her, for this impossibly complicated white woman, he would take on the world. Because she wasn't just any white woman to



him, wasn't just a novelty, a challenge. From the first, she had touched him beyond his hard-on. For her, he'd slay some major dragons.

"Laura, I'd like you to go out with me tonight, on a real date."

"A *real* date?" She moved away from him.

"The realer the better." He smiled broadly.

She didn't return his sappy look. "Not a good idea."

"If you're worried about me turning into a pervert or something over dinner, we can go to the restaurant in separate cars. That way, you can duck out if things aren't going the way you like. See? Complete freedom."

She shook her head. "You keep misunderstanding me. I enjoy being with you, but nothing has changed. I agreed to hooking up, nothing beyond hooking up. For example -- dates. I can't date you. And we shouldn't be walking this closely together, now that we're outside again in public."

"I see." And he did. Now. All along, he'd been laboring under a false assumption. She didn't share his certainty that this attraction between them would lead to something else, something lasting. He'd been living in a "love at first sight" dream world. She'd suck him off, no problem, but she wasn't about to do dinner with him. Dinner equaled intimacy, he guessed, whereas hand jobs and blowjobs only equaled hooking up. Terrific. Really, one hundred percent terrific.

"Believe me, James, this is all for the best. Charleston is a small city. Everyone knows everyone else. Being seen with a suspected murderess will damage your business interests here. I won't let my negative image impact you."

"I can take any crap anyone dishes out." He raked both hands through his buzzed hair. "Listen, I think it's time I told you about myself, about what brought me here to Charleston --"

"Hush." She placed two slender fingers against his mouth. "All of that is too real. I don't want real. I want pretend. Fantasy. If you can't deal with a limited sexual fling, then we really do need to stop seeing one another."

There went his plans, crashing and burning to the ground. If he didn't accept her conditions, he could forget all about seeing her again.

This was so much worse than he'd suspected. This wasn't only a race issue. This wasn't even fallout from her past tragedy. Not entirely. Some of her reluctance to get involved was a straight out dick issue. Her almost fiancé had done her dirt and now she was leery of becoming involved with anyone else with a bat and two balls. She didn't trust men, ergo, she didn't trust him.

Hold up. Maybe this wasn't worse than he'd suspected. After spending his whole life proving himself, he figured he was done paying his dues, but it looked to him like maybe he wasn't done, that he still had some dues to pay. And that was a good thing, because that

meant there was a fight. The fight of his life. But he was used to fighting, and this was a fight he knew he could win.

If a lack of trust was holding her back, he could fix that. He'd just show Laura he wasn't like that other guy. He'd show her, she could trust him.

He smiled, no challenge, no confrontation, no argument, no trying to convince her. "So, you're in this just for kink?"

"Sex is as relevant as any form of communication."

Sure. Sex was the same as sending an e-mail, only wetter. But since she had assigned him a part to play in her fantasy, he would play that part to the hilt. It was either that, or give up his one chance with her.

"Honey, no need to convince me about self-expression. In fact, feel free to express yourself all over me. You don't want to go out on a date? Fine. We'll stay indoors and do some expressing there." He ran a finger up her bare arm, from wrist to shoulder, and she shivered, no pretend, strictly real. "Come to my hotel room and we'll order in, and then get down to it. Follow me back to the Crepe Myrtle Inn in your car."

"Not tonight."

"Why not?" Every moment they wasted was a lost opportunity to prove his trustworthiness.

"Because, after leaving here, I'm driving to meet someone for drinks at the country club."

"A guy?"

"Yes."

He reined in his newly possessive nature. With a glibness he wasn't feeling, he asked, "With whom are you having this drink?"

"Gerald."

James's cool hit a heat wave. "What about his damn reputation? Aren't you afraid being seen with *him* will ruin *his* name in Charleston?"

"His family has lived here for generations. Nothing, not even a renewed acquaintance with me, can dim his luster. The man is golden. And unlike us, because he and I already have an established history, a drink in public won't raise any brows."

And unlike them, that history involved consummated sex.

Sex bound two people together, kept others out. A physical union could defy kings and nations, and create a new world. Time and time again, history had proven it so. "You sleeping with Gerry tonight?"

"It's Gerald, not *Gerry* -- he hates the informality of nicknames and won't allow me to call him that -- and that's a very personal question."

Maybe, since she was off to see the stuffed shirt who hated nicknames in her own car, sex was not on the agenda, not this time. But that small mercy didn't do much to bolster James's lagging spirits. He couldn't help but feel his chances with her were slipping right through his fingers.

Back at the parking lot, those same fingers tightened into a fist.

He was fucking desperate, willing to do whatever it took to give himself a fighting edge with her. Sex would give him that fighting edge. Hands down, he'd do her better in bed than her almost fiancé.

To convince her that if she wanted sex, he was the man to see, he palmed her ass, his thumb moving back and forth and over the fullness of a cheek.

"James, I owe Gerald this meeting."

"The way you owed me a blowjob?" Nasty, nasty, mean and nasty. He was fighting for her, and that meant fighting dirty, fighting street, fighting in a way a stuffed shirt like *Gerry* would know nothing about.

She responded to the grit in his vocal cords with a full-body tremor. "I -- I --" She shook her head. "No. Not like that. It wasn't like that. There was no question of paying a debt."

"You had me in your mouth and you liked the taste just fine."

"Yes, I did. I wanted to experience oral sex, and you didn't seem opposed."

"I'm not opposed to anything. Name it, and we can do it." He dropped his jaw and took her mouth. When her lips clung, he forced his way inside, his tongue moving like sex, as he handled her ass, roughly handled her ass. Leaving no doubt in her mind as to what he wanted to do to her ass, he drew up the back of her skirts.

Laura whimpered. Uncertainty. Unconsummated lust.

He worked with the latter, hoping to minimize the former.

Still kissing her, he slipped his hand inside her pantyhose and cotton panties, and palmed her bare flesh. When she started to pant, he pushed back from the kiss, pushed back from her. The idea was to leave her hungry for more. "Come to my room, Laura, and I'll give you everything you need there."

"Yes. All right." Her eyes hooded, she drifted toward him again.

He raised his hand to ward her off. "No more, not 'til you come to me. Now, tell me when."

"Tonight. After meeting Gerald at the bar."

"Eight o'clock, honey." He opened the door to her car and she got inside, fastened her seatbelt. "Not a minute later or I'm going to that bar and getting you." He pressed the keycard to his luxury accommodations into her hand. "Suite Forty."

“You may expect me then,” she said like a well-bred lady on her way to a tea party not to a fuck fest. “But I don’t need the key...”

“Take the damn key.” He pressed the plastic card into her palm, slammed the door closed, then stood there, watching the tires pick up gravel and put down a cloud of dirt, as she drove off to meet his competition.

## Chapter Fifteen

Laura entered the country club's smoke-filled bar. The man she had once loved with her whole heart and soul had already arrived. As he sipped his drink, she noted how the dim light cut hard lines into his handsome face.

She wasn't stupid. Gerald had his faults and she'd never been blind to them. Almost ten years her senior, he had, at times, seemed more her parents' contemporary in age and outlook than hers. They had, nevertheless, shared similar backgrounds, had been comfortable together, looked good together...

And he had cherished her. Princesses received less adoration than she had received from Gerald.

On the downside, she was a flesh and blood woman and she needed more than a man placing a jeweled crown on her head. She needed intimacy, genuine intimacy, and Gerald's attention had been distant and judgmental. She also needed a man with a better sense of direction.

Gerald had never located her clit.

Then again, he'd wasted very little time searching.

Perhaps someone would come up with a clit GPS for direction-challenged lovers like Gerald. As she walked toward him, he stood, his arms extended, as though to enfold her in a lover's embrace.

An embrace she narrowly avoided with a hasty sidestep.

She didn't miss the hug. Gerald had never swept her away. A kiss with James had been more intimate than sex with her former boyfriend...

No comparisons! She was confused and upset, and disappointed in Gerald, but holding the two very different men up to the same standard was wrong and unfair, and performed a disservice to both.

James was fantasy, Gerald reality. Naturally, everyday real would seem dull when placed side by side with fantasy. Naturally, Gerald would come out on the short end of the stick. How could she expect otherwise?

Though she believed he had cheated on her, and he believed she had cheated on him, they had loved one another once, and perhaps still did. At the very least, like the psychiatrists said, she owed him an explanation as to why she had run away from him and the possibility of sharing a life together in Charleston. But she wasn't ready for closure. Not yet. She was still open to a second chance with him, especially if she had wrongly believed him of cheating. If he hadn't cheated, then she owed him an open mind. Didn't she?

*Didn't she?*

After all, she, of all people, understood what it felt like to be falsely accused.

At the very least, they needed to clear the air, both of them, and then see what developed. However, she was both unenthusiastic and wary of his almost feverish desire to renew their old relationship; a relationship she only now realized had been tepid at best. But a *new* sort of relationship was something else again. She owed him that much.

*Didn't she?*

After James, she understood there was more to sex than the missionary position, passively done in the dark. She had tested the deviant waters with a toe, and she was ready to stop flirting with kink and move forward, full-throttle. As long as James didn't get hurt on account of her, it was anything goes, including toes, here on out.

They would start tonight. She would sneak up to his hotel room, and give herself over to his dominance.

Her panties dampened at the thought.

Gerald had never dampened her panties, which might explain why sex with him had never swept her away and had caused her more discomfort than bliss...

Gerald's heavy imported cologne, doubtlessly splashed on after his morning shave and renewed repeatedly during the course of the day, stimulated old memories, but nothing more, as he moved to kiss her lips. Turning her jaw slightly, his lips, dry and firm, landed on her cheekbone instead. She was here, her mind was open, but she was not jumping into anything.

He backed away slightly, picked up his almost empty glass from the bar. "Shall we move to our table? I hope you don't mind, but I asked for a booth in the back. More private. This way." He guided her to their reserved booth, a hand at her waist. "Watch the uneven floor here. This portion of the club is a new addition since you've been gone. Can you manage?"

"What do you mean -- manage?"

"Your lame leg." He supported her, unnecessarily, as they rounded the corner. "Shouldn't you have brought a cane?"

Here she thought she had made great advances in her rehabilitation, but with a few sentences from Gerald, she found herself doubting those advances. Had she been in denial about her progress? Was her limp so noticeable, then? Oh, dear. Did she shuffle?

"I'm fine, Gerald. Please don't fuss."

But he did fuss. He placed her like an invalid into the booth, and then agilely slid into his seat on the opposite side. "No more tennis, I take it?" His turned-down lips indicated disappointment. Her disability ruled out doubles, their former social activity at the country club.

"No. But I never cared for the game. Tennis was always your sport. I can play golf, however," she quickly interjected. Relationships were all about compromise and, though she loathed the activity, Gerald and she had played golf every Saturday.

"Terrific." He offered her a rarely seen smile. "We'll have to play a few holes."

He seemed to take for granted that they would fall into the same stodgy pattern as before, but she wasn't so ready to believe they could go forward, not until they went back.

The waiter appeared, took their drink order, then departed, leaving her to face Gerald. "You said we should talk. And I agree."

He grabbed her hand. This time, there was no avoiding his fingers. "I love you, Laura. I never stopped loving you. Despite the embarrassment you caused me by suddenly breaking off our relationship, I'm willing to start over again, fresh."

Straightening her shoulders, she took the plunge. "You cheated on me, Gerald. That was why I couldn't go through with the engagement."

"Cheated?" His mouth opened, snapped shut. "Laura! I never cheated on you!"

"In Miami." She dropped her eyes to her lap. "With a hooker or prostitute or someone like that. She had a stripper's name."

"Me? With a whore?" He wrinkled his nose, fastidiously, and loosened his hold on her, enough for her to withdraw her hand. "You always were high-strung, darling, but where did you get that crazy idea?"

She folded and unfolded her napkin. Was she crazy?

No!

Okay, yes. But she still had proof that he had cheated on her. Hard evidence. She led an active fantasy life but not to the degree of imagining his guilt.

Unless -- had she misunderstood what she read on the coaster? Had she jumped to the wrong conclusion?

"Laura, you know, you were always given to flights of fancy. Normally, I find your imagination endearing, but this is really too absurd. Insulting, too, in light of the fact that you were the one who had the pool-boy or blue-collar laborer, or what not, on the side."

"I did not cheat on you, Gerald. I had no one on the side. Those were flagrant rumors."

“So here we are, both denying any wrongdoing. Since we’ve reached an impasse, I say we go forward.”

Not yet. Not until they lanced this wound, so it would heal. If there was one thing she had learned from all her psych sessions, it was that healing required hard, and often painful, work.

Her bottom lip twitched, then trembled; her fingers knotted the napkin in her lap. “I have proof of your infidelity.”

“What sort of proof?”

It took all her courage to look up as she accused him. “Does the name Star ring any bells?”

“Star,” he said incredulously. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Laura. That name is perfectly preposterous.”

“Not for a hooker or an exotic dancer, it isn’t.”

His head wagged. “I really do think you need to see someone. A mental health professional. I hate to have to say this, darling, but you sound delusional. Understandable, after all you’ve gone through. And whatever the psychiatric term for your condition, I want you to know, I’ll be there for you. No need to suffer alone like this.”

Compassion softened his voice, and she couldn’t deny his diagnosis, not completely. It had taken her months to accept the deaths of her parents -- she had denied the murders had ever taken place. When she did finally come to grips with her loss, weighed down with survivor’s guilt and grief-stricken, she had suffered from bouts of severe paranoia. Fear had terrorized her, immobilized her. Although she had received therapy in a private psychiatric facility, still, she had rarely ventured outside her apartment. And the addresses for those apartments kept changing. Because of the insistent belief that someone wanted her dead, she kept moving from place to place. For all she knew, the individual who had murdered her parents and who had tried to kill her, too, might come back and finish the job. When reality became too much, when she just couldn’t cope, she did rush into her own fantasy world.

She needed to rush there now.

Barely hanging on, she stumbled from the booth. “Regardless of my present state of mind, I have proof that you cheated on me. And until we can openly discuss why you needed to go to a prostitute, I have nothing more to say. Now, I have a splitting headache and I’m going home.”

He started to rise from his seat. “I’ll just collect the check.”

She waved him back down into his chair. “No need to see me to the car. I’ll call you. We’ll try to sort this out again some other time.”

“Is this supposed proof of my infidelity still in your possession?”

“Certainly.”



“I’d like to see the coaster. Perhaps if I did, it would jumpstart my memory. I’m sure there’s a plausible and harmless explanation.”

For years, she’d been tottering on the brink of a meltdown, but suddenly, she slid over the edge into the vortex. Her legs shook, her hands, too, her thoughts were a jumble. She knew if she tried to speak, the words would tumble out of her mouth like an avalanche, only confirming her losing grip on control. Rather than give herself away, she made her escape.

Her next conscious thought was of deciding which parking space to pull into at the Crepe Myrtle Inn.

God only knows how she got there. The drive was a complete blank. Nor could she say what had brought her to the hotel. She only knew she had to see James. He made her feel safe.

She opened her tensed fingers and found a plastic card key clutched in her palm.

To James’s room?

Who else’s? Despite her present confusion, Laura knew arbitrarily visiting men in their hotel rooms was aberrant behavior for her.

Though the hotel lobby, furnished with period antiques sumptuously upholstered in gold and crimson velvets, delighted her senses and her sense of history, she didn’t pause over any of the pieces. She had only one thought in mind.

*Please, James, be in your room...*

The elevator took her to the fourth floor. She had no consciousness of selecting that level. When the gilded doors opened, she walked down the plush carpeted hallway to Room Forty, the only numbered door on the wall.

Not just a single bedroom. A suite of rooms, she suspected.

As if in slow motion, as if she were having an out of body experience, she inserted the key into the slot above the handle, dropping the plastic card back into her bag when the door clicked and she crossed the threshold.

The lights inside shone low and mellow. A glance confirmed the surroundings elegant, exclusive, and private. The masculine beauty of the unusual suite took her breath away.

As did its occupant.

*Breathe. Breathe.* She had to breathe.

At the sound of the closing door, James had exited the bathroom. Even in the dim light, she could tell he was naked. His dark body gleamed from the shower, his enviable muscles as hard as black marble, as beautifully contoured as a statue. Though, not cut from cold stone, but chiseled from warm and supple flesh. His thick, all-too-human cock rose, as if in salutation of her arrival.

His gaze never leaving her face, he walked toward her, an athlete’s loose and easy stride. A man clearly at home in his own skin and unashamed of his sexuality, he didn’t try

to hide his erection. All those masculine inches pointed directly at her, an honor extended to her.

James wanted her.

His swift reaction to her presence told her so. The bulbous head of his cock jutted enormously from its retracted foreskin, and oozed precum from the top.

At the unspoken compliment, she sighed. In remembrance of his taste, she licked her lips. And then whispered hoarsely, her mouth dry with arousal, "I used the key you gave me." She had no real memory of the occurrence, but he *must* have given her the key, as she'd found the card clutched in her hand. A lifeline, she clung to, even now.

As she'd caught him in the shower, she took a wild stab at the reason. "I'm early. I hope you don't mind?"

"Far from it. As you can see, I'm delighted."

He approached quietly, his bare feet soundlessly crossing the remaining distance that separated them. Upon his arrival at the door, where she stood uncertainly, too timid to make any sexual advances, too bold to run away, he took charge. Leaning into her, he stretched an arm, still beaded with water droplets, above her head, enclosing her, but not trapping her, in a cocoon of safety.

As usual in his presence, her fear diminished. Still there, not gone entirely, but not as palpable now. She could function. Rather than intimidate, his bulky size and closeness...his raw power...brought her a tremendous sense of relief. With this man she could push the brutal memories of the past aside. At least, for a short time. He would empower her, never belittle her. He would make her feel strong and sane, not helpless and crazed.

"You told me you weren't opposed to anything. Is that still correct, James?"

*God, please make him say yes. Please make him agree.*

His lids heavy, his narrowed and darkened gaze a caress on her heaving breasts, he jerked a nod, consenting without knowing the terms. But suppose the terms disgusted him, repulsed him. Suppose he didn't go in for that sort of thing? Only fair to spell out her requirements. But could she put the dark desire into words? Could she tell him what she wanted? Could she verbalize her unspeakable need? Could she beg him for mastery?

Strange and contradictory, but in bondage to him, she *knew* she'd break free of her horrible bondage to the past.

*Breathe. Breathe.* She had to breathe. Fight for control now, and she could give up control later. To him.

But revealing herself like this to a man she had only just met was so difficult! She had scars all over her body. All over her mind, too. Though James Stone had kissed her like a virtuoso, he was, after all, a virtual stranger.

A virtual stranger who had brought her to climax with a musician's sensitivity. His gentle brand of male dominance would keep fright at bay.

*Please don't turn me away now! I'll fall apart if you do.*

Within the confines of his raised arm, she straightened her shoulders. "James, I need you to tie me up and fuck me hard. Can you do that for me?"

## Chapter Sixteen

Had James joked or laughed or dismissed her request as silly, he would have crushed her. But he said simply, "Yeah, honey, I can do that."

Buoyed up on the knowledge that he would come through for her, more of her fear subsided. Her anxiety further quieted, soothed by his acceptance of her need.

After giving her that promise, James didn't speak.

Just as well, Laura thought. Since the murders, she clung to fantasy. Make-believe was her escape. Words would cut through the fairytale and allow reality to intrude. And her present reality was just too painful to face.

His gaze holding hers, but still not saying a word, he lifted her skirts. His palm captured her mons over her underwear, his fingers straying beneath nylon and cotton to sink into her pubic hair.

*Ah. So good. His touch felt so good. There. Right there is where I need you, James.*

He understood what drove her, what had brought her here tonight, and knowing she was in capable hands, her body relaxed, every tensed muscle loosened.

James would make the bad memories go away. Without diminishing her pride, without making her beg, James would take care of her.

Awash in sensation, nevertheless, she was the one who broke the spellbinding silence between them. "I'll shave it off if you like. Some men like it bare."

"Not this man." He yanked her underwear down her legs, the hushed sounds of cotton and nylon echoing. "I fuck women, honey, not little girls."

The rough words made her tummy clench. When he threaded his fingers through her light brown pubic hair in a combing motion and then pulled up on the curls, the rough

action opening the lips of her vagina, excitement shot through her. Would he tie her wrists tight with leather cuffs, stop the blood flow to her ankles with velvet cords?

*Do it, James. Do it. Do me good and hard.*

Tied up, she *knew* she could escape.

Escape. She needed to escape. Now more than ever, she needed to get away. From all the accusations and lies and deceit that surrounded her. From the horror that lived within herself. From the evil that stalked her every move. From the awful feeling of emptiness. No little pink pill could fill the void inside her.

James could. James could fill her up until she overflowed.

*Give me your cock, James. Your big, thick, luscious cock. Pound it up into me.*

Vaginal fluid seeped down the inside of her thigh. Could he see it? Had her body given her thoughts away?

He fingered her labia. "You're all a-glisten."

Her arms went behind her, palms pressed to the wall beside the door. "I've been wet for you since we met."

"And I've been hard for you." A long investigative finger separated her folds and slid up inside her. "Your cunt is tight, honey."

The coarse words fell on her ears like erotic music. "I haven't been with anyone since..." The rest of her sentence trailed off into nothingness.

"No need to tell me you haven't been active. I can tell."

The scent of her own arousal filled her flaring nostrils. Would he find her natural fragrance unpleasant? Would the muskiness of her desire turn him off?

"If you prefer," she panted. "I could shower first." Gerald had never insisted, but he had made his likes and dislikes known in subtle ways, like keeping a gardenia-perfumed douche for her in his master bathroom and then leaving her alone to bathe before intercourse -- his name for the activity. She'd squirted that repulsive, artificial floral stuff into her vagina, to mask all signs of her natural scent, which Gerald never came out and said, but obviously had found offensive.

"No shower," James said forthrightly, no subtlety at all.

Two fingers were inside her now, and moving. Up and down, moving. Another joined the party, until three digits nested inside her, a dancing trio.

His knuckles flexed. "Birth control?"

"No. And please don't leave me to get a condom."

In the near darkness, she read his frown. "Why? You got rhythm?" The air stirred as he shook his head. "Not reliable, honey."

True, but if he went to get a condom, she'd lose what limited courage she possessed and bolt out the door.

She swallowed, squeezed her eyes closed. So hard to admit her horrible weakness, her fears, her insecurities...her nuttiness. "Please don't leave me, James," she repeated instead.

Inside her vagina, his fingers rotated. "Open your eyes, Laura, and look at me."

She did.

"I won't leave you." His voice contained no judgment. "To set your mind at ease, I'm clean."

"Me, too." Her reply came out only a little squeaky. The forthrightness of the conversation positively floored her! "In the hospital, I had all the tests. And I just finished my period."

Practicalities out of the way, he exhaled a gusty breath that warmed her forehead. "So, skin on skin?"

"Yes. Skin on skin. Please, James?"

"Yeah. Skin on skin, Laura, if that's what you want. I'll withdraw."

She felt her face grow warm. Arousal. Embarrassment. Need. "I'm so scared."

His face came forward, his nose bumping hers. "Of what, honey?"

"Of disappointing you. I'm not very skilled at this." She bit her lip. "At sex."

He snorted gustily. "Who told you that? Gerry, your almost fiancé?"

"I don't want to talk about him." Though they'd broken up in less than amicable circumstances, she still had feelings for Gerald. She'd loved him once, and could again. He wanted them to get back together, and she hadn't ruled out that possibility. But honesty was important to her, as was fidelity and trust. If what she believed had occurred on his business trip had, indeed, really happened, then Gerald had come up short in all those areas.

Still, she wasn't without faults. She'd been selfish, and bratty, and sexually unresponsive. Understandable, his going to a prostitute. She had failed him in bed. Although she wished he hadn't lied about paying for sex, everyone deserved a second chance.

James now held his body at a rigid attention, his nose no longer in bumping range of hers. Her snub hadn't sat well with him. Since she refused to talk about Gerald with him, James's whole attitude had changed. She had angered him. And in that anger, she thought he would end it between them. That he would withdraw from her before they'd even begun. She thought the fingers inside her would stop moving and the lovely sensation of fullness would end, leaving her feeling deflated and hollow. Frustrated, too.

Not to mention afraid.

Since that horrible night, she had endured a baseline of fear, but why this sudden upsurge in her fright now? Yes, the incident at the Plantation had shaken her, but after meeting James, she had left feeling calmer. Now, this! Her lapse in memory, her frantic urgency to get here to the hotel, her nearly hysterical need for sex --

What was going on?

*Please don't leave me, James. Fuck me hard.*

Despite his anger, he stuck by her, his thick fingers stretching her. But he did ask, "Laura, why are you here with me tonight? Can you tell me that much?"

"Because, in the church, you made me come, James, and coming made me forget. I very much need to forget tonight. I know that's incredibly selfish of me, and I apologize if that hurts your feelings."

"Fair enough. And no need to apologize. Not ever."

As his thumb circled her clit, he squeezed her nipple.

She moaned. "Oh-oh-oh."

Under her dress, under her slip and bra, her breasts thrust forward, the tips elongating and achy. So achy. Her clothing was too restrictive, too heavy. Even the light, summery fabric of her dress irritated her sensitized skin.

As if he could read her thoughts, he stopped pinching her nipple. Before she knew what was happening, he parted her dress down the center. The sound of popping buttons filled the foyer. He pushed her slip down, yanked the cups of her bra up, and scooped her breasts out from the gaping bodice. His mouth descended.

He bit her.

She expected him to kiss her nipple. Gently. Reverently. But no. His teeth sank into the delicate flesh.

Shocking!

And just what she needed.

He was treating her like a woman, not a crazy basket case. The back of her head knocked against the wall, her skull bumping the plaster to the beat of the three fingers moving inside her vagina. After a while, though, reality intruded upon the fantasy, and the unaccustomed attention began to sting.

Arching her throat, she whimpered.

"Hurts?" he asked, his teeth lifting from the tip of her breast.

She gulped. "Sorry."

"Don't say that word again to me. Not ever. That word has no place here."

"Sorry -- I mean, I won't."

"So tell me -- what hurts?"

"My vagina."

"Say what?" His brow hiked. "We're alone here. Just you and me. Use sex words, honey."

"My p-p-pussy." She giggled. Oh, only to herself. Bad enough she'd stuttered. She didn't want James to think she was a complete idiot. But really, her saying *pussy*? She'd only just started thinking cock rather than penis...

“Widening your legs should help, honey.”

At his direction, she split her thighs. Whether it was her saying the sex word, or James’s forthright concern, or just a question of basic anatomy, but suddenly her vag -- *pussy* -- cooperated, and the hurt lessened. Until, he thumbed her clit. When he manipulated the scrap of flesh, the quality of the former hurt changed, replaced by tingles, burning sort of tingles, which intensified with each of his strokes. Not painful. Not exactly. Something between pleasure and pain.

She started to crest. The pressure not nearly as refined as in the church pew the other day. Every muscle in her body locked, every tendon tightened. The knot inside her dissolving, she came on a long, drawn-out scream.

Shocking. Liberating. Glorious! She, Laura Beaumont, actually screamed. Out loud. *Shrilly* out loud.

Her debilitating fear shattering, going limp with release, she slumped bonelessly against the wall. So, this was what it was all about. This was why people bothered to have sex. Amazing, what she’d been missing.

Then he backed away. As his fingers retracted from their full insertion, the loss was just intolerable. She almost grieved for the loss of him inside her body. She felt so empty without him.

Empty and greedy for more.

She reached out to him, held his wide wrist in place. Folding his digits over, she pressed, pressed, *pressed* the knuckles against her entrance.

“No,” he said firmly.

“Why?”

“Because fisting is extreme, Laura.”

“I want it done.”

“I know you do. I can tell. But I’m not ready.”

“I want it all, James.” She, who had never before James made sexual demands, who was still uncomfortable with anything more assertive than tact, actually insisted. “Every act. Every deviancy. Everything I don’t know about or have ever done.”

He drew a ragged breath. “Listen, I can give you a taste, but for fisting to work, lube is the rule.”

Oh! *Lube*.

James, ever the voice of reason.

She was not the voice of reason. “Don’t leave me to go get it!”

“I won’t, Laura. I won’t. Plenty of time later for the extreme stuff. We’ll do it all, I promise.” His knuckles buried themselves a scant amount.

The pressure felt weird there at the opening to her body, but his hand felt right.



She had almost grown used to the odd sensation when his cock, huge and hard, brushed against the uncovered skin of her outer thigh.

"You have a fine cunt, honey, and the sweetest damn tits I ever did see. I can't wait 'til both wear my cum."

Her sexual repertoire was less than limited, and this, everything he was doing and saying, was just so dirty, so earthy, so unlike anything she had ever known. Flattened against the wall, her dress raised, her belly and vag -- *pussy* fully exposed, her breasts bare, the nipples wet from his mouth and jutting straight out, she couldn't help but bite her lip.

James removed his hand from her body's center, the exit making a squishy wet sound, and began entering her, a straightforward vaginal penetration. When the bulbous head, slick with precum, went where his hand had just left, she quickly discovered three fingers in no way equaled the width of his cock.

His dimensions were magnificent, and utterly impossible for her to accept. This was not a case of mind over matter, but of volume as opposed to container. Simply put, he wouldn't fit.

"James, this won't work --" she began regretfully.

"It's only that you're made small, and I've got bonus."

"Bonus?" she asked, not understanding.

"See my feet?"

She chortled, a high pitched, crazy sound. "Well, not at the moment. But if memory serves, your feet match your height in hugeness."

"Yeah, and not only my feet are huge. That's what I meant about having bonus. But you'll take me, honey."

"I don't think so. I really don't. I'll just get myself together and leave. I wouldn't have made you happy. I'm just not sexual, I guess."

He pulled out, but he didn't pull away.

Though she knew nothing about him or his background, from the way James had maneuvered her into giving him a tour of Middleton Plantation, she should have known he wasn't the type to accept defeat easily. Maneuvering her again, he dispensed with her uncertainty over their disproportionate sizes as easily as he dispensed with her shoes. After her sagging underwear went south, he bent his leg in a northerly direction, his kneecap simultaneously spreading her legs and pubic lips.

He rubbed into her pussy, the friction tantalizing. Then, two hands at her waist, he dragged her up onto his leg until she was riding his thigh. Humping it, actually.

Her hips couldn't seem to stop pumping and thrashing. She had to be leaving behind a slick on his skin. How mortifying!

"You want it?" he asked. "Yes or no?"

"I'm not a tease. I merely expressed some doubts."

"And I'm telling you, I don't share them. Once we get going, we'll wring each other dry."

That sounded so good! "I want it."

"Laura, just so you know, don't ever tell me no after telling me yes."

He had just issued her a warning. With her agreement, she had bought into this, owned it, accepted his dominance, and there was no backing out.

To prove it, he pushed her off his leg, and pushed himself up and into her. No easing up, no giving her muscles a chance to relax, only her body's moisture easing the way. Four years since anything larger than a tampon had penetrated her, and a few fingers in no way equaled the size of his cock. She experienced more than a little discomfort.

She groaned in pain.

He didn't stop. Capturing her lips, her cries, her body, he began thrusting. Hard thrusting. Determined thrusting. Her three previous *tepid* excursions in sex left her unprepared for this siege. His big hand covering her swollen breast, her spine supported by the wall, his hips a jackhammer of power, she felt her body reluctantly give way and open to him.

The pain receded. Vivid, no-doubt-about-it pleasure grew. And she was frantically kissing him back, her arms flung over his shoulders, her fingernails clawing at his back, scraping his tough flesh. God, she must be drawing blood! But she couldn't stop raking her nails across his back.

He let her come up to scream. As the orgasm ripped through her, he pulled out and ejaculated, his semen saturating her pubic hair.

Post climactic tremors still pulsed inside her when something crackled an inch from her ear.

The intercom.

"Your three dates are on their way up, Boss," a male voice announced. "You lucky sonofabitch. They're hot."

*Dates?*

Then she remembered. She'd caught James in the shower, where he had been getting ready, not for her, evidently, but for his date with three hot women.

Without fixing her bra, she bunched her gaping dress together. Bending her knees, she picked up her discarded underwear, wincing at the ache between her thighs, slipped her feet into her shoes, and stood. "You have company. I'll leave immediately."

He reached for her. "It's not what you think, Laura."

"Of course it is. And that's totally fine. You and I aren't anything to each other. You're free to see whomever you wish. One girl. Two girls. Three girls. All of them hot."

This wasn't anything at all like Gerald's betrayal, Laura thought, as she opened the door and fled out into the hall just as the elevator opened and three gorgeous women, beautiful enough to be fashion models, exited.

This wasn't anything at all like Gerald's unfaithfulness, she decided, getting inside the elevator and punching the button for the hotel lobby.

This was nothing at all like that humiliation, she conceded, limping for the car, her injured hip throbbing, her unsupported breasts bouncing, her pubic hair sticky with cum, her underwear rolled up in a lumpy ball under her arm.

She started the engine, knowing this was entirely different from that past blow to her pride.

So why did this hurt so much more?

## Chapter Seventeen

Jumping into pants took James only a matter of seconds, but extricating himself from his unexpected company took a helluva lot longer.

Beautiful, accomplished, ambitious, and bulldog tenacious, the models wouldn't take no for answer. They were, all three of them, determined to come as his dates to the Inn's celebratory party. When he explained he only had two arms and so couldn't possibly escort them all, they remained undeterred. This was a big publicity opportunity. Finally, his gaze stealing to the wall clock, he resorted to bluntness.

And to the bare balls truth.

He told the ladies he was bringing the woman he loved to the party. After inviting them to show up stag, and promising them photo ops, they left happy.

Far from happy, James seethed into the intercom system, "Paul, get your butt up here."

Sixty *long* seconds later, his secretary waltzed through the door. "Yo, Boss."

"Why did you send those models to my room?"

"I called ahead --" Paul grimaced. "You weren't alone, huh?"

James let that pass. "I'm not taking models to the party, and that's final."

Paul rumped his already cyclone-hairstyle, until his 'do spiked every which way. "They must've left here some angry."

"They would've, if I hadn't offered all three gold-plated VIP invitations to the festivities."

Paul's gloomy mood brightened. "Great! Then, I still have a shot with them."

Another time, James would've laughed at Paul's optimism. Not tonight.

Laura had arrived at his hotel room, nearly frantic, her eyes wild, her pulses hammering, teetering on the verge of a meltdown --

And he'd let her down.

Again.

Somehow, someway, James had to make this mess right. And, more importantly, he had to make sure she stayed safe. His gut told him Gerald Du Pointe was laying some sort of head-trip on Laura. He wished she would open up to him about what had happened that night four years ago. But since the three models had pretty much wrecked her confidence in him, he would need to get the information through alternative means.

"Paul, I need you to find out whatever you can on Gerald Du Pointe."

"Sure thing, Boss. Whaddya have in mind?"

"Find out if he has a history of violence." James drew in a shaky breath. "Especially against women."

"The dude's a beater?"

"That's what I need you to find out."

"I'm on it," Paul said, and rushed from the room.

Too late that night to explain away the models, James drove to the Battery, parking his car on the street, close enough to see if anyone and came and went, but not so close that Laura would catch him pulling guard duty. After a quiet but sleepless night, the next day, he followed her as she made her rounds from historical site to historical site, her group of tourists in tow.

So as not to crowd her, James kept his distance.

But, at a cemetery across the street from St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Laura left her group of tourists and came marching over to where he stood, pretending to read the inscription on a granite tombstone.

He looked up, all-innocence. "Hey, Laura! Funny coincidence, us meeting up here."

"Nothing humorous about it, nor is this meeting up a coincidence. You're following me."

"Where'd you ever get that idea?" He shook his head. "Then again, maybe if you knew anything about me, you'd know I'm a history buff. Old cemeteries are my favorite haunts to explore..."

"You've been tailing me since early this afternoon."

"Have not!"

Her chin trembled, the blue smudges under her eyes got bluer. Or maybe it was that her pallor got paler. He swore her skin was so translucent, he could see through her flesh to the bone. "You're lying to me. Even after what happened, I never thought you'd lie to me, James."

This was bad.

*Yell at me, honey. Lay me out. Don't cry on account of me.*

Taking the pain out on herself, she'd been crying inside for too long.

"No lie," he said. "I have not been following you since this afternoon. I've been following you since early this morning."

This was better. Her chin had stopped trembling, and now she was glaring at him. Her anger, he could take, but not her terrible silent sadness.

She pointed a finger at him. "Stop stalking me."

"Laura, about last night..."

"No need to explain."

"There's every need. First off, are you all right?"

"Of course! Why wouldn't I be all right?"

"You seemed pretty upset when those three women showed up at my suite." He shook his head. "Listen, if you would just let me tell you about myself..."

"I don't want to know anything about you. Background information is a moot point now, anyway, as I never want to see you again. Now, just go. Please go." Turning, she walked back to her group.

He didn't leave, he stuck around, only to lose sight of her toward the end of the day. No other options, he returned to the Battery to wait her out in his car.

At eleven o'clock, she arrived home.

Where had she been all this time?

He sprang from his rental and was at the door.

As she closed it.

In his face.

He pounded his fist into the wood. "Let me in, Laura."

She cracked the door, a useless security chain in place. "What do you want from me, James?"

"You know what I want."

Her! All of her.

She folded her arms around her middle. "Yes, you want to explain away what I saw with my own two eyes."

"The hell I do. I'm past explaining."

He shouldered the door, the piddling chain snapped in two, and he was forcing his way inside the guesthouse.

"Get naked." Not the best greeting in the world, but desperate situations called for desperate measures.

"No." She backed up to the wall, the same position she was in the last time they were together.

"I told you -- do not tell me no after telling me yes. Now-get-undressed."

"James, you'd never f-f-force me."

Hope soared. She understood *that* much about him.

Leaning forward, he took her mouth. "No, I never would."

She didn't fight him, didn't resist; she kissed him back. Not sweetly, not romantically, not the way he wanted her to kiss him, but there was no denying her hunger.

He stepped away. No going back now. No softening in his position. "Do it."

"I'm attracted to you, but sex won't solve anything."

"Isn't getting it on what you told me you wanted, right from the start?"

"Yes. But that was before those three models arrived at your suite in the hotel. Since then, I've changed my mind."

He smiled. If she didn't have feelings for him, she wouldn't care if he'd gotten with every woman in Charleston.

Time to push. Time to get to the bottom of things. Time for Laura to leave her tears behind and get angry. "You changed your mind, huh? Why does that not surprise me? You're someone who makes a promise, and then doesn't deliver. Like when you backed out of marrying Gerry --"

She gasped. "I'm not like that! Even four years ago, when I was a spoiled snob, I wasn't like that. I didn't just cavalierly break off my relationship with Gerald. I had a good reason."

"What was this good reason?" he goaded, pushing her some more.

"It's private."

Two words, and she'd shut him out. Again. But then, no one ever said the road to trust ran smooth or that the path to success came without locked doors. He'd encountered plenty of bumps in the road and slammed doors in his pursuit of his dreams, why should this time be any different? Nothing worthwhile ever came easy. If getting through to Laura took a down and dirty fight --

Bring it.

She tossed her head. "Since you're demanding I follow through on this absurdity --" Her chin raised, she worked her zipper in back. One by one her clothes dropped to the floor, until she stood there naked before him.

An evasive tactic if ever he saw one. She'd sex it up with him, but she wouldn't talk to him. Swell. Just fucking swell.

Still and all, get her body to trust him and her mind would soon follow. "You're beautiful. Perfect."

"Scarred," she disagreed.

"You're so shiny and bright, you hurt my damn eyes." He dropped to his knees before her and wrapped her slender body up in his arms. "How could you think I'd call women up

to my room when I was expecting you?" After telling her he wouldn't explain, he turned around and did.

Love was a complicated, contradicting bitch at times.

He had his pride. But, in the face of love, what did pride matter?

Bottom line, he couldn't allow her to carry around a hurt that he had inadvertently caused. "The three women were models, there for publicity purposes. They came to my suite about a job."

"Oh, *pleeease*."

"It's true, dammit. My secretary sent them up for me to interview for a position as my *paid* dates for a party --"

She placed her fingers against his lips. "No more. I don't want to hear any more lies. I'm so sick of lies."

"I'm not lying to you, honey." He laid his lips on her belly and gave her a noisy hickey, then plundered her navel, the tip of his tongue slipping inside. "Those women were work," he said softly. "Nothing more than work."

He kissed the white zigzagging line on her hipbone, vowing again to kill the fuck who had caused her so much pain, then worked his way down to her pubic bone, pushing his face back and forth and into her neat curly brown patch, before kissing her other lips, the lips that would thereafter belong only to him.

She sobbed, made another stab at keeping him at arm's length. "I don't want this, James."

But her legs fell open, the finest of invitations. Laura had her confessions, too.

Taking advantage of her need, he shot his tongue inside her pussy, wetting her, French kissing her, loving her.

He loved this woman. His heart belonged to her.

Now, to convince her.

Initially, that convincing would take a physical route. An expression of his love through sex would buy him some time, time he needed to prove she could trust him.

"Fair is fair. You got to taste me in that damn plantation carriage house and now it's my turn to taste you," he murmured, still on his knees on the floor, no hurry to get up. He wasn't done yet. "Face the wall."

She shook her head. "We're done here --"

Trust was built on a foundation of resolution. On keeping promises. On following through.

"Tell me no after telling me yes and there'll be consequences," he said firmly. Two hands at her waist, he swiveled her around to face the wall.

He spanked her, a smack across the fullest portion of her ass. "Understand?"



Purring her agreement, she rubbed the rosy spot, then rolled her hips until her ass stuck out, red cape to bull.

Oh, man. Just his damn bad luck that she liked discipline.

Just his misfortune that he liked everything she liked. Old buildings. Nice manners. Classic clothes. A sense of history.

Raw sex.

But only if that raw sex was with her.

He raised his hand, set it back down on her rump, a spank that caused a dark thrill to tighten his balls. Corporal punishment was not exactly how he'd pictured spending tonight. Neither was getting more and more turned on.

One step forward and three steps back.

No one ever said the road to trust was smooth. Or straight. Their road came with some kink. Could he live with it?

One thought later, he decided, that yeah, he could -- as long as he gained her deviant heart in the process.

Laura needed rough sex from him? He was prepared to provide it. Raunchy talk? He was there. Whatever it took to gain her trust, he'd do.

After the second smack, as if she were a delectable ripe peach, he gave her a sharp nip with his teeth, and she sighed. Like he was opening up that same peach, he hooked his thumbs inside the crevice and spread her bottom wide, and she started to pant. He rimmed her, a tongue stroke that left no room for misunderstanding, and she hung with him, murmuring soft and low, "Yesyesyes."

He knew what Laura needed. But did Laura know she owned him in that need? Did she get that he'd own her, too, after the night was through?

## Chapter Eighteen

Straightening, James picked Laura up in his arms and went in search of a nice soft bed on which to lay his succulent peach. He'd do the spanks, the bites, the harsher aspects of lovemaking. He'd give her every kink she'd never heard of, but thought she needed --

But only if he could control the result.

Peaches bruised easily. He wanted to do Laura right, and that meant maintaining his control at all times. No more damn walls. And floors were out of the question.

He found her room, and set her down in the middle of the single bed. When he took the restraints -- bought at a well-stocked Charleston sex shop -- out of his pockets and shook out the metal tangles, her eyes went saucer wide. Curiosity. Excitement. No fear.

The very reaction he'd tried to achieve. He'd come prepared for any and every eventuality, except being rejected, and her present lip licking told him she had no plans to give him the boot any time soon. In fact, she looked downright enthusiastic at the way things were progressing.

The lady was hot for bondage? He'd give her bondage. But, Christ, she'd better not be hot for clamps, too. Though the store had plenty on display, he hadn't bought any. Just the thought of bruising those delicate nipples turned him white --

"Not the missionary," his honey announced in the middle of his mental meanderings.

Doggie. Great. Just fucking great.

"You want it that way, better roll over onto your belly, honey."

After rearranging herself, she went passive on him. Not a muscle did she move as he anchored her wrists and split ankles to the bed boards with the metal chains.

So she wouldn't feel threatened or think he had left her alone, he undressed where she could see him.

Not frightened at all, her lips lifted at the sight of his polka dot boxers.

On second thought, maybe the design on his boxers hadn't caused that Cheshire grin. Maybe his dick sticking out from his boxers was the culprit. He'd been hard for so long, erect was beginning to seem like his natural state.

Far from it.

Not that he'd lived like a monk, but he hadn't gotten this far in the hotel business by fucking around. Maybe some guys could climb to the top in their respective fields and still get laid five nights a week, but for him, episodes of sex had been few and far between. All his energy had gone into acquiring rundown properties and then turning those derelicts into smoothly running hotels, not into scoring. As a young man, he'd been driven to succeed, to the exclusion of everything else.

In the name of full disclosure, he'd like to get real and tell Laura that piece of information. He'd like to tell her what he was all about. But she wasn't at that point yet where she was interested in hearing about his background, including the pertinent fact that he didn't tie up women.

As in never.

*Here's hoping I did the bondage right*, he mused, climbing up behind her.

The bed was narrow, he was big, and it was a balancing act not to fall off the edge. Landing on his ass would have dealt a huge blow to the seriousness of this BDSM scenario. Bad enough his feet hanging over the sides of the mattress dented his *savoir-faire*. His Dom's façade, already shaky, wouldn't hold up under an infusion of slapstick comedy.

Fighting for her trust, fighting for them, he canned his dignity and barked, "Here on out, you are to call me Master."

"Yes, Master," she dutifully replied.

Cool. So far, so good. He must be doing something right.

He kissed down her spine, his thumbs at the dimpled flare of her hips, stroking back and forth there, the silky texture of her pale skin totally captivating him, totally entrancing him, totally enslaving him.

His dick rooted for entry. With an adoring sigh, he took himself in hand and prodded between her legs, a back to front pussy penetration.

He didn't like that she couldn't move under him, didn't like that she couldn't touch him, hated that she couldn't look into his eyes. But being inside her blew the top of his fucking skull off.

Then, prematurely blew his other head off, too.

Luckily, when he felt his control start to go, he pulled out. Disgraced, he hung his neck, breathing like he'd tried to run a marathon, one that ended for him after only a mile.

"Go to sleep." Spent and deflated and deeply shamed, he lumbered from the bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sometime during the night Laura awakened drenched with perspiration from one of her repeat nightmares. Her colorful fantasy life had gotten her through some rough patches, but sometimes her imagination worked against her. Like now. She hadn't seen the bodies of her parents after the murders, but that didn't mean she didn't picture them in her dreams. Sometimes, she wished she had seen their slain corpses. Real, in this situation, couldn't be any worse than how she saw the horrific scene at night in her restless sleep.

A damp lank of hair was removed from across her face. "Are you all right, honey?"

James.

Beside her on the bed, holding her close in his arms. She hadn't realized he was there.

She raised a hand experimentally. "You untied me," she said thickly, still in the grip of the bad dream. Shaking the horror always took her a while.

"I couldn't take it anymore," he replied. "I'm sorry, Laura. I tried, but I'm not cut out for the bondage scene. A weak constitution, I guess."

She flopped over onto her back and looked at him. "You don't normally tie your dates to the bed?"

In the semi-dark room, he laughed dismally. "Wasn't my coming after thirty seconds the tip-off that vanilla is more my thing?"

"I wasn't counting --"

"I was, and it still didn't work. BDSM doesn't do it for me -- if the woman is the sub. I was so nervous about performing, I tensed up and ruined everything."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Really. I know you have needs and all, but just so you know, I have needs, too."

"What kind of needs?"

"Needs that might sound...well...weak and unmasculine. Needs that I'd like to have addressed." The night light beside the bed picked up his woebegone expression. "By you."

"By me? But what can I do?"

He fell over onto his back and threw his arms up over his head. "Tie me up and take me. I'm a closet submissive, honey."

"You?"

"Switch my ass with a leather flogger if it ain't true!" His brows wiggled. "You can switch my ass with a leather flogger if it is true, too. When I spanked you, I kept hoping you'd return the favor and whup my ass but good."

She stared at him, agog. James had just revealed a hidden side of himself she had never suspected existed. "You did?" she asked incredulously. "You actually wanted me to...to...*spank* you?"

"I knew this would happen." As if deeply ashamed, he turned his face away and spoke to the opposite wall. "I knew you'd think badly of me. I knew it! That's why I didn't want to tell you. I've never revealed the submissive side of myself to anyone."

Once she regained her ability to speak again, she leaned forward and kissed his full lips. "I'm honored you trusted me enough to tell me, James. And it will be my utmost pleasure to tie you up and take you."

"Hard," he wheedled. "Punishingly hard."

"Uh -- all right. I g-g-guess. How do you -- you know -- want me to tie you?"

"First my feet. Then climb up on top, honey, and do my wrists."

She secured his ankles. "Test them."

He tried raising a leg. "Whoa! Woman, I can't move an inch. Your knots are da bomb. You must have been a girl scout."

"Yes. You?"

"They don't accept boys in the girl scouts, honey."

She planted her hands on her hips. "Do your friends think you're humorous, James?"

"Not particularly."

"You have discerning friends." She climbed over him, her thighs bracketing his hips, and started securing his wrists to the bed frame, while he, the sneak, hiked his head off the pillow and started mouthing her breasts, swinging scant millimeters away from his lips. She could barely concentrate on tying her square knot, what with his voracious suckling. God, he knew all her trigger points and hit them all, every one. Somehow, she didn't know how, she managed to muddle through. But efficiency came at a price. When she inspected her handiwork, her breast popped free of his mouth. *Darn!*

She toppled back on her haunches, her hands on her knees. "Okay, now what?"

His hot gaze first landed on her nipples, wet from his mouth and extended to armpits, then to her breasts, plumped between her arms, then fixed between her open thighs. "Ride me hard, cowgirl."

His explicit glance gave her the needed courage to come up on her knees and lower herself over his cock.

She was in charge here. Of him. Of her own actions.

A swell of power coursed through her. For years, she'd been battered about by circumstances over which she'd had no control, but on top of James, she felt that control return to her. No longer helpless, no longer weak, no longer at the mercy of anyone else, she made the decisions.

She took him into her body, just the head at first.

James clenched his jaw as if pained; a pulse beat in his temple. "Do it, honey."

A better woman than she might have put him out of his misery, but she was not that better woman. She'd been beaten down too long not to exult in her rise to power now. Convinced that James didn't expect nobility from her or anything else beyond being herself, she spitefully tossed her head. "Say please."

"Fuck please. Saying please ain't near good enough." He eyed her soulfully. "Pretty please. I'm begging here, honey. Pleading with you. Don't make me wait."

She didn't. Lowering herself down his shaft, she accepted him, from head to base. But slowly. Tauntingly. His pleasure hers to command.

And then, she realized something, something that had escaped her notice in all that powerful, feminist posturing. This was James. Not a fantasy. Not an X-rated imagined lover. A real man who needed -- if not her, precisely -- her body.

There was enough real power in that observation to last her a lifetime.

Compromising, she rode him hard, as he had asked her to, but moving any way she wished to move, while he quivered and shook, as much as the bondage would allow. He lasted an incredibly long time, until she shook and quivered, too, both of them shouting each other's names as they climaxed.

Afterwards, she wrapped her arms about herself, lonely and cold, truly miserable, without him.

"Untie me."

At his hoarse croak, she looked up. "But --"

"Don't fucking argue with me, Laura. Just fucking do it."

*Yikes!* Where had *that* come from? And where had her submissive sex toy gone?

She released him, and he scooped her up against his chest and held her. Simply held her, as his cum dribbled stickily out of her.

## Chapter Nineteen

Did his sweet and fierce honey realize she hadn't disengaged in time?

James smoothed his hands over his lover's backside, his thoughts a turmoil. He might just have gotten Laura pregnant. Might have planted the beginnings of his baby inside her womb.

Both arms wrapped protectively around her, he hugged his lady. His heart felt ready to explode. Still, he couldn't help the foolish grin spreading across his smug face.

A baby. How cool was that? Laura might be carrying his kid.

At the moment, however, Laura and he didn't appear to be on the same page. At the moment, her mind seemed to be otherwise occupied.

She plucked at the sheet, the one that fluttered with each of her agitated breaths. "James, can we talk?" she asked in a small voice.

"Sure. Name the subject. Sports. The weather. Biracial babies --"

"Murder."

The topic was not what he had expected. "Are you ready to talk about it?"

"I'd like to try."

"Then, I'd like to listen. Why don't we go get a drink or something, first?"

"A cup of sweet tea would be nice." She sighed. "I've never been able to go back inside the house, not since that night, and I need to. I think the nightmares would go away if I could just bring myself to see the spot where it happened, you know?"

He couldn't begin to know.

Instead of giving her a trite line, he gave her a tight squeeze, and then climbed out of bed.

Reaching back a hand, he helped her up. "Where's your robe?"

"May I wear your shirt? I'd like to feel your arms around me."

"Sure. But my real arms will be wrapped around you, regardless of the shirt."

"Oh, James." Her eyes went soft and something else, too, something he didn't dare name. Not yet. Too soon. Too new. Too fearful he'd jinx it if he put that soft look into concrete words.

"If you want, honey, we can go over there to the mansion now. Together."

"No. Thanks for offering, but I need to face my fears alone. No crutch. Not even a very nice crutch."

Hoping, hoping so hard he nearly burst with the hope, he yanked on his pants; while Laura shrugged into his shirt. Cuddled up in his arms and the shirt, they left the bedroom.

At the kitchen's threshold, she opened her lips. She let out a hurt sound, and then faltered.

"We don't have to do this now if you're not up to it, honey."

"Thank you for understanding. And not just about my hesitancy. About what just happened in bed, too." She ducked her head. "Your request. That was for my benefit, not yours. You don't harbor any latent secret sexual fantasies, do you?"

*Uh-oh.* "What do you mean?"

"I don't believe you're a submissive, James. I think you did that "tie-me-up" scenario for my benefit. So I could own my sexuality, as it were," she clarified.

He shrugged. "This probably isn't what you want to hear, but I'm an ordinary man, honey, with ordinary sex habits. No theatrics, no hat tricks. The magic happens when two people who belong together find each other."

Her hand slid inside the unbuttoned shirt to cover her heart. "Why, James Stone! I do believe you're a romantic."

He wasn't feeling romantic, not with so much of her skin showing, not with the end of a tit sticking out from the shirt, not with her belly bare to his gaze. Not with her pussy right out *there*, in front of him. Not when the plump lips of that pussy pouted at him. Christ, his cum still dribbled out of her.

He swallowed. "Who me? Romantic?" Fuck, but he was horny.

"Yes, you."

Heat crept up into his face. In the interest of full disclosure, of getting Laura to know the genuine him, flaws and all, he shuffled his prodding dick to a more comfortable position inside his pants, and admitted the truth.

Not the truth about him wanting to unzip his fly and have another go at her, but the other truth. "The right woman can persuade me to go to one of *those* movies. With the right woman, I can enjoy a candlelit dinner. I suppose, with the right woman, I can even wear my heart on my sleeve."



*The right woman is you, Laura. Just check the sleeve of that shirt you're wearing. My heart is beating there...*

And because he loved her, he knew another gentle push was in order to get her to open up. An *indirect* gentle push. A reverse psychology push. "Why not postpone this conversation 'til later, honey?"

"No." She shook her head. "I've got to do this. Now. I don't know if I'll ever feel this much in charge again. I owe that empowerment to you. I'm only sorry --"

"I don't want to hear that word."

"But I am sorry. For dragging you into all of this." She crossed the threshold into the kitchen. Stepping away from him, she pointed out the window, to the mansion across the drive. "I haven't even removed the furniture covers in the main house. Everything must be so dusty. I'll never be able to sell the estate if I don't face up to my responsibilities and do what needs to be done."

"Tell me what you want done and I'll see that it's taken care of --"

She shook her head again, the force of her adamancy whipping her hair across her suddenly colorless face. "I need to do this. Not strangers." She moved away from him, and he let her go. She wandered around the kitchen and then went out the door again.

He could hardly stand seeing her lost expression. While everything inside him wanted to protect her from the house, from the past, he followed her, pushed some more. "Tell me about it, honey."

"I never have before. Not even the police. I was so ashamed, you see. So, I told the investigators that I had changed my mind about my pending engagement to Gerald. And that was true, but it wasn't the whole truth. My inability to give him what he wanted in bed drove him away."

"What a crock of --"

"That was how I felt then. Now, with maturity, I realize the situation wasn't irreversible. We could've worked things out. But I was so vain. And hurt. I couldn't see that Gerald's infidelity was symptomatic of something else..."

*Yeah, that Gerry was a stupid fuck.*

No other way to explain why Gerry would've lost this woman over a paid quickie. One man's mess-up was another man's gain. He had Laura now...

She turned her glazed gaze to him, and then looked away. "Gerald wants a second chance. Everyone deserves a second chance."

Did she even know what she was saying?

He loved her! Didn't she realize, he was in this for keeps?

And because he was in this for keeps, he took his hurting heart out of the equation, and concentrated on her.

As tense as he'd ever seen her, she kept pulling at his shirt. He doubted she even knew what she was doing or that she was with him. In front of his eyes, she had slipped away. And not to a good place. To a very bad place.

"I make a mean sweet tea --" Laura could use the sugar. "Let's go back to the kitchen."

But she didn't seem to hear him. "A three-month drought gripped the city. But, on the night of my engagement party, the rain came down in torrents. In a way, the weather is responsible for my breakup with Gerald. The weather certainly led to the discovery that he'd cheated on me."

When she spun around and walked away, down the hall, James dogged her heels. Where the hell was she going?

She stood outside the door to a laundry area. "Rather than store Gerald's dripping-wet raincoat in the closet, I brought it to the mudroom inside the mansion, a much larger room than this one here at the guesthouse. I could've let one of the maids hang it up, but I wanted to be all wifey, so I hung up the damn raincoat myself."

Laura raised her arms, her actions shadowing her words. "I was placing it over a clothes rack, very similar to this one, to dry, when a bright red bar coaster fell out of an inside pocket. I bent my knees," As though in a trance, Laura dipped her knees. "And read the red bar coaster upside down off the floor: *KIT KAT LOUNGE*. The name would have piqued anyone's curiosity. I pretended I was sophisticated, but at twenty-one, I was still only a babe in the woods. My parents had sheltered me, as had their money. What did I know about such places?"

After brushing a hand over her eyes, Laura straightened up. But she didn't look at him. Once again, he was struck with the strange feeling that she didn't know he was there.

"I identified Gerald's distinctive scratchy handwriting immediately. '*Ask for "Star."* 7 p.m. 8/19. *Sommerville Hotel. Rm. 704. \$250 for the works, BJ included.*'"

Laura left the "mudroom" and returned to the hall. "I don't know if he still does, but in those days, Gerald traveled extensively for his pharmaceutical job. Evidently, the weather in Miami during his previous week's sales trip had been so ferociously wet he'd worn a raincoat every day." She laughed. "Forgetful Gerald! He'd left the evidence of his infidelity with a prostitute in the coat pocket." She brushed a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "After the discovery, I found my parents and told them to cancel the planned engagement announcement for later on that evening. I dumped everything in their laps at the very last minute. Back then, I had yet to appreciate that timing is everything in life."

Laura glanced at her wrist. "Where is my watch, anyway?"

"On the nightstand, back in the bedroom. Why don't we go there now and get it, honey?"

She laughed. "I've always had poor timing, but my poor sense of time hardly proved criminal intent. Most people in this city think otherwise. Guests overheard our argument

over the broken engagement and assumed I had killed my parents or had some phantom boyfriend kill them. And I suppose, in a way, I am responsible for their deaths. If I hadn't broken the engagement, the party would have continued 'til dawn, and the killer wouldn't have had the opportunity to kill Mommy and Daddy."

"Laura? Honey?"

She blinked and turned to him. "If I only I'd told my parents the reason for breaking things off with Gerald, they would have understood! But oh, no! I kept his unfaithfulness to myself."

Though the tears rolling down her cheeks ripped at his gut, he kept his distance, knowing she had to get the grief out of her system.

"Oh, James! I'll never forgive myself for those angry words. Those angry words were the last words I ever said to them."

"Families argue. They knew you loved them, honey --"

She wiped her eyes again. "After our words, like a spoiled little brat, I raced upstairs and shut myself in my bedroom, leaving my parents to make my excuses. I fell asleep wearing my new dress and hugging Teddy Bear."

While James watched, Laura walked toward the front door. "I was still hugging the stuffed animal when someone pushed me down the mansion's front stairs. I can't climb stairs anymore. Everyone thinks it's because of my hip. That's not the reason." She shuddered. "Anyway, the den is where it happened. There's no den here in the guesthouse."

James clenched his fists at his sides.

The den. The scene of the crime. To put it in human terms, where a murderer had killed two innocent people. To personalize it, where Laura's parents had died.

"I think you should leave now, James. I have things to do."

"What things, honey?"

"Remove furniture covers, vacuum, face my fears. For that to happen, I need to return to the mansion. And I need to go alone."

He frowned. "That's a lot. Are you up to all that?"

"Yes. I can do this now."

But, because he loved her, he knew Laura had demons to slay, horror to face down, a battle to fight. And as much as wanted to, he couldn't plead with her to keep him around, to allow him to stay. He had to accept...and support...her decision.

## Chapter Twenty

James was a truly wonderful man, and she'd do anything to prevent their association from being discovered. People talked, and they'd question his judgment if anyone saw them together.

So far, so good. To the best of Laura's knowledge, no one had seen them together, at least not as a couple. As long as they remained careful, as long as they didn't flaunt their relationship, James wouldn't suffer. She'd brought misfortune to her parents, and she couldn't bear the thought of bringing misfortune to James, too. Though she'd miss him when he left, for his sake, she was glad he'd be leaving Charleston.

So would she -- as soon as she sold the estate.

For that to happen, she had to get the house in shape. Those dustcovers had to come off, as in today! No more procrastinating. No more letting a bad case of the 'fraidy cats win.

With that resolved, Laura rushed to the supermarket for some industrial-strength cleaning supplies.

Growing up she had never done housework, including keeping her own room neat and tidy. But in the past four years, she had learned her way around sudsy water and a Hoover. Imagine her, a former Charleston socialite, washing floors and vacuuming!

That scandalous thought set her to giggling on her return home from the store.

"Why, Laura Jean! Are you laughing to...*yourself*?"

Oh, dear. Caught in the act of crazy. And by Gerald, of all people!

Armed with a new self-confidence, she stuck up for herself. "There's no law on the books against being in a good mood, is there?"

"No. But, under the circumstances, I should think laughter inappropriate."

James said he believed she grieved for her parents with every breath she took, and that was true. But her mother and father had loved her, and they would have wanted her to move on. Her continued guilt and sadness disrespected their memories. Here on out, she intended to celebrate their lives and their love by letting go of the past.

"Gerald, I deserve a laugh every now and again." With that disclosure, her resentment eased. She did deserve to laugh! And not now and again, either. Any time anything tickled her, she deserved a full-out belly laugh.

She practically shouted, "I deserve to be happy."

"You could be. With me. I can make you happy."

No one could *make* another person happy. No one could make *her* happy. Not Gerald. Not even James. The capacity for happiness was a wellspring that came from within. Here on out, she was choosing to accept happiness over sorrow, forgiveness over guilt.

Gerald took her hand. "Marry me, darling."

She shook her head, tried to withdraw her hand. It suddenly hit her, she didn't love this man, had never loved this man. All these years, she'd denied that reality, because it was too painful to admit.

She would no longer hide from the truth, or from the pain. The fairytale fantasy was over. "That's impossible, Gerald. There's too much between us."

"I don't believe this! You still think I cheated on you! Where is this ridiculous piece of evidence you say you have? Show it to me."

Gerald had never been so forceful. He must really love her and want another chance.

She now knew that was impossible. Even if she *had* misinterpreted the message she'd found in his raincoat pocket, she couldn't go back with him. But she could give him a second chance, not the second chance he was urging on her, not a second chance to get back together with her, but a second chance for him to move ahead with his own life, as she intended to move on with hers. "Come to the guesthouse tomorrow night, at seven p.m., and we'll talk."

"Will you have this proof?"

"Yes. I'll have it with me." And after she showed the coaster to him, she'd show him the door.

In the past, hurt and confused, she'd handled their break-up badly. She did owe him an explanation, but she now realized that she owed him nothing else.

"I think you're a little emotionally undone, darling. I think if we can get you in to see a good psychiatrist and get your instability managed, you'll see things much clearer."

"I see things very clearly. Now. See you tomorrow, Gerry."

When he gasped at the nickname, the one James liked to use, she twittered evilly to herself. No one was *managing* her instability, because she was perfectly stable.

Upon her return to the Battery, she went straight to the mansion. Straightening her shoulders, she headed for her worst fear.

The den.

She moved slowly, but without any horrible, paralyzing panic.

At first, she thought the axe lying on the den floor was another anxiety-induced symptom. She put the weapon off to a hallucination, just one of the many she'd experienced recently. At the door, she blinked several times, just to see if clearing her vision helped.

The axe didn't disappear.

This was no hallucination. Sunlight glinted off the blood-coated blade.

Not the murder weapon. The police had confiscated that as evidence. No, this was a cruel facsimile.

Calmly and rationally, no return of her usual numbing panic, Laura locked the mansion door behind her and returned to the guesthouse, where she picked up the phone and called James.

\* \* \* \* \*

James closed the door quietly and stepped inside the guesthouse. "The axe wasn't there, honey."

"What do you mean the axe wasn't there?" Her voice rose along with her upset.

Laura was sitting up on the living room sofa. At his statement, her normally rigidly straight carriage drooped. Her usually stiff spine collapsed. The stuffing taken out of her, she wilted one vertebra at a time.

Obviously, her trip to the mansion had wiped Laura out. After he left to check out her troublesome discovery, she must have passed out cold. Her silky blonde hair was sleep-mussed, her clothing rumpled, a covering lay over her knees.

He wished he could muss the silky strands even more. He wished he could get her out of those rumpled clothes and back under that covering, only with him.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the time.

"The axe wasn't there," he repeated.

Tears glittered in her too-bright eyes. "But I saw it!"

"I know you did."

"You believe me?"

"Of course, I believe you! Why the hell wouldn't I believe you?"

She plucked at the quilt covering her lap. Then, seemingly unable to stay still, folded her slender arms around her bent knees. "I'm grateful you don't think I'm crazy, James, but I have an in-patient bracelet from a psych hospital that says otherwise."

"If you said there was an axe, there was an axe. End of story."

"But I have a diagnosis of paranoia." She didn't look at him.

He didn't take his sights off her. "Paranoia doesn't make you crazy. Paranoia is sometimes based on reality."

"There's that, too. I have a hard time with reality. I do much better with fantasy."

"You saw an axe. That was no fantasy. The question is: Who put it there and why?"

"I'm sure a member of my growing fan club placed it there. Any number of people in Charleston hate my guts."

"So, why remove it?"

"To drive me over the edge," she grumbled sarcastically.

"Exactly!"

Her forehead puckered. "W-w-what?"

"Someone wants you to lose it. But you're not going to lose it. You're going to find out who's gunning for you. And I'm gonna help you. You're a strong lady, honey. We can beat this together."

"You think someone wants to drive me over the edge?"

He had been hovering at the front door, but at her forlorn expression, he moved across the floor at lightning speed. Planting his hip on the edge of the sofa, he took her into his arms. "You're not crazy. And because I know you're one tough customer, I can tell you that it's a possibility that someone wants you out of the way."

She cuddled into his chest like lost kitten. "But why?"

"That's what we need to determine. First things first. Who has access to the mansion?"

"No one!" She gasped. Shook her head from side to side. "That's wrong. My real estate agent has a key. She also has the combination to the front security gate. But why would Donna Sue do such a hideous thing? The realtor stands to gain a huge commission from the sale of the property. Why would she do anything to jeopardize the sale?"

"You tell me. Something in your past, maybe? Personal hatred of some sort. A hatred so vengeful that it superseded her own financial gain. Didn't you say she'd once been your friend? Did that friendship end after the murders or before?"

"Before, actually. Long before. She stopped speaking to me when I began dating Gerald. He was considered quite the matrimonial catch in Charleston and Donna Sue had set her cap for him."

*Set her cap.* Every once and a while, Laura drop a quaint turn of expression that sounded completely foreign to his urban ears. "So, Donna had the hots for Gerry and she was jealous of you because you snared him."

"Perhaps." A blush lent her pale cheeks some pink color.

"Laura, remember saying how you were tired of being nice all the time?"

Her mouth twisted. "Yes, she was jealous of me, but not because she had the *hots for Gerry*. Donna coveted the Du Pointe fortune."

"Was she angry enough to kill you to get it?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know, or you're too damn nice to accuse her of murder?"

"I said, I don't know. And I'm not about to make any wild and haphazard accusations. I've been on the receiving end of circumstantial speculation and I know all too well what it does to a person without playing those petty finger-pointing games myself."

"You're way too honorable, Laura. You've gotta learn how to fight dirty. How do you think I got ahead in business?"

She tilted her jaw. "I have a sneaky suspicion that you're all talk, James Stone. I have a sneaking suspicion you got ahead by working hard. I have a feeling your honor is very much intact."

"Thank you," he said, sheepishly. "Your good opinion matters a lot." Understatement. Her good opinion was everything to him. "I want you come back to the Inn with me."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't done what I set out to do. And no bullying tactics are going to keep me out of my own family home. That house is innocent of wrongdoing. Stairs are benign. Even an axe carries no intrinsic guilt. Only the evil person who planted that scare tactic is to blame here. And I need to stop running away. If someone wants me out of Charleston, I need to face their animosity. If that someone is Donna Sue, I'll just need to face her."

"Even if she's the one who murdered your parents and tried to kill you by knocking you head first down a flight of stairs?"

"Particularly, then. But I don't believe she did it. Donna Sue is a vindictive bitch. She might very well have placed the axe on the floor, but she's not insane." She laughed, dismally. "It takes one to know one, and my old schoolhood friend is not crazy. Someone other than Donna Sue killed my parents. Someone criminally insane."

James knew there was only one way to get through to Laura, and that was to lay it on the line.

"I'm not as brave as you, honey. When you finish doing what you gotta do, I need to be with you. I'll need to hold you. That's the only way I'll be able to reassure myself that everything is all right. That *you're* all right."

"You can't stay overnight here in the guesthouse again, James. Too risky."

"Fine. Come to me at the Inn."

"Yes," she agreed.

\* \* \* \* \*



Like a beautiful elderly lady, the mansion carried the patina of age with dignity. Generations of Beaumonts had called the estate home. Since she was the last surviving member of the Beaumont family, seeing to its care and ultimate disposal now fell to her -- a responsibility and a privilege.

A sense of duty and pride -- history, too -- threatened to overwhelm Laura as she surveyed the rooms, one by one, assessing what last minute primping had to be done. When potential buyers walked through the hallways, she wanted the house to shine, and not solely because a well-tended house would bring more on the market than one that showed obvious signs of neglect.

Filling a pail taken from a cleaning supply cabinet with hot water and sudsy detergent, she attached the new sponge she'd just purchased to an old handle. After running the mop around, she'd cracked all the windows on the first floor, to air out the closed-up rooms, and then removed the dustcovers from the furniture. Within a few minutes, breezes off the ocean eliminated the mustiness.

As she ran the Hoover over the den's hardwood floor, the shine seemed to mock her. She almost wished the person who'd placed the bloodied axe there had left some mark, a scratch, anything, to prove she really had seen that sharp blade shining in the sun. But no, now that she examined the area close up, she could see that not a single scuff marred the high gloss sheen. She couldn't point and say, "See there! I didn't imagine that blade!" She had no proof, whatsoever, that she hadn't hallucinated the episode --

Except, James's belief in her.

She could point to that, she could trust in that, she could reassure herself based on that. His confidence in her proved she wasn't totally nuts.

"I'm not completely bonkers," she said aloud.

At the sound of her own voice bouncing off the walls, Laura cringed.

Perhaps self-talk was just a bad habit she'd fallen into, brought on by loneliness; then again, perhaps it was a sign of deteriorating mental distress. Honestly, the thought of sinking into insanity still frightened her. But looking on the bright side, here she was, inside the house, proving she had conquered at least one fear.

At the foyer, she straightened her spine and tilted her chin upwards.

However, stairs were an entirely different matter, particularly the ones rising majestically before her. The grand staircase, the mansion's shining jewel, still scared her to death.

"The upstairs bedrooms can stay dusty one more day." She rolled the vacuum back to the first floor's utility closet.

Before she left through the front door, she glanced back, a long and lingering look, a visual caress of the home she still loved, despite the sadness of what had happened inside its walls. Her watery gaze took in everything, every gleaming *blameless* inch of her girlhood

home, a legacy of trust and love a murderer had destroyed. And, then, tears streaming down her cheeks, she turned her back on her beloved home and made her way up the drive to the guesthouse.

No need to key the lock, the door was ajar.

While she'd been cleaning up at the mansion, someone had broken in and trashed the place. All her belongings lay strewn on the floor.

Amidst the clutter and ruin, somehow she stumbled to her room. Curling up on the disarrayed bed, Laura grabbed Teddy Bear and succumbed to nothingness.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Laura regained consciousness in a bedroom she didn't recognize, with no idea how she came to be there. Though disoriented, she wasn't frightened, owing to the plush pillow under her head. The satin cover carried a familiar scent.

James.

He must have tucked her into his bed at the Crepe Myrtle Inn. Had she walked here? Driven? Been thrown over a man's broad shoulder and carried?

Trying to get her bearings, she took in the room.

Teddy Bear sagged on the nightstand, where James must have placed him. She never would have set him so far away! From early childhood, the stuffed animal had comforted her in moments of stress. A spanking new nightlight plugged into the light socket in the wall spoke of her caregiver's consideration. She looked down at herself. Though fully dressed, her plain cotton dress was rumpled. How it came to be so badly wrinkled was a blur. In fact, everything was a blur.

Except her need for sex.

Stretching her arms up over her head, she sent her fingers through her hair, not to tame the tangled strands, but to muss them further. Sex kittens always have messy hair.

After that, she rolled out of bed. A trip to the bathroom produced the necessary ingredients for the fantasy in which she intended to star.

*Star.*

That name of the hooker her almost fiancé had solicited for sex. Why had that name crept into her consciousness now?

And how soon could she send the memory packing?

A round of randy sex would go a long way toward dispatching that unpleasant reminder of her almost fiancé's infidelity, and she knew just the stud for the job.

Smiling to herself, Laura removed her rumpled clothes. Nude, she went in search of James, never doubting for a second that she'd find him. Her new lover was the responsible sort. He'd never abandon her in an unfamiliar hotel suite, regardless of how luxuriant.

She came upon the man of her fantasies talking on a console speakerphone, the sort used for conference calls, in a room furnished as an office.

No, make that a command center.

Odd, a hotel providing state-of-the-art technology for its guests. Every piece of hardware a busy and successful executive would require was in place, including an overhead projection screen for presentations, and one hell of a long mahogany conference table.

No matter. She hadn't gone looking for James to discuss how he'd rated such personalized attention from the hotel staff. She'd gone looking for James with only one thought in mind.

As she approached him, her hips rolling, he said, "Catch you later, Paul," and slammed down the console phone's receiver.

A gentleman through and through, he jumped to his feet. "Well, there you are! I'm glad you came and found me. Are you okay, honey?"

"Not yet. But depending upon your cooperation, I will be soon." She tossed the tube of lube at him.

He caught it one-handed, and she pushed him back down into his leather chair. "No need to stand on ceremony with me, James."

He raised a brow. "Uh -- I can see you're in Dominatrix mode. Got a whip, too, or are they no longer in style?"

"I'm through playing games."

"Oh, I can see you're all business, honey." His expression turned quizzical.

*Fondle my breasts, James.*

On the same wavelength, he caressed them. But only briefly, not nearly long enough.

"Pinch me," she demanded straight away.

"Where?" he demanded to know. Both of them equally forceful.

Her small breasts were bare, but the tips were long and red and swollen. And so hard, they hurt. He must know they ached! Why was he making her state the obvious?

A humiliated blush warmed her skin. "My nipples. Please pinch my nipples."

He did.

"You've got wet-dream tits," he said softly, working her into a frenzy with his fingering, his pressing, his language.

His dirty terminology made her tummy dip like an amusement ride. Until James, no man had ever spoken crudely to her. Just like she had the first time, she liked it.

He cupped her breasts, both of them at the same time, his thumbs flicking the hardened tips, back and forth, before pushing them together to deepen her cleavage. "Pearl necklace tits, honey."

His phraseology required a definition. "What exactly are pearl necklace tits?"

"When a man ejaculates between a woman's breasts and his cum circles her neck like a string of translucent pearls," James explained simply, without belittling her lack of experience, without any implication that she was ignorant.

At imagining his cock there, in her cleavage, imagining how sticky she'd feel as a result, her hips undulated, her thighs rubbed together.

More than liking the dirty talk, she loved the dirty talk.

His wide palm splayed over her lower tummy, his long fingers almost, but not quite, level with her mons. Sex-starved, she started to pant. "Fist me."

"Laura, wait --"

"You know I'm not a virgin. You know I'm experienced. You know I've had a lover."

His chest rumbled with male laughter. "Yeah, experienced doing the two-minute missionary in the dark. As to your good ol' lover Gerry, he might've gotten it up, but he couldn't have kept it up, not as long as I'll keep it up, inside you. He didn't do to you what I'll do to you."

She straightened her damaged spine. "Unless you do me, as I asked you to do, twice now already, I'll consider your statement purely male brag, Mr. Stone." She sighed. "I'll just have to go out, I guess, and find me a man who doesn't make empty promises only to leave me high and dry."

He took a breast in hand, rubbed the end between two dark fingers. "I don't know about that high part but I'm betting you're far from dry. And I never make empty promises. How do you want it done -- only the fist or my arm, too? Your choice."

*Shoot!* Now he goes all Northern liberal on her. Just when things were getting good, too.

She licked her suddenly dry lips. "Your arm, too, please."

"One more thing, honey. Give up your gracious, Southern manners nonsense. Here on out, you won't behave like a lady with me, nor will I treat you like a lady. We'll be just a man and a woman, moving together, sweating together, coming together. You don't understand yet what being fully owned by a man means, but when I'm buried in you deep, you'll learn my meaning, then. No airs, no snooty attitudes. You'll just be a natural woman doing what comes naturally with a natural man."

She agreed with her chin, a quick jerky motion up and down, before verbalizing her assent. "Yes. All right. Whatever you say, I'll do."

“Now, that’s the sort of compliance I like.”

She flicked his conservative gray silk tie with a finger, and then hiked her foot onto the chair beside his long legs. Plenty of room with his tight athlete’s body. James had one tight ass.

“Enough conversation. Fist me,” she ordered him again. “Do it now.”

His jaw lowered almost imperceptibly, the only outward indication he gave to her request, before trying to weasel out of his promise again. “Laura, you came here carrying a teddy bear. I checked for your car, but it wasn’t parked downstairs, which means you walked here. Why?”

Her memories came rushing back.

She couldn’t tell James about how her home was ransacked. If she did, he’d force her to call the police. Or, worse, he’d get involved.

She wasn’t calling the police. They hadn’t helped her before, and they wouldn’t help her now. As to telling James, she’d rather cut out her tongue.

“I had car trouble on the way to taking the stuffed animal to the cleaners,” she lied. “See?” She rubbed his head. “His fur is a matted mess.”

“You arrived here exhausted. I carried you to the bedroom.”

“I sleep a lot, James. My injuries, you know. But now I’m rested and ready for sex. Are you showing me some hardcore action or do I need to go looking for somebody else, somebody less romantic, who will?”

Now his jaw went rigid. “No need to look elsewhere. I already told you, I’ll do whatever you want.” He paused. “Within reason.”

“Why so grim, then?” She leaned into him and took his full lips in a sensuous kiss.

He responded, his mouth moving under the determined press of hers. But coolly, not passionately, his reaction controlled.

After not achieving the desired effect, she disengaged from the lip lock. “Can you get at it all right from this position?” She swung out her leg until her knee was at almost a ninety degree angle to her torso, and the lips of her pussy were wide open.

“Yeah, I can get at it.” He twisted the cap off the lube, smeared his hand with the thankfully unscented sex aid.

Her gaze went to his trimmed nails, his thick fingers, the immense width of his palm. Just to be helpful, she latched onto his greased hand, to make sure he wouldn’t get away, and forced his lubed fingers where she needed them. “Oh, your touch feels so good there on my cunt.”

In the quiet room, she actually heard him swallow.

And not in arousal.

He said softly, concern weighing his words, “Honey, you’re exhausted.”

She tossed her head and tsked. "That's a nice word for certifiably crazy with paranoia around the edges."

His turn to tsk. "You're as sane as me."

"From where I'm looking, you're wound a mite too tight. You could use some of my crazy." She leaned into his wide knuckles, until all four engaged her, the thumb tucked in out of the way.

"Laura, you lost your family. You're the only survivor in a horrific crime. Losing it doesn't make you crazy. Losing it makes you normal."

"Well, thanks for the vote of confidence." Hopefully, her flippancy would mask how his belief touched her. Hopefully, the sarcasm would hide her gratitude, cover her growing feelings for him. She would not put her problems on James! He was too fine a man to drag into the mess that was her life. "Now push, lover. I want your fist inside me."

But he didn't push. At the entrance to her pussy, his fist unfurled, his knuckles straightening, and his slick fingers, held tightly together, began to slowly enter her passage.

"James! I said your *fist*." How shrill she sounded.

"You'll get it when you're ready."

The most James had ever inserted was three digits. At first, her body struggled to accommodate the intrusion of four large fingers, with the thumb drawn into the palm to form a bird beak. But at his patient murmurings of "You're doing fine, just trust me and relax," her muscles lost their rigidity and loosened. Plus, James's in-charge attitude always excited her, and she liquefied at his firm tone of voice. He could deny his dominant tendencies all he liked; nevertheless, this was a man used to giving orders and having them obeyed. She could also tell that, despite his foot dragging, he wanted to fist her. Excitement glittered in his gray eyes. The thought of having his hand inside her aroused him. This lovely man wanted her and that was a heady realization.

Aroused by his arousal, exhilarated by a need that mirrored hers, she felt her body's token resistance flee and she swiftly adjusted to the fullness. When the hand inside her formed a loose fist, she threw back her head and cried in victory, even as her pussy throbbed at his ownership, even as the mouth of her passage burned. Whether or not he knew he was paining her, she couldn't say, but she did know he was enjoying the animalistic violence of the act as much, if not more, than she. His harsh, sexual grunt told her so. That grunt was a significant departure from his usual dignified manner.

As for herself, she'd just taken one more step farther away from the naïve young woman she'd once been, that vapid and spoiled and silly woman who had believed in love and fidelity, an immature snob as yet unscarred by the hand of evil. At any rate, it would appear that brutal sex was tapping into some primal vein within them both. Something dangerous inside her intended to provoke him further. She intended to push him to the sexual edge.

She started to move. Her breasts shifted to the beat of her dance. Her rear end pumped. Up and down.

“Fuck.” He grabbed her in back with his free hand, the span of his fingers enclosing a buttock. “Your ass. Your ass. I’m going crazy here.”

Now, he knew how she felt.

Laughing, she picked up her hair and held the mass over her head, and shimmied and writhed and pulsated, as his fingers clenched on her ass and his fist moved deeper inside her. When he pumped his arm, once, Lord, just once, she sobbed at the searing pressure, and spun out into the void, a leap into trust. She knew she could let go because James would be there upon her return. He wouldn’t desert her. Losing sight of her surroundings, conscious of only sensation, she came on an unladylike wail.

During the quiet after the storm, he cuddled her close. The hand that had fisted her, that had provided her with another devastating orgasm, was removed from her body. Rather than squeezing her ass, he now cupped her buttocks.

“I like you naked.” After the whispered admission, he settled her carefully into his lap.

A nice place to sit -- except for the huge bulge under her tush.

She bit his earlobe. “Let’s take care of that, hmm?” She straddled him, reached for his zipper.

“We’ve gotta be careful, honey. Accidents happen. I’ll go get a condom --”

“I told you, wrong time of the month.”

“Sperm don’t use a calendar, Laura.”

Listening to the complaints of her protesting pussy and his arguments, she compromised. “Remember your observation about my cum-worthy tits? How about backing up your compliment?” Like a good tour guide, she removed herself from his lap and led him back into the bedroom.

Flat on her back, her palms on the outside pressing inward, she plumped her average-sized breasts together. *Voilà!* Without breast augmentation surgery, she had gorge-deep cleavage.

Half-cute routine, other half genuine ignorance, she batted her lashes over the hills and valley of her chest and asked, “Is this how it’s done. Like so?”

In answer, he whipped off his tastefully staid clothes. “I’ll use lube.”

She eyed his immense erection with growing hunger. “No lube. Skin on skin.”

“Laura, listen to me for a minute --”

“I’m through listening. I’ve listened all of my life. I’ve been a good girl, done what I was told, played the outdated part of a demure and genteel Southern lady, and I’m sick of it. I want your real skin rubbing against my real skin. *No fucking lube.*” Real had suddenly become much more exciting than fantasy.



She could see conflicting emotion cross his face. Lust competed with consideration in James Stone, and those two emotions warred with one another for prominence.

She couldn't be more pleased that lust won the battle. His *prominence*, precum dripping, stuck out at a right angle to his body as he climbed aboard the bed.

And her.

The compliment of his undisguised appetite mitigated the humiliation of having his commendably toned thighs bracketing her less-than-toned body.

Lust might have taken the victory, but consideration had not been totally defeated. To spare her his weight, he held himself far up on his elbows as he thrust between her breasts.

His very vocal groaning more than compensated for the uncomfortable friction. His all-over tremors felt like an earthquake. The seismic proportions of his heaving touched her all the way down to her curled toes. She could tell he was quickly losing his staggering control.

And then "losing" moved to the past tense. He ejaculated, and then collapsed. Moving down her body, he pillowed his smoothly-shaven cheekbone on her belly. Breathing hard, he kissed her navel.

At his obvious pleasure, a pleasure her body had provided, pride filled her. But since she also wanted *him* to fill her, she wasn't about to let a little soreness stop her partying. She had a lot to prove and a limited time to do it.

"Fuck me hard," she ordered. "Don't let up. Unless -- your stamina hasn't returned? I understand some men take hours to recover their potency." She flung out the challenge, her brow arched.

Smiling from ear to ear, he sat up. And ignored the challenge. "Open your legs, honey. Show me your pretty pussy."

Oh, God. Not a good time. If her pussy looked as sore as it felt, he'd never agree to another round. "No," she said in her best snooty voice, her nose up in the air, a snobby Charleston socialite talking to a servant.

"Laura, I said open your legs and I meant open your legs."

When she didn't obey, he rolled her onto her side and spanked her bare bottom. And not a light and playful tap. This was a real disciplinary slap across the fullest part of her bottom.

The purr came out of nowhere and startled her. Her pussy throbbed, her backside smarted, and both vaguely -- well -- stimulated her. By the time he bent up her legs to her chin and opened her thighs, wide, she had already grown satisfyingly moist.

"Just as I suspected," he announced. "You're swollen. No more tonight."

Fortuitously, his arrogance escalated her excitement. She went from dewy moistness to dripping wetness. Reaching between her legs, she coated a finger with the evidence and held it up as proof. "See? I'm ready to see action."

He licked her flaunting finger. “Mmm. You taste fine. And I’m still giving you a shower, and putting you to bed.”

Cuddling her up into his arms, he headed for the bathroom.

## Chapter Twenty-two

James first turned on the shower and then placed Laura inside the glass enclosure.

Her eyes sparkled like blue diamonds. "Join me."

He folded his arms across his chest. "Will you be good if I do?" Water drops, clinging to the tips of her infinitely suckable nipples, taunted him.

"I told you, I'm done being good." Her hand snaked down her torso and disappeared between her shapely thighs. "Don't pretend you don't like me when I'm bad, James. I know you're not a liar."

No, he wasn't a liar, and her acknowledgement meant her trust was growing. Unfortunately, he was honest enough to admit being at the end of his limited ability to resist her. He did like her when she was bad, but he was also concerned for her.

Too concerned to leave her alone for even a minute.

He stepped inside the shower. "I'll wash you." He picked up the soap and lathered his hands with the bar.

"Yum! Lilac. Lately, I haven't enjoyed flowers very much, but that's one scent I still love. Lilacs don't grow well here in the heat of the South." She leaned back against him.

He could've started with her long graceful throat or her clearly defined collarbone or her perfectly straight tapered back. But no. His resistance weakening by the second, he filled his hands with her pert, cum-slick breasts. "You look beautiful in pearls."

She laughed. "Every well-bred socialite owns at least one necklace." When hers washed down the drain, she gave a wistful sigh. Then, she reached behind and palmed his balls.

He tightened immediately. "No more tonight, honey."

"We'll see about that," she gurgled under the shower's pulsating head.

The head of his cock was pulsating, too. When it came to Laura, he was so damn weak, he thought, washing her tits a little too strenuously, then moving down to knead her belly a little too vigorously.

She split her legs wide, and his hand sunk lower, soaping her light brown pubic curls, then cradling her cunt, his thumb circling, circling, the swollen lips.

“No.” The word came out strangled as he pushed back and away.

With a sexy coo, she placed her palms against the wall and brought her hips back.

The woman wouldn’t give up! She just wouldn’t take no for an answer.

He soaped up his hands again. His sudsy palms were all over her ass, his dick rising along with the bubbles in the stall. The shower filled with steam -- the heat of the water, the heat of their passion. Her skin was slippery, but in all honesty, that wasn’t why his finger slid into her ass crevice.

He rimmed her, a sexy tour of the dainty hole. Letting her know he meant business, he entered up to the knuckle. A middle finger fuck.

She bucked. “James --?”

“Shh.” To soothe her, he smoothed his other palm up and down her rounded spine. “Hush, now.”

“Oh, dear.” She went a little rigid when he pushed the finger up higher. “I don’t know about this --”

“Laura,” he said, quietly. “Just so you know, I’m taking it.”

“Oh?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Do you do anal with all your women?”

“Not all. Some of my -- uh -- dates preferred not to go there. And I’ve never really cared one way or the other. It was just sex. You’re the only woman I” -- he cleared his throat -- “had to have it with.”

“Does it hurt?”

“It can, if care isn’t taken. If the issue is forced. If the receiving partner doesn’t trust the giver.” One arm at her rib cage, shelving her unusually pointed breasts, he brought her back a little more. Not smack up against his cock, though. His finger was still lodged inside her ass. “Do you trust me, Laura?” He squeezed another finger inside her, added a third, and started the stretch.

She sucked in her breath and held it.

“Don’t,” he told her. “Breathe normally until right before I enter, then hold that breath, letting it out as I come into you.”

She nodded.

He pushed his fingers in and out of her ass, a slow and determined glide, getting her used to the penetration. "Like it?"

"I could," she said shyly.

He laughed and kissed her jaw. Everything about her turned him on, including her bouts of bashfulness. Even accounting for the heat of the water spray, he could see she was blushing.

He stopped the anal finger fuck and gave her ass a brisk smack. "That's enough for now." While she got herself together, he knelt at her feet to wash them, his hands moving up her legs, soaping his palms when necessary.

He'd given her long enough to recover. Back to business. "Turn around again, honey."

When she did, he opened her up in back.

"James!" With a squeal, she tried swatting his hands away.

He was having none of it. "Hold still, Laura."

"James, really --"

"Don't tell me no, after telling me yes," he reminded her.

"I'm not. It's just that --"

"You said you wanted it all, honey, and I'm gonna give you that all. Now, hold still."

He waited until she took that first step, until she stilled herself, before saying, "Now, bend over. Palms flat on the floor of the tub. I'll make sure you don't fall."

She stalled, then rounded. Hands on her knees eventually found their way to the porcelain, and he opened her again. Wider this time. "So sweet." No sense pretending he was backing off, when he wasn't backing off.

To get her used to his attention, he bathed her there, too. Then, sent his tongue inside, rimming her as he had done with his fingers.

"James, James, James," she groaned, but let him. She held still and let him do what pleased them both.

He took his time. No need to hurry when they were enjoying themselves under the warm water spray in the humid steam, both of them hot.

"Please, James," she begged. "Please?"

He pulled away, got to his feet, quit torturing them both. "Soon." He shut off the water. After drying all her nooks and crannies and shaking himself off, as well, he took her back into his bedroom. "You look tired, honey. Go to sleep now. I have a few things I gotta do the next room over, but I'll join you in a bit." He held up the corner of the covers. "Go on," he prompted. "Slip inside."

She gave a small embarrassed laugh. "I usually wear a nightgown to bed."

"Not this time."

She nodded meekly and lay down.

On her side. Not how he wanted her. "On your back, honey."

She rolled over, her damp hair, darkened from the shower, spread out like gold across the black satin pillow.

He smiled at the sexy prettiness of her. "Warm enough?"

"Yes."

"I won't cover you then. I want to look at you, honey."

Her eyes widened. "Look at me?"

"Yeah. Your pussy," he said, telling her the straight up truth about his addiction. "Spread open."

"Oh, my." She blushed. "While I'm sleeping, you'll look at me -- there?"

"Yeah. I can't seem to stop looking at you. There. Or touching you. There."

His honey's lids were growing heavy with sleep, so he helped her get settled the way he wanted. The way he had to have her. She didn't protest when he took one ankle and then the other and separated her legs until he could see everything at a glance. The notch in front. The dimple behind. The light brown curls. "Goodnight, Laura," he said softly, and backed out of the room, his gaze between her legs.

The next time he checked in on her, Laura was sound asleep. After the fourth such occasion, he gave up trying to resist her pull. So as not to disturb her, he crept into the room, taking a seat beside her on the bed. He had pulled on a pair of pants, but unzipped the fly, and got himself out. At this point, she'd been out like a light for hours, and frankly, he had suffered a major hard-on the same amount of time.

No, he'd put up with a hard-on longer than that. His arousal had pretty much started at first sight and had yet to let up. She pained him, and he loved her. God's truth, he did. But he wouldn't be a man if he didn't also want into her cunt.

He touched her while she slept. Tits, soft with sleep. Belly, concave and sexy. Cunt, silky and wet and rosy pink. As he lightly fondled her, she moaned a little but didn't stir. His eye on the slit, open and dewy, but still sex-swollen, he took his eager dick in hand.

She had no reason to worry about his potency. With the right woman, he could go all night without quitting. Laura was the right woman.

As climax approached, he pulled a washrag out of his pocket. Another upward jerk and he came into its folds. The hand-job took the edge off. Afterwards, he climbed into bed behind her and took her into his arms, holding the woman he loved next to his heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the first rays of morning light streamed into the room, Laura wiggled her bottom to get her lover's attention.

"Mmm," he muttered, still half asleep. "That feels fine."

"I know what will feel finer." To show him that she'd slept off her shyness, she scrambled up onto her hands and knees, her breasts toppling, her thighs spread, her pussy open and slick with her excitement, her bottom slightly lifted. To hell with ladylike inhibitions!

A drawer open and closed. The mattress creaked under his weight as James got up behind her on the bed. As he dropped a kiss on her bare shoulder, his thick cock brushed against her thigh. To prove she was all systems go, she rubbed against his jutting erection, until the seeping head nestled between her bottom cheeks.

His "Ah" sounded hoarse. Strained. Excited.

As his cock prodded her, she bit her lip. Doubts crept in. The same doubts she'd had in the shower. He was *so* large.

But this might be their last chance. *Her* last chance to explore every facet of lovemaking, the sweet along with the edgy. Soon, James would be returning to Boston.

It was for his own good, but selfishly, she missed him already. Besides, how long could they go on like this? This arrangement was never meant to be anything more than temporary.

It was just that...James infused her with his strength. She was so tired of always feeling scared and weak -- and alone. Making love with James made her feel like a whole woman. Stepping outside her sheltered upbringing satisfied her sense of adventure, a facet of her personality she had suppressed for years. With James, she didn't need to hide her true self. He was the most accepting person she had ever known.

But this was anal sex! If this were anyone else but James, she'd never consider it. That fact that it was *him* made all the difference.

Her jaunty tone hopefully hiding her serious case of the 'fraidy cats, she said, "My ass is yours."

"An agreeable lady," he grunted. "My total fantasy."

And James, conversely, was slowly but surely becoming her total reality.

She clung to the realness of him. She had some horrific memories, but unlike them, she would treasure this recollection of their time spent together. "I'm ready."

She wanted him to hurry! Before she lost her nerve. But James, a fundamentally careful man, took his time with her introduction to the path less traveled. His teasing driving her wild with longing, he circled her opening with his lubed finger for what felt like an eternity before entering. Under his guidance, her misgivings fled, replaced with urgency, with immediacy, with impatience. She practically screamed, "Now, James, now!"

Finally, he started to make them one in a way she had never expected to be one with a man.

Anal. No woman in her old circle of society friends had ever breathed the word. In no uncertain terms, this sexual act, more than any other, told her she was no longer part of that uptight, country club circle.

A pop, then a push, liberated her from her past, and he was inside her that first little bit. Surprisingly, rather than rebel against the invasion, her body wrapped itself around his cock and drew him in deeper, until he was planted as far as he would go, until her ass was stuffed with James.

So shockingly vulgar!

So painfully real. She was on hands and knees before him, and James was inside her, his big hands rubbing her shoulders, her back, kneading her belly, squeezing her breasts, his fingers rubbing into her pussy, and then forcing those same fingers between her lips, into her mouth.

She sucked her own juices off his fingers!

No man had ever owned her so entirely, or would ever do so again.

When he withdrew his hand, she raised her jaw and moaned her distress. What she had done was catching up with her. There was no going back, no claiming ignorance of the dark side of passion, not with a cock inside her ass.

Would he climax inside her, too? Or, would he withdraw, depositing his semen between her buttocks?

“You took all of me,” he growled, a masculine boast. One hand on her hipbone, holding her in position, the other now manipulating her clitoris, he started to move. Not thrust. A tempered in and out glide.

James was enjoying it, she could tell by his heavy breathing, by the guttural sounds he was making. She was also making sounds. Mewling. Moaning! The positioning, the unaccustomed fullness, her conflicting emotions about this descent into abandon, were so intense. Achieving climax seemed an impossible goal. Until she started to lose herself in the hypnotic rhythm of sex. Letting go of her initial misgivings, her conflicting emotions, too, she started to move with him, uninhibitedly straining toward pleasure with him, a woman stripped of everything extraneous, a woman stripped bare, a woman unafraid of any sexual taboo.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she cried, reaching for fulfillment, striving to make it her own, rocking against him, her wildly swinging breasts moving to the beat they made together.

“Ah, ah, ah,” she groaned in a frenzy, clutching at the building pleasure until it was all hers. She screamed at the end, and he shouted right after, his semen a hot burst inside her buttocks.

He hadn’t spared her anything, not even pleasure.

Afterwards, he didn’t immediately withdraw. He stayed inside her, gently moving, both hands now clenched on her hips. He laughed deep in his throat. “You’re the best,



honey.” He continued to engage her, not letting her forget what she had done, and what she would still do.

“Push back against me, honey. Yeah, that’s right,” he said, when she did, when she pushed her buttocks against his cock, until the penetration was unimaginably deep. He started thumbing her clit, his fingers invading her pussy, all four digits up inside her, his cock up inside her buttocks, wave after wave of sensation washing over her.

“Oh, James, oh, James,” she panted, and, yes, impossible as it seemed, came again.

Afterwards, she hung her head, unable to go on.

But he was still inside her, his hand and cock still moving inside her.

“Please, James, I can’t...”

“You can,” he insisted.

Perspiration drenched, she started to cry. Tears rolling down her face, she fought down that reticent part of herself and went with it, a woman at her limit, a woman willing to do anything for her man.

James was her man.

“Harder,” he growled.

And she rocked harder, until she was screaming in orgasm and her ass had captured every last drop of his cum, wringing him dry, as he had told her she would do.

With a long drawn-out sigh, he withdrew.

She did, too, withdrawing into herself, as she fell forward.

“No. Stay,” he ordered.

She came back up, holding the all-fours positioning, as his cum trickled out of her and streamed down the backs of her legs.

His terms now. She had agreed to this, as he had agreed to no condom. They had reached a mutual and beneficial arrangement of sorts.

The drawer opened and closed again, and something was inserted into her anus.

He moved that something. “Comfortable?”

Oh, God. No! She was not comfortable, not with any of this.

And she wanted it never to stop.

How to say such a thing?

She couldn’t. The sensation was incredibly naughty, and unlike anything she had ever known, and she couldn’t put her need into words. But unable to prevent herself, she did wordlessly wiggle her hips, drawing out the sensation, making the naughtiness last.

He chuckled. Groaned. Handled her hair. Understood! “I know you want to again. But let’s give your body a chance to adjust and me a chance to recoup. Why don’t we try this instead?”

Another something, an unbearably wicked, incredibly large, something, was pushed into her pussy from the rear.

Aghast at the double insertion, she cried, "W-what are they?"

The lips of her passage felt stretched. He must have known she was experiencing some discomfort over the fit because he began to massage her where the foreign *thing* entered her body. "An anal plug and a pussy dildo."

*Oh...*

Should she laugh or cry at this new initiation?

Both.

As he moved the plug and the dildo, and she giggled and wept.

Then, he placed her hand around what protruded. "You do it."

No! She didn't want this. Didn't want to take an active role; she wanted him to take charge!

But she didn't argue. His terms.

While he masturbated her with the plug, she reluctantly used the dildo.

"That's right," James said. "That's right. Honey, you're a terror in bed."

She basked in his approval. Soon, she was writhing. Sobbing. Whimpering her way to yet another fulfillment.

A very vocal fulfillment, followed by her collapsing face first on the bed.

Unable to stay awake, within seconds, she fell into a peaceful sleep.

## Chapter Twenty-three

“Hello, Mr. Stone.”

James looked up from his desk to find Laura peeking in at him from the door of his office. Her hair pillow-mussed, her lips kiss-swollen, her eyes all velvety. She was decked out in the black satin sheet from his bed, which, at his close inspection, she wrapped tighter under her arms. Still shy. Still bashful.

That nonsense had to end. He enjoyed looking at her. Voyeuristically. Not so voyeuristically. And she better get used to it.

No time like the present.

James pushed back in his chair. “Lower it, honey.”

“The sheet?”

He nodded. “Show me your sexy tits.”

The covering dropped to her waist.

“Mmm.” Under the cover of his desk top, his hand went to his lap, to the erection that refused to quit. “Your nipples make me hard every time I see them.”

“I’m small on top, James.”

“You’re just right everywhere, Laura. Especially your cunt. Show me that sweet place between your legs, honey.”

She lowered the black sheet to her notch. Just to the notch.

He grinned. No longer shy, she was teasing him with the draped cloth. He couldn’t be more pleased. “Such a pretty slit. Open it up. Gotta see your clit. Oh, and use both hands.”

“Ogre.” Despite her name calling, she was damn quick to let the black satin puddle on the floor.

“Very nice. Wet, too, from the looks of things. Now, turn around, honey.”

She did, but meekly.

He understood why. The anal plug. She wasn't used to sex toys. But she would be. Soon. He had plenty of tricks up his sleeves for curious Laura.

"I need to go home, James." Her shoulders hunched. "For a change of clothes."

"While you were sleeping, I bought you a couple of outfits downstairs in the lobby boutique. I'm pretty sure the sizes are all correct. 34B bra, small panties, size 5 dress." He paused. "You can turn around now."

Her chin lowered, she looked up at him from under her lashes. "Do you buy all your ladies new clothes after spending a night with you?"

"No. Not all."

"Only those who give you anal?"

He knew Laura had begun to trust him. Still, that question was laden with insecurity.

To bolster her flagging self-confidence, he revealed his own underlying insecurities. "Laura, I've never felt such an overpowering urge to possess someone completely, not until you. There's no need to feel embarrassed about anything we do together." And that is what her second thoughts were about: The wildness of their sexual escapades had embarrassed genteel Laura.

There was no room in love for embarrassment.

He loved Laura. But the time wasn't right to tell her so, not until he had proven himself to her. Right now, his love would only be an additional burden on her already burdened shoulders. She *thought* she wanted only fun and games from him, and until such time that she could accept more from him than sex, he would keep his love to himself.

And his sex all for her.

"Come here," he said.

She padded over on bare feet. "Yes?"

By temperament, he wasn't a Dom. But, in this moment in time, because Laura needed dominance in the bedroom to feel safe and secure, he gave her dominance. Hopefully, that would soon change, and their lovemaking would reflect an equalization of power, a shift he both welcomed and dreaded. A part of him found their present situation eminently satisfying. And, he had to admit, exciting, too. Her dependence had brought her closer to him. Her need to explore sex kept her in his bed, just where he wanted her, just where he could keep her safe.

He placed his hand possessively on her belly, and then, because he couldn't help himself, moved that same hand to her ass, capturing a cheek, fondling the roundness, his fingers moving into the crevice.

He loved Laura, purely and righteously. But he lusted over her ass as he had never lusted over anything before in his whole fucking life. Smarts and ambition had taken him far,

but what he was feeling was all primal and primitive, the stuff that cavemen must have felt about their women. He'd lay down his life for her, kill to protect her, take on any friend or foe who tried moving in on her. She belonged to him completely now, and no one and nothing was taking her away from him.

Christ, the scent of her sex almost made him come; fucking her occupied his every thought. She had given him all of herself, the finest gift a man could receive. If she didn't love him, she never would have done that.

He moved his hand around to her pussy. A reach between her legs and he was cradling her cunt. "I can't get enough of you, Laura."

Her legs fell open. "I feel the same way."

Yeah, she did. Laura liked the sex. A lot. He knew she'd let him have her again. And he would take what she offered. "You're not the only one vulnerable here, honey. I need to know you're completely mine. That plug tells me so."

"Oh, James," she said softly.

"Oh, Laura," he said just as softly and then playfully smacked her ass. "Now go back to the bedroom. I'll be right in."

With a radiant smile, she hurried away.

\* \* \* \* \*

She must have fallen asleep again. When she awakened, refreshed but not satiated, she found James in the room. He stood against the far wall, and he was staring between her legs.

Her widely spread legs.

While she slept, James must have removed the coverlet and then arranged her body in its present pose.

She started to close her thighs.

"No, honey. Stay like that."

"I must look so unsightly."

"Beautiful," James said, and dropped his pants to the floor. He was already erect.

She had done that. She had made a gorgeous man hard, just from looking. The stuff of fantasy.

The stuff of her present reality.

James approached the bed. "Your clit looks like a little dick."

As usual, he discussed her private parts as he would the weather.

He cupped her breasts, one at a time, and his penis rose up from its wiry nest of black hair, a lie detector test if ever there was one. Despite the dents and scars crisscrossing her

body, he found her attractive! He was stroking her ego along with her body, and her nipples hardened in response.

“There’s a bite mark on the right nipple. I noticed the bruise during your visit to my office.” James looked penitent. “I got carried away.”

“Get carried away again.”

He barked a laugh. “You’re my lusty Southern peach.”

He ventured lower to finger between her legs. Watching her closely, he applied pressure to her clit.

While she gasped out an unintelligible “Oh-oh-oh” James started moving her plug.

Stimulated beyond belief, she went into a spasm.

“Your cunt is off limits to Gerry or to any other man. And your ass is all mine. As for these succulent lips.” He thumbed her mouth. “I’ll take out any man who gets close, understand?”

She couldn’t speak, except to say, “Come to bed, James.”

## Chapter Twenty-four

Laura was still obviously exhausted, so he decided to hold her in his arms until her eyes closed. "Sleep is the best thing for you."

"No," she disagreed. "You're the best thing for me." She flipped over onto her belly, and then kneeled the mattress, getting up into the doggie position.

Her arms spread out before her, her back lengthened and leveling, her legs spread, just the way he liked, she looked over her shoulder at him. "Will you remove the plug, please?"

He'd left the open tube of lube on top of the nightstand. A few seconds, and he'd be ready to go.

"I need it hard, James. Don't hold anything back."

She had upped the ante, and he swallowed back his qualms.

And his anticipation.

No excuses, he wanted to give it to her hard. Laura got through to all his places, including the dark ones he didn't like to think about. "I won't hold back. I'll give it to you as hard as you can take it."

Discoloration, caused from his hands -- administration of discipline, rough playfulness -- stained the pale white flesh of her ass in angry stripes. He moved in behind her, and laid his lips to the marks, then his teeth.

She groaned. "Oh, God, yes."

He bit her, another mark to add to her collection, then came up. "I won't break through the skin, Laura. I won't cause you lasting hurt." That said, he pinched the pointed end of her bruised nipple. Hard. Not holding anything back, as he removed the plug from between her buttocks. "Hold."

When, ignoring his order, she wiggled her hips, done to get him going, he left her to withdraw the belt from the loops of his discarded pants.

His hands on her sides, he dragged her to the edge of the bed. "You disobeyed me, Laura." Rounding the leather over onto itself, he brought the belt down. He gave her five, the strap landing across the fullest part of her ass, as she cooed out her first orgasm. "Next time, you get ten, honey."

Without further preamble or foreplay, he shot to the hilt.

She bucked and strained, tried to crawl away, managed to escape several inches, but with his dick still up inside her a scant amount, she was stuck to him.

He looked down at their connection, at his dark flesh, the veins swelling, pulsating, lodged between her ass cheeks.

He pulled the lubed head out.

"Don't leave me, James."

"I won't, honey." Gripping her hip, to hold her in place, he went back in. Slow. Measured. Watching that male part of himself as it sunk into her.

"Oh, James." Tears saturated her voice. "Oh, James. I feel so full."

He struggled for control. "Where? Where do you feel full?"

"My ass." She groaned. "You're all the way up inside me. Deeper than before."

He pressed his palm against her forehead, which forced her body to meld even closer to his groin. "Where else?" he asked, though he already knew.

"My clit." She started to pant. "When you strapped me, my clit started to burn. Even after I came, the burn is still there. Help me, James."

He ground his teeth against the tight sensation; her body held him like a vise. "Don't fight it. Go with it. Move with it." He began pumping his hips. Not gliding like before, not thrusting like before. He hammered her. The kind of pounding his honey couldn't have expected.

"Yes, yes, yes," she sang as he worked her over, worked her over hard.

She was sweating, her blonde hair sticking to her nape. He dragged her up from her all-fours positioning to her knees before him. Giving her no room to retreat from the force of his penetration, he rammed his dick up higher inside her ass. His arms crossed over her tits, he bit back against the force of his own pleasure, and concentrated on pleasuring her.

When her body snapped like bow, he knew she was getting close.

"Scream," he ordered.

He thumbed her clit, and she went off with a shriek.

He pulled out without taking his. Something told him he'd need his juice for later.

\* \* \* \* \*



“Well,” she said, much, much later. “I think that about covers it all. I think we’ve done everything. What else could possibly be left?”

James turned her onto her back and peered straight into her eyes. “Love,” he said soulfully and kissed her. “Love is left. I love you, Laura.”

“You love me?” And she thought *she* had lost *her* mind.

He sighed. “Right from the very first.”

Highly improbable. But from the looks of his cock, making love was more than a little probable.

Rather than return the sentiment, Laura said “Fuck me” instead.

“Only if I can look into your eyes,” he negotiated.

“Agreed.” Life came down to compromise. “But only if we do it skin to skin,” she said, putting forth her condition again. Tactile contact told her this was real, not fantasy. At times, she still had her doubts that any of this was happening.

Especially, when he replied, “Agreed, my love.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“How long can you keep this up?” Laura asked him.

“Indefinitely.”

A relative concept. He was shooting to hang in for another twenty minutes or so. Longer, and his heart would give out, never mind his dick.

They had left the bed only for food, had only caught a few winks of sleep between steadily protracted bouts of sex. Currently, they faced one another amid the lust-rumbled sheets. Sitting up, their legs entangled, both of them naked, the scent of sex surrounding them, connected by his cock, which he moved inside her every once and a while. He couldn’t get enough of seeing himself there, delving into her, the dark flesh of his meat penetrating her pink pussy lips. He particularly liked withdrawing all the way out, and then laying pipe. Slowly. Feeding just the head back into her first. Then, when she cussed him out for his delay, he gave her the rest, until he had seated himself inside her as far as he could go, and his honey was hissing for more.

He lusted after her splendid ass, but he worshipped her insatiable cunt.

She had to be sore, though. He was sore. But still, neither of them would quit.

He grunted. “Tighten your muscles again like I showed you.”

She did.

Her breaths were coming in spurts, her tits rising in falling with increasing agitation. Growing rapture tightened her face and she started to writhe.

He almost spilled at the sight.

One more stroke and he'd come. He wanted to come. He didn't want to come. Coming meant leaving her body. Not coming meant more of this agony.

"We have to give in," she said hoarsely, her bottom lifting off the bed, her pelvis tilting.

"You go first," he bargained.

"No, together," she arbitrated.

And they did, his cum hotly streaming into her, their shouts ricocheting off the walls in unison. The sex had taken a shift from D/s to equality, and he couldn't be happier.

Until she made up her mind to jump off the bed and head for the bathroom.

That brought out the latent Dom in him. "Get back here! What about the afterglow?"

"I agreed to speak to Gerald tonight, and I need to bathe first."

His mouth hardened. "No bath."

"James, be reasonable. I'm coated with cum."

"I marked my territory, staked my claim, and you are not washing my ownership off in the tub. You carry my scent, dammit."

"I smell like sex," she yelled.

He roared right back, "Good. Sex is how I want you to smell."

Her voice lowered a pitch. "No need to be jealous. I don't love Gerald anymore."

His heart stopped beating.

Too afraid to ask her to repeat what she had said, he growled, "Go take a bath."

He followed her inside, watched while she sat daintily on the toilet and peed, watched her pat dry, watched her get into the tub.

He turned on the tap. "Why do you need to talk to Gerry?"

"I told you, he cheated on me, which he denies, but I have proof."

Proof that Paul was investigating. When the hell would he call?

"Gerald asked to see what I had. I owe him that much."

James sat on the tub rim, watching her bathe his cum away. "You're mine, Laura." His hand started to tell her so, a fact that bore repeating until she came and came and...

Came to believe it was real.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Was that Gerry you were talking to on the phone?" James leaned against the connecting door to the bedroom, where Laura had gone to retrieve her clothes. He had stayed behind in the bathroom, mostly to get a grip on his raging sex drive.

He wanted her again.

Laura stopped combing her wet hair. "Yes. That was Gerald. I called to tell him the plans had changed. Originally, I agreed to meet him in the guesthouse." Her gaze shifted away. "But I decided to speak with him at the mansion instead." She looked back at him and smiled. "I managed to face some of my fears. My family home no longer frightens me."

"Good, honey," he said, while thinking something else was frightening her now. What? Why wouldn't she talk to him, dammit!

"You don't owe that jerk anything," he said, losing his cool and shouting.

"According to my doctors, I'll never move on with my life until I let go of the past. Gerald is part of that past."

"I'll go with you."

"No. I know you want to help, but I have to stand on my own two feet."

Her ferocity took him aback for a second, and then filled him with renewed respect. Laura was a fighter.

So was he. And he was going with her to see Gerald, even if he had to tie her to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Teddy Bear had taken his share of hard lumps through the years. His bow tie had faded, his fur was matted in some places, missing in others. He had been with her through thick and thin. Even on a tumble down a flight of stairs, even through all her subsequent hospitalizations, even when she left the guesthouse after it was ransacked. And he was still with her on her return home to the mansion. Covered up in a pillowcase, stripped from James's bed, Teddy Bear rode in Laura's arms.

Perhaps doing so was cowardly, but she hadn't told James good-bye. At least not in person. Since he seemed unwilling to listen to reason on the subject of Gerald, she'd left her lover a good-bye note on the bathroom mirror. Mimicking the note he had left her in the Old Exchange, she scribbled the message in pink.

Pink lipstick, not pink liquid soap.

Laura keyed the door to mansion and stepped inside. Gerald would arrive any moment, and she wanted to be ready for him.

Four years before, a fall had broken her body, but it had taken a man to break her spirit. Gerald's infidelity had left a lingering mark on her, as real as the scars on her hip, as real as the metal pin holding that bone together. For the most part, her injuries had healed, but her spirit remained shattered.

Even if Gerald could explain away his infidelity, there was no going back. She no longer loved him. Didn't even know if such a thing as love existed. Was love real or fantasy?

James told her he loved her, but that was just sex talking. To believe in love, she would need solid proof, as real as the red coaster in Teddy Bear's pocket.

The night of her aborted engagement party, she had cried herself to sleep hugging Teddy -- after placing the proof of Gerald's unfaithfulness in the stuffed animal's hidden compartment. And there it remained to this day.

When the doorbell rang, Laura fingered the pocket. She would show Gerald her proof and see what he had to say. And then, after he left, she would address who had broken into the guesthouse. Someone, as James had said, was "gunning" for her, and she intended to find out whom.

And not by involving the police.

Her dealings with the authorities had left her feeling like a criminal. In four years, they hadn't produced one suspect in the murders of her parents -- other than herself. She had no faith in the police.

But her faith in herself was returning.

Four years ago, she'd been the victim, and for four years she allowed herself to continue to be victimized.

No longer.

With the money she made from the sale of the estate, she would hire a private investigator. She'd get to the bottom of who had killed her parents if it took her last dime.

And her last breath.

## Chapter Twenty-five

James sat at his desk, unable to work, unable to do anything but think of Laura meeting with Gerry later on that night.

When a rap interrupted his brooding, he yelled, "Get your butt in here, Paul."

"Boss, I found out about that prostitute who worked the Kit Kat Bar in Florida."

*"Ask for 'Star.' 7pm. 8/19. Sommerville Hotel. Rm. 704. \$250 for the works, BJ included."*

Laura had quoted him that line, the same sentence he had given to Paul to investigate. "Go on."

Paul came right to the point. "I heard back from my sources. A hooker named Melissa Morton, alias Star, was murdered four years ago, the night of August 19th, in Room 704 at the Sommerville Hotel in Miami, Florida. Time of death, approximately 8pm."

Gerald Du Pointe had supposedly been with the prostitute an hour earlier. Coincidence?

Maybe.

"The murderer left a heart on the bathroom mirror," Paul continued, "Drawn in pink crayon. A romantic killer, eh?"

James vacated his chair. Enough of giving Laura space. He was marching himself into his bedroom and telling her he intended to be there when she met with Gerry that night.

"Where you going, Boss?"

"To see my future wife."

Only Laura wasn't in his bedroom. The bathroom, then...

James spied the message, written in pink, from the threshold.

*My heart isn't nearly as nice as the one you left for me  
at the Old Exchange, but it's yours. I love you.*

*Laura*

She loved him?

Wait! He hadn't left Laura a heart at the Old Exchange!

James rushed back out, raced for the hotel door, yelled to Paul as he left the suite. "I'm going to the Beaumont estate. Give me ten minutes lead time. If you don't hear from me by then, send the cops to the mansion."

Paul followed him out into the hall. "You carrying?"

James shook his head. "My bare hands are all I'll need."

\* \* \* \* \*

Inside the living room, Gerald leaned forward, as though to kiss her lips, and Laura ducked, his lips brushing her cheek instead.

"You look tired, darling." Concern darkened his eyes. "Have you been sleeping?"

"Like a log." She indicated a chair. "Won't you please take a seat?"

"I prefer the couch. That way, we can sit together."

Ignoring his preferences, she sank into the wingback chair. Teddy sat beside her on the floor. "Gerald, four years ago I broke off our engagement due to your infidelity."

"I never cheated on you. That's your delusion speaking." His voice, lowered to mollify, contained a wealth of sincerity. "I love you. Despite your obvious mental collapse, I'll still marry you."

"Well, thank you for your willingness to overlook my craziness." She folded her hands in her lap. "But, we're over, Gerald. We were finished four years ago when you went to a prostitute during a business trip to Miami."

"How many times must I say it? I did not go to a prostitute. The very idea that a man of my caliber, of my standing in the community, would pay for sex, shows the extent of your mental health problems!"

"I have evidence."

"So you keep saying. Show me."

She brought Teddy onto her lap.

"A toy?" He laughed. "You really are certifiable --"

She unzipped the hidden pocket under Teddy's bowtie. Reaching into the shallow compartment with two fingers, she withdrew the coaster placed there four years ago before

sobbing herself to sleep. “Here’s my evidence, and I quote: ‘*Ask for Star. 7pm. 8/19. Sommerville Hotel. Rm. 704. \$250 for the works, BJ included.*’”

Gerald sprang from the chair. “Give that to me.”

Stunned, Laura couldn’t move as he ripped the proof of his unfaithfulness from her hand.

He stood over her, brushed his long golden hair back from his high forehead. “So, that’s where you kept the coaster. No wonder I couldn’t find it when I searched the house after your little accident.”

“Accident? Y-y-you searched the house --?” *And why are you telling me this?*

“Stupid twat. You’ve caused me a great deal of trouble when you found this in my raincoat pocket.”

*Twat?* Gerald never used coarse language.

Then, the rest of his words registered, and her jaw dropped. “You saw me?”

“You always were a clumsy cow! You dropped the coaster on the floor as you hung my raincoat up to dry in the mudroom, leaving me no choice but to push you down the stairs after dealing with your doting parents. They never liked me, you know. Their animosity toward me made killing them easier.”

“You killed them? You killed my parents?”

“You left me no choice,” he said, sounding quite reasonable. “I didn’t know what you had told them. I couldn’t very well have any messy ties to that slut’s death lying about to incriminate me, now could I?”

*Was Gerald insane?*

“When I wrapped my hands around her throat and squeezed, she never even fought me. That whore deserved to die.” He chortled like a maniac. “Star. What a joke. She couldn’t even give a decent blowjob.”

Dazed, unable to believe what he was saying, Laura repeated his previous assertion. “You killed my parents?”

“With an axe, conveniently left by the door. And now I’ll kill you. A suicide. Poor thing. In a deep depression over your guilty conscience, you took your own life. A hanging from your girlhood bedroom’s antique chandelier.” He flicked a piece of lint from his polo shirt. “You should have died when I pushed you down the stairs, and saved me this present aggravation. I was about to finish the job when the cleaning team interrupted. But, no matter. That’s all in the past. Your new boyfriend will testify that you’ve been acting strangely. Plus, bystanders who overheard our little tête-à-tête on the street and during our recent drink together will know I also voiced my concerns over your erratic behavior. You’re quite mad, you know.”

Gerald smiled an oily smile. "Otherwise, what would you possibly see in that James Stone? So what, he owns a string of premier hotels. He's still a street punk. Dangerous, too, I'm guessing, from the back alley looks of him."

He peered into her astonished eyes. "You told him about discovering the axe on the floor, didn't you? Don't bother denying it. I saw Stone's arrival from the bushes. Of course, he didn't find anything. I removed the axe as soon as you left. So disappointing, you didn't have a psychotic breakdown on the spot, as I had planned. And before you ask how I managed to get in the house without a key, the mansion's back window has a faulty latch. Really, darling, that latch should be changed. A security issue, you know."

Of all of his crazed utterances, only one phrase truly penetrated her shock.

"You killed my parents!" she screamed, and lunged for him.



## Chapter Twenty-six

Instinct made James try the door. When the knob turned in his hand, his gut told him to enter the mansion without making any announcement.

He was big, but events in his past had taught him how to move soundlessly. Above his shallow breathing, he heard them. Laura and Gerald Du Pointe. Their moans and grunts led him up the stairs to the hallway outside what he gathered was Laura's girlhood bedroom.

His mind interpreted their rolling around on the pink satin spread as a rough bout of sex. His heart breaking, his fury and jealousy spiking, he hung back, did nothing, just stood there silently as the woman he loved got it on with her former boyfriend.

By the time he understood a bout of rough sex was in actuality Laura struggling for her life, Gerald Du Pointe had almost succeeded in killing her.

Leaping through the air, he tackled the murderous bastard. After James got him off Laura, Du Pointe rolled off the bed onto the floor.

The bastard had hurt Laura and James was killing the bastard.

His fists came down, and kept coming down.

Until, all James saw was red.

Blood red. Drops splattering his white shirt.

Until, all James felt was the urge to destroy.

Bones breaking. Cartilage exploding under the slamming force of his knuckles.

Until, all James heard were the tears of someone crying nearby.

Laura! Her sharp weeping cutting through his numbing rage.

He looked up, their eyes met.

Hers pleaded. "Don't. Don't. Please don't kill him. If you kill him, the act will destroy you."

But the violence in him refused to wane.

James reached for Laura, pulled her close, held onto her as though his life and sanity depended upon her.

Because they did.

She went limp against his chest. "Gerald murdered my parents."

He smoothed her hair, his bloodstained hands smearing the pale strands crimson. "I know, honey."

"He intended to murder me, too, and make it look like suicide."

Sirens wailed outside, a killer moaned, and James felt his rage escalate.

Du Pointe deserved to die. Why hadn't he killed the bastard when he'd had the chance?

"Hold me, just hold me. I need you to hold me," the woman he loved sobbed into his shirt.

And James had his answer.

## Epilogue

The party to celebrate the opening of the Crepe Myrtle Inn was in full swing. Paul was working the crowded ballroom, three beautiful models clinging to his every word --

And various body parts.

James couldn't be happier for him. Or for himself.

Laura graced his arm. Laura. His beautiful, composed, brave Laura. Looking like a goddess in her white, off-the-shoulder gown, she had swept into the ballroom, greeting the mayor and hotel maids alike with the same gracious charm. He was so proud of her.

He'd come a long way from his humble beginnings, but every achievement, every accomplishment, paled in comparison to what Laura had overcome tonight. Conquering her fears, she'd climbed a steep flight of stairs to be at his side, and she'd done so smiling. At him.

Today, she was doing a lot of smiling. Lots of laughing, too. Like now.

"What's so funny?" he grumbled over the sounds of her hilarity. "Do I have something green stuck between my teeth?"

"My physical therapist called today to see how I was doing. Knowing I had a problem in the area, during the conversation, she suggested one of those stair machines." She chortled. "I'll call her back tomorrow and tell her there's no further need." Her eyes danced. "I'm free, James. Finally free. As of tonight, my past no longer imprisons me."

He squeezed her hand. "You better not classify me as part of your past."

She looked away.

"Laura, you'd damned well better classify me as part of your future. I didn't want to speak until after the party broke up, but I can't wait. I love you, you love me, so marry me, Laura."

"Why?"

"Many reasons, but the one right at the top is the way you kept me sane when I felt that sanity drip away in a puddle of another man's blood. Because of you, I let the police do their jobs. I didn't kill Gerald Du Pointe."

"And because of you, I faced that same man and refused to die. I fought back. He dragged me up those stairs to my bedroom, and I resisted on every step. For the first time in four years, I realized I actually did want to live!" She took a deep breath. "During my meeting with Gerald in the bar, he slipped."

"Slipped?"

"Yes. He asked to see the coaster. The *coaster*! My unconscious caught that Gerry would have had no way of knowing about the coaster, unless he knew more than he was letting on, because I never revealed my proof to him or to anyone else. Rather than confront the horror that he might've had some connection to the killings, I blocked it out. Not amnesia, per se, more like disassociation from the horror of the truth. I couldn't face that reality. That horrible fear. And so I ran to you. No one else. You."

Because of Laura, because he trusted in her forgiveness, he swallowed his own fears. "I have a confession to make --"

"Have you been following me again, James Stone?"

"No!"

She narrowed her eyes.

"All right, yeah, I did follow you. But only to the store today, and that was only because I wanted to make sure the corsage would match your gown."

She touched the sprig of lilacs at her pale shoulder. "I've always loved lilacs --"

"We'll take in Lilac Sunday at the Arboretum in Jamaica Plain next spring, don't you worry. That is, if you still want to go with me after I tell you what I need to tell you."

"Me? Up North? Next spring? But you bought the estate from me with the stipulation that I would oversee the mansion's conversion and running as one of your smaller boutique inns."

"I'm getting to that. Trust me."

"I do trust you, James."

He became somber. "But for a minute I didn't trust you. That's my confession. When I heard noises coming from your bedroom, I thought you and Du Pointe were..." He took deep breath, but his courage deserted him. In fear of losing her, he just couldn't admit the truth. He hung his head. "I should never have doubted you, Laura, even for a minute."

Going up on tiptoe, she kissed his lips. He tried to make the kiss last, but she moved away. "We need time to get to know one another. The reality of one another, not the fantasy of one another. And then there's your family to consider."

He talked over her. "They'll love you at first sight, just like I did."

“James, real, remember? Not fantasy. I have no doubt that your family will meet me with an open heart and mind, but let’s not cram our relationship down their throats with a marriage license. Go back home, James. Tell your family about us. Families are to be cherished. It’s only a brief separation. Trust in our love.”

He brought her hand to his mouth, pressed his lips to her knuckles. “I can’t leave you. Don’t you get it? You’re brave and strong. I knew that from the first glance, but I’m not. Marry me. Just marry me. Please? Everything will be all right in the end.”

Falling into his arms, she said the two words he needed to hear.

“The end.”

He realized something then. A very important something. This wasn’t the end, not for them. This was only the beginning. And all James could think was --

Bring it.

THE END

## **Louisa Trent**

I am a writer raised in a family of storytellers. My earliest and fondest memory is of my Irish Nana relating a mystical story of a man looking in a window upon a beautiful lady whose long silvery hair swept the floor as she walked. With a simple telling, my grandmother drew me into her tale. A man. A woman. A forbidden love that wouldn't die. From opening word to shivery conclusion, I lived that story with her. Many years later, I'm still awed by the spell of the fantasy world she created with only the dip and swell of her voice.

There's power in words. Hope in love stories. Joy in a happy ending. I'm proud to carry on my family's storytelling tradition.

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