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INCOGNITO

DESIRING DIXIE

Madison Layle  
Anna Leigh Keaton

Incognito: Desiring Dixie  
By Madison Layle & Anna Leigh Keaton

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**Desiring Dixie**

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## **Chapter One**

Bastian Ridgcroft dropped his head against the satin pillow and gritted his teeth. His cock pulsed in Connie's vacuum-like mouth, while Tara twirled her tongue around his left nipple and teased his anus with her fingertip.

Sweat beaded his forehead, and he stared at Tara's face. She had the look of a pleased woman—not surprising since he'd finger-fucked her to orgasm only moments earlier. He half-heartedly fondled her naked breasts, pinched her nipple, and made her moan with arousal once more, but nothing—*nothing*—was working tonight.

He fucked Connie's lips, thrusting hard, but his climax wouldn't come. He couldn't force himself over the edge.

"Fuck!" He sat up, dislodging Connie from his cock. "Turn around," he said to her, not caring that he sounded like an asshole.

Connie turned on all fours, her ass sticking up. He grabbed a rubber off the table next to the bed, sheathed himself, and plowed into her.

"Oh, *yes*, Master Bastian," the stray sub cried. "Please fuck me *hard!*"

*I am*, he thought, his internal voice filled with pissed-off venom. He pistoned into Connie, and Tara, good little sub that she was, went behind

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him and teased his butt, reached between his thighs with her other hand, and squeezed his balls. Her breasts rubbed against his back. She nibbled on his shoulder and the nape of his neck.

Connie tossed her head, her long blonde hair cascading over her back to her waist. Knowing she liked pain to get her off, he grabbed a handful and tugged until she moaned her pleasure. As he fucked her, his thighs slapping her more than ample butt cheeks, he reached around and pinched her clit.

She screamed, and her cunt clamped around his cock. He gritted his teeth. *Not enough...*

Tara chose that instant to push her finger into his ass and rub his prostate. *Finally!* He thrust into Connie three more times while he came.

Breathing hard, he shoved himself away from the women and collapsed on the bed. "Go," he said as he threw his arm over his eyes. He'd already made sure both of them got their orgasms, and he didn't have the energy to deal with them any longer.

"Yes, Master," they said in unison.

He waited until he heard the door close before getting up to remove the condom and gather his clothes. *What the fuck is wrong with me?* He jerked on his T-shirt then shoved his sweat-dampened hair out of his face.

Lately, he found satisfaction in nothing. Not sailing, not working, not sex. Incognito had been his place to play with women and have fun for years. Whenever he got stressed out, he headed to the club, picked up a stray or two, and fucked them until he didn't have to think about anything. Then his mind would be clear, and he could get back to work. But the past couple of months...

"Fuck!" He dropped to the edge of the bed to shove his legs into his jeans.

He knew why. He just didn't want to admit it to himself. Taking over his father's company had him tied up in knots so tight he wondered if he'd survive. He'd led a damn good life. He'd been a sports star in high school, graduated *cum laude* from Princeton, and proceeded to make his

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own fortune as a day trader. But no matter his accomplishments, his father never thought he was good enough.

Maybe he wasn't.

Standing up, he buttoned his pants, then pulled a thin leather strap out of his pocket and used it to tie back his hair.

When Dad learned about Incognito and his membership there, he'd flipped his lid. He'd judged the club sight unseen, and nothing Bastian could've said would change his mind. Being a member of a sex club was unacceptable for a community leader.

But Incognito was no ordinary fetish club. It damn sure wasn't a "disease-infested whorehouse" as his father had called it. Hell, many members were in the same tax bracket as his father. And the club had been his sanctuary for too long to abandon it. He needed this place. Needed the camaraderie he'd found here and the friends he'd made that understood him.

Bastian didn't want to be a community leader if it meant he'd have to be a hypocrite. He wasn't sure he wanted to take over the family business, although he did love the company. He grew up working there, starting in the factory when he was barely old enough to hold a job, and interning as an assistant to his own father when he was in college. He knew the company from the ground up, but he found a future of sitting in an office five days a week, the constant board meetings and superficial society appearances, utterly boring.

He glanced down at himself to make sure everything was tucked in where it should be, then pulled open the door and headed down the hall to the bar. Connie and Tara sat side-by-side, and both looked at him with wary glances as he neared.

He stopped between their bar stools and laid a hand on each of their shoulders. "I'm sorry." He kissed Tara's cheek, and then Connie's. "Let me buy you a drink to make up for my surly attitude?"

Connie grinned.

"Is everything all right?" Tara asked.

He winked and slipped on his trademark, *everything's great* grin. "It

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will be." He pulled his wallet from his pocket, dropped a twenty on the bar, and caught Tyrone, the bartender's, attention. "Girls' drinks are on me." He nodded at each of the women before leaving them. "Goodnight."

As he walked across the club to the front door, Katriona, co-owner and head Domme of the club, stopped him. "Do you have a moment?"

He wanted to say no but, after seeing the unusually serious rather than teasingly sultry look in her eye, he found himself nodding instead.

"I know you're a private man," she said, her voice a low purr as she led him into the semi-privacy of the foyer, "but I've been watching you the last few weeks, ever since the fundraising auction, and you don't seem quite yourself."

*Fuck!* Was he that transparent?

"Did something happen on the yacht that we should know about?"

Other than his breaking the rule of no sex, which he had no intention of admitting to the fundraiser's host, not a damn thing had happened on the yacht that he hadn't planned. Well, except for his own personal feelings of...

He shook his head. He needed to get his act together, his life back in order, so this nagging sense of something missing would go away.

"Dalton and I are here if you need..." She shrugged as her words trailed off. "He's a pretty good shrink, and he doesn't charge his friends if they just need to talk."

His cheeks heated with a blush he prayed his tan would cover. "I'll keep that in mind. Thanks."

She touched his arm in an affectionate pat. "You know you're not alone here."

And that was why he couldn't give up Incognito. "I know, and I appreciate it."

She winked and popped him lightly on the hip with her ever-present riding crop.

He chuckled. "Goodnight, Kat."

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Dixie Johnson punched the time clock, dashed into the mailroom, and slipped her puke-green apron on over her head. She didn't understand why, with all of the profits Ridgcroft Industries made annually, the company couldn't supply more color-coordinated uniforms for their blue-collar staff.

Someone really should tell the uniform department that the ugly blue shirts they were required to wear clashed horribly with the pea-soup-colored aprons.

"Girl, where have you been?" her friend, Carrie, asked in an aside whisper. "David has you down to do morning delivery and pick-up...starting five minutes ago."

Dixie didn't waste any time. As soon as she'd pulled the apron ties snug at the small of her back, she began to load the last of the interoffice correspondence on the mail cart. "I'm sorry. My car—"

"Say no more. I understand." Carrie handed her another package. "Although I was hoping for a better story."

"I'm not making up a story—"

Carrie sighed. "I know. Your sex life sucks worse than mine. It's sad, really."

Dixie gaped at her friend.

Carrie shoved a manila envelope into her hands. "Oh, come on. When was the last time you threw caution to the wind and had sheet-ripping, steamy-windows sex with a hunk you hardly knew?"

"I—" What could she say to that? *Never.*

Carrie gave an overly dramatic sigh. "You're always rushing around, working yourself to the bone from dawn to dusk. You never talk about any boyfriends or dates. I was just hoping that, for once, you'd tell me you woke up wrapped around a sexy stud. Every woman needs a little fun in their life...while they're still young enough to enjoy it."

Dixie rolled her eyes, and Carrie chuckled.

"Here ya go. This is the last of it. I started loading up for you, just in case...." Carrie cast a glance over her shoulder and lowered her voice.



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"But you might want to double-time it out of here before Mr. You-know-who checks to see if we're on schedule. I wouldn't put it past David to dock your pay if some suit grumbles."

"Thanks, girlfriend." Dixie tossed the small box on top, shoved the cart to get it moving, and winced at the squeak of one wheel.

She took the service elevator up to the top floor. From there she'd work her way back down. Leaving the cart outside each office, she hand-delivered the mail to the executives, or *suits* as Carrie liked to call them. A few raised a hand in silent greeting or to wave her off. Most were too busy with their wireless phones, PDAs, and other gadgets that made them too important to even acknowledge her presence.

"God damn it! When are we going to hire some people with enough common sense to not park fucking carts in the way where people might run over them?"

Dixie cringed when she heard the cursing. She rushed through the door of the empty office where she'd delivered a package to see a very angry Phillip Davenport. His hard, narrowed gaze targeted her in an instant.

Paper lay on the floor, evidence that he'd dropped a folder when he'd collided with her cart.

"I'm terribly sorry," she said, dropping to her hands and knees to pick up the papers.

"Don't wrinkle that, damn it. It's a contract worth more than you'll make in your lifetime." Phillip stood over her and didn't offer to help, not that she expected him to do so.

She had to crawl around because the papers had gone everywhere. Was the man blind? The cart was big enough that it should be hard to overlook, and the aisle was plenty wide enough for him to walk around it.

"What seems to be the problem, here?"

*Oh, please, let the floor swallow me.*

The question came from the CEO and founder of Ridgecroft Industries—the William S. Ridgecroft, Junior. Only no one called Bill Ridgecroft *Junior*. And she'd never dare call him Bill. Even Phillip

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stiffened as straight as a fireman's pole at the sound of that man's voice.

And here she was on her hands and knees like a dog begging for scraps. She hurriedly tried to gather all of the papers.

"Sir. Nothing, sir. Just a little accident," Phillip said.

*The two-faced, brown-nosing jerk.*

"Well, don't just stand there, young man. Help her pick it up," Mr. Ridgecroft said.

Phillip all but collapsed to the floor in his haste to obey the order. He dang sure didn't do it to *help* her.

When he stood up with the papers stuffed willy-nilly into a manila folder, she jumped to her feet, grabbed the handle of her cart to still her shaky hands, and made herself meet Mr. Ridgecroft's gaze. "I'm so sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"Nonsense. Of course it will."

Her eyes widened.

"Things fall all of the time. It's gravity. We can't escape that." He put a hand on Phillip's shoulder, gave her a smile, and said, "No harm done. Carry on." As the two men walked off, she heard him compliment Phillip on his latest contract negotiations, adding, "There's someone here I'd like you to meet."

With a relieved sigh, she completed her rounds without further embarrassment and returned to the mailroom. She'd just put the cart away when Carrie approached, straddled a chair, and propped her folded arms on the backrest.

"So, did you hear the latest news?"

Dixie shook her head, took a seat, and went to work on keying in shipments and printing labels.

Carrie lowered her voice and leaned closer. "The prodigal son has returned."

Dixie rolled her eyes, not really caring about the CEO's playboy heir. The young man was a spoiled brat if one-third of the rumors about him were true.

Brenda, another co-worker, leaned her well-endowed hip against

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the scuffed desktop. "Oh, come on. Aren't you the least little bit curious about him?"

Carrie chimed in again. "I hear he's gorgeous and wealthy and—"

"Arrogant, no doubt," Dixie added. "We've all heard what he did at that company-sponsored, black-tie dinner for the governor. To humiliate his father like that..."

Brenda giggled. "Oh, to have been a fly on the wall when he showed up with two women on his arms."

Carrie said, "Wait. I heard he was gay."

"You know, I think he swings both ways," Brenda said. "My cousin works for this caterer who did a holiday party a few years ago at the Ridgcroft Estate. He told me that Little Willie showed up with a guy *friend*, and both were dressed..." She cleared her throat suggestively. "...in black leather."

Dixie snorted. "There's nothing wrong with wearing leather. And since when does a person's clothes accurately broadcast their sexual preferences?"

"No, but I'm talking leather chaps and *nothing* else."

"Oh my!" Carrie giggled. "You're kidding me."

"Shh," Dixie warned when their laughter got a little too loud. She didn't want to feel the wrath of their supervisor for goofing off. Not that she was, but when had that ever mattered?

Brenda held up one hand as if she meant to swear before a court of law. "My cousin wouldn't lie. He said there was a huge fight between Big Bill and Little Willie. That's when the boy went gallivanting around the globe on Papa's penny. I think the old man just wanted him out of the picture."

Brenda might have a point there, Dixie thought. She'd never seen a picture of Little Willie in Mr. Ridgcroft's office. She'd never met the heir to Ridgcroft Industries either, but she'd heard enough about him to know she didn't want to meet him. If he acted as scandalous as rumor had it, she couldn't blame his father for sending the boy away.

"I can't believe," Carrie said between stifled chuckles, "that Mr.

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Ridgecroft is really going to hand over the reins of the company to him.”

“*What?*” Brenda asked—the same question that popped into Dixie’s mind.

Dixie kept busy punching in data, but the chatter peaked her curiosity, although she was loathe to admit it.

Carried nodded her head. “That’s what I heard from Gregory, the security guard. He said he overheard some suits talking about it. It’s all the buzz on the top floor.”

Dixie sighed and fought the dread of impending doom. Upheaval at the top always spelled trouble for those at the bottom holding up the corporate ladder. She had seniority, which should offer *some* protection, but layoffs were always a possibility whenever new management stepped in.

She closed her eyes and sent up a silent prayer. She needed this job. No one could survive on collecting aluminum cans.

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## **Chapter Two**

Bastian headed for his car through the mostly darkened parking lot. He'd spent the day shadowing his father, then spent two hours in the company gym working off the tightness that bound his shoulders and spawned a headache at the center of his skull.

Freshly showered and a bit more relaxed now that he'd traded his three-piece suit for faded, ripped jeans and a T-shirt, he figured he'd head over to Incognito for a drink before returning to the marina. He hadn't made it back to the club since the debacle with Connie and Tara almost a week earlier, so he thought he should make an appearance and let Kat know he hadn't fallen off the face of the earth.

Just a drink, though, he thought as he hit the button on the remote and heard his Aston Martin DB9 beep. Using the same remote, he popped the trunk and dropped in his gym bag.

"No, please. No..."

He quietly shut the lid of the trunk and turned toward the feminine, anguished plea. At first he didn't see anything, but then he noticed all the way across the parking lot, just at the edge of a ring of light from one of the halogen street lamps, a lone car with its hood up. The voice seemed to come from that direction, floating on the late evening breeze. He could make out movement in the shadows but was too far away to make out how many people stood near the car.

"No! Don't do this to me!"

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When the sound of metal striking metal rang out, Bastian didn't think. He took off at a dead run across the lot, praying the woman was all right.

"I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!"

A woman was standing in front of the car, leaning under the hood, and whacking the engine with something. He slowed to a jog as he drew near.

"You just wait," she said between pants. "I'm going to get a new car and leave you at the junkyard for all the seagulls to poop in."

Bastian laughed.

The woman swung around, monkey wrench lifted and poised to do some serious damage.

"Hold up, miss," he said, unable to conceal his chuckle. He held up his hands in surrender. "I came to rescue...the car from its abuser."

The woman, tall and lean with skin the color of mocha, narrowed her big, dark eyes. "Who are you, and what're you doing out here this time of night?" Her voice, when she wasn't yelling, was soft and sweet, with just a hint of southern drawl.

"I..." The meaning of her words finally struck. She didn't recognize him? *I'll be damned.* "I was just heading home, and I heard you yelling. I thought you were in trouble, but it seems I identified the wrong victim." He smiled, more at the realization that she didn't know him than at his erroneous assumption.

He'd spent the day cringing inside as his father's office cronies damn near fell over each other to make a good impression. Most of them only succeeded in looking like what they were—overeager suits with visions of corner offices, stock options, and VIP parking spots.

She sighed and lowered the weapon. "It won't start." She shrugged and ducked her head slightly, looking adorably embarrassed. "I guess I just lost my temper a little bit."

The car was at least twenty years old and rusting out at the bottom of the doors. The front license plate was held on with wire, and he couldn't tell what the original color might have been because of the

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splashes of red and gray primer. The thing looked like it belonged in the junkyard.

“Mind if I take a look?”

“It’s the carburetor. I need a new one.”

The carburetor would cost ten times what the car was worth. He looked at the woman again as he approached the car. She wore the pale blue smock given to janitors, mailroom workers, and cafeteria staff at Ridgcroft Industries. She was probably just getting off work, and the heap left her stranded. Poor woman.

Gorgeous woman, he corrected as he leaned under the hood and lifted the flashlight she’d left on and tucked against the radiator. She stood at least five-ten and had curves enough to make his mouth water. Her long, shapely legs were encased in faded, tight blue jeans, the ugly smock pulled across ample breasts, and her short, pixy-like haircut reminded him of Halle Berry.

He flashed the light around the engine. It had about an inch of oil and grime covering everything, and he wondered how she’d ever figured out she needed a carburetor. Upon closer inspection, he spotted something dangling down underneath. Dropping to his knees, he peered under the car.

“Look. It’s okay,” the woman said. “You don’t have to do this. I’ll just catch the bus home tonight and deal with this in the light tomorrow.”

He ignored her protests, rolled to his back, and slid under as far as he could. “Got it,” he said. *I think*. The electrical cable between the battery and the starter had come loose. He reconnected it then scooted out.

She stood over him, hands planted on hips. “You got what? It’s a temperamental car, and it might not like you.”

“Car Karma?” he asked with a grin as he rolled to his knees then stood up. “Go ahead, try it.”

She shrugged and opened the driver’s door, then got in and turned the key. The engine ground, sputtered, but finally caught. Bastian cringed. He didn’t think the car had too many more miles left in it.

“Wow,” the woman said as she got out of the car. “Thanks.”

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He dipped his head. "You're welcome." After wiping his palm on his jeans, he held it out to her. "Bastian."

Without hesitation, she took it in a firm grip. "Dixie."

Her hand was delicate, with long, tapered fingers, but it felt a little rough. This woman worked for a living. Her smile was big and gorgeous, her front teeth not exactly straight, but beautifully white.

"So. You work here?" She eyed his torn jeans as she slowly withdrew her hand.

"Naw." It wasn't exactly a lie. He wasn't scheduled to take his position as CEO until the first of the month, still a week and a half away. Dressed for comfort, not style, he chuckled, spread his arms wide, and looked down. "Do you think I've dressed the part?"

She laughed and shook her head. "I bet you'd really stand out in the boardroom."

He grinned.

She glanced at the office building over his shoulder. "You said you were headed home... From where?"

"Oh, my dad works here," he said.

"Ah... Pretty late for a visit."

"Yeah, he's left already." He shrugged. "I guess coming here today was pretty much a waste of my time...except for the part about rescuing contrary cars from wrench-wielding attackers."

She giggled.

"You work here, obviously." He motioned toward the Ridgcroft Industries logo over her left breast on the smock.

She nodded. "Mailroom."

He shut off the flashlight and handed it to her. "Kinda late for the mailroom to be open, isn't it?"

"Yeah." She grinned, bit her lush bottom lip, and glanced at the ground before once more meeting his gaze. "Hey, listen. You wanna grab a bite to eat? I'm starving, and since you fixed my car, I'll buy."

Pleasantly surprised by her offer, and the fact that maybe the attraction wasn't one-sided, he nodded. "Thanks."



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"Get in." She motioned to the opposite side of the sputtering car as she slipped behind the wheel.

He almost offered to drive them, not really wanting to get into her little rust bucket, afraid it would fall apart before it got out of the parking lot, but he didn't want to be rude. He went to the passenger side and tried the handle.

"Jerk hard," Dixie called. "It sticks."

He pulled up on the handle and jerked. The door came open with a squeal of rusted hinges.

"Sorry. The car's old."

*No shit.* He got in and was surprised at the car's spotlessness. The dashboard, though the vinyl was cracked, shone clean. The floor was bare of any debris, and the interior smelled of vanilla air freshener.

"It was my dad's car. I haven't gotten rid of it because it's all I've got left of him."

*Sentimental*, he observed with a hint of uncomfortable jealousy. He wondered what it would be like to have the kind of father-child relationship that would make a person want to keep a car on its last leg, just because it had belonged to the parent.... He shook off the thought.

The gears ground as she shifted into first, and then the car lurched a bit before smoothing out as she took off across the lot.

"You like American or Mexican?" she asked as she pulled out onto the street.

He reached up and grabbed his seatbelt to buckle in. "Ah. Mexican sounds good."

She glanced at him and flashed him a smile. "My favorite."

He didn't want to say it, but he couldn't just... "Shouldn't you put your seatbelt on? It is the law, you know."

"Yeah. Seatbelt's broken over here. I'm careful, though."

Carburetor, seatbelt, starter—if the grinding sound when she started it was any indication—and probably the transmission, too, judging by how difficult it was to shift. She was driving a little death trap.

"What do you do for a living?" she asked as she turned off the

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street into the parking lot of a fast food place.

"I'm a day trader." Taco Hut wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind when she said Mexican.

"Oh. I've heard you can make some pretty good money doing that."

She pulled up right in front of the door, since the lot was empty and the place would close in twenty minutes, according to the sign on the door.

"I do all right."

She grabbed her big, bright pink purse from between the seats, and that's when he noticed the back seat filled with trash bags. He looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

She laughed. "Recycling. Come on." She got out of the car, and then *she* held the door to the restaurant open for him.

He hadn't been in a fast-food joint since college. His stomach clenched just thinking of it. Last week there was an article in the paper about one of these places having a huge breakout of e coli.

"You know what you want?" she asked.

"Uh..." He stared at the menu board hanging over and slightly behind the counter. "Let me look."

She went right up to the counter. "I'd like the number two, just the burritos, not the combo, and a large ice water. And...oh, what the heck, an order of the cinnamon twisties." She turned and looked at him. "You decide yet?"

He glanced at the pimply-faced teenage clerk behind the counter and cringed. "Same, I guess."

"You sure?"

He nodded. He didn't think he could eat much of this food.

The clerk gave Dixie the total, and she reached into her bag, pulled out a handful of coins, and started counting it out on the countertop.

*Holy fuck.* Bastian reached for his wallet. As much as he'd appreciated the unusual sensation of having someone else cover the bill for a change, he couldn't let her pay for his meal. Hell, he couldn't let her

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pay for her own. "Let me—"

"There ya go," Dixie said as she laid out three pennies to hit the exact amount. And then she dropped two quarters in the tip jar next to the cash register.

She turned a smile on him. "Let you what?" Maybe she just carried around a bag of spare change to pay for her bad eating habits? Bastian's gut told him that was not the case. Still, her happy expression kept him from saying anything more.

Slipping his thumbs in his back pockets to cover his move for his wallet, he shook his head as the clerk set their food on a plastic tray. "Let me get the tray."

"Thanks, but I've got it. This treat's on me, remember?" She faced the clerk. "Could I please have eight packets of hot sauce, and five ketchups?"

Once her condiments were on the tray, she picked it up and turned to him. "Want to sit outside since it's such a nice night?"

It was almost ten thirty on a Friday night in not-the-best part of town. That just wasn't safe. "Why don't we stay in here?"

She shrugged, set the tray on a table, and slid into one side of the booth. He sat down opposite her and watched as she gathered up the ketchup packets plus all but two of the hot sauce packages and dumped them in her purse. Next, she took the stack of napkins, left two on the tray, and slipped the rest in her purse. Finally, she reached for one of the burritos rolled up in paper printed with the Taco Hut logo.

"Why do you have bags of recycling in your car?" he asked then cringed at his question.

She grinned, and it lit up her face. She was so pretty. Her eyes, almost as dark as night, fairly sparkled. As she peeled back the wrapper on the burrito, she said, "I get to keep all the cans I collect when I help clean the management offices." She took a bite, closed her eyes, and sighed as if she was eating five-hundred-dollar-an-ounce caviar.

Bastian's stomach clenched. Not because she was eating this pitiful food, but because he feared she'd never even had caviar. That this was a

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gourmet meal for her.

“I thought you said you work in the mailroom.”

She nodded and swallowed, then took a sip of her water. “I do. But the head janitor is a friend of my mother’s, and a couple times a week I help him out.” She leaned forward as if whispering a secret. “He’s getting old and can’t do all the heavy work anymore, but he needs the job.” After flashing him a smile, she took another bite.

“So, you keep the cans from the recycling bins?”

“Oh, no. No. Terrance says the company cashes those in and gives the money to charity. I wouldn’t take those. I just get the ones that people dump in the regular garbage. You would not believe how many people don’t care enough to toss ‘em in the right bin.” She snorted. “It’s true what they say, you know.” Another bite of the burrito. Sour cream and something red oozed out the opposite end. Tomatoes? He tried hard not to make a face.

“What’s that?”

“The more money you got, the less you care.”

In his experience, the more money people made, the more they cared about making more money—but he chose not to mention that. He was more interested in learning why she had to collect cans when she had what should be a decent job at his father’s company. “You go through the garbage looking for recyclables?”

She nodded as if it was no big deal. “Three floors of management, and I’d bet twenty-five percent of the employees don’t bother to get out from behind their desks to toss their cans in the recycling bin. And you should see the cafeteria. There’s a recycling bin by each trash bin, yet I find tons of cans in the trash. How stupid is that?”

*Holy fuck.* “Just out of curiosity,” Bastian said as he fiddled with the straw Dixie handed him for his water. “How much do you get for the stuff you collect? Per week?”

She shrugged. “About ten bucks or so. J&B recycling down on Bay Drive gives the best rates. Pays by the pound. A penny more than Grover’s.”

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"You, uh, work fulltime in the mailroom?"

She finished off her burrito and licked her fingers. "Yep. Been there about three years." After downing some more water, she picked up the small package of fried something or another. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Ah. No. Not really. Sorry. Maybe you want to take my share home?"

She shrugged. "Sure. But try these." She handed him one of the fried things.

He bit into it, and it wasn't bad. Some kind of crispy dough covered in sugar and cinnamon. He wasn't sure what to say to her. He nodded and smiled as he chewed, but his stomach knotted. This woman, who worked janitorial for free after a full day in the mailroom, who collected cans for ten bucks a week, had just bought him supper because he plugged in a wire on her car that shouldn't even be running.

He had the urge to pull out his wallet and give her all of the cash he had on him, and it was way more than ten bucks.

"You from around here?" he asked, uncomfortable with the silence and her steady gaze.

She nodded. "Well. Miami. That's where I grew up. But when Mom got sick, we moved out here."

"She's ill?"

"Alzheimer's."

"I'm sorry."

Dixie nodded and set down the package from which she'd been eating. "Yeah. Me, too. But she's getting good care. I kept her at home as long as I could, but with working all the time..." Her smile was sad. "After the first time she wandered off while I was at work, I knew I had to do something."

Without thinking, he reached across the table and laid his hand over hers.

She looked up with those big, dark eyes. "It's okay. I just miss her."

He wanted to take her home to his boat and wrap her in silk.

She withdrew her hand from under his. "Ready to go?"

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He nodded and stood, then held his hand out for her. She glanced at his hand, then up into his face, looking adorably confused, before she put her hand in his.

"I'll...um...just get a bag." She went to the front counter and returned with a paper bag into which she put the burritos and fried things. Then she reached across the table, plucked half of the sugar packets out of the plastic holder, and dumped them in the bag, too.

Bastian turned away and drew in a deep breath. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

"Come on," Dixie said. "Did you have a car at Ridgecroft?"

He nodded.

"I'll drive you back then. It's time for me to be getting home." She unlocked her door, and he realized he hadn't even locked his side. Who would take the damn thing in the first place?

The car wouldn't start. Didn't even turn over. "Not again." She slapped a hand on the steering wheel and tried the key again. Still nothing.

"Let me check that wire again," he said. "Maybe it's got a bad connector or something."

Dixie dug the flashlight out from between the seats and handed it to him. "I'm so sorry."

He grinned. "Don't worry about it. What's a guy for if not to come to the aid of women in peril?"

She laughed and nudged his shoulder.

He wanted to kiss her. Instead, he turned away from her plump, pink lips and shoved the door open. He wiggled his way under the front end, but the wire was still connected. Lightly tugging on it, he confirmed the connectors to be sound. His experience with engines only went so far. Most of his knowledge came from working on his boat. Visually he couldn't find anything out of place.

When he stood up, he looked at Dixie through the windshield and shrugged. "Maybe try it again, but..."

She turned the key, he heard a click, and she shook her head.

"I'll call a cab," he said.

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"No. No, that's okay. I'll just catch the bus." She rolled up the window, checked the locks on all three other doors, then got out, her big, pink purse slung over her shoulder and the paper sack of leftovers in her hand. "It should be by in a few minutes."

"No way. Sorry. I can't let you do that. Something happens to you, and I'd have it on my conscience forever." He drew his cell phone out of his pocket and flipped it open.

"No. Really, Bastian." She tried to stop him from raising the cell to his ear, but he turned away from her.

Dixie stared at Bastian's wide shoulders as he spoke into the phone. She couldn't afford a cab ride all the way across town from here to her house. She barely had enough left for bus fare.

She still couldn't believe she'd offered to buy him dinner. What in the world had possessed her to ask a total stranger— No, she knew. It had been all that talk today, the ribbing from her co-workers about not having a life outside of work.

She'd wanted so badly to refute their accusations but couldn't. It had been a long time since she did anything for herself, not counting her studies.

Bastian glanced over his shoulder at her and winked. The man was so good looking, and the way his T-shirt stretched across his muscles made her want to drool. His black hair fell to his shoulder blades, tied into a single ponytail with a leather thong. He reminded her of that guy that played the Highlander on the TV series. Younger than that actor, maybe only around thirty, but he had classic good looks, and his hair was gorgeous. She wondered what it felt like. Thick and soft, she'd bet. His eyes were midnight blue, and his smile a little lopsided and a lot sexy.

"Cab will be here in about ten minutes," he said when he closed the phone and turned back.

"Bastian," she said and folded her arms over her chest. "I can't afford a cab, okay? I take the bus all the time. It's no big deal."

He took a step closer to her, until she got another whiff of his... She didn't know if it was his shampoo or soap or what, but it was earthy and

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musky and made her tingle all over when she breathed it in. Earlier, she'd thought she would pass out from the sheer torture of him being so close in her little car. Either that, or do something totally unlike her and jump his bones.

"It's a big deal to me." His voice was amazing, too. Low and sexy. "I'll pay for your cab, okay?"

She shook her head. "No. No, it's not okay." She did not take charity. She wasn't *that* poor, yet. Besides, she thought as she looked over his rather ragged clothes, the jeans ripped out at the knees and the faded black T-shirt with a small hole next to the frayed collar, he probably couldn't afford the cab fare either. He must not be a very good day trader.

Bastian frowned at her, but even that was sexy. Goodness, the man was handsome. Chiseled features, high cheekbones, a seductive five-o'clock shadow. She wanted to reach up and run her fingers over it. Hell, she wanted to plaster herself against him and find out if those lips tasted half as amazing as they looked—if he knew what to do with them.

*Get a grip, Dixie girl.*

Yeah. Right. She'd been celibate for years. Her nipples got hard if the wind blew the right way.

"Okay. You leave me no choice."

She frowned right back at him. He didn't have to know how turned on she was by him.

"I'll ride the bus with you, if you insist on being so stubborn."

A laugh bubbled out of her throat. "Okay, fine." What the heck. Another twenty minutes with him would be nice. "Bus stop's just over there." She pointed across the street.

He grinned. "Let's go then." Lifting his cell again, he called and canceled the cab.

Later, when the bus drew near her stop, she glanced at Bastian. Most of the ride had been silent. She hadn't spoken because she wasn't sure she could. Sitting so close to him, sharing a bench seat on the bus, his thigh pressed against hers, his arm against hers, his warmth heated her in places he wasn't touching.



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"Almost there?" he asked.

She nodded. "About another half mile."

He sent her that sexy, lopsided smile. "I had fun tonight."

"I did, too," she said, and meant it. It had been a really long time since she spent time with a guy other than Terrance, and he didn't count. Terrance was almost seventy years old.

Bastian reached into his back pocket, pulled out his wallet, and extracted a business card. "Call me?" he asked, holding the card out to her. "I'd like to see you again." He winked. "Under less stressful circumstances."

He was so cute. She reached for the card, but her fingers brushed his, and she stopped. Big, warm fingers. Long fingers. *Oh. My goodness.*

She didn't want to say goodnight to him. Not yet. Because, even though he was giving her his card, that didn't mean he really meant it. He might pretend not to know her. Guys as good looking as him didn't usually hang around long. She knew. She'd dated a couple.

The bus came to a stop right outside the trailer court where she lived. It wasn't a real bus stop, but this late at night, the bus drivers usually let her off close to home so she wasn't walking alone on the darkened street.

"Come in for some coffee?" she blurted out as she stood up and moved past his long legs to the aisle. "Or...something."

He stood up. "I thought you'd never ask."

Her heart thudded hard as she turned her back and walked toward the door. *He said yes. He said yes.* But as soon as the bus pulled away, and she was left standing next to this virtual stranger on a dark street, she seriously doubted herself. He could be some psycho killer.

This wasn't like her at all. So what if her colleagues thought her sex life sucked? Did it matter that they were right?

*When was the last time you threw caution to the wind and had sheet-ripping, steamy-windows sex with a hunk you hardly knew?*

"Come on, Dixie. I don't like you being out here in the dark like this. It's not safe." He placed his hand on her lower back and guided her

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through the falling-down wooden gate to the trailer park.

No, she thought. He couldn't be a psycho killer. He'd come to her aid when he thought someone was attacking her. He'd fixed her car, or tried to, and he'd been willing to pay for her to take a cab home.

She glanced up at him, and he smiled. His hand at her back was gentle and warm. He was really tall, too, she thought with a dreamy sigh. Not many men towered over her the way he did.

Now, how did she go about subtly hinting that she wanted him in her bed, naked, as soon as possible?

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### **Chapter Three**

Bastian's heart tipped a bit more as they walked down the dirt track that passed for a road through the center of the run-down trailer park. Blackthorne Estates, the sign said, which sounded impressive, but the park was filled with trailers circa the 70's, and most of the dirty homes looked as if they were falling apart.

He kept his hand on Dixie's back, but what he wanted was to pick her up and haul her out of there. Tuck her away on his boat and pamper her.

"This is it," she said, pointing at one that looked like all of the rest. She dug into her purse and pulled out a ring with at least a dozen keys of varying colors and designs.

"Hey, there," came a raspy woman's voice from the trailer across what he supposed was the parking space.

Dixie turned around and waved. "Hi, Miss Sheila. How are you doing tonight?"

Bastian couldn't tell where the voice came from until a tattered curtain ruffled. The woman was as black as night, her face obscured by a screen over the open window.

"In a bit late, ain't'cha, girl? And who you got with ya?"

"This is my friend, Bastian. Bastian, this is Miss Sheila. She watches out for me." Dixie grinned up at him before she faced the window once more. "I had some car trouble tonight, and Bastian was nice enough to see

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me home."

Miss Sheila grunted. "Not bad lookin' for a white boy."

Bastian grinned. "Thank you, ma'am."

A raspy cough, and then Sheila said, "The boy has manners. I like him."

"He's very nice, Miss Sheila." Dixie looked at him. "Hold on a sec, okay?"

He nodded.

She walked across the gravel yard and reached up with the bag of burritos to the window. "Here. I had some leftovers tonight from dinner. Have you eaten today?"

A gnarled hand pushed the screen to the side and took the bag from Dixie. "You don't worry about me eatin', girl. But I do love me some tacos."

"Burritos, but they're good. See you Sunday evening for supper?"

"I'll be here, girl. I always am. Git that young man in the house before Ursula sees him and tries snatching him from ya."

Dixie laughed. "Yes, ma'am." She went up the three cinder block steps to her trailer and unlocked the two locks. "Goodnight, Miss Sheila."

"Goodnight, ma'am," Bastian said.

"Keep this'n, girl. Manners is good no matter what color he is."

Dixie grabbed his hand and pulled him into the trailer. "Don't mind her. She set me up with her three grandsons the first year I moved in here. She doesn't think a woman my age should live alone." After relocking the two deadbolts, she turned to him with a bright grin. "Her grandsons are in their forties. A bit old for me."

He stepped toward her, wanting to kiss her. He'd never met anyone quite so selfless in his life. The dinner he didn't eat, she'd given away to someone else who needed it. She made him feel special because she let him into her world. With few exceptions, most of the people in his father's world were egocentric.

Dixie stepped around him and headed for the kitchen, dropping her pink purse on the sofa as she went. He did a three-sixty to take in the

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room. A single-wide, the kitchen was at one end of the living room, a hallway down the other, presumably to the bedroom and bathroom. The furniture was well used and a little ragged. The coffee table, piled with books, looked ready to fall over and give up the ghost, but everything was spotlessly clean. Even the dreadful orange shag carpet looked freshly shampooed.

"I know it's not much, but it's home, and it's all mine. Oh, darn. I'm out of coffee."

Bastian turned and found her holding up an empty coffee can to show him a few grains in the bottom.

"I'd planned to stop at the store on the way home, but then Terrance asked me to help him out, and the car..." She shrugged. "I totally forgot."

"It's okay. I'm not that much of a coffee drinker." And he'd feel guilty about taking anything else from her that she needed.

"Yeah. Well." She made a cute little face that wrinkled her forehead. "I don't have anything else to drink, unless you want water."

He took the few steps separating them, until he invaded her space. "Dixie?"

She raised her eyebrows as she tilted her head back to look him in the eye. "Hmm?"

"Did you really invite me here for coffee?"

She ducked her head and turned away, threw the can in the garbage beneath the sink, then leaned against the counter, not looking at him.

"I won't say no, if you—"

"I've never done this before." She turned then, and her cheeks glowed with a bit more color than normal. "I don't bring men home. Ever. I haven't even really dated anyone, other than Sheila's grandsons, since I moved here. I don't have time."

He moved toward her, blocking her into the corner between counter and sink with his body, but he didn't touch her.

Her eyes widened. "I don't have time," she repeated. "I'm very

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busy with work and school and...and I don't even know your last name."

"Peterman," he said, using his mother's maiden name. The name he used for his day trading. The name he used in this town because he didn't like admitting who he really was to anyone, because everyone knew Ridgcroft Industries.

Her pink tongue came out to moisten her full lips, and he nearly groaned. His cock throbbed against the fly of his jeans. If she told him no, it just might kill him.

"Johnson," she said, her soft voice little more than a whisper. "That's my last name."

He smiled and moved a bit closer, until he could feel her heat, her breath. "A pleasure to meet you, Dixie Johnson." He lifted her hand, noting the calluses, and kissed the back. She sucked in a quick breath, and he lifted his gaze to capture hers. "Do you want me to leave?"

Her silence spoke volumes. She wasn't sure. Releasing her hand, he stepped back and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Sorry," he said and moved into the living room, away from temptation. He should have known she wasn't the type of woman to sleep with a guy she just met. He couldn't remember the last time he met a really good girl. A real one. Everything about Dixie spoke of wholesomeness. Purity. Perfection.

If nothing else, he didn't deserve her. He was as close to being a good guy as Attila the Hun was to winning Humanitarian of the Year award.

"I guess I should be going. I'll—"

Her fingers closed around his forearm, and she tugged. He turned toward her, and his breath whooshed out when she threw her arms around his neck, pulled his head down, and latched onto his mouth with hers.

*Holy fuck!*

Her tongue speared into his mouth, and her breasts pressed against his chest. He wound his arms around her and pulled her tighter against him, nudging his instantaneous erection against the apex of her thighs.

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After loosening the leather strap in his hair, she spread her fingers against his scalp, holding him in place. She moaned into his mouth and rubbed against him. He jerked his head back, sucking in a much-needed breath, and she nibbled on his neck, whimpering little sounds that nearly pushed him over the edge. Her hands ran through his hair, tugging slightly. If she didn't slow down, he'd come before he ever got his fly open.

"Dixie. Dixie. Slow down."

Her breath came out in shallow pants, and she rested her forehead against his shoulder. "Don't leave. And I didn't invite you for coffee. I want to have sex with you. But oh, goodness, Bastian. It's been a really long time and..."

He chuckled and smoothed his hand over her soft, springy hair. "It's okay, babe."

She sighed, her hot breath a caress against his neck. "I've never slept with a white guy, either."

"Ah, but Miss Sheila said I was a keeper. And if she approves..."

Dixie's gusty laugh warmed his heart. But then she pulled back slightly and looked up into his eyes. "I really don't have time for a relationship. I don't want you thinking that...that I'm looking for more here."

*Hmm.* He never thought hearing those words would be quite so disturbing. Lord knew he'd used them a lot over the years, but he'd never been on the receiving end. Referring to his earlier thoughts, he knew he wasn't good enough for this sweet woman. Besides, next week she'd be his employee, and Ridgcroft Industries had strict rules about fraternization.

He knew how to physically please women, though. Giving her a few mind-blowing orgasms was the least he could do for her.

"Where's the bedroom?" he asked, and at the same time she blurted out, "I don't have any condoms."

He grinned and cupped her cheek in his hand, gazing into her deep, dark eyes. "I've got that covered."

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Her shoulders slumped as if she'd been holding her breath. "Good. Bedroom's down the hall."

Instead of releasing her, he turned her and backed her through the living room and down the hall, nibbling at her lips as he went, his hands folded at the small of her back. It was nice to have a tall woman. He didn't have to contort to kiss her, and all her curves fit and hugged him in all the right places.

"Fuck, you're sweet."

She chuckled.

"What do you like?" he asked, his years as a Dom too difficult to completely suppress, even if he knew this would probably be the most vanilla-like sex he'd had in a decade.

As they went through the bedroom door, she reached out and hit the light switch. When he stopped her at the foot of the bed in the tiny space that was her bedroom, she looked up at him. "Like?"

He nodded and reached for the buttons on the front of her smock. "Uh huh. What do you like? What positions? Oral? Anal? Straight? Doggie? Missionary? Hard or soft?"

"Uh..."

He looked up from the beautiful breasts he was slowly revealing with each button he undid and saw her shock. "Fuck. I'm sorry. That was a little—"

"How about straight and spontaneous?" She ducked her head and watched him finish the buttons. "I'm not used to answering a questionnaire."

This time his smile was one of relief. God, he needed to watch that. From years dealing with women in the *lifestyle*, women at Incognito, which is where he'd exclusively picked up women over the past few years, he was used to needing the questionnaire. It usually came right after, "Hi, I'm Bastian."

"I can do spontaneous." He slipped the smock off her shoulders to reveal a pale pink bra against her dark skin. "You are so fucking beautiful." He bent and kissed the top slope of her right breast. She sighed



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and found his hair again, running her fingers through it, lightly tugging.

“I love your hair,” she murmured.

He unhooked the front clasp, and her breasts sprang free. Her nipples were fat and hard, the color of dark chocolate. *I love your boobs*, he thought as he leaned down and captured a plump peak between his lips.

Her fingers fisted in his hair, and she moaned, arching into his mouth.

Sweet and salty, her taste made him harder than he thought possible. After the fiasco last week at the club, he’d decided a bit of celibacy would do him good. Fuck that. He couldn’t wait to sink into Dixie.

She tugged his shirt out of his pants, and he moved back just long enough to pull it over his head, and then he pushed her bra straps off her shoulders and wound his arms around her, pressing her against his chest. When she gasped, he captured her mouth and sank his tongue deep.

“Oh, fuck,” he groaned as he ground against her, his cock throbbing with an ache he hadn’t felt in ages. A need he hadn’t had in years. Not only the need to possess and conquer, the one he fulfilled with the stray sluts at the club, but he wanted, *needed*, to please her. Yearned to hear her cry his name as he made her come again and again and again.

She nipped his shoulder as he licked her ear. “You cuss a lot.”

“Sorry.”

She ran her short nails over his pecs, scraping against his tightened nipples.

His body jerked in reaction. “*Ah, fuck.*”

Her laughter was the sweetest sound. He captured her lips with his, sinking into her warm, soft mouth as he unbuttoned her jeans.

“Bastian.” She gasped when he broke contact to push her pants down her legs.

“Yeah, babe. Say my name like that. It makes me hard.”

“Bastian,” she said again as she gripped his shoulders when he bent, peeling her skin-tight jeans down her thighs. Her panties were pale pink, just like her bra, and he shoved those down, too. He wanted her

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naked. Naked and writhing under him.

With a gentle shove, she sat on the edge of the bed. He pulled off her shoes, socks and pants, spread her legs wide, and buried his face in her hot, wet cunt.

Dixie grabbed his head, cried out, "No!" but her tight fingers that clutched him to her said otherwise.

He stroked her hardened clit once, twice, reveling in the sound of her pants and moans, her hips bucking against him, her fingernails abrading his scalp.

"Scoot back and lay down." He stopped his sucking and licking only long enough to give the instruction.

She did as told, pulling her fingers from his hair. He lifted her feet onto the bed and then spread her knees apart. "Oh, fuck yeah. So damn pretty."

A whimper was her only response. That and lifting herself like a sacrifice to him.

He looked up at her face to find her gazing at him. Propped on her elbows as she was, he had the perfect view of all of her. "I think we'll add oral to the list of likes."

She chuckled and plopped down on her back. "Then get on with it," she said, humor lacing her words.

His inner Dom reared up, and he almost told her she was not the one in charge here, but he bit his tongue. For now, she was in charge. And Dixie wasn't part of that life. She was sweet and hot and just wanted a good fucking.

He was here to oblige.

She cried out and lifted against his mouth when he leaned forward and drew her clit between his teeth and sucked hard.

"Oh, goodness... *Oh! Oh!*"

Wrapping his arms under her thighs, he splayed his palms over her stomach and pinned her pelvis to the bed, holding her still so he could eat her pussy. Her juices were sweet and tangy. Hot and slick. She still managed to rotate her hips, and he used her motions as a guide, sucking

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her clit in time to her small thrusts.

Fingers back in his hair, she held him against her, nearly smothering him. He didn't mind. It would be the best way in the world to die.

When her moans turned to small cries and then to animalistic grunts, he rammed two fingers into her cunt and sucked her clit hard.

She screamed, and he was sure she'd rip the hair right out of his head. She pumped her hips against his face while he stroked her deep inside, rubbing her G-spot and nibbling her clit. Her inner muscles milked his fingers, and *godfuckingdamnit*, he couldn't wait to get inside her.

When her fingers eased on his hair, her inner muscles relaxed a bit, and her cries died into soft pants tipped with the most erotic little whimpers, he eased his fingers from inside her. He stood, stripped off the rest of his clothes—remembering to grab the rubber out of his wallet at the last second—then climbed onto the small bed with her.

"Come here," he said as he physically hauled her up the bed so her head rested on the pillows. She was limp and sated, but he was so not done with her, yet.

She rolled toward him, burying her face against his chest, and for just an instant he couldn't move. Couldn't think. As hard as his cock was, and as much as he wanted to slide into her and fuck until neither of them could move, this sweet, tender cuddle went straight to his chest and lodged the breath in his throat.

He cupped the back of her head and held her there for a moment, reeling from the emotions rocking through him. But then she closed her hand around his cock and stroked him with a firm grip. His breath exploded from his lungs and, spearing his fingers through her short, soft hair, he pulled her head back and clamped his mouth over hers.

She groaned, and her hands squeezed harder, with not much finesse.

"You like tasting yourself on my mouth, don't you?" He ran his tongue over her lips then dipped into her again. "You taste your juices, babe?"

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She didn't respond except with some kind of sexy sound that came from deep in her throat, and the ever-tightening fingers on his cock.

"You want me to fuck you?" He wrapped his hand around hers and showed her how he liked to be stroked. "You want this cock in your creamy hot cunt?"

She jerked back, her eyes wide, lips parted to expel her breaths.

"Oh, fuck. Dix—" He had to remember she wasn't like—

"Yes. That's what I want." Obviously embarrassed by her own admission, she dipped her head to hide her face against his chest.

Though her admission surprised him, he quickly recovered. She might be more shy than brazen in her language, but she did want to fuck, and that assuaged most of his uncertainties.

"Tell me." He fingered her chin, forcing her to look at him, and whispered, "Say it."

"I..."

"Say it."

"F-fuck me."

He did not have to be told twice. He ripped open the condom pack and rolled it on. Giving her a big grin, he grabbed her under one thigh, tipped her onto her back, and came down over her. "Say it again."

Her eyes were still wide, and he knew she was fighting her own timidity, but he wasn't going to let her be bashful. There was nothing embarrassing about mutually satisfying sex.

"Say it again, Dixie. Tell me what you want." When she didn't respond, he nudged the tip of his cock against her clit.

She bit her lip, her eyes tightly closed.

"If you don't say it, you don't get it."

She turned her face to the side. "Fuck—"

"Don't, babe." He grabbed her chin and turned her head. "Look me in the eye and tell me." He flexed his hips once, slipping less than an inch inside her. He stifled his groan and focused on her eyes. "I won't bite...unless you ask me to." He grinned.

Her breaths were hot puffs against his face. Her gaze roved over

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his features until finally, their gazes locked. She returned his smile with a brief one of her own then it vanished. Her sexy lips parted. "Fuck me now, Bastian." She bucked, taking him in a tiny bit more. "I need it. I need it now and hard."

Sinking into her, he groaned out, "Good girl."

Her gasp as he seated himself to the hilt inside her made his heart near to bursting. And then he moved, hard and fast, slamming into her.

She cried out and wrapped her ankles behind his ass. Her nails dug into his biceps. Grabbing her hands as he pistoned into her, he pinned them above her head, lacing his fingers with hers. She growled and bucked her hips.

"You like that?" he asked, his mouth brushing hers. "You like being pinned down? You like not being able to move? Does that turn you on?"

She growled again, bucked again, then leaned up and caught his bottom lip between her teeth.

It was his turn to grunt. He slowed his motions, but with each hard thrust, he brought her closer to her climax and his own. Sweat beaded on her forehead and his. Transferring her hands so he could clamp her wrists in one of his, he reached down and brought her right leg up, over his arm. On his next deep thrust, she screamed and every muscle in her body tightened.

"That...is...your...sweet...spot."

"More," she cried.

He slammed into her repeatedly, fighting to hold back his own orgasm. Never had it been so difficult. Her inner muscles clamped around his cock like a vise. She shouted with every thrust of his hips. She was so close...so close...

Her full breasts bounced with each lunge, attracting his attention until he couldn't hold back. He leaned down, sucked her fat nipple into his mouth, and gently bit down.

Her entire body convulsed, pulsed, tightened, and she screamed long and loud. His own shout joined hers as he poured himself into her, pumping his hips a few more times to keep the pressure against her G-

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spot until she went limp.

"Holy fuck," he said, sucking in a ragged breath as he rolled to her side and collapsed.

"Stop cussing." Her hand plopped limply against his chest, her words a bit slurred. "It makes you sound like a street kid."

He chuckled. "How do you know I'm not a street kid?"

She made a snorting sound he found very cute. "You're educated. You speak well, other than the F-word." She yawned. "Besides. I've never heard about any street kids getting into the stock market."

He turned his head and looked at her beautiful face. Her eyes were closed, and a glow that hadn't been there an hour earlier made her cheeks rosy. "You're right," he said softly. "I went to college."

A soft snore was her only response.

Bastian lay there for a few more minutes, watching her sleep, trying to figure out his feelings. Part of him wanted to tell her who he was so there were no secrets between them. The other part, the bigger part, worried she wouldn't want anything to do with him. She was poor, and he was stinking rich.

*Will she look at me differently the moment she realizes who I am?* He didn't think so, but he'd met many women before that he didn't think would be gold-diggers. None had treated him the same once they learned he was not only a Ridgcroft, but *the* Ridgcroft heir.

He could make her life so much better than it was. He hated her living in this dump of a trailer court. It wasn't safe for a beautiful, young woman like her.

He wondered how much she made working in the mailroom. She said the trailer was hers, but she'd still have utilities and lot rent. Hadn't she mentioned something about school? Maybe that was why she took hot sauce and ketchup packs from restaurants. And sugar. For her coffee, which she was out of?

Money had never meant much to him, but now, with crystal clarity, he knew why. It didn't mean anything when one had it. Never in his life had he worried about throwing a soda can in the garbage versus the

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recycling bin. He hadn't even known there was someplace that bought cans by the pound. And he'd never thought someone with a full-time job at Ridgecroft Industries would need to collect those cans for a few bucks a week just to get by.

## **Chapter Four**

Consciousness crept in, and Bastian realized he was dying of thirst. The warm press of soft flesh touched him from shoulders to toes. His arms were around a woman, and for just a moment, he drifted, floating on a sensation of near euphoria. Of rightness. Of being in the right place at the right time where he belonged.

A car horn blared from outside, shattering his peacefulness. He opened his eyes. The light was still on overhead. He and Dixie were wrapped around each other, legs intertwined, her head tucked beneath his chin, her breasts pressed snug against his chest. Against his penis, which was slowly beginning to stir to life just from her nearness, he felt her springy pubic curls and damp heat.

He marveled at the contrast between his tan arm and her mocha shoulder. Her skin was so soft, so smooth. When he ran his fingers lightly down her spine, she arched into him, moaned in her sleep, and nudged his cock with her pelvis. Fuck, she was responsive. He wondered how far she'd let him go. There'd been excitement in her eyes when he held her down and pinned her hands. Would she like bondage? Would she trust him enough to let him tie her up?

Swallowing, he realized again how dry his mouth was. Slowly, careful not to wake her, he extricated himself and rolled to the side of the bed, which wasn't far, since it was so small. The mattress springs squeaked, but she didn't stir.



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He pulled the covers up over her. The bedroom wasn't as tidy as the rest of the trailer. He hadn't noticed until now, but the bed hadn't been made, there were clothes on the floor, and the top of the low dresser along the wall was piled with papers, books, lotion bottles and perfume. Taking a closer look, he recognized the bottles as cheap, drugstore variety scents.

Scratching his chest, he headed out of the bedroom, flicking off the light so Dixie didn't wake up. He went to the fridge and pulled it open. His heart landed in his toes. The fridge was empty except for a zipper baggie of condiment pouches, another of individual creamers, which he assumed she collected from restaurants also, a container of salad, and a single can of generic brand diet cola.

In the freezer, he found a couple boxes of generic brand TV dinners and five ice cube trays, all full. He pulled out a tray of cubes. Next to the sink he found the cupboard of dishes. All mismatched, there were four plates, two bowls, three coffee mugs, one of them with the Ridgcroft logo, and a half dozen glasses.

He pulled out a glass, popped in a few ice cubes, then filled it with tap water, which he prayed was drinkable. He downed it then refilled the water. It tasted fine, so he'd hope he wouldn't get some strange water-born disease. Taking another sip, he pulled open the next set of cupboard doors. The shelves were nearly bare. What was there wasn't healthy and more than likely tasted like shit. A couple cans of store brand stew, soup and green beans. Three boxes of generic macaroni and cheese. A box of soda crackers, and a small jar—mostly empty—of crunchy peanut butter.

*Fuck.* This woman was breaking his heart. And she'd bought him dinner then gave away all her leftovers to the old lady next door. He had to help her somehow.

*Her car.* The least he could do was pay to get her car running again. It'd probably be cheaper to buy her a new one, but he seriously doubted she'd let him do that, since the one she drove had sentimental value. She'd probably get pissed that he was doing this much. Silent as he could, he went into the bedroom, found his jeans on the floor, and drew out his cell phone. Then he headed back into the kitchen, took another drink from his

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water glass, and browsed through the phone numbers in the memory.

He had a guy who owed him a favor, and he just happened to be a mechanic. It was after midnight, but he doubted Darren would mind a wake-up call.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dixie woke up alone in the dark. She sighed, wrapped her arms around the extra pillow, and breathed in. It still smelled like Bastian. His unique, spicy, warm scent. Goodness, the things he'd done to her. She'd never come so hard in her life. He had a magic touch. Too bad the little interlude was over.

With a sigh, she pushed herself up and grabbed her bathrobe off the hook behind the door before heading into the living room to shut off the lights. Tying her belt, she yelped when she entered the living room and saw a naked white guy standing there.

His grin was quick and cute. "Hey, babe."

Her smile came easy. She loved when he called her *babe*. "I thought you left."

"Nope." He came toward her, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her forehead. How sweet was that? "I would never leave without saying goodbye."

Snuggling into his warmth, she breathed in his scent. Musk and male and sex.

"I didn't wake you, did I?" His hand coasted down her back to cup her butt.

"No. Why are you up?"

"To get a drink of water and got sidetracked by your pictures." He turned slightly, still keeping one arm around her, and moved her toward the little shelf where her family photos were. "Is this your mom?"

"Uh huh." It was her favorite picture. The only one of the whole family. "And my dad. He died about a year after it was taken."

His hand coasted comfortably up and down her arm as he held her.

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"I'm sorry."

"It's all right. It was a long time ago. He had a heart attack one night. Just never woke up. Mom was never really the same after that, but she worked so hard, two jobs most of the time, to make sure we didn't wind up in the projects. She wanted me in a good neighborhood, going to good schools." She looked up at Bastian, tears stinging her eyes. "I love her so much, and I miss her so bad."

"I thought she was still alive."

"You've never known anyone with Alzheimer's, have you?" When he shook his head, she said, "She's alive, but almost never there. Mentally, I mean. She doesn't know who I am. To her I'm just some stranger that comes to have meals with her a few times a week."

"Oh, Dixie," he whispered and wrapped his other arm around her, gently rocking her from side to side. "Isn't she too young for that disease?"

"Both my parents were in their mid-forties when I came along. They called me their miracle baby. They'd never expected to have any kids."

He kissed the top of her head. She didn't know why she was telling him this stuff. Her family life wasn't any of his business. Tonight was tonight only, and there was no room in her schedule for anything more.

"What's the books?" he asked, motioning toward the coffee table.

"I take nighttime courses at the college a couple times a week."

"Oh yeah?" He picked one up and turned it over to see the cover. It was her Environmental Science book. "What are you studying?"

"Marine Biology. Of course, at this rate, I'll be in my forties before I ever get my degree, but that's what I'm working toward. I was going to Barry University in Miami until I had to drop out to take care of Mom. Someday I hope to get back to fulltime." She shrugged. She didn't have a lot of hope of that, but she still had her dreams. Looking up at Bastian, she could easily see him sliding into those dreams.

*Wait, wait, wait.* She didn't know anything about him. "Where did you grow up?"

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"Right here."

"Where'd you go to school?"

He swallowed, and his gaze slid away, focused on the painting on the opposite wall. Her cherished, framed Christian Riese Lassen print that her mother got for her when she finished her first year of college. The piece was titled *Dolphin In The Sun*. One dolphin jumped out of the water, the background a rolling surf. Two others swam below the waterline among coral and small fish.

Whenever she thought of giving up on school, when she was too tired or just too worried about money and paying bills, she need only to look at that print and remember her life-long dream—the same dream her mother held for her.

"I went to high school right here, and then I went to Princeton."

She jerked back from him. "Are you serious? You went to Princeton?"

The first twinges of concern pricked her mind. He'd seemed so down to earth, ripped clothes and all. The type of guy willing to get his hands dirty to help a stranger, but if he'd gone to Princeton... Well, that took money. A lot of it.

He nodded and finally looked at her. "Yeah. I did. On an academic scholarship."

*Oh.* Scholarships certainly helped level the playing field. "Wow. That must have been amazing." Relieved, she laughed and snuggled back against him. She did love the feel of his arms around her. "I've never even been out of Florida."

His hand came up and cupped her cheek, pressing her against his chest. "I've traveled some." He skimmed his thumb over her bottom lip, and she shivered, frowning again. One didn't get to travel on scholarships.

"Military?"

He chuckled. "No. I have a boat."

"A boat..." She wasn't quite sure how to take that.

"Mmm hmm. It's nothing special, just home."

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She reared up to look at him. "You *live* on a boat?"

He nodded with a smile. "Bought it used and refurbished it. As long as I have my satellite Internet connection, I can go anywhere and work."

She relaxed. She'd heard of people hitch-hiking across the country with nothing but a backpack or traveling across Europe and staying at hostels. Why not do something similar in a refurbished boat? She sighed. What would it be like to be free enough to just...go and see the world?

"Sounds amazing. My dream is to see the Great Barrier Reef. Every year, I save up enough to take a trip down to the Keys and go snorkeling. I want to take SCUBA lessons." She tipped her head up to look into his face. He gazed down at her with his midnight blue eyes, and she nearly melted. He looked so serious. His long black hair framed his face, giving him a dangerous, mysterious air.

"You'll do all those things. I know you will."

She nodded. "Yeah. Someday."

He turned slightly and nudged her thigh with his erection. Sucking in her breath in surprise, she almost choked. He dipped his head and licked the shell of her ear. "You ready for some more hot lovin'?"

She burst out with a giggle. "Hot lovin'?" She pulled out of his arms so she could turn off the light. "Is that what that was?"

From behind, he wrapped his arms around her and cupped her breasts. His cock pressed against her ass. "You don't like me to use the word fuck. So what do you want to call it? And I thought it was pretty hot, didn't you? You screamed, you creamed, you said 'fuck' because you wanted it."

A tingle raced down her spine at the combination of his dark voice, naughty words and hot, hard body pressing against her. She arched so her nipples pressed into his palms and her ass cradled his cock.

"Yesss," she hissed. "It was definitely hot."

"Mmm hmm." His voice rumbled in her ear. "Come here, babe." He withdrew, and she nearly cried at the loss. But he took her hand and led her through the darkened trailer back to her bedroom. The streetlamps

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outside sent an orange glow into her room through the tiny slits in the blinds, so she could see his gorgeous, naked body. He was so obviously comfortable in his nudity. His cock stood out long and proud.

"We have to try something different this time," he said as he untied the belt on her robe. "I only had the one rubber."

"Oh." Disappointment flooded her. She wanted him inside her again. He'd felt so good—perfect—more incredible than any man she'd ever been with. He knew how to...to...fuck a woman. She ducked her head as her cheeks heated with embarrassment.

He lifted her chin with his fingertip and kissed her. Just a brush of his lips over hers. "But, I wonder... Will you let me...?"

"What? Let you what?" She pulled back. In the darkened room, he did look dangerous. And thrilling. A smile tugged at her lips.

Bastian pulled the belt from her robe then pushed the robe off her shoulders. "Do you have a scarf or bandana?"

Curious, she nodded. "Why?"

His grin was feral. "I want to tie your hands together and blindfold you. The rest...is a surprise."

Her smile faded as concern grew. "I don't know..." She'd only just met him.

"I only want to pleasure you. Do you trust me?"

Did she? She'd trusted him enough to take him home with her, to let him in her bed. If he'd meant her harm, he'd had plenty of opportunities before now—the deserted parking lot at work, when they were in her car, once he'd entered her home, or while she was asleep.

"Yes," she answered. "I trust you."

His grin was pure male sensuality. Wicked and alluring. Leaning in close, he whispered in her ear. "I want to make you come without ever touching your pussy."

"Psht. Right." She shoved his shoulder. "That's not possible."

He raised a black eyebrow. "Is that a challenge?"

With that low, sexy voice, she was ready to melt right there, standing next to the bed. A thrill shot through her. She'd never been tied

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up, and seeing how well he satisfied her earlier, she didn't doubt he'd try to do so again.

"Without touching me...there? Really. You think you can?" She turned to her dresser and rifled through a couple of drawers until she found a faded, soft blue bandana and handed it to him. "Yeah, Mr. Hot Lovin'. I challenge you." She held out her hands, fists side-by-side, and narrowed her eyes. "I don't think you can."

He wound the terrycloth robe belt around her wrists a few times and expertly tied a knot. Probably good at that because of his boat. Didn't sailors know knots?

"I accept your challenge, Dixie babe. Turn around."

She did, and he wrapped the bandana around her head, over her eyes.

"Can you see?"

"Not a thing."

"Good." Hands on her shoulders, he turned her slightly, nudged her forward until her knees hit the edge of the bed, then said, "Lay down. Facedown. Hands over your head."

Her pussy tingled at his commanding tone. She never dreamed she'd willingly do anything this kinky, this wicked, in the bedroom, but there was a first time for everything, wasn't there?

With a little shove, he pushed her onto the bed. She bounced and giggled, then scooted upward until her bound hands touched the wall and only her toes hung over the end.

"Good girl." The bed dipped as he stretched out next to her. His body heat made her sizzle, but he wasn't even touching her. "Follow every direction I give without question, and you'll have the most amazing orgasm of your life."

She giggled. Then yelped when he pinched her butt cheek. "Hey!"

"Be a good girl."

She laughed. "Too late. You corrupted me."

His chuckle was a deep rumble, and she wiggled against the bed. She wasn't about to admit that it probably wouldn't take much to make

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her come since she was already so aroused she tingled all over. Her clit throbbed with need of his expert touch, but she was *positive* he'd need to *touch* her there for her to actually climax.

"Okay, babe." The tip of his finger caressed her ear, and she shivered. "If I do anything you don't like, I want you to say the word..." That gentle finger skipped over the nape of her neck, and she bit her tongue to keep from moaning. "...apricot."

She laughed. "What?"

"Apricot. I want you to say it if I do anything you don't like. You say it, and I'll stop."

"Why can't I just say stop?"

His breath was warm against her shoulder. He kissed her sensitized skin then said, "Because sometimes women cry out *stop*, when they don't really mean it." He skimmed his fingers over her ribs, and she giggled. "If I tickled you, you might tell me to stop, but you'd be laughing, so how would I really know you meant it? If you have a safe word, something you would not typically say in the course of pleasure, and you say it, I stop."

"Okay. That's good then." She smiled to herself because she'd been right. He was a good guy.

"I'll never do anything to physically harm you, Dixie. Do you believe that?"

She frowned into the bandana around her eyes. "Umm. What, exactly, are you going to do to me, and why would I think, in the first place, that you would?"

His big, warm hand coasted down her spine. "Just checking. And all I'm going to do right now is make you come."

Goose bumps popped out on her arms and thighs. "Well then get on with it," she said, somewhere between a laugh and a moan.

He pinched her bottom again. "Be a good girl."

Hearing him say those words when, in fact, she hadn't been this bad in...ever...made her snicker. "Fine."

He pinched her again, this time a bit harder, but instead of pain,



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pleasure zipped through her. Her nipples pebbled, and she squeezed her thighs together to prolong the throb of need pulsing in her.

"Say, 'Yes, Bastian.'"

"What? Are you on some kind of power trip?"

He nipped her shoulder, and she groaned. "Say it. Say, 'Yes, Bastian.'"

It was sexy hearing his soft command. If he wanted her to play the meek little good girl, she could oblige. Especially if he did as he promised. "Yes, Bastian."

"Mmm. I like the sound of that."

With just his fingertips, he skimmed over her shoulder blades. She couldn't hold in the moan that time, and she pressed her chest into the bed as the ache in her nipples grew.

"You have the softest skin of any woman I've ever met. Did you know that your skin is one giant erogenous zone?" His breath tickled over her shoulder, and then his tongue followed. All the while, his fingers moved ever so lightly down her back, over her butt cheeks, up her sides. Moving, moving, moving, making her shiver and grow hot.

"You like that, don't you?"

She nodded.

"Say it. Tell me."

"Yes, Bastian."

"The sound of my voice and the words I whisper are going to turn you on so hard you're going to writhe with need. And then I'm going to say two little words, and you're going to come, and it's going to feel better than anything you've ever experienced."

She made a sound of disbelief and rolled her eyes behind the blindfold. *Yeah, right.* Sure, she was turned on now, but there was just no way she'd climax on command.

"It's called a psychic orgasm. You're going to want to come, therefore you will."

She could almost believe it, seeing as how right this second, she desperately wanted to come. If he would just touch her where she ached,

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she'd —

His voice dropped to a sultry murmur. "Was I the first man to taste your sweet cunt?"

Her breath lodged in her throat. Goodness, that word used to make her cringe, but when he said it, lust pulsed through her. She envisioned his mouth on her...there...again. His fingers never slowed or ceased in skimming over her body; her shoulders, her sides, her back, her bottom, her thighs. Every once in a while he'd travel down her arms to her elbows, then back. She tried to arch into his touch, but he always kept the pressure too light. Almost a tickle, but not quite. It made her tingle all over.

"Answer me, woman. Was I the first to ever eat your juicy pussy?"

"Ahh. Yes. Yes, Bastian."

She panted. Her skin grew hot. She tingled from head to toe.

"You were the best I've ever had," he said in her ear, his voice an erotic growl. "Mmm, so delicious. That tight, sweet clit I flick with my tongue...nip it with my teeth. I could eat you all day and never get enough. And your plump nipples. I love tasting them. Licking...sucking. You like it when I bite them, don't you?"

She couldn't answer that. With the effect his words were having on her body, the pictures they painted in her mind, she had a hard enough time now just breathing.

"I bet they're hard little nubs right now, aren't they? They'd feel so good in my mouth."

He ran his finger across the crease between her butt and the tops of her thighs. Then his touch changed, became sharper, as if he grazed his short nails over her flesh, up along her spine. Goose bumps erupted on her skin. She pressed her hips into the mattress and groaned.

"How about my cock?" He nudged her hip with his hard length. "Did you like that inside you?"

She nodded, her face buried in a pillow.

"Tell me," he whispered in her ear. "Tell me you like it when I slam my hard cock deep inside your pussy."

She reared her head back. "Yes, Bastian. Yes."

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The bed shifted as he moved, and then his body came down over hers, hot and heavy. She felt his heat from her shoulders to her thighs, his body like a blanket over hers. His cock rested on her ass. His chest hairs tickled her back. His hot breaths warmed her neck.

"I liked it, too. Sliding into your tight body, feeling your muscles clamp onto my cock. A warm, wet grip. You make me want to push deeper, harder. Faster." She tensed, her mind conjuring up a vision of him doing just that. She moaned. She lifted up and rubbed her bottom against him.

"You are so fucking hot. So gorgeous."

He licked a path over her shoulders and across her nape. She cried out as pleasure arced through her.

"You like it when I talk dirty, don't you, Dixie?" He nipped the side of her neck, her earlobe.

She whimpered as his penis throbbed against her butt, its length nestled between her cheeks. *Goodness. Goodness. Goodness!*

"It turns you on, doesn't it, when I say the word...fuck?" His voice was low as he spoke directly into her ear, his hot breath adding to the need coursing through her. "It does naughty things to your body, doesn't it? Yes...it does. Your clit tingles and throbs when I say fuck..." His legs wedged between hers and separated, spreading her thighs. "...when I fuck your tight cunt."

Vulnerability swamped her senses. Her heart raced. Her fingers clawed the bedding. His hips rotated, rubbing his heated length against her ass, but she felt as if he'd entered her, as if he'd struck her to the very core.

"Ohh..."

"You're such a good girl, aren't you? I bet you don't even say 'hell,' but you like being naughty. You like it when I'm bad, and when I make you scream. You love it when I fuck you real hard. Feel it?"

"Yes, Bastian!" She pressed her ass up against him, and her breasts into the bed. Her fingers ached from where she gripped the edge of the mattress.

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His hands speared between her body and the mattress to grab her breasts. "Yes, feel it, Dixie. Filling you. Harder. Hotter. Building...building," he said in her ear, then sucked the lobe between his teeth. "There, babe. So deep." He pinched and tugged her nipples hard. *"Come now."*

She cried out as the orgasm rippled through her, surprising her in its intensity. Surprising her that it happened. Bastian groaned, flexed his muscles, and she felt his hot semen on her lower back. He'd come, too, without a touch. Because she had.

*Oh, my goodness.*

"Bastian," she said on a whimper.

"Shh." He gently cupped her breasts and lifted a bit of his weight from her back. "Ride it out," he murmured then kissed her neck, her shoulder. "You're still shaking."

She gave a jerky nod and sucked in a breath. One hand came out from under her, and he tugged off the blindfold. She blinked, trying to clear her eyes. He moved off of her, knelt next to her, and untied her wrists. He massaged her fingers, hands and wrists. "Okay?"

"Uh huh," she managed to say when the tremors subsided.

He leaned over and kissed her lips. "Stay here, and don't move. I'll be right back."

She didn't think her body would move even if she demanded it. Her limbs were leaden, her heart beating deep and steady, vibrating throughout her body, extending the tiny electrical-like pulses to her pussy.

Bastian came back into the room and lay down next to her. Something touched her back, and it startled her.

"Shh. Just cleaning you up."

The warm cloth felt heavenly as he swiped it over her. When he was done, he left the room again but returned quickly. He crawled onto the bed next to her, scooped her into his arms, against his solid chest, and let out a deep sigh. "G'night, sweet Dixie."

"Night, Bastian."

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It surprised her that she felt so comfortable snuggled up against him. She hadn't had a steady boyfriend in years, and she'd never cuddled after sex with him. Never wanted to. Needed her own space. Was happy when he got up and left afterwards.

She breathed in Bastian's musky scent and sighed it out. She should not be this comfortable. She shouldn't want this.

Bastian's hand coasted up her arm, and then his fingers feathered through her hair. He kissed her forehead.

*Goodness.* She shouldn't be thinking about what tomorrow night alone in this bed was going to feel like.

## **Chapter Five**

Bastian smoothed his palm over Dixie's breast and watched her nipple plump and tighten at the caress. She moaned and arched up, seeking his touch even in her sleep. Dipping his head, he drew her other soft peak between his lips and licked until it hardened in his mouth.

He'd never met a woman so responsive to his touch. She'd been incredible last night, coming at his command. He'd worried he was pushing too far too fast, but she'd been game. And in the end, they'd both won.

He kissed a path over her collarbone then laved her breasts, plumping them with his hands. She had the best boobs he'd ever seen. Big and round and soft.

"Bastian," she moaned.

"Right here, babe." He kissed her tummy then rose up over her. "You awake?"

She nodded, but her eyes were still closed. Her hair was adorably mussed and sticking up all over the place. Her long, black lashes shadowed her cheeks. Her skin fairly glowed, and there was no mistaking her arousal. Her breaths were short; her chest rose and fell rapidly.

"Look at me."

Her eyelids fluttered and then slowly lifted. Her eyes were as dark as night, her pupils dilated.

"What do you need?"

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"You," she said, the word a whisper.

"Tell me."

She shifted, widening her legs, and he moved between them, nudging her sex with his cock.

Her hips lifted, rubbing herself against the tip of his penis. She kept steady contact with his eyes, and mouthed, "Fuck me, Bastian."

Capturing her lips with his, he slid into her. He drank her moan. Lifting her arms, she wound them around his neck, then her fingers were in his hair, holding him to her while he slowly, languidly, pumped into her tight, slick cunt.

Her body tightened around him almost instantly. She raised her knees, and he went deeper on the next stroke. She fit him like no other woman ever had. They were two halves of a whole.

Ripping his mouth from hers, he buried his face against her neck, panting, and quickened his pace. She couldn't be his other half, he thought desperately. She was too good. Too pure.

She cried out and wrapped her legs around him. "Yes, Bastian," she said on a moan as her arms tightened around his shoulders.

He shuddered, and it took every bit of his willpower to hold off his own orgasm. Never had a woman pushed him this far. He always held control. Always.

"Please," she whispered in his ear, her hot pants like music to him.

He opened his mouth to talk dirty to her, to say the words he had last night that had made her come, but he couldn't do it. Not right now. Not in this moment when she was so open to him, accepting of him.

*She doesn't know who the fuck I am!*

He wrapped his arms around her, lifted his head and met her gaze. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever met," he said, meaning it from the bottom of his soul. Inside and out, she was perfection.

She tipped her head up, exposing her neck, and moaned.

Ever so gently, he suckled the tender skin at the base of her neck, teasing with his teeth.

She convulsed, all her muscles tightened, and she came with a soft

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cry, pulsing around his cock. He closed his eyes, breathed in her sweet scent, and let himself go. He knew he'd never find another woman like this one. It was going to hurt like hell to let her go.

Once her heartbeat settled back to a normal cadence, Dixie turned her head and looked at the clock on her nightstand. She groaned. It was almost ten.

Bastian rolled to the side, pulling out of her. She glanced down at his penis to see, thankfully, a condom. "Where'd you get that?"

He chuckled. "You didn't seem too worried about safe sex a few minutes ago."

She poked his shoulder with her finger. "I was a little too distracted." She frowned. "And I trusted you."

He rolled onto his side to face her and laid a proprietary hand over her right breast. "I'm glad. And you're right. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you. Especially take a chance with your safety."

Now she really frowned and pulled back from his touch, her stomach clenching as panic swooped in. "You've got something?"

"No." He pulled her back into his arms. "I'm clean. But that doesn't mean I'm not going to protect you from...whatever."

Pregnancy, she thought. A baby was the last thing she needed, and although that was an impossibility since she was on the pill to regulate her cycle, he didn't know that. A part of her was impressed to see he'd go to such lengths to protect her, but she still felt foolish for letting him have sex with her when she didn't even know he had a condom. "So where'd you get it?"

His laugh was a deep rumble that sent frissons of pleasure skittering over her skin. "The same place I got you this." He leaned over her and lifted something off the floor. A store-bought cup of coffee and a brown paper sack. She recognized the insignia on the thermal cup as coming from the nearby mini-mart.

*Oh. Goodness.* Her heart took a little tumble in her chest. "Bastian," she said on a breath as she wondered at the tightness in her throat, the slight sting in her eyes. "Thank you."



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He kissed her cheek. "My pleasure, babe."

She pushed up, leaned back against the wall, and took the offering from him.

"Be right back." He got up and headed out of the bedroom. *Goodness, goodness, goodness. Look at that butt!* The man was built like a Greek statue. All toned muscle and long, lean lines.

She set the coffee on the nightstand and opened the bag. Two blueberry muffins and two bagels. There was also cream and sugar, a plastic knife, stir stick and a couple packets of cream cheese. By the time Bastian returned to the bed, she'd added the condiments to her coffee and was just taking the first glorious sip.

"Thank you," she said again, sighing as the hot liquid warmed her belly.

He crawled back into bed. "My pleasure. But you have to share the food with me."

She chuckled and handed him the bag. "How'd you know blueberry was my favorite?"

As he drew one of the bagels out of the bag, he shrugged. "I didn't. It's mine."

On impulse, she forked her fingers into his hair and pulled him forward so she could kiss his cheek. "You're pretty sweet, for a bad boy."

He winked. "It's an act." He pulled out the knife and cream cheese and proceeded to cut the bagel in half.

"What is? The sweetness or the bad boy?"

Instead of answering, he smeared cream cheese on one half and handed it to her.

"Hmm. For me to figure out, huh?"

He nodded and bit into his own piece. Dixie watched his straight, white teeth sink into the bread, and her pussy clenched. *Jeesh*. It was pretty bad when she got turned on by watching him eat.

"So, what are we doing today?" he asked in a conversational tone.

After she swallowed her first bite of food, she dipped her head to sip her coffee, hoping he wouldn't see her regret. But this had to end now.

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Breakfast in bed, even if it was from a corner store, had the possibility of inflicting some major damage to her heart.

"I...um...have plans today." And it wasn't a lie. She had to get moving if she was going to catch the bus and get down to Bingham Beach by noon.

"Oh."

When she looked at him, she couldn't miss the disappointment in his face, in his beautiful midnight-blue eyes.

"All right." He rolled to the side of the bed and sat up, then leaned over and picked up his pants.

"Wait." The word slipped out before she could bite her tongue. She didn't want this to end yet. God help her, just one more day.

He turned his head and looked at her.

"Come with me. To the beach. I'm..." She smiled even as her chest tightened. She was letting him in too far. "I have a date."

His brow wrinkled in a fierce frown, and then he turned away and shoved his legs into his jeans. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"Bastian." She set her coffee cup on the nightstand and went up on her knees behind him, wrapped her arms around his stiff shoulders. "It's not that kind of date. Come with me. It'll be fun." Why was she pushing this? She should be thankful he was willing to leave without asking any questions. She didn't have time to get in any deeper. A relationship was out of the question right now. Wasn't it?

When he laid his big, warm hand over her arm and caressed her, she closed her eyes and buried her face against his silky hair.

"You're sure?"

She nodded, even as the little voice in her head cried out that she wasn't sure. That she should let him go. Better he walk away now and be done with this than to invite him more fully into her life. Into her heart.

Goodness, it was too late. Sometime between him making sure she got home safely on the bus and him serving her coffee and bagels in bed, her heart had grown attached to him.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. "I'd love to

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spend the day with you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Bastian sat in the warm sand and watched Dixie teach a little girl how to fly a kite. When she’d said she had a date at the beach, this was not what he envisioned. Her laughter floated to him on the wind, and he cursed himself. He’d thought she was spectacular before now, but this...this sealed it.

“She’s something else, isn’t she?”

Bastian looked up at the man seated next to him in a wheelchair. The little girl’s grandfather. Her guardian. Her only living relative, Dixie had told him as they took the bus across town to Bingham Beach. He had MS and wasn’t able to do all of the things he wanted to with his granddaughter. Dixie had met them a few months earlier, and every other Saturday at noon, they met at the beach for an hour. This week she’d brought a kite; one she’d no doubt picked up at a dollar store, but the little girl didn’t care how little it cost.

“Yes, she is.”

The beach was busy on a hot, sunny weekend afternoon. He watched couples walking hand in hand, children and parents wading in the shallow surf, and breathed deep of the scents of the sea and the chip truck nearby.

“She’s never missed a day,” the old man said. “Rain or shine, she’s always here when we arrive.”

Bastian nodded. He believed it. If there was one thing about Dixie, she cared about others. Which made him feel even guiltier that he’d withheld the truth about himself. He wondered if it would matter that he was her boss’ son. That in a week or so he’d be her employer.

He frowned and dug his fingers into the warm sand. He’d given her a false last name, and she’d accepted that at face value. But he still wondered how she could *not* know who he was. Every once in a while his picture showed up in the tabloids. They were always trying to keep the

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rumors about him alive. And last month, when it was announced he'd be taking over as CEO when his dad retired, his picture had been on the front page of the local newspaper. The evening news had run a feature about it. He'd even heard it made CNN. Ridgcroft Industries was a major player in the pharmaceutical supply business.

She had to know. Was she playing dumb?

Pulling his legs up, he propped his arms over his knees. She didn't seem the type to be that dishonest. If she knew, she was a damn good actress.

"Never seen her here with a man before," the old man said. "Didn't know she was attached. Guess I assumed if she was, she'd have better things to do than play with a girl she's not related to."

"We're just friends," Bastian said and was surprised that the words made him uncomfortable. How could he be a friend if he'd been lying to her? How could she be one if she'd lied about not knowing who he was? They were fuck buddies. That's all it was.

Then why did those words make him feel ill?

"Look, Grampa!" the little girl shouted as the kite soared high, dipping and twirling over the water.

The man raised his hand and waved.

Dixie turned toward them and waved back, her face lit with laughter. And peace, he realized. She lived in near poverty—definitely what he'd consider poverty—but she was so at peace with her life. She gave and gave when she had so little of her own.

"Time to go, honey," the old man called. Lowering his voice, he said to Bastian, "I have to get home to take my medication."

Bastian nodded. "Dixie told me it's hard for you to be out."

"It is. But I can't keep Charlotte in the house all the time."

Dixie and Charlotte wound the string on the kite until it landed on the sand. Then they gathered it up and came up the beach toward them. Charlotte ran into her grandfather's arms and hugged him tight. "Dixie said next time she'll bring one of her sea books, and we'll look for living stuff under rocks."

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The grandfather smiled. "That will be fun."

Dixie grinned like a fool. It was more than obvious she loved being with this little girl.

"Here, Char," she said. "Take your kite. You can bring it back next time."

The girl took the kite then hugged Dixie around the waist. "Thanks, Dixie."

The old man motioned to a man seated on a bench behind them. His live-in nurse, Bastian had been told.

"You ready to go, Mr. Coleman?"

The old man nodded. The nurse dragged the wheelchair out of the sand and up onto the concrete path.

"See you in two weeks," Dixie said.

Mr. Coleman nodded. "Thank you."

The little girl waved at Bastian then turned and skipped off after her grandfather and the nurse.

Dixie watched them for a bit before she held her hand out. "Come on. Let's get some ice cream, and then I have something to show you."

He took her hand and let her tug him to his feet. "Something to show me, huh?" he asked as he wound his arms around her body. She wore a bright yellow one-piece swimsuit with a short denim skirt showing off her long, shapely legs. She looked good enough to eat.

She pushed away from him, retrieved her pink purse bag from the sand, and laughed. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Mr. Peterman."

For a second he frowned at the reminder that there were still secrets between them, but he hid it behind a playful protest of innocence. "What'd I do? Come on. Not once did you hear me say..." He cast a look around. "...the *F*-word."

She gave him a playful shove. "No, but you were thinking it."

He grinned as he pulled her back to his side so he could wrap an arm around her shoulders.

They bought ice cream cones from a vendor after arguing over who should pay. Bastian won that argument, but just barely. She insisted since

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he bought breakfast, she should buy the treats, but he wasn't going to let her pay for one more thing. They'd had a brief argument before catching the bus about her car. She'd wanted to call a tow truck to have it brought to her house, and when he told her he'd taken care of it, she'd almost exploded. It was only after he'd explained that the mechanic was a friend of his who owed him a favor, and that he'd instructed the guy to only do the bare minimum and get it running, that she'd calmed.

Truth was, he'd told the guy to get it drivable again. He'd pay for that lie later, he was sure. And she'd probably throttle him when she found out he intended to pay for the whole thing.

Independent woman.

The ice cream melted faster than they could eat it, and they were both laughing about the sticky mess when they finished what was left and stopped to rinse their hands at the public shower near a boardwalk.

Afterwards, she laced her fingers through his and led him across the beach. "I have a special spot I want to show you." When they reached a manmade jetty that hadn't been used in probably fifty years, with big signs that said not to climb on the rocks, Dixie didn't heed the warning and started up them.

"Hey. What are you doing? It says climbing on the rocks is dangerous." He grabbed her around the waist and tugged her back down.

She laughed. "It's okay. I come here all the time." She turned her head and grinned up at him. "Big Bad Bastian doesn't break rules?"

"Not ones that could get me arrested." Not for a lot of years, anyway.

"Don't be a baby. Besides, look down the beach." She motioned in the direction they'd come. They were a good hundred yards from the nearest person. "No one's looking."

He sighed and released her. "If I wind up behind bars, I'm holding you personally responsible."

"Deal." She took off up the rocks like a mountain goat, and he followed at a much more careful pace. When he got to the top, she was already descending the other side, and he saw what she was after.

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A strip of white sand was nestled in a cove of rocks. Private. Silent except for the whoosh of the tiny waves.

She hopped down onto the sand, dropped her bag to the ground, and turned to look at him. "Well? You coming?"

He picked his way down the jagged rocks and was relieved when he reached the sand without any mishap. He was not a climbing person. He loved to ski, sail, and had even skydived a few times, but he didn't trust rocks to stay where they belonged. He thought mountain climbers were insane.

Dixie wound her arm around his waist and turned to look out at the ocean. "Isn't this place perfect?"

He gazed at her profile, at the smile curving her full, sensual lips. "Yes. Perfect."

She turned her head and met his gaze. "I've never brought anyone here. And I've never run into anyone else here."

"Maybe most people read warning signs."

She stuck out her tongue and pulled away, then plopped down into the soft sand and leaned back on her arms. "Never saw you as a stick-in-the-mud."

He laughed and sat down next to her. "Never been called *that* before."

She turned her face up into the sun and sighed. "What *do* you do for fun?" She grinned. "Besides rescue damsels in distress and sleep with them."

"You have a smart mouth on you, lady."

She flashed him a bright smile. "Answer the question."

"Bossy, too." He leaned over and kissed her hard. "I'll have to do something about that."

She laughed against his lips and shoved him back. "I forgot. You like to be in control."

He cleared his throat and leaned back on his hands, mimicking her position. She hit a little too close to the truth. "Only in bed do I like my women submissive."

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She raised an eyebrow. "Submissive?"

He nodded. "I thought you liked it."

"Oh, I did—I do." She ducked her chin, a motion he was getting used to seeing when something embarrassed her. "It's just weird to hear you say it in such terms. I never thought of myself as submissive about anything."

He tipped her chin up with a finger. "It's okay to let someone take care of you once in a while, isn't it?"

She licked her lips and met his eyes. "It's dangerous."

He frowned.

Her sigh was loud. "I relied on my mom for everything. She was my best friend. I was working and going to school, but I still lived with her even when I was old enough to move out and be on my own. And then she got sick. In the span of less than a year, she went from normal to vacant."

"That's different."

Dixie shrugged. "Maybe. But I've got too much going on in my life right now to think about it. Between work and school, there's not much time for anything."

"You're here on a Saturday afternoon. So you have this time."

Turning her head, she gazed out at the sapphire water but didn't answer.

He waited for several long minutes, but she remained silent. "I take my boat out." He couldn't tell her about his other outlet. She wouldn't understand if he told her about Incognito.

"That must be nice."

"It is." He wanted to take her out on it. Wanted to take her to the tiny island he owned and skinny dip with her in the tropical lagoon surrounded by thick foliage. A place that made him believe he was the only person on earth. But she was too skittish.

He wondered if he'd see her again after this weekend. He flopped back on the sand and stared up at the cerulean sky. He'd see her. She'd soon be working for him instead of his father.



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“Hey,” he said, figuring it was time to get to the bottom of it all.

“Hmm?” She stretched out next to him, her arm against his.

“I heard that a new guy was going to take over as CEO of Ridgecroft.”

“Yep. The current CEO’s son. Willie Junior.”

Bastian had been referred to as ‘Little Willie’ for years when he was growing up. He hated the name. Willie Junior wasn’t much better. His father was the junior. He was William Sebastian Ridgecroft, III, which wasn’t something he admitted in most of the circles in which he normally hung out.

“Really? What’s he like?” If she was playing him, he’d know right now.

Dixie laughed. “Rumor around the mailroom is that he’s a real freak, wears leather, and likes men.”

## Chapter Six

"What?" He turned his head to look at her.

"Yeah," she said, still looking up at the sky. "I guess he showed up at some fancy-schmancy dinner his dad threw a few years back dressed in nothing but leather chaps, with a guy on his arm."

*Oh, for fuck's sake!* That wasn't at all what happened. He might've been wearing leather, he couldn't recall, but he sure as fuck wasn't wearing nothing but leather chaps! And gay? *Gay?* Not hardly! *Oh, fuck.*

"He got home from some sex club and walked right into the dinner party." She gave him a look that showed obvious disapproval. "Of course, then he and his dad had a big blow out fight, and Willie took off and disappeared for a few years. Some say his Dad was so embarrassed by his behavior that he paid him to vanish for a while."

"Where did you hear this?" he asked, trying to keep his voice even and not let his anger show. He'd left to get away from his controlling father and his father's money, to make his own fortune and prove once and for all that he was his own man.

Dixie shrugged and turned her head to look at him. "Like I said, rumors around the mailroom. I work with a bunch of huge gossips."

"Right. So what's this guy look like? Isn't he in the papers?"

"Wouldn't know." She rolled onto her side to face him, propping her head on her hand. "Don't read the papers. Don't have time. Listen to the radio for news while I'm getting ready for work in the morning." She

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grinned. "The real news, talk radio, not gossip news. Get enough of that at work."

She didn't have a fucking clue who he was. "Just because a guy wears leather doesn't mean he's gay."

She laughed. "You wear leather, Bastian?" She ran her fingers down his chest then tugged his shirt from his jeans. "Leather chaps?" Her hand coasted over his stomach, and then higher. "And nothing else?"

"Ah. No. Never wore chaps in my life, but I have a pair of leather pants."

"Oh?"

"Some women find them sexy."

"Really." She rose up on her knees and leaned over him, planting her hands in the sand on either side of his head. "I suppose that would go along with you being a bad boy, huh?"

He nodded. "Very bad boy."

The look in her eyes was pure sexual heat, and he hardened in the time it took to draw a breath.

Her voice dropped to a sexy purr as she leaned in and whispered, "How bad?"

His good girl was turning decidedly naughty. He reached up between her legs and pressed his middle finger against her sex. The crotch of her swimsuit was warm and damp. Her eyelids fluttered.

"So wicked I could turn you around and fuck you until the sun goes down."

Her breath sucked in when he tugged her suit to the side and skimmed the pad of his finger over her clit. "Doggie style," she said in a hushed whisper.

"Uh huh. Ever done that before?"

She shook her head, never breaking eye contact with him.

"Little Miss Innocent."

She grinned. "Last night was the first time I've done it with the lights on." She flexed her hips against his touch, and he dipped his finger into her cunt. "But I wanted to see you. You're so...gorgeous."

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"How about in the bright light of day? On a public beach?" He slipped a second finger into her, let his voice drop to a whisper. "Where you could get caught."

"Never."

"You've been with morons."

She laughed and nodded in agreement as she slowly rode his fingers.

"Will you let me fuck you here? With the sun beating down on your soft skin?"

She whimpered. "You are wicked."

With his free hand, he popped open the buttons of his fly. "Oh, yeah. I am."

He pulled his cock free of his jeans, removed his fingers from her hot, silky core, and went to sit up, to move into position behind her, but she laid her hand against his chest.

"Wait."

"Chicken?" He raised an eyebrow in challenge, but he wouldn't blame her if she was.

"No." She dipped her head a second, but then met his eyes once again. "I want to do something else I've never done before."

"Tell me."

Still kneeling beside him, she reached down and wound her long, slim fingers around his cock. "I want to...taste you."

He groaned and flopped back on the hot sand. She'd never given head before? Fuck, she was an innocent. He should feel guilty, but he didn't. She hadn't been a virgin, but she must have been with idiots in the past. "I am *not* going to say no to that."

She held his gaze for a long moment as she tenderly stroked him. "I don't want to do it wrong," she said in little more than a whisper.

"Put your mouth on me. There is no wrong way."

Dixie's heart hammered against her breastbone. Time was ticking loud in her head. She had to go visit her mother in a couple of hours, and she needed to study for her next exam on Tuesday. He didn't appear to

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believe her earlier when she said she didn't have a lot of time, but the truth was, she didn't.

And he lived on a boat. He said he traveled, so what were the odds he'd stick around for any length of time? No, she needed to keep her head on her shoulders, enjoy the here and now, and say goodbye when the time came.

Still, when she did say goodbye to Bastian, she didn't want to feel as if there was more she should have done. She figured she didn't have much time left with him, and if this was the last time she was with him, she needed to do it all, experience it all, so she could take the memories with her.

"Do it, babe. Suck my cock." He was so blunt her cheeks heated, but she wasn't about to back down now. She turned on her knees beside him and scooted toward his shoulder so that as she leaned over his body, she was eyelevel with his penis. He was long and hard, yet his flesh was silky.

They'd showered together in her tiny bathroom after they were done eating this morning. They'd soaped each other and messed around. He'd brought her to another orgasm with just his fingers and dark words. She'd stroked him with soapy hands until he'd come, and she'd wanted to put her mouth on him then but hadn't found the courage. She wasn't sure where that courage came from now, but she was going to do it.

Lowering her head, she licked the smooth, soft tip. Bastian's breath hissed out through his teeth, and his muscles clenched. A drop of moisture glistened where she'd just stroked, and she bent again to taste it. Salty. Tangy. The essence of him.

Her pussy throbbed, and her nipples tightened. She opened her mouth and took him in, careful not to touch him with her teeth.

"Ah. Fuck!" His hips thrust up, and he slipped deep into her mouth.

For some reason his reaction struck her funny, and she lifted her head and poked him in the side. "Stop cussing."

He burst out laughing. He lifted his head from the sand and looked

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at her. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Is it working?"

He groaned and dropped his head back down. "Yes."

Returning her attention to his cock, she watched his testicles shift and move as she stroked him with her hand. She swiped her other hand on his jeans to make sure there was no sand on it, then ever so gently cupped it around his balls.

"Yesss," he hissed. Apparently he liked that. "Suck my cock, woman. Do it now." His demand spurred her own arousal, and she clenched her thighs together to prolong the sweet ache. She dipped her head once again and drew him in deep, sucking him like a lollipop.

His hands came up to her head, but he didn't push her down on him. He gently guided her motions, showing her what he liked. She took him as deep into her throat as she could, tasting more of his pre-cum. When one of his hands left her hair, and then he burrowed his fingers back into her pussy, she moaned around his cock.

"Yeah, babe. Oh, yeah. Oh, fuck." He pumped into her mouth, never forcing her to take more than she could handle.

His sac tightened, his testicles drew up, and his penis grew harder.

He tipped up on his side, and she realized he was reaching for his wallet. She kept suckling him, licking him, fondling his sac. He opened his wallet and pulled out a condom, never stalling in his deep strokes of her pussy. He ripped the packet open with his teeth. Then, in the blink of an eye, he dislodged her, flipped her around, and shoved her skirt up over her ass. A heartbeat later, with his cock in a condom, he tugged her swimsuit out of the way and slammed into her.

She screamed and collapsed onto her forearms. He didn't pause. Each thrust was harder and deeper than the last. His fingers bit into her hips. Heat radiated through her body.

"So fucking sweet."

She rocked back against him, spread her legs a bit wider, and silently asked for more.

Flesh slapped against flesh. His testicles bounced against her clit

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each time he pressed into her. The orgasm built and built and built until she shouted, "More!"

One of his hands pulled her suit down and latched onto her breast, kneading and plucking at her nipple. He reached around and did the same to her clit with the other. She arched her back, felt him slam against that sweet spot he'd discovered last night, and she cried out as the world shattered into bright lights. The sound of crashing waves mixed with Bastian's deep, guttural grunts as his cock pulsed inside her when he came long and hard.

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The soft whoosh of waves and seagull cries. The warm press of Dixie's body next to his as they lay on the sand with the sun beating down on them. The soft ocean breeze cooling their heated flesh.

Bastian couldn't believe heaven could be any better than this moment. Coasting his fingers up and down her arm, loving the feel of her satiny skin, he sighed in complete contentment.

Dixie pushed herself up and looked at him. "I have to get going."

He shook his head.

She nodded. "I go visit with Mom for a couple hours and then have supper with her."

He couldn't ask her not to go, even if he didn't want to leave their quiet little cove. "Will you have dinner with me tomorrow night?"

"I can't. I have dinner with Miss Sheila on Sundays."

"Oh." He knew that. He couldn't go out Monday, not unless he was prepared to introduce her to dear old Dad, which he wasn't. Not yet. "Tuesday?"

"Can't. I—"

"Why not?" he interrupted, getting the awkward feeling she was about to announce that was the night she had to wash her hair or some other such nonsense.

At his tone, which he'd failed to hide, the shutters came down and

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the walls went up. She stiffened and pulled away. "Look, Bastian. I told you I don't usually do this. I don't have a lot of time. I had a wonderful weekend, but maybe we should—"

"Don't give me that line of bullshit." He sat up and grabbed her hand before she could get away. She tried to free herself, but he kept his grip firm. "You don't have time. That's what you said last night. You made time then. You made time today, so I don't believe you."

Her jaw tightened. "Let go of me."

"No, please. Listen to me, Dixie. We've got something special here. Give it a chance."

"We had sex. Lots of sex. You're very good at it, but that doesn't mean we're going to live happily ever after."

He snorted. "I'm not talking happily ever after. I'm talking a date. One single date. You and me somewhere where we're not going to wind up fucking. Somewhere we can be together and get to know each other better. To see if maybe there is something besides sex between us."

He already knew there was. He felt it in his gut. Maybe even his heart, though no way in hell would he admit that to her when she looked so skittish.

"No."

"Damn it, Dixie. Give me one goddamn good reason, and if you say you don't have time—"

"Don't you cuss at me!" She jerked her hand from his grasp and rolled away.

"I'm sorry," he said, but it came out more as a shout. When she picked up her bag and headed for the rocks to start climbing, he got to his feet and went after her. "Don't walk away from me."

She turned around and glared at him, hands planted on her hips. "I told you no."

"Why?"

When she just stood there, he said, "I know. Because you're afraid, that's why. I didn't see you as a coward."

Her hand lashed out, but he caught her wrist just inches from his



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face. "Oh, no, lady. You will not do that. And you're not going to end this by causing an argument."

She swallowed and glared, but he saw the uncertainty in her gaze.

He didn't know what to say or do. He'd never been dumped before. Women just didn't do that to him. It fucking sucked. And God help him, he never thought if someone was trying to dump his ass he'd fight to stay in the game.

So he did the only thing he knew how to do. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Softly. Gently. When she didn't struggle, he took it as a good sign. When she wound her arms around his neck and melted against him, he knew he would win this one.

He lifted his mouth from hers when she moaned. "Just go with it, babe. Let's see this through. One date. If you decide you don't like me, if you don't enjoy yourself with me outside the bedroom, then I'll walk away. But not until you agree to go out with me this once."

She stared at his chest, her fingers fiddling with his hair. Dipping his head, he kissed her cheek, then her forehead. He cupped the back of her neck and tucked her against him where she fit so perfectly.

With a sigh, she said, "Fine. One date. Wednesday night after I get off work."

He laid his cheek against her soft hair and grinned. He already had an idea of how to totally sweep her off her feet. And after that was done, he'd admit who he was. If he told her now, she'd run so fast he'd never see her again, but later...

"One date," she repeated.

"One date."

She pushed back and looked into his eyes. "Don't you *ever* call me a coward again."

He cupped her cheek in his palm. "I won't. It'll never happen again." And then he kissed her, slow and deep. "I'll pick you up at work. Five-fifteen?"

She frowned. "You're pushy."

He chuckled. "That, I think, you're just going to have to live with."

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“Humph.” She turned away and started climbing the rocks, but not before he caught the upward tilt to her luscious lips.

Admiring her ass as he followed, he knew that by the time Wednesday night drew to a close, she’d be putty in his hands.

## Chapter Seven

Nine o'clock Monday morning, Bastian pushed open the door to his father's office. "How much do the mailroom workers get paid?" he asked without preamble.

His father looked up from the papers on his desk and raised an autocratic eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

Bastian tugged on the Windsor knot of his tie. Fuck, he hated the damn things. Made him feel as if he were wearing a noose. "How much do you pay the mailroom workers?"

"What's got you so riled?"

He paced to the window and stared out at the ocean. "Would you *please* just answer the damn question?"

"I don't think I like your tone, William."

"I don't give a shit if you like my tone or not." Bastian turned toward his dad and sighed. "I want to know how much you're paying the support staff. The mailroom workers, the janitors, the cafeteria workers. You know, all those people in this building who have to wear those butt-ugly blue shirts."

"You'll have to ask HR."

"Bullshit. You tell me."

His father pressed his lips together and glared.

Bastian ground his teeth. "They need a raise."

"Now you just hold on a minute. Our pay scale is—"

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"I don't give a goddamn about the pay scale. Those employees keep this place running. They can't live on minimum wage. Damn it, Dad. No one can live on that. And some of them are single parents trying to raise their families; others are trying to go to college and barely scraping by."

"I never said they got minimum wage, son, but they have those jobs because they want them. You don't see me holding a gun to their heads, making them work here, do you?"

*No, I'm the only one in that position.*

He turned away and drew in a deep breath. "Fuck," he muttered, then almost grinned, expecting Dixie to appear out of nowhere and poke him for the profanity. He shoved his hands in his pockets and turned back to his father who sat in that fucking executive chair behind that monstrous desk looking like the goddamn king of Ridgcroft Industries. He almost snorted. William Sebastian Ridgcroft, Junior *was* the king. But come next week, the prince was moving in. And then he'd deal with the salary issues.

"No, Dad," he said, trying to keep the venom out of his voice. "No one is forcing them to work here. But some of them have no other choices, either." He opened his mouth to ask how much got taken from their checks for health insurance, but he snapped it shut so hard his teeth clicked. He would go to the HR department and find out. And as soon as his name was on this office door, things were going to change.

"Now that *that* is settled, you haven't forgotten the dinner I planned for you tonight. It's a small affair," his father was saying when Bastian's cell phone rang.

"Yeah, I remember." He waved at his father and walked out of his dad's office before answering the call.

"Bastian," he said into the phone as he headed for the elevator to take him to the HR department on the fourth floor.

"Hey, Bastian. It's Darren. Dixie Johnson just called me, wanting her car but, dude, this thing isn't worth salvaging."

Bastian stopped outside the elevator to finish the call. "What did

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you tell her?" He leaned against the wall and smiled at one of the pretty, young secretaries as she stepped off the elevator and walked by him.

"I stalled her like you told me to. Told her I was still working on it and would get back to her shortly to let her know when it'd be ready."

"Great. So what will it take to get it running?"

Darren sighed heavily. "To get it running? A carburetor and a starter. To keep it running, add on a transmission. The radiator is cracked, and the oil pan has a leak. Beyond that, the battery is almost nine years old and probably about to eat it. And don't get me started on the safety of the thing."

Bastian closed his eyes and tipped his head back. "What's with the safety, other than the driver's seatbelt?"

"The tires are completely bald, and the breaks are shot."

"Fuck." Dixie had been driving a death trap. He trusted Darren's assessment; the guy had been a friend since high school, and Bastian had helped him get his small mechanic shop off the ground by fronting him a loan. He wouldn't lie.

"Okay. Fix it. All of it. New tires and breaks. Everything you just listed."

"Dude. We're talking at least a few thousand here, and the car is so old and worn out it doesn't even *have* a Blue Book value."

"I know, but Dixie can't afford anything else. Fix it, and..." And how to get around Dixie? "And only charge her for a new battery." He wondered if she had the money for even that, but if it was running, there had to be some explanation behind its miracle recovery. He prayed she didn't know anything about cars. Then again, she'd known she needed a new carburetor. He just hoped some other mechanic had been the one to tell her.

"Oh, man. You're nuts."

Bastian chuckled. "Yeah, buddy, I am." Nuts about Dixie. "I can't let her drive something so unsafe."

"Okay. I'll send you the bill."

"One other thing." He cringed, already knowing Darren's response.

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"I'll throw in a few extra bucks if you can get it finished by tonight."

*"What? Dude, that's impossible."*

"No. Not for you it's not. Humor me."

Darren sighed again. "Is she worth this?"

"Oh, yeah. She's definitely worth it."

"Get my wife another bottle of that fancy wine you gave us last Christmas, and I'll do my best. Gretta went nuts for that shit."

At a minimum price of fifteen-hundred a bottle, the Romanée Conti was a bit more than fancy wine. "You're on. You deliver the car, and I'll have a bottle of the French Burgundy sent to Gretta."

"Awesome. Talk to you later. I gotta get to work on this fucker."

The line went dead before Bastian could thank him. He pressed the button to call the elevator. While he waited, he wondered what kind of trouble he'd get into with Dixie over this.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dixie wrote a check to pay for the new battery, knowing the sixty bucks pretty much wiped out her entire bank account. But, if the little car would get her around for a few more months, it was worth it. She didn't mind the public transit system, and on weekends she used it, but she hated being without a car during the week. Especially on nights she worked late. No matter what she'd told Bastian, waiting at a bus stop late at night freaked her out a bit. She wasn't an idiot when it came to her personal safety, but sometimes there just wasn't any choice. She'd taken a personal safety course through the college a few years ago and figured she could defend herself to a point, but she'd rather never have to put it to the test.

She slid into the front seat of her car and waved a thank you to Darren, the mechanic who talked as if he and Bastian were best friends. She wondered if Bastian had put him up to it, since the guy went on and on about what a great person Bastian was, always helping out his friends.

When she turned the key, the motor turned over with a sound

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closer to a purr than its usual screech, and it fired right up. Whoa, a battery did that? She should have had that last no-good mechanic check it. He'd charged her eighty bucks just to tell her she needed a new carburetor. And the price he'd quoted for that repair and replacement was completely out of her budget.

She grinned and waved again, since Darren was still standing there, then put the car into reverse. The gears didn't grind. As she pulled away from the garage and onto the busy evening street, she realized the entire car felt different. Not just the sounds, but it drove smoother. She narrowed her eyes and ground her teeth as she headed back to Ridgcroft. What did Bastian have done to her car?

She didn't have time tonight to call him and find out. She'd promised Terrence she'd come back to help him out. After paying for this battery—which she suspected didn't cover everything that had been fixed—she needed to collect as many cans as she could. Thank goodness her bags were still in the backseat.

Tomorrow night she had class and never got home before eleven, so she couldn't call the sneak to task until Wednesday. When he showed up to take her out, she'd get to the bottom of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bastian pulled up in front of his father's mansion and killed the engine. He was early. Instead of going in too soon, he picked up the file folder from the passenger seat. He hadn't had time to browse through Dixie's HR file, yet, but he'd seen her W2 from last year. He didn't know what to make of it.

Dixie made more than minimum wage. In fact, she made more than enough that he could find no earthly reason she should be living in a run-down trailer in a crime-infested part of town.

Did she have a gambling problem? She didn't drink, obviously. There had been no alcohol in her house. He saw no signs either in her house or on her body that would point to drug abuse. She seemed

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perfectly healthy. So where the fuck did all her money go?

Hoping to find the answer somewhere in her file, he turned on the dome light and flipped through the pages. His heart clenched and his stomach fell. "Fuck." There were six forms, all requests to add her mother to her health insurance. All had been denied. Following each denial there were letters of appeal. Dixie had tried repeatedly to get the company to allow her to claim her mother as a dependant, but because the mother received Social Security benefits and small retirement benefits, she wasn't eligible.

He had absolutely no idea how much a nursing home cost, but he figured it was a lot more than what Dixie's mom's meager income would be. So that meant Dixie must pay out of pocket for her mother's care. And live like a pauper because of it. He checked the rest of her paperwork and discovered a memo where someone in HR had responded to her query about education reimbursement. She'd been denied again because her choice of majors wasn't related to the work she did for Ridgcroft Industries.

"Fuck." Bastian flipped off the light and shoved open the car door. He'd have to talk to his father about this. There were things he had no experience with, and dealing with insurance plans was one of them.

Without bothering to ring the bell, Bastian strode into the house. Pierre, Dad's butler, came scurrying out from wherever the little man kept himself when he wasn't answering the door.

"Just me, Pierre. Where's Dad?"

"In the den with Ms. Haden."

So that was the guest list for the dinner his father called a small, private affair. "Fuck."

Pierre nodded. "May I fix you a drink?"

Bastian smiled at the intuitive butler as he headed for the study. "Make it a double."

"Yes, sir."

He pushed open the door to the lavishly appointed study. "Hey, Dad. Katie."



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Kate Haden was the only daughter to Zebulon Haden, owner of the biggest paper manufacturer in Florida. Dad had been trying to set the two of them up since high school. What Dad didn't know, though, was that Katie was a lesbian who was very happy with the woman she'd been living with since college.

"Hey, sugar," Katie said with a chuckle as she left her seat and came to him for a hug.

"Dad roped you into another dinner, I see," he commented when he held her in his arms and could whisper in her ear.

She nodded. "Just love these games, don't you?" She pulled back and gave a wicked grin. "Your father promised filet mignon." With a flirtatious wink she flipped her long, black hair over her shoulder. "I can't pass up some good meat."

Bastian shook his head and grinned. "You're a bad girl, Ms. Haden." She kept up the charade because her father would disown her if he ever found out there would be no grandchildren. Since her father was in his seventies and suffered from emphysema, she probably wouldn't have much longer to pretend.

Pierre came in the door behind them, carrying Bastian's drink. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

Bastian shook his head. "Thanks, Pierre." After a deep swallow of the scotch, he sighed and turned toward his father who sat in his leather wingback chair as if it were a throne.

"Dad. I have some things to discuss with you." Bastian sat down in the chair opposite his father. "I have some questions regarding the medical insurer we use."

His father scowled at him and motioned toward Katie, who'd just resumed her seat on the sofa and picked up her martini from the coffee table. "We have company, William. We can discuss business later."

"Oh, I don't mind," Katie said. "You know I'm always interested in learning more, so I can effectively take over Haden Paper."

Bastian sent her a grin. She had worked within Haden Paper since the day she graduated college. She knew that company inside and out and

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would take it farther than her father could ever dream. Unlike Bastian, who had run off to make his own fortune and, on principle, had avoided any part of his father's company until a couple weeks ago.

He almost asked his father exactly *why* he was expected to take over *now*, but he snapped his mouth shut. That conversation would wait until they were alone.

"All right, William," his father said with an imperious nod of his head. "What's your question?"

"There's an employee in the mailroom who pays out of pocket for her mother's nursing home care." He lifted the file. "She's asked that her mother be added to her insurance several times, but it's always rejected."

"And?" his father prompted

"And I want to know why we can't put the mother on the insurance. She takes care of her mother, as she would a child, so why can't we help her out a bit?"

"Well, son, that's not up to us. That's up to the insurance company."

Bastian shook his head. "This isn't right. She needs help caring for her mother." He stood up and handed his father the file. "Read those appeals. The poor woman lives in...under...she has nothing...all because of her mother's medical expenses." He shoved one hand in his pocket and tipped back the rest of his drink with the other. He didn't mention the single query about education reimbursement, deciding to save that for another time. Six attempts and numerous appeals clearly showed which expense Dixie valued more.

Dad pulled his reading glasses from his shirt pocket and slipped them on his nose. "Dixie Johnson..." He glanced up. "The pretty African American girl from the mailroom?"

Bastian's eyes widened a bit. He nodded.

His father raised an eyebrow. "Don't look so surprised, William. I know the people who work for me. There are three women in the mailroom. Dixie, Carrie, and Brenda.

Bastian sat back down and swiped his hand over his face to hide

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his embarrassment. He hadn't realized his father might come down from the ivory tower once in a while. He'd never thought William Ridgcroft II would bother with the underlings in his employ.

His father flipped through the file, scanning a page here and there. "She was denied coverage for her mother because the mother has income. She makes too much to be considered a dependant."

Bastian shook his head. "Doesn't matter. How can one woman be expected to pick up the cost of her mother's health care with no help?"

"That's really not our problem." His father closed the file. "Do you have any idea how many people are employed by Ridgcroft Industries?"

Bastian nodded. He had a ballpark figure. It was in the thousands.

"Can you imagine what would happen if we became personally involved with each one? If we stretched the rules for one and not another? If we started handing out money to every down-on-their-luck employee? That's not how you run a company, son."

*It's not every one. It's Dixie!*

*Fuck.*

Bastian gritted his teeth. He knew his father was right, and that sucked shit.

"There's nothing you can do for her?" The question came from Katie. He'd forgotten she was there.

His father closed Dixie's file and tossed it onto the coffee table. "I can call the insurance company tomorrow morning and discuss it with them, see if there's any extra paperwork that Dixie might be able to come up with that could change their minds, but that's about it."

Dad turned toward him. "How do you know Dixie?"

"She was having car trouble the other night. I helped her out." He slouched down into the chair. There had to be something he could do to help Dixie. *Something...*

"Is she pretty?" Katie asked, eyebrows raised, her lips kicked up into a teasing grin.

"Gorgeous."

"William," his father admonished. "You are not to have a dalliance

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with—”

“Dad!” Bastian sighed. “For the millionth time in the last fifteen years, Katie and I are not going to fall madly in love and give you heirs, okay? She’s my friend, but we’re not romantically interested in each other. So leave me the hell alone about getting married and giving you grandkids. If it happens it happens. If not, deal with it, okay?” He shoved out of the chair and paced to the massive windows that overlooked the ocean.

Damn, why did the man have to be the way he was? If he was expected to take over Ridgcroft in just a couple of days, he had to be able to talk straight with his father. And these arranged dates needed to stop. Permanently.

“Bastian,” Katie said, and he heard the distress in her voice.

He turned and frowned at her.

Katie glanced back and forth between him and his father. “Bill, you haven’t told him, have you?”

When Bastian turned back toward his father, his dad was placing a small pill under his tongue. *Under his tongue*. The only medication he knew...

His father laid his head back and drew in a couple deep breaths. Once the redness subsided from his face, he lifted his head. “I had a heart attack a couple months ago. It’s why I’m retiring. It’s why I needed you to come home.”

## **Chapter Eight**

Dixie punched the time clock at four after five and slipped into the bathroom to freshen up for her date. Bastian hadn't said where he was taking her, so she wasn't certain what to wear. She did know that she wanted to at least fix her makeup and brush her hair. And get out of the ugly smock.

She folded up the smock and set it aside before she leaned toward the mirror and applied mascara. The door to the bathroom opened. Carrie came in and took the first stall.

When she came out, she was studying her hands. "I swear my skin gets blacker by the day with all the ink that rubs off."

Dixie paused to look at her own stained fingers, set the mascara down, turned on the faucet, and raced Carrie to the soap dispenser.

Laughing, Carrie jostled Dixie and asked, "What's with the makeup?"

"I've got a date."

The look on her friend's face was priceless. "No lie? Who?"

Dixie grinned. "If all goes well tonight, I'll tell you tomorrow."

"No fair! You can't just say you have a date and not spill the beans. At least tell me where y'all met."

"He helped me when my car broke down the other day."

Carrie appeared stunned by the news. "I always thought that car was nothing but trouble, but I see it has some potential after all."

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Dixie laughed. She continued to dodge questions while she finished applying her makeup, and then glanced at Carrie's watch. "I gotta go or I'm gonna be late. Could you put my smock in my locker? Thanks. I'll see ya later."

She didn't give Carrie time to say anything else as she headed for the parking lot, figuring Bastian was already waiting for her by her car.

He wasn't, but another gentleman in a suit and black chauffeur's hat was. He'd double-parked a shiny black sedan in front of her car and leaned against the front fender. When she approached, he pushed away from the car, gave her a smile, and headed for the backdoor.

That's when two hands covered her eyes, and a familiar scent filled her nostrils. She stopped, and his body slid up behind hers.

"Surprise," Bastian whispered in her ear, making her giggle.

"You know, most people remove their hands when they say that, not the other way around."

"But then I never said I was most people," he murmured, his warm breath on her neck sending tingles racing down her arms. Keeping his hands over her eyes, he used his hips to nudge her into motion.

Her steps hesitant, she held out her hands in front of her. "I've already seen the car and driver."

"That's not the surprise." He coaxed her to a stop and something cool and silky slid across her eyes as he pulled his hands away. "Thank you, Sam." A few gentle tugs at the back of her head told her the something was a blindfold of some kind.

"Sam's the guy in the hat?"

"Mmm hmm."

"Pleasure to meet you, ma'am," Sam said so formally that she had to chuckle.

"Nice to meet you, too, Sam. What's going on?" she asked Bastian as he placed a hand at the small of her back and another on her head.

"The car is right in front of you, babe. Watch your head when you get in."

Curious about what he was up to, she decided to wait to bring up

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the work done on her own car. Why spoil the moment when he was trying so hard to impress? And doing a damn fine job of it.

The interior backseat was soft, cool leather. It dipped just a bit as he got in beside her. She knew from her brief glimpse that the car was no stretch limo, but it was still sweet of him to set up something like this for their first real date.

"I'm not exactly dressed for a chauffeured ride," she protested half-heartedly, both hands clutching her pink purse in her lap. She'd decided that, since he'd said he would pick her up at work, he expected her to be dressed similarly to how she'd been when they first met. So, with the exception of the ugly smock, she wore her best pair of blue jeans, sandals, and a simple cotton blouse.

"You're perfect." He draped an arm over her shoulder, and she felt the car pull away.

After a few minutes of silence, she asked, "So...where are we headed?"

"You'll see." He was grinning. She could tell by the sound of his voice. "How was work?"

She relaxed against the plush seat. And him. "Hectic as usual. There's always someone who needs some package yesterday."

He leaned across her for a second, his glorious scent engulfing her, and then something brushed across her bottom lip. She stuck her tongue out to lick her lip and see what it had been, and it slid across something smooth, rich, and tasty. *Mmm, chocolate.*

Opening her lips, she waited. He slipped it in, and she bit down. "Mmm...goodness." She didn't care that she spoke with food in her mouth. The chocolate-covered strawberry burst on her tongue, the tangy-sweet flavor making her mouth water.

He chuckled, and the low sound vibrated through her. A chauffeured car, strawberries and chocolate. She felt like a princess.

"Here. Have some more," he whispered as the juicy berry slid along her lower lip. She licked the tangy nectar, and he put the berry to her lips for another scrumptious bite. Chocolate was her weakness, which

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was why she usually avoided it like she did her supervisor on a bad day.

He removed his arm for a moment while he leaned across her again, and she heard what sounded like the rattle of ice cubes.

“Do you like champagne?”

She nodded. “Sure. Not that I have it often.” She chuckled. Last time she’d had any was the company Christmas party two years ago. “Don’t like beer, though.”

His arm came back around her shoulder, his breath close to her ear. “No beer. Tell me what you think?” A cool glass touched her lip, tilted, and sweet ambrosia dribbled onto her tongue.

“Oh, goodness. That’s really yummy.”

In silence, Bastian continued to serve her a few more sips of the sparkling wine and mouth-watering bits of fruit, and she savored every tantalizing bite.

No one had ever gone to such trouble for her. Her previous dating experiences amounted to dinner at a cheap restaurant and a movie. Sometimes dinner was a hotdog and small bag of buttered popcorn at the movie.

And the blindfold was something altogether new. Unable to see where they were headed, her excitement grew with each passing moment, and the sensuality of it all made her jittery and energized...exhilarated.

“We’re here. Almost.”

The car came to a stop, and he helped her out, making sure she didn’t bump her head on the doorframe. But he still didn’t remove the blindfold. Instead, he wrapped his arm around her waist and guided her with the motion of his own body. She heard the car’s engine rev, the wheels crunch on something as it pulled away, and the sound of...seagulls? She took a deep breath and couldn’t mistake the sweet tang of salty sea air.

“Okay. Careful now. I’ve got you, but what you’re about to walk on is a bit unsteady.”

She hesitated. “What is it?”

“Never mind. We’ll do it this way.” Before she could figure out



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what he was up to, he dipped down and then lifted her into his arms.

With a yelp at the sudden move, she clung to his neck.

The sounds of his footsteps changed from soft thuds to... Was he walking on a boardwalk?

After a few moments of being pressed against his hard body, his long arms curled around her, cradling her, making her feel as precious as a jewel, he stopped, let her legs go, and her body slid down his. A shiver of pleasure skittered over her, but he took her by the shoulders and turned her away from him. Then he removed the blindfold.

She blinked the slight blur from her eyes to see...a yacht. A very white, very pristine, very *large* yacht. She looked back at him to see him grinning like a little boy, stunningly handsome in black jeans and black, form-fitting T-shirt.

"Home sweet home."

Her eyes rounded, and her breath whooshed out of her lungs. "*This* is your *boat*?"

He nodded. "I know I said we should go somewhere where we couldn't—"

"I need to go." She pushed past him and headed back up the dock.

"What? Why?" His jogging footsteps thudded behind her. "I thought we had a deal. One date."

She stopped when she reached the parking lot. The car was gone. Where in the devil was the nearest bus stop? She dug into her pink purse, looking for coins and her bus schedule. She didn't even know if she had enough change for the fare.

"Dixie." He grabbed her arm.

She looked up at him as hurt and panic warred within her. "I like you. I do. You're a nice guy and all, Bastian, but..."

He frowned. "But what? I know it's not a race thing. So what's the problem?"

"You've been to my house."

"Yeah. So?" He crossed his arms.

"So, you tell me." When he remained mute, she rolled her eyes,

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unable to figure out why he was being so dense. "You live on *that!*" She pointed at the *yacht*.

"You knew I lived on a boat. I told you I did."

"That is not a boat. It's a *yacht* and is probably worth more than every trailer in my neighborhood put together."

"I don't believe this." He threw his hands up in obvious frustration. "Because I can afford to live on a refurbished yacht instead of some...rowboat...you won't have anything to do with me?"

"Tell me the truth. You paid extra to fix more than the battery in my car, didn't you?"

His jaw ticked. "And if I did, so what? Are you the only one in the world allowed to do a kind deed?"

"Helping plug in a wire for a stranded motorist is a kind deed. Paying to rebuild the whole car goes way beyond that, and I don't accept charity."

"Good, because I wasn't offering you any, and I didn't rebuild your *whole* car. I asked a friend to make it drivable and safe. Your car was a danger to you and anyone in its path."

She gasped at the insult.

"It wasn't a matter of *if* it left you stranded again God only knows where; it was a matter of *when*. The problem wasn't only the battery and carburetor. It was also a safety hazard. All four tires were bald, the brakes were shot, and the seatbelt was useless."

She winced at the laundry list of issues.

"I realize it was your dad's car and that makes it special, but I didn't want to see you get hurt. And if your dad were alive, I bet *he* would at least have the courtesy to thank me instead of throwing a fit because someone wanted to help you out."

Her lips drew into a thin line. Tears welled in her eyes. "The money, the chauffeur, the...the...the chocolate. The *yacht!* It all just proves that you and I are from two different worlds. What could we possibly have in common?"

He scowled at her, narrowing his eyes. "Besides a love of the

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ocean? I don't know. And I guess I was the only one willing to find out." He turned and headed back down the dock toward his *home*.

Her heart stalled. Tears blurred her eyesight. "No, wait." Her throat was tight, but she ran after him, her sandals slapping the wood boards. "God, I'm sorry." When he kept walking, she wrapped her arms around his waist from behind, and hugged him hard, pulling him to a stop. "I'm sorry. I just... I saw the yacht and freaked."

Bastian lifted his face toward the sky and closed his eyes. He'd never had a woman almost leave him because he *had* money. Usually they were crawling over each other to get a peek at his wallet or their hands on his credit cards.

Dixie was unique. Money didn't attract her. Wealth didn't impress her. It scared the shit out of her—a reaction he'd never before faced.

"It's just a boat," he said, placing his hand over her arms at his midsection.

She chuckled, but he heard the snuffle, too. "A boat, then," she admitted with a tender press of lips to his nape.

He turned in her arms, held her in a loose embrace, and gazed into her big, dark eyes that shimmered with tears. That she could be so upset over something as... He sighed, and his lips kicked up in a little smile. Money was a huge issue for her, and being that she didn't want his made him love her all the more. She was the woman he'd been searching the world over to find. Someone who wanted nothing from him but...*him*.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "Babe, the quality or quantity of possessions does not make someone a better person, no more than having less makes them less worthy of admiration. Not even a name can truly define someone; only what's in their heart can do that."

With a slow nod, she said, "I know. I've just had... I've had some really bad experiences with people in the upper tax brackets, but you're right. I shouldn't generalize. I'm sorry."

He opened his mouth to tell her who he really was, but the words stuck in his throat. Not yet. If she'd tried to leave him because of his boat, how fast would she run if she knew his given name? He wanted her to

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know the *real* him, not make snap judgments based on a surname given to him at birth. The only way to do that was to spend as much time getting to know one another as possible.

He raised his hand and cupped her cheek, looked into those big, gorgeous eyes and smiled. "Are we done arguing?"

She grinned and nodded, ducking her head in that sweet, slightly embarrassed way of hers that made his heart melt.

"Ready for that date now?" He stroked his thumb along the silky line of her jaw. He wanted to kiss her but knew that would lead to hauling her to his berth and making love to her all night. And that was not what tonight was about. He'd promised he wouldn't seduce her, and he wouldn't.

So, when she nodded, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and walked back to his yacht with her. He gave her a brief tour, making sure to move quickly through the captain's quarters and past the king-sized bed there. No need for more temptation than what already pounded at him just having her so near.

In the galley, he stopped and poured her a glass of the champagne he'd left chilling earlier, carefully covering the label on the bottle with his hand so she wouldn't have a clue how much he paid for it. He doubted she'd be impressed, especially after she'd almost walked off.

At least he didn't think she'd have a clue about price on... "Would you like to try a bit of caviar?" He pulled a tray from the small refrigerator with a variety of cheeses, crackers, and a tiny tin of hundred-dollar-an-ounce caviar. He felt foolish now for making this date so extravagant. He'd wanted to pamper her, not make her uncomfortable.

"Fish eggs?" she asked, her nose wrinkling.

He chuckled and held out the tray. "Cheese then?"

With a grin, she picked up a few chunks of cheddar, completely avoiding the brie and camembert. After he set the tray down on the counter, he grabbed a small plate from the cupboard and put the rest of the cheddar on it, and then a few crackers.

"Come on. Let's head out." He took her to the flybridge where she

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could sit and watch while he navigated the vessel out of the harbor and into the open ocean. He'd already checked the weather and oceanic conditions in preparation for the trip to his island, which was about ten miles offshore. A glance at the clock told him they should arrive about an hour before sunset—plenty of time.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her sip her champagne and nibble her cheese and crackers. The wind ruffled her short hair, and all he wanted to do was drop anchor and make love to her right there. She wasn't the first woman to set foot on his boat, but he wanted her to be the last. The only. The forever.

Catching him staring, she turned her head and grinned. "It's beautiful, Bastian. Are we going someplace in particular, or just...cruising?"

He winked. "It's a surprise. It won't take long."

She popped a chunk of cheese into her mouth and chewed slowly as her gaze roamed over the horizon. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks glowing from the wind, and her full, juicy lips were curved into a perpetual smile. He took a deep breath of the salty air and knew for a fact this was where he always wanted to be. Right here with Dixie.

"Oh my goodness! Look!"

He jerked his gaze in the direction she pointed. About a hundred feet aft, just off the port side, was a school of four dolphins skimming through the water in the wake of his yacht.

*Perfect. Thank you, little fishies.* He throttled back, and the yacht slowed. Then he killed the engine, took her glass and plate from her, set them down and grabbed her hand. "Come on."

She followed him down the ladder. By the time they reached the deck, the dolphins had come around and were circling the boat, their dorsal fins popping up at random.

"Look, look, look," Dixie said, her voice high and filled with excitement as two of the dolphins leapt from the water several yards off the starboard side. She leaned over the railing and reached out, pointing. "There they are!"

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Bastian's heart skipped a beat, but he wrapped his arm around her waist to keep her steady. She giggled like a child, and something deep inside him unfurled the last bit of the way.

And then, as fast as they'd come, they were heading away, their slick, dark gray skins shimmering in the late day sunlight.

Without warning, Dixie turned, wrapped her arms around his neck, and planted a hard kiss on his lips. "Thank you, Bastian. Thank you so much." And that's when he saw the tears streaming down her cheeks. But her brilliant smile told him they were tears of happiness.

"My pleasure, babe." He thumbed away her tears and kissed her again, quickly, softly, forcing himself not to linger. "We gotta go if we're gonna get to where we're going before sunset."

She nodded, but then tucked her face against his neck and held him tight for a long moment. He wrapped his arms around her and skimmed his hand up and down her back. He wasn't sure just how many years he'd gone without the experience of a simple hug. And he wasn't sure why he'd never missed such intimate, nonsexual contact.

"Okay. Let's go." Dixie pulled back and turned away, heading back to the ladder to the flybridge, and he got the distinct impression she was trying to hide her emotions from him.

When he was back at the helm, heading for his island, and she'd finished off her champagne, she said, "I've always loved the ocean. My parents called me their little water baby and joked that I was part fish myself. And what I want to do most is work with dolphins—that's why I'm going to get my Marine Biology degree—but what about you? What draws you to it?"

"When I was small, my father worked a lot, so I spent a great deal of time with Mom. She used to take me to the beach, almost everyday. We'd search for seashells and watch the ships come and go. We'd play this game where we'd make up places they'd been to or far off locales they were leaving to go see."

"Sounds wonderful."

"It was."

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"And your dad? Did he ever go?"

"Yes and no. He did before my Mom died, but after that... Well, things changed."

"I'm sorry." She got up, ran her hands over his shoulders and down his back before wrapping her arms around him. "I guess we have more things in common than I thought. It's hard to lose a parent." When she laid her head against his back, her arms encircling his waist, he shut his eyes for a second and took a deep breath. Just having her near comforted him. Her understanding was icing on the cake.

He throttled down as the island came into view. It was a picturesque atoll that didn't offer much in the way of civilized creature comforts, but did provide a quaint beach and hidden cove, if one could navigate the tricky entrance. Buoys with warning signs of private property and about hazardous shallows usually kept the public from venturing too close. But this was his sanctuary. He could traverse the narrow channel into the cove while blindfolded.

He'd timed their arrival perfectly, with the sun situated low on the horizon but high enough to illuminate the glassy calm waters and sandy shoreline. "Surprise," he murmured.

"Oh, Bastian. It's so beautiful."

While she studied the view, he cut the engine and dropped anchor. She followed him to the back of the boat where he opened a compartment and retrieved snorkeling equipment.

"Uh, I didn't bring a swimsuit."

He eyed her from head to toe and gave her a wicked grin. "Who said you needed one?" Setting aside the gear, he began to strip. After a brief pause, she kicked off her sandals and followed his lead until he wore only his briefs, and she was down to lacy lavender bra and panties.

"Okay, but if we get arrested by the Coast Guard, you're posting my bail."

He laughed, grabbed an underwater light, and opened the gate to the diving platform and sat down, patting the seat next to him. They donned fins, masks and snorkels.

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“Ready?”

She nodded, and he could see the excitement in her gaze in spite of the mask. He took her hand, and together they slid off the swim deck into the salty waters of the cove.

Over the next half hour or so, they swam along the surface hand-in-hand, watching the brilliantly colored fish dart and dance beneath them among the coral reef. As the sun’s rays diminished, he used the light to prolong the adventure, shining it on a translucent jellyfish. They paused to watch it float by, careful to keep their distance from its long, stinging tentacles.

He grinned inside each time her grip tightened on his hand and she pointed to something new that caught her attention, her joy evident in each discovery. She loved the sea as much as he did. He had a feeling they’d spend a lot of time right here, swimming these waters, and making love under the stars on the deck of the boat.

He wondered whether she’d love Incognito as much. *One step at a time*. He first had to break the news of his identity. *Soon*. He could invite her to the company party being held in his honor, when he would formally take over the reins from his father. He could tell her in the limo after he picked her up.

As they neared the shore and his knees hit the soft sand, he motioned for her to lift her head.

She came up laughing and pushed her mask up onto her forehead, as he did. Plopping down in the shallows, she looked back toward the boat. He’d left a few lights on so they wouldn’t have any problems finding it in the dark.

“I didn’t know we’d come so far,” She said.

He checked his diving watch before turning off the flashlight. “We’ve been out here an hour. You getting hungry for some real food yet?” His own stomach growled.

She nodded, and when he sat down next to her, she leaned her arm against his. “Yeah. I’m hungry. But this...” She looked up. “Oh, goodness. Look at all those stars.”



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"Yeah," he said on a sigh. "I love this place."

"It feels as though we're the only people on earth."

He nodded. "I like that feeling." Turning his head, he met her gaze.

"I wouldn't mind if you and I were the only people on earth."

Her teeth flashed in the darkness as she grinned. Then she nudged his shoulder and rolled away with a splash. "You're going to be bad. You said you wouldn't be bad tonight." She giggled as she kicked her fins, heading for deeper water.

He sliced through the water after her and grabbed her hand, dragged her body against his, and caught her lips with his in a searing kiss. He was sure she felt his hard-on against her body, but he wouldn't do anything naughty tonight. This was her night, and what he wanted now was to sit across from her on the deck and share the gourmet meal he'd had prepared for them.

When he lifted his head, she panted against his cheek. "Goodness..."

He chuckled. "I'll say."

"Maybe we could be a little bad."

He laughed and hugged her tight. "Nope. Not tonight." He released her except for her right hand. "Come on. Dinner's waiting. Put your mask down, and we'll watch the wildlife as we swim back.

She lowered her mask into place. "Hey, Bastian," she said, her tone tentative.

"Yeah?"

"This has been the best night of my life. Thank you for..." Her grin flashed. "For putting me in my place earlier. I shouldn't have misjudged you because of your financial status."

He pressed his lips to hers again, his heart constricted by the knowledge he kept from her. But he wasn't ready, yet. Not until later, after she knew him better. Really knew *him*.

"It's not over, yet." He winked and, switching on the flashlight, he lowered his face into the water before he broke his promise and took her right there, under the stars, in the warm, nighttime sea.

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Dixie had barely punched her time clock the next morning when her co-workers pounced.

"Conference room, now, girlfriend." Brenda pulled her into the bathroom where Carrie waited. Dixie laughed, her grin so big her cheeks hurt.

"Okay, spill it," Carrie said. "Who's the new boyfriend? Is he packin'? And more importantly, does he know how to use it?"

"His name is Bastian. None of your business, and —"

"That means he's Grade-A *Prime*," Brenda announced and burst into laughter.

Carrie eyed her. "It could mean she doesn't know, but by the look in your eyes, girlfriend, *I know* you know." She grinned and yanked Dixie into a hug. "I'm so happy for ya! 'Bout time you got yourself a man."

Brenda leaned her ample hips against the counter. "So long as he treats ya good, an' I don't have to beat 'em up, I'm happy for ya, too."

Dixie chuckled, her thoughts turning wistful as she recalled the time they shared last night on his boat. They talked into the wee hours of the morning over a sinful cream and mousse dessert and fizzy champagne, sharing tales of family and childhoods. He'd asked about her mother and shared news about his father's recent medical problems. He didn't say how much that worried him, but she read it in his gaze. He was such a caring person, even if he liked it kinky in the bedroom.

And the kiss he'd given her at her door before he left... "He's amazing," she said on a sigh.

"Okay, that's enough daydreaming," Carrie said. "Best we be back to work before Mr. You-know-who starts lookin' for us." Her friends grabbed her by the arms and escorted her out of the bathroom, where they ran into Mr. You-know-who.

"I assume this is a rare coincidence that I find all three of you requiring the restroom simultaneously."

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"Yes, sir," Dixie began, speaking on behalf of all three.

Brenda stepped forward. "I was just tellin' the girls here that the company is finally going to be getting rid of these ugly smocks, and we were debating over whether you, bless your heart, had anything to do with it. You did, didn't you, sir?"

David looked at Brenda, straightened his spine, and eyed their uniforms. "They are rather out-dated, don't you think?" he asked, not really answering her question one way or another.

Brenda slapped him on the shoulder and gave a hearty laugh. "I told 'em you understood. I said, David's no idiot when it comes to style. I mean, all you have to do is look at the suits you wear. And wouldn't it behoove his department, *your* department, if your workers wore uniforms with more class?"

"Of course," he agreed, straightening his tie and blazer. "The replacements are on order and should arrive in about a week. Carry on, ladies."

Brenda winked at Dixie as they walked away, but David called them to a stop again. "Miss Johnson, you're scheduled to deliver to the upper floors this morning. There is a special package for the CEO on my desk. Ensure that he receives it ASAP."

"Yes, sir."

She breathed a sigh of relief once inside the mailroom with the package, which she placed on the cart atop the rest of the deliveries. Brenda and Carrie were still giggling at how easily Brenda had played on David's ego.

Dixie cast a sideways glance at Brenda. "Do you really think he had anything to do with the change in uniforms?"

"With what that man wears? Hell no. He was more likely the designer of the shit we wear now." Brenda laughed. "No, I heard the order came from the top, and rumors are rampant about more changes because of Little Willie."

Dixie sighed. She just hoped those changes didn't include layoffs.

Carrie snickered. "Well, if he can trashcan these puke-green aprons,

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too, for something with more style, he's got my vote from now on."

"Hey, while you're up there, keep your eyes and ears open," Brenda added. "Maybe you can pick up some more on that big shindig the suits got planned. The announcement went out this morning. Everyone at the company is invited, although it's formal, so I'm not sure how many blue-collars will show, but who knows?"

Dixie nodded and pushed the mail cart toward the elevator.

"I might get gussied up just to drink free liquor and gawk." Carrie's last comment made Dixie smile despite herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bastian slipped his arms into his custom-tailored jacket as he walked into his father's office. The spry secretary jumped up from her chair and went to push open one of the glass doors that separated her reception area from the inner sanctum. William S. Ridgcroft, Junior was already at his desk, looking over paperwork.

Bastian thanked the secretary with a wink and fastened the button of his jacket before facing his father's wrath for failing to be prompt.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Come in, come in."

How many times had he seen his father seated behind that desk, ordering underlings about without even a glance in their direction? Bastian eyed the top of his father's head until the older man finally looked up.

"Well, don't dawdle. You've wasted enough time, and we've much to get done today."

With a sigh, he stepped around the desk to look over his father's shoulder at the legal documents. His father's hand shook slightly as he held his pen, but neither he nor Bastian mentioned it. Instead, he stood silently at his father's side and listened as the older man went over the details of the board's most recent decisions.

The fight had gone out of Bastian after the news of his father's heart

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attack. He'd rebelled for years because the man never seemed pleased with him. He could never live up to the lofty expectations his father set for him. He was expected to dress a certain way, maintain a short, *respectable* hairstyle, and marry a debutante—someone from a *good family*, his father had said, which really meant someone his father chose from a *wealthy* family.

Though he'd left to make it on his own, and had done a damn good job financially, none of that mattered to his father. They'd never been able to talk about personal issues without arguing, and the only acceptable business topic was Ridgcroft Industries. The boy inside Bastian wanted to take over the company and prove he could do a better job than his father. The man inside knew that childish dream was pointless. His father was handing over the reins because he had no other choice, no other heir, not because he thought his son was the most capable person.

"William, pay attention!"

His father's bark startled him from his musings in time to hear the office door open.

"I am, Dad." He looked up, and his heart ceased to beat.

His gaze collided with Dixie's.

The secretary stepped around her, saying, "The package you've been waiting for, sir, has come in."

"Good, let's see it." His father stood up, and Bastian took a step back, his gaze still locked on Dixie. She remained frozen, the package in her hand.

"Well, come on..." Impatience laced his father's tone.

The secretary took the package from Dixie and rushed forward. "Sorry, sir," she said then turned to usher Dixie out.

"You..." Dixie's voice was soft, but her eyes were hard, filled with fury. The secretary reached for her, but she brushed the woman aside. Her chin rose defiantly.

*Godfuckingdamnit.* Why did this have to happen now? He'd meant to reveal the truth when the time was right, when they were alone. He'd had it all planned....

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"Ah, yes," his father said, "the mailroom girl my son's taken a philanthropic interest in."

"Dad," Bastian warned when her eyes turned toward his father, widened briefly, and then narrowed once more on him. "I can explain." He started to step around the desk, but his father grabbed his arm.

"Dixie's the name, right?" his father asked.

The secretary stared, her curious gaze shifting back and forth as if watching a tennis match.

"Yes, sir. My name is Dixie, but I'm not your *mailroom girl* any longer. I quit. I refuse to work for an asshole like your son."

The secretary gasped. Dixie turned on her heel and started out the door.

"Wait, Dixie!" Bastian shook free of his father's grasp and moved toward her, but she turned on him with an angry glare.

"Did you have your fun? Have a great laugh with your father over your new *girl*?" She glanced at the secretary.

"It's not like that—"

She shoved him. "You lied to me! You told me your name was Bastian Peterman, not William Ridgecroft, Junior."

"Actually, it's William the third. I'm the Junior," his father chimed in, making Bastian toss a hard look in his direction.

"Well, *William The Third*, this woman is through playing your games, so you can just go...go *fuck* yourself." With that, she stormed out of the office.

## Chapter Nine

"Let her go, son. You deserve better."

Bastian stopped and spun toward his father. "What did you say?"

"I think I'll just..." The secretary backed out and pulled the door closed.

"You heard me. No gold digger talks to a Ridgcroft that way."

Bastian let loose his ponytail then ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't believe this. You still don't get it, do you?" He pointed toward the door. "Dixie's no gold digger, and she has every right to be mad at me. She didn't know I was a Ridgcroft because I didn't tell her."

"Perfectly understandable why you'd hide your true identity while dallying with the likes of her. She's not of our ilk."

"Our—" He'd never wanted to strike his father more than he did right then, but he held his fists in check. "You think our name makes me or *you* any better than the next person? It doesn't."

"A name is the least of it. A person's upbringing is reflected in one's actions. It's obvious by her trashy language that she's not good enough for you."

*Fuck.* His father lived a life of delusion if he believed a word he just said. Bastian rolled his eyes. "You're wrong, Dad. *I* am not good enough for *her*. I doubt Dixie knew the meaning of the word *fuck* until she heard me say it. And she wasn't a dalliance. She's the most selfless, caring person I know. She was someone I thought—" His throat closed up on

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him as the reality of her loss sank in. As the look of pain and anger in her eyes flashed in his mind. He shook his head, walked over to the window, and stared out at the ocean. It had always offered so much peace in his turbulent world. Now it reminded him of everything he'd lost.

He faced his father once more. "You've tried for years to pair me with women of *our ilk*. Most have been shallow bitches more concerned about names, bank balances, and manicures than in anything I had to say." He took his suit jacket off, threw it aside, and yanked off his tie.

"What do you think you're doing? William, put your clothes back on."

"I'm being me. I hate these damn suits. I can't work like this. It's not me, and I'm tired of trying to hide who I am, Dad. I'm finished pretending to be something I'm not. And if that means I can't walk in your footsteps, so be it." He released the top two buttons of his shirt. "Dixie didn't know my real name, but she did know the real me. And it's about damn time you did, too. Maybe then you'd realize you have it all wrong. Dixie's the one who deserves better, not me."

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" his father asked as he stepped up beside him to look out the window.

"What?" Had the man not heard a word he said?

"The ocean. It always brought your mother so much joy."

Uncertain at his father's sudden change in tone, Bastian stared at him.

"You had that in common with her. A free spirit. I guess I always envied you the closeness you two shared in your love of the sea, especially when you turned to the water for comfort rather than me after we lost her." His father looked at him. "We've had many fights over the years, many disagreements, you and I, but I don't think I've ever been more proud of you than I am at this moment."

Bastian blinked. His father had lost his mind.

"I've been a terrible father."

"Dad—"

"No. Let me finish." He stepped away from the window. "I've



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treated you more like an employee than a son. The fact you turned out to be the man you are is a credit to your mother. She kept you balanced."

"She was a beautiful woman." And he didn't just mean on the surface.

"Indeed, she was. No matter how successful I became, she always kept me grounded. You get that from her, you know?"

"What?"

"Your ability to see past stereotypes, to identify the true nature of a person, and to accept them unconditionally."

Suspicious of the glint in his father's gaze, the sudden curve to his lips, Bastian narrowed his eyes. "What are you getting at?" He had the uncanny idea that his father had been playing him.

William S. Ridgcroft, Junior smiled and gave Bastian a pat on the shoulder before he walked back to his desk. After a long moment of silence, he said, "Your old man didn't fall off the peach cart yesterday, boy. I've known you all your life, seen you mature into a head-strong, independent young man." He leaned back in his leather chair and folded his hands over his midsection. "I haven't always agreed with every decision you made in life—and made my opinion known loud and clear." Humor laced his words, but it made Bastian uneasy.

He'd seldom seen his father like this, more calm than...vocal. Bastian crossed to the small bar against the far wall and made himself a drink. He needed something in hand to steady himself.

"But I recognize good character when I see it," his father continued. "I watched you shun everything given to you just so you could prove yourself capable of making it on your own, amassing your own fortune, doing it your way."

Bastian faced his father, his untouched drink still in hand.

"You spied on me." The accusation came out soft, without any anger, as something deep inside Bastian uncoiled. He'd spent years trying to prove himself worthy of the name Ridgcroft by eschewing his father's dictates and plans for him—even the very name itself. He wasn't a puppet on his father's string, an employee to be ordered about, and all this time,

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he'd been doing just what his father wanted?

"If you'd like to call it that, yes, I've kept tabs on you, Bastian Peterman. Regardless of what name you go by, you're still my son." His father rose and approached him once more. "I've seen too many friends raise their children amid wealth and privilege only to pamper them into spoiled weaklings who whine at any perceived slight. It wasn't easy to let you go, especially after the fight we had over that club you champion, but I am very glad to see the kind of man you've become."

His smile was warm and sincere. "Forgive me for not saying this enough, son, but I love you, and I'm very proud of you."

\* \* \* \* \*

*One week later*

Dixie sat at Miss Sheila's dining table, her hands curled around a cup of warm coffee. Sheila set in front of her a plate of scrambled eggs and a couple slices of buttered wheat toast with jam.

"Eat up, girl."

"I'm not hungry." Thunder growled, and heavy raindrops beat on the metal roof of the trailer as if to call her on the fib.

"Don't give me no lip. You need to eat, and these old bones didn't spend time at a hot stove for nothin'." The old lady took a seat and began eating her own breakfast.

Dixie took an obligatory bite of eggs, and her mouth watered as she chewed. She did love the way Miss Sheila made spicy eggs with a dab of hot sauce and tiny chunks of sausage and peppers.

"I ain't one to pry..."

Dixie bit back a snort at that untruth.

"...but, I can't help but notice you haven't been yourself lately."

"I'm fine." Dixie stuffed another bite into her mouth, flinching when another thunderous boom echoed through the trailer.

"Uh huh. I can see that." Sheila stirred her oatmeal.

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"It's just that I hate storms."

"That ain't why you never answer the door when that white boy comes lookin' for ya."

"Miss Sheila..."

"I ain't pryin'. Just telling it like I see it."

Lightning flickered through the thin window coverings.

"So, when do you want to tell me the truth 'bout why you ain't been goin' to work all week?"

"Miss Sheila," she pleaded with a long sigh. She should've known her well-meaning neighbor wouldn't let it go forever. She should be surprised the old lady had managed to hold her tongue this long.

"I know you're not one to be lazy, and it doesn't look like you've been sick."

"I quit."

Sheila nodded. "Okay."

Quitting had been a spur of the moment decision, but it seemed right at the time. And even now she couldn't fathom the idea of going to work everyday with the risk of bumping into Bastian—*William The Third*—again. Seeing him hurt too much.

It was bad enough the man kept showing up at her place, banging on the door until she was ready to scream.

She shouldn't have left her car behind. Paying bus fare to get to job interviews was wasted money, but her pride kept her from retrieving it. Tomorrow she'd go back to that mechanic and demand to know the full price of the work he'd done. And she'd pay for all of it before she'd put one foot back inside the vehicle.

*The mailroom girl my son's taken a philanthropic interest in.* Ridgcroft's words still stung. She wasn't some philanthropic anything.

The crunch of gravel beneath tires made her look toward the front door. Miss Sheila got up to peek out the window.

"Hmph. A white man."

"Tell him I'm not home," Dixie said. "Tell him I've moved or something."

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"I won't lie for ya, girl." Miss Sheila's tone changed from maternal to amused. "But I can tell him you aren't home, 'cause you're not."

"Just don't tell Bastian I'm here. Promise?"

"Don't you worry none. I promise I won't tell that boy nothing," she said as she pushed aside the curtains and cracked open the window.

Dixie strained to hear the faint sounds of him knocking on her door. The continuous patter of rain made the effort difficult.

"If you're lookin' for Dixie, she ain't home," Miss Sheila called out.

Dixie released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and lifted her coffee mug to her lips.

"Could you tell me where she might be?"

Dixie frowned. That didn't sound like...

"Sure can. She's in here. Come on in out of the rain."

"Miss Sheila!"

The elderly woman waved a hand at her. "Now don't go hissin' at me. I didn't break my promise." She opened the door, but it wasn't Bastian who stood in the doorway beneath a black umbrella. It was his father.

"Thank you." He stepped inside, closing his umbrella. "Bill Ridgcroft, ma'am."

"I thought I seen your face on the news before. Welcome. Name's Sheila Jefferson."

The two shook hands, making Dixie take a swig of her coffee just to keep from gaping. Thank God it had cooled, or she might've scalded her tongue.

"And I figure you already know Dixie here." She took his umbrella from him and propped it against the doorjamb.

"I do." Mr. Ridgcroft smiled. He appeared dressed as he normally did in a dark navy, custom-tailored business suit and bold, solid red, silk tie.

"So long as you mean her no harm..."

His smile widened into a grin. "She's safe with me."

Miss Sheila nodded, her expression still serious. "Then I'll just

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leave you two alone to talk for a bit."

"Thank you." After Sheila vanished down the hall, Mr. Ridgecroft approached the table. "May I have this seat?"

Dixie's manners kicked in, so she answered, "Sure, Mr. Ridgecroft." But before he could say more, she added, "If Lil' Willie sent you here, you're wasting your time. I don't want to see him."

*He can take his philanthropic interests elsewhere.*

Mr. Ridgecroft took the seat across from her and didn't even cringe when the old chair creaked under his weight. "Please, call me Bill. And Bastian doesn't know I'm here." He paused until she met his gaze. "He does prefer to go by his middle name, always has. He abhors the name Willie."

Dixie crossed her arms. "What brings you here...Bill?"

"I believe there's been a misunderstanding for which I share some of the blame."

Dixie cocked an eyebrow at him. "Oh? How so?"

"My words last week were...ill chosen. And I'm afraid it misled you into thinking that my son and I viewed you as some sort of game or charity case."

"So you've come to plead his case for him, take the blame—"

He laughed. "Not in the least. My son's quite capable of handling his own battles. No, I've come to offer you my sincerest apology for my own part in this matter. What you and Bastian have to discuss is between the two of you. But as your employer—"

"Former employer."

He nodded. "I didn't want you to quit over something I said. Your position at Ridgecroft Industries is open should you wish to return."

"Why would I want to do that?"

He sat and stared at her for a moment. "I could tell you that the company needs good, hard workers like yourself, but the truth is we could replace you in the mailroom with someone eager for a foot in the door at a Fortune 500 company. No, your position remains open because I believe you're not the type to throw away opportunities over a

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misunderstanding. Unless I'm mistaken and you don't have a forgiving heart?"

"That doesn't justify the fact that your son lied to me, and he'll soon be the new CEO."

"Bastian is short for his middle name but, as I said before, he never did like his name. He's avoided using it for years, choosing to go by his mother's maiden name instead. Although I still call him William just to needle him." He smiled as if sharing a family secret, but it was short lived. "Can you imagine what it's like to have people vying for your affections only to realize they were only after you for your inheritance, your wealth, your name?"

She could envision it. She'd witnessed it many times as the *suits* on the upper floors at Ridgcroft Industries fell all over themselves to win approval from the man who now sat before her. A billionaire who took time to track down a former mailroom clerk and...apologize?

"Should you decide to return, I know you'll do a good job, not because your annual evaluations say as much, but because my son saw something special in you. He championed your devotion to the care of your mother, and I've learned to trust my son's instincts when it comes to people."

Bill stood, straightened his jacket and tie. "I won't keep you any longer, but I do hope you'll think about what I said and consider returning to work at Ridgcroft Industries." He pulled out an envelope and placed it on the table. "Thank you for listening to me. Give my regards to Miss Jefferson."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bastian was dressed to the nines in a tuxedo with tails, his bowtie draped undone around his neck, the top two buttons of his shirt unfastened. He sat in a room filled with people he'd long considered friends and acquaintances, but he didn't feel ready for a party. The atmosphere at Incognito was as festive and welcoming as always, but it

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failed to lift his spirits.

Just when his relationship with his father was finally coming together, his love life was in shambles. He'd spent his recent days buried at work going through the motions, checking the Dow and other financial markets, meeting those he would soon lead as chief executive officer of Ridgcroft Industries. Fighting the urge to go to the mailroom to see if by chance Dixie had reconsidered her decision to quit.

He glanced at his watch. He still had an hour left before he had to leave for the official company formal where he was expected to make his first official appearance as CEO.

Unwilling to participate in the typical cat-and-mouse game with stray subs that populated the busy area around Incognito's bar, he'd chosen a darkened corner booth where he nursed his drink for countless moments. And in a very non-Dom manner, he kept his eyes lowered to avoid meeting someone's gaze since it might be misinterpreted as an invitation.

He didn't know why he'd come here tonight. It wasn't as if he wanted company. He could certainly show up at the Ridgcroft party early if he wanted to be surrounded by people...and feel just as alone in the crowd.

No, he knew why.

*Dixie.*

He couldn't sit on his boat another minute, thinking of her. He missed her. Day and night. Especially at night in bed, alone. He'd gone to her trailer everyday only to find no one to answer the door regardless of when he stopped by. He couldn't tell whether she was home because she'd left her car parked in the Ridgcroft Industries parking lot. The car that had belonged to her dad. The car he'd paid to have repaired.

She must really hate him to have abandoned it. Although he clung to a thread of hope that if he could just talk to her, if he could get her to listen for one minute...

But for a man used to women who chased him, a Dom used to subs who obeyed his every whim, Bastian found Dixie's rejection troublesome.

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And painful.

“This seat taken?”

“Go a—” Bastian stopped when he looked up to see Dalton, Kat’s fiancé, standing across the table from him. “Sorry, no, it’s not. Please. Have a seat.”

As he did, a waiter appeared. Dalton glanced up. “I’ll have what he’s having.”

The server looked at Bastian.

“Ice water,” he said, noting his answer drew a smile from Dalton.

After the waiter left, Dalton said, “At least you’re not drowning your problems in booze.”

Bastian chuckled. “Wouldn’t do me any good.”

“Want to tell me about it?”

Bastian stared at the other man for a long moment.

“Kat told me you seemed...preoccupied the last time you were here. I’d say she’d be right this time around, too.” He paused while the waiter set his drink before him and left. Then Dalton took a sip before continuing. “I just wanted to let you know I’m here to listen in case you need a sounding board.”

Bastian gazed into his own glass. “In less than an hour, I’ll be the new CEO of my father’s company...responsible for the livelihood of several thousand employees.”

“Ah. That’s the reason for the tuxedo.”

Bastian nodded and emptied his glass, leaving only a few small cubes.

“For a moment, I wondered whether you were late for a wedding.”

Bastian scoffed at the chances of that happening any time soon.

Dalton continued to hold his glass cupped between palms. “Running a company can weigh heavily on a man as young as yourself, especially someone as independent as you are.”

He hadn’t thought of that, but Dalton had a point. Up to now he’d been responsible for only himself, not an entire workforce for a Fortune 500 company. The stress from that responsibility was tough enough. Add



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to it the legacy his father was passing on and it could be overwhelming.

But none of it compared to the burden of knowing Dixie no longer trusted him and not knowing if his lie ruined every chance he had to be with her.

"I'm in love with a woman who will have nothing to do with me," he admitted without looking up to see Dalton's reaction.

"Because of the life?" By his tone, he didn't seem surprised by Bastian's admission. It was understandable that Dalton would jump to such a conclusion. Many people shunned the fetish lifestyle without ever experiencing it to find out there was much more to it than society believed.

Memories came back to haunt him now as he recalled the way Dixie responded favorably to his domination in the privacy of her bedroom, how she'd opened up to new experiences. Although, when he'd questioned her about the Ridgcroft heir, by her expression, she'd harbored a disapproving opinion of his escapades. Of course, that had also been based on half-truths and rumors.

Bastian shrugged. Maybe that was part of the problem. Incognito had always been his safety net, the one place where he truly felt free to be the man he was. But, outside of here, he put on a front, used a false name, and only shared parts of himself. Maybe now that she knew her Good Samaritan and the Ridgcroft heir who patroned sex clubs were one and the same, maybe she wanted no part of him.

"Shit." He cradled his head in both hands, his elbows propped on the table.

Dalton said, "By your reaction, I gather the answer is yes."

"I don't know. It's possible that's part of it." He looked up. "She'd lived a very vanilla life until we met. She enjoyed the role-playing we did and trusted me enough for some bondage, too, but that was before..."

"Before what?"

"Before I fucked up and lied to her about my identity."

Dalton whistled.

Wanting to grind his teeth, Bastian slid an ice cube in his mouth

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and crunched on it instead.

“Don’t get yourself down,” Dalton said. “All of us in this lifestyle have hidden our true selves to the outside world at one time or another—and at times, even to those we most care about.”

Bastian nodded. “If I’d just had more time... I’d planned to tell her today, but she discovered the truth last week.”

“Trust is vital in any relationship. I don’t guess I need to tell you that.”

“No.” He’d gained her trust only to lose it and her. The real dilemma now was whether she’d let him get close enough to make amends. Was there *anything* he could ever say or do to prove he deserved her trust? He just didn’t know, and the not knowing was killing him.

## Chapter Ten

Dixie's nerves caused havoc on her stomach. Uncertainty kept her rooted to her spot outside the entrance to the Ridgcroft party, while the soft, cheerful rumble of party-goers and quartet music floated on the evening air.

She glanced at the wrinkled invitation in her hand. The one Bill had left on Miss Sheila's table. She'd stared at it repeatedly since then—even snatching it off her nightstand in the middle of last night after tossing and turning for hours, unable to sleep because she couldn't stop thinking about Bastian.

She'd been furious with him upon learning his true identity. And remembering how he'd questioned her on the beach about *himself* only angered and embarrassed her more. At first.

After his father's visit, however, Bastian's words came back to her, and they'd haunted her ever since. Had he been trying to tell her then?

*Not even a name can truly define someone; only what's in their heart can do that.*

She fisted her hand around the invitation.

She'd searched through her purse and found the business card Bastian had handed her on the bus that first night. Embossed lettering said, *Peterman Day Trading*, and had a phone number on it, lending some truth to his father's claim that he avoided using his real name. He hadn't lied to just her. He actually lived under an assumed name.

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Had her temper and stubbornness cost her any chance of a future with him?

He'd at least earned the right to explain why he felt compelled to hide his identity from her. She should give him that chance. And if he chose to snub her... Well, she'd survived similar treatment before. Although, this time, her heart would take the brunt of the impact.

Taking a deep breath to push down the awkwardness, she entered the front doors and approached the uniformed attendant posted outside the banquet hall. Holding out the crumpled invitation, she kept her expression deadpanned while the curiously amused attendant straightened it out and verified her name on the guest list.

"Welcome, Miss Johnson." He opened the door for her.

The noise slapped her in the face, and the sight of so many sparkles from gemstone and sequins-covered cocktail dresses made her insides curl into a knot. Still, holding her head high, she forced her feet to move, to carry her into the room.

*Babe, the quality or quantity of possessions does not make someone a better person, no more than having less makes them less worthy.* Bastian's words came to mind, offering some comfort, and were enough of an encouragement to help her face her uncertainties.

Having arrived late, she'd missed the formal announcements over dinner, for which she was grateful. Had everyone been seated and quiet, her arrival might've come at a most inopportune moment. As it was, she slipped into the crowd in search of Bastian without too many ripples.

She spotted him, barely visible across the room and speaking with Phillip Davenport, the executive she'd had a run-in with over spilled papers and a mail cart.

"Dixie!" Carrie surprised her with a big hug. "I thought you up and quit. That's the rumor. What're you doin' here?"

"I..." She stared across the room, through the sea of people, craning her neck in an attempt to keep track of Bastian's location. "I needed some time off, but I spoke with Bill about my job yesterday, and he assured—"

"Bill? Bill who?"

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"Ridgecroft."

"You mean *Mister* Ridgecroft?"

The crowd separated just enough, and Dixie's gaze collided with Bastian's. He froze. Phillip appeared to question him about something, his face turning to follow Bastian's gaze. And then Phillip grinned, his hand clapping Bastian on the shoulder, his lips moving, but he was too far for Dixie to make out what he said.

"Dixie?" Carrie asked. "Hello..."

Bastian slugged Phillip. A move that surprised Dixie as much as it sent a shockwave of gasps through the partygoers.

"Oh, Bastian..." Dixie whispered.

"Did you see that?" Carrie all but squealed. "Oh, my Lord in heaven."

Dixie didn't say another word. She couldn't. Her lungs weren't working as she watched Bastian weave through the stunned crowd straight for her.

He stopped in front of her, raised his palm as if to cup her face, but he stopped just shy of touching her and then slowly lowered his hand. She couldn't misread the longing in his eyes, the caution and uncertainty. Could she?

"You're here," he murmured.

The rumble of whispering on-lookers made its presence known, but she forced herself to ignore it...to ignore everything except for him. He appeared so handsome in his tuxedo, so strong and yet fragile that she found the paradox unfathomably heartwarming.

"What did you do that for?" she asked, holding his gaze.

Bastian glanced over his shoulder toward Phillip. "He had it coming." He faced her once more and took her hand, caressing the back with his thumb. "I'm sorry I lied to you. I'll never do it again."

A lump lodged in her throat. Tears welled in her eyes.

Carrie cleared her throat, drawing Dixie's attention. She blinked and swiped at a tear that escaped. "I'm sorry. Carrie, this is—"

"Girlfriend, I work for the man. I know who he is." Carrie turned to

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Bastian and stuck out a hand. "I'm Carrie, Mr. Ridgecroft. Work in the mailroom with Dix. "

Bastian grinned, shook hands, and said, "Please, call me Bastian. Mr. Ridgecroft makes me look around for my father."

Carrie laughed until a scuffle silenced her. Phillip had regained his feet and stopped before them with a handkerchief held over a busted lip and a cell phone in the other hand.

"I'm calling the cops," Phillip threatened, "and charging you with assault! I'm gonna sue and when it's over, I'll own this damn company. You're all my witnesses. You saw what he did."

"I didn't see nothin'," Carrie chimed in, "but you lose your footing and fall on your face."

Phillip scowled, but before he could say more, Bill Ridgecroft's secretary stepped up and shoved him. "I overheard what you said a moment ago, Phillip Davenport, and if Willie hadn't slugged you, I would've."

Dixie noticed Bastian wince at the use of his childhood nickname, but he let it go as the petite, normally docile secretary poked Phillip's chest.

"So you'll do no such thing, or I'll...I'll tell everyone about your *lunchtime* activities."

Phillip's face turned beet red—from anger, embarrassment, or both, Dixie didn't know. But he pressed his lips in a thin line, muttered an, "I quit," and walked out.

Carrie snickered. The secretary gave a nod of approval as a pleased smile slid over her lips. Dixie blinked and faced Bastian, who was staring at the secretary.

"How is it that you know what he does during lunchtime?" he asked in a lowered voice.

Dixie's curiosity made her want to ask what those lunchtime activities were, but she refrained and instead, let her imagination run wild.

The secretary winked at Bastian. "Don't you worry about that, boss.

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Just so you remember that secretaries and mailroom personnel know a helluva lot more about what goes on in this company than do most suits."

Bastian laughed, while Carrie nodded in agreement with a huge grin on her face.

A very male, very bemused sigh came from behind Dixie, which made her turn.

Bill Ridgecroft stood not two feet from her, his gaze on his son and a serious expression on his face. "You have an uncanny ability to cause scenes at social functions, son."

Bastian sobered until his father let loose his own smile.

"I, too, overheard Phillip's comment. You did fine." He faced Dixie. "I'm very glad to see you've returned, Dixie. How is your mother doing?"

Somewhat surprised by his question, she stammered, "Fine, sir. Thank you."

"Good. Give her my best, will you?" As Dixie nodded, he turned to his former secretary, sliding her hand into the crook of his elbow, and said, "Now, why don't you and Carrie here join me for a drink...hmm?"

Bastian grabbed Dixie's hand and, when she looked at him, he gestured toward the door. "Let's find someplace more private where we can...talk."

She smiled and followed him from the room.

When he led her out of the building, though, his feet setting an even faster pace across the parking lot, she laughed and said, "Don't you need to stay for the rest of the party?"

He pulled a keychain from his pocket, pressed a button, and heard his Aston Martin beep. Opening the passenger door for her, he shook his head. "I've more important things to do."

"You're the CEO. What could possibly—"

"Get in, Dixie."

She gave him a mischievous smirk and slid into the car.

With a deep breath, he circled the car and got in. The scent of leather and her floral perfume hit him as he cranked the engine and pulled out onto the street. In his periphery, he could see her palm caress

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the leather seat, and he tightened his grip on the gearshift.

Her dress was a solid-colored, pale blue, free of any fancy adornment. Plain compared to the cocktail gowns worn by most of the females at the party, but the simplicity of her outfit made her stand out from the crowd. A true gem among gilded, faux stones.

After a few minutes, she asked, "Where are we going?"

"My place."

"To talk..."

"Yep." *For starters.*

She leaned her head against the headrest and kept silent as he maneuvered through the late hour traffic, heading for the marina. After he parked, he jumped out and took her hand as she got out of the car.

His heart raced with adrenaline as he led her onto the boat and straight to his cabin. His thoughts swirled with ideas about what he needed to say first. So much so that he had to take a deep breath before he turned to face her, to see her in his space...with him, where he'd most wanted her to be.

"I know why you lied to me," she said, breaking the awkward silence between them.

"You do?"

She stood before him, bold and demure at the same time, her chin up and hands clasped together in a nervous fashion. She nodded. "You hide who you are because when people hear your real name, they see you as a dollar sign, a meal ticket. And you thought if I knew, I'd do the same."

He shook his head. "No. No. I knew you were different." Unable to keep his distance, he took her hand in his. "What you say is true about others, but I've been using my mother's maiden name for so long that when we first met, it just came out. I didn't really think much about that at first, but, yes, I'll admit a part of me was thrilled when I realized you didn't recognize me. You treated me like—" He paused, trying to find the right words. "You saw me for who I am. I didn't want to let that go, but I never should've waited so long to tell you the truth. I was wrong, and I'm



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sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

He cupped her cheek and stared into her deep brown eyes. His heart ached with the need to pull her closer, to embrace her and never let go.

"Will you forgive me?"

The suspended moment nearly killed him, but then she smiled. "I already have."

He leaned down to kiss her, but her fingers stopped him with a gentle press against his lips.

"And I have a confession to make."

He straightened and waited.

"Before my mother grew ill, I was in college in Miami...on scholarship." She grinned, a hint of pride highlighting her eyes. "There I met a medical student, a guy from a well-to-do family in upstate New York. He was on a fast track to a very successful career as a surgeon. We dated." She pulled away and began to pace. "I fell hopelessly in love, but then his parents came for a visit. He seemed nervous about it, but I was elated. I invited them to dinner at my Mom's." She brushed her palms down the skirt of her dress in a nervous fashion that melted his heart even more. "It didn't go well."

When she stopped to face him once more, the pain from that event, the impact it'd had on her, was evident in her eyes, in her frown. He wanted to slug the bastard.

She shrugged. "He was out of my league. I'd learned my lesson, and I decided then and there that it would never happen again. I'd never risk my heart by associating with someone like—"

Bastian stepped forward and took her upper arms in a gentle grip. "Someone like me?"

A tear beaded on her lashes and slipped off to slither down her cheek.

"I was afraid to believe it, but you're not really like him." Her frown turned angry. "He was a pampered snob with more money than balls."

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Bastian cocked an amused eyebrow at her, and she ducked her head, obviously embarrassed by her choice of words. Then her frown returned with more regret than fury, and her eyes began to glisten all over again.

"I misjudged you," she said. "For that, I'm so sorry."

He thumbed a second tear away and held her gaze.

"Will you... Can you forgive me?"

He smiled. "I already have."

Pulling her against his body, he dipped his head to taste her lips, and felt her fingers tug loose the band that bound his ponytail. He deepened the kiss and allowed her hands free rein to glide over his shoulders, neck, and back. When he could stand it no longer, he yanked off his tuxedo jacket and blindly worked on his cufflinks, while she followed his lead and unfastened his cummerbund, bowtie, and shirt buttons.

The long rasp of her dress' zipper tantalized his senses, and he took great pleasure in letting his hands trail after the outfit as it slid off her body. She kicked off her shoes and stepped clear of the garment, leaving her in matching pastel-blue lingerie.

"No." He stopped her hand when she reached to undo his slacks.

Obviously confused, she eyed him, but didn't try to pull her wrist free from his grasp.

"I need—" He hesitated, took an unsteady breath. "I need to know that you trust me."

"I do."

He shook his head. "It's easy to say, but I know I broke faith with you by not revealing my real name. I've vowed to never lie to you again, so I'm not going to hide anything from you. Not any longer. If you trust me, you have to trust the real me. I'm a very dominant lover."

She grinned. "I know. I like that about you."

He shook his head again. "I mean, I'm a Dom. It's why I asked you to use my name, like a title, when we made love at your place that night. It's why I wanted to tie you up."

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"You mean you like it when I'm submissive?"

"In bed, in private, yes."

She narrowed her gaze at him, which for a heartbeat made him nervous, but he refused to back down. If they had any hope of a future together, she had to know and understand his desires. As a Dom, he'd damn sure do everything in his power to fulfill hers.

Then she asked, "You gonna get kinky on me?"

He risked a grin. "Would you like that?"

She fought her smile but failed. "Maybe."

He grabbed her other wrist and yanked her tight against his chest, her hands pinned at the small of her back. She sucked in a quick breath and met his gaze. "Tell me the truth, Dixie."

"Okay. I admit it. I never imagined I would, but I love it when you get kinky," she murmured, her lips a hair's breadth from his own.

"And I love you." He captured her mouth, laying bare every emotion he possessed. Startled, either by his words or his sudden kiss, she took a second before responding, although it wasn't long before she returned his kiss with enthusiasm.

He released her hands and swept her into his arms, swinging her around until she squealed with laughter. "I'll teach you everything I know, and trust me, babe, we're gonna have a helluva time."

He carried her a few steps across the cabin to the bed. When he set her on her feet, she again reached for his slacks and, once more, he stopped her. He had to; if she touched him now, as hard as he was already, he might come before his zipper dropped an inch.

"Tsk, ts. Patience, Dixie."

She gave him a playful pout, until he said, "Strip."

She made short work of her bra and panties, and then looked back at him.

He toed off his shoes and reached to unfasten his pants, but he paused, glanced up, and with a grin, ordered her to, "Close your eyes."

"Bastian..."

"Now. Or the pants stay put."

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Her pout was far from playful now, but he loved it just the same.

"No peeking."

She crossed her arms under her breasts, a move that distracted him for a second. Then he undid his pants, sliding the zipper down as slow as possible. Her expression showed intense concentration, focused and listening.

After removing the last of his clothes, he noticed the slight smile on her face.

"You're peeking," he accused, catching her by surprise with a pop to her butt. She yelped and spun around, but before she could've seen much, he pulled her against him and kissed her hard, his hands taking control of hers. A very feminine moan was all the evidence he needed to assure him that she was enjoying the embrace that aligned her body with his.

He pulled back a little. "For that, I ought to make you go without."

"No, please—"

"Please what?"

Her gaze met his then lowered a bit, and he knew she understood how the game was played. "Please, Bastian," she said. "Don't make me go without."

He kept his expression serious. "Be good then, and I'll only make you wait."

She started to smile.

"Turn around." He was pleased to see her immediately obey. "Bend over. Rest your forearms on the mattress and spread your feet apart."

Once she was in place, he walked over to the built-in drawers in his closet. He didn't have to look back to know she watched his every move. Opening one drawer, he retrieved some sex toys. More than he'd need this time around, but he wanted her to see them, to understand the types of things he'd like to work into their relationship over time.

Sprinkling various items about her body, he noticed how she shifted her stance, studied the flogger, collar, cuffs, and ball gag. The

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nipple rings, butt plug, vibrator, and more. Her breathing became more erratic, shallow, and aroused. Her fingers kneaded and fisted the bedspread.

“You want to use all of this on me?”

He ran a hand possessively over her smooth, flawless ass. “Eventually. When you’re comfortable with the idea and trust me enough to ensure your pleasure as well as my own.” He couldn’t see her face, but she didn’t move from her bowed position over the bed, so he took that as a positive sign. He gripped her ass and rubbed his hard cock along her pussy, teasing her and himself to the point of distraction. “I meant what I said before. I want us to share everything together. Our ups and downs, likes and dislikes, our desires...our love.”

She twisted to look over her shoulder at him. “I do love you, Bastian. It’s why you scared me so much, why I think I fought and ran and avoided seeing you. You shouldn’t have claimed my heart so fast, but you stole it from me the first time we kissed.”

“We can fight, so long as we make up.” He slid into her. He had to, needed to.

She dropped her forehead to the mattress and uttered a muffled sigh.

He raised his face to the ceiling, held still inside her pussy, enjoying the warmth and pleasure from being one with her once more. Reveling in the knowledge that she loved him.

“Don’t ever run again, though. Don’t hide from me, and I won’t either. No matter what the disagreement, we can work it out together. I won’t let you down, babe. I swear it.”

“Together...?”

He pumped into her. Once. Hard. “Together.”

“Mmm. I love that.”

He squeezed her ass and forced himself to withdraw from her hot, slick depths. She moved as if to follow, to hold him inside, but he wouldn’t allow it. Popping her lightly on the butt, he said, “Be still.”

She yelped in protest, but her shallow breathing gave away the

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arousal coursing through her. He'd be damned if he'd take her fast, even if every muscle in his body screamed for him to do just that.

She was back. She loved him! He wanted to make this moment last forever.

Picking up the vibrator specifically designed to stimulate the clitoris, he flipped it on and touched it to the back of her right knee. She jolted and tossed her head to look over her shoulder.

"Face down," he said, his tone mild. He waited to see if she'd obey. After a brief hesitation she complied, and he smiled. He resumed his caress with the vibrator, drawing small loops over each silken thigh. With his other hand, he stroked her back, along her spine, and watched her arch toward his touch.

Slipping his fingers between her pussy lips, he separated them, exposing the tight bud of her clit. *So slick, moist, and ready.* He flicked her clit with the vibrator, circling it, rubbing it. She squirmed and moaned, but he didn't pull away, not until he sensed her reach that edge.

"Want me to stop?"

"No!" She wiggled her ass in search of his touch, but he held back.

He chuckled. "No, what?"

"No, Bastian. Please don't stop."

"Are you mine, Dix? My love, my sub, now and forever?"

No hesitation. "Yes, Bastian. I love you."

He stroked her clit again, using the vibrations to bring her to the peak repeatedly, until she writhed with the need for completion. Then he set it aside, sheathed his cock in a condom, and grabbed a firm, yet flexible, silicone string of anal beads that started small and increased in size.

"Please, Bastian..."

"Please, what?"

He steadily inserted the beads into her anus. She froze at first to the tiny sensation he caused and moaned with each successful insertion past the tight rosette of sphincter. Once the tenth ball was in place and only the removal ring was left exposed, he picked up the vibrator once more.

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She groaned and clawed at the sheets when he flipped the switch, the familiar buzz filling the room.

“Please, what?” he repeated.

“I can’t take any more,” she said, her voice muffled by the covers in her face.

“Yes, you can. Don’t lie to me.”

She shook her head and fisted the sheets. But she lifted onto her toes, raising her ass higher, closer to him as he positioned his cock head against her moist pussy.

“Can’t you?”

She whimpered.

“Okay, then. I’ll stop.”

“No! *Please...*”

He held still, the vibrator shaking in his palm but held clear of her body. “Please, what?”

“Please... *Fuck me!*”

He plunged his cock into her to the hilt, filling her pussy with his flesh, even as he wanted to fill her womb with his cum.

“You on the pill?” *Please say yes.*

“What?”

“The pill.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you!” Dropping the vibrator on the bed, he pulled out, removed the condom, and slammed back into her. Flesh stroked flesh, and he groaned at having the last barrier between them vanquished.

She bucked against him, a silent plea to pick up the pace. Instead, he retrieved the vibrator and held the end against the loop of the anal beads.

She squealed, and he gritted his teeth at the sudden ripples that penetrated her ass and radiated into her pussy, surrounding his cock. Then he began to move, fucking her with solid, thorough thrusts. Her ass and pussy contracted around the beads and his cock, as if to suppress the constant motion that held her enthralled.

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*"Ffuck,"* he shouted, keeping the vibrator in place, his other hand pulling on her hip and thigh as he powered harder into her cunt. "Take it, babe. Yeah, that's it."

Her head tossed, her thighs quivered, and her screams grew in volume, until he knew her climax was imminent.

So was his. "Come now!" He shoved his cock in to the hilt at the same second he yanked the beads from her ass. The sensation overwhelmed them both.

She screamed. He shouted. His ejaculation exploded into her womb while her body squeezed him and shook with orgasmic release.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dixie lay cocooned within Bastian's arms beneath a thin, satin sheet. The rhythmic slap of gentle waves against the hull was a natural lullaby in the otherwise silent cabin.

Bastian pressed his lips to her forehead, and she snuggled closer to his naked warmth.

Her thoughts wandered to Bastian in worn jeans coming to the rescue when her car broke down. To a playful Bastian on the beach with a melting ice cream cone and milky white mustache. The romantic Bastian who shared his love of the sea. To the uncertain Bastian in a tuxedo, a millionaire CEO willing to apologize to a mail clerk before a crowd of peers. And to the private, dominant lover who showed a brilliant mastery of her body.

He'd said she saw the real him, and she did. He was nothing like her former boyfriend, or like many people thought. He wasn't the spoiled little rich kid, the prodigal son who was a disappointment to his father.

Most of all, he'd seen the real her beneath the ugly smock and second-hand clothes. Beyond the run-down car, the trailer, and her own misguided prejudices. Her ex and his family had made her feel unworthy, out of his league. Like a fool, she'd bought into that ideal, grew bitter and defensive. But Bastian showed her that nothing but the heart mattered. He



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found her worthy of his love. And she loved him for it.

“What would you say to living on a boat? With me?”

She pushed up onto one elbow and looked down at him. His dark hair spread out on his pillow in disarray that gave him a wild, piratical appearance.

*A boat.* She smiled at his continued use of such a term for the yacht.

“You can keep the trailer, if you want, or sell it and use the money for your Mom. I’m not asking you to give up your independence. I just want us to be together. If that means I have to be a landlubber part of the time, I will.”

Her smile widened into a grin. “I’d love to live on the ocean. On your *boat*...with you.”

He pulled her down for a kiss that would’ve quickly heated to much more had she not pulled away.

“I want to keep my Sunday dinner dates with Miss Sheila, though.”

He smiled. “And every other Saturday with Charlotte and her grandfather.”

“Yes,” she admitted with a grin. “And I want you to meet my Mom.”

His eyes were so loving and tender at that moment, she wanted to melt into him. “I’d like that.”

She laid her head on his shoulder, close enough to catch the strong beat of his heart. He hugged her tight, and she rested her palm on his chest. His fingers lightly stroked her back in intoxicating circles.

“Can I ask you something?” she said, lifting her head to look at his face.

“Mmm hmm,” he murmured, his eyes still closed, head cushioned by the pillow.

“Are you bisexual?”

His breathing hitched, and one eye popped open.

Heat warmed her cheeks, but she still needed to know. As sexually experienced as he was, she couldn’t help wonder whether any of the rumors at work were true. She didn’t mind being submissive in the

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privacy of their bedroom, but sharing him with another person wasn't something that turned her on.

"Where'd *that* question come from?"

"Are you?" she asked, not backing down.

"No. I'm very heterosexual. Why?" He dropped his head back against the pillow. "Wait. Is this about that rumor you heard that I was gay?"

A bit embarrassed at lending any credence to such gossip, she nodded. "I've heard you frequent sex clubs, that you once crashed a party for the governor with two women on your arm, and disrupted a holiday dinner in nothing but chaps with a *boyfriend*."

He pulled her over his body, until she straddled his hips and cock.

"Not that I believe it, but... Well, I just thought I better ask because, now that I have you, I'm not really into sharing."

"You won't have to. As your Dom, one of my most important priorities is to ensure that I take care of you and meet all your needs. If that means a monogamous relationship, I can handle that. Besides, I don't want to share you with anyone either."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "So the rumors aren't true."

"Not exactly, no. Although..." His expression turned serious. "I won't lie to you. I am a member of one fetish club. It's an exclusive place, for members only, and run by a very nice couple—friends of mine who are engaged to be married later this year. I'd like to take you there sometime to meet them."

She eyed him and decided she'd like that, to meet his friends. She'd like that very much. "I must admit, I'm curious. What's this club like?"

"You'll just have to wait and see," he murmured, his lips twitching. "You have a lot to learn, my sub, before you're ready to go there."

Propping her hands on either side of his head, she gave him a bright smile. "Can your sub make one teensy-weensy request?"

His gaze lit with amused pleasure, and he gripped her hips in both hands. "Of course."

"Someday, somewhere, will you wear leather chaps...and nothing

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else...for me?"

He burst out laughing. "Only for you, babe. Only for you."

The End

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**Author Bio**

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romances for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle and romance can be erotic—even in her own home.

Madison Layle avoided her childhood chores on the family farm by curling up with books, and disappearing into other worlds of fantasy, adventure, and romance. With maturity came the love of her own real-life hero (a.k.a. my darling hubby), and a real understanding of why her parents locked their bedroom door.

Madison and Anna Leigh first met online through a critique group, a meeting which sparked a strong friendship and a fun partnership. Together, their writing has taken on a spicier flavor, so while their hubbies are off at work, they let their imaginations soar....

Visit them anytime at any of their online haunts:

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