

*Charlotte Boyett-Compo*

# Hot Georgia Winds



**HOT GEORGIA WINDS**

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a novel of erotic romance by

**Charlotte Boyett-Compo**

**CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO**

Phaze  
6470A Glenway Avenue, #109  
Cincinnati, OH 45211-5222

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eBook ISBN 1-59426-995-5  
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Cover art © 2007 Debi Lewis  
Edited by Kathryn Lively

Phaze is an imprint of Mundania Press, LLC.



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## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

### Prologue

Francesca Castile took a long sip of the iced Bailey's Irish Cream and let the potent liquor roll around on her tongue before she swallowed it. It burst on her senses as it always did and made her long to gulp the delicious brew as though it was water, and she a parched husk.

Sighing, she forced the double shot of her favorite libation down on the table and looked her best friend of fifty-one years, Georgi Lansing, in the eye. "Don't start up with that again, Georgi," she warned.

"Ah, come on, Frankie!" Georgi said. "What will it hurt?"

Giving Georgia stern look, Francesca shook her head. "Every time the five of us get together, we wind up doing something we ought not to do. Or have you forgotten Savannah?"

Georgi giggled. "I'm not damned likely to forget Savannah," her best friend said. "I don't think Tybee Island will forget us, either!"

"And then there was New Orleans," Francesca reminded her. "Mardi Gras, 2000."

"Oh," Georgi said, and a pink tint highlighted her cheeks—sculpted cheeks the best plastic surgeon in California had given her a year earlier.

"Not to mention the Romantic Times convention we went to in Orlando." Francesca winced. "Those poor waitresses at the Arabian Nights probably still have nightmares about us."

A long, hopeless sigh escaped Georgi. "You are getting to be such a fuddy-duddy, Francesca Louise Castile," she said.

"Grown women should act their age, Georgetta Marie Blake," Francesca stated. "We're not freshmen at Bama anymore."

"We're not senior citizens yet, either," Georgi replied. She straightened her shoulders. "At least I'm not."

Francesca took another long sip of her drink. Yesterday the nit-twit at McDonald's had given her a discount although Francesca had asked for it and didn't think she looked old enough for a senior citizen discount. But that little incident had only added insult to injury for earlier that morning, she'd found another gray hair and had silently cursed her

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hairdresser. Soon, she'd be going under the knife just as Georgi and their three closest friends already had. It was inevitable.

"It's just a weekend, Frankie," Georgi insisted. "A sort of breaking in of Alex's new condo in P.C. You don't even have to leave her damned building if you don't want to."

"And Brett won't be coming with us?" Francesca asked. Of the five women, only Georgi still had a ball and chain attached to her, but since he stayed mostly on his side of their million dollar mansion and Georgi stayed on the other, they had survived thirty-four years of relatively happy marriage.

"Hell, no, he won't be coming!" Georgi said, aghast at even the thought. "Who could have any fun with that dead-man walking tagging along?" She narrowed her eyes. "When has he *ever* come along with us, Francesca?"

Francesca started to tell her friend that if Georgi's husband came with them, perhaps they wouldn't get into trouble this time. Instead she simply shrugged.

"Okay, so it's settled," Georgi told them. "Sammi will pick us up in her pretty new Escalade after church tomorrow and we'll stop in Marianna at that terrific seafood place for lunch."

"I don't know," Francesca hedged. She rolled the bottom of her glass around and around on the table top.

"Have you been getting your mustache waxed?" Georgi asked, staring at Francesca's upper lip. She folded her fingers into a fist and leaned her chin on it. "You really should try the laser..."

"All right," Francesca hissed. "Just stop already."

"And for the love of God, don't tell Richard where we're going this time," Georgi insisted. "I don't want that self-indulgent bastard calling to chew you out about some perceived slight his new wife suffered at the country club."

"Will Brett know?" Francesca asked. She had no intention of telling her ex-husband anything.

Georgi rolled her eyes. "Unfortunately he will, since our stupid daughter-in-law could deliver that brat of hers any minute now. Otherwise, he wouldn't know where we'll be, either."

Francesca smiled. Despite the bored look on Georgi's face, she knew her longtime friend was as thrilled about the pending birth of her grandchild as she could possibly be.

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"Okay, but if we wind up in the P.C. Police Department again this year..." Francesca said, letting her words hang in the air along with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, yeah. I hear you," Georgi grumbled. "Redneck Riviera, here we come!"

So on that pleasant June afternoon, Francesca Dubois-Castile, Alexandra Baylor-Hutchins, Georgette Blake-Lansing, Samantha Hudson, and Theodora Jennings-Chambers—friends since childhood—left Albany, Georgia right after Mass let out at St. Teresa's Catholic Church for the beaches of Panama City, Florida. In Sammi's plush new SUV they tooled along to the *Super Sounds of the Sixties* on CD and joined in on the songs that had defined their generation.

## Chapter One

"Man, if you think this is nice, you ought to see Star Kiernan's place up on the top floor," Alex told her friends. "Or better yet, her stud Dáire's digs. Now *that* is luxury, lemme tell you!"

Francesca was in absolute awe of the condo that had been part of Alex's divorce settlement. An address at Farraige Port—the elite, gated high rise community where billionaires were on a very long waiting list to own a dwelling there—was a prize few could afford, and fewer still would ever win. The price tag for one of the four luxury apartments on Alex's floor had to be easily in the six-figure range.

Not that Alex's ex had to worry about money. As the owner of a fleet of luxury rental yachts and his own private island or two, Buddy Hutchins could afford shelling out cash to get rid of his first wife to make room for Slut Number Two, as Alex referred to the woman who had broken up her unhappy home. The woman to whom Alex had given the nickname Slut Number One was her mother-in-law, Beatrice.

"How many bedrooms you got here?" Teddi asked.

"Three," Alex said, kicking off her espadrilles. "Each has its own private bath and two queen-sized beds." She padded barefoot across the copper and gold flecked terrazzo floor to a large ornate desk and picked up four keycards. She brought them over to her friends. "These will get you into the elevator, the private pool, the saunas on the sixth floor, and the gym on the second floor. It won't, however, get you into the private penthouse elevator. You'd have to have the right thumbprint for the biometric verifier to ride up in that."

"This place is huge," Georgi commented. She was standing at the wide sweep of windows that overlooked the Gulf of Mexico.

"It is nothing compared to Star's place," Alex said. "Both hers and Dáire's condo only have two bedrooms and those two condos take up the entire top floor! You can just imagine the luxury."

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"I take it you've been up there," Francesca said. She, too, had removed her sandals and had taken a seat on the immense floral sofa facing the expansive view.

"Star had a party one night and she invited me. At one point, we ran out of mixers so I tagged along with her over to Dáire's to swipe some. I just about dropped my drawers when I walked into that little piece of heaven. Star is lucky to have a man like that in her bed."

"I've been to her restaurant," Sammi said, "but I've never met her. I saw him there one night, though, and..." She shook her hand in front of her. "Va-va-vavoom!"

"Prime American beef, ladies. Prime American beef," Alex proclaimed.

"You think they'll ever get married?" Francesca asked.

Alex shrugged. "I hope not. Taking that hunk off the market just makes me ill."

"If what I've heard about them is true, they only have eyes for one another," Teddi remarked.

"Unfortunately, I believe it is true," Alex said with a heartfelt sigh. "When she's in the room, no other woman exists for Dáire."

"I wish I could find a man like that," Sammi said.

"Why?" Alex demanded. "You wouldn't marry him."

"No," Sammi agreed with a grin, "but I'd wear his tight ass out before I left him at the curb."

"Evil," Teddi pronounced. "Purely evil."

"Speaking of which," Alex said as she flopped down in a huge double papasan chair. "I have a little surprise coming for supper tonight."

"We're eating here?" Georgi asked.

Alex nodded. "We have reservations at Star's restaurant the Corinth Tuesday night."

"Why not eat there tonight?" Teddi asked.

"It's closed on Sundays and Star is always the hostess on Tuesday nights. I want you guys to meet her. She's a doll and—don't hold me to it—but if he's in town, Dáire will be there, too."

"Okay, so what's for supper tonight?" Sammi asked.

Alex's face lit up. "There is fantastic barbeque place on the Strip and the pork ribs will just melt in your mouth! They serve their six-rib platters with a cup of Brunswick stew, a cup of *the* most delectable baked beans, a little bowl of coleslaw just like Mama used to make, with pickles and onions and carrots. A couple slices of pulled barbeque beef, a



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barbequed chicken leg, a little dish of sliced dill chips, and four—count 'em, *four*, ladies—buttermilk cornbread muffins." She rolled her eyes. "Pig heaven, girls. Pig heaven!"

"You expect us to eat all that?" Francesca laughed, knowing full well they would although they'd pigged out at the seafood restaurant in Marianna.

"Oh!" Alex said. "I forgot the dessert. Peach cobbler!"

"Yum," Georgi said. Nothing made her sigh like warm peach cobbler—not even a hunky man.

"What are we going to wash it down with?" Sammi inquired with a grin.

"Mango margaritas! Shaken not blended!" they all shouted at once, then giggled.

Alex tucked her lower lip between her teeth and met each woman's eyes.

"Uh oh," Francesca said. "I know that look. What have you done, Georgette?"

"Well, we also have entertainment," Alex reported.

The other women exchanged looks. When Alex provided entertainment it could be anything from a midnight cruise out into the Gulf on one of her ex's private yachts, to a flight on one of his jets, to a destination that was a carefully guarded secret.

"Sail or fly or drive?" Teddi inquired.

"Fly."

"North, south, east, or west?" Sammi asked.

"West."

"One, two, or three states over?" Georgi questioned.

Alex's eyes lit up. "Three."

"We're going to New Orleans after supper?"

"To spend tonight and all day tomorrow, shopping and doing our thang, then another night in that haven of sin. We'll fly back Tuesday in time for supper at the Corinth," Alex answered.

Francesca gave Georgi a narrowed look. "You see?" she said. "I *knew* I'd get into trouble if I listened to you!"

"Then stay here and molt, Castile," Georgi snapped. "You're too old to go with us anyway. Who wants a senior citizen plunking along with her walker?"

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Francesca took a pillow from the sofa and sailed it at her friend's head. "Bitch!" she tossed behind the pillow. "Don't forget your Polygrip and Preparation H when you pack!"

"Actually," Sami said, "Prep H is good for under eye bags, Frankie, and you seem to have developed..." She got no further, for a pillow came crashing her way, too.

"You people are going to be the death of me!" Francesca snapped, hugging a third pillow to her chest.

"So you'll come with us?" Alex queried.

"I ought to stay here and ravish Dáire Cronin," Francesca said, "but yeah, I'll go."

"Then go get your suit on and let's take a dip before supper comes," Alex said. "I'm hot and sticky."

"A state of being you perpetuate," Sammi mumbled.

"Only in my thongs, dearie," Alex declared.

\* \* \* \*

Barely able to walk after their pig-out on the barbeque, the women were standing beneath the wide porte-cochere of Farraige Port, waiting for the limousine that would take them to the Bay County International Airport. The ride would take about thirty minutes, the driver told them.

"Where will we be staying in New Orleans?" Teddi asked. "I heard our usual haunt is still closed down because of the hurricane."

"We'll be staying in the Quarter," Alex said. "That's as much as I'm gonna tell you." She was looking out the heavily tinted windows as they pulled into traffic."

The Learjet 35 took off as the last rays of the sun sank in the west. The pilot and co-pilot were both women, but the flight attendant male. He had chilled glasses of champagne waiting for Alex and her party when they'd come on board. He asked if there would be anything else.

"Can I have you?" Sammi asked the handsome young man.

"It'll cost you extra," the flight attendant replied with a grin. No doubt he was used to such come on lines.

"Honey, you're Bad with a capital B," Sammi pronounced and winked at him over the rim of her glass.

"When was the last time you recharged your vibrator, Sam?" Georgi inquired politely.

"Her vibrator doesn't recharge," Teddi said in a deadpan voice. "It takes an industrial strength nine-volt battery."

The flight attendant laughed as he headed back to the jump seat.

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Francesca picked up a fashion magazine from the rack beside her plush leather seat and began thumbing through it. Once a year she and her friends drove up to Atlanta to shop for new fall wardrobes. It was the one time they didn't manage to get into mischief.

"Frankie, have you heard anything from Regina lately?" Alex asked. "The last I heard she was still living in Naples."

"Actually, Richard told me she built a house on San Marco," Francesca answered, flipping the pages without looking up at her friend. "I guess her real estate business is doing pretty good."

"Does he get down to see her very often?" Alex pressed.

Glancing over the top of the magazine, Francesca gave Alex a sad smile. "No. He's too busy with his new family to care about our daughter."

"I can't imagine where that dickhead's brain was, starting a family at his age," Georgi snarled.

"He wasn't thinking with his brain or his dick," Sammi commented. "He was exercising that enormous ego of his in an attempt to perpetuate stupidity."

"To produce the long-awaited heir to the Castile throne, you mean," Alex mumbled as she snacked on a bag of potato chips.

"Fat lot of good that did him. Sixty-three year old men shouldn't be allowed to impregnate twenty-year-old slut puppies," Teddi affirmed. "By the time his new daughter graduates college, dickhead will be molding in his grave."

"If there's a God," Georgi declared.

Francesca laughed. "Hell, he might outlive us all."

Georgi snorted. "The old fart has one foot in Crown Hill as it is."

"I hate Richard Castile," Sammi said. "I've always hated Richard Castile and I will live to spit on the bastard's grave or..." Her eyes took on an unholy gleam. "Better yet, I'll smear runny yellow shit on the door of his ugly family mausoleum."

"You are brutal, Samantha Kaye," Georgi said, "but I like your thought processes, girl."

"We'll be landing shortly, ladies," the pilot announced. "Try not to grope Jeff too hard when he comes to take your wine glasses."

"Do you reckon he'd come real hard if we did?" Sammi asked, twisting her neck around to give the flight attendant a grin.

"We really need to stop by Wally World and get this girl a battery for her toy," Teddi said with a shake of her head.

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There was another limousine waiting for the women when the jet landed at the New Orleans Lakefront airport. After being ushered inside, the friends settled into the seats and a couple of them yawned.

"I am pooped," Francesca said as she lay her head back on the seat and closed her eyes. "I hope the place we're staying has comfortable beds."

"I've tried out just about every one of them and I can vouch that they are a little piece of heaven," Alex said. "Each and every one of them."

Francesca opened her eyes and looked across at her friend. "I don't like the sound of that, Hutchins."

Alex blew her a kiss. "Live with it, babe."

The airport was ten minutes from the central business district, but even at that time of evening on a Sunday night, the Mardi Gras city was alive and in full swing. Hurricane Katrina might have wrecked havoc on the resilient residents, but it had not crippled them.

When the limo pulled up in front of a red brick, four-story building with beautiful lacy wrought iron balconies, the first thing the women noticed was the profusion of riotous flowers cascading over the sides of the planters festooning the balconies. The ferns hanging under the balcony roofs were swaying lightly in the breeze, backlit from the tall floor to ceiling French doors into the building.

Opening the door for them, the chauffeur stood at attention as the ladies stepped onto the sidewalk, looking at the building but seeing no sign to inform them where they would be staying. It was Teddi who spied the single tile hanging over the brass mailbox.

"Oh my God," she said, eyes wide. "You've got to be shitting me!"

Georgi came to stand beside her and giggled. "Oh, my. I thought this was a legend."

"What?" Francesca asked and joined them. When she saw the tile, she frowned. "I must be dense but I don't get it."

"You will," Alex said with a laugh that made Teddi and Georgi howl in a very unladylike way that caused passersby to give them a wide berth and a disapproving eye.

"Lemme see," Sammi said and as soon as she saw the tile, her face turned pale. "Oh, Alex, really! This can't be..."

"Oh, but it is!" Alex said. She put her hands to the small of Francesca's and Georgi's backs as a stately black gentleman in elegant livery opened the door for them, doffing his tall top hat as the women came inside.

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"Welcome to the Rising Syn," the doorman greeted them, "where dark fantasy slips into the arms of his lover."

"What?" Francesca cried out. She tried to turn around and head back out the door but Alex prevented her, pushing her forward as Teddi and Sammi came behind them.

Alex leaned toward Francesca, whispering in her ear. "Live a little before you file for that Medicare, Castile. If you can't find it here at the Syn, it ain't out there."

Francesca's cheeks were flaming. Her eyes were almost as wide as her mouth. She tried once more to push past Alex, but her friend would have none of that. She took one of Francesca's arms and Georgi took the other and walked her backwards into the most opulent parlor Francesca had ever seen. The stunning beauty of her surroundings stilled her protests.

The high ceilings with their splendid architectural moldings were painted a soft blue, and the papered walls were done in a creamy beige damask flocking. A single huge chandelier hung suspended in the center of the room, flanked by two curving staircases stained in dark, rich mahogany. The carpet underfoot was surely Aubuson and seemed almost alive with vibrant pink and red camellias and sensual clusters of wisteria. Scattered about the room were Louis XVI settees in off-white molded frames, the cushions and backs of which were upholstered in moiré green silk with ivory embroidery in a striped design, and the heavy drapes at the windows quite literally sparkled with green moiré panels framing soft white sheers with delicate green embroidered ferns scattered about the material. Sitting in intimate settings in groups of two were Louis XV fauteuils—upholstered armchairs—richly carved on all faces with rocaille decoration. Lovely commodes and consoles also graced the stunning room. It was a decorator's dream.

"Shut your mouth, dear," Alex told Francesca. "One would think you've never before been allowed in polite company."

Francesca snapped her lips closed and glared at her friend. She was furious at the situation and had every intention of leaving as soon as she got the chance. "A bordello, Alexandra," she hissed. "You brought us to a fucking bordello!"

"Well, whatever else would you do in bordello other than fuck, sweetie?" Alex asked. Before Francesca could say anything else, she spun her friend around and Francesca found herself staring into a pair of amused, dark gray eyes.

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"Madame Madeline Le Soleil Levant," Alex said. "May I present my good friend Francesca Castile?"

"*Enchanté*, Francesca," the impeccably dressed black woman, who sat behind a gilt-framed desk, greeted her.

"*Bonsoir*, Madame," Francesca mumbled.

"It is said Madame is the direct descent of Marianne Le Soleil Levant, who owned the infamous House of the Rising Sun after the War Between the States," Alex said.

"One hears many things," Madame Madeline agreed. "Not all things are true, *n'est pas*?"

"*Juste comme non tous les amis sont les amis vrais*," Francesca grated.

"What'd she say?" Sammi whispered to Teddi.

"Just as not all friends are true friends," Teddi translated.

"In other words, she's p.o.ed."

"*Un peu*," Teddi said, holding up her thumb and index finger a little ways apart.

"*Peut-être je pourrais faire à nuit de Madame Francesca's un peu accablant moins*," Madame suggested with a benevolent smile.

"No offense, Madame," Francesca said, "but I don't think anyone could make my night any less overwhelming."

"*Seriez-vous offensé si j'essayais*?"

At the deep, very masculine voice, the women turned.

"Well if she'd be offended if you tried she'd be a damned fool, darling," Alex said. Letting go of Francesca's arm, she moved toward the tall, dark, and unbelievably handsome man who had appeared behind them. "How are you, *mon beau*?"

"I am well, Miss Alexandra," he said, his amber gaze passing slowly over Alex. "And you are as beautiful as ever." Drawing her into his arms, he gave her a light kiss on both cheeks then stepped back. "Will you introduce me to your friends?"

"I don't know that I want to," Alex said. "Then I might have to share you."

His slow, easy smile did funny things to the stomachs of the women staring at him.

"He was made to share," Madame said. "Mesdames, may I present Monsieur Brandyn Fontanelle?"

Francesca felt those words to the pit of her being. She could not take her eyes from the newcomer. His hair was as black as a raven's wing and

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curled lightly around his ears, falling in waves to just below the nape of his strong, muscular neck. Wiry black curls also showed at the opened V of his shirt collar. He was movie star handsome with rugged tanned features that included a deep cleft in his chin, twin dimples in his cheeks, and a body—as it had once been noted on film—made for sinning. Behind the soft white silk shirt, his pecs flexed as he reached for Georgi's outstretched hand. His full lips twitched for a moment before he lowered them to the back of her hand.

"*Enchanté*," he said to her and smiled when she turned her palm to cup his lean cheek.

"*C'est mon plaisir*," Georgi replied, making a little moue with her lips when he released her hand and turned to Teddi.

"May I call you Brandy?" Teddi asked breathlessly.

"You may call me whatever you like, my lady," he said, his kiss on the back of her hand made around a knowing smile. "But Brandy is the name most ladies use."

"What other name do they call you?" Sammi inquired when it was her turn.

"Stud," Alex said with a grin. "Or love god. Take your pick."

Brandy released Sammi's hand then turned to Francesca. He lifted one dark brow. "*Me permettez-vous d'embrasser votre main, ma dame?*" he queried, bidding her permission to kiss her hand.

As though she were locked in a dream, Francesca extended her hand to him and he cupped it in both of his, stepping closer to her—almost crowding her with his large body—and stared down into her eyes for a long, searing moment before he brought her hand to his lips. Instead of kissing her hand as he had the others, he turned it so he could place his mouth on the soft skin at her wrist. She felt the distinct heat and wetness of his tongue as he flicked it across her throbbing vein.

The other women didn't move as he stepped back—still holding Francesca's hand—and led her toward the bank of curving stairs.

"I can't..." Francesca started to say.

"You will," he whispered. "I promise you will or I'll die trying."

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### Chapter Two

As they walked up the stairs side by side, she glanced at him. "What will you die trying to do?" she asked.

He gave her a look that made her toes curl. "Draw a smile from those silken lips," he answered, staring at her mouth.

She felt a blush heating her cheeks as she smiled, unable to keep from doing so.

"See?" he asked. "I've accomplished my objective."

"Are you always successful?"

A faint shadow darted through his gold eyes. "Not always."

"I can't believe there's a woman alive you can't charm."

"There have been a few," he said softly.

He led her to a spacious bedroom done in mauve and rose with a king size brass bed with an intricately swirled headboard and footboard sitting directly in the center of the room beneath a stunning chandelier. A rose marble fireplace sat at one end of the room with two sofas upholstered in burgundy silk flanking it, a low coffee table positioned in front of the sofas. At the other end of the room were two large oak armoires to either side of a desk and chair. At the opened double French doors, soft, pink gauzy curtains fluttered wistfully into the room on a cool evening breeze. Underfoot was a plush, sculpted emerald green carpet with floral area rugs scattered about.

"Very nice," Francesca said as he closed the door behind them.

"May it be ever so humble," he replied.

She turned to look at him. "This can't be home for you." She nodded at the floral print pillows. "Too feminine by far."

Brandy smiled. "No, it isn't my room. Staff lives on the third floor and Madame's quarters encompass the entire fourth floor."

"So you do live here?"

"Most of the time," he said. "When I'm not otherwise engaged."

He was wearing expensive black silk trousers that held a crisp crease down each pant leg. Black leather Italian loafers—the shiny grain



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of which matched the slim belt at his waist—and black socks completed his wardrobe. In his left ear, he wore a thin gold hoop barely visible behind one sleek curl of his dark hair. No watch, no bracelet, no rings adorned the rest of him, but there was just a hint of a gold chain inside the opened collar of his white shirt.

"Are you Catholic?" she asked, glancing at that chain.

"I am," he answered. "Would you care to sit?"

"St. Christopher, Miraculous medal, Sacred Heart of Jesus..." She knew he had picked up on her question for he put a hand to the front of his shirt and smiled slightly.

"St. Jude," he told her. "The saint of lost causes."

"Ah," she said as she moved to the sofa. "And are you a lost cause?"

"I am what has been made of me," he said softly and went to the bar fridge and opened the door. "Double Irish cream, right?" He looked around at her. "Preferably with no ice?"

Francesca drew her legs up on the sofa and half-turned to face him as he poured her drink. "Someone has been tattling out of school, I see."

She saw his expressive mouth purse. He had such beautiful lips for a man and she wondered what they were going to taste like.

"Alex wanted you to enjoy yourself while you're here," he said. He came over to the sofa with two glasses—one containing her liquor and the other with a clear liquid bubbling away.

"No potent potable for you, milord?" she asked with a cocked brow.

"I don't drink," he said and took a sip of the lemon-lime she could smell.

"Smoke?"

He shook his head. "Never have."

"Illicit drugs?" she questioned, eyes wide.

"Define illicit," he countered, grinning at her over the top of his glass.

She laughed. "You're quick."

"Not in the areas that count," he said, his gaze heated.

Francesca felt her cheeks burn. "I have to ask," she said, leaning forward to put her glass on the low cocktail table.

"So ask," he said, taking a seat beside her, turning as had she to face her. He crossed his left ankle over his right knee, as relaxed as if they'd known one another for years.

"This is a bordello for women, isn't it?"

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"It is defined by Madame as an elite club for privileged ladies," he replied. "You must belong to the club, pay annual dues, uphold to the rather stringent rules, and be very discreet in whom you bring here. Reservations are made well in advance and sometimes take nearly a year to book."

"I see," she said. "So not just anyone can walk in off the street and be...ah, entertained."

"I am told the annual dues would prohibit most would be visitors from joining," he told her. "And so you'll know, the staff is examined weekly by Madame's personal physician and we must pass with flying colors or we are let go. There is no chance of a member contracting an illness while here at the Syn. If she brings it to us, her membership is revoked." His gaze flicked away. "The staff has all undergone vasectomies so neither can we impregnate a member."

Francesca blinked. "Wouldn't condoms been a better alternative to sterilization?"

He shook his head. "There are many women who don't like to use prophylactics and some who only use them to perform oral sex on their partner." His left eyebrow jumped. "Flavored, of course."

A wild tint of red stained her cheeks. She practically stammered her next question.

"Are there only men...ah, entertainers...here?"

"Only men," he answered. He took one last sip of his soda then placed it beside hers on the table. "What else would you like to know about the Syn?"

"How many of you work here?"

"It depends on how many women are visiting," he answered. He draped a long arm over the back of the sofa until his fingers just grazed her shoulder. "Right now, there are five of us..." he grinned, "...entertaining ladies. Two members are never here at the same time. It isn't allowed. The member may bring up to five ladies with her or she may come alone."

"Ah, a little one on one, huh?"

"No, it is usually six on one," he corrected and when her mouth dropped open, he shrugged. "Some women like that kind of thing."

"Tell me about you," she said, wanting to get away from dwelling on that wicked statement.

"What would you like to know?" he asked, propping his elbow on the sofa arm, his head tilted on his fist.

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"Are you from New Orleans?" she asked.

"I was born in Jefferson Parish," he said. "I'm a bayou baby."

"Brothers and sisters?"

"I have six older half-brothers and one half-sister," he said, a muscle jumping in his jaw. As though he expected her next question, his foot jumped impatiently. "I'm thirty-five."

"And I'm fifty-eight," she said.

He let that declaration pass, just sat there looking at her with his gorgeous amber eyes glinting. She nervously toyed with a loose thread on the arm of the sofa. "Did you go to college?" she asked.

His slow grin made her want to kiss him until he groaned. "Sweetness, I didn't even finish high school but—as the old saying goes—I'm well read."

*And well hung*, she thought, her eyes dipping to the thickness between his legs. Instead, she snapped her attention back to his amused face, feeling herself blush when she realized he knew where she'd been staring. "Why not?" she countered.

He shrugged and the material of the silk shirt stretched across his broad chest. "I went to work full-time when I was fifteen. There was no time for school."

Her forehead wrinkled. "What kind of work were you doing?" When he gave her a rather annoyed look she held up a hand. "I'm not prying. Really. I was a high school guidance counselor for nine years," she said.

"Ah," he said as though that made a difference. "You would be concerned about someone dropping out of school."

"Very much so," she said. "Did you have to help support your family?"

He laughed at that as though she'd told him one whopper of a dirty joke.

"You find that amusing?" she asked.

His foot jumped again and he gave her a long look while chewing on his lower lip. It seemed to her he was trying to decide how best to answer her.

"If you'd rather not talk about it..." she began but his deep, low tone stopped her.

"I have never talked about my life to any of our members," he said. "What you really want to know is how I got here."

She looked away from his probing intensity. "I admit I'm curious."

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"It's not pretty and it's not romantic," he told her. "Not like the lyrics from an old Statler Brothers song."

"Bed of Rose's," she said, recalling the country tune from the seventies.

"The woman who took me in and wiped away my childhood wasn't a rose," he said. "She was more like a stinging nettle."

"Ouch," she said. "Her name is Madeline, isn't it?"

"Madame is the second employer I've had. The first was named Celeste," he said. "At least, that was the name she went by."

"Was she a...? I mean did she...?" She bit her lip. "You know."

"Yes, Francesca, she ran a whorehouse," he said.

Her name on his lips sent tremors of delight contracting through her belly. He ran the tips of his fingers over the cup of her shoulder and it was all she could do not to fling herself on him and rip that sleek white silk from his chest.

"Would you like some music?" he asked suddenly.

She could tell he was finished with telling her personal things about him.

"Yes," she said, although it hadn't even occurred to her. She watched him get up and walk over to one of the armoires. Her eyes were glued to his firm, slightly upturned butt, and the black silk trousers lovingly hugging that delectable rear.

He opened the armoire doors and pushed them into the side pockets. Inside the unit was what had to be a state of the art entertainment unit, including a large plasma screen TV.

"Celtic mood music," he said, putting a CD into the machine. "Heavy on the tin whistles and fiddles."

"I'm going to have to have a long talk with Alexandra," Francesca muttered.

"She only wanted to please you," he said, coming back to the sofa. Before she knew what he was about, he had hunkered down in front of her, sliding his hands down her bare calves to her feet, easing her sandals off. His head was bent and she ached to run her fingers through those lush black waves. When he looked up at her beneath smutty, sinfully long eyelashes, his eyes were filled with heat.

"You have beautiful feet," he said, massaging the arch and toes of her right foot between both his hands.

She had a clear view down the front of his silk shirt and she could just make out the glint of the oval gold metal nestled amongst his dark

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chest hairs. For some strange, unfathomable reason that turned her on more than his strong fingers kneading her toes and caressing the arch of her foot. Inhaling the clean, spicy scent of his Halston, cologne she was so engrossed in the fantasies that fragrance suggested that she missed his question and had to ask him to repeat it, mentally shaking herself.

"I asked if you would like to dance," he said in a low, husky voice that turned her insides to mush.

Unable to find her voice, she merely nodded and he released her foot to slide his hands up her legs to her knees, then extended his left hand toward her. She nestled her fingers in his and allowed him to pull her from the sofa. Turning away from her—her hand held behind his back—he led her out into the room where there was ample space in which to dance, then pivoted around slowly to draw her into his arms.

Pressed up against that hard, masculine body, Francesca ached in places she had forgotten she had. His legs were sliding against hers, the fingers of his left hand holding hers firmly against his chest and his right arm tight around her back, his fingers splayed between her shoulder blades as he moved them sensuously in time to the lilting Celtic love song. The easy side to side movement of his hips made her mouth water. She realized at some point he had removed his shoes for she could feel the slide of his socks against the inside of her right foot.

"You are a great dancer," she said, "but then I imagine you're good at everything you do."

"Not everything," he said with a low laugh. "I can't sing, although—" He swirled her around and dipped her before sweeping her up even closer to him if that was at all possible.

"Although?" she repeated, her gaze locked on his full lips.

He grinned and she noticed how perfect and his white his teeth were. "Although I play a mean guitar."

She could feel just a hint of an erection pressing against her belly. It nearly made her knees give way beneath her and had his arms not been around her, she surely would have swooned at his feet.

He lowered his head and placed a soft kiss at the juncture where her neck met her shoulder and she felt chills rippling down her body at the contact.

"Tell me what you like," he whispered in her ear, his lips just skimming the opening of her ear.

"I..." She had to swallow. The blood was pounding in her ears and at the moment his tongue flicked inside that sensitive portion of her

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anatomy and his pearly white teeth clamped lightly on her ear lobe, she whimpered, unable to do anything but drag in a ragged gasp.

He stopped moving with her and bent down to thrust a hand under her legs as he lifted her up into his arms, high against his brawny chest. She threaded her arms around his neck and he carried her to the bed, his eyes locked on hers every step of the way. He lowered her to the bed, nudging her with his hip until she scooted over enough to accommodate his tall frame beside her. He stretched out beside her and the budding hardness between his legs had become a rigid press of heat against her thigh. He leaned over her, his mouth hovering mere inches above hers. He tangled his left hand in her short graying hair.

"Tell me what you want me to do," he whispered so softly she had to strain to hear him. His breath was warm and sweet—smelling of the lemon-lime soda—against her face.

"Anything," she whispered back, heat, and wetness seeping between her legs. "Everything."

His lips were against hers—toying with hers, nibbling on them—his tongue flicking out to sweep across the arch of her upper lip, to run along the ridge of the lower one, to lick, to press wetly into her mouth, his lips suckling hers.

She whimpered again, louder, and the sound was so full of longing, so desperately in need of fulfillment. He moved over her, pressing his full weight upon her, pushing her legs apart with his knees, his free hand dragging the hem of her skirt up until he could touch the sleek surface of her inner thigh. He caressed her, stroked her flesh, lightly squeezed.

Francesca watched his eyes spark with amber fire for just a brief second before he turned his exploratory kiss into a full-blown assault on her senses. He held her head steady and his mouth slanted savagely across hers, his tongue thrusting deep inside as he ground his lower body against her. He squeezed the inside of her thigh and moved his hand up between them until he touched the elastic leg of her silk panties.

"*Je vous veux*," he muttered against her lips, telling her he wanted her.

Francesca wanted him, too, more than she had ever wanted anything in her life. Her body was on fire with needing him inside her. The heavy stab of his cock against her thigh shifted until it was prodding at the juncture of her thighs.

"Oh, God!" she cried out. He pushed against her and the tips of his fingers slid under the panty leg and touched her moist folds.

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She could feel calluses on the tips of his fingers as he circled her wet opening. An image of him playing a guitar flitted through her mind.

*"Je veux vous goûter,"* he growled in her ear.

It took Francesca a moment to realize he had told her he wanted to taste her. That was something Richard had never attempted in their twenty-seven year marriage, and he had been the only man to whom she'd given herself over the years.

Before she could stop—no doubt taking her lack of response to his suggestion as implicit agreement—Brandy slid down her body, pushing her skirt up to her waist as he moved. Hooking his thumb in her panties, he had them off her before she could stop him.

Not that she wanted to stop him or had any desire to do so. He was positioned between her legs, his avid gaze on her sex and though she wanted to cover herself, to shield that most private part of her from his view, she lay like a deer caught in headlights as his fingers trailed between her legs.

He put his hands on her knees and eased her legs farther apart, glancing up at her as she sucked in another harsh breath.

"Shh..." he whispered. "Just relax and let me pleasure you."

All she could do was lie there as he lowered his head over her mound. His fingers were gently splaying her apart, his fingertips bracketing her folds, and the moment his tongue swirled over her clit, she dug her heels into the mattress. Her hands went to his hair and raked through it, holding him as he licked at her swollen nub.

Fire jumped from nerve ending to nerve ending as he swirled his tongue over her, then dragged it down one fold, up the other, then fluttered at her opening. Her hands tightened his hair.

"Hurt me, baby," she heard him say, his hot breath fanning over that most sensitive part of her. "Hurt me if you want to."

She slid her hands from his scalp to his cheeks and tugged, wanting him to slide up her body.

"What, sweetness?" he asked, obliging her. He lay atop her with the lower part of his body between hers, the hard prod of his erection stabbing against her. "What do you want me to do for you?"

Francesca gazed deep into his enigmatic eyes and wondered how many women had hurt this man deliberately. How many had used him, taken what he had to offer, then cast him aside, never giving him another thought until he was desired again? She could see abiding hurt in that

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amber gaze—though she was sure he believed he had it carefully hidden—and it ripped through her like a hot knife.

"Kiss me," she said.

A strange look passed over his handsome face, and he lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss wasn't hard. It wasn't forceful. It was sweet and tender, and when he lifted his hand to her breast, he cupped her as gently as though she were a piece of fragile crystal. The heat of his hand through the cotton of her sundress sent waves of desire spreading through her.

She caressed his face and he pulled back, gazing down at her, trying to gauge her needs. "Tell me," he said.

She bit her lower lip for a moment then ran her thumb over his chin. "I want to undress you," she said and could tell that surprised him. "May I do that?"

"Of course," he replied. He pushed off her and knelt between her legs.

Francesca sat up with his help and reached for the buckle of his belt. She unbuckled it and drew it from the loops, dropping it over the side of the bed to the floor. Her fingers slid to the top button of his silk shirt and tugged it open. Slowly—holding his gaze the entire time—she worked the pearl buttons free, exposing his broad chest and the fine, thickly matted hairs that grew there. Tugging the tail of his shirt from the waistband of his pants, she lowered her attention to the crisp tiger line of dark hairs that disappeared behind the covering of the trousers. She then reached for each of his arms in turn, undoing the buttons at his cuffs before spreading her palms up his chest, through that delicious dark mat and pushed his shirt from his shoulders.

She stared at the hard pectorals, the striated muscles rippling across his abdomen, the bulging biceps with their heavy veins. This was a man who took care of his body, who worked it hard to hone it to such sweet perfection. He was proud of the way he looked—she could see it in his eyes—but in some deep part of her psyche she knew that pride came from knowing she found him attractive.

Her gaze fell to a tattoo that circled his right pectoral, surprised that a man who wore no jewelry save the gold St. Jude medal would have such a thing.

"Is this a symbol for something?" she asked. She traced the tattoo with the tips of her fingers.



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"Yes," he said then took her chin in his hand and lifted her face—and her eyes—from the tat. "Do you like what you see, sweetness?"

"You are beautiful," she told him, unhooking the clasp at the waistband of his trousers.

"I am glad you think so," he said softly.

She dipped the tip of her index finger into the deep hollow of his belly button and heard him suck in a quick breath. "Do you like that?"

"I'll like whatever you do to me," he replied.

A small frown marred Francesca's forehead. She feared that was entirely the truth and no matter what she did, what she required or demanded of him, Brandy would gladly provide.

Unsettling thoughts fluttered through her mind as she slowly lowered the zipper of his fly. He was so hard, so engorged, he slipped free as soon as the opening allowed and it surprised her to see he disdained the wearing of underwear. There was nothing between him and the Italian silk trousers straining across his lean hips.

"Oh my God," she breathed as she stared at that thick, long shaft. He was so large she wondered if she could fit all of him inside her. She looked up into his face. "You are huge."

It was his turn to frown. "Do you find that disgusting? If you do, I can have one of the other men..."

"I want you!" she was quick to tell him. "Just you."

He seemed to relax at that. "I won't hurt you, Francesca. I will be very gentle. I swear it." His cock jerked and a small bead of moisture oozed from the broad tip.

She took him in her hand, easing her thumb over that pearly drop, smearing it across the velvet tip. She saw his eyes close and his head fall back at her gentle touch. The cords in his neck were the sexiest thing she'd ever seen and she wanted to run her tongue along those throbbing arteries and taste his sun-burnished skin. Without realizing she was doing it, her hand tightened around his shaft and he groaned deep in his throat.

"That feels so good," he said, then his eyes flew open as though he had committed a terrible sin. He lowered his head, his breathing ragged. "I..."

Francesca ran her free hand into the opening of his pants and cupped his balls, pulling them free of the fabric. He tensed in such a way she was sure he thought she would hurt him but when she tenderly kneaded that heavy sac, he began to relax, though there was stiff wariness in his eyes.

"Who hurt you so badly?" she asked.

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His answer stunned her. "Who hasn't?"

They stared at one another a long, long time, then she removed her hand from his rigid flesh, trying not to see the wild look of disappointment that flashed over his handsome face before she crossed her arms over her chest and jerked her sundress over her head. As his amber eyes glowed golden fire at her, she reached behind her and unhooked her bra, peeling it off her shoulders and tossing it aside.

She spread her hand in the middle of his chest and pushed him backwards and to the side, taking hold of the his pants as he did, dragging them down his long legs, ridding him of his socks, making note that even his feet were perfect with their short, clipped, well-manicured nails.

"Ride me, cowboy," she said, lying down beside him, pulling him over her so they were crosswise the bed.

He needed no second invitation. He rolled over on her, shoved one hand under her rump, took the base of his cock in his other hand, and rubbed it along her hot sex.

"I want you," he said and there was such an ache in his words it brought tears to her eyes.

"Take what you want, Brandy," she said. "It's yours."

He growled—the sound coming from low in his chest—and he swooped down to capture her breast in his mouth. His weight was mostly on the right side of her body as he lay stretched out along her. His lips suckled at her. His teeth nibbled at the hard pebble that was her nipple. His tongue swept across her flesh and swirled over it. Hot warmth spread from one breast to the other as he trailed his mouth across her. His fingers dug into her rump. His other hand continued to rub his cock all over her aching folds.

"I want you inside me!" she said, her nails scoring his back as she tried to pull him completely atop her. "Please, Brandy. I need you inside me!"

He stopped rubbing against her and put the tip of himself into her opening, going slowly, stretching her gently to accommodate his size. He would have eased into her, but she wanted none of that. She wanted him and arched herself up until she had impaled her sheath on his shaft. Still he was not completely inside her and she knew it. She brought her legs up and locked them around his hips. She ground against him hard, holding him as tightly with her arms and legs as she could.

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Brandy slid his other hand under her and lifted her to him. When he began to move inside her—thrust slowly at first then faster as he drove deeper—he buried his head against her shoulder.

"Love me," she heard him whisper. "Please love me."

Those words cut her to the quick for she didn't think he'd even been aware he'd said them. He was driving into her, spurred on by the arching of her hips up to him and the pressure of her nails digging into his back.

It had been a long time since Francesca had experienced the pleasure of a man's body locked deep inside her own. Years since the last time Richard had taken pity on her and came to her bed—Viagra in hand—to fumble ineffectually between her legs. His erection had lasted only minutes and he'd come before she had even felt the first stirring, collapsing on her, heaving for breath before rolling aside and giving her a pat good night.

Frustrated, discouraged, feeling old beyond her years and wanting more, knowing there *was* more, she had often looked with hopelessness at the young men playing tennis at the country club, swimming in the pool, jogging along the pathways and ached, the moisture between her legs slowly evaporating from age and disuse.

Here she was with a man she feared was half her age—younger perhaps than her only child—and the stirrings that had long since been but a fleeting memory were building within her and igniting fires she thought long dead. Her cunt was flowing with juices—she could feel hers; she could smell his—and pleasure was trickling through tissues atrophied for lack of stimulation.

"Come for me, baby," she heard him whisper. "Come for me hard."

And she did. Release rushed over her like an avalanche and flooded her being with such wondrous delight, such an overwhelming sense of rightness, of relief she opened her mouth and screamed.

Brandy reached up to gently lay his hand over her mouth. He didn't want her embarrassed for having made such a humbling sound. He pushed hard into once, twice, three times more than came on a long, protracted spurting that drained him, milked him, and filled her so completely she began to cry.

"Oh, baby, no," he said, thinking he'd hurt her. He pulled out of her, rolled to the side, and gathered her tenderly in his arms. He pushed the tousled hair from her forehead. "Shh, baby. Don't cry."

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She was clinging desperately to him, never wanting his arms to fall away, never wanting him to leave her side. Her face was buried against his shoulder and her hands were scrambling at the flesh of his chest.

"It's all right," he said, crooning to her, gently rocking her against him. "It'll be all right."

She fell asleep in his arms with his lips just touching her temple, his body wrapped protectively around her.

## **Chapter Three**

"How long can you stay?" she asked as she spiraled her fingers through the mat of hair on his broad chest.

They had awakened, made love twice more, and now were both wide awake. She lay with the front of her body pressed tightly to his side, his arm possessively around her shoulders.

"You have me for the entire night," he replied, his lips against her forehead. "And tomorrow and tomorrow night." He lightly rubbed his fingers up and down her arm.

She looked up at him. "Really?"

"Unless you want another man," he said.

"Not a chance, cowboy," she said and she locked her eyes with his. "I never want another man, Brandy."

"I like that," he said.

"What, that I don't want another man?"

"That especially but I like you calling me cowboy."

"No one's ever called you that before?" she asked surprised.

He hiked his shoulder in a negligent gesture. "They have, but it didn't sound the way you say it and when they called me that, it sounded marginally better than stud."

She laughed and traced a circle around his nipple. "Do you have a car?"

"Yes," he said. "Why?"

"Do we have to stay here or can we take off on our own?"

"We can do whatever you want to," he told her.

"Could we drive over to Pensacola and spend the next two days away from this place and my interfering friends?" she asked.

He arched his brows in surprise. "If that's what you want."

"That's what I want," she said.

"Then that's what we'll do," he stated. "Write a note for Alex and let's blow this joint."

\* \* \* \*

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

In the glow from the dashboard lights, she could not take her eyes off his hands as he wove through the sparse late night traffic heading east on Interstate 10. When he reached for the stick shift of his silver BMW M5, she wished those strong fingers were on her breasts, inside her wet channel, stroking her. She shivered with the thought.

"Is it too cool for you?" he asked, reaching to adjust the air conditioning.

She put her hand over his. "I'm perfect," she said. "You are perfect."

"What?" he asked, laughing. He glanced at her, threading his fingers through hers then pressing her hand to the top of his thigh. "I'm far from perfect, sweetness."

"You just don't know," she said and when he looked at her again, she squeezed his hand. "I always swore my ex-husband was a cold blooded bastard. He would turn the A/C up so high I would need a sweater in the middle of August. It didn't matter how uncomfortable I was. His comfort was all that mattered."

"How long were you married?"

"Longer than I should have," she said. "By the time I realized that he'd hired a brand spanking new college graduate to be his *personal* assistant, emphasis on the personal." She cocked a shoulder. "The writing was on the wall and he filed for divorce four months later."

"The man was a fool," he stated.

"I was a fool for ever marrying him," she countered.

He caressed her hand. "Did you have any children?"

"A daughter, Regina. She lives down in Florida," Francesca replied.

"She's getting married in December to her college sweetheart."

"Do you approve?"

She sighed deeply, leaning her head on the back of the seat. "I think they're too young, but Collier is a great guy. He owns a thriving construction company and Reggie has her real estate license. Together, they've been building high-end houses and condos on San Marco and Sanibel."

"Sounds like they've got good heads on their shoulders," he commented.

"I think so."

They were quiet for a moment as he entered the tunnel that ran beneath Mobile Bay in Alabama. The lights of the tunnel were bright, making him squint.

"What about your family?" she asked. "Do you see much of them?"

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"Not if I can help it," he said and she saw his jaw clench.

"What about your mother and...?"

"She's dead."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"And your father?"

"He's dead, too."

"Oh," she said, covering their joined hands with her right hand. "I'm sorry, Brandy."

"I'm not," he said and slipped his hand out of hers and put it on the steering wheel, his knuckles flexing on the leather wheel cover.

"You two must not have gotten along," she said. They were once more out on the interstate where the roadside lights were intermittent, lighting his set features in long flashes of illumination.

"I hated him with every fiber of my being," he told her.

"May I ask why?" She was being incredibly nosy, but there had been something in his voice that invited her to question him. Her guidance counselor training was picking up on a need she believed he had to talk. "Would you...?"

"My father's first wife died on Christmas Eve in 1970. I was told she fell out of tree trying to get her pet cat down and broke her neck in the fall," he said, sweeping his eyes to her for a moment. "We lived on an island and I never saw hide or hair of a cat the entire time so I assume the cat died with her in the fall."

"You don't think it was an accident?" She saw his hands flex on the steering wheel again, his knuckles white against the tan of his flesh.

"My father was the kind of man who needed a female to take care of him. He and his sons lived like pigs and couldn't boil water between them so if they wanted to eat, to have clean clothes, the old man needed to get himself another wife, so he went looking for one."

"There are quite a few men like that," she said.

"Easter came early that year and he went to Mardi Gras looking for a girl to take his wife's place," he said as if he hadn't heard her. "He saw my mother, she fit the profile he was looking for, and so he abducted her just as he had his first wife seventeen years earlier."

"Oh my God," Francesca said. "You've got to be kidding?"

He turned to give her a hard look. "Sweetness, I don't joke about something like that."

"And he got away with it?"

"All four times he did it," Brandy replied quietly.

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"Four times?" she gasped.

"He was good at what he did. He looked for girls who were alone, who were vulnerable. Maybe they'd slipped away from their family or friends to meet a guy or had just gotten separated from the people they'd come to the celebration with. He would follow them until he got them where he could stick a needle into them—a syringe filled with a mild horse tranquilizer—and when they collapsed, he'd pretend he knew them and would simply pick them up, say they were sick, and take them back to his pickup. It happens more than you know at Mardi Gras, believe me."

"I can't believe no one would question him," she said.

He shrugged. "People at Mardi Gras are more concerned with partying than they are about anything else. Crime is rampant during the parades."

"What happened then?"

"He'd drive down to the water, put them in the pirogue, and take them out into the bayou, way out in the middle of nowhere where he had a cabin. He would rape them repeatedly until he got them pregnant."

"How old were his other children when he abducted your mother?"

"Gaston was sixteen," he replied. "Maurice had just turned fifteen. I think Jules was twelve, Remy was ten. Yvette was seven. Olivier was six and Michel was four."

"At least their poor mother didn't have one a year," she said.

"She had four miscarriages and apparently a lot of what they said was female troubles," he said through clenched teeth. "It's a wonder the poor woman survived as long as she did."

"What about your half-sister? I can imagine what her life must have been like."

His voice changed to a soft, sad tone. "As mean as the old man was, as evil as he was, he never laid a hand to Vettie," he said. "She lived in a world all her own. She still does."

It was the way he said it that touched her heart. "She's retarded?"

He nodded. "The State finally took her to Mandeville when I was nine," he said. "That's where the Southeast Louisiana State Hospital is."

"Is she still there?" she asked.

"Not once I started making enough money to get her into a better place. She's in the Chancel now," he replied. "It's a privately owned clinic in Metairie."

"How did your mother die, Brandy?" she asked quietly.



## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"She died giving birth to me." His eyes narrowed with pain. "That's one of the reasons the old man hated me as much as he did. He said I killed her and he never let me forget it."

"How old was she?"

"Fourteen."

Francesca squeezed her eyes shut at that news.

"I was born in September of 1972. In March of '73, he brought Justine, the third girl, home during Mardi Gras. I was eleven when she died. She was twenty-three years old and had gone through six miscarriages before he finally strangled her and dumped her body in the water for the gators."

Francesca put a trembling hand over her lips as she did the math in her head. "She was twelve when he abducted her?"

"Two days shy of it," he replied.

She shuddered. "What happened to the girl from 1983?" she asked.

Brandy's smile was as cold as ice. "He miscalculated with that one. Someone saw him take her and followed him back to the truck. As he was laying her in the truck bed, the man came up behind him and hit him with a two by four. The guy beat the hell out of the old man—nearly killed him—then stole his truck, the girl, the pirogue, and everything he had on him. The old man decided to lay low for the next two Mardi Gras seasons but by the time '85 came around he was dead."

"How did he die?"

"Someone slit his throat while he was sleeping."

Francesca's face turned pale. "Who killed him?"

"Someone he'd cheated, no doubt, or it could have been the man who beat him coming back to finish the job or it could have been a relative of one of the girls he took. Vengeance is a way of life in the bayou."

"Were you in the cabin when it happened?" she asked.

He looked out his side window as though he didn't want her to see his profile. "No, he'd already gotten rid of me by then."

"Where...?"

"Let's change the subject," he said and reached over to flip on the radio. He groaned when the song that started playing was Jon Bon Jovi's "Prostitute". He turned the radio off.

"You can change the station," Francesca said.

"With my luck it would be the Animals or Tom Waits," he grumbled.

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"Or maybe Reba McIntire singing 'Fancy'."

He was quiet for so long after that, she began to feel uncomfortable, thinking she had insulted him in some way. They had crossed into Florida when he suddenly pulled onto the side of the interstate.

"What's the matter?" she asked. It was almost three o'clock in the morning and they were in the middle of a rural stretch of road lined on both sides of the interstate with scrub oak and pine. Not a light in sight.

"Nothing," he said. The tires of the BMW crunched over the gravel at the edge of the road as he came to a stop. He shifted into park and cut the engine, flipped off the lights.

Francesca's heart skipped a beat. It was dark where they were and there wasn't another car in sight. She flinched when he twisted around in the driver seat to face her.

"Here's the deal, Sweetness," he said. "I want you to crawl over the console and get into the back seat. Lie down, take your panties off, and spread your legs for me. Spread them wide, as wide as you can get them. I'm going to join you back there and then I'm going to fuck you until I get these goddamned images out of my head."

She could hear the pain threading through his voice, desperately trying to stitch up gaping wounds she had inadvertently opened.

"Do it," he ordered.

Francesca would never know why she had no fear of what he was demanding. She would never know why she didn't question or argue with him. It was totally outside her comfort zone, beyond anything she could have ever imagined herself doing, but without a word she unbuckled her seatbelt, twisted around, and forced her body through the opening in the split bench seat. The rear seat was cold as she stretched out on her back, lifted the skirt of her sundress, and peeled off her panties. She was watching him as he sat turned where he could watch her, his left arm braced on the top of the steering wheel.

"Spread your legs," he said in a husky voice.

She let her knees fall apart. She saw him glance up, the oncoming lights of an eastbound car reflecting off his handsome face.

"Touch yourself," he said—not looking at her and his breathing was louder than it had been a moment before. He cut his eyes down to her as the lights behind them came closer. "Do it, 'Cesca."

"What if it's the state patrol?" she asked. No one had ever called her that and she made a mental note to tell him how horny it made her.

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"What if it is?" he queried. "Put your hands on yourself, baby, and get it wet for me. Get it so slick I'll slide all the way into your throat when I ram into you."

She was already as wet as she could be. His words were doing the strangest, most unbelievable things to her libido. With him sitting there watching her as the coolness of the air fanned over her naked sex, the blood began pounding in her ears. She stroked herself slowly, shyly for this was not something she had ever considered doing. It seemed so sinful and though she was no stranger to a vibrator, actually putting her fingers on her sex seemed wrong. It felt wicked.

"I can smell you, baby," he told her, his voice low and husky.

The oncoming car passed them and before she could take another breath, he was pressing between the seats, his hand pushing hers aside, one finger—then two—sliding into her cunt. He hooked her bent right leg around him, the underside of her knee resting on the flange of his hip.

"That's what I wanted," he said. He worked the fingers of his right hand in and out of her as he knelt with his left knee wedged between the console and the rear seat, his right leg over hers and pressed into the seat between her spread legs. She could feel the rigid heat of his hard erection rubbing against the inner flesh of her thigh.

Francesca shuddered from head to toe when he pulled his fingers out of her and brought them to his mouth, pushing them inside as he sucked her juices from his flesh. She gasped seeing that and at the sound of the smacking appreciation he had for her taste.

"You have no idea what that does to me," he said, then lowered his hand to the zipper of the faded jeans he'd changed into for the trip to Florida. He unhooked the clasp, tugged the zipper down, and moved over, taking his engorged cock out and holding it at the base. "No idea at all."

Two cars in succession swished by on the interstate and Francesca tensed, terrified someone would stop. She strained to hear the sound of an engine gearing down, backing up, harsh red taillights flooding the interior of the BMW or—worse yet—the rotating strobe of a police car.

He thrust into her so hard, she scooted toward the side panel of the seat, the leather squeaking beneath her bare ass. His right hand was gripping the side of the rear seat's head rest as his left clutched the one behind the passenger seat. He was throwing himself into her with hard, punishing strokes that made them both grunt. Their flesh slapped

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together, the sound of the juicy slide of cock into cunt—the smell of it—goading them both on.

Her hands were on the front of his blue and white long-sleeve gingham shirt. She ripped it open—buttons flying—and half pushed it from his shoulders, barely his broad, hairy chest to her view. She yanked it from the waistband of his jeans then shoved her hands up his chest, clamping her thumb, index, and middle fingers firmly around the hard pads of his nipples. She squeezed savagely.

"Oh, God!" he cried out and a ripple of reaction shuddered through him. He ground himself against her, hips rotating brutally.

"You like that?" she whispered.

"Damned straight," he managed to get out.

"Then fuck me, cowboy," she told him. "Fuck me hard."

"Tell me you want me," he said. She could barely see his eyes in the faint sky glow coming in through the windows.

"I want you."

"Say my name."

"I want you, Brandy."

"Only you, Brandy," he stressed and thrust deeper, faster, his cock sliding in and out of her like a piston.

"Only you, Brandy. I want only you." And she meant it. "No one else but you."

He was panting for breath and at the moment her cunt began to grip him, squeeze him, undulate around his straining flesh, he let his head fall back and he roared, the sound loud and victorious in the confines of the luxury car. He shot his cum long and thickly into her, pumping against her like a crazed man, mindless of the semi that roared past them with a strident blare of its air horn.

Francesca grunted as he collapsed atop her, struggling to gain his breath. He had put so much into taking her, his hair was damp with sweat, his chest slick as he lay against her. She wrapped him in her arms.

"You are mine, cowboy," she told him. "Mine and nobody else's. Do you hear me?"

His lips were at the hollow of her throat, his head on her shoulder. "Don't throw me away, Francesca," he asked. She felt moisture on his cheek and she knew it wasn't sweat.

"Never, baby," she swore, tightening her grip on him. "Never in a million years."

## **Chapter Four**

Brandy shot straight up in the bed, his heart tripping like a jackhammer. Sweat glistened on his upper body, ran into his eyes, and down through the hair on his chest. He was sucking in harsh, ragged breaths, making low moaning sounds as the dream slowly faded.

"It's all right," she said, running her hand gently over his back. "It was just a dream, cowboy."

He jumped at her touch, so lost in his nightmare he didn't know he wasn't alone. He had no idea where he was—the room was a complete mystery to him—and for a moment didn't even know who it was who lay beside him in the strange bed.

"Where am I?" he asked, lifting a trembling hand to shove it through his damp hair.

"Pensacola," she said.

He stared at her, his eyes narrowed with fear. "How did I get here?" he whispered.

"We drove, remember?" she asked, pushing a lock of dark hair from his eyes. "We took your car."

"I'm not in the hospital?" he asked, his eyes searching hers.

"No," she said. "Of course not. We're at a hotel on the beach."

He lay down and dug the base of his palms into his eyes, fingers splayed apart. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"For what, sweetie?" she asked, then felt her heart constrict as he began to sob, his shoulders shaking, chest heaving. It was such a forlorn, hopeless sound it brought tears to her eyes.

She moved so she could wrap him in her arms, and when he turned his face to her breast, his hands covering his face, she groaned with compassion for him. She shushed him softly, rocking him against her while he cried as though his heart would break.

"What happened to you, darling?" she whispered to him. Her hand smoothed over his back.

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For a long time she held him until the last of his sobs died away. They were both naked beneath the sheet, but the combined heat from their bodies was more than the air conditioner could ease. She was perspiring as she lay there holding him until his breathing was slow and even and barely audible.

She decided they would not discuss what had caused his outbreak, and instead asked him what he'd like to do that day. The sun was already up and striving to break through the slit in the heavy drapes.

"I'm the one who's supposed to entertain you," he said as he eased out of her arms.

"Then let's go take a shower and decide how best you will do that," she said, flinging the covers aside.

"Okay," he said as though nothing had happened.

He swung his legs off the bed and watched as she padded into the bathroom. She had lush, womanly curves to her matronly body that pleased him. There was padding on her hips and thighs and if he had to bet on it, he'd wager she'd had no intrusive work done on her shapely frame. The laugh lines around her eyes and the absence of creases bracketing her mouth intrigued him, for they were always the sign of a woman who found pleasure in life and not disappointment.

"Are you coming?" she called out to him and he heard the shower go on.

"I'm not even breathing hard," he called back to her and when she laughed, he smiled. He got up from the bed and went into the bathroom to find she was already behind the frosted glass doors of the shower. "Want me to scrub your back?" he asked.

She opened the door. "Get in here, cowboy," she said, wagging her eyebrows at him.

He obliged, reaching for the unwrapped bar of soap resting in the holder, but she snatched it out of his reach.

"Unh unh," she said. "Turn around and put your hands on the wall and spread 'em, mister."

He smiled and obeyed her, pressing his palms to the cool tile. The moment her soapy hands touched him, he closed his eyes. "You are going to spoil me," he said in a gruff voice.

"That's my intention," she said.

He hung his head as her hands moved over his shoulders, the nape of his neck, his back, and sides. He closed his eyes, thoroughly enjoying her ministrations. No one had ever bathed him in his life except his father

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and Justine, his father's third 'wife', then only until he turned three and was told to do it himself. Having someone touching him so lovingly, so thoughtfully, did funny things to his heart.

"Tell me about the tattoo," Francesca said as she soaped his right arm, sliding her palm over the bulging muscle of his biceps.

He opened his eyes to stare sightlessly at the tile wall through the wispy swirls of condensation forming in the shower. "What do you want to know about it?"

"What it means," she said. "How long you've had it."

His eyelids flickered. "I got it when I was fifteen," he told her. "It's a hyena."

She stepped closer. Amid the interlocking knots that encompassed the tattoo, she finally noticed the snarling head of the animal as well as gothic letters and numbers interwoven around the arm band. "Why did you choose a hyena?"

"I didn't," he said. He turned around to face her. "It was given to me as a punishment."

She saw something dark and unsettling flit through his gaze. "Can you tell me what it signifies?" She didn't think at first he would answer, but then his broad shoulders slumped and he exhaled loudly.

"The hyena is a symbol of one who waits for the leftovers. The letters and numbers in the tat stand for Jeremiah 12:9." His eyes flicked away from hers as he quoted the scripture. "My heritage is a prey for hyenas, is surrounded by vultures; Come, gather together, all you beasts of the field, come and eat!" He looked back at her. "In dreams, when a hyena appears, it prophesies you will meet much disappointment and much ill luck in your undertakings. If you look closely, you'll notice the interwoven knots look like barbed wire. That symbolizes being confined to specific boundaries. In my case, it means the Syn."

"Who would put such a wicked thing on you?" she asked, her temper rising. "And why haven't you had it removed?"

"The man who ordered it done was an evangelical preacher named Phineas Albermarle," he answered. "And if I could have it lasered off, believe me I would, 'Cesca, but I'm not allowed. That's why I wear long sleeved shirts most of the time. I don't want people seeing it."

"Who won't allow you to have it removed?" she demanded,

"Madame," he said and when she would have said more, he laid the tips of his fingers over her lips. "I can't do anything about it so let's drop it, okay?"

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"But..."

"Shh," he said, taking the soap out of her hand. "It's my turn now."

"Oh, no, it isn't," she said and held her palm out. "Gimme it back."

He sighed and laid the soap in her hand. He watched her rolling the creamy bar between her hands, then sighed again as she put her palm to his chest and began lathering him.

"So, after we go get breakfast, what shall we do?"

"What constitutes breakfast for you?" he countered. "After my morning yoga exercises I'll have juice and coffee."

"That's not breakfast," she said with a snort. "That's a waste of time."

He arched a brow. "What do you usually have?"

"Serious calorie intake," she said, rubbing her hand over his shoulder, across his throat and onto the other shoulder. "Hot buttered grits and two scrambled eggs and patty sausage all mixed up together, a couple of pieces of bacon on the side, home fries with onions and bell peppers, toast with grape jelly, coffee, and OJ."

"That's not a breakfast, woman," he said with a shake of his head. "That's a coronary in the making."

"My breakfast, my coronary," she defended her eating habits as she spread the lather down his hard, flat stomach. "Ooh, now what's this?"

He was as erect as a horny teenage boy and just as unable to control it. He sucked in a breath as she wrapped her soapy hand around that hard engorgement.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have really large balls?" she asked, running the soap over that pendulous flesh.

"No," he said, gritting his teeth. He shifted his legs farther apart and she slid the soap up the crack of his ass, making him squirm and groan at the same time.

"You like that, huh?" she said, her smile evil.

His hands came up and clamped around her upper arm. He pushed back beneath the cascade of the water and leaned into her, holding her under the warm spray. "Wanna see just how much I like that, Sweetness?" he growled.

With her hair plastered against her head and his dripping down into her upturned face, the water sloughing the soap from his muscular body, Francesca had never been more aroused. His heavy cock was probing against her lower belly, heightening her desire. His handsome face was pure heaven.



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"I want to give you so much pleasure you will never forget me," he told her and slid her up the shower wall until he could insinuate his muscled thigh between her legs so she could straddle him. Bracing his knee and toes against the tile, he covered her breasts with his hands and kneaded them, his mouth going to the hollow at the base of her throat.

"Brandy," she whispered, her hands going around him until she could cup his firm buttocks. She dug her short fingernails into his flesh. "Do whatever you want, baby."

He lifted his head long enough to slant his mouth recklessly across hers, his tongue thrusting deep into her mouth, swirling around inside it, his thumbs stroking back and forth across her passion swollen nipples. He kissed her hard—putting real force into it—then released her right breast to reach down and drag her leg up over his hip. He did the same with her other leg until she had them locked around him, the tip of his cock pressing at her entrance.

He pulled back just enough so he looked into her eyes as he pushed himself up inside her. Her arms were under his arms, her hands spread over his shoulder blades, her elbows pressing hard into his side as he went deeper into her honeyed flesh. His lips were parted and when he pressed as far into her as his cock would go, her eyes dipped down to his mouth as he swept his tongue across his upper lip. She returned her attention to his sensual amber eyes and smiled tenderly at him.

"I believe I'm falling, cowboy," she told him. "And falling hard."

He shifted her against him, moving so his hands were under her ass, bracing her. "No, baby. I'm not going to let you fall."

She slowly shook her head. "No, baby, I mean I'm falling for you."

He blinked and a look of fear crossed his handsome features for just a second before he blinked again to chase it away. A tremulous smile pulled at his lips—hesitant at first, as though he didn't believe what she was saying but hoped it was so—then that smile grew until it covered his face and lit his golden eyes.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"I think so," she admitted.

He was so incredibly hard inside her he didn't think he was possible to get any harder, but when she moved her head forward so she could kiss his forehead, he thought his cock would break it was so rigid. It hurt because it was so stiff, so full it burned and he arched his hips forward and up, thrusting just once inside her before he felt the answering vibrations deep within her.

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She wriggled against him as her climax became a wild, insane itch seeming to originate in her very womb. Her belly quivered, clenched, contracted and the orgasm pulsed down through her sheath with such force Brandy grunted. She came around him forcefully—squeezing, rippling, and tugging on his swollen shaft.

"Goddamn!" he hissed and began pumping into her so fiercely they were banging against the shower wall. Her legs became living clamps around his waist. Her nails were gouging into his back. He came and came and came until he was so depleted, he thought he'd melt and swirl down the drain.

Straining against him, Francesca was quivering. Her orgasm had been so intense she had actually seen stars when she'd come. She had felt him pulsing into her, felt his cum striking against the walls of her vagina, and felt his cock jerking. She was holding onto him with every bit of strength she had for she didn't think her legs would hold her.

"I wanna go to the mall," she heard him say and lifted her head to look down at him.

"What?" she asked, her mouth sagging open.

"I wanna go to the mall," he said and slid out of her, letting her feet lower to the floor of the shower. "You asked what I wanted to do after breakfast and I'm telling you. I wanna go to the mall."

Francesca lifted her hand and shook a finger at him. "You're not going anywhere, mister. I haven't finished bathing you, yet," she said.

He grinned. "Big, bad mama," he teased and stepped back, spreading his arms. "Okay, have at it. I've got a Jones for the mall."

"Humpf," she said and looked down at the floor of the shower. "What happened to the soap?"

"You mean after you tried to cram it up my ass?" he asked. He lifted his foot and kicked it toward her.

"You were standing on the soap?" she said. "You could have fallen and broken something."

He bent down and retrieved the mushy bar of soap and slapped it into her hand. "Bathe me, wench."

Heaving a loud sigh, she grimaced as she worked the disintegrating bar into lather then put the bar in the holder. "I'm sure the maid is going to wonder what we did with that soap."

"You could always tell her you tried to shove it up my..."

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"Oh, hush!" she said, laughing and squatting down to wash his long legs, admiring the way the gods had put him together. She'd never seen such handsome legs and feet on a man. "Give me your foot."

He hesitated then stepped back. "That's okay," he said.

She looked up at him. "What, are you ticklish?"

"My turn," he said and reached for the soap.

"You are, aren't you?" she asked, devilment sparking in her eyes.

"No," he said, then began smoothing the suds over her.

Francesca watched him as he worked. He had this endearing little habit of tucking the right side of his lower lip between his teeth as he concentrated. It made him seem almost childlike. She was starting to smile at that thought when he ran his hand between her legs and she gasped, heat and juices flooding her as quickly as that.

"Oh, yeah?" he asked and began sliding his fingers all along her folds.

"You are a bad boy," she said.

Brandy's smile slipped a notch. "Don't say that," he said. His fingers slid inside her and he turned his hand until he could touch her g-spot with his middle finger.

"Oh, baby," she moaned as he stroked that spongy little indentation with expert timing.

He leaned over to capture one nipple between his teeth, flicking his tongue over the tip.

Francesca threaded her fingers through his dark hair as he worked his sweet magic on her breast. Before she knew it, she was coming hard on his questing fingers. He was pushing into her, pulling out, pushing deeper still until the last of her juices flowed around him. She shuddered when he brought his fingers up to his mouth and licked away those juices.

"God, I love the way you taste," he said, then squatted down to wash her legs, her fingers still in his wet curls. When he laughed, she tugged gently at his hair.

"What are you laughing at?"

He lifted his head and looked up at her, grinning like a child. "You've got tiny little tufts of hair on your big toes."

She felt her face turn red. "I do not!" she protested, but she knew she did. She'd always hated those few spiky little hairs she tried to remember to shave off when she did her legs.

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"Yes you do!" he said, chuckling. "You've got little patches of hair..."

"Oh, shut up!" she said and tried to pull her ankle out of his grip.

"Hairy toes," he giggled and got up. "You've got..."

"That's enough!" she snapped and spun around to turn off the water. "Unless you want to forget about going to the mall."

He sobered instantly, though the merriment was lurking in his eyes and in the way he kept his lips pursed together. Sluicing the water off his arms and legs, he continued to look at her with that amused amber gaze. He spread his hands through his wet hair and shook his head, spraying her as she opened the door and got out of the shower, pulling one of the thick white towels from the rack. She turned and held it out to him and she saw his expression change again—just that mercurially fast.

"No one has ever treated me like you do," he said as he took the towel. "Never."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him how the women he entertained behaved toward him, but she didn't want that sweet look to leave his face again. Instead she asked him what he usually did on the weekends.

"I only get Sunday off," he said as he began toweling his hair. "Once a month I get to go to the Chanel to see Vettie. Dr. Lassiter doesn't allow me to visit any more often because he has Vettie on a pretty strict schedule."

She had wrapped the towel around her. "When do you see her next?"

"Two weeks," he said. The towel was touching him in places she wished she could.

"Would you let me go with you?"

He looked up slowly with his hands pressed against his groin, his face showing both disbelief that she'd asked and wariness that she was only being polite. "Why would you want to?" he asked.

"So I can meet her," she replied. She raked her fingers through her short hair. There wasn't much else she had to do to it to maintain the great cut her hairdresser had given her.

"Are you serious?" he questioned.

"Yes, I am."

"You'd come back over here to do that?" He was staring intently at her.

"Sure, why not?"

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Francesca saw moisture gathering in his eyes and saw him lower his head.

"Don't say things you don't mean, Sweetness," he said.

She marched over to him, put her hands on his cheeks, and lifted his face. "You listen to me, Brandyn Fontanelle," she said, refusing to allow him to look away. "I don't tell lies, cowboy. When I tell you something you can take it the bank! Do you understand me? I will be back over here two Sundays from now and we will go to the Chancel to see Yvette. Is that understood?" When he didn't answer, she repeated the question.

He stared at her a long, long time, and she knew he was trying to assess whether she was telling him the truth or just shining him on, but then he smiled.

"Yes, ma'am, I believe so," he said.

"Okay, then," she said. "Now that's settled, get your jeans on, and let's boogie."

"I don't have a shirt to wear," he grumbled. "You ripped the only one I had with me, remember?"

"Cry baby," she accused. "I'll go down to the gift shop and buy you a shirt. What size do you need?"

"Large, long sleeve," he told her.

"In this weather?"

"I want long sleeve," he said stubbornly.

"I'll get what I can find and you'll wear it, cowboy, or walk around flaunting that luscious chest of yours," she said.

"Nobody will let me in a restaurant without a shirt," he reminded her.

"You just have to be difficult, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am, Miss Hairy Toes," she heard him say in a low voice.

Her back was to him but she was grinning at his teasing. She knew it didn't come easily to him.

## **Chapter Five**

They were sitting on a bench in the mall, just watching the people walking past them. He seemed fascinated by the hustle and bustle and appeared perfectly content to sit there slurping on the ice cream cone she'd bought him with his long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles.

"I always wanted to be a writer," he said around a long lick of the vanilla soft swirl.

"Yeah?" she asked. "What kind of writer?"

He shrugged. "They say you should write what you know but all I know is how to screw." He frowned, staring down at the cone. "Do you suppose you could make money writing about screwing?"

"The authors at Ellora's Cave do," she replied and flicked her tongue around her ice cream.

"Is that the eBook people?" he asked.

"Uh huh."

They were silent for awhile, then she asked him what it was about the mall he enjoyed.

"I like to watch the people," he said. "And I like to look through the stores." He had reached the cone and took a healthy bite of it and chewed for a moment, watching a young family with a stroller walking past.

"Do you like to shop?" she asked, knowing full well few men did.

"I like being able to," he replied. "People who grow up without will accumulate stuff when they have the money even if they don't need it and have to go into hock to have it."

Francesca had never had to do without. Her family had been wealthy and she'd been an only child, garnering a hefty inheritance when her parents died. She had married into an even wealthier family, had been able to save nearly all the money she'd had when she'd worked at the high school, and her investments over the years—not to mention the very generous divorce settlement from Richard—had given her a

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sizeable fortune of her own. She didn't know what it was like to grow up without, and asked him if it had been really hard for him as a boy.

"You've no idea," he said, popping the remainder of the ice cream cone into his mouth.

A little girl and her mother walked by, the child's hand clasped securely in her mother's. The pretty child was carrying a doll that was nearly as big as she was. She waved at Brandy and he waved back, giving the little girl a big smile. He followed her with his eyes until she and her mother were lost among the shoppers.

"Come on," he said, reaching for Francesca's hand.

She had to quicken her steps as he pulled her along behind him. His long legs were eating up the distance as they wove in and out among the slower walking people.

"Do you know where you're going?" she asked.

"I've been here before," he told her and had to pull up short—sucking in his stomach—to keep from being bulldozed into by two elderly ladies with arms full of bags.

"Be careful, young man!" one of the blue-haired ladies reprimanded him.

"Yes, ma'am," he said dutifully and waited until they passed before he started dragging Francesca behind him.

As soon as she saw the multi-colored sign, she knew where he was going and was fairly sure she knew why. She tightened her hand in his and he glanced back at her, giving her a look that went straight to her heart. Pulling her behind him into the store, he made a beeline to where the dolls stood in cellophane boxes, their painted little faces looking far too mature for their intended age.

"May I help you?" a saleslady asked. She was devouring Brandy with a heated look that should have sent his faded jeans up in flames.

Brandy glanced at the woman. "I'm looking for just the right doll," he said.

The saleslady gave Francesca an arch look. "For your daughter?" she asked, letting her gaze flick over the older woman whose hand was clasped in the much younger man's.

"My sister," he said and his eyes lit. "This one!"

He let go of Francesca's hand for he had to jump up to grasp the edge of the cardboard box on the upper shelf, but he snagged it, drawing it down with a laugh. It was the largest dolly in the store and it was absolutely beautiful.

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"I'll take this," he said.

"You have good taste," the saleslady said. She flicked her withering glower over Francesca again.

"And he tastes good, too," Francesca could not resist saying.

Brandy's head snapped around. He was looking at Francesca as though he couldn't believe she'd said such a thing.

The saleslady's chin went up. "Will this be cash or charge?"

"Cash," Brandy said, still giving Francesca a disbelieving look.

On the way out of the store, he heard Francesca say something to the saleswoman but couldn't quite make it out. He didn't think he wanted to know what she'd said to make the other woman's mouth sag open and her eyes flare.

"Are you not playing nicely?" he asked as she fell into step beside him.

"I never was good at sharing," she said.

They took the dolly out to his car, then decided to just drive around awhile until they found a place to have supper. Both had skipped lunch after the breakfast Francesca had ordered for them at I-Hop. A slushy and an ice cream cone had sufficed for their noon meal.

"How often do you come over here?" she asked when they stopped for a red light.

"About two or three times a year. It depends on whether or not the member who lives here has one of her beach parties. When she does, she flies me over to be her escort for the weekend."

"Ah, I see," Francesca said, feeling jealousy like a pit bull rampaging in her belly. "And to warm her bed?"

He looked over at her. "That's what I do, 'Cesca."

"Have you ever thought of quitting?" she asked, flicking imaginary lint from the skirt of her sundress. She frowned, thinking she should have bought something else to wear when she'd bought him a shirt at the hotel gift shop or at least while they had been at the mall. But she hadn't been thinking of herself. She'd been thinking of him. "Have you ever thought of marrying and settling down?"

"Are you offering to make an honest man of me?" he countered, shifting into gear as the light turned green.

"Would you accept if I did?"

He didn't answer but flicked on the turn signal, waited for a few cars to pass in the oncoming lane before turning onto a side street.

"Brandy?" she pressed.



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"I heard you, Sweetness," he said, driving into the parking lot of what looked to be a large office complex.

"Where are we going?" she asked, looking around the lot.

"Here," he said. He slipped expertly into a parking place and turned off the engine.

"What are...?" she started to ask but he was out of the car and walking around the front of it to her side. He opened her door and held out his hand.

"I wanna show you something," he said.

She let him help her out of the car. As soon as she was standing beside him, he left go of her hand, slammed the car door shut behind her, and started toward the office complex, his hands shoved into the front pockets of his jeans. She followed behind, thinking how light on his feet he was for even though he was wearing scuffed cowboy boots, the heels barely made a sound on the asphalt.

He surprised her by not going into the office complex, but down the sidewalk in front of it and around the side, skipping down a few steps to a brick-paved sidewalk that led out into a small park. It was almost five o'clock on a Monday afternoon and people were coming out of the complex and getting into their cars, leaving for the day.

"How do you know about this place?" she asked.

It was a lush little bit of heaven canopied with the spreading branches of live oaks festooned with lacy Spanish moss. A thick mat of green grass lay underfoot and it felt springy under her feet as he veered off the sidewalk toward a group of black wrought iron benches and a set of swings. He went over to one of the swings and moved behind it, holding it for her to join him and sit down. When she did—tucking her skirt gracefully beneath her rump—he stepped back, pulling on the swing, then pushing her until she was flying freely. He pushed her a few more times then sat down in the swing beside her, digging his long legs into the air to get himself going. He flew much higher than she—*recklessly so*, she thought—leaning way back to pull the swing as high as he could get it.

She watched him for the longest time as he just soared beside her, letting her swing finally come to a slow movement. He looked so careful but so troubled at the same time. Looking around the park, she saw they were alone and she figured he knew they would be. As he allowed his swing to slow, she saw he was staring at the office complex.

"What is that place?" she asked. His answer surprised her.

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"It's a drug rehab facility," he said, scraping his boot heels on the sand beneath the swing. "I've spent a lot of time in there."

"For what?" she asked.

He let the swing still and crossed his legs at the ankle, wrapping his arms around the chains. "Heroin addiction," he answered.

She was so surprised by his admission, she couldn't think of anything to say. She stared out across the lovely little park, watching a group of pigeons pecking at the ground.

"How long ago was this?" she finally asked.

"Two years ago," he said.

She thought of him not wanting her to wash his feet. Since she'd seen no indication of needle tracks on his arms or thighs, she figured that must be where the telltale signs were—between his toes.

"Is this the hospital you mentioned after your bad dream?" she asked.

"It wasn't a dream, Sweetness," he said softly. "It was a memory."

"Of being here?"

"Yeah."

She turned to look at him. "How many times have you been here?"

"Man, you must think I'm a real sleaze."

"I think no such thing. I was just asking."

He hung his head. "I've only been here once but it was for nearly a month."

She bit her lip. He had a serious problem and it was one that explained a lot about the man.

"Still want to make an honest man of me?" he asked, locking gazes with her.

She didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"You don't know what you're..."

"I had a problem with Demerol," she said softly and when his forehead wrinkled, she nodded. "A big problem. I wound up at Shands in Gainesville to detox."

He slid his hands up the chains and gripped them tightly. "Are you serious?"

"Unfortunately so."

"What got you addicted?"

"Migraine headaches," she said. "I used to get them every month until I went through..." She shrugged. "...Menopause. Now I get them

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about four times a year. Demerol and Vistaril are the only things that help. I'm allergic to just about everything else."

"How did you...?"

"We had a neighbor who was a nurse and she was addicted to it, too. Between us, we had some pretty mellow days. I would have a shot in the morning, one during the day, and another at night. I was definitely hooked." She pushed her feet against the ground to set the swing moving. "It lasted about a year until Richard put his foot down and carted me off to Shands. God, I hated him for that."

He was watching her so closely, paying attention to every word she said, and there was understanding on his handsome face. "Were you giving it to yourself?"

She nodded. "I learned to." She brushed a hand over her right thigh. "Learned to put it in the exact same spot. There's a tiny dark spot there still and that was nearly thirty years ago."

"Do you still get the drug?"

"Yes, but now I don't have the urge to abuse it. I learned my lesson." She gave him a long look as if to ask if he had learned from his mistake.

"I didn't give it to myself, 'Cesca," he said. "Not even the first time. I never once took it willingly."

"I don't understand."

"I haven't talked about this to anyone," he said. "Not even my therapists here. It's not something I wanted them to know."

"Whatever you tell me won't go any farther," she said.

"I know that."

"Then talk to me, baby," she said gently. "Tell me."

He got up from the swing and walked behind her and began pushing her again. She knew it was because he didn't want her to see his face as he spoke.

"Before I went to work for Madame, I was working for another woman."

"Celeste," she said.

"You remember everything, don't you, Sweetness?" he queried.

"You were working for Celeste," she prodded.

"She wasn't a nice person," he stated.

"And that's why you went to work for Madame."

"No, I went to work for Madame because someone put a hollow-point bullet between Celeste's eyes last year."

"That would seriously fuck up your day," she commented.

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"Made mine," he said.

"Were you the accommodating fellow who snuffed her?" she asked.

She heard him laugh. "That's the second time you've accused me of offing someone, Sweetness. I'm a whore, not a murderer."

"Oh, and here I thought the terms were interchangeable," she responded. When he laughed again, she knew his mood was lightening. "So I take it Celeste was the one who got you hooked."

"If you pissed her off she would have a couple of men—we used to call them Frick and Frack—after you. They'd hold you down and shoot you full of dope, then keep doing it until you were strung out. Then they'd stash you someplace to go through withdrawal. As a punishment, it worked really well."

"And you pissed her off."

"I seriously pissed her off," he declared.

"What did you do, piss on her beignet?" she asked.

"Nah, I creamed it," he said with a snort.

"You are so vulgar," she accused. "Really, what did you do?"

He stopped pushing her and came around to stand beside her. "Which time?" he questioned.

Francesca lowered her legs and scraped her feet on the ground, her head turned toward him, her eyes wide. "They did that to you more than once?"

"The last was number four," he said.

"What did you do?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Well, let's see," he said. "The first time I was thirteen and I tried running away from her. I didn't get far, not even around the block. I tried again the next year but that time I got as far as Baton Rouge before Frick and Frack ran me to ground. The last time was a week before she got killed. She was insanely furious with this guy who used to work for her—a guy she had set up down in the Caribbean with his own place—because he was dumping her so she took it out on me. Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time." He shook his head. "It could have been any one of us she set Frick and Frack on. It just happened to be me."

"So how did you wind up over here?"

"Madame came in and took over Celeste's operation," he said. "It was strictly business with her. She chose only the best moneymakers from the stable." He thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "She knew about me—hell, all the madams and pimps in N'Orleans know about

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me—and she asked where I was. One of the guys told her I was in the Dungeon down in Storyville. She sent her men after me and when they saw what bad shape I was in, she had them bring me over here."

"Why here?" she asked. "Why not somewhere in New Orleans?"

"Her brother is on staff here and she's been here a time or two herself," he answered. "She knew I'd get good care."

Francesca thought about what he'd been through and as she did, her agile mind jumped back to something he'd said. Her mouth dropped open. "The first time you were thirteen?"

He nodded, his gaze locked on hers.

"When did you go to work for her?"

"Two years before."

Her face paled. "Brandy..."

"Since I'm in such a blabby mood, I might as well tell you all of it," he said. He walked around in front of her and held his hand out. "Let's go sit on one of the benches."

He led her to one of the wrought iron seats. Sitting down, he hunched forward, arms folded defensively across his chest, elbows on his knees, and chin on his chest. His body language reminded her vividly of actors portraying strung out drug addicts on television cop shows.

"My old man used to beat the hell out of me every chance he got," he told her. "My half-brothers, too, but Gaston most of all."

"Gaston was the oldest?"

"Yeah," he said, lifting his head to look across the park. "Knowing him, he more than likely raped her once the old man broke her in. Hell, for all I know he could be my father and not Gilbert Fontanelle."

Francesca wanted to put her hand on his back but she held back. He had lowered his head again.

"Gaston despised me," he continued. "Still does. He once told me that if it had been left up to him, I'd have been drowned like an unwanted kitten as soon as I was born."

"He sounds like a real prize," she said.

"He's psychotic," he stated. "Anyway, this trapper named Maurice came to the cabin one Sunday morning. Maurice was seven feet of pure evil with arms like tree trunks and the disposition of a cornered badger. Everybody on the bayou was terrified of him. The old man owed him money—a lot of money apparently—and didn't have it to pay him. He came after Papa and would have stomped him into the ground if Gaston hadn't suggested a way for Maurice to get his money back."

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"Oh, no," she said, realizing where the story was going.

"Papa and the rest of them were only too glad to get rid of me. Maurice grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and dragged me over to his pirogue and took off for town. Once we were out on the water away, out where no one could see, he told me to get down on my knees in front of him." He rocked his head from side to side as though trying to work out a creak in his neck.

"Did you know what he wanted you to do?" she asked softly.

"Oh, hell, yeah," he said. "I'd been doing that since I was probably three years old if not younger. I don't even remember when my brothers started forcing me into doing it."

"Did your father know what was happening?" she asked, wiping at a tear that had started down her cheek.

He turned his head to look at her. "He knew."

The way he said it, the pain in his gaze gave her some idea of how hellish his childhood had been.

He looked away. "I tried to jump out of the pirogue," he said. "I would rather have been gator bait than touch that bastard. He lunged for me and I fell, hitting my head on the side of the boat. When I came to, I was in a dark room with no windows, only a thin slit of light coming in under the door, lying naked on a cot."

"Had he...?" Her face turned red.

"No. He wouldn't have made as much money off me if my cherry had been broken," he said brutally. "I think that's why Gaston wouldn't let the others screw me. He had intended to have Papa sell me when I was old enough."

He stood. "Come on, I'm hungry."

She watched him stalk away with his hands once more deep in his pockets, his shoulders hunched as though he were expecting someone to hit him. She got up to follow him, jogging to catch up.

The parking lot had all but emptied with only about a dozen cars left parked off to one side. He told her it was for the night time employees.

"Where do you want to eat?" she asked as he left the parking lot and pulled out into traffic.

"Let's get a steak," he suggested. He glanced at her sundress. "We need to get you something else to wear, too, Sweetness."

"I'm okay."

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"We'll go back to the mall and get you something else to wear," he said as though he hadn't heard her. "There's a really good country western bar and grill across the street from the mall and I need a beer."

"I didn't think you drank," she said, casting him a worried look.

"I do today," he said, his jaw tight.

## **Chapter Six**

After a trip into an upscale ladies' shop in the mall—Brandy insisting on paying for the designer jeans and red knit top she picked out—they went down to the restaurant. A fifty-dollar tip to the hostess got them a secluded table right away.

The restaurant was darkly lit, done in a Wild West theme, and noisy. Country music was piped in from the dancehall on the other side of the building. After ordering steaks with all the fixings for the both of them, Brandy leaned back in the oak Windsor chair and took a long sip of the longneck he had curled in his fist.

"Do you like country music?" she asked. She'd poured her own beer into a glass and was licking the foam from her upper lip.

"Sweetness, if you do that again, I might come over this table and nail you right here on the floor in front of everyone," he warned her, his eyes as hot as the flames flaring up on the huge grill across the room. "And yeah, it's my favorite kind of music." He motioned a passing waiter for another beer.

"Not Zydeco?" she asked. She had felt a rush of heat and juices between her legs at his careless remark and squirmed in her seat.

"God, no," he replied with a snort. "I hate that shit." He stared at her. "Are you horny? You look horny."

"Brandy!" she reprimanded him. The waitress had arrived with the salads and she was sure the woman had heard his question. From the grin on the waitress' face, she knew she had. She pushed her chair back.

"Where you going?" he asked.

"To the restroom," she told him.

Her face was flaming as she wound her way through the diners. She smiled at a woman coming out of the restroom as she was going in. Once inside the stall, she stood there fanning her face, trying to get her heart and body under control. She undid her jeans and peeled them down, used the toilet and was just finishing when someone entered the stall beside



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hers. Standing, she was about to zip up when the panel between the stalls creaked and she looked up to see Brandy watching her.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asked.

His arms were braced on the top of the stall. He was obviously standing on the toilet in the next stall.

"Get down from there!" she hissed at him, fumbling with her jeans.

"Zip 'em and I'll make one helluva scene, sweetness," he said.

He dropped down out of sight. She heard the stall door next to hers open and then hers rattled. "Go away!" she told him.

"Open up, baby. I'll stand here until you do."

"Brandy, someone is going to come in here any moment..."

"Someone is going to come in there, too, Sweetness. Open the door or I'll crawl under the stall."

"Oh, for the love of Pete!" she snarled and unlocked the door. She had to move back for the door swung inward and he was bulldozing his way into the stall. "You can't do things like this!"

"Watch me," he said and crowded her against the toilet, shouldering the door closed, running the bolt into the lock before turning, and thrusting his hand down the opening in her jeans. His fingers slid along her sex and she groaned.

"You are terrible," she said.

"No, baby," he said. "I'm horny as hell."

He was fingering her and she was so hot and ready for him her knees were weak.

"We can't..."

He withdrew his hand, took her by the upper arms, and pivoted her around until she was behind him. "Lemme show you how this is done," he said, snagging his zipper down.

Francesca didn't know whether to be appalled or amused when he shoved his jeans down and sat down on the toilet. His erection was standing straight up as he slapped his thighs with his palms.

"Come on, Sweetness. Take a seat on old Trigger here and let's go for a long slow ride," he said, wagging his eyebrows at her.

She narrowed his eyes. "You are awful," she said, slipping her jeans down her thighs and stepping out of them. She was so aroused she wanted to sink her teeth into him. She straddled his legs and impaled herself on him. "That what you want?"

"Now that's what I'm talking about, mama," he said. He slid his hands up under her knit pullover, beneath her bra and molded them to her

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breasts. "Now grind on me, 'Cesca. Make your cowboy come hard and long inside his sweet little cunt."

Lust ripped right through Francesca at those words and she stabbed her hands through his dark curls and slammed her mouth over his, thrusting her tongue deep inside as she lowered and raised herself on his stiff shaft. His hands went around and behind her, cupping her rump, helping her to move as she swiveled around him.

She rode him hard but it wasn't slow and it didn't take long before the muscles of her vagina began gripping him in staccato little squeezes that made him whimper behind the hot pleasure of her mouth. One particular downward plunge set him loose and he dug his fingers into her soft ass and held her down on him, his cock spewing thickly inside her.

Neither of them had heard the arrival of anyone else in the restroom until a low, throaty voice spoke up in a thick southern drawl. "Was it as good for you two as it was for me?"

Francesca pulled back from Brandy, her hand going to her mouth in shock, her eyes as wide as saucers.

"Darling, it rocked my world," Brandy answered.

The woman in the other stall laughed.

"Will you be quiet? You are going to get us kicked out of this restaurant!" Francesca chastised him. She scrambled off him and snatched up her jeans that were lying at his feet. She thrust her legs into the garment with angry, jerky motions. Her face was a livid red as she yanked up the zipper then slumped against the stall wall, her hands up to hide her embarrassment.

Brandy chuckled and got to his feet, pulled his jeans into place, zipped them, then eased past her to unlock the door. He sauntered out as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Francesca heard the stall door beside hers open and then a low whistle. She cringed, waiting for the woman to leave. She waited a full minute but there was no sound of running water at the sink or the restroom door opening.

"You're not leaving until I come out, are you?" she whined.

"Not on your life," the woman answered.

Her head falling to her chest in defeat, Francesca came out of the stall to find a short, chubby lady leaning against the sink. She grinned at Francesca.

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"I don't know a woman alive who wouldn't like having that prime piece of beef with her in a restroom stall," the woman said. "Don't sweat it, sugah."

Francesca groaned. "I don't usually do things like this." She went to the sink counter and turned on the water.

"He belong to you?"

"I'm working on it," Francesca replied, surprised at the truth of that statement.

"Well, don't let one like that get away, dear. If I got the chance, I'd break my fat neck getting in a stall with him, but I gotta ask," the woman said in a low voice. "Does the sausage live up to the promise of those tight little buns?"

The evil little imp that sometimes sat on Francesca's shoulder opened her mouth for Francesca and spoke before she had a chance to stop him, he blurted, "Sweetie, you could nibble on that sausage all night long and still have some left over for breakfast."

The woman laughed. "I thought that might be the case."

Another woman came in and that gave Francesca a chance to escape.

Brandy was sipping on his second beer when Francesca came back to their table. She stopped beside him, took the beer from his hand, and gave him a frown.

"You've had more than enough alcohol, cowboy," she said and set the beer on the tray of a passing waiter.

"Spoilsport," he complained, digging into his salad.

"If one bottle of beer does that to you, God help me what two would do," she grumbled.

"Beer had nothing to do with it, Sweetness," he said around a mouthful of salad. "You looked too good not to have a taste."

Their entrée arrived without Francesca even having had a chance to taste her salad. She looked helplessly at the salad, sighed, then picked up her steak knife and fork to begin scoring the meat.

"You gonna let that go to waste?" he asked and before she could answer, he reached over and snagged the bowl, dropping it into his empty one before ripping into it with the same purpose he'd used on her in the restroom. He practically inhaled the salad, then began slathering butter on the huge baked potato on his plate.

"Hungry, are you?" she asked.

"Famished and so horny I could..."

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"Okay, that's enough," she said. "You'll have to wait until we get back to the hotel before you satisfy that particular appetite."

He gave her an arch look. "Who said? We can drive down to the beach and take our clothes off, lay down in the surf as though we were Lancaster and Kerr and go at it like crazed bunnies."

"Ugh," she said, stabbing a piece of steak. "I hate sand in my coonie."

He stopped with a big gob of potato halfway to his mouth. "Coonie?" he queried. "You call it your coonie? Where did that come from?"

She grinned smugly at him. "I'll never tell." She leaned toward him. "What do you call your tallywhacker?"

He actually winced. "God, I hate that word. It is even more vulgar than joint."

"Well, what do you call it, then?" she countered.

"Fred," he stated.

Francesca laughed out loud, drawing attention to them. She clapped her hand over her mouth when he said that name was better than coonie.

They ate in silence for awhile, enjoying the excellent food and the wonderful band that was playing in the dancehall. He asked if she'd like to go dancing after supper and she said she didn't.

"Tired?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, I just want to be alone with you the rest of the evening," she said. "I would love to drive out to the beach and just watch the tide coming in."

He gave her such a heart stopping look, she wanted to chuck the rest of the dinner and drag him out to the parking lot and into the backseat.

"That's doable," he said, buttering a roll. "We can go over to Destin and out Gulf Shore Drive."

"Okay."

They did stop it at the dancehall for just a few minutes to listen to Steele Blue and the Coppers wail on a rocking version of "Boot Scootin' Boogie". Brandy even managed to coax her out onto the dance floor and into the line dance. When the song ended, he took hold of her hand and pulled her toward the bandstand.

"Brandy, what are you...?"

He motioned for the lead singer to lean over and he said something into the guy's ear. Steele Blue stared at him for second or two then

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nodded. He turned to motion his bass guitarist over. They spoke earnestly for a moment then the lead singer gave Brandy a thumbs up.

The music started—a slow tune—and she heard him begin to sing.

He had lied to her, Francesca realized as the band began playing an old Johnny Mathis song that made shivers run up her spine. His voice was deep and pure, perfectly pitched, absolutely beautiful, and filled with such sensual emotion, everyone on the dance floor stopped to listen to him sing. Even Steele Blue, who had started the song, knew he was outclassed and grew quiet, making a lowering sign with his hand for the musicians to play softer.

Tears gathered in Francesca's eyes as he waltzed her across the floor, the other people standing in a circle around them. He moved so gracefully, so sensually, his left hand gripping hers, his right hand at her waist. The muscles of his long legs flexed and bunched, his lean hips swayed, his hard-as-nails ass in the confines of those tight faded jeans holding the attention of every woman there. As he guided her in the most seductive slow dance she'd ever taken part in, she knew without a shadow of a doubt that she wasn't falling in love with this man. No, she wasn't falling. She'd already fallen and fallen hard. In his arms, she felt like a real woman for the first time in decades.

He was staring down into her eyes and when the song ended, you could have heard a pin drop as he lowered his head to gently claim her lips. "I love you," he whispered against her mouth.

Not one word, not one sound broke the magical moment as he led her off the dance floor, all eyes on them as he walked her out of the dancehall then all hell broke loose as applause and whistles sounded behind them.

"Damn, Brandy," she said, swiping at the moisture clinging to her cheeks. "You know how to create a mood, don't you?"

He said nothing, just escorted her to his car, opened the door for her, and then came around to get behind the wheel.

"You told me a fib," she said as he started the engine.

He glanced at her with surprise. "About what?"

"You have a beautiful voice, baby."

"Oh, that. That wasn't singing, Sweetness," he said, as attuned to her tone and thoughts as she was. "That was me loving you for everyone to see."

"And staking your claim?" she asked, looking at his strong, handsome profile as he moved confidently into traffic.

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"We'll talk about that," he said and she could tell his mood had altered—just that quick—like mercury on a glass.

He drove like he danced—effortlessly—moving in and out between the cars with assurance. The knuckles of his left hand were lightly tapping a rhythm on the driver side window when he wasn't holding the wheel while shifting.

"What time do you have to be back to N'Orleans tomorrow?" he suddenly asked, not looking at her.

"Alex didn't set a specific time," she said. "We have one of her ex-husband's jets at our disposal. We have reservations in P.C. for supper..."

"At the Corinth," he said. "That's her favorite place."

Francesca felt another stab of jealousy at the easy way he mentioned Alex and one of her preferences. That demon imp on her shoulder kicked her with his pointed little shoe and put words in her mouth she hadn't meant to say. "I think she has the hots for Dáire Cronin."

"From what I hear, a lot of women do," he said with a snort. "Must be a helluva stud."

"I don't know," she said. "I've never met the man."

Brandy pulled around a slower moving car and cut the man off as he took the BMW onto an off ramp. The angry blare of the other man's horn didn't seem to faze him. He never even glanced in the rear view mirror.

"Okay, what brought that on?" she asked.

"Thirsty," he said and whipped into a convenience store parking lot. He stopped at the curb and left the engine idling. "Want something?"

"No," she said, not liking the odd look that had settled on his face.

He got out and went inside and she watched the woman behind the counter giving a long, hungry look as he headed for the back of the store. As soon as Francesca saw the six-pack of longnecks in his hand as he walked up to the counter, she frowned. When he came back out and got in the car, he stowed the six-pack in the back seat after taking one out.

"Don't you dare open that up until we're either parked somewhere or back at the hotel," she warned him. "Escambia Country cops really frown on open container violations."

He stuck the ice-cold bottle between his legs and shifted into reverse, not bothering to reply to her order. Instead of heading for Destin as he had originally suggested, he swung the car around and took the road back to the hotel.

"Are you angry at me?" she asked.

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"No," he said. "I'm angry at me."

"Why?"

"I shouldn't have said what I did," he told her.

She knew exactly to what he was referring. "A little too much involvement, Brandy?" she asked quietly. She was looking at him and he turned his head toward her for a second. "Don't encourage the client."

He raked a hand through his hair. "It's not that," he said.

"Then what is it?"

"We'll talk about it at the hotel," he said and was silent the rest of the way. After he'd parked, he turned the engine off and lifted the beer bottle, twisted off the cap then took a long swig.

"Why are you doing that?" she asked.

"I'm over twenty-one, Sweetness," he said. "Way over." He twisted around and grabbed the six-pack from the back seat, then got out. He seemed more than a little annoyed that she opened her own door and exited the car before he could come around and open it for her.

Instead of going up to their room, he walked through the lobby, past the indoor pool, and out into the night, not even looking to make sure she was behind him. He was headed for the pounding surf, the beach pristine white beneath his boot heels.

She followed him and when he sat down cross leg on the sand, set the six-pack beside him, and then drained the beer left in his bottle, she felt like turning around and going back into the hotel. If he was going to get drunk, she didn't want to watch.

"Sit down, Sweetness," he said quietly. "I promise I won't get any surlier."

She dropped down beside him, taking off her sandals to shake the sand from them. "One remark about my hairy toes and I'm outta here, Fontanelle," she warned him.

He smiled, sliding the empty bottle into the cardboard carrier. "Can I suck on them?"

"Not until I wash them you can't," she said, and then poked him in the ribs. "Can I suck on yours?"

The smile vanished from his face. "No," he said.

"Why not?"

"They're not pretty like yours and they taste like sauerkraut," he replied.

"You know that for a fact, do you?" she teased.

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He nodded. "You know damned well that's where the needle tracks are and I'm not about to let you see them."

"Are we going to talk about what happened when you were a child, after you woke up in that room naked?" she asked.

He shrugged. "What's to tell? Two men came in and jerked me up off the cot, took me to this room sort of like a mini auditorium where there was a raised stage with a table in the middle of the floor, a woman sitting at one end of the table. Beyond the stage were these fancy upholstered club chairs sitting side by side and in them were four men." He spoke in a matter of fact tone with no inflection in his voice at all.

"What happened, Brandy?" she asked softly.

"She auctioned me off to the highest bidder," he replied. "The two men shoved me over to the table, bent me over it on my belly, pulled my legs apart and the winner came up to claim his prize."

"Oh, God," Francesca said.

"Lemme tell you, it hurt like hell, and I screamed and screamed until I lost my voice. Blood was running down my legs. I thought he was trying to kill me." He drew his knees up into the circumference of his arms. "By the time the fourth asshole finished with me, I was begging for death."

"Each of them sodomized you?"

"Oh, yeah," he said. "It was share a kid's ass night at Celeste Dubois'. The first guy—this pervert named Jules Warden—got to break me in and the others just tagged along for the ride." He turned and gave her an arched brow. "No pun intended."

"They had to have hurt you badly," she said, feeling the horror of it cold and prickly around her heart.

"When they were finished, her doctor took care of me. I was so traumatized I couldn't speak for over a month but she didn't need me to talk. I was out of commission for about two weeks. Warden wanted to buy me for his stable but he wouldn't meet her price, called me used goods. Eventually she brought good old Phineas Albermarle in and my hell truly began with that bastard."

"The preacher? The one who had you tattooed?"

"The pedophile," he corrected.

There was nothing she could say. Whatever she had imagined he had endured as a child had never involved such brutality and sickness.



## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"So, now you know all of it," he said. "I spent the first five years of my life being backdoored by Albermarle and the rest of it getting to fuck pussy, primarily women old enough to be my grandmother."

That's vulgar," she said.

"That's my life," he stated.

"Whatever happened to the preacher?"

"He got caught dipping his wick into the nine-year-old son of one of his deacons, the man beat the hell out of him, and Phinny wound up in Angola where I hope the inmates reamed him a new one."

"He must have paid quite a bit to have you exclusively," she said.

"He had something on Celeste, I think, but I'll never know. Once I turned fifteen, he was no longer interested in me—I was too old—and so he moved on to another kid. Pedophiles are like that. By then I was into puberty and her female clients were giving me the once-over so Celeste started training me as one of her prized gigolos, Julian being number one."

"Julian?"

He waved away the question. "It wasn't as bad after that but I still tried to run away a couple of times and we all know what the results of those attempts were."

"Brandy..."

"No more. That's it, Sweetness," he said. "I'm not telling you another thing about my life. I told you Celeste was killed and Madame hired me on. She's been great to me, has treated me like a human being, but if I were try to leave her, she'd come down on me like white on rice."

"Can't you buy your contract?"

"What contract, Sweetness? There's no real contract. I'm hers for life. She owns my ass." He turned to her and his eyes were so filled with hopelessness, so bleak and needy she wanted to reach out to him but she didn't think he'd allow it. "That's why I shouldn't have told you I love you. There's no future for us, 'Cesca."

She held his gaze, refusing to let him look away. "Were you being honest?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Were. You. Being. Honest?" she stressed.

"Yes, but..."

"I love you, too, cowboy, so we just have to figure out how to get you the hell away from New Orleans."

## **Chapter Seven**

"It can't be done," he told her. He lay down on the sand, propped up by his elbows, and stared out across the dark ocean. "My line of work is like belonging to the Mafia. It's for life."

"Okay," she said, leaning over him to pull one of the longnecks out of the carrier.

He took it out of her hand, twisted the top off, then handed it back to her.

"*Merci*," she said.

"*Vous êtes bienvenu*," he replied.

She sipped the beer then licked her lips, unaware his eyes were glued to her mouth. "If the preacher man kicked you out of his bed when you turned fifteen, is there a cut off age for what you are doing now?"

He had to tear his attention from her delectable mouth. "What do you mean by a cut off age?"

"Well we know some men remain sexy even in their seventies. Hell, look at Sean Connery."

"Yes, but can they get it up at that age?" he countered. He raised one knee to relieve the pull on his lower back.

"Now, see, that's the question," she said. "Men can be sexy as hell a lot longer than women can but is there an age where you get to retire from gigoloing?"

"I don't think that's a word," he replied.

"You know what I mean!" she said with exasperation. "Most women don't want a man once he starts to sag in all the wrong places or if he can't perform. So I'm assuming Madame will let him retire when that happens."

"I'm thirty-five years old, 'Cesca," he reminded her. "I've got a long way to go before the plumbing stops working but..." He did that adorable little lip chewing thing for a moment. "If one of us gets sick or has an accident preventing us from performing, she'd ditch us in a heartbeat."

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"I don't want you to get sick and just thinking of you getting your pecker cut off in a wood chipper doesn't appeal to me at all," she said, drawing thoughtfully on the beer.

"A," he said, "I try to keep away from wood chippers. B, I wouldn't have my pecker near one in the first place and C, his name is Fred."

"My point is," she said as he reached over to take the bottle from her and take a sip, "there are ways to get out of that business."

He gave her back the bottle. "Would you want me if you had to take care of me because I'd had a run-in with a marauding wood chipper?"

"Well not if it ground up your pee-pee," she said with a roll of her eyes. "What good would you be to me then?"

"See, I knew it!" he said, nudging her with his foot. "You just want Fred. You don't want me."

"My secret's out," she said on a long sigh. She extended the empty bottle to him.

He took it and tossed it aside, flipping over her to press her into the sand. "Fred wants you, too, baby," he said in a gruff voice.

Francesca loved the weight of him lying atop her. His well-honed body fit hers as though he'd been created to do so. His lower body was between her legs, his jean-clad knees pushing hers apart, his strong, calloused hand under her shirt, under her bra, and squeezing her breast as his mouth claimed hers in a heady kiss that made her bare toes curl. This thumb abraded her nipple and his tongue fluttered in and out of her mouth and the notion that most men didn't know how to properly French kiss a woman skipped through her mind. She pulled her mouth from his.

"Who taught you to kiss like that?" she asked.

He frowned. "I don't want to..."

"I'm curious because most men stick their tongues in your mouth, halfway down your throat, and keep it there like you are supposed to really groove on having it gag you. On top of that, their spit is flooding you. You don't do that. You slip it in; you slip it out. You thrust and withdraw. You nibble my bottom lip. You lick the corners of my mouth. You touch my tongue but you don't slurp it. You..."

"Sweetness," he interrupted. "French kissing is designed to mimic the art of intercourse. It is meant to be a sensual seduction of the female not a poking contest whereby the participants exchange spittle. A man doesn't stick his Freddie in you and just leave it there. He pumps it. He slips it in; he pulls it almost all the way out; he slips it in again. He grinds it against you. Most men don't know how to do it correctly and they

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

forget to swallow. French kissing is meant to enhance the foreplay not disgust the woman."

"You do it like it was meant to be done," she said.

He smiled, then pushed her bra up over her breast and bent his head to draw her nipple between his lips.

"And see? You do that right, too?" She threaded her fingers through his hair. "You don't just..."

"Hush, woman," he said as he flicked his tongue over her swollen nub.

She closed her eyes as he tongued her, suckled her, and squeezed her breast lightly as he nibbled her. The hard shaft probing at her through the fabric of their jeans made her womb contract. She wanted him inside her so badly she rolled him over until he was beneath her and she was straddling his legs. She sat up, her fingers going to the button at the waistband of his denims.

"You know what I want?" she said, undoing the button then slowly tugging the zipper down.

"What do you want, Sweetness?" he asked, his eyelids heavy, his tongue arching over his bottom lip.

"I want to see how Freddie tastes," she said as she freed him from the jeans.

Brandy cupped her shoulders as she bent over him, taking his stony erection into her mouth. The moment the warmth and wetness of her lips closed over him, he hissed with pleasure and his fingers tightened on her flesh.

She drew on his cock as though she were enjoying a lollypop. Her lips slid down him as her left hand held him at the base, her fingers pulling the skin downward. Her right hand was kneading his balls. The moment she began gently twisting his shaft—lifting it and lowering it between her firm lips—her tongue laving him, his breathing grew ragged and harsh. He arched his hips up to her, his head pressed back into the soft sand. He felt the middle finger of her right hand sliding under his balls and toward the rim of his anus and he shuddered. It had been many years since he let anyone touch him there. Normally he would not have but he trusted Francesca not to hurt him, to shame him, and her touch did not bring with it the humiliation he'd known for so long.

The burn of his desire was building deep in his cock and he was so hard, pulsing with such need that he dragged his hands from her shoulders to her head, cupping her, holding her against him as she

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

worked her magic. He was groaning, hissing, and undulating his hips as she milked him with that sweet tongue. Her finger was touching the pucker of his anus and sending waves of sheer delight through his balls.

He tried to push her away from him but she increased the pressure of her mouth. Her suckling was so strong, so firm, he was becoming lost in the sensation. He had no will of his own and he understood she had no intention of releasing his swollen flesh until she had tasted all of him. As that thought settled wickedly in his head, as her firm finger circled him—dipped in just a little—he cried out and he ejaculated so hard he thought his heart would burst from the strain.

"Francesca!" he shouted, his fingers clenching spasmodically in her hair. His hips were lifted to her while she continued to drink from his salty shaft and when she had taken all of him, when he heard her swallow, he groaned, the very intensity, the trust of that moment nearly breaking his heart.

She lifted her head, easing him from between her lips and looked up at him. He had raised his head to look down at her.

"I love you, Brandy Fontanelle," she told him.

Had he not been drained of every last ounce of his essence, he would come again as she watched her lick her lips, clearing away the last glistening drop of his cum.

"I..."

"Shh," she told him. She moved up his body until she lay atop him, his depleted cock pressed between them.

Her mouth came down on his and he could taste himself. That scent drove him mad with a need he didn't understand and his arms came up and wrapped around her so tightly, so possessively, she moaned.

"Let's go back to the room and take a long, long shower," she whispered against his lips. She rose up just a little. "I'll even let you suck my hairy toes."

His grin was slow and evil and filled with something she knew could only be unbridled happiness. "Woman, you got a deal!"

He flipped her over beneath him, gave her a hard kiss, and then got to his feet so lithely, so athletically, it took her breath away. When he held out his hand to her, she gave him hers. He drew her up easily with his muscled strength and yanked her against him.

"You'd best put Fred back where he belongs," he told her.

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"Of course," she agreed but had to struggle to slip her hand between their tightly clenched bodies. "We wouldn't want him to catch a head cold."

"No," he said. "We sure wouldn't."

She managed to get him back behind the restraint of his jeans then gingerly zipped him up. He had not let go of her but was nuzzling her neck, flicking his tongue against the hollow of just below her ear. When she was finished, he swooped her up in his arms and started toward the hotel.

"Are you going to leave the beer on the beach?" she asked, turning her head to look back at the cardboard carton.

"I'll make some teenager a very happy guy," he said.

The desk clerk must have seen them coming toward the door for she rushed to open it for them. "What happened?" she said, her face anxious.

"She twisted her ankle chasing me on the beach," Brandy lied.

"Should I call a doctor?"

"Not necessary," he said. Francesca had buried her head against his neck and he could actually feel the heat of her flush against his skin. "I'll take care of it."

"Are you a physician?" the woman asked. There was uncertainty in her tone.

"Yes, I am. Seventh floor," he said, then waited for her to punch the elevator button for him.

"Well, if you think she'll be all right..." the woman said, hesitating as the polished steel doors opened.

"She' will," he said. "Good night."

Francesca gazed up at him as the doors slid shut. "That's the second fib I've heard you make."

"I wasn't lying," he said. "I am a physician....of sorts."

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Oh, really?" she drawled.

"Uh huh," he said. He gave her a look that made moisture gather between her legs. "I'm a love doctor, baby, and I'm about to operate on you and your hairy little toes."

\* \* \* \*

Instead of the shower she had suggested, he had filled the large whirlpool tub with very warm water and they were sitting across from one another, her feet in his lap as he massaged her instep.

"That is almost orgasmic," she said with a sigh, eyes closed to the pleasure.

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

He lifted her foot to his mouth and suckled her big toe, sweeping his tongue over that tiny tuft of hairs that so intrigued him. His right hand was wrapped around her ankle, his left over the arch of her foot, his thumb stroking her instep.

"Brandy," she whispered for what he was doing to her foot was sending waves of lust coursing through her.

His amber gaze filled with golden fire and he stretched his leg under hers and pressed his big toe between her legs.

Her eyes flew open as he wiggled that firm digit against her clit. He was flicking it up and down and the sensation was so intense, so compelling, she gripped the sides of the tub, leaned her head back, and squeezed her eyes shut in concentration. She didn't even hear the little pop his mouth made when he pulled her toe from between his lips.

"Look at me, Sweetness," he ordered.

She was panting as she lowered her head and met his steady look.

"I want to see you come for me," he said, the sole of his foot tight between her legs, hard against her soft folds as he arched his toe up and down her aching clit.

She licked her lips and swallowed, her breathing quick and shallow as the arousal built within her. It was a maddening itch that made her wriggle her bottom on the floor of the tub.

"Unh unh," he denied. "Sit still. Don't move one muscle."

Trembling little hitches of sound were escaping Francesca's parted lips. She was quivering beneath his relentless massage of her clit.

"You're not playing fair," she whimpered.

"Life isn't fair, 'Cesca," he said, his voice little more than a whisper.

The release shot up from the depths of her and she came hard, crying out as he shifted his foot so his toe could enter her. Though it didn't go far inside her, it was just enough to prolong her orgasm and her entire body rippled with the force of her coming.

"That's my baby," he said from between clenched teeth and snaked out his hands to grab her hips and slide her toward him, letting the buoyancy of the water help lift her lower body over his legs until her knees were bent to either side of him, his straining cock pressing upward and into her in one lithe movement.

"Oh God!" she shouted.

His hands were hard on her hips as he lifted her up and down upon his shaft. Her arms wrapped around his neck, her breasts slammed into his chest, her mouth captured his and as his tongue dueled with hers—

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sliding in and out between her lips as his cock slid in and out between her legs—she came again on a long, sustained note that trilled into the recesses of his imprisoning mouth. With hers also came his release and he held her impaled on it until the last jerk of his engorged flesh ceased.

Her mouth slid from his and she pressed her cheek tightly against his face. "I can't lose you, cowboy," she said. "I can't."

Brandy made no reply. He was staring at the wall behind the tub, his amber gaze bleak. Though everything inside him cried out to stay with this woman, to expend his dying breath in her sweet, loving arms, he knew he would not be allowed to keep her. He could stay with her; she could not stay with him. They had less than twenty-four hours to remain together and when those hours were over, his heart would break.

"Marry me, Brandy," she said.

He slowly closed his eyes. "If I could, I would, Sweetness," he told her.

She pulled back and as she saw the pain flickering across his handsome face, she made him a vow she wasn't sure she could keep.

"I will find a way for us to be together. I promise you."

He nodded, a gentle, sad smile on his full lips.



## Chapter Eight

Alex gave them an annoyed look when they walked into the parlor of the Rising Syn. She—along with Georgi, Sammi, and Teddi—had been waiting for two hours. Looking pointedly at her watch, Alex flicked her gaze down Francesca, over Brandy, and released a long breath.

Sitting behind the desk, Madame Madeline had a vague smile on her face, but there was a hard gleam in her dark brown eyes. "Did I not tell you he would get her back on time, *ma petite*?" she asked Alex. She was looking directly at Brandy. "My Brandyn knows what is expected of him."

Francesca felt Brandy flinch. Though they had walked from the car with her hand in his, he had released his hold on her when the black gentleman had opened the door for them. He had ushered her inside with a hand discreetly at the small of her back.

"Say your goodbyes, Brandy," Madame said. "The ladies must be on their way and you must dress for your evening appointment."

"May I have a word with you before we leave, Madame?" Francesca asked. Brandy had already taken a step away from her and she felt as though she were losing him.

"*Certainment*," Madame agreed and arched a brow at Brandy, who immediately—and to Francesca's way of thinking, obediently—came around to pull her chair out for her.

Madame turned and laid the palm of her hand on Brandy's cheek. "Go now, *bébé*, and make yourself handsome for the senator's lady."

Brandy smiled wanly at the older woman and, without saying a word, headed for the stairs.

"Brandy?" Francesca called out to him, her eyes worried.

"I enjoyed our time together, my lady," he said, his back to her. "I will remember it always."

When she would have gone after him, Madame stuck out an arm to stop her. "He knows his place, Madame Castile. Do not make this any harder for him than it obviously already is," she said quietly.

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

"Frankie, let's go," Alex said. "Our dinner reservation..."

Francesca spun around. "If you are in a hurry, then go," she said. Her gaze swept over her friends. "All of you. I can find my way back to Panama City when I'm through here."

"You *are* through here," Madame said sternly. "I have already explained to Alexandra that I will not allow you to return to my establishment."

Francesca lifted her chin. "If it is a matter of money, I..."

"Did he tell you how much he makes in a year's time, Madame Castile?" Madame interrupted.

"It did not come up," Francesca snapped.

"Other things did, though, did they not?" the older woman inquired, and Francesca knew Madame was not being vulgar.

"I know about his past."

"It does not surprise me that he would tell you yet he did not reveal the amount of his earnings. He knew you could not afford to do what you so wish to do, and that is to buy him from me." The older woman's face was brittle, her gaze steady. "He and I share what he earns fifty-fifty, and believe me when I tell you I have not made a deal like that with any of my other men. Last year, he cleared over five hundred thousand dollars after taxes." She smiled hatefully. "Are you willing to pay me a million dollars for every year between now and—shall we say a relatively conservative estimate of twenty-six more working years—before I will allow him to retire?"

"You know I can't pay that kind of money," Francesca said.

Madame shrugged. "Then there is nothing left to discuss. He stays where he is."

"Please don't do this to him," Francesca pleaded. "You have to know he is miserable doing this kind of..."

"He was not miserable until you made him so," Madame snapped. She took a step closer to Francesca. "You come here and you hold out your hand offering him the kind of life he has dreamed of having, and you dangle yourself before him like a succulent carrot. Yes, he will reach for such a thing but it is not for him. He was born to be shared among many women, not tied to the apron strings of one!"

"Women hurt him!" Francesca spat. "Do you know that?"

"It is part of what he does," Madame said with a snort. "He is accustomed to it."

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

Georgi came over to Francesca and took her arm. "Frankie, please. This is getting you nowhere. Obviously he isn't willing to get involved in this. He's upstairs getting ready to screw another woman and you're down here making a fool of yourself."

Francesca snatched her arm back from her best friend's grip. "You don't know anything about this!" she spat.

"Listen to your friend, Madame Castile," the procuress said. "The matter is settled. Brandy stays and you must leave." Her lips twisted. "Now I will be forced to call the *gendarmes*."

Tears burning her eyes, Francesca spun on her heel and ran for the front door. She snatched it open and was standing at the curb with her face buried in her hands, crying her heart out as her friends came out to join her. She allowed Georgi to help her into the waiting limo. As soon as she was inside, she curled up on the seat in a fetal ball and sobbed brokenly, her head in Georgi's lap, until they reached the airport and the waiting jet. When she boarded the steps, her expression was filled with bitterness and a raging hatred of Madeline Levant.

\* \* \* \*

Brandy stepped out of the shower where he had stood with his palms flat on the wall under the nozzle for nearly twenty minutes, with the icy water beating down on the back of his head. He had a raging headache and a strong urge to take his straight razor and run the freshly-sharpened blade over his wrists. He snatched a towel from the bar and wrapped it around his waist, his wet hair dripping.

He wasn't surprised that she was waiting in his room when he came out of the bathroom. He barely glanced at her as she sat in the wingback chair with her legs crossed, hands resting on the chair arms. As he expected, the clothing she wanted him to wear was lying on his bed. He stared at the dark brown, tight leather pants and the cream-colored, long sleeve cotton pullover that the senator's wife preferred he wear—the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. Brown loafers—polished with a high sheen—had been placed on the floor by the nightstand.

"Come here," Madame said.

He didn't question, didn't argue. He simply turned away from the bed and went to stand in front of her. Knowing full well what was expected of him, he fused his gaze with hers then let the towel drop to the floor.

"Come closer."

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

He moved until he was knee to knee with her and she could lean forward slightly to reach out and cup him. Her fingers were cold as she lightly squeezed his balls, then ran her hand up and down his cock, her thumb over the slit in the head.

"You knew better," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

Madame sighed, releasing him and sitting back. "Why do you do this to yourself, Brandy?" she asked.

"You want the truth or do you want me to lie to you?" he asked, never breaking eye contact with her.

"I always prefer the truth—as you well know," she replied.

He dropped to his knees before her. "I want someone to love me," he told her. "Someone to want me for who I am and not what I have or what I can do with it."

She put out a dark chocolate hand to cup his chin. "It isn't going to happen, *bébé*," she said.

"Madeline..." he began, but she put the tips of her fingers over his lips.

"I was reading an article just this morning about the strange things that can happen to people when they are careless, when they don't listen to people who are trying to help them. I know you wouldn't want anything to happen to Madame Castile, now would you?"

Brandy flinched. It wasn't an idle threat Madame was making and he knew it all too well. Any fight he might have been striving to dredge up went out of him.

"Stand up," she ordered.

He did as he was told and stepped back as she made to get out of the chair. He was braced for what he knew she would do, and when she put her hand between his legs and groped him brutally, he didn't make a sound, didn't move a muscle, or blink an eye.

"Don't make me punish you as Celeste did, Brandy," she said in a hard as nails voice. "The idea of seeing you in pain disturbs me, but don't think for a moment I won't hurt you despite the fact that you are my most favored one. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Now, get dressed," she snapped, letting go of him. "And wear the Michel Germain Sexual Pour Homme cologne. Don't bother shaving. She prefers a light shadow."

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

He stood where he was for the longest time after the door shut behind her departure but he refused to allow the pain to flow. He was used to hiding his true feelings behind a charming smile and a gracious manner. He could be whatever his client demanded, do whatever she instructed, and keep his true feelings to himself. Though the thoughts of Olivia Larroquette's yellowed fingertips on him, her loose cunt slipping around his cock, and her acrid, cigarette breath blowing in his face made his flesh crawl, he would give her what she came to him to find—a few stolen hours with a man who could put shaft to cunt and do it with firm strokes.

As he pulled the tight leather pants over his naked ass and began buttoning the small copper buttons at the fly, his mind was winging its way east, the heart inside his chest dying mile by mile.

\* \* \* \*

"I wish Frankie had come with us, Star. I really wanted you two to meet," Alex told the restaurateurs, "but she's nursing a broken heart."

"Been there, done that," Star Kiernan said. "Men have a way of trampling on a lady's soul, don't they?"

"This one did it with hobnail boots," Georgi reported, "although to give him his due, I don't think he meant to. I believe he's more than likely suffering as bad as she is but we can't tell her that."

"Oh, now, that's intriguing," Star said, pulling up a chair and joining the four women. She flung her long, dark brown French braid over her shoulder and her green eyes sparkled. "Tell me what happened."

"We all go over to New Orleans for a little fun," Alex said. "I set Frankie up with the best-looking guy there and she fell for him."

"Hook, line, and sinker," Georgi agreed.

"She even tried to buy him but the woman wouldn't sell him," Teddi put in.

"Sell him?" Star repeated. "This just gets better and better. Do they really do stuff like that over there?"

"He's a high priced gigolo," Alex told her. "And worth every penny of his \$5000 a night fee."

"Whoa, baby!" Star exclaimed. "Where's this?"

"At the House of the Rising Syn," Alex stated.

Star's eyes widened. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope," Alex replied. "And I'm here to tell you, that man would give Dáire a run for his money in the hunk department."

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

"No shit?" Star was even more intrigued. "What's this hunk's name? I gotta go check him out."

"I bet it's something really sexy like Trey Long," an amused voice said behind her. "And if you go check him out, you can stay in N'Orlens."

"Ladies, my better half," Star introduced the women to her boyfriend, Dáire Cronin.

It should have been against the law for a man to look as good as Dáire. He had killer features that made every woman in the room very aware of his presence and every man feel threatened. Actually, with his black curls and dark brown eyes, he bore a striking resemblance to Brandy Fontanelle.

"And his faithful companion, Jackson," Dáire introduced the man beside him.

"Eat shit and die, Dairy Crow," Jackson said but his eyes were locked on Sammi. "Hello, future wife of my future children."

"You wish," Sammi said, although her eyes had lit up at the sight of him. "Has anyone ever told you that you look just like the six-million dollar...?"

"Yeah, but his were grafted on," Jackson said. "Mine are the genuine articles, pretty lady. Wanna check 'em out?"

Sammi grinned. "So they aren't better, stronger, faster?"

Jackson groaned, rolling his eyes to the heavens.

"Oh, I like you," Dáire told Sammi with a snort. "You're just what he needs."

Star had snaked an arm around her man's hips. "Do you know of that place in the Crescent City, Baby?" she asked him.

"The Syn?" He nodded. "I've heard of it but it's not a place where guys go unless they want a job there."

"I take it you've never done the gigolo thing," Teddi said. She had her elbow propped on the table—chin in hand—staring at him like he was a slice of sinful dessert.

"He doesn't charge for his services, else he'd have to give change," Jackson reported.

"Speak for yourself, Jack Off," Dáire grumbled.

Star leaned her head against Dáire's hip. "Do you think the man in N'Orlens is as upset as your friend is?"

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"I do. I saw his face and that man was this close to crying as he had to turn his back on Frankie," Teddi said, holding up her thumb and index finger close together.

"And Frankie just fell to pieces when she had to leave him," Georgi said. "I haven't seen her like that since tenth grade when Bryce Haverton broke up with her."

"He was gay," Sammi said.

"Bryce?" Georgi gasped.

Sammi nodded. "He's a hairdresser in Ft. Lauderdale."

"Can you find out about this guy?" Star queried, then asked Alex what his name was.

"Brandyn Fontanelle," Georgi replied for Alex.

Jackson frowned. "Why does that name ring a bell?" he asked Dáire.

"Is he the guy on your instructional video on how to make love to a woman?" Dáire countered.

Jackson ignored the jibe. "Do you know how long Fontanelle's worked for the Syn?"

"Well, I've been a member for about six years and I remember when he started there," Alex said. "I was one of his first clients. That was two years ago, I think." She tilted her head to one side. "Why?"

"The name sounds familiar," Jackson said. He put a hand on Dáire's shoulder. "You remember that unsolved murder of the Madame over there? What was her name?"

"Like I know all the madams in N'Orlens," Dáire said with a snort.

"The one Julian used to work for," Jackson reminded him.

"Oh, her. Celeste Dubois," Dáire answered. "The supposed ex-nun."

"I remember that!" Star said. "It was a big deal at the time. Are you talking about Julian St. John? Silkier's husband?"

"Yeah," Dáire answered.

"Were you guys involved with that?" his lady asked.

Dáire nodded. "The Cumberland Group was asked to go over her records because she had a lot of government people as clients and Uncle Sam didn't want information like that to get out."

"Among the things we found was Dubois' diary," Jackson told them. "It was a good thing we did."

"Why?" Alex asked.

"Julian St. John had a warrant out for his arrest," Jackson replied. "The cops thought he'd killed a man but it turned out someone else had done the actual killing. It seems Dubois got pissed at St. John for

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something and called his uncle, knowing the man would cause his nephew all kinds of shit. What she didn't know was the uncle would show up with a hired killer in tow to take St. John out."

"Oh, my God!" Alex whispered, her eyes wide. "What happened?"

"The hit man tried to kill St. John, St. John defended himself, was stabbed by his uncle but managed to get away before the uncle could finish the job." He scratched his stubbled cheek. "St. John lost a kidney if I remember right."

"Dubois spirited St. John out of the country, letting him think he'd killed the man and could never come back to the States. She says it was her way of keeping him where she wanted him," Dáire added. "In her diary she notes who did the actual killing and she also made a notation that if anything should happen to her..."

"Like her coming up dead with a bullet between her eyes," Jackson laughed.

Dáire gave him an annoyed look. "She said it would be the uncle who did it because he'd threatened her on numerous occasions. She gave the particulars of who he was and where the authorities could find him should she come up dead."

"Which she did," Jackson said.

"But then so did the uncle," Dáire put in. "Dubois also said in her diary that if the uncle ever came back to the States from across the pond, she'd set her own hit men after him. It was assumed that was what she did."

"So Julian was cleared of the murder charge?" Alex inquired.

"All charges were dropped on him, but the man who works for him..."

"Henri?" Alex questioned.

"Yeah, Henri Bouvier. There is a warrant out for him."

"Julian has been back to New Orleans a few times since he was cleared," Star said. At Dáire's narrowed look, she grinned. "Or so I've heard."

Alex shivered. "I never knew Julian was involved with anything so bizarre."

"You think that's bizarre? One of those perverts had this Fontanelle guy as his..." Jackson began but Dáire dug his elbow into his friend's side to shut him up.

"Why do you want to know about Fontanelle, Starlight?" Dáire asked her.



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"Their friend tried to buy him from his Madame and she wouldn't sell him," Star said.

"Poor guy," Jackson said. "Must be terrible having to service all those rich, lonely ladies, huh, Dairy Crow?"

"Tough life," Dáire agreed with a twitch of his lips, "but somebody's gotta do it."

"Will you be serious?" Star growled at her lover. "It sounds like these two belong together and that woman is trying to keep them apart." She arched her head back. "Is must be awful for a man to be chained to a woman like that." She gave Dáire a meaningful look.

Dáire and Jackson exchanged a look, then Dáire sighed. "Okay, I'll see what I can find out about him."

\* \* \* \*

Olivia Larroquette was not smiling when she came down the stairs. Her wrinkled lips—cratered from years of sucking on strong Turkish cigarettes and a tough, disapproving nature of almost everyone around her—were set in an unforgiving line. She gave Madame a baleful look.

"Was there a problem?" Madame asked.

"Let's just say he neither had on his game face nor was he at the top of his game tonight. I was most disappointed," Olivia snapped. Her gray gaze bored into Madame. "Perhaps it's time I sampled the other fare on your menu, Madeline."

"*Naturellement*," Madame was quick to agree. "Change is always good."

"You should have a talk with him, Madame," Olivia said with a sniff. "Such behavior is bad for business." With her chin high, she turned and marched out of the establishment, her warning explicit as it hung in the air.

Madeline Levant's eyes narrowed dangerously and she motioned for one of her helpers to assume the duties at the desk. She got up, smoothed the front of her expensive red silk sheath, and headed up the stairs, her fingernails digging little half moons into her palms. Without announcing herself—not that she ever did—she flung open the door to the room Brandy had been assigned and stood at the threshold, her face as hard as stone.

"You could have cost me dearly tonight, *bébé*," she said, coming into the room and slamming the door shut behind her. "That uppity white bitch threatened me."

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He was lying on his back on the bed, the sheet tossed carelessly over his hips, one arm flung over his eyes, one knee raised. His chest was heaving and only a blind man could not see he was crying quietly though he made not a sound.

"This will not do, Brandy," Madame snapped at him as she advanced on the bed. "Olivia Larroquette is my most important client. Without her support, I might as well close the doors." She stared down at him, watching the tears falling silently down his cheeks, and heaved a disgusted sigh. Without another word, she spun around and left the room, slamming the door behind again.

Brandy lay there until he could get his emotions under control. It would be several days—as it always was after Olivia's visit—before he would be able to work again. Turning over to his side, his hands sliding under the pillow, he winced as the long, bloody scratches on his back and rump and thighs stuck to the silk sheet. He didn't need to look in the mirror to know she'd gouged him brutally this time because he had not played the game with her. He had not flinched as she dragged her nails down him, drawing blood. He had not moaned when she repeatedly thrust her sharp nails into him. He had just laid there as she did her best to hurt him enough to elicit a response.

He hadn't obliged her, knowing full well she would go to Madame and asked for a new playmate. He had suffered enough over the years under her vicious hands. Let a younger man have the pleasure from now on.

His back stung in dozens of places and he was fairly sure her sadistic bent would leave a few scars this time but he didn't really care.

Nothing mattered now.

## Chapter Nine

Francesca stabbed listlessly at the hole she was making in her garden. She'd bought some perennials that sat wilted in plastic cartons while she poked at the ground. Kneeling on the thick rubber mat, she was sweating as the harsh Georgia sun beat down on her head, but she paid no attention to it. She was bored, irritated, and just plain depressed.

Straightening up with the trowel in her hand, she ran the back of her wrist over her damp brow, dirt falling on her thighs and she sat back on her heels. She watched a pair of butterflies fluttering by—playing tag among the clusters of wisteria—and sighed wistfully. It seemed everywhere she looked, things were in twos, duets of happiness, while she was alone and lonely and feeling abandoned.

She looked around at the flats of flowers, stared at them for a moment, then tossed the trowel beside them and got up. Gardening was really the last thing she wanted to do at that moment. After slipping her shoes off on the patio, she went into the dark interior of the house and straight to the fridge from which she took the ice-cold bottle of Bailey's. Retrieving a glass, she poured herself a triple and took glass and bottle with her up the stairs to the bedroom. A long soak in the tub might help.

At first, she was going to ignore the phone when it rang, but then she marched over and snatched up the receiver, balancing the liquor bottle under her arm. "Hello?" When there was silence on the other end, her jaw tightened. "I'm sorry but I can't read sign language." She started to hang up.

"I just wanted to hear your voice."

Her fingers tightened around the receiver. "Cowboy?"

"I just needed to hear your voice," he said softly, then the line went dead.

"Hello?" she said and repeated it, although she heard the buzz of the broken connection.

It had been a week since she had left New Orleans and in that time she had tried—unsuccessfully and hopelessly—to find a listing for him.

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Alex refused to give out the telephone number to the bordello despite a shouting match that might well have ended their long friendship. She had written him a letter in care of the Syn but she didn't hold out much hope he'd ever see it—at least, not if Madame had anything to say about it.

More miserable now than ever, Francesca slumped to the floor beside her bed with the glass of Irish cream still clutched in one hand, the receiver in the other, and the bottle pressed beneath her arm. The incessant beep of phone warning her it was off the hook didn't penetrate the despair into which she'd plunged.

"Oh, Brandy," she said and her heart ached so brutally she could barely breathe.

\* \* \* \*

Wednesday nights were affectionately known as Hump Night at the Syn. The place was always buzzing with local women who were forced to allow out-of-towners to have the weekends. An atmosphere of gaiety prevailed and champagne was always on the house between seven and nine PM. *Hors d'oeuvres* were always provided and a live quarter played lively music in the social room on the second floor. The tinkle of champagne glasses, women's giggles, and an occasional deep rumble of a male laugh added to the festive environment.

"Madame, really!" Beatrice DuMond complained. "I do wish you would speak to Brandy. He hasn't smiled all evening."

Brandy's lack of joviality had not escaped Madame's notice and she had every intention of taking him to task for it after the women had departed for the evening. No client was ever allowed to spend the night on Wednesdays and it would be as good a time as any to have a serious talk with her star performer.

"I shall do just that, Bea," Madame assured her.

"Perhaps you should send him to his room," Virgie Albright, Bea's sister, suggested. "He is bringing everyone down with that pitiful expression. Pray tell, what is wrong with the boy?"

"Nothing a good spanking wouldn't cure if he was a day or so younger," Madame said. "Excuse me, ladies." She set her glass of untouched champagne on a table and headed straight for Brandy.

He saw her coming and tensed, recognizing the look in her merciless black eyes all too well. He stepped away from the ladies to whom he was pretending to listen.

Madame took his arm and he could feel her fingernails digging into his flesh beneath the black silk shirt he wore. She was smiling for

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everyone to see, but her eyes were flint hard, and a white line had formed around her lips. She spoke to him in a low voice that brooked no objection.

"Go to your room and stay there," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed. He refused to wince when she dug her nails in harder before she released him and turned away, calling out gaily to a newcomer.

He climbed the steps like an old man, the black leather of his pants squeezing his groin too tightly. All he wanted to do was take off his boots, his shirt, put on a pair of cut-off shorts and sit out on the balcony with a beer or two to watch the goings on out in the Quarter. He was doing just that two hours later when Madame barged into his room and out onto the balcony. He didn't even bother to look up at her. He was sitting hunched forward on the wrought iron rocker with his arms clutching his belly. Watching the couples stroll the streets had done nothing to help the feel he was in and had only intensified his isolation.

Madame came to stand over him. "Do you have any idea how much money I have invested in you?"

He lifted his head and gave her a steady look. "Do you have any idea how much money I have made for you in the last two years, Madeline?"

"Down to the last fucking penny!" she threw at him and, when he turned his head from her, she snarled. "Look at me!"

He did and, as soon as she saw the belligerent glare on his face, she drew back her hand and slapped him as hard as she could, rocking his head to the side. "What the hell is wrong with you?" she shouted. "Don't you *dare* give me that look!"

Her palm print on his face burned as he slowly turned back to face her. There was wounded pride in the amber of his eyes lit from the street lamp across the way, hurt in the expression on his full lips.

"Just let me go, Madeline," he said. "I..."

"Never," she said, leaning over until she was on eye level with him. "Not as long as I live. Do you hear me?"

His shoulders slumped. "I'm tired, Madeline. I'm sick of being pawed and pinched and scratched and fucked. That's all I've ever known and I am tired."

Her black eyes were pinpoints of pure malice. "It's all you're good for," she told him.

"That was hateful," he said quietly.

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She turned around, grabbed another rocker, and pulled it over so she could sit down in front of him. "Do you really think you would fit into Francesca Castile's world, Brandy? Her family is among the highest strata of society in the state of Georgia. She graduated *magna cum laude*, was valedictorian of her class. What are you? Huh?" She repeated it. "What are you?"

His eyelids flickered with hurt.

"I'll tell you what you are, *bébé*," she said, her voice hateful. "You are the bastard child of a bastard child of a bastard child, the product of child rape. You are poor white trash, a male whore. You didn't finish high school and you don't even have a G.E.D. As for money?" She laughed cruelly. "You have only what I allow you to have. Hell, that fancy car you drive isn't even yours. The clothes on your back aren't yours. Everything you have—including that precious cock of yours—belongs to me." She sat back in the rocker, allowing her words to wash over him like acid. "I own your sweet white ass."

Brandy could not look away from the gloating expression on her lined face. He knew she had intended to hurt him, to shame him, to crush his spirit, and she had succeeded. He felt as low as she intended him to feel and just as useless.

"Do you honestly think," she said in a softer voice, but one in which the venom still dripped, "you could ever fit into her world? Once the novelty of having you in her bed wore off, she would begin to hear the snide comments behind her back." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "There's Francesca's little boy toy. She picked him up out of the gutter in N'Orleans and brought him home to play with. My, my, my, my. He's young enough to be her son."

She fell silent, her gaze locked with his. The street noises had died away.

"You've made your point," he finally acknowledged. "I had no intention of going to Georgia to cause her problems. I just wanted some time off, a vacation."

"No," she stated.

He exhaled a long, tired breath and lowered his head.

"And you will be back next Sunday at two o'clock."

He looked up, shock lining his face. "That's my day to see Vettie. I never come back before six. It's the only day out of the month I..."

"You will be back here at two o'clock and you will be showered and shaved by three to entertain Madame Singleton and her friend, Adeline.

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

They will be staying until the following weekend." She held up her hand when he opened his mouth to protest. "This is not debatable, Brandy."

"Why are you doing this?" he asked, knowing he was being punished.

"I don't like to be messed with, white boy. Perhaps this will teach you not to fuck with me," she said, getting to her feet. "If I need to reprimand you one more time, I promise you will not like what I do!"

She headed off the balcony but stopped, turning around to glare at him. "I have arranged for you to go to the gym in the morning. Prepare to be there until noontime. After that, you have a dentist appointment for a cleaning."

Lightning flared in the distance, catching Brandy's eye and he looked that way. He sat there watching it until the first faint rumbles sounded. He leaned over, took another bottle of beer from the cooler beside him, unscrewed the cap, and took a long swig before resting the cold edge of the bottom on his thigh.

He thought of the call he had made earlier to Francesca. He wasn't going to say anything, but when she'd snapped at her unknown caller, he had heard the anger in her voice and knew he had to say something. It wasn't what he'd wanted to say but at least she now knew he was thinking of her. He hadn't used the phone in his room—had gone instead to the corner to use a pay phone—because he knew damned well he was being watched and someone would have listened in on the call.

The first drop of moisture hit him as the thunder rolled overhead, and the street below the balcony lit up from a bright flash of lightning. He laid his head back, covered the top of the beer bottle with his thumb to keep the rain out of it, and let the water start beating down into his face. Behind his closed eyes, he watched the strobed effect of the light zigzagging across the sky and hoped like hell a bolt would skewer him where he sat in the metal chair and end his misery.

\* \* \* \*

Gaston Fontanelle hated his half brother with an unreasonable intensity. It went far beyond having been forced to share his father with a squalling brat that had kept them up most of the night when the tiny bastard came slithering out from between Monique Duvall's slimy thighs that September afternoon. If he'd had his way and his father had allowed him to do it, Gaston would have tossed the family's new addition to Big Gus, the bull gator that nested nearby. Instead, he'd spent weeks pulling

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his pillow tightly over his head while the hateful little nuisance bawled lustfully night after night after night.

As he stood under the overhang in front of the Syn, Gaston was enjoying the cool breeze blowing into his face. The sound of the steady rain hitting the streets and sidewalks was soothing. He took a drag on his cigarette—the tip glowing bright red in the dark—and filled his lungs with the tart taste. He was a three-pack a day man and, because of his lethal habit, had a violent cough. Sometimes that cough caused trouble for him and that night was a case in point. He'd been charged by Madame to lurk in the shadows to keep watch over Brandy, to see that the fucking little prick did not leave the Syn without being followed. Remy, another Fontanelle brother was stationed at the back door with the same instructions—to make sure Brandy was kept under tight surveillance.

So it was that when the front door of the Syn opened and Brandy slipped quietly out into the night, Gaston's presence was heralded by the onset of the smoker's fierce cough.

"Those things are going to kill you one of these days," Brandy said.

"What the fuck do you care, you little son of a bitch?" Gaston snarled.

"I don't," Brandy said. He leaned against one of the fancy wrought iron uprights that braced the porch ceiling. "The sooner, the better."

"Fuck you," Gaston growled and flicked his cigarette out into the street. "Get your ass back inside. You ain't going nowhere tonight."

"Wasn't planning to," Brandy lied. He figured he'd be followed if he left the bordello but wanted to see if he could slip away from his tracker long enough to make another forbidden call.

"You lying pack of shit," Gaston said, striding heavily over to Brandy. "I won't tell you again to get back inside. I'll just pick your scrawny ass up and throw it through the fucking window."

Brandy snorted. Though Gaston had beat on him unmercifully when he was a little boy, his oldest half-brother hadn't touched him since Brandy had beaten Gaston to the ground thirteen years ago, breaking the older man's nose and knocking out four of Gaston's rotten front teeth.

"Why don't you try it, Gaston?" Brandy asked quietly. He hadn't moved, just continued to lean against the upright with his arms crossed over his chest even when the older man crowded him, breathing his rancid hot breath into Brandy's face.

"You looking to get hurt, boy?" Gaston hissed. "'Cause if you are, I can whistle for Remy and we'll oblige you."



## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"Yeah, I figure it would take at least the two of you bumbling jackasses to do the job," Brandy said, putting out a hand to shove Gaston away from him. "Get out of my face before I put my tennis shoe up your crusty ass."

Gaston stumbled back and hit the brick wall. He made no move to come after Brandy again, mainly because he didn't have Madame's consent to jump Brandy. He feared the black bordello owner far more than he did his youngest half-brother's lightning fists. Hawking up a wad of phlegm, he spat it at Brandy's food then hitched up his ill-fitting khaki trousers and narrowed his mean eyes.

"One of these days I'm going to hurt you worse than Frick and Frack ever thought of doing, you goddamn prick."

"Keep telling yourself that, Gaston," Brandy said. He unfolded his arms and pushed away from the upright. He walked over to the front door and pulled it open, giving his older half-brother one last contemptuous look before going inside.

"I'm gonna hurt you, Brandy! I swear to God I am!" Gaston shouted as he glared in the window at his half-brother as Brandy headed for the stairs. When the younger man flipped him off, Gaston howled with rage and kicked the brick wall with his scuffed cowboy boot.

Snatching open the door, he stomped into the parlor only to come up short when he saw Madame standing at the foot of the stairs.

"He's gonna run, Madame," Gaston predicted.

"Oh, I know he is," Madame said.

"What you want me to do?" he asked, coming closer to her.

"Stay where you are, Gaston," she said, fanning the air. "You reek."

He bobbed his head. "Yes, ma'am." He took a step back, his boot heel scuffing across the carpet. "You want I should follow him to the Chancel next Sunday?"

"There will be no need," she said. "He will go see his sister, but though I told him to be back here by two o'clock, we won't be seeing him. He'll strike out for Georgia as sure as I'm standing here."

"Then you'll want me to go fetch him from that Cracker woman?" Gaston asked.

Madame shook her head. "No," she said. "He wants a vacation and I'm going to give him one."

Gaston frowned. "I don't get it."

"I'm not surprised," she drawled. "You are not the sharpest knife in the drawer, are you, Gaston?"

## **HOT GEORGIA WINDS**

He scratched at his butch haircut. "I reckon not, ma'am."

"I am going to allow your brother to stay in Georgia for a good long while. I want him to settle in and have that fantastical life he so craves. I want him happy and content and comfortable. Let him have his Cracker woman as you call her."

"I still don't get it," Gaston admitted. "We ain't going to go after him? You ain't going to punish him?"

"Oh, I am going to punish him in ways he will never forget, Gaston," she corrected her henchman. "I'm just going to give him enough rope to hang himself with before I yank the stool out from underneath his sexy feet."

Gaston's eyes lit up. "Will I still be able to hurt him, Madame?"

"Yes, my thought-challenged friend," she said. "You will get to hurt him 'til your heart's content."

## **Chapter Ten**

Sitting behind a tall, wrought iron gate, the imposing structure of the Chancel looked pristine and flawless. The mansion itself had been done in white stone, and its beauty was enhanced by the immaculate, lush, emerald green lawn. A curving gravel drive led up to an impressive portico roofed with red clay tiles. Everywhere flowers and shrubs bore a professional touch, and the riotous blooms and perfectly pruned trees added even more beauty to the private sanitarium and its plush grounds. Two guards with twelve gauge shotguns stood just inside the gates, watching as Brandy stopped beside the security camera and spoke to a guard inside the mansion. When the gates began to open inward, the guards moved back, nodding pleasantly to Brandy as he drove into the compound.

Brandy looked forward to his visits with his sister, though the intimidating presence of the sanitarium always made the hair stand up on his arms when he saw the gates closing behind him. The overwhelming feeling of being confined never failed to make him uneasy the entire length of his visit. Today's stay would be cut short, and for that he was filled with anger as he pulled into a parking slot to the west side of the mansion. There were five other cars there but he barely glanced at them. One he recognized as belonging to Dr. Lassiter, and he was surprised the imminent psychiatrist was there on a Sunday.

Greeting the woman at the desk and signing in, Brandy took the name badge provided for him and started toward the day room where he knew Vettie would have been taken.

"Oh, Mr. Fontanelle?" the woman at the desk called out to him.

He turned, smiling. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Your guest is already here and is in with your sister," the woman told him.

Brandy's smile vanished. "My guest?" he repeated, and fear drove straight through his heart. "What guest?"

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

A flicker of uncertainty shadowed the woman's pleasant face. "Why, Miss Castile, sir," she said.

"Miss Castile?" he repeated, his face showing his surprise.

The woman's uncertainty became dread. "Weren't you expecting her, Mr. Fontanelle?"

Absolute joy pushed every nuance of fear out of Brandy's mind and it transformed his face from handsome to breathtakingly gorgeous. His smile was so radiant the desk clerk put a hand up to flutter at her breast in agitation.

"She came," he said. "She really came!"

He spun around and practically ran into the dayroom, his heart thudding so hard in his chest he was having trouble breathing. The moment he saw her sitting cross leg on the carpet with Vettie, their heads close together, he came to an abrupt halt and thought he'd pass out from the sheer delight. When Francesca looked up and smiled at him, he actually groaned.

"Look who's here," he heard her tell Vettie.

His half-sister glanced up at Francesca and, when the older woman pointed to him, Vettie turned her face toward him. She looked back at Francesca.

"It's your brother, Brandy," Francesca said softly.

Vettie nodded and scrambled to her feet. She came shyly over to him—not looking him in the eye—then wrapped her pudgy arms around him in a brief bear hug before turning around and going back to sit beside Francesca.

Brandy's heart was soaring as he came to join them. He always wore jeans and tennis shoes when he came to visit for he always wound up playing dollies with his sister or hide and seek out on the verdant greensward. Dropping down opposite what his soul had already labeled as his two women, he reached for Francesca's hand, his entire body quivering with pleasure when she didn't hesitate to slip her fingers into his.

"I told you'd I'd be here," she said, squeezing his hand.

"I know," he whispered, his gaze roaming over her lovely face, "but I didn't dare hope you meant it."

She shook her head at him to lightly chastise his disbelief in her. She held his gaze. "Did you bring anything with you?" she hinted.

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

Brandy frowned for a moment, then his lips parted as he remembered what was in his trunk. "Yes, I did!" he said and shot to his feet.

"Where go?" Vettie asked.

"I think he has a surprise for you," Francesca answered.

"Praise for Vettie?" the forty-two year old woman with the mind of a three year-old asked.

"I believe so."

"Him pretty," Vettie said with a sigh. "Him always pretty."

"He is a good brother, isn't he?"

"Umm humm," Vettie said and picked up one of her dollies.

Francesca was looking through the archway, and when Brandy returned with the doll he had bought at the mall in Pensacola, he had taken it out of its box and had it tucked behind him.

"Vettie?" Brandy said. "I think someone would like to come live with you."

Vettie's head swiveled toward him. "Who?"

He pulled the doll from behind him. "This young lady here."

Francesca had to purse her lips to keep from crying when she saw the utter happiness that passed over the retarded woman's face. Vettie squealed and jumped up, nearly tripping as she ran to her brother to grab the doll, burying her face against the toy's pretty pink dress.

"Like!" she pronounced. "Love doll, Bran-Bran!"

"I'm glad," he said and laughed as his sister started waltzing her new friend across the floor and showing the doll to everyone in the room.

"She'll forget I'm here, now," he said with a sigh and held his hand out to Francesca to help her up. "I could leave and she wouldn't even miss me."

"I noticed her attention span isn't very long," she said.

"If you tell her who I am, she seems to have some vague recollection of me, but I don't think the word brother means anything to her," he said, and Francesca could hear the sadness in his voice.

"I spoke to Dr. Lassiter earlier," she told him. "I hope you don't mind."

"No," he said. "Not at all. With your guidance counselor training, you probably understand him a lot better than I ever will." He was still holding her hand as they stood there. "What did he say?"

"That he doesn't believe there will ever be any progress in her case."

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Brandy nodded. "He once asked me to consider not coming to visit her," he said. "He said I interrupted her schedule and threw it off."

Vettie was sitting at the table with two other women and they were all stroking the new doll's long blonde hair.

"Have you been out in the garden?" he asked her. "It's really lovely."

"I was waiting for you," she said, her heart in her eyes as she looked at him.

"I've been waiting for you all my life," he said and his voice broke with emotion. "God, I've missed you."

Francesca hooked her arm through his. "Show me the garden, cowboy," she said.

They walked out in the soft sunshine, the grounds so vibrantly green after the previous week's heavy rain. Few people were outside but those that were seemed engrossed in their own conversations as they sat on benches or on blankets spread on the ground. Brandy led her to the far end of the fenced in grounds to a small red-tiled bungalow out back nestled beneath huge live oaks festooned with swags of pearl-gray Spanish moss. Little clusters of shrubs in groups of four and five plantings were scattered among the brick walkways that meandered across the property.

"This is beautiful," Francesca said. She was leaning against Brandy, her hands wrapped around his right arm.

A white wrought iron bench with a thick inlaid oak plank for a seat sat beside the bungalow. It was here Brandy escorted her.

"Does someone live here?" she asked, looking up at the ivy-draped walls of the bungalow.

"I heard there was a man who resided here," Brandy said, "a few years ago. It was rumored he had leprosy."

"Oh," Francesca said, shifting uncomfortably on the seat. "Do you think that's true?"

"I don't know, but I do know the building is off limits and there's a thick padlock on the door. Few people even venture out here to it."

They were silent for a moment, their hands entwined.

"Did you really think I wouldn't come?" she asked quietly.

"I didn't dare hope, sweetness," he said. "These past two weeks have been sheer hell for me."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him if Madame had caused him problems, but she figured she already knew the answer to that.

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"Were you followed here?"

"I didn't see anyone, but that doesn't mean they weren't there," he replied. "I was told to be back to the Syn by two o'clock."

"Oh, no!" she said, glancing at her watch. It was already almost noon. "Brandy, no! I thought we'd have all day."

"We will," he said, his gaze on the gardens. "I won't be going back, Francesca."

Her heart skipped a beat. "What do you mean?"

He turned to face her. "I was planning on calling you later this afternoon—just to see how you were doing. I wouldn't have come to Albany unless you invited me."

"You knew I would."

"I was hoping you would but I—" He looked away again.

"You what?" she questioned.

"I can't stay there," he said softly.

"Why not?" she pressed.

When he looked back at her, his eyes were glistening with a film of despair. "She's already threatened you, 'Cesca. I can't take a chance that something might happen to you. If I'm with you..."

"We'll hire the best bodyguards in the south," she stated. "I've got money up the ying-yang, cowboy, and I can afford the very best. If bodyguards aren't good enough, I can hire a mercenary out of Bogota to make Madeline Levant disappear from our lives forever."

He smiled at her angry eyes and clenched jaw. "I believe you would, too," he said.

"Damned straight I would," she stated. "I came here today to make sure you understood that. If I had to knock you over your puddin' head and toss you in the trunk of my car, I was going to get you to Georgia!"

He reached out to cup her face. "You're a big, bad mama, ain't you? You and your hairy toes."

She nipped playfully at his palm and he chuckled, drawing his hand back just as playfully before caressing her face.

"There is one thing, though, if you come with me to Georgia," she said.

"What's that?"

"I will insist on making an honest man of you," she said. "I will not be living in sin with you."

Brandy blinked. "Are you asking me to marry you?"

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

"No," she said. "You are going to do the right thing and ask me, sonny boy."

"Sweetness, I don't know..."

"I'm not giving you up this time, Brandy Fontanelle. You might as well consign yourself to that fact. We *will* get married and—if you stop to think about it—what can she do once we are?"

"You have no idea," he mumbled.

"Don't you want to marry me?" she asked.

He stared into her eyes. "Baby, I want that more than the air I'm breathing."

"Then so ask me already!" she demanded.

"If we do this," he said, "I don't dare come back to Louisiana. That would be like waving a red flag at a bull."

"There's no need for you to come back," she said.

"Yes there is. Vettie's here," he reminded her. "I can't leave her here. I love my sister."

"All right then, we'll move her over to Georgia. We have some terrific private sanitariums. My Aunt Rachel is in Lakeside Villas over in Savannah. I've got family on the board of directors so it won't be a problem getting Vettie in." Before he could object, she put her fingers over his lips. "Let me make a call and we'll start the paperwork today."

"Cesca..."

"Can you trust Dr. Lassiter not to contact Madame?" she interrupted. "It's going to take a few days to get Vettie transferred."

"As far as I know he doesn't even know about Madeline," he replied. "I can't imagine any reason she would have had to ever contact him, but if he's still here, I can go talk to him."

"You'd better have a damned good excuse ready for him for when she does contact him. You know she will when you don't show up when she told you to."

"You're probably right," he agreed. "Leave that to me. I'll handle it."

"So?" she said.

"So?" he repeated, and when she looked pointedly down at the ground in front of her then arched a brow at him, he slipped off the bench and onto one knee, taking her hand in his.

"Someone's about to propose!" someone across the garden called out.

Brandy groaned, glancing behind him at the audience he now had.

"Better make it good, cowboy," Francesca suggested.



## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

He brought her hand to his heart. "Sweetness, will you do me the honor of becoming my bride?"

She cocked her head to one side as though thinking about it for a moment then squinted. "Are you going to keep making fun of my toes?"

"Your hairy little toes?" he wanted clarified.

She hissed at him.

"Every chance I get, baby," he answered with an unrepentant grin.

"Well, in that case, I guess so then," she said on a long sigh. "Yes, cowboy, I'll marry you."

To a hearty round of applause, he stood, drew her to her feet, and kissed her. When they turned around, they saw Dr. Lassiter coming toward them, a smile on his beefy face.

An hour later, leaving his BMW in the parking lot, Brandy was lying uncomfortably across the middle bench seats of Francesca's SUV when they drove away from the Chancel. Instead of going east as anyone watching might suspect, they headed west, catching I-55 heading north. They would then take I-20 east at Shreveport, cross Louisiana, Alabama, then on into Atlanta before picking up I-75 south. It would be a long, roundabout way to get home, but Francesca thought it would give them time to have everything in place before reaching Albany.

With three cell phone calls, Francesca set several things into motion. Her first call had been to Dougherty County Sheriff Pete Hatcher in Albany, who had been a good friend since junior high school. She explained the situation to him and asked for his advice. He assured her he would make sure his men kept a close watch on her property until she had bodyguards in place and would call to inform Janelle, her housekeeper, to be on the look out for strangers lurking about.

Her second call was to her attorney, Mike Thompson, whom she asked to provide armed bodyguards and to purchase a handgun for her.

"What the hell do you need a gun for, Francesca?" the lawyer had gasped.

"For protection, Mike," she snapped. "Why else."

"Protection from whom?" he demanded to know.

"Anyone who might try to break into my home."

There was a long pause, then the lawyer asked what she'd gotten herself into now.

"Just do it, Mike," she grated. "Okay? Trust me that I know what I'm doing."

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

"It'll be the first time," the lawyer declared. "What kind of gun do you want?"

Francesca conferred with Brandy, who had crawled over the console and into the passenger seat and it was decided two Smith and Wesson 990L semiautomatics were what would be needed.

"That's what Gaston carries," Brandy told her. "It has stopping power."

"You'll have to get a CCW permit if you plan on carrying the damned thing with you," the lawyer informed her. He explained that was a Carrying Concealed Weapons permit.

After briefly explaining the situation to him—and over his very strident objections—Thompson agreed to start the ball rolling for them to get married and to send his assistant to purchase the guns the first thing Monday morning.

"Anything else you need from us?" Francesca asked.

"I believe I have a copy of yours on file but he'll need his birth certificate and a photo ID if you want to get married in Georgia," Thompson had told her.

"He doesn't have a birth certificate," she said. "And it would be a problem to get one."

"Is he old enough to drive?" Thompson growled.

"I'm not robbing the cradle, Michael," she growled right back at him. "And yes he does have a driver's license."

"Social Security card?"

"I believe so." After checking with Brandy, she went back on the line. "He lost his Social Security card but he has his passport with him."

"Thinking of fleeing the country, was he?" Thompson inquired in a gruff tone.

"Actually, he was."

There was a long, heavy sigh. "Well, if he has two forms of ID, you can hop across the border and get hitched in Florida. Any notary public can perform the ceremony down there if you're in that big a danged hurry," Thompson grumbled. "But I'll go on the record again and say I don't think this is a good idea, Frankie. When will you be home?"

"Middle ways the week," she answered.

"Taking a honeymoon before the wedding?" her lawyer sniped.

"Will you just set everything up for us in Tallahassee?" she asked. "Please?"

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"Against my better judgment," Thompson snapped and slammed down the receiver.

"The good counselor doesn't sound like a happy camper," Brandy commented as they stopped for the lunch they never got at the Chancel.

"He's a big old bear but he's harmless," she said of her lawyer.

Wanting to put as much distance as possible between them and any potential trackers, she went through the drive-thru and was stunned when Brandy ordered two Whoppers with everything, two large fries, and an order of onion rings, a large soft drink, and two hot Dutch apple pies.

"You've got to be kidding!" she gasped.

"I'm a growing boy," he defended, his lower lip thrust out. He leaned over and laid his head on her shoulder and batted his eyelashes at her. "Please, mommy, please? I promise I'll be a good widdle boy."

She laughed at him. The man was relaxing and starting to enjoy himself. Who was she to deny him his comfort food?

After getting herself some chicken tenders with barbeque sauce and fries and a small soft drink, she placed the third phone call to Georgi—they were positive Madame would eventually get in touch with Alex—as they waited at the drive-thru window for their food.

"She'll probably terminate Alex's membership," Brandy said.

"Alex was going to do it anyway," Francesca told him. "She learned about this place in the Caribbean..."

"Mistral Cay?" he asked, lips twitching.

"How did you...?"

"I know the man who owns the island. He and I go way back," Brandy said. "He provides a similar service and I can honestly tell you that if you and I had met at the Cay, Julian would have given us his blessing and we wouldn't be sneaky toeing around like this."

"Where the hell are you?" Georgi demanded. "I stopped by to pick you up for Mass this morning and Eileen said you'd left yesterday for Louisiana. What the hell have you done, Frankie?"

"I met Brandy and we are on I-10 on our way to Las Vegas," Francesca told Georgi.

"*What?*" Georgi screamed into the phone. "Why?"

"I just wanted you to know we were all right," Francesca said. "We'll be back in a few weeks, maybe a month. He's never been to Vegas and..."

"Woman, have you lost what little mind Richard left you after the divorce?" her friend interrupted.

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

"Be happy for us, Georgi," Francesca said. "We really love each other." Before Georgi could say anything else, Francesca terminated the call.

"With any luck at all, Gaston and Remy will be heading out I-10 to Vegas," Brandy said as he took the huge sack of food from Francesca and began rummaging in it for his Whopper.

"Try not to get crumbs everywhere, son," Francesca lectured him.

The woman at the drive-thru window laughed. "I have to tell my son the same thing," she said, handing over the soft drinks. "Doesn't matter how old they get, does it?"

Brandy craned his head down so he could look through the driver's side window to see the middle aged woman at the window. "My mommy has hairy toes," he told the woman with a broad grin.

Francesca was hard pressed not to burst out laughing for the poor woman's smile slipped off her wrinkled face. There was no telling what she was thinking as Francesca thanked her and drove off.

"You are a horrible, nasty little boy," Francesca said, giving him a stern look. "What on earth was I thinking hooking up with the likes of you? I don't need the aggravation." She had to clamp her jaws tightly together to keep from roaring with laughter.

Brandy slipped his hand between his legs and cupped himself. "I got whatcha need right here, mama. Why don't you come and get it while it's hot?"

"Eat your food," she ordered, giggling.

As they got back on I-55 and headed for Shreveport, Brandy fed her the chicken tenders dredged in plenty of barbeque sauce and held the cup of soda for her to take a sip in between big bites of his own buffet.

"Want me to drive for awhile?" he asked her.

"I'm fine," she said, but when they reached Shreveport he took over, handling her blue chip Cadillac Escalade with the same sensual precision as he had driven his BMW.

"I like this car," he said.

"Want one?" she inquired as she watched him. She never got tired of looking at him.

"Nah," he said. "I want an XK coupe."

"Oh, yeah? What color?"

"Liquid silver," he stated. "With charcoal seats and burl walnut trim."

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"Wanna wait until the new models come out or will this year's be okay?"

He chuckled. "This year's will be fine."

"Wanna stop in Atlanta and pick one up on the way down, or do you want to wait until after we get back to Albany? We could take the puddle hopper up to Hotlanta and you could drive it back."

He glanced over at her, his face pale. "I was joking, Sweetness."

"I wasn't," she told him.

"No," he said. "I don't have that kind of money and..."

"It will be my wedding present to you," she said, reaching over to smooth the dark curling hair at the nape of his neck.

"No," he repeated, his jaw tight. "If I can't afford it, I don't want it." His hands tightened on the steering wheel. "I've got about \$60,000 in my checking account and roughly twice that in savings that Madeline doesn't know about—leastwise, I hope she doesn't. I left all the clothes and things she bought me at the Syn, the BMW is at the Chancel where she can send for it. If I can't buy it myself, it won't get bought." He shot her a look. "The only thing I'll be buying other than some clothes is a wedding band for you."

"Okay," she said.

"And I'm going to have this fucking tat taken off my arm," he decided. "As soon as possible."

"I think you'd be happier if it was removed," she agreed.

"And I intend to work," he said. He shot her another quick look. "I'm not going to live off you."

She caught herself before she could tell him there probably wasn't much call for a male escort in Albany, but she didn't know that for a certainty and—at any rate—didn't want to insult him.

"I know how to do carpentry work," he said, surprising the hell out of her.

"You're joking!" she said.

"No, I'm not and I'm damned good at it."

She just stared at him. "How did that happen?"

He shrugged. "When I was younger, Celeste would hire some of us out to construction crews to help beef up our muscles and to keep our tans. She didn't believe in going to a gym to work out. She wanted her stable to have muscles formed from hard work and not from some machine in an air conditioned workout center. Her clientele appreciated the fact that we weren't just male hookers. We were working men."

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

"Now that astonishes the hell out of me," she said, "but in a warped way, it makes good business sense. No sissy boys need apply, huh?"

"I liked working carpentry," he said. "Being out in the fresh air, doing a good job. I felt like I was accomplishing something."

Her admiration of the man was bumped up another notch. She shook her head. "How did I get so lucky?" she asked aloud.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," she said, turning around so she could slip off her sandals and prop her feet on the dashboard. "I bought this section of land up in Lee County that I wanted to build some low-cost housing on for senior citizens. I wanted duplex units with extra wide doorways for wheelchairs and ramps up onto the front porches, handicapped accessible kitchens and bathrooms, all the necessary conveniences for people who can't afford the ridiculously high prices rental agencies want for good, substantial units. I had been talking to Collier, my future son-in-law, about bringing a team up to build the houses. He and Reggie are going to invest in the project along with Georgia and Sammi. How would you like to work on something like that?"

"I'd love it," he said, his eyes glowing. "I really can swing a mean hammer, Sweetness."

"Okay, it's a done deal then, but..."

"But?" he repeated, giving her a quick look for he was passing a couple of semis.

"You'll be on the payroll and there won't be any negotiations about that. I'll pay you just like I would any other hunky construction worker off the street. Understood?"

"What's the going rate for hunky construction workers?" he asked as he smoothly pulled in ahead of the big rigs.

"Well, let's see. If we figure on fifty-one weeks..."

"Nope, I want a fifty-week job," he stated.

"Okay, fifty weeks at seven hundred..."

"Eight hundred," he corrected.

"You think you're worth that?"

"I know I am."

"You might be a bit rusty, you know."

"No way, Sweetness. Your man is well-primed."

"Vulgar, too," she said. "All right, eight hundred a week—before taxes, dude—with a two-week unpaid vaca..."

"Paid vacation."

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"Now just a minute, cowboy!" she said. "Who's the boss here? Me or you?"

"Eight hundred a week before taxes," he said. "Fifty weeks a year with a two-week paid vacation and medical plus dental and a 401K, plus all the cock you can handle." He gave her a smug smile. "How does that sound?"

"Fifty weeks a year with a two-week paid vacation and medical plus dental and a 401K, plus all the cock I can handle *and* a guaranteed backrub three times a week," she countered.

"Fifty weeks a year with a two-week paid vacation and medical plus dental and a 401K, plus all the cock you can handle and a guaranteed backrub three times a week but you throw in a watch." He held up his hand. "Nothing expensive. A Timex will do."

"Why a watch?" she asked, her brows drawn together.

He gave her a look that made the juices flow between her legs.

"I want to know exactly how close it is to quitting time."

"Because..."

"I won't have to guess how soon I'll be able to jump your bones."

"Expecting fringe benefits from management, huh?" she said with a grin.

"Is management complaining?"

She scooted down further in the seat. "Why don't you find us a nice exit where we can have some serious privacy, cowboy, and let's discuss the matter in length."

"Nine inches enough length for you, baby?"

"We'll see," she said with a smirk.

\* \* \* \*

It took him awhile to find a nice turnoff into a shady, secluded piece of land where he could drive the SUV under a spreading oak tree, concealing it from prying eyes.

"There's a blanket in the back," she told him, opening the passenger door.

"Oh, yeah?" he asked. "Why?"

"Albany High football games," she said. "I never miss one." She grinned. "I was a cheerleader, you know."

He shook his head. "What is the world coming to when they'll allow hairy-toed girls onto a cheerleading squad?" He popped the power lift gate and reached inside for the blanket. Beneath the towering tree, he

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spread the blanket, keeping an eye out for red ant beds or other critters that might prove dangerous or a nuisance.

Francesca knelt down on the blanket. "Consider this a job interview, stud," she told him as she tugged her blouse from her pants and began unbuttoning it.

He went to his knees before her and pushed her hands away. "Allow me, Miss Castile," he said. "I'm very good with my hands."

"I believe I've heard that," she said as he undid the buttons slowly from bottom to top, his eyes locked on hers.

His knuckles grazed the tops of her breasts as he undid the last button. "And what I have between my legs will rock your world, darling."

Francesca's left eyebrow jumped skyward. "Now, is that brag or fact, sugar?"

"All fact," he replied and slipped the blouse from her shoulders in a slow, lazy way that had goosebumps popping out on her flesh. His fingers went to the front closing of her bra. "Now, this is handy."

"I aim to please," she said in a husky voice.

"I'm going to hold you that," he said.

"Hold me to what? This?" she asked, reaching out to run the palm over her hand down his crotch. She rubbed him slowly, thrilling to the hardness that was already straining against his jeans.

He unhooked the bra and slid the straps over her shoulders. "Be careful, Sweetness," he said. "He bites."

"Fred?" she asked. "Not *my* Fred."

He leaned into her and captured one firm breast with his lips, clamping his teeth onto the swollen nipple. His tongue rolled over the puckered flesh as his warm breath sent shivers through her womb.

Francesca let her head fall back, enjoying the sweet pleasure of his mouth on her. She had dreamed of this every night—and daydreamed of it every waking moment—since she'd last lain beside him, his flesh against hers. Having him there, having his hands tight on her waist, his curly hair brushing lighting under her chin as he suckled her, was pure heaven for her. She wanted to feel him, to taste him, to lick every inch of him as though he were an all-day sucker. The warmth of his flesh was sending the aroma of his expensive cologne straight through her loins. She was becoming intoxicated as she drew the scent deeply into her lungs.



## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"Take your shirt off," she told him. "I want to run my hands all over you."

He pulled back, yanked his shirt out of his jeans, and with one quick flick of his wrists, pulled the front of his green plaid shirt apart, the white pearlloid snaps popping sensuously from neck to waist.

"Talk about handy," she said with a giggle.

He undid the three snaps at his cuffs and peeled the shirt off. "This what you want, boss lady?" he inquired.

Francesca put her palms on his pecs. "Yeah, stud. This is exactly what I want." She caressed his muscles, ran her fingertips over his nipples, then tugged at his chest hair. "Now take those pants off so I can see what's under than denim."

He came to his feet in one lithe, athletic bound. Lifting first on foot then the other, he slid off his sneakers and socks and tossed them aside. Unbuckling his belt—his attention never leaving her face as she knelt there with her head back as she stared at him—he unsnapped his jeans and pushed them down, his erection springing out of the denim like a recruit before a drill sergeant.

"Oh, yummy," she said, reaching for that turgid flesh.

"Unh unh, lady," he said. "You have way too much clothing on." He held out his hand to help her up. "Let's see what we can do about that."

She let him pull her to her feet and heard him growl as he undid the clasp of her slacks and tugged the zipper down to reveal only a thin scrap of a thong hiding her from his view. He kept hold of her hand as she stepped out of her slacks. When she started to push the thong down, he shook his head and simply ripped the wisp of silk from her hips.

"You are a demanding man," she said, breathing heavily.

"I am a desperate man," he countered.

"Demanding and desperate," she whispered. "I like that in a man."

He ran his hand between her legs. "This is what I want," he said and insinuated his fingers beneath the triangle of the thong. He fingered her clit, his full lips easing into a knowing grin as her juices coated his hand. "And this is what I am about to take."

His words sent a quiver through her body. He slid his right arm around her, pulled her tightly to him then drove her backward, lowering her toward the blanket, cushioning her descent with his brawny strength. He wedged his lower body between her thighs and stretched out atop her, pushing her legs apart as he feasted on her breasts. His cock slid along her thigh, the moisture cool against her flesh.

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She tangled her hands in his thick hair. It was like warm black silk—glossy, sleek, and the tendrils curled between her fingers. "I wish I had your hair," she said.

He lifted his head. "Baby, you have everything of mine," he told her. He slid up her until he could take possession of her mouth, dipping his tongue between her lips. With his right arm beneath her, he put his left hand on her breast and kneaded her firmly as he deepened the kiss.

There was such heady pleasure in having him lying on her. His body weight holding her down was the closest thing to sheer contentment she'd ever known. She wished she could lay there forever with his smell, his strength, his delicious heaviness surrounding her. The taste of his mouth, the warmth of it, simply added to the delight she was experiencing in his arms.

Brandy moved his hand from her breast to his cock and positioned himself at her moist sheath. With one sure, firm stroke, he took what he wanted, going deep, and full inside her.

They moved together like they had been partners for years—knowing how to shift to please the other, where to touch, when to lift. Slow and easy at first, then picking up speed as the sweet rush of passion took hold, she clung to him, her arms tight around his neck, her legs wrapped around his hips as he thrust into her. His cock was as hard as steel, a velvet clad rod of intense delight that pressed deeply into her and filled her completely.

She craved this man. She needed him, wanted him, and knew she would never be able to live without him now. He had wiggled his way not only into her heart but into her very soul. He was firmly entrenched there, never to leave.

Release came for them at the exact same moment—he, going absolutely motionless to allow her to feel his cock flexing inside her and she, stilling so he could experience the rippling of her climax around his shaft.

When the last tremor faded away, he released her lips and laid his head upon her breast. "I love you, 'Cesca," he said.

She cradled him against her. "I love you, too."

Their hearts ceasing the frantic beat of passion, their bodies began to cool from a light sheen of perspiration, their breathing slowing, they lay there with a soft breeze sloughing over them and the smell of honeysuckle permeating the air and forgot the rest of the world for a little while.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Madame did not call Dr. Lassiter at the Chancel when the deadline for Brandy to appear at the Syn came and went. She did not call Alexandra Baylor-Hutchins or even consider picking up the phone to call Francesca Castile. Though Gaston Fontanelle waited on the back porch with his brother Remy, she did not send for him. What she did was ask Alain Bouchard—her second highest paid escort—if he would like the job that had been vacated by Brandy.

"He's not coming back?" Alain had asked, eyes wide and worried.

"Not here, he won't," Madame said gently. "I will be moving him to another of my establishments when he returns to us."

Alain shuddered, for they all knew what that meant. He gladly took the job and the hefty increase in both salary and prestige and counted himself one lucky fellow.

The person Madame called was in a place so remotely removed from New Orleans, it might as well have not even been on the same map. Dialing the 641 area code, she politely waited through two receptionists and a secretary before finally reaching the person she sought.

"Dr. Wynth, how are you?" she asked in her thick, practiced Cajun drawl—as phony as the courtesy she was forcing into her tone.

"I'm quite well, Mrs. Levant," Dr. Brighton Wynth, the Executive Director of Operations of Wynth Industries, replied. "I trust things are good with you."

"Never better. I have been reading faithfully your reports on the successes you are generating with the secondary institution there at Baybridge. It seems as though you are making remarkable headway with your patients."

"Yes, we are very proud of Etesian Hills and I wish we could shout those successes to the world, but as you know we have no desire to go public with our facility. It shall remain an elite, private institution for families such as yours."

"I quite understand." She paused. "And how is Christien?"

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"Strange that you should call at this time. I was going to be contacting you tomorrow. This hasn't been one of his better weeks. He hasn't been responding as I felt he should to the haloperidol," Dr. Wynth reported. "I'm afraid I may have to order another round of ECTs. I do so hate to resort to that, but sometimes Christien gives us no other alternative."

"I understand perfectly, Doctor," Madame said. "He was always such a stubborn and recalcitrant boy."

"Well, as his legal guardian, it is up to you to decide whether or not I should continue with the series of treatments."

"How many are we talking about here, Doctor?"

"I would think no more than twelve, not less than ten," Dr. Wynth suggested. "He has been so uncooperative and I just feel we need to be a bit more aggressive with our treatment."

"Well, you know best," Madame said. "I will leave the regimen of Christien's management up to you."

"I appreciate your faith in us, Mrs. Levant."

"I have every faith in you, sir, or I would not be contacting you regarding one of my other nephews," Madame stated.

"Will you need for him to visit us?" Dr. Wynth inquired.

"It looks as though things are headed that way, yes. He is not responding favorably to the meds. Regrettably, like poor Christien, our family practitioner has informed me Brandyn is exhibiting the classical signs of dissociate identity disorder just as his older brother did."

"Oh, my," Dr. Wynth said, and his tone took on a new level of excitement. "Well, the disorder does run in certain families. When will he be coming out to us?"

"Well, not for a month or so, I don't think, but please save a bed for him," Madame replied. "We will bring him when we feel the time is right."

"I will certainly do that, Mrs. Levant," Dr. Wynth agreed.

"And just so you'll know? I will be cutting your foundation a rather substantial check in thanks for the excellent care you have given dear Christien these last five years."

"That is most generous, and we can certainly use the shot in the arm—pardon the pun."

After another few minutes of polite conversation, Madame ended the call and sat back in her expensive body-formed chair. She swiveled the plush leather seat back and forth while she toyed with the pen she

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held in her hands, rolling the fourteen-karat-gold cylinder around and around.

In her mind's eyes she pictured Christien Léglise and smiled. Kit hadn't been quite as handsome as Brandy, but he had been an even more gifted lover. Taller than Brandy but a bit heavier, he had dark brown wavy hair and green eyes—a deadly combination in a Cajun man. His dark complexion bore the unmistakable stamp of his quadroon mother and he had a very intriguing little scar over the right side of his mouth that women always commented on.

Kit—like Brandy—had committed the unpardonable sin of falling in love with one of his clients. He had planned to flee the country with the daughter of a most important civil rights leader, but Madame had found out about it in time. While Brandy's affair had, lamentably, become public knowledge among the staff, Kit's had not. He had simply disappeared in the middle of a sunny spring afternoon, never to be seen again. The woman to whom he had given his heart had vanished without a trace, as well. Gaston Fontanelle and his overzealous brother Remy had taken her out to the bayou and the matter had simply ceased to exist for Madame.

"But here it raises its ugly little head again," Madame said to herself. "And another good source of income has been lured away by blazing hormones."

She swiveled around in the chair and tossed the pen to the desk. Her anger was high and she needed a release only one thing could bring about. Leaning forward, she flipped the switch on the intercom that would alert her secretary.

"Yes, Madame?" the girl answered immediately.

"Tell Alain I will require his services this evening and clear his schedule for the next week."

"Yes, Madame."

Thoughts of the riding crop she would use on Alain's smooth bare white back and ass made the black woman smile.

\* \* \* \*

Gaston was not happy. He had hoped to be able to go after Brandy and not sit at the Syn cooling his heels playing pitch with Remy. Glaring moodily at his cards, the strain was too much for him so he slapped them down on the table.

Remy looked up. "Be cool, bro," he said. "You'll get your chance at him."

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"Little fucker ain't been nothin' but trouble since the day he was born," Gaston complained. He snagged the bottle of Jim Beam and took a slug. "Shoulda drowned his squalling red ass like I wanted to."

"Old man would have reamed you a new one if you had," Remy commented.

"Why the fuck you think Madame wants to wait so long for?" Gaston snarled.

Remy laid his cards down and tilted his chair back. "My guess is that the longer Brandy stays with the woman, the more he'll relax his guard, making it easier for us to take him." He scratched at the front of his soiled jeans. "And the longer he's over there enjoying himself, the more it'll hurt him to get snatched away from it."

"Yeah," Gaston said. "It'll hurt all right. I intend to see to that."

"But..." Remy said as he swiped his tin of chew off the table and opened it.

"But what?"

"I'm thinking it would hurt him big time if somethin' were to happen to that Cracker woman before we put his ass down," Remy suggested. He pinched off a section of chew and tucked it between his cheek and gums. "Maybe we could have a whole lot of fun with her before we get rid of her, you know?"

Gaston stared at his brother. "Like we done with Kit's nigger woman."

"Be careful 'bout using that word," Remy cautioned. "Madame hear you say that word and she'll have your balls."

"Ain't afraid of Madame," Gaston scoffed, though they both knew that was a lie. Gaston was terrified of the black woman—and rightfully so.

"At any rate, we'll bide our time like Madame wants and let our little brother get all cozy and comfy with that Georgia cunt then we'll go in and tear his world down and him along with it," Remy stated.

"Not soon enough for me," Gaston growled.

\* \* \* \*

Georgi called Alex and Sammi on a three-way conference. Teddi lived right next door and had come over when Georgi sent her maid to fetch Teddi.

"I am really sorry, ladies," Alex apologized. "If I had known Frankie would go off the deep end and start behaving like a teenager in

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heat, I would never have taken her over there! My God! You'd think the woman was old enough to know better!"

"The question is, what do we do?" Sammi asked.

"What *can* we do?" Teddi queried. "If they're on their way to Vegas, five will get you ten they'll come back hitched."

"Don't say that!" Georgi exclaimed, giving Teddi a hateful glare.

"I suggest we call Richard," Alex put in. "Maybe he can talk some sense into Francesca."

"Well, that's a stupid suggestion," Sammi quipped. "When has Frankie ever listened to anything Richard had to say?"

"Sammi is right," Georgi said. "Frankie is more liable to do the opposite of what Richard tells her."

"I still think we should call him," Alex declared. "Reggie, too. Maybe she'll listen to her daughter."

"Man, I hate to get Regina involved in this!" Georgi said. "And who wants to tell her that her mother is having a mid-life crisis and has taken up with a male prostitute?" She shook her head. "I sure as hell don't want to be the one to impart that information to my goddaughter."

"I'll bite the bullet and tell her," Alex said. "After all, this is all my fault."

"I guess I could tell Richard," Teddi said. "We have a board meeting at the hospital this afternoon."

"Well, when you tell him, make sure no one is listening in," Georgi warned. "We don't want this shit to be broadcast all over Albany."

"If she comes back married to that little bastard, there's no way something like that won't be all over the county in a matter of days," Sammi reminded them.

"Poor Francesca. She'll be a laughing stock," Teddi prophesied.

"Or the most envied woman in our circle," Georgi countered.

"Well, I can tell you from experience," Alex put in, "she'll be the most satisfied one among us but even so, you don't have to marry the vibrator to get the climax."

"Yuck!" Sammi said. "That's just plain crude."

"What I'm worried about is that black bitch over in N'Orlens," Georgi told them. "She was not very pleasant to Frankie and after this, who knows what might happen?"

\* \* \* \*

Later that afternoon Richard Castile sat in the Albany General Hospital cafeteria and listened with growing trepidation as Samantha

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Hudson related to him what had transpired in New Orleans. The more he heard, the redder his face got and the tighter his broad square jaw became. When Sammi was finished with her tale, he sat back in his chair and exhaled a long, angry breath.

"What the hell were you women thinking?" he demanded. "Or am I wrong in assuming any of you have brains with which to think in the first place?"

Sammi rolled her eyes. "There is no cause to be insulting, Richard," she mumbled. "It was simply supposed to be a lark. No harm was intended."

"No harm?" he countered. "You..."

She shushed him, cutting her eyes around the room to remind him they were not alone.

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "You traipse over to a goddamned bordello, pay some strange man to go to bed with my wife, then blithely think there will be no hell to pay for flaunting the laws of God—not to mention Country?"

"First of all, Richard, she's no longer your wife," Sammi snapped. "Second, you flaunted the laws of God when you took up with that silly little bimbo from your office, so you are a fine one to talk!"

"What about disease, Samantha?" he grated. "I hope to God you women used condoms!"

"Richard," Sammi said, "let's don't make this any more unpleasant than it already is. Let it suffice to say we were careful in that department and let it go at that. Are you going to help us or not?"

"What do you think I can do?" he countered. "The damage is already done."

"We were hoping you could talk some sense into Francesca before she makes what may become the biggest mistake of her life."

"And just how am I supposed to do that if she is on her way to Las Vegas with this boy toy of hers?"

"Call her and talk to her," Sammi replied. "Try to reason with her. Let her know that what she is doing is going to cause all kinds of serious repercussions."

Richard shoved a hand through his thick white hair. "I can not believe this is happening to me."

"To you?" Sammi challenged. "For the love of Pete, Dickhead, this isn't about you!"



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He sent her a hateful look, then pushed his chair back from the table. "Francesca has made her bed," he said. "Let her sleep in it with her filthy little gigolo! I want no part of her madness and I won't have her indiscretions causing me problems in this town!" Marching off with his shoulders hunched like those of an angry bull, he did not acknowledge those who stopped to speak to him.

"Asswipe," Sammi said. She ground her teeth, then opened her purse to take out her cell phone to place a call to Alex. "Did you get in touch with Reggie?" she asked when the call went through.

"Yes, but now I'm having second thoughts about having called her," Alex said.

"That doesn't sound encouraging," Sammi said. "What happened?"

"I had barely finished telling her what was going on before she said she would be on the next plane up here. That was one pissed little girl. How was Richard?"

"The same prick as he always is," Sammi reported. "He refused to help."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"I may have made a mistake in telling him, Alex," Sammi admitted. "I didn't like the gleam in his eyes when he marched out of here."

"Oh, God! You don't think he'll spread the news around do you?" Alex asked in a worried tone.

"I wouldn't put it past him. I've got two more meetings before I can leave here. Call Georgi and let her know what went down. With our interfering, we may have lost a dear friend today."

"We were only trying to help," Alex said.

"Yes, just as Custer was at the Little Big Horn and look what happened to him!"

## **Chapter Twelve**

Francesca and Brandy arrived in Albany late on Thursday night after a quick trip to Tallahassee. Arriving that afternoon at the law offices of one of Mike Thompson's colleagues, they had found all the necessary papers ready for their quickie marriage and had said their vows before a notary public there in the office, the nuptials witnessed by two lawyers. Following a side trip to a jeweler for simple plain gold bands for each of the newlyweds and a celebratory supper at a posh eatery, they had headed up to Georgia.

Having made the decision not to inform her friends of her return, Francesca had gone to bed thinking no one except the guards who had stopped them at the gate to her property knew she and Brandy were in residence.

Rising before his new wife the next morning, Brandy slipped into a pair of black poly-mesh shorts, snagged a large towel from the linen closet in the bathroom, then padded barefoot downstairs. Going into the kitchen, he punched in the code Francesca had given him to turn off the alarm on the patio doors and went outside, leaving the double French doors open to the early morning air. Spreading the towel on the still damp patio flagstone, he sat down to begin his morning yoga exercises.

Regina Castile was in the den reading the morning paper when she heard the patio doors open. Glancing at the home security alarm panel on the wall, she saw the control for those doors had been deactivated from inside the house. Frowning, she laid the paper aside, picked up her steaming cup of coffee, and went into the kitchen. When she saw the man lying face down on the patio with his head pillowed on his hands, legs slightly apart and toes touching, she quietly slipped between the opened French doors and out onto the patio, making her way stealthily to one of the overstuffed lawn chairs about fifteen feet away.

Brandy was totally focused on the exercises, oblivious to every thing around him as he shifted from position to position, keeping himself

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grounded, centered, his breathing relaxed. Normally he worked to soft music but it was early and he did not want to wake Francesca.

It was an impressive sight that Regina was observing as she slowly sipped her coffee. Her gaze was riveted to the rippling muscles that corded and bunched, flexed and relaxed as the extraordinarily handsome man on the towel moved so effortlessly through his routine. She had the opportunity to study him at length as he worked. For an hour she observed him until he turned at one point to find her staring at him and went as perfectly still as a statue.

Reggie would later tell her mother she had seen stark fear shoot through his eyes for a moment before he relaxed. "You must be Regina," he said.

Reggie smiled. "And you're my mother's gigolo," she replied softly.

He flexed his neck from side to side then bent down to pluck the towel from the flagstones. "Actually, I prefer boy toy," he said, wiping his face and chest of the light sheen of sweat that had gathered there from his workout.

"Well, sugar," Reggie drawled, "you're far from being a boy and I'd venture to say no woman would dare toy with you. What am I supposed to call you?" She arched an eyebrow at him. "Just don't expect me to call you Daddy."

"Brandy will do just fine," he told her.

"Brandy what?"

"Fontanelle," he answered.

Her gaze dropped to his left hand. "So you two made it legal, huh?"

He draped the towel around his neck. "How do you feel about that?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

She tilted her head to one side. "To be honest, I was perfectly prepared to despise you on sight, cry foul, beat my chest and yowl, but how can I do any of that when you look so good I can see why my mother would want to jump your bones?"

"Looks aren't everything, Regina," he said.

"No, but when a man looks like you, no woman's heart is safe." She narrowed her eyes. "Or her bank account."

"Oh," he said. "Now I've gone from being a gigolo to being a hustler."

"From what Aunt Alex told me, you are a high priced pro," she said.

"She'd know," he said, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

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Reggie's smile widened at the insult. "So tell me," she said. "Do you work the porn circuit doing movies, posing for nude shots, stripping in clubs, that sort of thing?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Bummer," she said, putting the empty coffee cup on the table beside the chair. "I was hoping I could go rent something with you in it."

"Sorry to disappoint you," he said.

"You haven't," she said. "I like that tat, by the way."

He glanced down at his right arm. "I'm going to have it removed."

"Too bad," she said. She drew her legs up into the chair. "After I spoke to Aunt Alex on Monday, I called a friend of mine who used to live in New Orleans. I asked him if he knew you and he said he did."

Brandy's eyebrows shot up. "Really? And who was this?"

"Just a friend," she replied, her cheeks blooming in a faint shade of pink.

He unfolded his arms and took hold of the ends of the towel, pulling on the towel. He looked at her with a faint smile. "So what did this friend say about me?"

She surprised the hell out of him with her answer.

"That you were one of the really good guys." She held his gaze. "That if you left New Orleans with my mother, you did so because you really love her and were willing to risk everything to be with her. He said what you did was exceedingly dangerous—not just to you, but to my mother—but that he figured you'd find a way to make it work because what you put your mind to, you do."

Brandy whistled. "I can't imagine anyone having that kind of faith in me."

"He said you'd say that," she told him. "He said you were one of the most honest people he'd ever known, so here's my question to you." Her smile faded. "Do you really love my mother?"

"With all my heart," he answered.

Reggie stared at him for a long moment, then slowly nodded. "Okay." She held out her hand. "Think we can be friends?"

He walked over to her and took her hand. "Yes."

"Good," Reggie said, "but I'm still not going to call you Daddy. How 'bout I call you Cajun?"

He shrugged. "I can live with it."

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"Now that warms my heart even better than this truly delicious coffee," Francesca said, and they both turned to see her leaning against the patio door jamb.

Reggie got up and came over to her mother to give her a kiss. "You did good, Mama," she whispered, bussing her mother's cheek. "He's hotter than a pancake griddle." She glanced around at Brandy. "Wanna cup of coffee?"

"Please," he said. "Black."

"Black?" she echoed. "Oh, that's just gross. Don't tell me you're into health food to go along with that yoga-schmoga."

"Heavens, no!" Francesca answered for him. "The man is a veritable fast food junkie!"

Reggie laughed and went into the kitchen.

Francesca went to the grouping of chairs where her daughter had been sitting and sat down on an oversized glider, patting the seat beside her. She had on a lightweight terrycloth pullover that fell to her ankles and she was barefoot. Sitting down beside her, Brandy sat the glider into motion.

"So what do you think of my little girl?" she asked.

He grinned mischievously. "It runs in the family."

"What does?"

"Hairy toes," he giggled. "Hers have more hair than yours."

"How dare you ogle my daughter's bare toes!" she said, pretending outrage.

"Hey, baby, if they're in plain sight, I'm gonna look," he said, lacing his fingers through hers. He brought the back of her hand to his lips as Reggie came out with his coffee.

"What are you castigating him about, Mama?" she asked as Brandy took the cup.

"My husband has a foot fetish," her mother said on a long sigh.

"Oh, kinky," Reggie said, sitting down across from them. "He likes my feet, does he?"

"Just your big toes," Brandy corrected.

Reggie looked down at her feet. "You're into hairy digits, too, huh? Collier likes to shave them for me. He..."

"More information than we need!" her mother interrupted.

"I think I'm gonna like your Collier," Brandy said.

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"He'll be here this weekend," Reggie told him. "We wanted to take a look at the property Mama bought for the low-cost senior citizen housing."

"We can ride out there today," Francesca said. "Brandy is going to be one of our carpenters." She squeezed his hand.

Reggie's eyes lit up. "Ooh, now that's a mental image that will stay with me all day. Cajun stripped to the waist wearing a faded pair of tight blue jeans with ragged holes in the knees, a leather tool belt slung low around his waist, mud-streaked old tennis shoes and sweat dripping down that hairy chest and off that too-beautiful curly black hair—sans baseball cap, of course." She wagged her brows.

"Sure, give the boy toy heat stroke," Brandy complained. "I demand the use of a baseball cap and I want it in my contract."

"No way, Cajun," Reggie disagreed.

"We'll let you use a sweat-soaked cowboy hat to keep your brains from being fried in the hot Georgia sun," Francesca stated and laughed at her husband's groan.

"My aunts will be over to watch the show all day long," Reggie put in.

"Your aunts can go take a hike," Francesca said, her mouth tight. "Interfering old biddies."

"Aunt Sammi told Daddy about it," Reggie informed her mother.

"Oh, that's just great!" Francesca snapped. "That is all the hell we need! That pompous ass will be over here reading me the riot act and..."

"He'll be escorted off the property if he says one word to offend you," Brandy said. He gave Reggie a steady look. "No offense, but I won't let him upset your mother."

"No offense taken," Reggie said. "My father can be a bit overbearing, but I don't know anyone who's ever successfully put him in his place. I'm looking forward to seeing you try."

"I'll do more than try," Brandy said quietly.

Francesca turned her head to look at her husband. She'd never heard that tone of voice before and it made her womb contract. She gave him a 100-watt grin.

"Atta boy, Cajun," Reggie said. She stood. "I'm gonna go take a quick shower. When do you want to go out to that property, Mama?"

"In about thirty minutes?" Francesca asked. "I have some legal matters to go over with Mike Thompson later today, so I thought we

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could go out to the property then have lunch out at the mall at that Mexican place."

"That'll work," Reggie agreed.

After Reggie had gone inside, Francesca swiveled on the seat so she could look directly at Brandy. "Richard will do everything in his power to cause us trouble, Cowboy," she said.

"He won't be the only one," he reminded her.

"When I woke up to find you gone, my heart missed a beat until I heard you two out here talking," she said. "Don't ever scare me like that again."

"I didn't want to wake you," he said.

"Wake me," she ordered. "I would have liked to watch you going through your paces."

"How 'bout you join me tomorrow morning?" he asked. Yoga is a great way to start the day."

She leaned over and kissed him. "I can think of an even better way to start our days."

He returned her kiss then got up from the glider. "I need a shower, too."

"I'll join you," she whispered.

On their way up the stairs—her hand in his—she told him she had decided to throw a party to introduce him to Albany society. "A sort of preemptive strike," she said.

"Are you ready for that?" he asked, his brows drawn together.

"Everyone is going to know about you," she said. "Richard is worse than any old woman when it comes to gossiping." They had reached their bedroom. "If we throw this elaborate wingding and invite on the movers and shakers, the important folk, and you charm them as I know you can..."

"Sure, throw the boy toy to the wolves," he said with a sigh as he twisted the lock on the bedroom door.

"They'll slobber all over you, stud," she said. She pulled off the terrycloth pullover to reveal nothing underneath. "And you will have the women eating out of your hand."

Brandy's gaze was riveted on his wife's lush breasts. "And the men?"

"They'll be green with envy and hate you on sight, but I have a way to endear you to them."

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He stepped out of his shorts and kicked them aside, coming to press his sweaty body against hers, taking her into his arms. "How you gonna do that, *bébé*?"

All other thoughts went completely out of Francesca's head. She reached her hands around to cup his delectable rear. "You know, I could munch on these hot buns all day."

"You know what goes good with hot buns?" he asked, rubbing his hardening erection against her belly.

"What's that?" she asked in a gruff voice.

"Warm honey, and I know exactly where the pot is."

"Oh, I bet you do, Pooh Bear," she replied. When she saw tears suddenly gathering in his eyes, she stepped back. "Baby, what is it?"

His face contorted with emotion. "I just love you so much it hurts, 'Cesca," he said. "I can't believe I'm standing here with you and that you are my wife. I never thought I'd ever have someone to care for."

She put her arms around him. "Someone to care for you," she stressed. "You have a family, now, my love, and we're gonna take care of you."

He swiped at moisture trickling down his cheek but was too choked up to say anything. She simply took his hand and led him into the bathroom with a hot promise in her eyes that took his breath away.

\* \* \* \*

Reggie was in the kitchen again when her mother and new stepfather came downstairs. She waited until Janelle, the black housekeeper, had been introduced to Brandy before telling her mother that she'd had a phone call while they were in the shower.

"From Daddy," Reggie said.

"Did you tell him...?"

"He knows you're home," she said. "The guards out on the gate wouldn't let him in this morning, so he's out there on his cell phone waiting for you to give the guards permission for him to come in."

"Like hell I will," Francesca snapped. She asked Janelle if the guards had given her a number to reach them.

"Yes, ma'am," Janelle said and went to a desk by the subzero refrigerator to pluck a card from the bulletin board on the wall over the computer monitor on the desk. She handed the card to Francesca.

Going to the wall phone, Francesca called the number and spoke to the guard on the gate. "Under no circumstances is Mr. Castile to be allowed onto these premises. Understood?" She listened. "I don't care



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what he threatens you with, young man. This is my house, not his, and I am ordering you to send him on his way. Tell him if he doesn't vacate my driveway, I will call the police and have him forcibly removed from my property. You can also tell him I will be obtaining a restraining order this morning to keep him away from me and my husband!"

Brandy winced when Francesca slammed the received back on the wall cradle. "Ouch, Sweetness." He suddenly reached behind then slapped his palm against his forehead. "I forgot my wallet. I'll be right back."

Reggie made a point of letting her mother see her ogling Brandy's ass as he hurried out of the kitchen. "Hubba, hubba, huh Jannie?" she asked the housekeeper.

"Nice," Janelle said with a bob of her head.

"Look, but no touching, ladies," Francesca said.

Reggie then told her mother about the scared look she'd seen on Brandy's face when he'd discovered her watching him earlier. "I think I unsettled him there for a moment."

"You did," Francesca said. "It disturbed him that he hadn't been aware of you. He'll be more cautious from now on. We can't afford to take chances."

"You really think the woman he worked for is going to come after him?" Reggie asked.

"I hope not but better safe than sorry," her mother answered.

Brandy entered the kitchen. "Lunch will be on me, ladies," he said.

"Won't that get a bit messy?" Reggie asked, batting her eyes.

"Mind outta the gutter, Regina Faye," her mother warned. She picked up the receiver and dialed the gate again. "Is that asshole gone? Good. We're heading out now."

"He may be down the road a ways," Reggie suggested.

"He'd better not be," Francesca said, her eyes sparking with a militant gleam.

"Aren't you going to be hot in a long sleeve shirt?" Reggie asked Brandy.

"I'm used to it," he said. His white shirt was rolled half-way up his forearms.

"And it hides the tat, huh?" Reggie inquired.

"Yes, it does," Brandy replied.

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"Daddy has a tat," Reggie said and at her mother's astonished look, nodded. "It's this small version of his company logo on the fleshy part of his right forearm."

"You've got to be kidding!" Francesca exclaimed. "Was that the bimbo's idea?"

"It was done by the owner of Miami Ink when Daddy came down to visit us a couple of months ago," Reggie told her. "And he bitched and moaned about how bad it hurt. Wait 'til he gets a gander at Cajun's armband!"

"There's no fool like an old fool," Francesca grumbled.

\* \* \* \*

The property up in Lee County was bordered on one side by the meandering Kinchafoonee Creek, a Creek Indian word meaning white bones. The reddish-brown water ran sluggishly along the banks among Georgia pine, scrub oaks, and cypress trees. Encompassing sixty-eight acres, the land that had been left to Francesca by a great aunt was on high ground and would make an ideal rural setting for those who wanted quiet country living.

Walking along the pathway that had been bulldozed for the site planners to gain access, Francesca pointed out where she thought a system of cul-de-sacs should be set.

"I disagree," Brandy said, shading his eyes from the harsh morning sun. Even the dark Ray-Bans he wore did little to cut down on the glare.

"Why?" Reggie asked.

"The one thing most elderly people seem to hold most dear is companionship," Brandy said. "Many of them have lost their lifelong partners, their siblings, and they've retired with nowhere to go and nothing much to do. In any town in any state in the Union, you'll find older people—especially men—gathered in little mom and pop cafes or sitting together in fast food restaurants, just shooting the bull. Not buying more than a cup or two of coffee, but spending as much time there as the management will allow."

"That's true," Reggie said. "So?"

"Why not design this property in a large circle with the duplexes side by side? No streets except for the one. Don't make it a neighborhood. Make it home. Have wheelchair accessible sidewalks. In the middle, put in a nice pond with a walking bridge over it, fill it with koi and swans and ducks for the old folks to feed. Plant flowers and shrubs to add eye appeal. Scatter comfortable benches and picnic tables

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about. Put in horseshoe pits. Have a little clubhouse facility off to one side where they can have their morning coffee and play checkers and sit around shooting the breeze all day if they want. Maybe bring a visiting nurse in once a week to take vitals and to put them through a simplified exercise regimen. Hell, it wouldn't cost all that much to hire a team of resident nurses to be on call twenty-four hours a day. Hire a recreational director to plan programs for them. Install a big screen TV for them to watch old movies on. Alternate different religious services every Sunday for those who can't get to church or temple. Have fish fries and barbecues once a month. Maybe put in a nice kitchen where noonday meals can be provided for them at a small cost. Circle the entire back end of the property with a level walking path for them to take exercises, maybe provide three-wheel bikes for them to ride. Equip each one of the residents with one of those life alert necklaces in case they fall or..."

"You've really been thinking about this, haven't you, cowboy?" Francesca asked, amazed at his thoughtfulness.

He shrugged. "I just know if I had grandparents, I'd want to make sure their golden years were as comfortable as possible. They've given so much, so it's time they reaped a few of the benefits."

"And we could build communities like this all over the south!" Reggie said, her eyes glowing. "I have a piece of land that would be perfect for something like this!"

"Just so you know, I get dibs on calling bingo on Sunday afternoon," Brandy said. "I want it in my job description, boss lady."

Francesca slipped her arm around her husband's waist. She looked up at him with adoring eyes. "You are something else, Brandyn Fontanelle. Do you know that?"

"I'm what you're making me, 'Cesca," he said as he draped his arm over her shoulders.

Reggie walked over to them and slipped her arm around Brandy's waist, too. "We're going to be a helluva team, guys," she said. She hugged him. "I can't wait to get this thing started."

The sound of tires crunching over dirt made them all turn around.

"Oh, hell," Francesca said. "It's Richard."

Brandy tightened his hold on his wife, feeling her fingers digging into the fabric of his white cotton shirt.

The Cadillac CTS-V braked angrily—if a luxury car can do that—and a man with a shock of thick white hair got out, slamming the door savagely behind him.

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"Goddamn it, Francesca! Do you have any idea how humiliated I was at the gate this morning?" he yelled at her. He marched toward them, his face stony, and his hands clenched into fists. "I ought to slap the shit out of you, woman!"

"Try it and you'll be sipping your next year's worth of meals through a straw," Brandy said quietly.

"Tell your white trash himbo to keep his mouth shut or I'll..."

Brandy removed his arm from Francesca and stepped forward. "I'm right here and there's nothing wrong with my hearing, old man. Tell me yourself."

Richard lifted his chin. "I have nothing to say to you, dude," he snapped.

"Dude?" Brandy repeated, blinking with amusement.

"What do you want, Richard?" Francesca asked. She had taken her place beside Brandy and wrapped her hands around his upper left arm as though to keep him in check.

"Well, obviously I'm too late to keep you from marrying this...this..." He flicked a disgusted look over Brandy, "...person, but the least you can do is possess the common courtesy not to expose our daughter to this sordid nonsense."

"What nonsense is that, Daddy?" Reggie asked. "Mama and Brandy are in love and I, for one, think it's great."

"You are a young and impressionable girl, Regina," Richard snapped. "You have no concept of how this is going to affect my business, my..."

Brandy folded his arms over his chest. "How is it going to affect you, Dick?" he asked, stressing the name and giving it a connotation the women understood all too well. "You're not in business with my wife, are you?"

"Francesca," Richard said, ignoring Brandy, "please tell this individual to stop interfering in our conversation and to keep his mouth shut or I will to shut it for him."

"Bring it on, pops," Brandy said. "If you think you're man enough."

"I am more man than you are, you little guttersnipe!" Richard insulted him.

"Actually, I can swear on a stack of bibles that Brandy is ten times the man you were in your heyday, Richard," Francesca said. "Now if you want to get into a pissing contest with him I can't stop you but I do know his is a lot bigger than yours."

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"And at least thirty years younger and harder," Brandy quipped.

Richard roared and rushed forward, taking a wild roundhouse swing at Brandy's head.

Brandy pushed Francesca out of the way and ducked, driving a hard fist into the older man's gut. Richard grunted, gagged, and then went down to one knee, gasping for breath.

Reggie shook her head. "Not cool, Daddy," she said and headed back to her mother's car. "Not cool at all."

"I'll have him arrested," Richard hissed.

"You took the first swing, Richard," Francesca reminded him. "Get the hell up and get off my property."

Richard staggered to his feet, one hand pressed tightly to his throbbing gut. "You will be sorry you did that, boy," he threw at Brandy.

"Leave my wife alone, Dick," Brandy said. "Come around again and I'll cut you so badly it'll take five surgeons to sew you together again." He reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a switchblade, snicking it open with practiced ease, the blade glinting lethally in the morning sun.

Richard's eyes flared. "Did you hear him threaten me?" he asked Francesca as he hurried back to the safety of his car.

"I didn't hear anything," Francesca said.

Richard got in the car and the thump of the locks engaging almost made Francesca laugh. She watched her ex-husband backing down the road as though the hounds of hell were after him. She turned to Brandy.

"I'll cut you so badly it'll take five surgeons to sew you together again?" she repeated. "Where did you hear that?"

Brandy flicked the switchblade closed and stuck it back into his pocket. He gave her a steady look. "You don't know all there is to know about me, Sweetness, and never doubt that I don't know how to use that blade. I do."

They walked back to the car, and when they got inside Reggie leaned forward from the back seat and tapped Brandy on the shoulder. When he looked around at her, she informed him that although it wasn't illegal to own a switchblade in the state of Georgia, it was, however, illegal to carry one.

"Duly noted," he said and slipped the blade out of his pocket, opened the glove compartment, and tossed it inside.

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

"Is it legal to carry them in the state of Louisiana?" Francesca asked, wondering if he'd been carrying that dangerous looking weapon when they were together.

"No," he replied. "Can't own one or carry it there."

"Don't be surprised if Daddy sends the law after you," she warned and sat back in the seat.

"I'd be surprised if he didn't," Brandy declared.

"I have to ask," Reggie said. "Do you have any outstanding warrants out on you?"

"Nope," he replied. "Not even a parking ticket."

"Okay," she said. "Just wanted to be on the safe side."

"If Richard goes to the police, they'll do a background check and Madame will find out where you are," Francesca said.

"And you don't think she does already?" he countered.

"I'm more concerned with the cops finding out he's a hooker," Reggie said and grinned playfully at Brandy.

"How many times do I have to tell you I'm a boy toy, *fille*?" Brandy queried.

Francesca looked worried and he slid his hand to her shoulder. "It'll be okay, Sweetness."

She nodded but she caught Reggie looking at her in the rear view mirror and neither woman felt relieved at his words.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

In the Mexican restaurant, it was Reggie who saw the two Dougherty County cops strolling in, stopping to speak to the hostess for a moment before the Latino woman turned and pointed toward their table.

"Here comes Johnny Law," Reggie mumbled.

Thankful the restaurant wasn't full of patrons, Francesca nevertheless tensed and opened her purse to extract her cell phone. She thumbed in Mike Thompson's number and spoke quietly to the person who answered on the other end.

"Here they come with one hand on their gun and the other on their nightsticks. Don't they look threatening?" Reggie whispered to Brandy.

Brandy had his back to the advancing lawmen and just continued to eat the plate of tacos in front of him. When the two policemen appeared beside the table, he looked up at them, his smile wavering just a little. "Hello, officers," he said.

"Are you Brandyn Fontanelle?" the burlier of the two inquired.

"Yes, sir," Brandy said. "That would be me."

"Would you step out of the booth, sir?"

"Certainly," Brandy said and when the cops moved back, he scooted out of the booth, his hands held away from his side.

"Would you empty your pockets, please."

Brandy nodded and reached behind him to pull out his wallet.

"Slowly, please," the burly cop instructed.

Brandy laid his wallet on the table and fished into his front right pocket for the handful of change and the finger rosary he had there. He laid the change on the table. Without being asked, he pulled the pocket inside out and moved to the left pocket.

"Do you own a switchblade knife, Mr. Fontanelle?" the other policeman asked.

"Yes, sir, but I am not carrying it on me," he said. "I understand that is against the law in the state of Georgia." He pulled a few dollar bills from his left pocket and pulled that pocket inside out, as well. With his

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hands still well away from his body, he looked the burly cop in the eye. "Would you like to frisk me, officer?"

The big cop stepped closer, crowding Brandy. "I'd love to frisk you, son," he said in a low voice only Brandy heard, his dark blue orbs boring into Brandy's eyes. His gaze slithered down Brandy slowly and he caressed his nightstick as though it were a woman's breast. "Maybe some other time. Don't guess I've got any probable cause to do so right now." He glanced at Francesca, who was holding the cell phone to her ear. "Give my regards to your lawyer, Mrs. Castile."

"Fontanelle," Brandy corrected and when the cop's gaze shifted meanly to him, Brandy never flinched. "She's Mrs. Fontanelle now."

A sneer tugged at the cop's upper lip. "Yeah," he said and touched his finger to the brim of his uniform cap. "You ladies have a nice day now, you hear?"

Sauntering away like they owned the restaurant, the cops stopped briefly at the cashier's desk, then continued on outside.

"I wouldn't want to get on that bastard's bad side," Reggie said, watching Brandy's face.

"No, you really wouldn't," Brandy said, sitting down. He was aware of the other people in the restaurant staring at them.

"They are gone, Mike," he heard Francesca say, then, "I'll ask him." She looked at Brandy. "Did they threaten you?"

"No," Brandy said. He pushed his plate away, no longer hungry. He sat back, listening to his wife finishing up her conversation with the attorney.

"What did Richard tell the police?" A brief pause. "Unh huh, I didn't figure he would. He knew Reggie and I would tell them he started it. Yes, I know he's crazy. I've known that for years." There was a long pause before she spoke again. "Yes, I would appreciate that, Mike. The sooner the better. Thank you."

When she hung up, she stuffed the cell phone into her purse. "What did that pig say to you?" she asked Brandy.

"Just the usual intimidation bullshit. Nothing I haven't heard before," he said. And certainly nothing for you to worry about."

"Mike is going to get a restraining order against Richard. I don't want this situation to escalate," Francesca said.

"It won't if it's left up to me," Brandy said, "but I'm not going to back down to him, 'Cesca."

"I wouldn't expect or want you to," his wife told him.



## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"You're used to that kind of thing, aren't you?" Reggie inquired.

"Are you ladies finished?" Brandy asked. He wanted to get out of the restaurant and away from the prying stares that were crawling all over them.

Once out in the parking lot, Brandy slipped the Ray-Bans on. He didn't miss the police cruiser parked near the mall's entrance or the two cops leaning against the side.

"Drive slow and cautiously, 'Cesca," he told his wife.

She understood. "I always do," she said and, at his snort, bumped her hips against his.

"Are you saying my mother has a lead foot?" Reggie asked.

"It's all that hair on her toes that weighs it down," Brandy sniped.

Laughing, the trio climbed into the car and drove slowly and cautiously from the mall parking lot and into the traffic on Dawson Road.

\* \* \* \*

Reggie had made plans to have supper with friends and, since her fiancé wouldn't be coming in until the weekend, she had informed her mother she would most likely be spending the night with one of those friends.

"To allow us a bit of privacy," Francesca told Brandy as they finished up the steaks, baked potatoes, and salad Janelle had prepared for their supper. Now, they were lounging by the pool, watching the sun slowly lower in the west.

"I like Regina," he told her mother.

"She likes you," Francesca said. "Frankly, I had been worried. I don't see her very often and I just didn't know how she'd react to you."

"She's got a good head on her shoulders," he said.

They were silent as the crickets tuned up and the cicadas answered, buzzing through the cooling evening. The water in the pool looked so inviting Brandy suggested they take a dip.

"I'm too full to go put on my suit," Francesca complained.

He unbuttoned his shirt. "Who said you had to?" he asked.

She was lying on one of the plush chaise lounges, her ankles crossed, a glass of her precious Bailey's in hand. She eyed him as he unbuttoned his jeans and stepped out of them.

"What if Janelle looks out her window and sees us?" she asked.

"She'll get quite a show," he said, then turned and dove gracefully into the pool, setting out with sure, strong strokes beneath the water,

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swimming as expertly as a dolphin to the shallow end of the pool. He jackknifed and started back again, moving like a missile through the waves. When he surfaced, he flung the hair out of his eyes, spraying an arc of water in the air, reaching up to hold onto the diving board. He crooked a finger at her. "Come here, you."

Francesca took a leisurely sip of her Irish cream then put the glass aside. She took off her clothes and walked to the edge of the pool, sitting down on the coping, her feet in the water. "You want me?" she asked. "Come get me, stud."

"Oh, *bébé*," he growled and let go of the diving board, sinking down beneath the water like a submarine.

Before she could scramble up, he had her ankles in his hands, gripped tightly. She laughed. "You evil man, you," she chided, realizing he had begun using that particular form of endearment as though to cleanse it of any other meaning it had for him.

Very slowly, he splayed her legs open until he could press his face against her sex. He was treading water and it had to be hard for him to do but he lapped at her, his tongue cool along her warm folds. He slipped his tongue inside her as her fingers threaded through his wet curls.

"The things you do to me should be a sin," she told him.

He looked up at her. "They are," he said, then flicked his tongue out to stab at her clit. He pulled her into the water with him, sliding her body down his, then laid out flat on his back, drawing her over him, his powerful legs kicking as he propelled them backwards through the water.

"Tell me your most wicked fantasy," he said, one arm locked around her, the other drawing the water toward him as he swam.

"You are my most wicked fantasy," she responded and laid her cheek on his chest.

In the house, they could hear the phone ringing and one glance upwards at a flicker of movement at one second story window, Francesca groaned. "She was watching!"

"Maybe she'll learn something," Brandy said of the housekeeper.

When they reached the shallow end, he turned so she was beneath him and he took her legs, dragging them around his waist. "Love me, Sweetness," he said in a husky voice.

Francesca felt the prod of his thick erection and maneuvered her body so she could slide down on it, locking the two of them together. "Don't you ever get tired of making love to me?" she asked.

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"No, and I never will," he said as he began the slow thrust of his shaft inside her channel.

He took her slow and easy with the water waving over them. His hands were under her rump, her arms were around his neck and when they came, it was a soft, sweet spasm of pure heaven that had them clinging to one another long after the sun had set.

\* \* \* \*

Georgi frowned when she looked up to see the visitor who had barged into her house. "I don't remember inviting you over," she said.

"Give me the name of the whorehouse where that sleaze worked in N'Orlens," Richard demanded.

Getting up from her lounge chair, Georgi padded over to the bar. "Want something to drink?" she inquired, pouring another liberal amount of scotch into her glass.

"I want the name, Georgette!" he growled. He was standing in the doorway with his shoulders hunched and his mouth in a hard line.

"May I ask what you're going to do with that information, Dick?" Brett Lansing, Georgi's husband inquired, lowering the volume on their plasma screen TV.

"This doesn't concern you, Lansing," Richard snarled. "Stay the hell out of it."

Brett shrugged and resumed watching the sitcom in which he'd been so engrossed when their maid had let Castile in.

"The place is called the House of the Rising Syn," Georgi answered, going back to her chair and sitting down, tucking her legs beneath her.

"Oh, how apropos," Richard sneered. "Do you have a number for the pimp who..."

"The Madame," Georgi corrected, "and no, I don't."

"Who does?"

"Alex."

Richard twisted his head to glare at Brett. "You'd better get your woman in hand, Lansing, before something similar happens to you."

Brett didn't bother to look around, just waved a hand at Richard, who spun on his heel and marched out. "What a prick," Brett commented.

"Think I should call Frankie?" Georgi asked, chewing nervously on her thumb nail.

"Has she returned any of your five thousand urgent calls since she's been back?" Brett asked.

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Georgi replied she hadn't.

"Then stay out of it," Brett suggested. "I think you and the other women have caused enough trouble for Frankie already."

\* \* \* \*

Richard jerked the cell phone from his pocket on the way back to his car and thumbed in the speed dial for Alex. When she answered, he demanded the number of the bordello.

"I heard there is a restraining order against you," Alex said.

"Just give me the fucking number!" Richard snarled, and when he had it, he called Alex a bitch then hung up, thumbing in the New Orleans number as fast as his thumb would move.

\* \* \* \*

"He says he is the ex-husband of Francesca Castile," Madame's secretary informed her.

"Tell him I have nothing to speak with him about, but tell him not to worry. Everything will be taken care of in due time," Madame said, the paper in her hands crackling as she scrunched it up. "And do not disturb me the rest of the evening. I have the headache from Hell."

Going up to her room, Madame kept the paper clutched in her hand. Anyone who had reason to glimpse the look on her face kept well out of the black woman's way for that look never boded well for the person who had caused it. Once in her room, she shut and locked the door, then went to the sofa in her sitting room and sat down, the paper still gripped tightly in her hand. For a long time she sat looking at the lovely painting of a magnolia tree in full bloom that hung on her wall. When at last, she tore her attention from the painting and looked down at the wad of paper in her hand she carefully unfolded it and smoothed it out on her silk clad thigh.

The paper was a hated reminder of Madame's very vigilant plans having been foiled. It was a copy of the marriage certificate between Francesca Marie Castile and Brandyn Jules Fontanelle.

"Damn you, Brandy," she whispered.

Not even Kit Léglise had dared go this far. Fucking a client behind Madame's back was one thing, and might even have been pardoned if adequate atonement had been made. But marrying her legally was another matter entirely, and it was something the black woman had not seriously counted on happening. She hadn't thought Brandy had the nerve but obviously another part of his anatomy was now doing the thinking for him.

## **CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO**

"You made a bad, bad mistake, Brandy," Madame said. "A lethal mistake."

Picking up the phone, she dialed Gaston's extension and when he answered, she ordered him and Remy to Georgia.

"I want to know when and where the best place would be to catch him off guard. Check out every angle and leave nothing to chance. I want to hit him hard where it will do the most good before you pick him up. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And Gaston? No mistakes."

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Despite having agreed to be up and about with Brandy early the next morning to begin learning the yoga he loved, Francesca had instead burrowed further down into her pillows when he'd kissed her awake, mumbling something about having had too much sex. Grinning, he'd left her alone and gone downstairs to start a pot of coffee. Having the patio all to himself this time but checking out his surroundings carefully—as he had failed to do the morning before—he engrossed himself in the calming effect of the exercises. When he was finished with his routine, he poured a cup of coffee and took it with him down to the front gate to talk with the guards.

Vern Franklin was in charge of the three men guarding the front gate. He was an affable fellow with a penchant for discussing the latest sports' world fiascos. He could—if given the chance—go on indefinitely about the silliness of paying athletes ungodly sums of money to play. That day, he was particularly incensed about the multi-million dollar deal a pro baseball player had received.

"Here's the working man out trying to make a decent living for his family and you get some wet behind the ears, snot-nosed brat from some place I never heard tell of getting more money than Midas just to pitch a little ball across home plate. Just ain't right, Mr. Fontanelle. It just danged sure ain't right," Vern stated.

Brandy commiserated with Vern though he had no idea who the man was talking about or why Vern should care so deeply. He listened more than he spoke, and when the Dougherty County cop car pulled up across the street and the duo of policemen from the day before got out and leaned against the front of the vehicle, he asked Vern if he knew the larger of the two men.

Vern glanced around and frowned. "Unfortunately I do, Mr. Fontanelle. That big bruiser is Lane Beaudry," he said, making the name sound like a curse. "I've had a few words with him in the past. He ain't

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the kind of man you want to tangle with. There's those who say he's meaner than a junkyard dog."

"And the other one?"

"That's Levon Bass," Vern said. "Bass ain't so bad but he takes his clues from Beaudry, if you know what I mean."

Brandy took a sip of his coffee, staring directly at the brawny cop whose legs were crossed at the ankle as he lounged against his cruiser with his hands braced behind him on the fender. "I think I'll go see what he wants," he said.

Vern's frown deepened. "Why don't you let me do that, sir?" he asked, worry rife in his tone.

"Thanks, but I can handle it," Brandy said and started across the street, looking both ways before he stepped off the curb. This morning he had on black ankle length workout pants but his chest and feet were bare.

The second cop was leaning across the hood of the car, chewing on a wooden toothpick, his hands clasped loosely in front of him. He had a gaze almost as unapproachable as Bass', but at least he nodded politely enough when Brandy came up to the car. Bass didn't move a muscle and his taut face was completely expressionless.

"Morning, Officer Bass," Brandy said. He barely glanced at Beaudry. "You gentlemen are out early."

"Crime don't keep no hours," Bass said in a thick southern accent.

"I suppose not," Brandy agreed. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Bass looked to his partner. Beaudry was giving Brandy a withering look that was intended to make the younger man nervous.

"Go talk to Franklin 'til I call you," Beaudry ordered Bass in a gruff voice.

Without a word, Bass pushed away from the cruiser, skirted the front of it, and headed for the guards at the gate to Francesca's property.

"You've got him trained well," Brandy observed.

"*Épargnez la tige et abîmez l'enfant*," Beaudry recited the old adage of sparing the rod and spoiling the child, then turned his head and spat. "What you doing here, B.J.?"

"I was going to ask you the same question, Lane," Brandy said. It had been years since anyone had called him by his nickname and it sent chills down his spine. "You could've knocked me over with a feather when I looked up and saw you yesterday. It was all I could do not to laugh."

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Beaudry snorted. "Should have frisked you like I wanted to," he said and turned his head so his gaze locked with Brandy's. "Should have run my big old callused paw all over that itty bitty package of yours."

Brandy's back was to the guards at the gate so no one but Beaudry saw him grin. "That package ain't so little no more, Gator," he stated.

The big cop snorted again. "Seems to me you're in a heap of trouble...again." He gave the younger man a slow once over. "Can't keep it out of mischief, can you?" When Brandy didn't answer, he asked who he figured Madame would send after him.

"Gaston and Remy," Brandy answered and at Beaudry's arched eyebrow, he nodded. "She hired them right after she hired me."

"Son of a bitch," Beaudry hissed. "I still think they had somethin' to do with what happened to Kit."

"You were lucky she didn't hire you," Brandy said.

"Hell, B.J., I knew better than to go with that mean black bitch when old Celeste got plugged 'tween her evil eyes. I warned you not to go with her either if you remember, but you wouldn't listen."

"I wasn't in any condition to listen to much of anything," Brandy said quietly.

"Yeah, well, there's some truth to that," Beaudry agreed. "You was in pretty bad shape right along then."

"I needed someone to look after me," Brandy said.

Beaudry flinched. "I know, and if'n I'd had a way to take care of you, I'd have taken you with me, B.J. Even so, I don't think she would have allowed it to happen. Madame wanted you worse than anything I'd ever seen. She sure didn't want me or Waylon."

"I never understood that," Brandy said. "You boys made Celeste good money. You made a helluva lot more than I did."

"That we surely did, but Madame didn't want no rough trade in her new stable," Beaudry said, "and rough trade was our middle names, Bubba."

Brandy thought of the countless times he'd seen Beaudry and Waylon beaten so badly they had trouble walking after turning a violent trick but for every bruise, cut, welt, or bump the brothers had taken, they'd given twice that many to the johns who visited them.

"How the hell did you wind up as a cop?" Brandy said, shaking his head. He dumped the last of his coffee that was now cold on the street.



## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"I pulled in a few favors from clients in N'Orlens," Beaudry said. "I wanted to see what it was like on the other side of the law. I have some cousins here in Albany so I just headed up here, and that was that."

"What about your record?" Brandy asked.

"What record?" Beaudry challenged. "I defy you to find any records on me, son." He leaned away from the car, dusted his hands together, and then hitched up his Sam Houston belt. "I'm a good cop with a rep for being a bad ass where criminals are concerned. That's the way I want it kept. I'm happy doing my shifts and going home to my significant other."

"What's his name?" Brandy asked.

Beaudry sniffed. "None of your fucking business," he said.

"Strange name for a lover," Brandy said with a chuckle. Brandy leaned a hip against Beaudry's cruiser. "Do you ever think about back then?"

Beaudry looked off into the distance. "Every goddamn day of my life," he said. His gaze took on a bleak look. "Do you think he's alive somewhere?"

"Kit?" Brandy asked and at Beaudry's slow nod, he shrugged. "God, I hope not. I hope the man is dead and in his grave."

Pain flitted over Beaudry's face. "Me, too," he said. He reached up to adjust his hat. "You'd best hightail it back over to your fancy digs, Mr. Showboat. Our little talk is over." He glanced at Brandy. "Just wanted you to know I had your back."

Brandy wanted to hug Beaudry but he knew they were being watched. From the corner of his eye, he'd seen Francesca come out to the gate. She had started across the road but Bass waylaid her.

"Got yourself a pretty lady there," Beaudry said.

"I love her, Gator," Brandy said.

"Figured you must to have run away from Madame." He gave Brandy a chilling look. "Not the brightest move you've ever made, slick."

"If you hear anything..."

"You'll know about it," Beaudry said. "Lucky it was me what took that call when old pussy-face Castile called it in yesterdiddy." He laughed and the sound was pure evil. "I 'bout shit a brick when I heard the name Brandyn Fontanelle. Talk about blasts from the past!"

"Apparently Castile didn't file a complaint against me, then," Brandy said.

"Hell, no. Uppity snot said he just thought we should know there was a man carrying a concealed weapon, an illegal switchblade, and he

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figured we ought to take it away from him. Said he followed y'all to the mall and we could find you at the greaser joint." He eyed Brandy. "Pussy-face didn't say you threatened him with it but I figured you had to have for him to know you was carrying it. Not like you to give something like that away unless you meant for him to know 'bout it"

"I told him I'd cut him," Brandy stated.

"Try not to do it when I'm on duty. You can't believe the paperwork involved," Beaudry advised. "I'd have to run you in and strip search you and..." He wagged his brows. "Well, now on second thought, slick, you go right on and wave that little pigsticker around all you want. Slice his 'nads off for all I care. That way I'll finally get my hard old hand on that soft little cock of yours yet."

"You didn't back in the day and you ain't gonna now," Brandy quipped. He started to walk off but turned and gave Beaudry a level look. "They'll come after me eventually, Gator. I'd just as soon not wind up out in some Georgia cypress swamp swilling down quicksand."

"I'll keep an ear out, B.J.," Beaudry promised. "I owe you."

Nodding imperceptibly, Brandy headed back across the street. He held up a hand when Francesca would have berated him. "No harm, no foul," he said. "I just wanted to know the lay of the land."

"What were you thinking, Brandy?" she demanded.

He took her by the arm and gently pulled her away from the gate. "We'll talk about it up at the house."

"What did he say to you?" she asked in a low voice as they started up the drive away from the gate, unable to wait even a moment longer to know what had transpired between her husband and the cop.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you yesterday but I know him," Brandy said. "I've known him since I was a kid. We used to work together at Celeste's."

"You're joking!" she gasped, stumbling to a stop. Her eyes were wide. "That cop?"

"Well, he wasn't a cop back then."

He took her around the side of the house and out to the patio, sticking his head in the kitchen to give Janelle his empty cup and to ask her to bring them out a cup. They sat down in the glider and Brandy brought his foot up to rest it on the seat.

"We called him the Bull Gator because he was the oldest among us. I think he was thirty-two when I first met him," he explained. "He and three of his brothers were already working for Celeste when I was

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brought there. His two oldest brothers—Francois and Frederick—were better known as Frick and Frack."

"Oh, my god!" she said. "The two men who brought you to the auction that night?"

He nodded. "That was them. Lane and Waylon were twins and they were into what is known as rough trade in the business." At her perplexed look, he explained the Beaudry boys had been turned on by bondage and sado/masochistic sex. "They liked to hurt and be hurt," he told her. "They preferred men. The bigger, the better."

"That's sick," she pronounced.

"Gator sort of took me under his wing and ran interference with Celeste a lot of the time, trying to keep me away from the really sadistic johns," he went on to tell her. "There wasn't anything kinky about our relationship. Both he and Kit would take care of me after some john had hurt me. They were the big brothers I wished I'd had."

"Who is Kit?" she asked.

Brandy looked down. "Christien Léglise," he answered. "His nickname was Kit and he was in his late twenties when I first came to Celeste's. He was a great guy. Handsome, muscular, with a very gentle personality. Men liked to hurt Kit because he gave off this naive, childlike innocence. It was like he'd turn the other cheek, let them bash that one in, and then turn back with a smile for them to hit him again. I always suspected Kit was doing penance for something in his earlier life. He seemed to think he deserved being treated like that. Gator was deeply in love with him."

"Were they lovers...?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "It wasn't like that. I don't know if Kit ever knew Gator loved him. I sincerely doubt it. When Celeste was killed, Madeline hired four men from her stable. Kit and I were two of them. She didn't want Lane and Waylon and I lost track of them."

"At least you had someone still looking out after you," Francesca said.

"For a little while, anyway," he said. "What Madeline didn't know when she hired us on was that Kit had been seeing this girl named Letrice LaSalle, the daughter of a civil rights' activist. They had been secretly meeting for over two years. No one knew how or where they had become involved. Kit kept pretty much to himself. They had made plans to leave the country together but on the day they were to leave, Kit up and disappeared. Two days later, Letrice was gone, too. There were

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rumors they were together but those of us at the Syn knew better. We knew without a shadow of a doubt Madeline had punished Kit for trying to leave her."

"Punished him how?" Francesca asked.

"I really don't know, 'Cesca. They could be anywhere or they could both be dead. I'm pretty damned sure they aren't together," he answered.

That news frightened Francesca and she leaned into Brandy, gripping his right arm between her hands, laying her head on his shoulder.

"He didn't say it, but I think that's why Gator became a cop," he said softly. "He wanted to try to find Kit but—like the song says—that's one body that'll never be found."

A hard shudder went through Francesca.

"I need a shower," he said, catching a whiff of the sweat permeating his body after his yoga workout. Gently disengaging his arm from his wife's tight clutch, he looked down at her. "What have you got planned for today?"

"Collier is due in from Naples today and I thought we'd go over the architect plans for the duplexes. We'll go out to Gargano's for supper. Reggie wants to go dancing. She and Collier took ballroom classes and I think she wants to show off for us."

"Okay," he said. "Wanna come scrub my back?" He wagged his brows at her.

"If I do, I'll jump your bones, cowboy," she said. "You go ahead. I need another cup of coffee."

He leaned down and kissed her before going upstairs. Her heart ached at the sight of him—his strong young body and mop of wayward curls that crowned his handsome head so perfectly stamped indelibly on her soul.

She sat there thinking about the man her husband had told her about, wondering if Kit and the woman he had loved had known this same penetrating fear that she felt. It appeared that their love had not survived Madeline Levant's vicious vengeance. She could only pray hers and Brandy's did.

\* \* \* \*

"We were all around the house last night, ma'am, and we don't see no way to get in through the fence that surrounds it without setting off the alarm. Looks like she's got one helluva security system installed and even if I could bypass it, there's still the matter of the guards," Gaston

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told Madame later that day. "They are out front and they are armed to the teeth. One sound inside that house and they'd be all over us."

"Tell her about the cop car," Remy said from the passenger seat.

Madame had heard him. "What about the cops?"

"Yeah, there's been a cruiser going back at intervals, checking things out. Thought I recognized one of the cops but I can't be sure. All I know for a fact is security is real tight around him," Gaston reported.

"So it will have to be when he's off the property," Madame said. "Did you find out about the cars they use?"

"There's a new Escalade in the garage," he replied. "Other than the maid's car and an airport rental the Cracker woman's daughter's been using, there ain't any more. Rental car is gone today."

"What about Brandy? Does he drive the Caddy?" she inquired.

"He don't go nowhere by himself," Gaston told her. "That Cracker woman is with him all the damned time and she's always driving."

"Which should make it easier for you to take her out. Let him watch her die then snatch him," Madame said. "See to it, Gaston!"

Gaston cursed as he closed the lid on his cell phone. "Fucking woman don't want much," he snarled as he pocketed the phone.

"What'd she say?"

Gaston snorted. "To take him when they're away from the house. Like we didn't know that already! She wants the woman dead but she wants him to see it done."

Remy took out his semi-automatic and, pointing it at the floorboard, ratcheted the 9mm slide to thrust ammo into the reservoir, then slid it back into his shoulder holster. "I'm ready when you are, big brother," he announced.

They were parked along the road down which Brandy and his wife would have to travel to get into town. It was a fairly overgrown section of land with tall stands of pine and scrub oak on either side and was secluded enough for an ambush. There were no cars in sight.

"Roll her down, bro," Remy said, and when Gaston pushed the electric window button, his youngest brother picked up the Dakota T-76 Longbow assault rifle from his lap and aimed it through the window opening. Eyeing down the Nightforce 12-42x56 NXS scope for a moment, he pulled off a .338 round and proficiently hit the marked pine 1200 meters to the rear of their stolen car. The yellow Day-Glo circle he'd painted earlier on the bark at about the approximate height they'd

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calculated the Georgia woman's head would be at within the confines of her car had splintered.

"Piece of cake," Remy commented as he pulled the rifle back into the car.

With his expertise and the perfect conditions of the day, the brothers knew it was possible for Remy to hit a moving target even farther away than the pine. Parked on the side of the road with the woman coming right at them, unaware they were waiting, he could sight her well before they saw him and take her out efficiently right through the windshield of the Caddy. All they needed now was their target.

\* \* \* \*

"Reggie is going to pick Collier up from the airport and meet us at Gargano's later," Francesca told Brandy as she started the car. "His plane won't be in until two. I thought we could do some shopping until then."

Brandy nodded absently. He was nervous and he didn't know why. He'd been on edge ever since climbing out of the shower. The sixth sense that had always seemed to warn him of impending danger had kicked into high gear that morning, and because it had, he had gone out to the garage earlier to make sure his switchblade was still in the glove compartment and to add additional protection just in case. He'd been afraid Francesca or Reggie had taken the eleven-inch Italian stiletto and hidden it from him but had been relieved to find it where he'd left it.

"Did you hear me?" she asked.

"Yes, mommy," he replied as he buckled his seat belt but his mind wasn't on her words. Locking himself into the safety harness just seemed to add to his anxiety. He didn't like the idea of being lashed to the seat so he quietly unhooked the belt and pushed the buckle beneath the outer edge of his left thigh and tucked it under. Any passing cop would think he was buckled in and in compliance of the law.

Francesca glanced at him and wondered about the preoccupied look on his face. His eyes seemed guarded and when they drove away from the gate and the guards, she watched him taking note of everything around them.

"Are you expecting trouble?" she asked him.

He shifted his shoulders. "I just feel tense," he answered.

"They're not going to try something in broad daylight, sweetie," she said.

"You don't know Gaston," he told her. "The man's not right in the head. There's no telling what he's liable to do."

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They were passing several large estates set well back from the road with gated entries. Ahead of them was a barren stretch of road around a sharp corner the locals called Deadman's Curve since several fatal head-on crashes had occurred there back in the fifties and sixties. The highway arced into an 85-degree turn, the south side portion of the road hidden behind a dense pine thicket. Rumble strips and an advisory thirty-five miles an hour speed limit along that part of the roadway despite the legal limit of fifty-five helped to prevent further accidents but that part of the road was still considered dangerous and few people took the curve faster than the posted thirty-five.

Brandy wasn't thinking about the curve as Francesca took it. His heart was hammering and sweat had broken out in his palms. He was looking down at his jean-clad thighs, wiping his palms down them, when his anxiety level seemed to peg out, making him snap his head up.

He saw the car before he saw the glint of morning sunlight on the glass in the rifle scope. His eyes went wide and he reached out, grabbing Francesca's arm and brutally yanking her toward him over the console. He heard her yelp of pain when her ear connected with the gear shift just a split second before the hot-bonded bullet from the sniper rifle impacted the laminated safety glass windshield, punching a hole right through it.

Driverless, Francesca's car skidded into the curve, fishtailing toward the pines. It slid off the red-clay shoulder of the road and into a shallow ditch, coming to rest against the trunk of a blackened pine.

"Stay down!" he hissed at Francesca.

Scrambling, Brandy got the glove compartment open and pulled the Smith and Wesson 990L out, pushing open his door to roll out of the car even as he slid the chamber back to advance a bullet into the semi-automatic. The heavy thud of boot steps hitting the tarmac as Gaston and Remy raced toward him made him twist around, bringing the weapon up to lay down a spread of fire low across the surface of the road.

Remy caught a bullet in the calf of his leg and went down screaming, his own handgun skittering across the pavement as he grabbed his wound with both hands. The high velocity hollow point had done maximum damage to Fontanelle's leg and he was bleeding badly, the femoral artery having been nicked and he was bleating like a stuck pig.

Chunks of asphalt sprayed up around Gaston as he spun around and went back for his brother. Pointing his gun behind him, he laid down a volley of retreating fire until his clip was emptied—bullets pinging off

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the bumper and front panels of the Escalade or thudding into the dirt in the ditch where Brandy lay—before grabbing Remy up and pulling him toward their stolen vehicle. All the while, Remy was screaming at the top of his lungs.

Getting to his feet, Brandy crouched with his knees bent, both hands on the gun, and took one last shot at Gaston as the man shoved his brother into the car, climbing over him to get to the driver's side. The round hit the back windshield and the glass exploded inward. The passenger door was swinging back and forth as Gaston stomped down on the idling accelerator, shot out onto the highway, and disappeared in a heavy explosion of burning, squealing rubber.

Francesca recognized the peeling sound of the car fleeing and lifted her head, staring at Brandy as he stood beside the car, his knees still flexed in a shooter's stance. She said nothing as he slowly straightened up and turned his face toward her. There was such fury, such brutal intent on his face, she barely recognized him.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Are you hurt?"

"N...no."

He slowly lowered the gun as sirens began to wail in the distance. Calmly, he walked over and laid the semi-automatic on the hood.

"Get out of the car, Sweetness," he said, "where the cops can see you." He came around to the passenger side of the car and put his palms flat on the top of the car and stood there waiting for the police to arrive.

Francesca opened the driver's door and stepped out as she caught sight of the strobing lights rushing toward them down the highway. She leaned against the side of the car with her arms crossed around her.

"Lower your arms, 'Cesca," he said. "Hold them out from your sides."

She did as he said, her heart thudding so hard against her ribcage she was afraid she would faint.

Tires spewing gravel, two cop cars arrived at the same time. One pulled behind the Escalade to block the road and the other pulled in front of it. Policemen got out with guns drawn.

"Don't move!" one of the police yelled at Brandy.

"No, sir," he agreed and stood stock still as the cop rushed to him. He looked into Francesca's terrified eyes and smiled gently at her to reassure her.



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"Where are the other people involved in this?" another policeman asked.

"I can tell you who they are but I can't tell you where they went," Brandy said as the cop moved up behind him and began to pat him down.

"This your weapon?" another cop asked.

"Yes, sir," Brandy replied.

"Blood all down here on the pavement," someone called out.

"You shoot one of the assailants?"

"I think so," Brandy answered.

Francesca's eyes nearly popped from her head when she saw the cop behind Brandy reach up and grab his right wrist, jerking it down behind him. "You aren't going to handcuff him!" she gasped.

"It's all right, 'Cesca," Brandy said calmly, trying not to wince as his other wrist was pulled behind him and the hinged handcuffs were locked into place around his wrists. He was like a rock standing there—steady and strong—but there was deep hurt in his amber gaze.

"No, hell it isn't!" she said, infuriated. "We were shot at and were only protecting ourselves. Why are you arresting him?"

"You have the right to remain silent," the cop told Brandy, pulling him away from the car.

"Call your lawyer, ma'am," one of the other cops said and when she turned to glare at him, she realized it was the burly man from the day before. He was holding her handbag out to her. He held her gaze. "They'll take your husband downtown for questioning. Best you get your lawyer to meet him." Snatching her purse from him, she would have gone after Brandy as they pulled him toward one of the cruisers but the big man stepped in front of her.

"He'll be all right, ma'am," the man told her. "You just make that call."

She flicked her gaze to his badge. "Beaudry," she said.

"That would be me, ma'am," he agreed. He politely took her arm. "You can ride downtown with me."

The other policemen were putting Brandy in their cruiser—one pushing Brandy's head down as he got into the backseat behind the heavy grill. When they shut the door, Brandy turned in the seat to look back at her.

"We'll be right behind 'em, ma'am," Beaudry told her as he escorted her to his cruiser.

"It was his brothers," she said.

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"Yes, ma'am," Beaudry said as he opened the backdoor of his vehicle. "I figured as much."

In the backseat of his car, she made the call to Mike Thompson to ask the attorney to meet them at the station. When she hung up, she met Beaudry's look in the review mirror. There was understanding in his dark gaze.

\* \* \* \*

No one had called Richard Castile but he showed up at the police station nevertheless. His loud blustering made it clear to everyone listening he thought he should be in charge of Francesca's safety.

"I've hired a private security firm to shadow my wife," he told the desk sergeant. "They'll be here at any moment."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," the sergeant said, rolling his eyes. "Take a seat, sir. They'll call you if they need you."

Mike Thompson was in with Brandy as his representation. Francesca was waiting in another room where she was giving her statement, her hands shaking so badly she could barely hold the cup of coffee some kind soul had supplied her. Reggie had been called and had gone to the airport to pick up Collier. They would arrive shortly.

Richard was pacing like a caged tiger when Francesca was led out of the interrogation room. He rushed to her, throwing his arms around her in a strong bear hug. "Are you all right, darling?" he asked.

Francesca pushed at him. "Of course I'm all right, Richard," she snapped.

"That little bastard could have gotten you killed," Richard said, refusing to allow her to push him away.

"You're going to smother me with your bad breath if you don't let go," Francesca hissed at him.

Reggie and her husband took that moment to come into the station. Reggie ran to her mother and Richard was forced to release her as Reggie threw her arms around her mother.

"Are you okay?" Reggie asked, tears flooding her eyes.

"I'm fine and so is Brandy," Francesca told her.

"Who gives a shit about that filthy criminal?" Richard growled.

"I do, Daddy," Reggie said.

Francesca asked Reggie to accompany her to the restroom. She had to get away from Richard before she got herself arrested for physically assaulting the fool.

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While Francesca and Reggie were down the hall Brandy was released. He and the lawyer stopped at the counter for Brandy to retrieve his valuables from the desk clerk.

"You!" Richard shouted as soon as he saw the younger man coming toward him and Collier Bennett. He marched up to Brandy, face like granite, lips cracked into a sneer. "Are you satisfied now, you worthless goddamn bastard? Frankie could have died today. Do you even care? Why the hell don't you get your ass back to Louisiana and leave her alone before you get her killed?"

Brandy said nothing to the accusation. He swung his gaze around the room looking for Francesca, worry settling when he didn't find her.

"She and Reggie are in the restroom," Collier said, stepping forward with his hand out. "I'm Col Bennett."

"Don't shake that bastard's hand, Collier!" Richard practically screamed. "Don't you know what he does with it?"

Collier ignored his future father-in-law. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Brandy acknowledged. He let go of Collier's hand, balling his fingers into fists at his side. He was glaring back at Richard with the same intensity as the older man was shooting at him.

Mike Thompson joined them. "You're free to go, Brandy," he said. "Just don't leave town."

"I'm not going anywhere," Brandy said, meeting Richard's incensed glower.

"No, you're gonna stay here until your pimp murders Frankie and you can collect her insurance," Richard snorted. "Isn't that what you cheap gigolos do?"

"Richard, for the love of God," Thompson snapped. "The man isn't even in her will yet. Leave him be!" He turned to Brandy. "Go on outside with Collier. I'll wait for Frankie."

"That's right," Richard said. "Turn tail and run like the sniveling coward you are."

The cops loitering around snickered at the insult, but stood close by in case they were needed to break up any potential violence.

"Shut the hell up, Richard!" Thompson snapped, knowing full well what Richard was trying to do.

"You letting him fight your battles for you, dude?" Richard smirked.

"I..." Brandy began but Collier took him by the arm.

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"Dick is waiting for you to take a swing at him so he can get you arrested for assault. Don't give him the satisfaction." He pulled Brandy down the hall with him.

Once outside, Brandy slumped against the brick building. "Thanks," he said.

"Castile is an asshole," Collier said. "Nobody knows that better than me."

"I'm going to wipe the floor up with him one of these days," Brandy mumbled.

"And I'll hold your coat while you do it," Collier informed him.

Francesca came hurrying out, flinging herself at Brandy, and wrapping her arms and her body around him as though she were a human shield. "Did they hurt you, baby?" she asked.

"He's fine, Frankie," Thompson said. "They didn't touch a hair on his cute little nappy head."

Collier laughed. He draped an arm around Reggie's shoulder. "Let's take them home then we'll go back and get a pizza. I don't think either one of them is in the mood for Gargano's tonight."

"No, we're not," Francesca stated.

Though the police had been in contact with area hospitals, no one had brought in a gunshot victim but even so neither Francesca nor Brandy wanted to take a chance on running into Brandy's crazed family again that day—especially with one of them severely wounded.

Sitting in the back seat of Reggie's rental car with Collier driving, Brandy was holding Francesca's hand so tightly she knew it was bruising but she didn't have the heart to tell him. He had been silent ever since they'd left the police station, staring out the window at the passing traffic as though he expected more trouble, his shoulders as rigid as though he'd been cast from stone. His left leg was jumping but she didn't think he was even aware it was doing so.

It was as they passed the place where the ambush had happened that Brandy jerked his hand from Francesca's and hissed at Collier to stop the car.

"What?" Collier asked, glancing in the rear view mirror.

"Stop the car!" Brandy yelled. "Just stop the fucking car!"

Collier braked to the side of the road but before he had the rental car to a full stop, Brandy shoved the rear door open and was out of the car, stumbling away into the pine thicket.

"What the hell is he doing?" Reggie asked.

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The three people in the car saw the young man stop, bend forward, then vomit, putting a hand on a tall pine to brace himself as he relieved his gut of the fear that had been building in him all morning.

"Stay here," Collier stay and started to get out of the car.

"No," Francesca said. "I'll go." She scooted across the back seat and went after her husband. He was heaving for breath when she got there, his body quivering as though he had a violent chill.

The moment she put her hand on him, he knocked it away. "Don't," he snarled.

"Brandy," she said quietly. "It's me, sweetie."

He turned such misery-filled eyes to her she took a step back. All his terror was centered in that gaze and he shook his head like an angry terrier.

"Look what I've caused," he said, tears gathering in the amber depths. "I almost got you killed!"

"It's all right now," she said softly.

"No, hell it isn't!" he shouted at her. "It's dangerous for you to be with me. You could have died this morning, Francesca!"

"But I didn't," she said in a reasonable tone, reaching out to touch him again but he backed away from her.

"Leave me alone," he said. "Just get in the car and forget you ever knew me."

"Like hell I will," she said with a snort. "You are my husband. You are the man I love."

"I'm the man who is going to get you killed!" he bellowed. He was trembling so violently his teeth were clicking together.

"Who will protect me if you don't?" she asked, searching his wild gaze. "Who will protect you?"

He shook his head again. "I don't care about me. I..."

"I do," she said. "I love you more than life, itself, Brandyn."

"Don't say that!" he yelled and hunkered down, his arms wrapped around him, his head down, rocking on the balls of his feet as though he were a child.

She squatted down beside him and put an arm around his tense shoulders. "I love you," she repeated. "You are everything to me and I'm not about to lose you."

Neither of them was aware of the police car pulling up in front of Reggie's rental car. They didn't see Lane Beaudry motioning Collier and Regina to stay in the car as he walked to where Brandy was kneeling.

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Francesca caught movement out of the corner of her eye and looked up, frowning when she saw Beaudry. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"I just thought you'd like to know they found Remy Fontanelle in Two Egg, Florida," Beaudry said. "He bled out before Gaston could get him to a sawbones, I guess. Gaston left him sitting on a bench in front of a grocery store." His mouth twisted. "Nothing like brotherly love, huh?"

"He'll be back for me," Brandy predicted. "He'll want me now more than ever."

Beaudry tipped his hat back. "That would be my guess." His dark face took on a mean look. "And he's not likely to stop until someone puts a slug between his crossed eyes."

Brandy got to his feet, not allowing his wife to help him. He moved away from her. "I need to get her home, Gator."

"That's what I'm here for, slick," Beaudry agreed. "I'll follow you to the house. You know come morning they'll be out here to talk to you. There will have to be an inquest."

"It was self defense," Francesca said.

"Yes, ma'am, I know, but it just don't end like that. B.J. will have to answer for the man's death."

## Chapter Fifteen

"It'll be all right," he told her as they climbed the stairs to the bedroom.

"What if they arrest you?" she asked, fear making her voice tremble.

"They know I had no choice. One look at the Escalade and it's pretty self-evident what went down."

"They won't put you in jail?" she asked. Her hand tightened spasmodically within his firm grip.

"No, *bébé*, I'm not going to jail," he answered, leading her into their bedroom.

Francesca did not let go of his hand as she shut and locked the door. She turned around and threw herself at him, ripping at his clothing as though she were a wild woman.

He knew what was happening and let her do what she wanted without so much as blinking. There was fear in her eyes and hunger on her lips as she ripped his shirt, yanked brutally at his belt, stripping him completely in no time flat until he stood naked before her. He staggered back as she placed her palms flat on his chest and shoved him toward the bed, growling low in her throat as she tore at her own clothing, mindlessly shredding it when it refused to come away easily.

Climbing onto the bed, he stretched out and merely grunted when she fell on him, her naked body writhing on his as she fiercely claimed his lips, her hands arched like claws through his thick hair to hold his head steady for her assault. She was taking him with her tongue—forcing it in and out of his mouth, going deeper with each sweet thrust. He could feel the wetness between her legs sliding on his lifted thigh, could smell the heat of her as she rode him but he made no move to put his hands on her, his arms around her. She was slithering atop him like an eel in heat—if there was such a thing—and all he did was lie there and let her take her frustrations and fear out on him.

Francesca reached one hand down to cup his sex, groaning as his thickness filled her hand. She passed her thumb over his slit to smear the

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saltiness there. Reaching between her legs, she put her fingers between her legs to gather moistness then put that slick offering to his lips.

"Lick, baby," she said.

He obliged her, swirling his tongue over her wet fingers, sucking the tangy residue from her flesh.

"Taste good?" she asked, her eyes boring into his.

"Like honey," he whispered.

She positioned herself above him and impaled her slick sheath upon that hard length, wriggling around on it, rotating her hips, grinding her pelvis against his. Her tongue stabbed into his mouth and she rode him—and rode him hard—with her breasts bouncing as she moved. The sound of their flesh slapping together was a heady turn on.

Brandy reached up to take hold of the brass rungs of the headboard. He lifted his hips to thrust into her, but that was all the help he gave her, instinctively knowing she needed to conquer him, to control him, to show him he was hers. His cock was as hard as a rock and as her velvety softness slid up and down it, he burned with wanting her.

When they came, their climaxes burst at the same moment and he slammed his hands down to her hips to press her hard against him, lifting and lowering his hips until she collapsed with a trill of pleasure atop his sweaty chest.

"You are mine, Brandy Fontanelle," she said.

"I am," he whispered.

"And mine you will stay!"

"I will be yours for as long as there is time," he promised.

Her lips were against the hollow of his throat and he lifted one hand to cup her head, to rake his fingers through her short hair. He loved this woman with every ounce of his being and if it was the last he did, he would make sure she was kept safe.

\* \* \* \*

He stood by the bed for a long time just watching her sleep. He ached to touch her cheek, to kiss her, but was afraid he'd wake her if he did. He had to leave—there was no denying it. It didn't matter that his heart was breaking or that tears were welling in his eyes. He had to go before she wound up paying for the mistakes he'd made—that he could not and would not allow.

Quietly, he went down the stairs with his sneakers in hand. He'd put them on once he was outside. With his black long sleeve pullover, black jeans, and black sneakers, he would blend in with the night and hopefully



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be able to slip past the guards. Luckily there was no moon to highlight his passing, for the sky was heavy with the threat of rain. As he stepped off the patio and onto the lush grass, the first light droplets of moisture struck him and he looked up, letting the rain fall onto his face, with his eyes closed and lips parted, he let the coolness sooth him for a moment. When at last he lowered his head, his clothes were soaked, clinging to him, the rain now coming down in earnest. As he suspected, the gate was closed and no doubt locked, the guards huddled in their window-fogged cars outside the high barrier. But they were there to keep the bad guys out and not the good guy in. He slipped to the stanchion that held the mechanism that controlled the sliding gate and punched in the code, holding off entering the last number until a flash of lightning pulsed overhead. He opened the gate just enough for him to slip through between the edge of the wrought iron edge and the brick stanchion then he melded into the night, slipping stealthily past the guards' cars.

For half an hour he trudged through the rain. Walking with his hands deep in the pockets of his jeans, he knew he was being watched. Whether it was Gaston or Beaudry, he didn't know, but one of them was out there. His fingers wrapped around the stiletto in his left pocket. Someone—he knew—was going to die tonight.

*Never pull your blade unless you're willing to kill, boy,* Henri Bouvier had told him long ago. *Don't ever leave home without it.*

The comfort of the rosewood handle of the Italian-made switchblade warmed his fingers. He caressed it as a lover would his woman. More than once it had saved his life, and more than once the eleven-inch blade had been bloodied. He was good with the weapon—just as Henri had taught him—and he had no compunction whatsoever about using it. The blade, however, had yet to take a life.

He heard the crunch of tires on wet pavement behind him but there were no lights stabbing into the night. The car was running without headlights, rolling along easily, the hum of the motor lost in the steady downpour of the rain. Idly he wondered how the driver could possibly see for it was pitch black out then thought of the expensive night vision gear Gaston and Remy used when gator hunting.

A vague unease drove down between his shoulder blades but he ignored it. As much as Gaston would like to kill him, the bastard wouldn't. Hurt him? Yes, most definitely he would do that, but killing him would be the last thing Gaston would ever do. Madame would make sure of it.

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There was a slight snick—as of a car door opening—and Brandy tensed, easing his left hand from his pocket. That sound had alerted him to a second person in the car. The odds against him had just gone up. With his hand along his thigh, he pressed the button on the stiletto and the stainless steel switch blade flicked open. Holding it close to his leg, he pivoted around just as his attacker rushed him.

*Stab midway the gut, Henri had instructed. Twist ninety degrees and then yank upward quickly and with force to pierce the heart.*

The assailant made a gurgling noise as Brandy struck, driving the blade deep into the unknown man's gut. In the dim light of a lightning flare, Brandy caught sight of the dead man's surprised look before the Taser he held dropped to the ground at their feet. With the man still impaled on his blade, Brandy jerked upward as Henri had taught him, then withdrew the blade, stepping quickly back.

He wasn't expecting the burst of pain that slammed brutally into his back, driving him to his knees in the wet grass on the side of the road. He cried out—the agony of the hit so vicious and so debilitating he couldn't seem to move his legs—and dropped the switchblade.

"You fucking cocksucker!" he heard Gaston scream at him.

Brandy glanced back, saw Gaston with a pair of night vision goggles perched on his head, making him look like some nightmarish alien bird or prey.

The same blinding pain struck him again in nearly the same place along the small of his back as he tried to scramble out of the way. He groaned just as Gaston's savage kick into his side flipped him over so he lay with the rain pounding into his face. He was gasping, digging his hands into the wet red clay, getting no purchase. In a sudden garish glare from the lightning, he saw Gaston with a baseball bat raised, watched helplessly, sure the crazed man would bash out his brains. He struggled to bring his arms up to cover his head, crossing them over his face.

Cursing, Gaston threw the bat to the pavement and reached into the pocket of his rain slicker. As soon as he pulled the rag from his pocket and uncorked the bottle, Brandy knew what his half brother was about to do, for the cloying stench of chloroform wafted through the air. Twisting over to his belly—though the pain in his lower back was so horrible he could barely stay conscious—he tried to push himself up, to dig his heels into the mud, gasping as the pain burned all the way down his spine. Striving hard to get away, he fell facedown in the wet grass and Gaston was there, straddling him. Leaning down, he grabbed a handful of

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

Brandy's hair and pulled his head back, slapped the rag over his face, and held it there so Brandy had no choice but to breathe in the overpowering fumes.

The last thing Brandy remembered was Gaston's knee pressing savagely into his back and the ungodly pain that drove him over the edge of consciousness.

Mumbling furiously under his breath, Gaston held the chloroform-soaked rag over Brandy's face until the younger man lay still. He then shot to his feet, jerked the back door of the sedan open, threw the rag to the floorboard then went back to Brandy and picked him up, tossing him into the car as though he were a sack of groceries. Slamming the door, he hurried around to the driver's side, opened the door, and reached in to flick the button on the key fob to open the trunk. Glancing around nervously now, he ran to the man Brandy had killed. He picked the man up under the arms—some guy named Dave he had found in a bar and offered fifty bucks to help him get back at a supposed rival—and dragged him over to the trunk, fumbled the limp body inside.

"Son of a bitch," Gaston snarled, for despite trying to be as careful as possible, the dead man had bled on him. Jerking off the goggles, he threw them into the trunk then slammed the lid down. Going back to the driver's side, he got in and cranked the car. With another explosion of fury he remembered Brandy's switchblade. Backing the car up a little so the headlights would illuminate the area, he reached through the console, picked up the rag, got out and went back to look for it. When he spied it, he used the rag to pick it up, careful not to disturb the prints on the handle.

By the time he spied the sign that marked the county limits, he was finally beginning to breathe a bit easier. He reached into the pocket of his slicker and pulled out his cell phone, thumbing in Madame's private number.

"Yes," came the voice at the other end of the connection.

"I have him."

"Was there any trouble?"

Gaston hesitated. "Ah, he killed the man I hired to help me."

There was a long pause. "Did you clean up the mess?"

"It's in the trunk of the car. I couldn't leave it behind but I have the weapon with his fingerprints on it."

"Where are you now?" The question was a hiss of pure fury.

"On my way to I-75," he reported.

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"I will meet you where we planned. Keep him out, and Gaston?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Don't you dare hurt him."

After hanging up, Gaston pulled off onto the shoulder of the road on a secluded area of US 300 and switched on the overhead light. The rain was coming down in sheets that beat at the windows. Leaning over, he opened the glove box, removed a plastic pencil box, opened it, and took out a syringe and ampoule. Efficiently he loaded the hypodermic, then twisted in his seat so he could press through the opening of the bench console.

Brandy was lying on his side and it was easy to plunge the payload of the syringe into the unconscious man's thigh through the wet fabric of his jeans. That done, Gaston leaned farther into the back seat, retrieved a pair of handcuffs and leg irons, and slipped them quickly and expertly into place, running the chain of the leg irons under the chain of the handcuffs to affectively hobble Brandy, keeping his legs bent. Gaston did not want to take a chance on his half-brother waking and causing trouble.

\* \* \* \*

Francesca woke to a loud clap of thunder that shook the windows beside her bed. She jumped and opened her eyes in time to see a successive series of lightning strikes stitching across the sky to illuminate the bedroom. Instinctively, she reached behind her for her husband but the bed was empty, the place where he should have been much too cool.

"Brandy?" she called out.

Lightning shrieked across the heavens—the storm was in full swing and rain was pelting the glass so heavily she wondered if it wasn't hailing. She called his name again and, when he didn't answer, she flung the covers back and got up, sticking her feet into the slippers beside the bed. Once more she called him but a loud rumble drowned out her words.

He wasn't in the bathroom or the bedroom. When she went to the stairs, called down, and got no answer, she knew he was gone. The house felt empty of his presence. Hurrying down the stairs—hoping against hope she was wrong—she went into every room but there was no sign of him.

"Mama?" Reggie asked, having been awakened by her mother's frantic calls.

"He's gone," Francesca said. She covered her face with her hands.  
"Brandy, no!"

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"How'd he get past the guards without them knowing?" Collier asked. He, too, had been alerted by Francesca's voice and had come from the room that was allotted to him when he visited.

Reggie went to her mother and put her arm around her. "Call them, Col. See what you can find out."

It took only a moment for the guards to discover the breach in the gate. The men were apologetic—fearful of losing their jobs—but Collier had assured them it was not their fault. He just wanted to make sure no one had gotten inside the perimeter so the guards were bustling over the grounds as well as in the house as Reggie tried to comfort her mother.

"I'll get the rental car and go after him," Collier suggested.

Francesca was wooden-faced, sitting curled up on the sofa with her daughter holding her hand. She nodded gratefully to Collier but held out no hope her future son-in-law would find Brandy. There was no telling how long he'd been gone.

After Collier had left with one of the guards accompanying him into the heavy deluge, Francesca waved away an offer of a cup of hot tea and instead asked her daughter to hand her the phone.

"Who are you going to call?" Reggie asked.

"The only person I know who would have the number of the woman in Louisiana."

Reggie bit her lower lip. "Is that a good idea, Mama?"

"Probably not," Francesca said with a sigh and punched in Alex's number, waking her friend out of a restless sleep.

"What?" Alex demanded as she whipped up the phone.

"Give me the number of the Syn, Alexandra," Francesca said.

"Frankie?" There was a slight pause and a click—a light going on in Alex's bedroom. "Do you know what time it is?"

"I don't give a fuck what time it is, Alex! Give me the goddamned number!" Francesca yelled.

"Tell me why," Alex said, shoving the silk sleeping mask from her eyes.

"He's gone, you bitch!" Francesca shouted, slapping at Reggie's hand as her daughter tried to take the receiver. "God only knows what that woman will do to him. I have to talk to her."

"Talking to Madeline Levant isn't going to do you any..."

"Give me the fucking number!" Francesca shrieked.

"Do you want my help or do you want me to hang up?" Alex asked. Her voice carried the strength of steel in it.

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"I want him back," Francesca said and broke down, letting the receiver drop from her hand.

Reggie lunged for the phone before it hit the floor. "Aunt Alex, its Reggie. Please give us the number. We..."

"It won't do any good but I can help," Alex interrupted. "Give me twenty minutes and I'll be over and for God's sake, don't call the police!"

The phone went dead. Reggie set it down on the coffee table and sat down beside her mother, drawing Francesca into her arms as the older woman sobbing fiercely.

"Shush, Mama," Reggie said. "Aunt Alex is on her way over."

"I don't want her," Francesca sobbed. "I want Brandy."

True to her word, twenty minutes later Alex pulled up to the gate and was allowed inside, accompanied by one of the guards. She looked like death warmed over with makeup but didn't seem to care as she came directly over to the sofa, getting right down to the matter at hand.

"Okay, I've already made a call to someone I know will be able to help us," Alex said. "He and his friend will be here as quickly as the helicopter can bring them. He's also contacted another friend and he, too, will be here by morning."

"Morning will be too late," Francesca whimpered. "She could..."

"Madame isn't going to do anything to hurt him," Alex interrupted her.

"You don't know that, Aunt Alex. Someone tried to kill him and Mama today," Reggie cut in. "Who do you think it was that did that?"

Alex blinked. "Are you shitting me?"

"If Brandy hadn't shot one of the two men, he and Mama could have been killed," Reggie snapped. "As it is there's going to be an inquest because the man Brandy shot died."

"Self-defense," Alex said, fanning away the threat. She went to squat down in front of Francesca. "Listen to me, Frankie. Dáire Cronin and Julian St. John are..."

"Julian?" Reggie questioned. "You know Julian?"

Alex snapped her head around, one eyebrow arched. "How do *you* know him, little girl?"

"He's a friend and he knows Brandy," Reggie replied. "I asked him about Brandy before I came up here."

"Well, that makes things even better," Alex stated. "Between the two of them, I'm sure Dáire and Julian can settle this matter and get Brandy back for you."

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"I love him, Alex," Francesca said. She swiped at the tears running down her cheeks. "I can't lose him."

"Sweetie, we'll do everything we can to make sure you don't if that's what you want," Alex said. "I feel bad about..."

"Don't," Francesca said, shaking her head. "I don't want to hear what you think. I don't care what you think. Just help me get him back."

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

# Chapter Sixteen

Brandy's world was a swirling mass of kaleidoscope colors that shifted around him. His head was throbbing brutally, his ears were buzzing, and he was sick to his stomach. He tried to move but long before he realized his wrists and ankles were bound, the ungodly pain in his back flared up and he gasped, alerting Gaston that he was awake. He stilled instantly.

"One word out of you and I'll stomp you like a grape," Gaston swore at him, swinging his head around to glare at Brandy.

Knowing he couldn't take another blow to his injured back, Brandy lay there feeling every bump in the road as the car moved along. The rain had stopped and a faint gray tinge lit up the sky beyond the passenger side windows. He knew they had to be driving northward for the sun to be on that side of the car. Though his eyes felt heavy, he strained to keep them open. When the car began to slow and he felt the unmistakable ripple of rumble strips shaking the vehicle, he bit his tongue to keep from crying out with the pain.

He didn't try to struggle against Gaston when the older man leaned over the seat with a hypodermic needle in his hand. He winced as the drug was injected into his thigh but welcomed the almost immediate relief from the burning, stabbing pain across his lower back. Before Gaston had the car in gear and drove it back onto the roadway, Brandy was unconscious.

\* \* \* \*

Dáire Cronin and his partner arrived just after dawn and the two men gladly accepted the cups of coffee Reggie offered. Cronin was all business as he took Francesca through the previous day's events and asked endless questions that made no sense to any one other than him and his partner. By the time Julian St. John arrived at a little past nine o'clock, there wasn't anything else either Francesca or Reggie could tell him. Collier was still out searching for Brandy, but Dáire told Reggie to tell him to come back in. There was nothing the contractor could do.



## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

St. John—with his dark good looks and amber eyes so much like Brandy's—made Francesca's heart ache. She stared at him, listening to him explaining how he knew Brandy.

"You worked for Celeste Dubois, too?" Francesca asked.

"Yes, I did," Julian replied, "but fortunately I didn't have the same bad problems B.J. did."

She couldn't get used to her husband by that name, but she realized it fit him so much better than Brandy.

"Any woman who controls your body and soul is a bad problem, St. John," Dáire remarked. "No man needs to be under that kind of pressure."

"I don't disagree with you," Julian said. "I received my share of grief from Celeste, but it was nothing compared to his."

"So what do we do?" Daniel Jackson, Dáire's partner, inquired. "Do we take a trip over to the Crescent City to retrieve the boy?"

"My guess is that would be the last place she'd take him—if she even has him," Julian commented. "But a trip over to have a talk with her is definitely a must do."

"You're sure she won't hurt him?" Francesca wanted clarified. She had chewed her fingernails to the quick in her worry.

"Madeline didn't like what Celeste did to make B.J. tow the line," Julian said. "That doesn't mean she won't use the same persuasion or at least threaten him with it."

"What kind of persuasion are you talking about?" Dáire asked.

"Getting him strung out on smack," Julian replied in a matter of fact tone, "then making him go cold turkey."

"Ouch," Jackson said with a wince. "Been there, done that, got the t-shirt. Ain't a healthy thing." He shook his head. "No, sir. Ain't a healthy thing."

"Something like that isn't pretty and it isn't easy, but it's better than beating the hell out of him or chopping something off," Dáire said. "The question is, will the man she sent to retrieve him do as she orders or will he be mean enough to take his anger out of Fontanelle for killing his brother?"

"I know Gaston," Julian said. "He's rabid at the best of times."

"What of the Madame?" Jackson asked.

"As dangerous an adversary as you'll find with mammary glands," Julian responded.

"So we need to get to our man ASAP," Dáire said.

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"If we ever want to see him again," Julian stated.

\* \* \* \*

Gaston pulled into the parking lot of the Piggly Wiggly Supermarket on Martha Berry Highway just a few miles from the Richard B. Russell Airport. He checked on Brandy, saw the younger man was still unconscious, and took out his cell phone. Drumming on the steering wheel with his left hand, he waited impatiently for the call to go through. When Madame answered, he informed her of his location.

"We are on the ground and waiting," Madame snapped. "I'll let the captain give you directions on how to get to the airport."

Gaston listened, then broke the connection. The sooner he had Brandy off his hands the less likely he would be to smother him. All the way north on I-75 he had twisted around to give his half-brother hateful stares, his hands itching to squeeze the life out of Brandy. Only his intense fear of Madame kept him from doing so. That he would most likely pay for any damage done the little prick during the fight was a given.

By the time he pulled up before the waiting Lear jet, Gaston was sweating profusely even though the air conditioner in the stolen Buick was cranked up as high as it would go. He got out of the car and sprinted up the waiting gangway of the plane.

Madame was sipping a cocktail as Gaston sidled up to her, an ingratiating smile on his lean face. Two men dressed in the white uniforms of medical technicians were standing midway of the plane.

"He's in the backseat all trussed up, ma'am," he said. "What do you want me to...?"

"Where are the keys to the cuffs?" one of the med techs asked.

Gaston fumbled in his pocket to extract the key, handing it to the man who shouldered Fontanelle roughly aside. The second man deliberately bumped into Gaston as he followed close behind. "Hey!" Gaston said, his face turning red.

"You have inconvenienced me, Gaston," Madame told him. "Don't make me any madder at you than I already am." She gave him a mean look. "I assume the mess is still in the trunk." At his nod, she cursed beneath her breath. "Ditch the car at a mall and take a cab to the bus station. I will deal with you when I get home."

"Yes, ma'am," Gaston said and had to step aside as the two men in white came back on the plane with Brandy strapped to a gurney.

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

Madame set her cocktail aside. She got up to follow the men as they placed the gurney where it could be lashed down for takeoff. Sitting down beside the gurney, she reached out to push a lock of tousled hair from Brandy's forehead, her gaze going over his features, looking for bruises or cuts.

She waved a dismissive hand at Gaston. "Leave, asshole. We're getting ready to takeoff."

Gaston bobbed his head and hurried off the plane. He could smell his own sour sweat and wondered if Madame had been aware of it. As soon as Brandy woke up and told her he'd been hit in the back with a baseball bat, the shit would hit the fan. He wasn't so sure he should go home to Louisiana after all—especially if any permanent damage had been done to the little bastard. As he got into the car he made a mental assessment of what he would be giving up and realized there were too much money and too many weapons he'd left behind. He had no choice but to go back, but he dreaded it.

"Take all his clothes off and let me see every inch of him," Madame told the med techs. "I don't trust that Cajun prick not to have hurt him."

When the clothing had been cut off Brandy and she saw there were only a few light bruises on his wrists, ankles and arms, she breathed a sigh of relief. But when he was turned over and she saw the dark, ugly contusion that ran from midway his back to his tail bone and stretching from both sides of his waist, she screeched with outrage.

"What the hell would have caused that?" she yelled, her eyes wide.

"He was hit with something," the med tech told her.

She put a trembling hand toward the livid bruising but didn't touch it. "Damage?" she whispered.

"Worse case scenario? Spinal cord injury. My guess, though, is severe bruising, possibly compression fractures of the spine," the man replied. "We won't know until we x-ray him."

"Spinal cord injury?" she repeated. "Do you mean paralysis?"

"I don't think that's the case, ma'am. We'll be very careful with him just the same," the man said and nodded at his companion. The two of them carefully turned Brandy over to his back.

"I'm going to start an IV and start getting some fluids into him," the med tech said.

As the catheter was inserted into his arm and the needle removed, Brandy moaned and his eyelids fluttered open.

"*Bébé?*" Madame said, leaning over him. "Can you hear me, *bébé?*"

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

Brandy's eyes were glazed with pain and the effects of the drugs Gaston had administered. He stared up at her without speaking, a single tear falling from the corner of his right eye.

"What did he hit you with, *bébé*?" she asked as she caressed his cheek.

"Does it matter?" he whispered, wincing as the pain flashed through his spine.

"I want to know," she said.

He sighed. "A bat," he answered.

"Wiggle your toes for me," one of the med techs instructed.

Brandy flexed his feet, crying out as the agony worsened at the movement.

"Do you feel this?"

There was an uncomfortable scraping on his soles that made Brandy hiss. "Yes, I feel it," he growled. "Leave me the hell alone, will ya? My back is killing me."

Madame straightened up and looked at the med tech. "Give him something for the pain."

"Yes, ma'am."

He didn't care what they did to him. He was expecting the worst anyway. Hearing the drone of the plane's engines he figured they were taking him back to Louisiana. Trying to keep his head as still as possible because the slightest movement was excruciating, he followed Madame with his eyes as she sat down with her cell phone pressed to her ear.

"Justin, I have a job for you," he heard her say and looked away, staring up at the plane's ceiling. "Gaston Fontanelle. He is on his way back to N'Orleans and should be there within the next day or so. He lives behind the Syn."

He knew who she was speaking to, and the man on the other end was as bad as they came. He should feel some remorse that she was ordering his half-brother's death, but as bad as he hurt he couldn't dredge up even a smidgen of regret for Gaston. He'd always heard that those who lived by the sword, died by the sword.

"Use a baseball bat, Justin."

He shuddered and closed his eyes. Those who wielded the bat were brought down by the bat. Gaston was as good as dead.

"Have you ever had morphine, son?" the med tech asked.

Brandy opened his eyes. "I was addicted to heroin," he said, looking the man in the eye.

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

The med tech frowned, then twisted his head toward Madame. "Ma'am?" he inquired.

Madame put away her phone and came back to stand beside the gurney. Her merciless black eyes bored into Brandy. "You are in a lot of pain, aren't you, *bébé*?" she asked.

"You know I am," he said. His gaze shifted to the syringe in the med tech's hand and he licked his lips.

"Do you want her to experience the same pain?"

Brandy stopped breathing. "Madeline..."

"It is not my intention to get you hooked on drugs as Celeste did," Madame cut him off, "but you knew you would be punished for running away, now, didn't you?" When he didn't answer, she took his chin in her hand. "Didn't you?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"I will ask you again: do you want her to experience the same pain you are enduring at this moment?"

Tears he refused to shed flooded his eyes. "No."

"All right then here is how it will be, *bébé*," she said, keeping his face anchored. "You are being taken to a place where you will be spending the remainder of your days away from this woman who has been your downfall and away from the sister you love so very much."

"Madeline..." he began, his heart aching as though it were being cleaved into.

"That will be your punishment," she cut in. "Consider yourself fortunate, indeed that I will not hurt you as I have hurt others in similar situations." She looked up at the med tech. "Give him the shot."

The morphine burned a bright pathway through his vein when the med tech administered it through the injection port, but almost immediately gave him a good deal of relief and he exhaled deeply.

"Close those baby browns and let the magic elixir do its job, son," the med tech advised. He adjusted the flow on the IV then moved back where Brandy could no longer see him.

"I'll be good, Madeline," he said. "Leave her alone and I'll be good."

"I know you will, *bébé*," she told him.

"Don't hurt her," he pleaded.

"She will remain safe as long as you keep your mouth shut, endure your punishment with no one the wiser," she lied.

"I'll be good," he said, his voice slurring as the drug crashed over him like waves to the shore.

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

"Yes, *bébé*," she said, smoothing his hair back from his forehead. "Now go to sleep."

"We've been cleared for takeoff, Madame," the pilot said over the intercom. "Weather looks great out that way."

"Thank you, Captain," Madame said as she took her seat and buckled in. "We're ready to go."

When they were twenty minutes into the westbound flight, Madame once more took out her cell phone and placed a call to Justin Thibodeaux in Baton Rouge. "One other thing. After you visit Fontanelle," she said with the phone was answered on the other end. "Francesca Castile, Albany, Georgia. The address is 7308 West Foehn Drive. I will leave the particulars up to you but I would like this one accomplished over a period of several very strenuous days, Justin."

Terminating the call, she slipped the cell phone back into her purse and closed her eyes, a slight smile on her dark face.

\* \* \* \*

As Julian St. John's private jet was landing in New Orleans later that afternoon, Francesca was striving not to run into her kitchen, snatch open a drawer, and pull out one of her sharpest butcher knives to plunge into Richard's sanctimonious butt. He was pacing in front of the sofa in her den—carrying on about how close she had come to utilizing the pre-paid coffin that awaited her when she cast off her mortal coil. She sat grinding her teeth, trying not to glare at her daughter for letting the pompous fool in, and digging her fingernails into her palms to keep from actually growling at him. Following Richard's circuit before the sofa as though she were watching a tennis match in slow motion, her eyes bored into her ex-husband like lasers.

"And now he's skipped town with an inquest into that poor man's death..."

"That poor man tried to blow my fucking head off, Richard!" Francesca shouted, coming to her feet, her fists clenched so tightly she could feel the blood beading in her palms. "And the only reason Brandy left was to keep me safe!"

"Poppycock!" Richard said.

"Poppy...?" Francesca's imagined her face had taken on the aspect of a Halloween fright mask. "*Get the fuck out of my house you insufferable prick!*" she screamed.

Richard took a step back from his ex-wife's explosion and looked to their daughter for help. "Do you see what that man has done?" he asked.

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"Your mother never used to even know such words, much less use them!"

Reggie just shook her head and looked to Collier for help, but her fiancé only shrugged his wide shoulders and sat there with his arm draped over the back of his chair.

"Get. Out. Of. My. House!" Francesca snarled.

Richard threw his hands into the air. "There is no talking sense to you, woman. You..." he said in a self-righteous tone that only made matters worse. He had to leap back to avoid the crystal ashtray that came sailing toward his head. With one last incredulous look, he fled the room, slamming the front door behind him.

"Goddamn asshole!" Francesca labeled him as she flounced back on the sofa.

"Calm down, Mama," Reggie said. "You're going to have a stroke if you don't."

"Why haven't they called?" Francesca asked.

"They are probably landing right about now," Collier said reasonably. "They'll call when they have something to report."

"I can't stand this waiting!" Francesca said. She propelled herself to her feet and ran up the stairs.

"Don't," Collier said when Reggie started to go after her mother.

"Col, she's..."

"A grown woman, and wouldn't appreciate you intruding on her right now," Collier finished for her. "I know it's hard, but sometimes you have to cut the apron strings, baby doll."

"What if something has happened to Brandy?" Reggie asked. "I can't even begin to imagine how she would take it."

"We just have to hope he'll be all right," Collier said.

\* \* \* \*

While Julian, Dáire, and Jackson were stuck in their limo behind a massive pileup on Interstate 10, the jet carrying Brandy was landing at the Newton Municipal Airport in Iowa where a private ambulance from Baybridge sat waiting. Alongside the two ambulance drivers was a third man who wore the black uniform of Wynth Industries Security Forces.

"Welcome to Iowa, Madame Levant. Sergeant Elias Gaines at your service, ma'am," the unsmiling man in the uniform greeted Madame as she came down the steps of the plane.

"Is it always this humid here, Sergeant?" she complained, fanning the stagnant air wafting around her.

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

"I'm afraid so, ma'am," Gaines replied.

"I would not have imagined Iowa to be so intense," she said, looking around her. "Or so hilly."

A slight crooking of Gaines' lips passed for a smile with the man. "Most folks believe Iowa to be as flat as a pancake. It surprises them to find out that isn't true of the entire state."

The med techs were coming down the steps with the gurney. Madame barely glanced at it before opening her purse to take out a legal-size envelope. She handed it to Gaines. "Would you please see Dr. Wynth receives this?"

Gaines scowled. "You won't be coming out to the facility?"

"No," she said. "I just can't...I don't wish to..." She lowered her head. "My nephews mean the world to me and it is very hard for me to realize they will need psychiatric care for the rest of their lives. To see them in such a place..." She looked up at him with a wavering smile. "I hope you understand."

Gaines nodded, his eyes narrowing. "Oh, yes, I understand perfectly," he said and, without another word, turned on his heel and headed for the ambulance.

"Rude bastard," Madame said as she watched Brandy's gurney being loaded into the back of the ambulance.

She stood there for a few moments longer, feeling as though she was being watched. It was an unpleasant—almost repulsive—impression and it made the hair stand up on the back of her neck. Surreptitiously she looked around her but could find no one looking her way. Rolling her shoulders against the eerie sensation, she climbed back into the plane, ordering a double scotch on the rocks to ease her nerves. She was shocked to see her hands trembling as she took the glass from the steward.

As the ambulance took Interstate 80 east from the airport, Gaines flipped open his cell phone. He was staring at the unconscious patient and the IV dripping into the man's muscular arm.

"Aye?" came the growl at the other end.

"I have the patient for Etesian, milord," Gaines said. "You were right. The patient is Caucasian. The aunt is..."

"I know what she is. Get him out to the facility and make sure my lady examines him before he goes to his room," was the order.

"Aye, milord," Gaines answered and snapped the lid down on his phone.



## **Chapter Eighteen**

"She's out of town," Julian reported after he made a call to one of the escorts at the Syn. "Whatcha wanna bet she's wherever B.J. is?"

Dáire slumped in the limo seat. He was staring out the window as a large wrecker moved slowly past with a badly crumpled semi cab in tow. There was blood splattered on the driver side window and he shook his head. "Somebody won't be going home tonight," he commented.

"So what do we do, Dairy Crow?" Jackson asked, using the nickname he knew would annoy Dáire even more.

"Did your man know where Levant went?" Dáire asked Julian.

"Didn't have a clue but he said she told her secretary she'd be back tonight," Julian answered.

"Then we'll wait and see her tonight," Dáire said.

Julian glanced down at the briefcase Cronin had brought with him. "May I ask what's in that?"

Dáire smiled nastily. "Tax statements," he said. "And not a fucking one of them legit."

"Oh, and don't forget that other document we brought along for the ride," Jackson said. "The Cumberland Group has a dossier on Madeline Levant a mile long. The things we know about that woman could send her to prison for a long, long time."

"Won't be necessary," Julian said quietly.

"You're sure?" Dáire asked.

"I'm positive," Julian said.

"You've got that much on her?" Dáire questioned.

Julian turned his eyes to the window. "We'll have to see, won't we?" he replied enigmatically.

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Bronwyn Cree was waiting in the exam room when Brandy was wheeled in on the gurney. She frowned at the excessive amount of straps that held him in place. "Is he even conscious?" she asked Gaines.

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

"Nope," Gaines said. "He's strapped down so tight because he has a back injury. The guy from the plane said he should be x-rayed as soon as possible."

"What kind of back injury?" Bronwyn asked.

"Hit to the small of the back with a baseball bat kind," Gaines said with a snort.

Flicking her long brown braid over her shoulder, Bronwyn ordered a full battery of tests done on their new arrival. "Including an MRI," she told the technician with her. She looked up at Gaines. "When you report to Cree, tell him this man doesn't look anything like Kit Léglise."

"What you think is going on here, milady?" Gaines asked.

"I think the Levant woman is warehousing people here she doesn't like, is what I think," Bronwyn snapped. "Tell him to give me a call when he has time."

"Aye," Gaines agreed.

Standing behind the protective shield as the first round of x-rays were being done on Brandyn Fontanelle, Bronwyn felt strong hands close around her shoulders just a fraction of a moment before she was pulled back against a rock-solid chest. Warm breath fluttered across her ear and the edges of very sharp teeth tugged playfully at her earlobe.

"Better not let my husband catch you doing that, Reaper," Bronwyn said as she laid her head on that hard chest.

"I'm not afraid of him. Besides, he's too busy chasing perverts to know what we're doing," Viraidan Cree, the chief security officer of Wynth Industries Security Services, whispered into his wife's ear. He wrapped his arms around her waist where their child was safely nestled. "What's the story on this guy? Gaines said he had a back injury."

"Supposedly received when he fell out of bed. There's massive bruising but so far we haven't found any compression fractures on the initial films. He could have a herniated disk or two though. I won't know until we do a myelogram."

"Ouch," her husband commented. "Is that necessary?"

"We'll see what the MRI tells us and take it from there," she said. "I don't want to put him through any more pain that he obviously has already suffered." She wiggled her shapely rump against the thick bulge she felt in his pants. "He's pumped so full of morphine, he hasn't even sighed since he's been here."

"Another one, huh?" Cree inquired.

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"Just like when Kit was brought here. Like Kit did, he has bruises on his wrists and ankles as though he'd been shackled. Same family guardian, by the way," Bronwyn informed her husband.

"How is Léglise?" her husband asked. He released her and stepped back, acutely uncomfortable now, his cock aching for her. "Did you talk Wynth out of any more ECTs?"

"Kit is practically comatose now," Bronwyn answered with a knowing smile as she turned to face him, her eyes dragging down to his tall frame. "There's nothing to be accomplished by giving the man more electroconvulsive therapy. I think Brighton is finally starting to agree with me. The thing that concerns me is why these men are here. I would bet my last penny Kit did not have a dissociative fugue disorder when he came here. I don't think there was anything wrong with him but after all the antipsychotic drugs he's been given in the last few years, he may be developing tardive dyskinesia."

"Say that in words your lumbering caveman will understand, wench," Cree growled.

Bronwyn pursed her lips. "Tardive dyskinesia is a neurological disorder caused from long-term dosing of antipsychotic drugs. TD is characterized by random movements of facial muscles, arms, legs..."

"The constant drumming of his fingers and hands on the table, his habitual grunting?" he asked.

"Yes. The good news is TD is often reversible and I hope we've caught it in time to prevent his condition from worsening."

Cree folded his arms over his brawny chest. "This situation has always bothered me. Why would Wynth take Léglise as a patient if nothing was wrong with him?" He glanced past her shoulder to the x-ray sled on which the new patient lay. "And what about this guy?"

"Money is my guess," Bronwyn answered. "I did some checking over in accounting and it seems Madeline Levant has been giving large sums of money toward Brighton's research grants. She's the goose laying the golden eggs so he is taking her word for the supposed condition of her nephews."

"Those men aren't any more kin to her than I am," Cree said. "I was watching her at the airport. She's as black as the ace of spades."

"I've gone over both Kit's chart and the new guy's and they are from the same doctor in New Orleans," Bronwyn said. "If you lay those charts side by side, the diagnosis, protocols, everything is exactly the same. I know damned well the charts are phony."

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

"So why are these men here?" Cree asked. "Whose nose did they tweak out of joint?"

"That's up to you to find out," Bronwyn said. "I can't really bring this up with Wynth or he'll take my ass out of here and who knows who he'd assign to them next."

"Someone who wouldn't give a warthog's ass about them," Cree said with a snarl.

"So go do your thing, Reaper," Bronwyn asked, then licked her lips, making her husband fidget.

"I could find nothing on Léglise," her husband reminded her with a warning look about her behavior. "Why do you think I'll be able to find something on Fontanelle?"

"Because you are my lumbering caveman," she said, batting her eyes, "and you want to make me happy."

Cree chuckled and sauntered out of the room as quietly as he had entered, the x-ray tech watching him every step of the way.

"He's taken," Bronwyn told the woman. Though she said it playfully, she surmised the tech could see there was nothing playful about the glint in her eyes.

"I know," the tech replied with a sigh, "but that rear end cupped so sweetly in those black leather pants and that black silk shirt..." She sighed so loudly Bronwyn thought the woman was about to have an asthma attack.

Bronwyn was about to chastise the woman for such a remark but the man on the x-ray sled groaned and she saw his eyelids flutter open. She frowned when the tech told her unnecessarily the patient was awake.

"Shut down the machine," Bronwyn said, not wanting to take a chance with the baby she was carrying. As soon as the tech obeyed, Bronnie walked around the shield and to the sled. She smiled down at the man who was staring up at her with confusion. "Hi."

Brandy didn't recognize the woman leaning over him but there was gentleness in her eyes.

"You are in the Etesian Hills Clinic in Kellogg, Iowa," Bronwyn told him. "I'm Dr. Bronwyn Cree, your case worker."

"Iowa?" he grated, a hopeless, helpless look coming over his face. "Why am I here?"

"Your aunt had you committed," Bronwyn said softly.

His eyes flared. "An asylum?" he gasped.

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"No," Bronwyn said, laying her hand on his shoulder. "This is a clinic."

"Can I leave?" he asked, searching her eyes.

Bronwyn squeezed his shoulder. "No, Brandyn, I'm afraid you can't."

His lips trembled and tears welled. "Ever?"

"How's your back?" she asked, not wanting to give him hope that she and her husband might find a way to get him either released or spirited out of the clinic.

"Please," he whispered. "I don't belong here."

Bronwyn glanced around at the tech. "Would you get me a glass of water for Mr. Fontanelle, please?"

"Sure thing."

When the tech was out of the room, Bronwyn leaned closer to Brandy. "Tell me why you are here, Brandyn," she said. "Who wanted you out of the way and why?"

For a moment she thought he would answer but then he shut down, memory or fears making him close his lips tightly as he shook his head. He drew in a harsh breath, the movement sending shock waves into his injured back.

"Do you need something for the pain?"

"Please," he said and his voice was strained, pleading.

"I'll order something." She stroked his cheek. "Brandyn, if you can't tell me why you're here," she said gently, "can you tell me why Kit is?"

She watched his face pale, his eyes widen, his hands clench into fists on the sled.

"Kit is here?" he asked.

She nodded. "He'll be three rooms down from you."

"Kit Léglise is here?" he repeated and his tears fell in twin rivulets down his ashen cheeks.

"Where did you think he was?" she asked.

"Dead." The one word dropped from his quivering lips as though it hurt him to say it.

The tech came in with the glass of water and a straw.

"When you're able, I'll bring him in to see you," Bronwyn said and took the glass from the tech. She held it down so Brandy could take a few sips. While he was drinking, she asked the tech to instruct the charge nurse to draw up a twenty-milligram shot of morphine for their patient.

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

and to have an intravenous infusion pump ready when the patient was brought to his room.

"Yes, ma'am," the tech replied and went over to the wall phone.

"Thank you," Brandy said, the inside of his mouth no longer feeling like a desert.

"Is there anyone I can call for you, Brandyn?" Bronwyn asked, hoping he'd answer before he shut down again but the wariness in his gaze told her he knew what she was doing.

"Are you finished with me?" he asked.

"For awhile," Bronwyn said. "I've an MRI ordered for later this afternoon. We need to find out how much damage you took to your back when you fell."

"Fell?" he echoed. "I didn't..." He broke off, swallowing hard.

"No, I know you didn't fall, Brandyn," she said. "Someone hit you and they hit you very hard. With a piece of wood would be my guess."

He was staring into her kind face, trying to make up his mind whether to trust her or not. If he was to ever leave this human dumping ground, if he was ever to see Francesca again, he would need her help but he was too leery of opening up just yet.

"It's okay," she said. "When you feel you can trust me, I'll be ready to do what I can for you." She smiled softly. "Deal?"

He nodded and groaned, wincing horribly. "I've got to stop doing that," he hissed.

"Let me see what's keeping your med," Bronwyn said. She patted his arm then left, walking out into the hall before reaching into her pocket for her cell phone.

"Cree's lair," was the answer on the other end, "where the elite come to be eat."

"Behave," Bronwyn berated her ever-randy husband. She heard him sigh deeply.

"You're no fun, wench," he complained.

"He's scared shitless, Reaper."

"Who?"

"Fontanelle."

"He's awake?"

"Yes and I'm willing to bet you a twenty-ounce steak with all the fixings at Rube's that the fear isn't for himself. You should have seen the blood drain out of his face when he found out Kit was here. He thought Kit was dead."

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"Interesting," Cree said. "I've got a call in to Morgan Bouchard."

"The FBI agent over in Des Moines?" Bronwyn thought of the man they'd met a few months earlier when the agent had brought a serial rapist to Baybridge, the maximum security prison on the other side of the Wynth Industries property. Her husband and Bouchard had hit it off pretty well—a remarkable feat for her very private husband.

"Aye," her husband agreed. "He's from Louisiana and I'm hoping he'll be able to help us on this."

"Let me know if you need any info out of his or Kit's file," she said. "You taking me out to eat tonight?"

"If I don't wash away down the drain from the cold shower I'm about to take," Cree said before hanging up.

Bronwyn shook her head. Sometimes her husband had a one track mind.

\* \* \* \*

"Her plane landed five minutes ago," Dáire's contact at the airport in New Orleans reported to him on the phone.

"Follow her. If she stops between there and the Syn, I want to know about it," Dáire ordered. When he hung up, he gave Julian a long, evaluating look. "So what's the plan?" He looked down at the expensive black Italian silk suit accompanied by the black silk shirt and black tie and black loafers Julian insisted he wear.

"When she returns to the bordello, we'll show up unannounced," Julian said. "She doesn't like surprises."

"Will we be allowed in?" Jackson asked.

Julian's grin was brutal. "Do you really think they could stop us?"

"I'd be surprised to learn she doesn't have bodyguards watching her," Dáire commented.

"Oh, she does but I know most of them or..." Julian's grin became just plain evil. "Better yet, they know me."

"Okay so we go in and then what?" Dáire inquired.

"Let me do all the talking. Don't say a word, either of you. Just stand there and look menacing. Make sure your guns are where she can see them."

"I can do that, but the Pillsbury Doughboy here couldn't look menacing on a good day," Dáire quipped of Jackson. "And I think his gun came from a box of cereal." He gave Jackson—dressed entirely in white—a bland look.

## HOT GEORGIA WINDS

Jackson growled, his eyes narrowed, and made snapping sounds at Dáire.

"Don't do that, Jack Off. That only makes you look like an overweight pit bull with bad dentures," Dáire snorted.

"Eat shit and get irritable bowel syndrome, Dairy Crow," Jackson muttered.

Julian hid his humor behind a hasty cough. The two men were always swapping insults but he knew they had each other's back. More importantly, they'd have his.

For the next twenty minutes the men sat discussing everything but the situation into which they had been thrust. When the phone rang, Dáire answered then stuck his thumb in the air to let his companion's know things were a go.

The last thing all three men did was check their weapons. Though Julian did not carry a gun, the butterfly switchblade he expertly flipped open and closed gave him all the protection he needed.

"Let's do it," Dáire said.

\* \* \* \*

Madame was hungry, tired, and depressed when she came through the back entrance of the Syn, annoyed even more that the two men she'd hired to replace Gaston and Remy didn't quite come up to her standards. Gaston had yet to show his face in New Orleans, but when he did he wouldn't be around for long. Giving the two new bodyguards a cursory glance, she didn't bother to speak to them. She went directly to her office, calling out to her secretary to bring her a sandwich and a beer.

Sitting down at her desk, she leaned back in the chair and pinched the bridge of her nose. She had the beginnings of a tension headache and her bunions were killing her. Kicking off her shoes, she swung the chair around until she could prop her aching feet on the desk top, closing her eyes as she ground her teeth to the fierce aching beside her big toes.

Vaguely aware of a commotion at the front of her establishment, she was confident her majordomo could handle it. He was big and dangerous, capable of taking care of any situation that usually occurred: curiosity seekers wanting a look inside, just plain stupid people with nothing better to do than snoop, or suspicious husbands and/or jealous siblings looking for a wayward relative. She was not expecting to open her eyes and find Julian St. John staring across the desk at her. Like a guilty teenager caught masturbating, she jerked her feet off the desk and sat up straight, smoothing the skirt of her dress.



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"J...Julian," she stammered. "How n...nice to s...see you!"

"You won't think so when I'm through with you, Maddy," Julian grated.

Madame's eyes switched to the two men flanking Julian a few feet behind him, one covering the door, the other glaring at her, both wearing sunglasses although it was dark out. "Who are t...these gentlemen?" she asked.

"Mr. White and Mr. Black," Julian said.

Madame swallowed. "L...like in the m...movie, huh?" she asked, trying to smile but her lips barely moved.

Julian put his palms on her desk top and leaned forward. "Where is he?"

She blinked. "Who?"

Julian—dressed in a long sleeve white silk shirt and black leather pants—arched a dark brow. "Don't fuck with me, Maddy."

"Honestly, Julian!" she said. "I don't know who you're talking about."

"Wait outside, Mr. White," Julian told Jackson. "And close the door behind you."

Madame got slowly to her feet. "Now, wait a minute, Julian. You c...can't..."

Julian flicked a solitary glance to Dáire Cronin—the man dressed all in black—and a black oxide .50AE Desert Eagle was drawn from a holster barely concealed by the handsome man's expensive tailored suit.

"Do you remember Celeste, Maddy?" Julian asked softly.

Madame's eyes widened, her attention glued to the man in the black suit.

"Have you ever seen firsthand the mess hollow point bullets centered between a woman's eyes can make to even the most carefully applied makeup?"

Slowly, her horrified gaze shifted to Julian. She was trembling. "W...what do you want, Julian?"

"B.J."

She flinched. "I d—don't..." She stopped as she heard the slide on the semi-automatic engage. "Iowa! He's in Iowa!"

Julian went as still as a statue. "Iowa," he said.

"Yes, Iowa," Madame stammered.

For a long moment, Julian stared at her, then he ordered her around the desk.

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"Why?" she whined.

"You're going with us to get him," he replied.

She shook her head like a wet terrier. "No, I won't do that. No."

In a single heartbeat, Dáire stepped forward without a word and in a blur of movement pressed the barrel of his gun between the black woman's horrified eyes.

"Mr. Black is one of the most efficient and feared hit men in the country, Maddy," Julian said. "Just keeping him on my payroll, having him at my beck and call, sets me back nearly as much as the profits you make for your entire stable for a whole year. At last count—and we're not including Celeste in the tally—he's executed over one hundred men and more than two dozen women without breaking a sweat or batting an eye. The man has no morals, and I can guarantee you he has no compunction whatsoever about killing you. As a matter of fact, he'll be very disappointed if I don't allow him to shoot you. Now, do you really want to be added to his list?"

"You're going to kill me anyway," Madame hissed.

"Why?" Julian asked. "What did you do to Brandy?"

Madame was having a hard time standing still. The pain from the barrel being held so firmly over the bridge of her nose had intensified her tension headache to the point she could barely see.

"I haven't done anything to him. Gaston..." She licked her lips.

"Gaston, what?" Julian growled.

"He hit his brother in the back with a baseball bat," she said. "There could be serious damage." She felt a trickle of urine slither down her leg as Julian's brutal look trekked across her face. "I had nothing to do with it, Julian! I told Gaston not to hurt him. Justin is going to..."

"Justin Thibodeaux?"

"Yes," she whimpered. "He's taking care of Gaston and then..." She clamped her mouth shut.

"And what?" Julian shouted, knowing full well what the bordello owner had done.

A thin trickle of blood oozed out of Madame's right nostril then her eyes rolled up in her head and she collapsed like a broken puppet. Neither man made a move to catch her as she fell and she cracked her head against the corner of the desk.

Dáire holstered his gun then squatted down beside her, putting two fingers to her throat. He held his hand there for a few seconds then

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reached up to remove his sunglasses. He craned his head to look up at Julian. "She's dead," he said.

Julian cursed vehemently, then yelled for Jackson, who hastily opened the door. "Call the paramedics," he ordered.

"What did you two do?" Jackson asked in a calm voice.

"We didn't do anything. I think the bitch had an aneurism," Dáire snapped.

Julian went around behind her desk and started looking for her purse. "Check her pockets to see if she has a cell phone," he told Dáire.

The cell phone was found in her purse under the desk. Flipping it open, Julian ran through the numbers in memory until he found one that had J.T. beside it. Without a second thought, he thumbed in the number.

"Talk to me," came the gruff Cajun voice at the other end on the second ring.

"Justin, its Julian St. John."

"How you got Madame's phone, Julian?" Justin demanded.

"I've got her phone," Julian said. "I've got her stable. I've got everything of hers. She kicked the bucket."

"No one be grievin' o'er dat," Justin declared.

"You want to be on my payroll, Justin?" Julian asked.

"Do de Pope wear de funny hat?" Justin shot back with a chuckle.

"Have you taken out Gaston?"

"Notchet," Justin answered. "Want me to or not?" There was a slight pause. "Will do it fer nothin'."

"That's your call," Julian said. "What about the Georgia woman?"

"Ain't been dere yet," Justin said. "Gonna go dere next."

"Negative, Justin," Julian said. "She's under my protection."

"I hear ya," the Cajun stated. "Won't touch 'er."

"I'll be in touch," Julian said, then hung up. He slipped the phone into the pocket of his shirt then took out his handkerchief and wiped his palm, a look of disgust on his face as though touching the phone, talking to the Cajun killer had given him a bad case of indigestion.

"Francesca going to be all right?" Dáire asked.

Julian nodded, not looking at Cronin.

"You sure?"

Julian lifted his gaze to shoot Dáire a steady, uncompromising look. "He knows better than to cross me."

"Okay," Dáire said.

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Jackson had used the phone on the desk in the parlor to call the paramedics and the sound of an ambulance and police car in the distance accompanied him into the office. "We gonna hang around and talk to the Crescent City's finest?" he inquired.

Julian shook his head. "You two go wait in the limo," he said. "I'll handle this." Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew the switchblade and handed it to Jackson.

Although there were several handsome young men milling about the parlor, there were no women in sight. It amused Dáire when one muscular stud winked at him as he passed. He knew the wink wasn't sexual, but a guarantee no one would say anything to the cops about the man in white and the man in black who had never been in the Syn.

Julian sat down in one of the two plush chairs flanking Madame's desk and just stared at her. He knew he'd offer jobs to most—if not all—the men who had worked for Madeline Levant. That didn't concern him. What caused the worried look on his darkly tanned face was that he had no idea just exactly where in Iowa Brandyn Fontanelle had been ditched.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

"A male prostitute, huh? Nice company you keep, Cree," Morgan Bouchard said as he stared out at the lights of the city gilding the golden dome of the state capitol building. He had an excellent view from his loft apartment. "What is his name again?"

"Brandyn Fontanelle," Viraidan Cree answered. "Goes by Brandy." He was just finishing up his second bag of hot and spicy meat skins and was sipping on his third Pepsi of the night as he eyed the unopened box of chocolate-covered cherries waiting for his loving, devoted attention. If he couldn't have sex, he'd have junk food.

"Don't know that name in particular, though there was a whole bunch of Fontanelles who had records as long as my hairy arm," Bouchard commented. "Do you know who he works for?"

"Her name is Madeline Levant."

"Oh, now that's an oldie but goodie, a name I know very well," the FBI agent said. "How soon you need the information, Aidan?"

"As soon as you can get it to me," Cree replied.

"Let me do some checking and I'll call you back."

Cree crumpled up the empty cellophane of meat skins, pitched it over his shoulder where it landed just short of the wastebasket, then snagged the box of chocolate covered cherries, gleefully tearing into that cellophane cover. "See ya," he mumbled, dropping the rechargeable phone into his lap from between his jaw and shoulder. Destroying the cardboard box to get at the candy, he popped three cherries into his mouth and began chewing with relish.

\* \* \* \*

Jackson dusted at a smudge on the pants of his white suit. "So we're good to go?" he asked absently.

"The police don't usually care what happens to women like Maddy unless they have clout. She did but it dissolved when she died, until someone finds her private records on her clients," Julian remarked. "I'll

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have to be around for the inquest but that won't be for a few days. We can fly up to Iowa and start looking for B.J."

"Where?" Dáire asked. He had taken off his tie and unbuttoned his black silk shirt halfway down his bronzed chest. Even though the AC was cranked up high in the limo, he was sweating.

"Do you know anyone in Iowa?" Julian countered.

"Not a fucking soul," Dáire replied. "Never even been through the state."

"I do," Jackson mumbled.

"Who?" Dáire snapped irritably.

"Friend of mine who went through the academy with me," he said. He was frowning at the smudge. "You met him once."

"I've met a lot of people once, Jack Off," Dáire growled. "Who the hell are you talking about?"

"Warrior," Jackson replied. "Warrior Bouchard."

Julian's eyebrows shot up. "Morgan Bouchard?" he asked. "Creek Indian with a fucking hero ego the size of Alaska?"

"That would be Warrior," Jackson agreed. He gave Julian a surprised look. "He get on your bad side at some time or other?"

"He used to date my wife," Julian grumbled.

"Whoa," Jackson said. "Small world, huh?"

"Your wife is from Louisiana?" Dáire asked.

"No," Julian hissed. "She's from Iowa. I was born there."

"Real small world," Jackson added.

"I would never have pegged you for a Midwesterner," Dáire said.

"I'm not," Julian stated emphatically. "I grew up in England." When the two men gave him a confused look, he waved it away. "It's a long story."

"So where did you meet Warrior, then?" Jackson asked.

"I met him when I went back with my mother to help her and my stepfather move to the Cay. He just happened to walk into the restaurant in Iowa City where we were eating." His eyes narrowed dangerously. "Son of a fucking prick. I do not like that man."

"Because he once dated your wife or because he's an asshole? What's he look like?" Dáire asked, obviously getting a kick out of seeing Julian riled.

"Like an asshole who once dated my wife," Julian snapped. "Bastard had the nerve to swoop down on Silkie and nearly smother her

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with a greasy kiss." He was unaware he was digging his fingernails into the leather of the seat. "I wanted to deck him but Mama wouldn't let me."

"She might have spanked you otherwise, huh?" Dáire questioned with a twitch of his lips.

"Fuck you, Cronin," Julian hissed.

"Now boys," Jackson said. "Play nice." He had taken out his cell phone and was calling the office in Panama City. When he had their secretary on the line, he asked her to go into his office and look up Bouchard's number in his Rolodex. He got the FBI agent's voice mail when he called so was only able to leave a message.

By the time they reached the airport and Julian's private jet, it was almost midnight and Jackson was yawning fiercely. He went directly to his seat and curled up and was snoring before the plane started taxiing down the runway.

"That man can sleep anywhere," Dáire grouched.

"That's not sleep," Julian observed. "That's a nap attack."

They exchanged a grin and also settled down for the trip. It had been a long, tiring day and before long, they were snoring in concert with Jackson.

\* \* \* \*

Francesca could not sleep and sat on the glider on her patio and stared out into the night. She had tucked her bare feet up on the seat, encircling her legs within her arms, her cheek resting on her knees. It was a defensive, protective posture she'd developed as a child when her bitterly squabbling parents would fight. It was the only way she felt safe, and at that moment in time she felt as unsafe, unsure, and defenseless as she ever had. Beside her on the glider seat was a loaded semi-automatic but she still felt vulnerable.

Her heart was breaking and she was so worried about Brandy, terrified of what might be happening to him. She wondered how she would cope of the next few days. Her husband was a strong man, a gentle man, but he had suffered so much in his short lifetime, had endured far too much agony of spirit and flesh and soul to have more heaped upon him. It wasn't right, and she was coming apart just thinking of it.

"Where are you, cowboy?" she whispered.

She knew she had to have faith in the men who had gone after him. There had been something truly malevolent in the eyes of Dáire Cronin and Julian St. John. She thought perhaps each of them must have experienced something similar in their lives. Julian—she knew—

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understood all too well what Brandy had already been through since he had shared a portion of his own sordid life with Brandy. As for Dáire? Though he was as handsome as they came, there was a cold ruthlessness to him she sensed and would not want to make an enemy of the man.

Heat lightning flared, lighting up the backyard and she lifted her head to look that way. Was it raining where Brandy was? Did he hear it? *Could* he hear it? Or was he lost in some drug-induced abyss from which he feared he would never escape?

She thought of the man he'd told her about, trying to remember the name. Madame had separated that poor man from the woman he loved just as she'd separated Francesca from Brandy.

"I hate you," Francesca said through clenched teeth. "I'll hate you 'til the day I take my last breath and I'll curse you long after I'm moldering in the grave, you bitch."

*Hurt me, baby. Hurt me if you want to*, he had told her that first night and she remembered thinking how many women had deliberately hurt him either physically or emotionally.

*Is he in pain now?* she wondered. Was there someone there to comfort him if he was?

A hitching sob tore through Francesca's chest and the tenderhearted woman's side of her screamed in agony that he might be hurting. A memory of her grandmother once commenting that all females tended to protect the males in their lives—whether fathers, brothers, lovers, husbands, or sons—came back to her.

"I failed you, cowboy," she said. "I didn't protect you."

That more than anything made Francesca Fontanelle want to kill something.

\* \* \* \*

Brandy couldn't sleep despite pushing the button on his IV pump every two hours. He was groggy, but there wasn't a high enough dosage of morphine in each release to put him out. His back was a burning, stabbing hurt that refused to allow him to lie comfortably in any position. At that moment he had found the only halfway endurable way and that was on his side with his knees drawn up, his hands tucked between his legs. Sweat glistened on his face and ran down his neck but he didn't have either the energy or the will to wipe it away.

Down the hall a man who had been screaming intermittently all evening released a bone-chilling yowl that made the hair on Brandy's



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arms stand up. Whatever hell the man had been plunged into was surely eating him alive.

"Can't sleep?"

Brandy looked toward the door to find a tall, imposing man leaning against the door jamb, his arms folding over his chest, one leg crossed over the other. The light from the hallway spilled into the room but since the man's back was to the light, his face was only a dark shadow that blended into the black clothing he was wearing.

"I hurt too bad," Brandy replied.

"Med not working?" The man's voice was deep, soft, and somehow soothing.

"Afraid not, but I don't want it increased."

The man pushed away from the door, unfolded his arms, and came over to the bed. "May I ask why not?"

Brandy still couldn't see the face above him for he didn't want to move his head, knowing the pain would flare sharply at the slightest movement. "I had a problem," he answered.

"Ah." A very warm hand settled on Brandy's forehead. "Let's see if I can help."

"Who are you?" Brandy asked. He felt a kind of strange electric current that seemed to be flowing from the man's palm.

"Most people just call me Cree," the man replied. "When was the last time you pushed the button on the pump?"

"About an hour ago."

"Give it a hit."

"Are you a doctor here?" Brandy asked. He thumbed the button.

Cree snorted softly. "Not likely. I'm in charge of security. My lady's the doctor in the family."

Between the out of the ordinary sensation that was coming from Cree's hand and the med flowing into his arm, the pain in his back seemed to be easing. Strong, warm fingers were making light, slow circles on both of Brandy's temples.

"Whatever you got zinging around in your body ought to be packaged," Brandy said, closing his eyes.

"Mind over matter, my friend," Cree said. There was a long pause before he spoke again. "How long have you known Kit?"

"Since I was a boy," Brandy said.

"Tell me about him."

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Brandy was floating somewhere outside himself, his back no longer giving him sharp doses of agony. He was unaware he was telling the stranger he'd just met not only Kit's life story but his own as well, and he left nothing out with a few gentle probes from Cree.

Cree wasn't looking down at the man whose temples he was massaging. He was staring at the wall behind the hospital bed, his amber eyes hot with raging anger as he listened to Brandy's story. His lean jaw was clenched tight though his hands were as gentle as down on the young man's flesh.

"And you fear for your lady," Cree said, withdrawing his fingers.

"Yes," Brandy answered.

Cree said nothing for a moment then placed his hand on Brandy's shoulder. "You can sleep now, Brandyn," he said.

Brandy shifted his cheek on the pillow, exhaled loudly, then went to sleep.

Fury such as he hadn't known in a long, long time gripped Viraidan Cree as he left Brandy's room. He walked three doors down and entered another room where another young man sat up in bed, his attention glued to the shifting, flickering lights of the television set suspended high on the wall opposite his bed. His hands constantly drummed against his legs with a complex rhythm as he sat there and he hadn't even noticed Cree entering the room. The sound on the television had been turned completely down.

"Kit, look at me," Cree said.

The man on the bed turned his head slowly. There was no expression on his face and his dark eyes were blank and bleak.

"Do you remember B.J. Fontanelle?" Cree asked, picking the name Brandy had called himself.

Kit's lips pursed for a moment then he shook his head.

"He's down the hall."

The dark eyes flared for a moment before Kit stepped up the beat of his palms against his legs, looking back up at the TV.

"I'm going to get you both out of here," Cree said.

The drumming ceased for just a brief moment then resumed but at a slower pace.

When Cree reached the luxurious apartment he shared with his wife at Baybridge, he was in a killing frame of mind. He'd tried calling Bouchard a couple of times but the FBI agent didn't answer. It didn't matter to Cree that it was well past one in the morning.

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"You look like someone ran over your wittle motorcycle," the elderly man who shared their apartment observed from a rocking chair in the great room of the apartment.

"I'm not in the mood, Cedric," Cree snapped at the man.

"She's asleep," the old man said. "Don't go waking her up with that pissy temper of yours."

Cree flopped down on the sofa and lifted his hands to dig the base of his palms against his tired eyes. "Sometimes I think the human race is far more evil than any of Raphian's spawn," he said. He kicked off his boots and stretched out on the sofa, flinging one arm over his face. "And the females are deadlier than the males."

"Oh, I could have told you that a long time ago, Cree," Cedric agreed. He closed his eyes and rocked gently. "Try to rest."

Cree didn't want to rest, but his body was begging for it. What he wanted to do was wake his wife and plunge into her body like a madman, but what he wanted even more was to tear something apart.

Something that looked like Madeline Levant.

Morgan Bouchard had lost his cell phone sometime during the evening—something that happened quite often to the Louisiana man—and he wasn't in a good mood, either. He didn't have Cree's personal cell phone number, though he did have some information he thought the security chief of Wynth Industries would appreciate having. Annoyed that he would have to wait until morning to call, he prowled his loft apartment, searching for the cell phone until his eyes grew too heavy to keep open. Flinging himself down across the bed—his usually preferred method of sleeping—and was snoring loud enough to wake the dead within a matter of minutes.

\* \* \* \*

Checking into the first motel they could find after leaving the Newton, Iowa airport via taxi, Julian, Dáire and Jackson each got a room and called it a night.

## **Chapter Twenty**

"Did he even know you were questioning him?" Bronwyn asked her husband the next morning as she set his breakfast before him. She pulled the silk gown she was wearing tighter around her shapely body that would soon begin to show evidence of her pregnancy.

Cree automatically reached for the salt, even though over the years his wife had repeatedly asked him to taste his food before seasoning. As he always did, he ignored her arched brow and pursed lips as she sat down at the table with him, and scattered salt all over his food and much of the table. On his plate were six scrambled eggs, which he mixed into a large mound of buttered grits, six spicy sausage patties, which he cut up and stirred into the melee of grits and eggs, and four pieces of buttered toast. Beside his plate were a large glass of orange juice and an oversized mug of hot coffee very liberally laced with sugar and cream.

"He had no idea he was answering me," he told his lady.

"So Madeline Levant is a Madame," Bronwyn said as she took a sip of her hot chocolate.

Her husband frowned brutally, his hawkish gaze spanning the table.

"What did I forget?" she asked, already getting to her feet.

"Mayhaw jelly," he grumbled.

She went to the fridge and pulled out a jar of the pale, rose-colored sweet condiment she had to send to Colquitt, Georgia for two boxes every year when the town had its Mayhaw Festival.

"Don't you find this strange, Bronnie?" he asked as he took the jelly, opened it, and smeared a large dollop on his toast.

"What, that you go through a jar of Mayhaw jelly every two days?" she asked, shaking her head. "You're going to become a diabetic."

He snorted and rolled his eyes at her suggestion. "Brandy's wife lives in Albany, Georgia."

Bronwyn's lips parted. "You didn't tell me that!"

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He shrugged. "Well, she does and that's not the only strange thing." He took a large bite of the toast and chewed. "You know how Warrior and I've kind of meshed?"

"You mean the FBI guy?"

"He used to live in Albany, too."

"Now you're starting to really freak me out, Reaper," she said.

He stopped eating, turned his head, and gave her a speculative look.

"Now what did I forget?" she asked with a sigh, preparing to get to her feet.

His leering grin was so hot the temperature in the room shot up a good five degrees. "I'm horny," he stated. "I got home so late I didn't get any num-nums last night and I'm so gods-be-damned horny my cock is about to poke through the leather of my pants."

"Aidan, really..." she said but he shot up from the table, reached out to snag her hand, and started pulling her from the kitchen and through the great room.

"Have fun, kids," Cedric called from his rocker.

"Get bent," Cree grumbled as he led Bronwyn down the hall and to their bedroom.

Bronwyn stumbled along behind him, resigned to what she had known would happen once her man got a few jolts of sugar into his system. She winced when he yelled at a big black dog lying at the foot of their bed.

"Get off that bed! Now!" Cree hissed. "And don't you dare fart on the way out!"

The dog jumped down, gave Cree a murderous look, then padded regally from the room.

"He's horny, Ralph," she heard Cedric tell the dog.

Cree kicked the door—which bore numerous scuff marks from his black boots—shut, then grabbed Bronwyn around the waist and carried her to the bed, falling down with her upon the thick viscous foam mattress. His big hand went to the sash at her waist and with one expert tug it came open.

"By the gods I love you, wench," he said as he pushed the robe aside to find her nude beneath it. His avid gaze seared her breasts with its heat.

Bronwyn put a hand to his cheek to cup it. "You are my life, Reaper."

There were no more words. Viraidan Cree needed his woman, and not even hell itself could keep him from taking her. His hand was

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trembling as he palmed the lush globe of her breast. Holding it gently, reverently, he lowered his mouth and claimed that sweet flesh with his lips, dragging his tongue lovingly over the peak.

Bronwyn plowed her hands slowly through his thick dark hair, her fingernails grazing his scalp in the way she knew he loved. His mouth on her was such a sweet, wondrous blessing that she could not wait to share with him when she nursed their child. As though she had spoken her feelings aloud, he lifted his head.

"My baby," he said and slid his hand to her belly and caressed her. "Our baby." Tears glistened in his eyes. "Our son."

She smiled at him. "Have you picked a name?" She had wanted to give him the honor of doing that though he had insisted she pick their child's name.

He swirled his palm on her belly. "Colton," he said. "Colton Sean Cree."

"Sean?" she whispered. The name had priceless meaning for them both.

Her husband lowered his lips to her stomach and kissed her. "Aye, wench," he said.

She tugged on his hair. "I want you inside me," she said. "I need you inside me."

That cocky grin that had always made her heart soar covered his face and he reached down to free his rigid cock from the restriction of his pants. "I believe I can accommodate you," he agreed. He lowered his hand to her sex and arched a dark brow. "Why, wench, ye be all slick."

"Aye, Reaper," she said, "and I'm hot all the way to the core."

He slipped one finger insider her and then a second one. "Aye, you are hot in there."

"Hot and wet and wild," she said, then grinned. "Sort of like those videos Cedric and Ralph like to watch after you and I have gone to bed."

Cree's brows jumped up. "They watch porn while we're sleeping?"

"You know how old men are," she said with a giggle.

His fingers were slowly moving in and out of her creamy sheath. "I know how this old man is," he said, fingering her clit with slow circuits of his thumb.

Reveling in the fact that her man was quite dexterous with his digits, she preferred something a lot larger, firmer, and oozing in her cunt.

"Come inside me, Reaper," she said.

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He was lying beside her and shifted to wedge between her legs. Her arms went around his shoulders, her legs came up to capture his waist, and he thrust slowly and firmly into her wetness, settling himself deep inside her.

"This is where you belong," she said, kissing his chin.

"This is where I'll always be," he replied.

\* \* \* \*

Grumbling to himself as he padded barefoot and bare-chested into his kitchen, Morgan Bouchard's dark hair looked as though someone had taken a hand mixer to it. Thick spikes of wiry locks haloed his head. Sniffing, scratching idly at the thick mat of hair that grew along the tiger line that reached from between his chiseled pecs to just beneath the waistband of his silk boxers, he yawned wildly, more asleep than awake as he trudged to the stainless steel fridge. Taking out the gallon jug of coffee he made twice a week, he poured himself a cup, and stumbled over to the microwave to nuke it. As soon as he opened the oven's door, he exhaled deeply.

"Ah, hah! There you are," he said, swiping his cell phone from the turntable. It began vibrating almost immediately in his hand, surprising him, but he answered as he stuck his coffee cup into the oven and punched in one minute and forty seconds. "Bouchard."

"How's it hanging, you old LSU tiger, you?"

The FBI agent frowned. "Who's this?"

"Someone whose alma mater always beats the sweats off yours at play-off time."

"Jackson!" Bouchard exclaimed. "How the fuck are you?"

"Trying to but can't find a girl interested in meeting me halfway," Jackson replied.

"You still look like porky pig?" the Fibber asked. "That may be why." He heard hissing and snarling in the background. "What's up?"

"I could swap compliments with you all day but we've got a situation," Jackson said.

"We as in you and The Cumberland Group?" Bouchard asked.

"This is personal," Jackson answered.

"Okay. Let's have it."

"Ever heard of a Madame down in N'Orlens named Madeline..."

"Levant," Bouchard finished for him.

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There was a long silence, more hissing, then Jackson asked if Bouchard had been smoking a peace pipe full of jimson weed or had suddenly developed psychic powers.

"You looking for someone who's gone missing down that way, Jackson?" the Fibber countered.

"You betcha breechclout," Jackson said. "Know where we might start?"

"That depends," Bouchard said. "Has this guy done something naughty?" He glanced at the manila folder lying on his kitchen table. "Like maybe gutted a guy over in that Detroit of the South city?"

"It was self-defense," Jackson said.

"So I heard," Bouchard agreed. "Where you calling from?"

"A right nifty little strip of land called Newton."

"Where exactly in Newton?"

Jackson gave his academy mate the name of the motel along the interstate and was told to wait where he was, help was on the way.

"You coming or just gonna breath hard in my ear?" Jackson asked.

"I can't but I'll be sending the cavalry to you. You'll know him by the tat," Bouchard said. "Can't miss it. He'll take you to your target."

"We're going over to the Country Kitchen for breakfast. Have him meet us there."

"You and who else?" Bouchard asked. "He'll want to know."

"Oh, 'tis like that, eh?" Jackson said. "Okay, it's me and Dáire—remember him?—and another guy you might have heard of named Julian St. John."

There was a low whistle on the other end of the line. "Goddamn, what is this world coming to? If that ain't a kettle of smelly fish. Even though I wish I could be there to kick St. John's uptight ass I've got to be in court in twenty minutes. Give him the finger for me, okay?"

"Will do," Jackson said and from the curse on the other end of the line, he must have carried out Bouchard's suggestion. "Appreciate the help and I'll let you know how everything comes out."

\* \* \* \*

Julian, Dáire, and Jackson were being served when the tall man in black came sauntering through the restaurant's door, garnering the immediate attention of the hostess and anyone else standing close by. Their waitress backed away from him as he walked toward the table—the only one at which three men were sitting.



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"Coffee," he ordered the woman, then slid smoothly and with confidence into the booth beside Julian, sweeping a pair of mirrored Ray-Bans from his eyes, folding one arm, and sticking the other in the opened collar of his black silk shirt to dangle down the front of his wide chest. He leaned back, draping an arm on the back of the vinyl-covered bench. "Cree," he introduced himself, making no move to extend his hand.

"Julian St. John," Julian said. "Dáire Cronin and Daniel Jackson."

"Bouchard said you were government men," Cree said, staring steadily at Dáire, somehow sensing he was the more important of the two. "What agency?"

"The Cumberland Group," Dáire replied.

"Covert shit," Cree said with a sniff. "I've had dealings with them in the past." He turned his head, dismissing Dáire and Jackson. "And you are the man who took Bouchard's woman."

"I'm the man she wanted," Julian said.

"From what I hear, a lot of women wanted you," Cree said.

Julian stiffened. "Bouchard has a big mouth."

Cree looked pointedly at their food. "Eat, ladies. Breakfast is the most important meal of your day."

The waitress returned with Cree's coffee.

"Warrior said you could help us with a problem we have," Dáire said. He had taken an instant dislike to the man across from him. The dark blue tribal tattoo on the left side of Cree's face not only annoyed him, it sent a visceral message that rippled up and down his spine. It said this man was trouble.

Cree glanced at Jackson. "Her name was Marilyn Gracey and she had a fondness for cherry laurel switches and paddle ball paddles without the rubber ball. She was your third foster mother and the last one you had before you joined the Army to get away from her."

The forkful of hash browns dropped from Jackson's hand and clattered into his plate. His eyes grew as round as saucers, his face draining of its normally florid coloring.

Cree swung his gaze to Dáire. "The woman who fucked you over was named Tyndall Gentry and her favorite toy was a leather razor strop that had belonged to her father. I believe you slipped it into her coffin before the burial, right after you pissed on it."

Dáire's jaw clenched. "No one knew that but me," he growled.

"Yours was named Celeste Dubois," Cree said as he turned his head to look at Julian. "She once bloodied your ass with a radiator belt when

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you talked back to her. That wasn't her normal way of punishing her *boys*, but it got your attention."

"Where the hell did you get that information?" Dáire demanded.

"Mine was named Ski'Ah," Cree said. "Both times. One fucked me against my will and a descendant of that bitch came to Terra and kidnapped my ass."

"Terra?" Dáire repeated. "Where the hell is...?"

"Brandyn Fontanelle has had two women screw him over, too," Cree continued. "Celeste Dubois made him a pillow muncher for twisted bastards who liked to hurt him, and now this Levant broad has had him committed to a mental facility just to punish him for loving a woman."

"A what?" Julian gasped.

"A woman," Cree said, his lips twitching. "They're like men only softer and a helluva lot more fun."

"Cut the shit. Do you know where Brandy is?" Dáire snapped.

"About fifteen miles from here," Cree answered. "At Etesian Hills."

"Never heard of it," Dáire grumbled.

"Few people have," Cree responded. "It's a dirty little secret the very rich folks have been keeping for three years now."

"Let's go," Dáire said, shoving against Jackson, who had completely lost his appetite without ever taking a bite to get out of the booth.

"You might as well eat your food," Cree said. "You aren't getting into the facility until I say you can."

"You work there?" Julian asked.

"I am the chief of security," Cree told him.

"Then you are going to..." Dáire pushed Jackson. "Get the fuck up, Jack Off!"

"I'm not going to do anything until it's time to do it," Cree said, locking gazes with Dáire. "At the moment, my wife is taking very good care of Brandyn and Kit, getting them ready to..."

"Kit?" Julian nearly strangled on the word. "Kit Léglise?" At Cree's slow nod, he slumped in the seat. "Oh, my God!"

"Who's Kit?" Dáire asked.

"Another one of Levant's pretty boys," Cree replied.

"Kit is there, too?" Julian whispered. "All this time?"

Cree nodded again. "And not in very good shape," Cree said. "Too many drugs, too much ECT."

"What's ECT?" Julian asked.

"Electroconvulsive therapy," Dáire answered.

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"Shock treatments?" Julian's face showed his distress.

"Brighton Wynth, who owns Wynth Industries, is the CEO of both Etesian Hills and Baybridge," Cree informed them. "We'll have to wait until he leaves the compound before we can move."

"Baybridge?" Jackson echoed. "Isn't that the maximum security prison?"

"It is," Cree replied. "And that's why no one would have thought to look for Légise or Fontanelle on Wynth Industries property and why not just anyone can sashay in there and take them out."

"We have to get them out, Cree," Julian said.

"And we will," Cree told him. "You just have to have a bit of patience. As soon as Wynth leaves the compound..."

"How do you know he will?" Dáire interrupted.

"One of my men will let me know," Cree said as though Cronin hadn't spoken.

"I have a plane at the Newton airport," Julian said.

"Can it be equipped for two gurneys?" Cree inquired. "Kit may be able to sit up long enough to fly to..." He frowned. "Where will you take them?"

"Mistral Cay," Julian said. "It's an island I own in the Caribbean. We'll make a side trip to Albany to pick up Brandy's wife, Francesca."

An odd expression shifted over Cree's face. "I take it you can protect him."

"Levant is dead," Dáire said.

For a moment Cree just stared at him, then slowly smiled. "Must have been one helluva headache she had."

Dáire blinked and Jackson whispered, "How do you do that?"

"Mind over matter, ladies," Cree said. He picked up his coffee and took a sip, frowned then motioned for the waitress for a fresh cup.

\* \* \* \*

Kit Légise stood beside Brandy's bed as the younger man slept so peacefully and wanted to push back the lock of hair that had fallen into B.J.'s eyes, but he was afraid he would wake him. He just held onto the bed railing with his head tilted to one side, a slight smile on his face.

*They hurt me, Kit*, the little boy had cried until he was hoarse.

*I know*, Kit had replied. *They hurt me, too.*

They had been so young, so vulnerable, and so helpless. Now they were grown and still vulnerable, still helpless, still at the mercy of others.

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It was Kit's low grunting—an unconscious sound the man made without even being aware he was doing it—that woke Brandy. He flinched at having someone so close to him and he drew back, groaning as the pain invaded his spine. But despite the dark circles under his eyes, the gaunt features, and the stooped shoulders, he recognized Kit.

*"Vous êtes développé jusqu'à soyez un homme très bel, peu de B.J.,"* Kit said, complimenting the young man on having grown up to be a handsome man.

Despite the raging pain in his back, Brandy held out a hand to one of the two men who had helped him stay sane when he had been in Celeste's bordello. "How are you, Kit?" he asked.

"Barely alive but surviving," Kit replied. He pulled his hand back as though he didn't like to be touched and began lightly tapping his palms on the railing. "Have you seen Letrice lately?"

"No, Kit," Brandy said. "Not lately."

"I bet she's even more beautiful now," Kit said. He turned and walked off as though they spoke every day at this time.

Dr. Bronwyn Cree intercepted Kit in the hallway, spoke quietly to him for a moment, then patted him on the back, sending him in the company of one of the orderlies back to his room. She came in to speak with Brandy, a gentle smile on her lovely face.

"How are you feeling today, Brandy?"

"What did you people do to him?" Brandy asked. "He looks like hell."

She came over to the bed and leaned on the railing. "I've only been assigned to Etesian Hills for about four months, and since that time I've done everything I could to stop most of the treatments Kit's been having. I've cut his meds almost in half and I'd hoped to wean him off them completely. Someone else will have to do that when he leaves."

"Leaves?" Brandy asked. "Where is he going? What are...?"

Bronwyn lowered her voice. "In about an hour—maybe less—you and Kit will be on a private jet owned by a friend of yours..."

"No!" Brandy said, wincing as he moved to quickly. "I am not going anywhere with her!"

"Do you remember meeting my husband last night?"

"I am not going..."

"Do you?" she cut him off.

"Yes, but..."

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"He called me about ten minutes ago to tell me he had arranged for an ambulance to pick you and Kit up here later this morning, probably around lunch time," Bronwyn told him.

"Don't let her take us," Brandy said, his eyes bleak. "Please don't..."

"Madeline Levant died last night," she informed him. At his stare, she lowered her voice even more. "She had a massive aneurism. She won't ever hurt you or Kit again."

"Then who...?"

"Julian St. John is here with his private jet, and when you leave Iowa he's going to fly you to Albany to pick up your wife and take you down to his island for you to recuperate." She straightened up, her voice louder. "I am happy to report there is only a lot of bruising on your back but no fractures or disk problems. It'll take awhile to heal, but you'll be just fine."

A burly man came into the room, his white lab coat pristine, and his manner very arrogant. "Ah, is this Mrs. Levant's nephew, then?"

"Yes, Dr. Wynth," Bronwyn said.

The man glanced at the IV pump. "Are we keeping him comfortable?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Good," Wynth said. "We'll start our sessions tomorrow, Brandyn."

With a vague smile, the man left as officiously as he'd entered.

"Insufferable lard-ass," Bronwyn said under her breath.

Brandy could sense the woman's contempt of the doctor even had she not labeled him. There was deep, abiding anger in her eyes. "I take it he's not one of the guys with the white hats."

"Have you ever heard of Baybridge?" she asked.

"It's like Pelican Bay, isn't he?" he countered. "One of the super max prisons?"

Bronwyn nodded. "You're about a quarter of a mile from Baybridge, inside the Wynth Industries compound. It is one of the most secure facilities in the world. Guard towers are located every ten feet all around the property. Along the road leading into the compound are security stanchions set every forty feet. They are state of the art infrared tracking devices that can tell you anything you want to know about the vehicle and who is inside it. There are ground sensors buried along the roadways, in the surrounding fields, within the ten-foot perimeter of all the buildings. Pressure will activate the sensors, and when it does, a strong

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current shoots up to incapacitate the intruder and set off an alarm in the command center. Helicopters fly over the grounds at random times and sweep the area with heat-seeking equipment. Most of the prison, itself, is under ground with walls, ceiling and bottom floors composed of twelve feet of sandwiched titanium sheets and concrete, impossible to dig through with anything less than a backhoe." She smiled grimly. "In other words, once in Baybridge, you have a helluva hard time getting out. Prisoners sent here are sent here for life, and believe me when I say you really don't want them to ever leave."

"Like James Strickler," he said, thinking of the serial killer whose list of victims totaled over a hundred.

"He's on Five North," Bronwyn said. "There are two clusters of buildings at Baybridge. The Western Complex is where the inmates are housed. The Eastern Complex houses the staff condos, shops, corporate buildings, and maintenance facilities and this facility is between them, set well back where no one can see it so only an elite few know its here."

"How did Madeline find out about it?" he asked, a perplexed look on his handsome young face.

Bronwyn shrugged. "I can't even begin to imagine, unless one of her clients told her about it. Wynth is very secretive about it."

"She has a brother who runs a rehab clinic for the very wealthy in Pensacola," he said.

"Well, that may very well be how she learned of its existence."

He shifted just a little and the pain of it flashed through his eyes. "I won't be able to sit up, Dr. Cree," he told her. "How am I...?"

"We'll take you out on a gurney," she said. "Kit, too, if necessary."

"We won't be stopped?"

She gave him a wicked grin. "When my husband puts his mind to something, Brandy, nothing can stop him, and no one had better try."

He returned her smile. "A real badass, huh?"

"You have no idea," she replied. "People who anger him find he can be a real wolf." Her eyes twinkled when she said that.

A man in a black uniform appeared at the door. "Milord says they are on their way in, Doc. They'll wait out Highway 6 until the tick is off the facility."

"Thank you, Elias," she said. "Is the ambulance ready?"

"Aye, milady, it is," Elias Gaines replied. He touched a finger to his temple and left as quietly as he had appeared.

"The tick?" Brandy asked.

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"That's what the men called Wynth."

"I take it none of you like him."

"We can't stand him," she stated.

"Then why work here?"

"There are those of us who are the only line of defense between evil and righteousness, Brandy," Bronwyn said. "Some things should not be left to chance. Some things need closure. We may not like what passes for policy at Wynth Industries, but unless and until something better comes along, we'll be here." She touched his hand. "If Aidan and I hadn't been here, if we hadn't been suspicious of Kit's committal, and now yours, the two of you would have been here 'til your dying day."

"What if there are others like us here, Dr. Cree?" he asked, searching her eyes.

"We'll find them if they are, Brandy," she said. "Trust me. We will."

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

The black SUV in which the four men were sitting had windows much darker than the laws of Iowa allowed, so the vehicle was registered and tagged in the state of Florida. No one could see into the interior of the vehicle, and Jackson was surprised the county mountie and the two local police cars that passed them did not stop it but rather cruised on by as though uninterested.

"They don't even glance at us," Jackson leaned over to whisper to Dáire. "Don't you find that a bit off?"

Dáire didn't answer. He was glaring at the back of Cree's head, antsy and annoyed for no reason he could readily find. He didn't like the tall man, but there was more to it than that. It was rare that another male intimidated him and this one did—much to Dáire's resentment. He was damned sure he wouldn't want to come up against Cree when the man was riled. There was something in the amber eyes that bothered Dáire. "Were you ever in the military, Cree?" he asked.

Cree glanced in the rear view mirror and their gazes met. He hooked his finger on the nosepiece of his sunglasses and lowered them so he could see Cronin clearly. "Not here," he replied. "But, aye. I was a warrior long ago." He chuckled. "In a galaxy far, far away."

"Funny," Dáire snapped.

"You asked," Cree said then pushed his sunglasses back in place.

"Did you do wet work?" It was asked in a nasty tone that made Jackson turn his head to look at him and Julian twist around in the front passenger seat to give him a surprised glance.

A sound more like a purr than a chuckle came from Cree's throat. "Let's just say I've dispatched more than my share of the bad guys." Once more he glimpsed at Dáire via the rearview mirror. "Many more than the fifty-three you've sent out of this world in body bags."

Dáire flinched. No one—but *no* one—except him knew just how many people he'd killed in his lifetime. Not even The Cumberland Group



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knew about at least two of them. There was no way Cree should have been able to come up with the number.

"Like I said," Cree drawled. "Mind over matter."

"Reaper One?" the SUV's radio chirped.

Cree picked up the mike. "Go ahead, dispatch."

"Elvis has left the building."

"Copy."

The SUV picked up speed as it rolled down Highway 6. As it neared a T-intersection with a serpentine road winding north, Cree put on his blinker. A maroon-colored car was waiting at the stop sign when he took the turn.

"Brighton Wynth," Cree reported of the driver of the maroon car.

"Better known as Elvis?" Julian quipped.

"More affectionately known to those who know him as *asshole*," Cree answered.

About a mile up the curving road, they rounded a ninety-degree turn between two tall hills that had hidden the rest of the road from view. A security kiosk in the middle of the road blocked entry onto Wynth Industries property. Triple layers of high-security fencing—each section of fencing set part from the next by a six-inch depth—topped with razor wire and dotted with warning signs to indicate the inner fence was electrified, stretched around the property from two heavy-duty sliding gates to either side of the kiosk. One guard tower was outside the gate and another just inside it. According to Cree, at half-mile intervals were more towers and each was being circuited by a man armed with a laser rifle.

"We also do chopper fly-overs at irregular intervals and guards with dogs patrol the grounds twenty-four/seven," Cree added. "The ground beyond the fence is riddled with heat sensors. If it moves on the property, we know about it."

"Tight security," Julian observed.

"Baybridge houses the worst of the worst," Cree said. "Letting even one of those pervs get loose is a scary proposition."

Rolling to a stop at the kiosk, Cree lowered his window. He nodded to the guard who came out of the shack.

"Just you coming back in, milord?" the guard asked.

"Just me, Price," Cree reported.

The guard swept his sunglass shielded eyes at the men sitting in the car with Cree then stepped back. "Have a good day, milord."

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Cree rolled the window back up. "There will be no notation of you ladies ever having been at the facility," Cree said.

"You have that much clout here?" Julian asked.

"With my men, I do," Cree answered. "When we've made sure Léglise and Fontanelle are in the ambulance, my wife and I will drive you out to the airport. I'll accompany you down to Mistral Cay."

"That isn't necessary," Dáire snapped.

"It is for me," Cree said. "I take my responsibility to Léglise and Fontanelle very seriously. Until they are safely at their destination, I won't be comfortable."

"We can handle their safety," Dáire told him.

"I'm sure you can, but I will still accompany you to the Cay, then take the next boat back."

"I'll have my pilot fly you," Julian said, wanting to nip a pissing contest between the two men in the bud.

Dáire clamped his lips shut, irritated that Cree would be with them any longer than he felt was necessary.

The SUV was passing triangular-shaped stanchions that had been placed opposite one another every forty feet along the roadway. Cree told them the stanchions were tracking their car. "Though they are reporting four life forms within the car, the records will officially show only one—me."

"Sweet," Jackson commented.

"If the security is so tight, how the hell are you going to explain two patients up and disappearing from the facility?" Dáire demanded.

Cree's grin stretched his handsome face in such a way he looked like a little boy who had just played the grandest joke on someone.

"With the unfortunate, untimely death of Madeline Levant her guardianship of Léglise and Fontanelle is now in the hands of her immediate heir. By the time the tick gets back to the facility, papers will have been faxed to us by the new guardian requesting the men be returned to Louisiana immediately and without delay so they can attend Levant's funeral. Wynth will be pissed it was handled while he was absent, but the rather hefty \$300,000 donated to Wynth Industries by Levant's heir should appease the tick." His grin widened. "Especially when the men are not returned to Etesian Hills."

"May I ask who the new guardian is?" Julian inquired, wondering who would inherit the multi-million stable of Madeline Levant.

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Cree swung his gaze to Julian. "I believe his name is Julian St. John."

Julian's mouth dropped open. "Are you shitting me?"

Cree shook his head. "She left everything to you with the caveat that you take care of her *boys* as they should be cared for."

"Son of a bitch," Julian whispered.

"In her own, perverted way, I suppose she really cared for the men who worked for her," Cree commented, "and only wanted the best for them."

"Who are you getting to sign those faxed papers for me?"

"Your man at Mistral Cay—Henri Bouvier—is most likely signing them for you even as we speak," Cree replied.

"You've covered all the bases, haven't you, Cree?" Dáire grumbled.

"There is always the possibility we'll miss something," Cree admitted. "It happens to the best of us."

They came to a second kiosk and Cree stopped, spoke briefly to the man on duty then took the road that led to Etesian Hills.

The grounds of Wynth Industries were spectacular with flowers and shrubs that peppered the expanse with bright bursts of color. The prison was an imposing sight as they drove past it, its copper-colored windows catching the sunlight.

"I don't see any bars or arrow-slit windows," Jackson said.

"The prison, itself, is completely underground," Cree explained to them. "What you are seeing are the on-site living quarters and offices of the staff. W.I. prefers its people to live on base—if you will—rather than of the economy. If you don't ever want to leave the facility, you really don't have to. Everything is provided you could possibly want."

"I imagine you need to go out, though, just to keep your sanity," Julian said.

"You've got that right," Cree admitted.

The Etesian Hills building was a soft beige brick that blended beautifully into the rural setting surrounding it. A large crescent-shaped manmade lake stretched behind it and since the day was windy, white caps were rolling on the dark blue water.

"The lake freezes over in the wintertime," Cree said, "and some of the staff goes ice fishing."

"I have never understood that concept," Jackson said. "Do they put little shacks out there on the water?"

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Cree nodded. "My father has one that looks like an old fashioned outhouse, complete with the cutout moon on the door," he said with a laugh. "I've never once seen him come back with a single fish. I think he just goes out there to be alone."

Driving around the side of the building, the men could see the ambulance that was already backed up to the door. A man in a black uniform was standing with his hips propped against the hood.

"One of your goons, I take it," Dáire muttered.

Cree parked beside the ambulance. "My second in command," he acknowledged, "and not a man you want to mess with, Cronin." He turned off the SUV's engine then twisted around in his seat. "Neither of us is."

Dáire held the other man's stare while Julian and Jackson felt the temperature drop at least five degrees inside the air conditioned car. When Cree's attention was taken by a slight tap on the driver side window, the two warriors stopped glaring at one another as Cree turned around to see who was paging him, lowering the power window.

"He's not going to be in town long," the beautiful woman standing outside the car said. "I've got your boys in the ambulance already and set to go, so get your butt in gear, Reaper."

"Did you get the stuff?" Cree asked.

"Did you ask me to?" the woman countered. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small box which she handed to him. "They're marked."

"Muchos gracias," he mumbled, stuffing the box into the pocket of his shirt.

Cree looked around at Julian. "How 'bout you going with the men in the ambulance and letting my lady have the shotgun seat?"

"Sure," Julian said, opening the door and getting out. He smiled at the woman who came around the front of the SUV.

"Bronwyn Cree," she said, holding out a hand.

"Julian St. John," he introduced himself.

"Brandy was in a lot of pain with his back. I gave him a pretty good dose of morphine before we moved him so he's sleeping right now. Kit is out of it at the moment, not communicating. I may give him something to knock him out once we get to the airport."

"Okay," Julian said. He headed for the ambulance.

Bronwyn got into the car, automatically turning around to thrust her hand at Dáire. "Bronwyn," she said. "The big oaf's better half."

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Cree grunted as he backed the car up and sat waiting for the ambulance to precede him.

"Dáire Cronin," Dáire replied. "You have my sympathies."

Cree twisted his head around and gave Dáire a warning look.

"Jackson," the other man in the backseat said into the deafening silence. "I'm Dáire's better half."

Bronwyn frowned. "Have we met?" she asked Jackson.

"I was wondering the same thing," Jackson said. "Ever been to Quantico?"

"I applied for a job there back in 1994 or '95," Bronwyn replied.

"Might have been there," Jackson said. "I retired from there about that time."

"Small world," they said in unison, then laughed.

"Did the fax from the Caribbean come in?" Cree asked his wife as the ambulance pulled out and he fell in behind it.

"Yes, it did. The tick is going to blow a gasket, but the wire transfer to his personal account should soothe him a bit," Bronwyn replied.

"Where is the money coming from?" Dáire asked.

Bronwyn laughed. "We did some creative bookkeeping," she said. "When W.I. has its next government audit, there's going to be some s'plainin' to do, Lucy."

"Is that intentional?" Jackson queried.

"Wynth has been skating along for too many years," Cree said. "It's time he was taken down a few pegs. Trying to adequately explain 30k in his personal account should do the job."

"Especially when that same amount will show up missing from W.I.'s grant account," Bronwyn giggled.

"Remind me not to make an enemy of you two," Jackson said with a grin.

"We're just out to save the world, Jackson," Cree said.

"Anyone ever tell you that you're so sexy when you're delusional?" Bronwyn asked her husband.

\* \* \* \*

On the way to the airport, Julian sat on the rumble seat beside one of Cree's men and watched Brandy sleeping. Kit was sitting on the other side of the security man, tapping lightly on his thighs, his eyes closed. He was making strange little grunting sounds the security man told him was normal.

"Too many meds," the security man said softly.

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Julian's eyes filled with tears. Kit had been a very personable young man despite the horrific life he had endured before being sold to Celeste Dubois. Though he'd been physically and emotionally abused by both his father and grandfather, he always had a smile on his handsome face. Now, his face was drawn, his eyes hooded when they were open, and his body as tense as a tightly wound spring. He had lost so much weight, he looked gaunt, and there was a tremor to his long, tapered fingers. Now and again, he would run his forearm under his nose.

"We're going home," Kit said suddenly, leaning over and looking at Julian past the security man. "I'm going to see Letrice."

Julian smiled but made no comment.

Kit bobbed his head then closed his eyes again and resumed his rhythmic drumming, punctuated with the cadence with soft grunts.

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, Julian St. John's private jet was winging its way eastward, trying to outrace another brutal summer thunderstorm rushing up from the southwest. Bronwyn had said her goodbyes, kissed her husband, and taken the SUV with her back to the compound, the ambulance following.

Settling in for the trip, Julian, Jackson, Dáire, and Cree passed the time playing poker. Kit was staring out the window, humming to himself, and Brandy was sleeping soundly, strapped safely onto the gurney.

By the time the plane landed in Georgia, it was well after lunch and everyone was starving. Having already contacted Francesca to ask her to meet them at the airport, they had also asked her to bring along several buckets of chicken, copious side orders, and desserts for the six passengers plus the three crew members. She was waiting in the terminal when the plane taxied in, hurrying outside to shift nervously from foot to foot as the plane's door opened and the stairs came down. With her were her daughter and future son-in-law carrying the requested food.

"Nice looking woman," Cree observed as he watched her through the window.

"Nice lady, too," Jackson told him.

As soon as the stairs were down, Francesca was racing up them. Although Julian had assured her on the phone that Brandy was fine, she had to see for herself, had to touch him, had to *know*.

"He's still asleep," Julian said quietly as she pushed past him and rushed to the gurney.

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

Following at a more sedate pace, Reggie and Collier came on board with the food, handing it over to the steward for him to begin setting it out for everyone. The plane would need to be refueled for the flight to Mistral Cay so they had plenty of time to relax and enjoy their food.

Francesca sat down beside her husband's gurney and put her hand over his. "I'm here, cowboy," she said softly then leaned over to kiss his forehead.

When the food had been ladled into paper plates and soda tops popped, everyone took their seats to begin eating, and the pilots taking theirs back to the flight deck.

"Where's Kit?" Jackson asked, looking around the cabin.

Julian looked up. "Did he go to the head?"

"He'd have to have passed me," Dáire said, his face pale. "He didn't."

The three men stared at one another for a moment, then hurried to the door. Kit was nowhere in sight.

"Hey!" Dáire yelled at one of the airport workers. "Did you see a man come down the stairs?"

"Yes, sir," the worker said. "He went on into the terminal."

"Goddamn it!" Julian hissed.

Their food forgotten, the three scrambled down the stairs and onto the tarmac, sprinting toward the terminal.

Cree leaned back in his seat and began eating.

"You aren't going after him, too?" Francesca asked. She was gently stroking her husband's still hand.

"Don't need to," Cree said. "I'll find him when I've finished."

"You seem sure of that," Collier commented.

"Yep," Cree responded.

When the others came back fifteen minutes later after a search of the airport, their food was cold and their tempers were hot.

"Relax," Cree told them. "I'll go after him in a few minutes."

"In a few minutes he may have hitched a ride to God knows where!" Dáire snarled.

"Doesn't matter which way he went," Cree said. "I'll get him."

"Oh, really?" Dáire sneered. "And why is that?"

"Because I'm the best thing on two feet when it comes to tracking, Cronin," Cree said with a brutal grin.

"Is that so?"

"It is. I can find him in less than twenty minutes."

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"How much you want to bet, you arrogant prick?" Dáire challenged.

Cree shrugged. "How much can you afford to lose?"

Dáire's jaw clenched and a muscle jumped. "You name it."

"Ten thousand dollars to the Humane Society of Iowa," Cree said, "if I find him in twenty minutes. Double that if I find in half that time."

"You're on!"

Cree glanced at his watch. "Time me, ladies." Unfolding his tall frame from the seat, he swiped one last extra crispy drumstick and walked off the plane.

"Of all the unmitigated, egotistical, narcissistic gall..." Dáire fumed, unable to put together adequate insults for Cree.

"How's he going to find him on foot?" Jackson asked.

"Damned good question, Jack Off," Dáire growled.

Before the clock had advance eight minutes, Cree came back with Kit in tow, the two of them talking quietly as they came up the steps.

"He's not going to try that again," Cree said, "if you promise to take him to New Orleans and not to the Cay."

Julian and Dáire exchanged a quick look but it was Julian who spoke.

"Kit, there's nothing for you in New Orleans," he said softly. "Letrice doesn't live there any more."

Kit's vacant smile faded. "Where did she move to, Julian?"

Seeming relieved Kit recognized and remembered him, Julian took a deep breath. "Why don't we just go on down to the Cay and I'll send Henri back to look for her?"

Kit shook his head. "No, I know where to look. Henri doesn't."

Cree had been following the conversation closely. He was standing close to Kit. When Kit began to grunt and slap his palm against his leg, Cree touched the man's shoulder.

"How 'bout you and me going to New Orleans and setting things to rights there?" Cree asked.

"What does that mean?" Dáire inquired.

Cree locked gazes with Dáire and the other man stepped back from the anger and lethal intensity of Cree's amber eyes.

Kit was grunting louder. "She's dead, isn't she?" he said in between grunts. "My Letrice is dead." He gave Julian a wild look. "Madame killed her, didn't she?"

"No," Julian answered honestly. "Madame didn't. She..."

"Then Gaston or Remy did it," Kit said. "I know they did!"



## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"We don't know Letrice is dead, Kit," Julian said.

"Yes, you do," Cree said quietly. "You just don't want to admit it."

Kit slammed his hands over his face. "I hate this. I hate this!"

"You see what you've done?" Dáire snarled.

It was Francesca who got up and came to Kit, slipping her arm gently around him and leading him back to where she'd been sitting. She gave the other men a hard look, warning them to stay put.

"You stupid asshole," Dáire insulted Cree. "Kit..."

"Had to know the truth," Cree said. "He'll never get past it if you keep shielding him. If it had been your woman murdered, what would you do?"

"I'd kill the bastard who'd done it!" Dáire stated.

"As would I," Cree said, "and I have no doubt Julian feels the same way."

"I do," Julian admitted.

"Then give Kit the opportunity to seek his own vengeance," Cree told the others.

"We're not hearing this," Collier said, taking Reggie's arm to lead her off the plane.

Francesca was speaking quietly to Kit, but looked up to wave goodbye to her daughter and Collier. As soon as they were off the plane, she went back to talking to Kit.

"That man is in no condition to go after anyone," Dáire said. "He'll only get himself killed."

"I agree," Julian said, "but we can find Gaston and take him with us to the Cay. I have a jail on the island and we can lock him up until Kit is better."

"Then what? You just let the two of them have at one another?" Dáire demanded.

"We let Kit decide what he wants to do once he's able to make that decision," Julian said.

## **Epilogue**

Brandy opened his eyes to find himself between cool, soft sheets with a brisk wind blowing sea foam green gauzy drapes that billowed gently into the room from opened French doors. Above him was a tufted canopy of the same material and the coverlet that lay atop his legs had delicate swirls of mauve, burgundy, and dark green. The delicate scent of frangipani wafted through the air to calm him and the sound of waves crashing against the shore was soothing. Though it hurt him to do so, he raised up on his elbows to survey the room around him. He was stunned at the beauty of it, at the magnificent tropical themed oils that hung on the ivory walls.

"Hello?" he called out, his voice hoarse, his throat dry.

She came in through the French doors in a pale yellow terrycloth shift that set off her golden tan. Her smile was bright, welcoming, and when she came to the bed and bent over to kiss him, she smelled of sea air and the gardenia perfume she preferred.

"You are a lazy boy," she said, pressing him down gently, her smile slipping a little as he drew in a quickly concealed gasp of pain.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Mistral Cay," she replied. "Julian St. John's decadent nudist colony." She lowered her voice. "Cowboy, when your back is healed, we are gonna enjoy the hell out of this place."

"Neat, huh?"

"Do you remember meeting Viraidan Cree out in Iowa?"

He nodded. "Big guy in black."

"Before he took off back to Iowa, he booked a two-week stay for him and his wife. Julian even has a pirate ship—a *pirate* ship!—that you can have fantasies on. Aidan heard about that and his eyes lit up like the Fourth of July." She giggled. "Dáire and Jackson—I'll tell you about them later—they have booked time here, too, but on the part of the island without the glorious male studs wandering around bare assed."

"Kit?"

## CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO

"He's here with us, cowboy, and being taken care of. Julian isn't far away for now. We were going to take a side trip to N'Orlens to pick up Gaston and bring him down here for Kit, but Julian learned Gaston had been found over near Mobile with his head bashed in. They don't have a suspect, but Julian believes it might have been the man Madame hired to kill Gaston."

"Gaston is dead?" he asked. "The woman doctor in Iowa said Madeline..."

"She's dead, too," Francesca cut in. "There is no one standing in our way, my love."

"Am I dreaming?" he asked, praying that wasn't the case.

Francesca slid her hand under the sheet to wrap her fingers around his cock. "Does this feel like you're dreaming, cowboy?" she asked.

"If I am, I hope to God I never wake up," he told her.

She caressed him. "Julian's doctor says you should get up and walk a little, at least sit out on the patio and look at the ocean for awhile."

"Can it wait?" he asked, reaching down to cover her hand under the sheet.

"You have something more pressing to do?" she inquired with an elevated brow.

He pushed his hand down on hers a bit harder. "I believe I do, yes." He rubbed her hand against him.

"Let's see," she said, flinging the cover back.

His cock was standing straight up when she released it. A glistening drop of ooze hovered at the slit.

"Oh, Mr. Fontanelle, whatever is wrong with poor little Fred?" She batted her eyes at him. "Does him have an itty bitty cold?"

"No, Mrs. Fontanelle," he replied. "He's just dying to *meat* you."

Francesca grinned at the emphasis he'd placed on the word, seeing it in her mind just as she knew he'd intended. "Umm," she said, running her thumb over the pearly dot. "I guess I'll have to give him the kiss of *piece*, then, huh?"

Brandy drew in a long, deep breath as she bent over and drew him into her mouth. The sweetness of her tongue against his straining flesh filled him with such happiness he thought his heart would burst. With his hand in her hair, he closed his eyes and gave himself up to her.

There had been such ugliness in Brandyn Fontanelle's life from the very day of his conception. There had been nearly unbearable pain and debilitating humiliation and nearly every manner of dehumanizing

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degradation a male could endure. No one had ever shown him respect or consideration. No one had ever offered love or devotion. His soul had never known peace until Francesca had come along. He'd had no family until she took him in and washed away the sordid memories of his past. Celeste Dubois might have made a man of him, but Francesca had truly made him a man.

Francesca eased her mouth from his swollen shaft. "Where did you go, B.J.?" she asked.

His eyelids snapped open and he looked down at her with surprise. "What did you call me?"

"Gator said that was what he and Julian called you. I like that name so much better than Brandy," she said. "B.J. suits you."

He swallowed. "I prefer it, too," he said.

"Then its B.J. from now on," she declared. "But you didn't answer me. Where did you go just now?"

"Nowhere," he said. "I'm right where I want to be."

He reached for her, pulling her over him though she protested, worried she'd hurt his back.

"Ride me, Sweetness," he said. "I need to feel myself inside you."

"But your back..."

"There are some pains that need fixing more than others," he said, looking into her pretty eyes. "Right now, Fred needs more attention than my back."

"I think I can handle that," she said with a wicked wink. She pulled the shift from her and tossed it aside.

She straddled his legs and eased her wet channel down his shaft. She flexed the muscles of her cunt to squeeze him.

"God," he whispered. "That feels so damned good."

Slowly, she began rotating her hips up and down and around him, drawing from him the salty essence that she could still taste on her lips. Leaning forward, she captured his mouth with hers and thrust her tongue deep. His hands were on her waist, guiding her in the age-old rhythm that would stoke both their fires into blazing conflagrations.

The tips of her breasts were pushing against his chest, burning tight little holes in his flesh as she rocked on him. A sensual heat rose from her body and he inhaled deeply, reveling in the tang of her love juices mingling with his. She released his mouth and sat up, grinding her hips against his, her head thrown back, her eyes closed—concentrating on the rotation that was rapidly bringing them both to sweet culmination.

## **CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO**

Brandy stared up at her with such deep, abiding love in his amber eyes that it made his entire face glow. One tumbled lock of hair fell over his forehead and he was beginning to pant, the need to take her so ripe and so full in his mind and body he was having trouble lying beneath her. He wanted to flip her over and pound into her as hard as their bodies would allow but he doubted his back would allow him the chance. Even though he was on fire with need for her, the pain just over his hips was intense. He ground his teeth, wanting the climax. He was straining to keep from allowing his body to vent that need.

He felt the first ripple of her release undulate down him and he gave himself up to the staggering surge that pulsed him deep inside her sweet, hot body. Her fingernails were digging into the sides of his chest as she came over and over again, a soft moan escaping her lips for just a moment before a full-throated growl of satisfaction made her shudder then collapse against him, her heart hammering in her chest.

Brandy gathered her to him—his cock still semi-hard inside her—and placed a soft kiss upon her brow. For the first time in his life, there was nothing and no one for him to fear.

He was home at last in the arms of his sweet Francesca.

## **HOT GEORGIA WINDS**

### **About the Author**

Charlotte Boyett-Compo is the author of fifty books. Married 40 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley.

A native of Sarasota, Florida, Charlee was adopted at birth and grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia. She says of her heritage: "I was born in Florida and raised in Georgia so that makes me an official Sunshine Cracker!" She now lives in the Midwest where she enjoys the changing of the seasons.

Her hobbies are writing, watching Gerard Butler strut his stuff in period movies, and trying to keep her adorable husband, Buddha Belly, from snoring and hogging the TV remote. She is owned and operated by five cats who allow her to only leave the house for catnip, kitty kibble, and clumping kitty litter.

**CHARLOTTE BOYETT-COMPO**

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