



WIND GODDESS

by

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Virtually Yours

Love in the world of Virtual Reality. Where things are never as they appear. What happens when a woman falls in love with a virtual man?

Perfect Timing

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“Meant to Be”

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Wilda is Kelly's guardian. She must succeed in her task for herself and her sisters. But mostly for the two headstrong mortals who don't realize their importance to each other until it's almost too late.

Water Goddess

Erin Sanders is a school teacher with a past that has scarred her very soul. She is close to no one until a chance encounter turns her world upside down.

Daniel Rodriguez is a man who knows what he wants. He's a serene soul who feels drawn to Erin through a brief meeting and vows to find out more about her.

But Erin has secrets that tear at her world.

Daniel doesn't heed Erin's words or warnings. He vows to gently open her eyes to a world she didn't know existed. A world where a man will give anything to be in her heart.

Dedication

This is for all the women who bend but don't break.
Who stand in the eye of the storm and don't flinch. And who
laugh aloud in the theatre even when no one else does.
This one's for you.

Prologue

Wilda smiled at her sisters. “Two of us have succeeded, Tempest.” She brushed her titian hair back and nodded to Kendra. “Though one of us almost got herself killed.”

Eden shook her head. “I swear if you try that, Tempest, I’ll bring you back from the dead and kill you myself.” Her brown eyes moved worriedly from Kendra to Tempest. She shook her finger. “Don’t think I don’t know what you are capable of.”

“Oh, ye of little faith.” Tempest’s lips twitched. She glanced at Wilda and Kendra. “We knew it wouldn’t be easy.” She took a deep breath. Thoughts flew through her with a rapidness that would have dizzied her sisters. So quick to make a decision. It was always her way. And once she made the decision, she would stick to it until the end.

Her heart skipped a beat as she thought of her past failures. She had been so close once. So very close. And then her mortal had chosen a path that took her away from her happiness. It had damn near killed Tempest.

Their ascension was important. No doubt about that. But it had been the investment from the goddesses. It was the process of taking a person’s life and guiding them to an ending that would feed their soul.

Wilda and Kendra had chosen wisely. Tempest's mind flew back over their mortals and studied them. Her sisters chose women physically like themselves with personalities to match.

What would she do with a mortal with a temperament to match her own? Tempest grinned. Probably send the witch flying through the air like that little girl in the mortal movie. A tornado was a definitive form of travel. Tempest bit back a chuckle. She was not an easy female. None of them were. But Tempest cloaked herself in stubbornness as much as Wilda preferred her red garments.

Her sisters came through with flying colors. She could do no less.

Tempest stood at the edge of the cloud and waved her hands in front of her. The clouds parted on a sigh and left the sisters with a view of the world below them.

"Are you nervous?" Kendra whispered.

Tempest arched an eyebrow and shook her head haughtily. "I am never nervous, sister." She paused. "I am merely studying."

Maybe that was the key after all. Tempest frowned. A mortal like herself? God help her. If they didn't kill each other in the first couple of days, they would probably be best friends. She bit her lip.

So many women who needed guidance. Women who had a goddess in them but had no idea how to set her free. Tempest watched for several minutes as the mortals conducted their everyday lives oblivious to her scrutiny. There was a woman in Wyoming who had potential. Another in Maine who needed a helping hand.

Tempest closed her eyes for a second. She needed a

worldly woman. One who could embrace her life fully. One with a zest for life and all its possibilities. Her fingers tangled in her hair. Should she? An ebony-haired woman with a stubborn streak? Would the choice save her, or devastate her?

Tempest closed her eyes and sent her soul soaring downwards into the midst of mortals. She could feel the indecision and insecurity. And then her thoughts snagged on a voice. A voice that could have cut glass with irritation so deep it seemed to be carved in every word.

“That one.” Tempest pointed, and her sisters gathered close.

Wilda looked slightly ill. “Um... Tempest?”

“Yes, sister?” She turned and studied Wilda.

“Does this mortal remind you of anyone?” Wilda’s green eyes were wide and unblinking.

Tempest shrugged. “Not really.” She brushed her ebony hair back and smiled. “But I like her spirit.”

“You’ll have your work cut out for you, sister.” Eden shook her head. “This one has buried her heart deep. Her head rules her world.” She looked at Tempest. “How do you propose to handle that?”

Tempest waved her hand, and her blue eyes hardened in determination. “I choose her. She will come around. You’ll see.”

Her three sisters peered down again, and shook their heads in unison.

“Tempest.” Kendra sighed. “You may have very well met your match.”

Chapter 1

“Drop dead, and burn in hell.” Sylvia Masters slammed the phone down and growled low in her throat. That pissant supplier was going to cut off her white lace? Not in this damn lifetime. *Asshat*. She ran her hands through her short black hair and scowled at the numbers in front of her. Her dark blue eyes sharpened and focused on each bottom line.

She finished the preparations on the Bristow wedding yesterday. The Stone wedding was Alicia’s baby. Sylvia rubbed her temple absently. That left three more slated to be completed in the next month.

Summer was wedding purgatory. Sylvia took a sip of her soda and mentally shuffled the files so she could concentrate on which wedding came next. Not as many fall weddings. And only a few people wanted winter weddings.

She brushed her short black hair back from her face and scowled. Another month or so, and she would be right back to planning summer weddings. A year in advance. That’s about how long it took to plan everything and have it lined up perfectly for the “big event.”

Sylvia snorted and pushed back from her mahogany desk with a sigh. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back to

lean against the plush gray headrest of her office chair. It was late. Her entire staff had left at five. But she needed to go over a few things before she, herself, called it a night. It was a Friday evening. She had no plans. May as well finish up a bit of business before returning to her empty house.

She moved her neck to the right and heard a satisfying pop. She did the same to the left and sighed at the sound. Maybe it was time to call in a massage therapist and let a professional take the kinks out of her. Sylvia smiled. *In what lifetime?*

“Tense?”

Sylvia’s dark blue eyes popped open, and she stared. She knew the man in front of her even though they had never met.

A building magnate, Tristan Calhoun bought and sold property with a single-mindedness she couldn’t help but admire. He made millions and gave it away to several different charities. But none of the press releases or pictures could have prepared her for the man inhabiting her most personal professional space.

He leaned casually against her doorframe with his hands in his tailored pockets. His expensive brown suit was unbuttoned and hung loosely at his sides. But Sylvia could see the breadth of the man, and she mentally shook her head.

Tristan Calhoun was a big man. No mistake. He looked like he could go a couple of rounds in a wrestling ring and come out on top. His brown leather shoes shone brightly in the artificial light of her office. A man who took care of appearances.

But it was the face of the man that fascinated her. A black and white picture in the paper was nothing compared to the beauty of the man in front of her. His russet hair was long enough to resist attempts at taming it. It curled and waved

whichever way it chose.

Sylvia studied Tristan's face and wondered who had a good day when they created it. His square jaw clenched at her perusal, but he didn't say a word. She moved up past his perfect cheekbones to brandy-colored eyes that met hers without a word.

Wolf's eyes. They stared unblinkingly back at her and studied her in turn.

She caught her breath and then chided herself. Obviously one of Mr. Calhoun's many escorts finally snared him. Why else would he be darkening her door?

Sylvia stood and smoothed her dark blue suit down. "Can I help you, Mr. Calhoun?"

"I need your services." His eyes never broke contact as his husky voice washed over her.

She arched an eyebrow but didn't smirk. It would have been bad form. Sylvia smiled slowly. "You'd like me to plan your wedding?" She kept a blank face even though she mentally did cartwheels. Tristan Calhoun could throw a lot of business her way. She didn't need the referrals, but she would never turn down more clients.

"Mine?" Tristan snorted and shifted to stand tall in the doorway. "Not hardly." He paused. "My sister's."

Sylvia cocked her head to the side and looked at him. "You want me to plan your sister's wedding?"

"Yes." The word came out abrupt. "That would be why I am here, Ms. Masters. Perhaps you would like to jot this down?" Tristan raised an eyebrow and looked pointedly at her desk.

Sylvia's back stiffened. "I assure you, Mr. Calhoun, I'm perfectly capable of taking mental notes." *Asshat.*

He shrugged lightly and stepped inside her office. Tristan

raked his hands through his hair and closed his eyes for a minute. "My sister, Keira, wants to be married at Christmas." He grimaced.

"That's only four months away." Sylvia already mentally went through the next four months and knew she could do it if she had to. But it would cost the man in front of her. The thought brought a genuine smile to her face.

"You find this entertaining?" Tristan growled.

Sylvia's smile widened. "A bit."

"It's good to know that sadism is alive and well in corporate America." Tristan sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

Sylvia could guess at what was bothering him. Tristan's parents were killed in a well-publicized plane crash over a decade ago. That left him to raise his baby sister by himself. And that baby sister was obviously all grown up now. And wanting to leave the feathered nest.

"Does she know what type of wedding she would like?"

Tristan's eyes flew open. "What? No words of sympathy? No condolences for her older brother?"

Sylvia snickered. "You have my condolences for the bill. That's about it." She waved to the chair opposite her desk. "Please. Have a seat. We can get the generalities out of the way." Sylvia opened her planner and snagged her favorite pen from the right side of her desk.

"When will the blessed event take place?"

Tristan grimaced and lowered himself into the gray chair opposite her. "Christmas Eve. My sister believes that the holiday season is the perfect time to marry."

Sylvia's lips twitched. "Hard to reason with an upcoming bride, isn't it?"

“You think?” Tristan’s brandy-colored eyes focused on her again. “You’ll plan the wedding?”

“Why me?” Sylvia brushed her short cap of black hair back and studied the tycoon in front of her. “There are hundreds of wedding planners out there.”

“You’re the best.”

The simple statement shouldn’t have warmed her insides, but it did. Sylvia allowed herself a small smile. “Flattery won’t get you a discount, Mr. Calhoun.”

He shrugged easily and ran his hand through his unkempt hair. “Keira wants you. Period. And you are the best.” His eyes darkened as they studied her. “As well you know.”

“Always nice to hear it again.” Sylvia flipped open her planner and studied her appointments. “I can see Keira early next week. We can go over the invitation list, and she can tell me what she wants for her wondrous wedding.”

“No problem.” Tristan took a business card out of his wallet and scrawled a number on the back. “That’s my cell. Call me when it’s convenient.” He stood quickly and loomed over her desk.

Sylvia stood also and stuck out her hand. “To a wonderful wedding, Mr. Calhoun.”

“Tristan.” He took her hand and shook it slowly. “I believe you’re just what we’re looking for, Ms. Masters.” Tristan stepped back. “I look forward to the results.” He left the room as quietly as he entered it.

Sylvia sank into her chair and studied the empty room.

They would call it the wedding of the century. Sylvia’s mind was already sifting and sorting through the ideas she thought Keira would like. She embraced the second wind of energy she received and bent back over her desk.

* * * *

Sylvia slid her key into the front door of her home and swung the door wide open. She sighed lustily and kicked off her heels. She threw her coat and purse on the wood end table and tossed her jacket on her tan leather couch. The door slammed satisfyingly behind her, and Sylvia smiled.

Her weekend.

She padded into her kitchen and took a pint of Ben & Jerry's out of the freezer. The spoon slid in easily, and Sylvia grinned like a five-year-old in a candy store. The first taste was almost orgasmic. She let the flavor melt on her tongue.

Work now done for the week. She may be a workaholic, but her weekends were sacred.

Sylvia set the pint down and slid her dark blue pants from her legs. They ended up in a pile at her feet. She kicked them aside and ate another spoonful of ice cream. *My God*. She would marry an ice cream maker in a hot second. If she ever had plans on marrying anyone. Which she didn't.

Weddings were stupid rituals. Sylvia chuckled and walked back into the living room. She sure as hell wouldn't be putting that on any of her shop's brochures. But it was surely the truth. Once upon a time, she dreamed of a perfect wedding with Prince Charming. Then she grew up.

And it's not like she had a wonderful example from her parents.

Sylvia rolled her blue eyes. Marriage had been a noun to them. Some type of status symbol. Never had it been a verb. Something to label themselves with. Never something to do. She dug the spoon in deeper and was rewarded with a plump cherry.

The moan that escaped almost embarrassed her. Sylvia savored the bite. She had no desire to clutter up her life with a

significant other. She and the ice cream were just fine, thank you very much.

The tick of the clock marred the perfect silence of the room. Sylvia reached for the remote and clicked on some Bon Jovi. The eighties filtered through her high-tech system, and the bass moved over her. She bobbed her head and settled onto her couch. Sylvia kicked her jacket off and grinned.

Nothing like fifteen years in a strict boarding school to make one a closet slob. Sylvia frowned and took another bite. It had been worse than the military. Bedding measured on each side until it met standard. Clothes segregated by color and type. Shoes polished and placed by shade in the closet. Not one speck of lint or any other substance on the carpet. No dust on any surface.

Sylvia shuddered.

Never again.

She had been three when she started. Her parents more than eager to ship her off for her schooling. Summer meant traveling with her parents. Sylvia could speak six different languages. Set a table to die for. Dress to the nines and impress ambassadors.

So. Damn. What.

Sylvia dipped the spoon again and was disturbed at the sound of metal hitting the bottom of the container. She brought the utensil to her lips and licked the last bit of sweet dairy goodness.

Good thing she had a dozen more pints in the freezer.

A persistent sound disrupted her eighties hair band. *What the hell?* Sylvia frowned and concentrated. *The phone. Hmph. They could leave a damn message.*

Her employees didn't dare disturb her on the weekend

unless there was a major emergency.

Sylvia sat the empty container on her oak coffee table and kicked her feet up on the couch. She looked down at her white button-up shirt and curled her toes. Maybe she would just pop on some mindless television and unwind on the couch.

She turned off the stereo system with one click and her television on with another. Weekends were God's little gift to the workaholic.

* * * *

A bell sounded.

Sylvia groaned and rolled over. *Another bell. For the love of God.*

"Damn it," she muttered and opened her eyes. Only ten o'clock in the morning. Whoever stood outside her door could go to hell with no detours.

Then the pounding started.

"Son of a bitch." Sylvia jumped up from the couch and scowled. Someone had a death wish. Fine. She would be more than happy to grant that request. She unlocked the door and flung it open.

Tristan Calhoun stood there. Of course he did. The egotistical bastard. His tawny hair somewhat tamed. Dressed in khaki slacks and a dark blue shirt. Those brown eyes looked at her unblinkingly. He held his hands behind his back.

Sylvia ran her fingers through her hair and growled. "First, don't you ever show up on my doorstep again uninvited. Second, how in the hell did you get my address? Third, you better have brought some coffee." She waited for a response.

Tristan grinned and held up a large cup of coffee. "First, I won't make that mistake again. Second, your address isn't ex-

actly hard to find. Third, I hope you like mocha lattes.”

Sylvia snatched the coffee cup from his hand and took a sip. Caffeine second only to ice cream.

Tristan’s wolf eyes studied her. He took a sip from his own coffee and smiled. “Going to invite me in?”

“What would be so damn important that you would invite yourself over to my house? I have an appointment with your sister early next week.” Sylvia frowned. “My personal life is just that. If you have a problem with that, you can find yourself another planner. I won’t be subject to the off-hour whims of you or your sister.”

“Understood,” Tristan agreed smoothly. “Can I come in?”

Sylvia narrowed her eyes. “This had better be one hell of a quick visit.” She opened the door further and stepped aside.

Tristan stepped in and arched an eyebrow. “Wild night?”

No embarrassment whatsoever. Sylvia shrugged. “Not particularly.” She looked down at the single white button-up top she wore. “Well, fuck.”

Tristan coughed to hide his laugh and took another sip of coffee. He looked at the clothes scattered everywhere and chuckled.

“I swear to God if you say exactly one smart ass word, you can find yourself another wedding planner.”

“My lips are sealed.”

Sylvia sighed. “Have a seat. I’ll be right back.”

She hurried from the room. After this morning, Tristan would not be interrupting her at her home again. Obviously some ground rules needed to be set up. There had been only one other time that a client intruded on her personal life.

That had been the Bridezilla from hell.

Never again.

Sylvia took off her shirt, changed her underwear, and slid into a long green sundress with spaghetti straps. It only took a second. She padded barefoot back into the living room.

Tristan stood by her sound system examining its contents.

He turned and raised an eyebrow.

"I don't think many people have Mozart and metal close to each other on their play lists."

"They're missing out." Sylvia yawned hugely and apologized. "Listen. I have plans. You're not part of them. Now. Please impart your urgent message and leave."

Tristan's eyes darkened. "Not much for chitchat, are you?"

She doubted he would be impressed by the knowledge she could chitchat him to death in several languages. "Just get to it, okay?"

"No problem." Tristan faced her. "Keira can't make up her mind. First, it's a big wedding. Then it's a small wedding. She wants blue. No, she wants red." He raked his hand through his hair and grimaced. "That girl is driving me insane. I thought you would like a heads-up."

"It's a special day." Sylvia motioned to the couch. "Have a seat."

"Thank you." Tristan eased his large frame onto the leather couch and sipped his coffee.

"First, don't argue with her." Sylvia looked him in the eye. "Simply nod your head. She doesn't want your opinion. She wants to bounce ideas off you. When she finds one that clicks with her, she'll know it. Second, is the groom involved at all?"

"Jon?" Tristan snorted. "No."

"Good."

“Excuse me?” Tristan frowned. “Isn’t he supposed to be?”

Sylvia sighed and shook her head. “Heaven help me from clueless men who involve themselves in planning weddings. He’d probably enjoy a BBQ washed back with beers while football plays on the big screen.”

Tristan threw back his head and laughed. “That’s rather a blanket statement, isn’t it?”

“I’ve planned hundreds of weddings, Mr. Calhoun. The minute I bring that scenario up, hypothetically, each and every man gets a glazed look of longing on his face. It’s quickly wiped away by a glance from his fiancée. Nonetheless, it’s hard to miss.” She paused. “I have, however, planned many a nice reception more along those lines.”

Sylvia took a sip of coffee. “It’s all about compromise.”

“So. You’re not intimidated at all by my sister’s marital flakiness?”

She rolled her eyes. “Please. I have it under control, Mr. Calhoun.”

“Tristan.”

Sylvia nodded. “Are we through?”

Tristan stood. “For now, Ms. Masters.” He inclined his head. “I apologize for intruding on your weekend. I look forward to your plans for Keira’s wedding.”

“No harm, Mr. Calhoun.” Sylvia lifted her chin. “Just don’t let it happen again.” She strode to the front door and opened it. “Have a nice weekend. If your sister continues rattling along, I suggest you find a happy place and see if you can exist there.”

Tristan grinned. “Ah. A plan. I can work with a plan.”

“I’m sure you can.” Sylvia waited patiently for him to walk back across her threshold. When he did, she gave the

door a little push. But to her surprise, Tristan came back inside.

“I don’t suppose I could interest you in lunch?”

“Not even if you were Hugh Jackman, and I was starving.”

Tristan winced. “Point taken.” He inclined his head. “Until next week, Ms. Masters.”

“I’ll be counting the minutes.” Sylvia didn’t give the door a small push, she shoved it. The sound of the slam brought a smile to her face. *Ah, blessed peace.*

Sylvia didn’t worry about Tristan’s sister. She simply tried out ideas on her hapless brother. A shame Keira’s mother wasn’t around to help with any of that. Sylvia frowned. Not that she would take over that little duty. *Hell no.* She would simply do her job. Nothing more. Nothing less.

* * * *

The weekend passed quickly, and Sylvia cursed at her relentless alarm clock Monday morning. She smacked it as hard as she dared. Her alarm clocks tended to have a high mortality rate. Sylvia lay back and studied the cream tiles on her ceiling.

Her day would officially begin when her feet hit the floor. And they would hit it running. Sylvia sighed and swung them over the edge of the bed. She paused in mid-swing. And she had lovely gray Persian carpet. A thick shag that comforted her bare feet.

“Screw it,” Sylvia muttered and stepped on the carpet. Enough of extolling the virtues of her room. She walked into the bathroom and started her shower. She didn’t see the five hundred dollar silver sink. The three thousand dollar shower. The four hundred dollar cerulean blue towels.

Sylvia Masters already counted down the minutes until

she had to be in the office. Weekend mode now gone. Work mode fully engaged.

She stepped out of her silk emerald night set and under the hot water. All rote now. Out of the shower. Dry her hair. Eat a quick breakfast bar. Grab a cup of coffee. Get dressed. Go to the office.

At exactly eight o'clock, Sylvia crossed the threshold into Bridal Bliss. She smoothed down her gray pantsuit and turned off the alarm. Sylvia turned on the lights and studied the shop.

It looked perfect.

Overstuffed coffee-colored couches formed a u-shape around an antique coffee table scattered with bridal magazines. Two medium fountains brought in the soothing sound of running water from the corners. A large fish tank with six different varieties of fish had been built into the wall and calmed many a frenzied bride. The tan carpet was thick with multicolor highlights that brought out the rest of the colors of the room.

One large window faced the outside street, but the beige shades were usually drawn. The atmosphere planned as low-key with track lighting and soothing music. Several bouquets of silk roses decorated many surfaces.

Sylvia walked into the kitchen in the back and turned on the coffeemaker and the espresso machine. Her clients expected the very best. They got it. They had a fully stocked refrigerator and industrial stove. The shining pale blue countertop boasted every kitchen device known to man. The wood cabinets were stocked with emergency supplies such as cocoa and chocolate. Everything perfect. And speaking of perfect, Sylvia opened the back door. There were fresh biscotti and tea biscuits on her step.

God bless Marie next door at her bakery. There would be another delivery at noon.

Sylvia set up a tab for fresh baked goods the day she leased the space. And it had been a fine investment. She scooped up the steaming baked goods and inhaled deeply. One little biscotti, and life would be on track for the day. She swiped a chocolate one and threw her old coffee away.

The day would be a busy one. Sylvia needed to check in with all her employees and plan for the big Calhoun wedding. Iron out any wrinkles. Set up a time for someone to come decorate her shop with fall colors. She poured herself an espresso and smiled.

Life was good.

The ringing phone broke into her thoughts. Sylvia frowned and put down her cup. She picked up the phone.

"Bridal Bliss."

"Sylvia?" The voice sounded weak.

"Yes." She frowned. "Who is this?"

A cough. Then a snuffle. "Beth." Another cough.

"Jesus! What's wrong?"

"I..." A sneeze. "I have a cold."

"You think?" Sylvia frowned. "Good God, woman! Take some vitamin C and get your butt to the office. I'll keep you in the back away from the customers."

"I'm contagious."

And just like that, the day went rapidly downhill.

Sylvia frowned. "Okay. Take some meds and get better soon." It came out more as an order than as a concern. "I have a large wedding to plan. The wedding of the century. This is a hell of a time to be sick."

"I'm sorry." Beth sniffled. "I'll try to be back to work as

soon as I can.”

“Fine.” Sylvia slammed down the phone and paced the small kitchen. A young planner, Beth had only finished college and received her decorating degree. But she had potential. A lot of it. A great eye made up for the lack of experience.

“Shit,” Sylvia muttered. She ran her hands through her black cap of hair and scowled at the clock. Nope. The son of a bitch didn’t slow down. Just kept ticking along like everything was fine. She snagged another biscotti and snapped a bite off the end.

Okay. Deep breath. She could do this. Hell, she thrived on this type of cluster, didn’t she?

“Sure. Sure.” Sylvia strode into her office and called Alicia. “Get your butt here as soon as possible.” She didn’t wait for a response but slammed down the phone. Then she called Liz, her secretary, and repeated the message.

“Damn. It,” she growled and looked at the clock. The appointment with the Calhoun siblings scheduled in an hour. *For the love of God.* This day already well on its way to becoming banner suckage.

Sylvia sat in her chair and mentally sorted through the cluster.

“Ms. Masters?”

Sylvia’s head jerked up, and she scowled. An ebony-haired beauty stood there examining her. The woman’s fitted copper shirt and pencil-slim skirt were impeccable and wrapped around a figure Sylvia envied. The black shiny boots with copper buckles were stunning. And they added at least four inches to the woman’s already impressive height. Diamonds glittered at the woman’s throat, ears, and wrist. Sapphire eyes studied her.

"May I help you?" Sylvia stood and glanced at the clock. Not even eight-thirty yet, and she knew she locked the door. "We don't open until nine."

"Beth sent me."

Sylvia cocked her head to the side. "Guilty conscience?"

"Concern." The word came out short. "She seemed to worry about you and this business." The woman arched an eyebrow.

"That's nice." Sylvia walked around to the side of her desk. "But I don't know you. Nor do I appreciate you simply showing up like it would be a good thing." She pointed to her door. "You can see yourself out."

"No."

Sylvia narrowed her eyes. "I can have security escort you."

"Won't be necessary." The tall woman moved forward. "I am Tempest. And I know what I'm doing, thank you. I would be an asset. And right now, you need the help."

"Well, Tempest." Sylvia bit the name out. "That's all well and good. What weddings have you done?"

"I've done several celebrity West Coast weddings. Kelly Marshall's for one."

That stopped Sylvia in her tracks. This woman in front of her helped with the soap star's wedding? The fairytale marriage every magazine in the country wanted a picture of?

"Do tell," Sylvia drawled. She crossed her arms and waited.

Tempest looked her in the eye. "Kelly wanted a variation of the soap set her fiancé worked on. But she also wanted something original and comfortable her parents could enjoy. We meshed both worlds and had a Cinderella type theme. Except, Kelly and Sloane's warped humor demanded that

Kelly lose a boot instead.” Tempest grinned. “It was a lot of fun.”

“And you have pictures to prove this?” Sylvia cocked her head to the side.

“Such a cynic.” Tempest opened a large black bag and removed a large leather photo album. She flipped through the pages until she found what she wanted. She turned the album around and handed it to Sylvia.

The proof was in the pictures. The smiling couple with Tempest. Tempest and three other magnificent women. The picture of the boot. A carriage.

Sylvia closed the album with a snap. “Fine. I’ll accept your help. The salary will be based on your experience. But understand this. When I don’t need your help anymore, you’ll be gone.”

Tempest nodded shortly. “Finally. Something we can agree on.”

Chapter 2

Sylvia showed Tempest to her temporary office and then walked back to her own. The extra help would be nice. As long as the new chick didn't interfere with plans already set in motion. That wouldn't be tolerated in the least.

Liz and Alicia both stood in her doorway dressed sharply and ready for their assignments. Liz wore a brown suit with her chestnut hair pulled back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. Her large glasses balanced on her slender nose, and a minimum of jewelry. Her light brown eyes were sharp and didn't miss a single thing.

Alicia wore a white silk blouse and black skirt that fell just above her knees. Her blond hair fell loose across her shoulders in waves. A perfectionist down to the last ribbon tied on the wedding bouquets.

Both were in their late twenties. Both were an invaluable part of her team.

"Beth is sick."

Alicia frowned. "Is she all right?"

Sylvia waved her hand. "A cold or something. The point is that we are now shorthanded." She stood by her desk and ran her fingers through her hair. "Beth called a friend in.

Tempest is her name. She's in Beth's office right now. But I'm not sure if she'll work out or not. At this point in time, I'm undecided as to her usefulness."

Liz nodded. "What do we want to do?"

Leave it to Liz to cut to it. Sylvia smiled at her secretary. "We see if she's useful. And we carry on with business as usual. The Calhoun wedding is priority one right now. If we pull this off, and we will, then the referrals will be staggering."

Alicia grinned. "I love my job."

"Thank God." Sylvia glanced at the clock. "Liz, open up. Alicia, keep working on the Stone wedding. Keep me apprised." She paused. "And, ladies?"

Both women waited.

"There's a healthy bonus in this if we meet all our goals by the end of the year."

They nodded and left.

Sylvia had half an hour to check her emails and return calls. Then she would shuffle it all to the side to be at the Calhouns' beck and call for the planning period. She bent over her planner and studied the time table in front of her.

"Can I be of assistance?"

Sylvia lifted her head. It was the statuesque new girl.

"I'm not sure, Tempest." Sylvia closed her planner and pushed it to the side. "Beth could be back tomorrow. I wouldn't feel comfortable handing out her caseload to someone I don't even know."

"Beth won't be back for at least a week." Tempest paused. "Possibly longer."

"I don't need another employee." Sylvia stood.

"And I don't need to be shot down before I'm given a

chance.” Tempest strolled to the front of the desk. “I’m damn good at what I do. I don’t want your job. I don’t want your clientele. I’m helping a friend.”

“Pretty words.”

“True ones.” Tempest smiled. “I appreciate the abrupt attitude. Believe me. But don’t count me out. I’m an asset. Use me.”

Sylvia nodded reluctantly. “Research conventional and unconventional colors for a Christmas wedding. I don’t want the same old crap. Find me something new I can bring to the Calhoun girl. Make it stunning.” Sylvia stared her in the eye. “Don’t disappoint me.”

“I don’t plan on it.” Tempest turned on her heel and left the office.

Jesus. Sylvia rubbed her forehead. Where was the Ben & Jerry’s when she needed it?

Five minutes later, Liz buzzed her.

The Calhouns were waiting for her.

Sylvia checked her hair and make-up one last time and hurried out of her office.

The man impressed her. The girl, woman, Sylvia amended, was stunning.

Keira Calhoun had the same tawny hair as her brother. But hers fell in large waves to the middle of her back. She had brilliant blue eyes and striking features. She wore a cream peasant blouse with a pair of designer blue jeans. A pair of leather designer sandals were showed off by several toe rings and a diamond anklet that cost more than Sylvia’s last vehicle. And the rock on her finger could very well blind her. Keira’s Jon didn’t do anything by half measures.

The full mouth broke into a smile, and Keira advanced on her.

“Ms. Masters!”

Sylvia smiled and extended her hand, but Keira moved closer and hugged her tightly. The woman’s expensive fragrance tickled her nose. Keira broke off and grinned.

“I’m sorry! I’m so excited to see you.”

“Thanks.” Sylvia pasted a smile on her face. She motioned to her office. “Shall we plan a wedding?”

Keira nodded. “I have lots of ideas, Sylvia. Can I call you Sylvia?”

“Sure.”

Tristan cleared his throat and shrugged. Sylvia scowled at him but smiled at Keira. “You can definitely call me Sylvia. We’ll be rather close over the next few months. A Christmas wedding, I hear.”

“Yes.”

Sylvia closed her office door and motioned to the chairs on the other side of the desk. “Have a seat, and we’ll begin.”

No sooner had Keira’s ass hit the chair than she began talking about what she wanted. Sylvia nodded in the appropriate places since a verbal response didn’t seem to be needed. That went on for a full twenty minutes before Sylvia lifted her hand.

Keira stopped in mid-sentence.

“Now.” Sylvia smiled her best smile. “I understand, Keira. And you have lovely ideas. But I have a list of things we need to work on. A wedding can take up to a year to plan. We have four months.” She passed the bride a list and one to Tristan. “If you’ll notice, some things take precedence here.” Sylvia tapped the paper. “The big musts right now are a wedding planner, a reception site, and an announcement of the wedding.”

“We’re one for three,” Tristan added.

"But a good one." Sylvia smiled. "We'll have a list of reception sites to you by the end of the week. If you'll fax me an announcement, I'll make sure that it's published in all the papers."

"Then what?" Keira frowned. "I'm not even sure what colors I want. A wedding cake. Flowers. Any of it!"

"It's okay." Sylvia softened her voice. "This will be your day, Keira. A day that begins your new life with your husband, Jon. And it will be absolutely perfect. But you have to trust me to put everything in place for you. That's why you hired me."

Keira smiled and nodded. "You're right. You're right." She blew out a breath. "It's just so huge. And I feel like Christmas is just around the corner."

Sylvia reached across to pat her hand. "We'll get there. Don't doubt it. I have assistants working on color schemes right now. We'll find something you will absolutely love. I guarantee it."

"And the cost?"

Keira turned and scowled at her brother. "Tristan!"

"It's all right." Sylvia soothed her and smiled. "I'll have an estimate faxed to your brother's office for every item. There are no hidden costs. He'll have everything in black and white in front of him."

"That's all he ever does." Keira sighed. "Pore over his damn ledgers. I thought it would be a good idea to get him out of the office to help with this." She put her hands on her hips and glared at her brother. "You promised to behave."

Sylvia covered her laugh with an indelicate cough. She patted her chest and prayed she wouldn't break out into hysterical laughter.

Tristan behave? That seemed a stretch by anyone's imagination. This man had to be in control of every aspect of his life. Why would his sister's wedding be any different?

Sylvia cleared her throat and stood with a smile. "Your brother is perfectly within his rights to question anything and everything I do. He is, after all, paying for this. And I can respect his concern."

Keira frowned. "Are you sure? He can be a bit of a steamroller."

"Hey," Tristan interrupted and waved his hand in front of the women. "Still in the same room here."

Sylvia ignored him and focused on reassuring Keira. "I realize your brother might be a bit difficult, but I'm sure the two of us can come together for the sake of your wedding." Her tone hardened as she glanced at Tristan. "After all, this is about *your* day and *your* happiness. Everything else is secondary."

Keira's face lit up. "You're perfect! Thank you!" She hurried over to Sylvia and hugged her again. "I'll be down in the kitchen. Liz said you have an espresso machine and fresh biscotti." Keira pecked her brother's cheek and practically danced out of the room.

Sylvia smoothed down her pantsuit and glanced up at Tristan. He studied her closely.

"That was smooth," he drawled.

She smiled. "Your sister is a sweet kid. It's my job to reassure her."

Tristan moved closer. Sylvia could smell his aftershave. Damn, the man smelled delicious. She cocked her head and looked up at him.

"I'm referring to the part where you put me in my place

under the guise of ensuring my sister's happiness." His brandy-colored eyes didn't break contact. Tristan's voice lowered. "Smooth," he repeated.

Sylvia stiffened her spine and met his eyes. "Your sister is my priority, Mr. Calhoun." The words were sharp and pointed. "If you choose not to use our services, then that will be up to you break it to your sister. Likewise, if you and I cannot come to a compromise." Her blue eyes challenged him.

Tristan smiled slowly. "Ah, Sylvia." He breathed the name out and touched her collar. "I'm sure you and I can reach several compromises."

Sylvia arched an eyebrow and removed his hand. "Not if they include me on my back and your pants off."

Tristan barked out a laugh. He shook his head. "You're so hard and distant. Your nice professional wall in place. We could be friends, Sylvia."

"No." The word came out definitive. "I have no interest in being 'friends' with you, Mr. Calhoun." Sylvia brushed her hand through her hair. "Go open your little black book and find a date for this evening. I have no interest."

"The invitation stands." Tristan buttoned up his suit.

"So does the refusal." Sylvia smiled. "I'll fax you pertinent information as it becomes available." She stuck her hand out.

Tristan took it and rubbed his thumb along her palm. "I look forward to it." He nodded once, dropped her hand, and left her office.

Sylvia rubbed her fingers along her palm where Tristan stroked the flesh. *Dangerous, that one. Used to turning on that charm to get whatever he wants. Whoever he wants.* And Sylvia would never be just another notch on any man's bedpost. In-

cluding the attractive Mr. Calhoun.

She sat at her desk and tried to sort out the timetable for the Calhoun wedding. The only problem she may come across would be Jon's parents. There was many a future mother-in-law who could and did throw a monkey wrench in the works.

Several hours later, Sylvia closed down her computer and stretched. She would grab a bite to eat and then do some research of her own. Giving Tempest the colors was a simple test. But Sylvia had ideas of her own.

She stood and then stopped.

Speak of the devil.

Tempest smiled and held out a folder to her.

Sylvia took it and waited.

"I spoke with Keira and Tristan in the kitchen for a few minutes before they left." Tempest's husky voice lightened. "Keira glows."

"I know." Sylvia allowed herself a small smile and tapped the folder. "What is this?"

"The colors."

Sylvia frowned and opened the folder. Green and gold. It was a complete homage to Ireland. The smile took her by surprise. Sylvia closed the folder and studied the woman in front of her.

"Why Ireland?"

"It's their heritage." Tempest nodded. "They both have Claddagh rings. Tristan wears his on his pinkie. Keira has a toe ring. She also wore a bracelet of Celtic knots." Tempest paused. "I also found out that Jon is of the same background. It seemed perfect."

"And did you mention these colors to the client?"

"No." Tempest motioned to the folder. "These are for

you to decide. You're the boss."

"I see that we agree on two things." Sylvia slid the folder onto her desk and turned to Tempest once more. "Good job on the colors. You may not be such a hindrance after all."

Tempest's lips twitched. "I'll take that in the spirit given, not the way it came out."

"You're an unknown." Sylvia tapped her fingers on her desk. "And I don't like unknowns. I've built this company from nothing. It is, by far, the most important thing in my life. So. While your appearance seems fortuitous, I'll withhold judgment until I have further information."

"I appreciate your honesty." Tempest motioned to the folder. "There's also a list in the back of florists that do specialty bouquets along this line. Three of the shops sell gilded rose petals in a rainbow of colors." She turned on her heel and left the office.

"Show-off," Sylvia muttered. She reopened the folder and studied the contents. *Okay. Tempest is good. Hell. Very good.* There were also private emails listed as contacts. It usually took an act of God to get those.

Her stomach growled, but she ignored it. Sylvia sat back down and thumbed through the pictures in the folder.

Clever scheme. And green and gold were beautiful colors. She could do a lot with accent colors and wedding shots.

Liz sent a call through ten minutes later, and Sylvia snarled a response. She immediately bit back on the hatefulness. She forgot to tell Liz that she was in the middle of something. For all her secretary knew, she had been at lunch. And she always worked through lunch.

Sylvia picked up the phone. "Hello."

Rapid Japanese shot out at her, and she responded in

kind. The discussion became heated, and Sylvia took a drink of her cold coffee and grimaced. The man kept repeating that she ordered too many fortune cookies. His small factory could not keep up with demand.

Sylvia explained that he could keep up, or she would take her business elsewhere. After a few minutes, the man's defeated voice gave in. She grinned and hung up the phone. When she looked up, the smile faded.

Tristan Calhoun. *My God, the man is a mountain.*

He held two large drinks in his hand.

Sylvia walked, as if in a trance, to the cups. "Please tell me that's coffee."

Tristan waved the cup in front of her nose. "The best coffee in the city." He took the cup back and cocked his head to the side. "I didn't know you spoke Japanese."

"Gimme." Sylvia snatched the coffee and sipped it with a contented sigh. "Japanese, Russian, Spanish, Chinese, and French. I also speak a smattering of Czech and Turkish."

She took another sip. "For the Love of God. I need to buy stock in this." She closed her eyes and sighed. "So good."

Sylvia's eyes popped open to see Tristan smiling at her. She fought the blush and turned her back to him. "What can I do for you, Mr. Calhoun?"

"Tristan," he reminded her.

She simply smiled and waited patiently. When she turned around, he held a picnic basket out in front of him. Her smile slid from her face. *Sneaky bastard.*

"You and Yogi have plans?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Not that I'm aware of. But I'd like to have lunch with you. Liz said you hadn't left yet."

"I'll catch something later." Sylvia's stomach growled,

and she mentally cursed it.

“Parts of you are hungry now.”

She leveled him with a stare. “I distinctly heard myself say no. Yet here you are. Waiting. Picnic basket in hand. Does this usually work for you?” she asked.

Temper flashed on his face for a second before he nodded. “Occasionally, Ms. Masters. I can be extremely persistent.”

“That’s wonderful.” Sylvia smiled. “Because so can I.”

“Truce.” Tristan sighed and held his hands up. “You’re starving. Keira dragged me all over this godforsaken town today. I need to eat. I’m simply killing two birds with one stone.”

“Nothing about you is simple, Mr. Calhoun.” Sylvia inhaled deeply. She could smell chicken in that basket. Food she didn’t have to make herself or pay someone else to make. There would probably be wine, too. A nice glass of red would be heavenly right now.

“We’ll eat on the carpet.” Sylvia walked to her closet and pulled out a cream sheet and spread it on the rug. “This will have to do for a picnic blanket.”

Tristan arched an eyebrow and motioned to the sheet. “Sleep here much?”

“No.” She smiled. “But I like to be prepared.” Sylvia sank down to the sheet and motioned to the large wicker basket. “What do we have?”

She watched in awe as Tristan removed several sandwiches, salads, and desserts. The basket stuffed to overflowing. And there were delicious chicken breast sandwiches. Sylvia put two on her plate. She wanted to taste one of everything. But considering she didn’t have sweatpants in her closet, that

probably wouldn't be wise.

"Worth it?" Tristan asked as he piled food on his plate.

"Yes," Sylvia admitted reluctantly. "I was rather wrapped up in work. Oh!" She started to stand, but Tristan took her hand and pulled her back down. "It can wait, woman. Eat lunch. Let your food settle. You can tell me whatever it is when we're done."

Sylvia narrowed her blue eyes and sat back down. "Don't think I'm sitting down because you thought it wise." She took a sip of wine. "I sat because I chose to."

Tristan threw back his head and laughed. "I'm well aware of that, Ms. Masters."

"Thank you."

The smile slid from Tristan's face. "Didn't hurt too badly, did it?"

Her lips twitched. "Nothing a little red wine can't fix." Sylvia motioned to the basket. "You do have red wine, don't you?"

Tristan placed his hand over his heart. "You wound me, Sylvia." He pulled out two wineglasses and poured the wine to half full. He handed her a glass and smiled.

"To Keira's wedding. And a lifetime of happiness."

They clinked glasses, and Sylvia took a sip. High class spirits. Just like the man across from her. A man used to getting exactly what he wanted. The thought didn't leave her mind for a second. As long as she kept that little nugget close at hand, she couldn't go wrong.

"Where's the taskmaster now?" Sylvia took a bite of her sandwich and waited.

Tristan sighed. "I called in back-up. Currently her best friends, Jill and Tina, are keeping my lovely sister company."

Keira's not available to drive me mad. I'm buying lunch for all of them. It's a great trade."

"Ever the businessman." Sylvia lifted her wineglass and gave him a mock toast.

Tristan shrugged his big shoulders. "It makes her happy."

Sylvia took another sip of her wine. "And what made you decide to darken my door with the picnic basket?"

Those brandy-colored eyes studied her. "I thought it best to make nice with the wedding planner."

"Bullshit," Sylvia said mildly and smiled. "You thought to bring up your offer of 'friendship' again, I'm quite sure."

"Would being my friend be so bad, Sylvia?" Tristan leaned forward mere inches from her face.

Sylvia leaned forward, also. "I'm not paying the price, Mr. Calhoun." She paused. "I don't mind enjoying the occasional lunch sharing. But I'm not interested in pursuing this past that." She leaned back.

"We're a lot alike, you know." Tristan took a bite of the chicken sandwich and chewed thoughtfully. "We work hard. I thought someone so like-minded would enjoy a bit of a break."

"I do." Sylvia smiled. "On my terms."

"Terms are negotiable." Tristan smiled.

Sylvia's lips twitched. "Mine are not."

He sighed and took a sip of wine. "Then the opera is out?"

"The opera. The jet to Rio De Janeiro. And all the other nonsense I can quite easily afford for myself." Sylvia met his eyes. "I like to be able to choose the company I keep, Mr. Calhoun. Not have it forced upon me."

"Point taken." Tristan stood and brushed his hands through his hair and then buttoned his suit. He nodded his

head. "Enjoy the lunch, Sylvia. I'll have one of my people pick up the basket sometime later today." He turned and walked out the door.

Sylvia took another sip of wine and tried to calm her heart. Telling men she wasn't interested was an easy thing to do. Hell, it was rote by this time. No man ever thought to challenge her. None pushed farther than she had been willing to give. Except Tristan. And maybe now, he received the message loud and clear.

She looked at the lovely wicker basket and told herself it had been for the best. No man could possibly be worth giving up herself for. And none would ever be.

* * * *

Sylvia was hard at work eight o'clock Tuesday morning on the bouquets. They had to be perfect. Everything had to be perfect. Keira would be in at nine to okay the wedding colors and Sylvia hoped she could go from there and begin to make contact with the florists.

A sharp knock on the door startled Sylvia, and she lifted her head with a growl.

Tempest stood there in an emerald pantsuit with matching heels. Emeralds and diamonds decorated her ears, throat, and arms. She appeared, of course, stunning. It made Sylvia's chocolate brown suit look dowdy in comparison. And her sensible brown sandals piteously lacking.

Sylvia pushed the envy deep down and motioned her forward. "You have something for me?"

"Yes." Tempest moved forward and held out a thin manila folder. "If Keira decides she approves of the Irish-Celtic wedding, I have the names of several businesses capable of creating the perfect invitation."

“So do I.” Sylvia took the folder and put it on her desk. “Anything else?”

Those dark blue eyes smiled down at her. “I like you, Sylvia Masters.” Tempest laughed and turned on her heel to leave.

Sylvia’s eyes widened, and then she allowed herself a small smile. “Tempest.”

The statuesque woman turned around. “Yes?”

Sylvia picked up the folder and waved it. “Thanks.”

“My pleasure.” She waved a hand laden with emeralds and walked down the hall.

Okay. So maybe the beautiful Amazon is useful. Sylvia chuckled at Tempest’s words. Though her judge of character is still in question.

Liz arrived seconds later and received her assignments for the day. She stopped at the doorway and turned around. “How’s Beth?”

“Healing, I hope.” Sylvia didn’t look up from her paperwork. Her office door shut behind Liz, and Sylvia sat back in her chair. True to his word, one of Tristan’s “people” came to retrieve the picnic basket yesterday. She half-expected Tristan, himself, to come back for it. But maybe Sylvia had made her point after all. Then why did that bother her?

She shook off the odd thoughts and bent her head back over her desk.

Half an hour later, Liz buzzed her that Keira had arrived. What she neglected to mention was that big brother had arrived with her.

Keira blew through the doorway with a large smile on her face and a soft brown leather pantsuit that only a woman so young with Keira’s coloring could wear. Sylvia would look

like a calf. Tristan wore a charcoal gray suit with an electric blue tie.

Sylvia forced a smile and motioned to the two chairs opposite her desk. She glanced at Tristan. "I wasn't aware you would be joining us this morning, Mr. Calhoun."

Keira grinned and smacked her brother on the arm. "Me, neither. But apparently he had some cancellations that freed up his time. Isn't that great?" She beamed at her brother.

"Great," Sylvia echoed with a false smile. *Just damn fantastic.* She braced her spine. Either way, she would get the information she needed to continue on with the planning of Keira's wedding.

She could largely ignore Tristan. Sylvia glanced at his large frame seated comfortably in her chair out of the corner of her eye, and Tristan nodded politely at her. Or not. *Damn it.* She looked back at Keira and opened the first folder Temp-est brought her.

Sylvia slid it across her desk and motioned for Keira to open it.

Keira's quick intake of breath told Sylvia all she needed to know. Tristan immediately moved closer and put his arm around Keira. When Keira raised her head, there were tears in her brown eyes.

"How did you know?"

Sylvia passed the young woman a box of tissues and smiled gently. "Your and your brother's jewelry, largely. The Claddagh rings. The Celtic bracelet."

"Oh, Tristan." Keira raised her teary eyes to her brother. "Mom and Dad would love it. It's absolutely perfect." She dabbed at her eyes. "They met in Ireland, you know." Keira sighed. "Love at first sight,' Dad always said. Mom would

peck his cheek and laugh. 'For one of us,' she always replied."

Tristan set his jaw. "They would have loved it, honey." He stood quickly. "May I speak with you out in the hall, Ms. Masters?"

"Of course." Sylvia smothered her frown and stood. She walked out into the hallway and let Tristan close the door behind him.

"Any more surprises?" he demanded.

"Pardon me?" Sylvia scowled up at him. "I'm trying to plan a wedding. If Keira hadn't liked that one, I would have offered another. And another. Until we found the perfect fit."

Tristan raked his fingers through his hair and sighed. "I'm sorry." He looked her in the eye. "They planned on flying to Ireland the night they were killed."

Sylvia put a hand to her throat. "Oh my God. I'm so sorry." Her blue eyes darkened in sympathy. "I had no idea. We simply thought that jewelry to be an indicator of a possible preference to colors and scheme."

"Keira doesn't remember." Tristan closed his eyes. "And it probably wouldn't matter if she did." He blew out a breath. "I'm sorry, Sylvia. It is perfect. Our parents took us there several times. We both loved it as much as they did." Tristan raked his fingers through his hair again and rested his hand on his waist. "Sometimes it's just so damn hard."

Sylvia put her hand on Tristan's shoulder. "I'm so sorry." She looked up at him. "More than likely the entire scheme will be along the same lines. Do you want me to steer Keira away from it?"

"No. Of course not." Tristan smiled tightly. "It *is* perfect."

"Mr. Calhoun." Sylvia removed her hand from his shoulder and smiled gently. "I will do everything in my power to

make this wedding perfect for your sister and her groom. I know it must be hard to lose the only family you've had for so many years. But Keira is in love. It tends to make one lose brain cells. Her emotions are high right now. Try to understand. And just think, you're gaining a brother-in-law. More testosterone for you."

Tristan chuckled. "Okay. I bow to your judgment in this matter. This is singular bowing, mind you. It might not ever happen again."

Sylvia chuckled and shook her head. "Perish the thought, Mr. Calhoun." She paused and looked up at him. "You've done a wonderful job raising her. She's an intelligent, caring woman."

"Thank you." Tristan rubbed his hand over his face and caught the tear that almost slipped from his right eye. "I do my best."

They both walked back into the office and continued the meeting.

* * * *

Sylvia needed ice cream. It wasn't a little niggling in her brain. It was a full-blown scream from her cerebral cortex. The meeting with Keira had gone exceptionally well. Sylvia's own issue had been trying hard not to look at Tristan Calhoun and picturing him wrapped up in her sheets.

What is it about the man?

He had money. So what? So did she.

He was extremely attractive. A fact half the East Coast could attest to. Irritating to say the least.

Tristan Calhoun was under her skin. Sylvia didn't like or appreciate it. The sooner he got out of her life, the better.

Then things could finally get back to normal.

The phone call pissed her off. Liz and the rest of the staff already left for the day. Sylvia picked it up on the second ring and assumed it would be business related. She couldn't have been more wrong.

"Bridal Bliss. Owner, Sylvia Masters speaking."

"Ah. Owner Sylvia Masters. Come have dinner with me this evening." The voice deep and persuasive in her ear.

Sylvia tapped her pen impatiently against the paper pad she had been making notes on. "No, Mr. Calhoun. I have plans this evening. Thank you for thinking of me. Have a pleasant evening."

"Wait a second."

Sylvia paused in the middle of hanging up and brought the phone back up to her ear. "Yes, Mr. Calhoun?"

"We could make it a business meeting."

Sylvia arched an eyebrow. "I conduct my business in my office, Mr. Calhoun. Good evening." She hung up the phone and rolled her eyes. *Persistent. Irritatingly so.* Sylvia threw her pen down and leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

Part of her had been extremely tempted to throw caution to the wind and let events unfold as they may. And if that ended with her and Tristan naked and sweaty in the sheets, so be it. But then self-preservation kicked in. *What good is a businesswoman who sleeps with clients?* Her hard won credibility would be lost when she became the plaything of billionaire magnate, Tristan Calhoun.

Chapter 3

Sylvia rolled out of bed the next day and yawned hugely. She had an extremely hard time falling asleep last night. Tossing and turning was not conducive to a productive day at work.

“Damn it,” she muttered as she walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

She stripped her tank top and boxers off and threw them into the hamper. What kind of power did Tristan Calhoun have that he affected her whether they were in the same room or not? Wasn’t right. Not a bit.

Sylvia stepped underneath the stinging hot water and closed her eyes. She didn’t second-guess herself. It never helped. Then why did she suddenly wonder if she’d made the right decision yesterday?

The water woke her up marginally, and Sylvia stepped out and wrapped a plush blue towel around herself. She glanced at the clock. Plenty of time to catch the morning news and brew a pot of coffee before she dressed.

Maybe even time for a couple of pieces of toast.

Sylvia clicked the television on and popped two pieces of bread in the toaster. Her ebony hair dripped a bit down her

shoulders as she propped her hip against the counter and waited for her breakfast to finish toasting.

Then her appetite left her.

Sylvia turned the volume of the television up. A local reporter caught Tristan Calhoun with a stunning blond on his arm at an art gallery opening last night. He answered questions while the blond simpered and hung on every word. Sylvia shook her head. The blond couldn't have been more than twenty with breasts that threatened to pop out of her tight gold sheath. It cut low in the front. *The better to show off her surgery-enhanced assets. And the damn piece of fabric barely covers the girl's ass cheeks.*

Sylvia looked down at her small breasts and frowned. No way in hell would she compare herself to the Barbie on Tristan's arm.

"Bastard," she muttered and yanked her two cold pieces of toast from the toaster. Sylvia threw them in the trash and poured herself the first cup of coffee for the day. Obviously she had been right about Tristan.

A cold comfort.

* * * *

Sylvia dressed in a red pantsuit and painted her lips a nice crimson color that fairly shouted, *Don't fuck with me!*

By God, she was hell on wheels today. How she ever let Tristan cross her mind to begin with beyond her.

Sylvia opened Bridal Bliss and took her accounting books to her office. A little number crunching always made her feel better.

Everyone on the staff had their collective assignments. She shouldn't have to troubleshoot anything today. Smooth sailing.

She heard the door open. It didn't break her concentra-

tion. Sylvia tallied numbers and made sure every line measured up properly. Then her spine stiffened as she recognized the smell of Tristan's cologne.

Tristan watched her in silence for a moment. "How much did you net last year?"

"Three point two million." Sylvia's capable hands worked the calculator while her eyes trailed over every figure.

"A tidy sum," he commented.

"I thought so." Sylvia never lifted her head.

"And you vacationed in..." He let the sentence trail off expectantly.

Sylvia lifted her head with a snap, and her blue eyes pierced him. "I didn't."

"Why?"

Her hands stilled immediately. "Mr. Calhoun. I don't believe my personal time is any of your damn business." She smiled and showed all her teeth. "So kindly get the hell out of my office."

Instead of following her edict, the infuriating man simply sat in the plush gray chair on the other side of her desk and steepled his fingers. His brown eyes never left hers. "You seem like an intelligent woman."

The irritating, arrogant son of a bitch. "Mr. Calhoun." The ice in her words had the power to make a man's blood run cold. "Get the hell out of my office before I have you removed."

"It's Tristan," he reminded her absently. "You're used to getting your own way, aren't you?" The words were mild, but Tristan's light brown eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"This is not twenty questions, Mr. Calhoun." Sylvia stood and smoothed down the nonexistent wrinkles in her red pant-

suit. "I'm not playing this game with you." He opened his mouth, and she continued. "Or any other game, for that matter."

Sylvia walked to the side of her desk and stood there. "I'm planning your sister's wedding. You're paying for it. The only thing I want to see of you is your name on the bottom of a check. Understood?"

Tristan stood also and moved forward until only a foot separated them. Sylvia braced her feet and stood her ground.

"I understand a lot of things, Ms. Masters. Some of which I doubt you understand yourself." Tristan leaned forward a bit and lowered his voice. "You'll have my name on the bottom of the checks, Sylvia. But I'm afraid you'll be seeing a bit more of me than you originally anticipated." His voice dropped another notch. "You see, I plan on being a deciding factor in all facets of this wedding."

"Bastard."

"Undoubtedly." Tristan studied her coolly. "But seeing as how our parents have passed, I am the one responsible for making sure Keira has the dream wedding she deserves. And since I don't plan to marry myself, this will be all the wedded bliss I need ever experience."

"Too busy screwing the flavor of the month?" Sylvia let the words spill out with venom dripping from every syllable.

"Careful, Ms. Masters," Tristan purred. "One would think you gave a damn." He turned around and walked toward the door. He stopped with his hand on the doorknob and then turned back around. "And just so you're aware..." he paused, "I don't have a flavor for this month...yet." Those wolf eyes darkened and pinned her. "But I believe you would be worth a taste." The door snapped shut behind him.

Did that conceited ass of a man call me tasty? Sylvia scowled. Next time they met, she would be sure to hand him his balls so he didn't mistake the nature of their relationship. Men like him were a dime a dozen. Money to blow through and women to go through. Sylvia rolled her eyes. She'd rather jab herself in the eye with her letter opener.

Liz opened the door with her trusty notebook in hand and studied her. "Good meeting?"

So that's what the asshole told my assistant to get to me.

"Great meeting." Sylvia smiled serenely. "Though next time, have Mr. Calhoun wait in the lobby until I call for him."

"No problem, Ms. Masters." Liz thumbed through her notebook. "Our pearl supplier is on line one. He says he's going to be twenty short for the Jackson wedding."

Sylvia arched an eyebrow and glanced down at her phone. "Thanks, Liz. I'll be busy the rest of the afternoon."

Liz nodded her head and shut the door behind her.

Sylvia sat behind her desk and picked up the phone. She may not be able to verbally decimate Mr. Calhoun anytime soon. But she would be damned if she let another individual have the last word. She clicked line one and put the phone to her ear. Before the man could utter a word, she spoke.

"You've got two options, Harry. You either find another twenty buttons, or I'll make sure that none of your pearls decorate another wedding gown in this century." Sylvia let the man talk for about five seconds before she interrupted him. "Have them shipped priority mail. I have a seamstress on call." She hung up the phone in the middle of his sentence. *Now. Isn't that better?*

* * * *

Sylvia's eyes began to cross on the third notebook of

numbers. No small surprise there. She sat back in her chair and laced her fingers behind her head. The exchange between herself and Tristan ran through her head. Obviously the rules had changed for him. She had now become a challenge. A simple woman who would leap into his bed and carve her name on his bedpost.

Her mouth tightened.

Someone knocked on her door, and Sylvia braced herself.

"Come in," she called.

Tempest strolled in. She wore all black today. The black silk shirt and pencil skirt accented the long fluid lines of the woman in front of her. Her hair pulled back into a sophisticated chignon while bits of onyx decorated her lobes and throat.

"Do you have a stylist?" Sylvia asked before Tempest could utter a word.

Tempest smiled. "I do not. But I'm flattered you think I do."

"You don't need to work, do you?" Sylvia studied the woman in front of her. "Not financially, I mean."

"No." Tempest's lips curved into a small smile.

Sylvia nodded. "Neither do I. In fact, I'm sure my parents preferred I didn't." She rubbed her temple. "They wanted me to be a diplomat."

Tempest coughed delicately, and Sylvia chuckled.

"That's what I thought of the idea." She paused. "I wanted to build something exclusively mine."

"And you have." Tempest walked forward and motioned around the office. "This is yours. All this. Plus your employees and all the couples that you helped to make their weddings exquisite and memorable." She tapped her cheek

thoughtfully. "Why weddings, Sylvia?"

Sylvia shrugged uncomfortably. "I'm not quite sure." She laughed quietly. "I suppose being dragged to so many where I thought the decor subpar had something to do with it."

Tempest's eyes were intelligent and kind. "Is that all?"

"No." Sylvia motioned to a chair. "Have a seat."

Tempest sank gracefully into the chair and tilted her head to the side. Her wave of ebony hair fell forward and concealed half her face. She brushed it back impatiently.

"I used to believe in fairy tales." Sylvia closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. "Prince Charming and the princess of choice. Castles and kings. Peril and power. Fate and folly." She opened her eyes slowly. Her dark blue eyes met Tempest's. "Weddings represented all that for me. All that and more."

"But not any longer." Tempest smiled sadly. "The beauty of the fairy tales is long gone, isn't it?"

"Not long gone," Sylvia amended. "Just pushed far enough back to allow me to concentrate on the financial aspects. The bottom line is most important now. I see weddings as a necessary evil to appease nervous parents."

"That's rather cynical." Tempest blinked and waited for a response.

"That it is." Sylvia shrugged and tucked an errant lock of hair behind her ear. "I've grown up. I've made a mint off of giving an illusion to people. I'm the marital magician."

Tempest's laughter pealed throughout the room. "The marital magician. I rather like that, Sylvia. I like that a lot."

Sylvia motioned to the ledger in front of her. "This makes sense to me. Always has."

"You don't find pleasure in planning the wedding

and seeing the results?”

“Of course I do.” Sylvia frowned. “But it’s more customer satisfaction now. Odd how dreams change.”

“Isn’t it?” Tempest murmured.

Sylvia cleared her throat. “Sorry about that. And thanks for listening. I actually brought you in here to talk about your continuing with us while Beth is out.”

“I’m here for as long as you need me, Sylvia Masters.” Tempest smiled. “Beth may continue to be out for awhile.”

“How do you two know each other?”

“A mutual friend,” Tempest answered easily. “It’s a small world.”

“Isn’t it just?” Sylvia frowned and thought of her earlier conversation with Tristan. A thought occurred to her. “Are your parents still married, Tempest?”

“Yes.” Tempest smiled. “They’ve been together a very long time. And even though they don’t always see eye to eye, they realize they are so much more together than they are separate.”

Sylvia grew quiet for a minute. And then she spoke. “Your mother didn’t lose herself?”

Tempest mulled over the question and all the reasons behind it. “No. I can honestly say that she and my father complement each other. They both came into the relationship with the realization they were two individuals. They still are. But they’ve come together and raised four daughters together. They’ve seen each other through so much. And when they needed to lean on someone, it was each other.”

“A pretty picture,” Sylvia commented. Her head filled with pictures of her mother’s constant fundraising and putting off her dreams to make sure her father succeeded at every-

thing he wished. The quiet dinners where no word had been spoken. The silent treatment that said so much more than words. She snapped back to the present.

“You have three sisters?”

Tempest’s lips twitched. “That I do.” She studied Sylvia. “Do you wish you had siblings?”

“No.” Sylvia fought the shudder that worked its way through her. Siblings would have simply meant more tuition for out of country schools. Another thing for her parents to fight about. “I don’t think I was meant to have siblings.” She smiled ruefully. “I provided enough of a surprise for my parents.” Curiosity got the better of her. She leaned forward. “What are your sisters like?”

“Wicked and wonderful. Maddening and magical.” Tempest ran her fingers through her long ebony hair. “Totally and completely irreverent and thick as thieves.” Her blue eyes sparkled. “Some of those more than others.”

Sylvia switched gears. “I can understand why Mr. Calhoun wants to be a part of his sister’s wedding. But I don’t understand why he has to be underfoot the entire time.”

Tempest sat back with a small smile. “Ah. The indomitable Mr. Calhoun.” She laced her fingers behind her head. “He strikes me as someone who must have control in every situation. No doubt it’s served him well as the tycoon he is.”

“No doubt,” Sylvia muttered and rubbed her temple.

“How is the Calhoun wedding progressing?”

“As well as can be expected with constant supervision by the controlling brother.” Sylvia frowned. “We need to book a church for the wedding. Keira showed me the invitation list, and it’s extensive. We need something large and accommodating. There will be well over five hundred attendees.”

“Done.” Tempest smiled assuringly. “And I’ll check around today for exclusive bridal shops. Are we still staying with the Celtic theme?”

“Yes.” Sylvia nodded. “We had a bit of a glitch with that.” Her blue eyes saddened. “We hit a bit too close to home with that one. But it’s been approved.” She tapped her fingers on her desk.

“What bothers you?” Tempest asked softly.

“A great deal.” Sylvia took a deep breath and blew it out softly. “A lot rides on this wedding. Failure is not an option.”

“Sounds like you’re planning a major military coup.”

“What’s the difference?” Sylvia smiled tiredly.

Tempest bit her lip and stood quickly. She walked over and placed her hands on Sylvia’s desk and looked her deeply in the eye. “I have a gift for you, Sylvia Masters. A gift I think you need right this minute.”

“A gift?” Sylvia’s eyes blurred into a dreamlike state.

“Yes.” Tempest smoothed back Sylvia’s hair with a smile. “The first of two I will bestow upon you, my mortal.” She cupped Sylvia’s chin and imprinted each word into Sylvia’s mind. “I give you the realization that you are more than these numbers in your ledger. That your worth is not measured in dollars and cents but by who you are. And you are an intelligent, capable woman whose strength is tempered by your gentleness. Find the balance, my dear. Not the bottom line in your ledgers, but the bottom line for you as a woman.” She stepped back and smiled as Sylvia’s eyes focused again.

Sylvia blinked twice. “So. You have the church well in hand?”

“Yes.” Tempest waved absently as she walked out of Sylvia’s office and to her own.

Sylvia brushed her hair back and looked down at the ledger in front of her. The numbers blurred in front of her, and she pushed back the books with a groan. No more numbers today. Just a bit of a relaxing bath at home.

* * * *

Sylvia unlocked her front door and pushed it open with a sigh. How long had she been this tired? Months. She pushed the door shut with a slam and locked it. Everything she carried dropped to the floor with a thud.

“Die, day, die.” Sylvia stripped out of her clothes on the way to her bathroom. She stripped nude by the time she reached the faucets and turned them to almost boiling hot. All the muscles in her neck and shoulders knotted in protest from her stressful day. Maybe the hot bath would at least relax her a bit.

She played a bit in the running water before deciding to nip a glass of red wine from her kitchen. *Music. There must be music.* Sylvia turned on Mozart with a click and walked back to the bathroom with wine in hand. She sipped it and smiled.

Steam rolled up from her bathtub, and she placed the glass of wine on the small table by the tub. Sylvia sank into the heat with a small groan and closed her eyes. Bathtub bliss. Too bad she couldn’t conduct business from this very spot.

The small smile slid from her face as her mind wandered toward a certain tycoon. Tristan Calhoun. Couldn’t he leave her alone while she tried to relax? He would probably be the first to advocate naked business practices.

Sylvia blushed at the thought of the highly attractive man sharing her tub. *Talk about bliss.* She sighed and reached out for her wineglass. Her fingers curled around the stem and brought the drink back. A lovely red. Not as expensive as

what Tristan brought to her on the picnic but a good year.

“Damn him,” she muttered and brushed her hair back. He personified Prince Charming all right. A Prince Charming who played the field. No settling down for that one. Hadn’t he made that abundantly clear? No bridal bliss for him. Only the wedding for Keira. But wasn’t she exactly the same?

Sylvia didn’t want any weddings in her future. Content to be the savvy businesswoman who brought that bridal bliss to others. *Shit*. All she needed now would be to adopt about half a dozen kittens from the pet shelter.

She had a great life. A satisfying life. Didn’t she? Sylvia sank further into the hot water and let her mind wander. *What had Tempest said earlier? About her parents being complete individuals before they came together as a whole? Isn’t that the missing key?*

Hundreds of couples had come through her shop. And the ones who lasted weren’t those where the couples were so dependent on each other that they couldn’t decide a simple color for a cummerbund.

Sylvia’s blue eyes popped open in alarm. Surely to God she hadn’t been considering giving Tristan Calhoun a tumble, was she? *Bad idea. Very bad idea*. She groaned. Her experience with the opposite sex minimal at best, Tristan Calhoun way out of her league. Even for a tumble. And the thought of him with all the eye candy on his arm made her slightly nauseous.

He was a fantasy. A man she could take down from her mental shelf and play with to her heart’s content. A man she could do whatever she wished to in her head without worrying about actually falling short in the real bedroom.

It would have to do.

A secret smile played on Sylvia’s lips. He could be her mental boy toy. Willing to do her bidding in every fantasy she

could ever think of.

Sylvia let herself relax fully into the water and licked her lips. She brought his image into her head easily. Untamed tawny hair. Brandy-colored eyes. The broad muscular body and strength he radiated.

She let herself touch his soft hair and smiled. And then her hands moved over his face and memorized every feature. Her thumb ran over his full lower lip a second before she moved her mouth to match his.

And then the heat that made her moan aloud. Tristan's strong arms banded around her and molded every inch of her to his powerful body. *More*, all she could think. *I want more*.

Tristan's mouth moved over her bare skin, and Sylvia arched in the bathtub. He was wicked. And she loved every minute of it. His strong hands removed her clothes and then his own. When their bodies met again, heat filled Sylvia's body.

Her eyes flew open in the tub, and her breath sounded shallow to her own ears.

"Oh, hell."

Sylvia stood quickly and wrapped a towel around herself. No more for today. Tristan Calhoun seemed to take control even in her fantasies.

* * * *

Sylvia published the wedding announcement in every major newspaper in the state and all the largest ones on the East Coast. She didn't have long to wait for the results. Liz left a large pile of telephone messages on her desk at noon. There were at least six high society families who saw the wedding announcement and wanted to book her for their own weddings.

Networking. Sylvia smiled. All working out rather well. She brushed her ebony hair back and rested her head on the back of her chair. If she closed her eyes for only a second, she could finish the rest of the day focused. A practice she had read about but never employed.

She shifted and sighed. *No go.* She could see no point in trying to relax when there was so much to do.

“Well hell,” she muttered and picked up her notebook again.

Keira would come by tomorrow with Jon, and Sylvia looked forward to showing the groom-to-be a few of her ideas. They would have to mesh completely for her to go forward with her plans.

There were a few boutiques that Sylvia wanted to check out first before she dragged Keira along with her to try on dresses. The regular ones wouldn’t do for what Sylvia had in mind. There had to be no doubt that this one-of-a-kind wedding would stand out for everyone involved.

Sylvia rubbed her temple and frowned. She would have to deal with Tristan. No way around it. And for a man who made his living as a businessman, he didn’t seem to spend a lot of time in his office.

It bothered her a great deal. More than she would ever admit to anyone. He should have his nose to the grindstone and out of her business.

“Sour grapes.” Sylvia sighed and looked at her notebook. The headache only a small throbbing. Nothing life-threatening. Stress the trigger. It usually was. Sylvia reached in her drawer and pulled out a bottle of ibuprofen. She washed two down with her cold coffee and grimaced.

“No wonder you’re usually so happy to see me.”

Sylvia's head snapped up, and her blue eyes narrowed. "For the love of God."

Tristan stood there in black slacks and a white dress shirt uncuffed and rolled up to his forearms. He leaned casually against the doorframe of her office. His tawny hair swept back in an attempt to tame it, she was sure.

He held two cups of coffee in his hands.

Damn him.

"Mr. Calhoun." Sylvia smiled tiredly. "Is there some type of bat signal that goes off to let you know when I'm in dire need of coffee?"

His lips twitched. "Ms. Masters. We superheroes never reveal these things."

She rolled her blue eyes and sighed. "I just wondered how your business seems to thrive when you seem to be everywhere but at the office."

Tristan moved forward and held out a cup. "I delegate." He took a sip of his own coffee and smiled. "Good stuff."

Sylvia reached out and took the cup in her hand. It warmed her palm. "Warm coffee," she murmured. "What a concept."

Tristan walked around to the side of her desk and frowned down at the cup on her desk. He lifted it and sipped. "God, woman!" He slammed the cup back down. "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

She took another sip of the coffee he brought and looked at him. "Some things tend to slip my attention when I'm busy."

He arched an eyebrow. "Proper caffeine should never be one of those things."

Sylvia's stomach growled.

Both Tristan's eyebrows arched. He put his hands on his

hips. "And you don't eat, either?"

"I swear to God, if you pull a picnic basket out of your ass, I'm out of here." Sylvia smiled.

Tristan chuckled. "That would be beyond my realm of expertise." He paused. "I could, however, call The River and have someone deliver a catered meal."

Sylvia warred with herself for a full minute. Tristan simply watched her without saying a word. "I suppose that would be an option."

Tristan simply shook his head and pulled a cell phone from his pocket. "We had chicken last time. How about seafood? Perhaps some shrimp and lobster?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. The feeling all new to her. Tristan calmly ordered while she watched. When was the last time anyone had ever done anything like this for her? Or had they ever?

Tristan finished his call and put his cell phone back. He sank into the chair across from hers. The silence stretched out.

"I don't suppose you simply happened by?" Sylvia took another sip of her coffee and studied Tristan.

Those wolf eyes pinned her. "I don't suppose I did."

Sylvia's stomach fluttered with nerves. "Then why are you here?"

"Keira."

"Ah." The knots in Sylvia's stomach eased. Keira a safe subject. "And what does the bride want now?"

Tristan shrugged easily. "Everything." He smiled. "She wants me to give her away."

Sylvia bit her lip. *How painful must that be?* "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I know that will be difficult."

“Yes.” Tristan rubbed his hand over his eyes. “For one, I wish our father could do it. For two, I don’t want to.” His wolf eyes saddened. “I don’t want to give her away.”

Emotion clogged her throat. *How wonderful and terrible to have that much love for another person. Keira is a lucky girl.*

“How long have your parents been gone?”

Tristan sighed. “Almost two decades.”

Sylvia started, and he grinned. “There is a wide age difference between Keira and myself.” He chuckled. “Mom always said Keira had been a gift late in life. I remember when they brought her home.” Tristan’s eyes darkened in memory. “She cried loud even then.” He paused. “I was in high school. She turned the whole house upside down.” His eyes met hers. “It was great.”

“You’ve raised her.” A statement of fact.

“I’ve raised her,” Tristan admitted. “I’ve watched her grow from a small girl into an opinionated woman who’s fallen in love. I’ve seen her through bad dates. Bad haircuts. Bad grades.”

Sylvia laughed at his expression. “Not a scholar?”

“Not hardly.” Tristan snorted and rolled his eyes. “She had no interest in school. Nor does she want to go into the family business.”

Sylvia leaned forward. “What does she want?”

“A family of her own.” Tristan sighed. “She wants the one thing she didn’t grow up with. The one thing I couldn’t give her.”

“Oh, Tristan.” Sylvia held her hand to her throat and searched helplessly for the right words. “That’s not true at all. She’s a wonderful, intelligent woman. You’ve done a tremendous job raising her. You’ve given her everything she needs to be the amazing person she’s supposed to be. Mar-

riage isn't taking her away from you. It's expanding your family." She smiled a small smile. "Most women want to start their own family and share all the wonderful experiences they themselves have had."

"But not you?" Tristan stared intently at her.

Sylvia shifted uncomfortably. "We were discussing Keira."

"So we were," Tristan murmured. He paused and then spoke again. "The question still stands."

"I don't care to repeat the experience I had with my parents with anyone," she responded stiffly.

Tristan opened his mouth to say something when a sharp knock on the door stopped him. He stood and strode over to open it. A delivery boy with several bags smiled at him.

"Mr. Calhoun?"

"Yes." Tristan returned the smile and held out his hand. Two bills disappeared into the delivery boy's hand. Tristan easily held the bags and watched while the boy disappeared back down the hall.

Sylvia stood and walked over to help him. She took two bags and inhaled deeply.

"Mmm." She smiled. "You don't do anything by half." Sylvia walked toward the place where she kept her sheet, but Tristan's hand stopped her. "I have it. Why don't you sit down?"

Sylvia nodded her assent and sank gracefully to the ground. Tristan shook the sheet out and carefully placed the food in the corner between them. He unpacked plates and cutlery.

It was wrong. Sylvia knew that as she and Tristan settled down to lunch. The catered meal decadent and improper. She should have grabbed a biscotti from the kitchen and refreshed her own coffee.

But damn it all to hell. It tasted absolutely delicious. Sylvia plucked another shrimp from the container and plopped it into her mouth. Tristan grinned at her and did the same.

“Doesn’t this beat cold coffee and starving yourself?”

Sylvia washed the shrimp down with a sip of her red wine and inclined her head. “Yes. It does. But I can’t afford to make this a habit.”

“Why is that?” Tristan frowned and dipped his lobster into the butter sauce. “For a woman who is so put together, I worry about your health.”

Sylvia shrugged. “I eat when I need to. I have several items on my agenda that I need to attend.” She smiled. “And I have several calls from prospective brides wanting the same wedding planner Keira Calhoun is using.”

“You can have balance.” Tristan studied her. “How about dinner this evening?”

“No.”

He grinned at her. “You could have hesitated a moment or two to give a guy hope.”

Sylvia chuckled. “For some reason, I believe you to be the type of man when given an inch, it’s never enough.”

Tristan reached across and took her hand before she could think to stop him. “Dearest Sylvia. Even a busy magnate such as myself takes time to enjoy dinner. Surely you could see to clear your schedule and join me?”

Sylvia hesitated.

“We could go to The River. Or I could have them bring something to us. Your choice of place and dining.”

“You’re the devil. You know that, right?” Sylvia took a shrimp and held it in her hand while she watched Tristan. “Tempting a workaholic with food she doesn’t have to prepare

herself. It's rather sadistic."

Tristan threw back his head and laughed. The laughter rumbled through the room, and Sylvia joined in.

"So. I tempt you." Tristan nodded. "That's good. That's very good."

"You could tempt a nun, I'm quite sure," Sylvia said primly and put the shrimp in her mouth before she admitted something else better kept to herself.

"We could make it a working dinner." Tristan shrugged. "You bring your ideas. I bring the food. You can even bill me."

Sylvia winced. "Ouch. I may be about the bottom line, but that's beneath me."

Tristan let go of her hand. "I'm free this evening, Ms. Masters. You can bend my ear with all sorts of plans about my sister's wedding. And since I'm paying for it, it probably would be a good idea to run your grand ideas by me."

"One dinner," she conceded and frowned at Tristan's smile. "And wipe that smirk off your face. One business dinner. That's it. And I'd rather it be a place where the paparazzi does not photograph us together. I don't need to be the latest 'it' girl."

Tristan nodded. "We can meet at my office. No one else will be there in the evening. And I have a few loose ends to tie up, myself. Do you know where it is?"

Calhoun Tower? Sylvia bit her lip to keep from laughing. A damn landmark. She couldn't miss it if she tried.

"I think I can find it," she promised.

Tristan reached back into a bag and brought out a container Sylvia didn't see earlier. He faced it toward him and opened the lid slowly.

“What is it?” Sylvia’s blue eyes widened. The aroma of rich chocolate filled the air, and she moaned softly. “You didn’t.”

“What?” Tristan grinned wickedly. “I didn’t order The River’s famous chocolate ice-cream cake? Why, Sylvia. I believe I did.”

“You are very, very bad.” She moved forward. “But that’s okay this once. Hand me a fork.”

“No.”

Her blue eyes widened in shock and then narrowed. “Seriously. A fork. Now. Or you’ll be the one explaining the cutlery sticking out of your leg to the EMT.”

“You have violent tendencies.” Tristan rifled around in the bag and pulled out a fork. He dipped it into the decadent dessert and pulled out a bite. The rich chocolate clung to the fork.

Sylvia licked her lips. “Point taken. A bite, please?”

“My pleasure,” he murmured and moved the fork toward her mouth.

She opened her mouth to order him to give her the fork when he slid the first bite into her mouth.

Oh my.

Sylvia licked her lips and savored the feel of the chocolate on her tongue. *Heaven. It had to be.* The taste of rich chocolate melted on her tongue and slid smoothly down her throat. She closed her eyes in bliss. When the bite was gone, she opened her eyes to see Tristan staring at her.

Sylvia wiped her lips. “I’m sorry. Do I need a napkin?”

“No.” The word came out low and strangled.

“You’re sweating.” Sylvia frowned. “Are you feeling okay?” She leaned forward and pressed her wrist to Tristan’s

forehead. "Was it something you ate?"

"It was something you ate," Tristan murmured before he grabbed her wrist and pulled her lips down to his.

If the chocolate had been decadent, Tristan had to be sin incarnate. Sylvia's body reacted without her consent, and she strained against him while his mouth plundered hers. His tongue stroked hers while his hands roamed down her body and drew her down onto his lap.

The minute she felt his arousal, Sylvia jackknifed her body up from his and glared down at him. Her hands shook, and she stuffed them in the pockets of her black dress pants. "We're not having a little afternoon delight, Mr. Calhoun."

Tristan raked his hands through his hair and grimaced. "I'm sorry, Sylvia. I truly am." He blew out a breath. "You make me forget all reason."

Right.

Sylvia calmed herself slowly and looked at the picnic on the floor of her private office. "I think this was a bad idea." She smiled apologetically. "Thank you for lunch. But I have to get back to work."

Tristan opened his mouth and then shut it. "Maybe you're right." He stood quickly. "I'll help you clean up."

Sylvia held up her hand. "I have it. Thank you, Mr. Calhoun."

"Sylvia. Don't cancel on me this evening."

She could barely think straight. But a dinner at Tristan's office sounded like a highly bad idea. Sylvia shook her head.

"Don't." Tristan held up his hands. "I promise to keep my hands to myself."

She arched an eyebrow. "I keep hearing it. But there seems to be a lapse between the saying and the doing."

"I'll be good," he promised and smiled angelically.

"One business dinner." Sylvia looked him in the eye. "And that's it. Any other business will be done in my office. Agreed?"

"Yes." Tristan looked at his watch and cursed. "I have a meeting in fifteen minutes. But I'll expect you around seven. Will that be all right?"

"Yes." Sylvia moved around to the back of her desk. "I'll see you then."

Tristan glanced at the food on the floor and back at Sylvia. "I'll order food in." And then he turned and walked out of her office.

Sylvia sank into her office chair and let her head sink against the back of it. She could still taste the chocolate cake. And Tristan. Both so very bad for her. And she wanted both.

There came a quick knock, and then Sylvia's door opened. Tempest stepped inside with an armful of catalogs. The black sheath hugged her full frame and stopped at mid-calf. Her long legs tapered into black stilettos that could easily pass for a dangerous weapon. She glanced briefly at the floor and then stepped around the food.

"I think the florist on Broadway will deliver the best bouquets. I had them work up some samples." She put some pictures on the desk in front of Sylvia. "The petals hold the color they use better." She stuck her pen behind her ear. "And we can approach Keira about invitations at the next meeting. But if we're sticking with a Celtic style wedding, I think we should go with Bailey's for those." She put a handful of samples on Sylvia's desk and waited for a reply.

"You're not going to say anything about the spread of food that currently litters my office floor?"

Tempest glanced back down at the food and then at Sylvia. Her lips twitched. "I would say 'where's mine?' but there seems to be only enough for two."

"Don't be an ass." Sylvia picked up the samples but didn't look at them. "Isn't it a bad idea for a businesswoman to have a meal with her client?"

"Seriously?" Tempest frowned and sank into the chair opposite Sylvia. "Did you just seriously say that?"

"Oh shut up." Sylvia grinned. "I know how it sounds. But I also know it's a bad idea."

"Because?" Tempest tapped her long black nails on the desk.

"When is Beth coming back?"

Tempest snickered. "Nice try. Really nice try. She's feeling better. But the doctor thinks a change of climate will do her good. I have a villa in France she will be staying at."

Sylvia's blue eyes widened. "She needs to go to a villa to recuperate from a cold?" Her hand shot to the phone. "I really don't think so." She dialed Beth's number and received an answering machine message.

Sylvia slammed down the phone. "Is she going to be okay? She's not dying or anything, is she?"

"No." Tempest smiled assuringly. "Her lungs are simply having a hard time dealing with the bug she has. The doctor suggested a change of climate. I offered my home."

"In France."

"In France." Tempest grinned. "I wouldn't mind loaning it to you for awhile, either."

"Is that where you live?"

"I have several homes." Tempest brushed her ebony hair back. "And now back to the subject of breaking bread with a

client.”

“Oh hell.” Sylvia ran her hands through her short mop of hair and grimaced. “I think Mr. Calhoun wants a hell of a lot more than a bit of bread with me.”

“He seems like a nice man.” Tempest shot a glance to the floor. “He’s willing to feed you.”

Sylvia’s mouth snapped shut. “He’s a playboy. And he thinks any woman he wants will just give him a roll. I’m not one of those women.”

“Has he tried to roll you?” Tempest leaned forward with wide eyes.

Sylvia snickered. “We’ve kissed. And I stopped it there.” She sighed. “I won’t be just another number to anybody.”

“And you shouldn’t be.” Tempest tapped her cheek. “But what if you’re not just another number?” She left the statement hanging there while she stood. “Check out the samples. I’m going to look at Beth’s caseload and see what I can do.”

Sylvia watched Tempest leave and cursed under her breath. She stood and walked back over to the food to tidy up. The chocolate ice-cream cake started to melt, and Sylvia took a small bite and sighed. Then she dumped the rest of it in the trash.

Chapter 4

Calhoun Tower was a magnificent skyscraper with beautiful glass windows and arches at the base of the building that lent itself to old world charm. There were twenty stories, and Sylvia had the feeling Tristan would be right at the top.

She changed at her office into a pair of tan slacks and an ivory shirt with long sleeves. This was, after all, a business meeting. The fact her stomach jumped with nerves had not been conducive to her own unsteady peace of mind.

Tristan's mouth on hers.

Sylvia closed her eyes for a minute in her car before she got out. *Business meeting. Business meeting.* She repeated the words in her head like a mantra lifeline. *That's all this is.* And if she chose to walk into the lion's den like a complete hormonal idiot, then that fell on her.

If only Tristan Calhoun wasn't...Tristan Calhoun.

Sylvia sighed.

The beautiful billionaire that seemed to mark her for his affections. Sylvia tapped her fingernails on the steering wheel. The truth of the matter simple. She needed him for her business right now. To network into a full year of bookings. To possibly add a couple more staff members. To grow even

larger. Maybe open another office.

But at what price?

Her body? Her heart?

“Screw this,” Sylvia muttered and stepped out of her car.

She shut the door with a slam and walked toward the front of the building. Anymore thinking in her car, and she would simply put it into drive and get the hell out of here.

Sylvia strode purposefully toward the guard at the desk in the center of the room. He sat in front of a large group of computers that he watched even as she approached him. The guard appeared in his mid-thirties and built like a tanker. His arms flexed as he moved from one side to the other.

“Can I help you, Miss?” He raised his head and gave her an appraising look. His light green eyes took in every aspect of her appearance.

Sylvia smiled. He was good. And she had no doubt that if she asked him a week from now what she had been wearing, he could tell her. Right down to the gold studs in her ears.

“Sylvia Masters to see Mr. Calhoun, please.”

The guard smiled and nodded. “He’s expecting you, Ms. Masters. Take elevator number four to the top floor. Make a right and walk down the hallway. It’s the last door on your left.”

“Thank you.” She smiled and turned to go.

“Miss?”

Sylvia turned back around. “Yes?”

The guard actually blushed. “Sorry to bother you. You worked on one of my sister’s friend’s weddings.” He cleared his throat nervously. “I’m, um, actually getting married next fall. Could I possibly make an appointment for my fiancée to speak with you?”

Sylvia smiled and dug out a business card from her purse. "It would be my pleasure..." she looked at his name tag, "Mr. Cane. Contact my office and talk to Liz. She's my secretary. I'll make sure to clear a planner for you."

He grinned broadly, and Sylvia could see that his fiancée was a lucky woman. "You're the best, Ms. Masters." He nodded his head to her and whistled as he stuck her business card in the pocket of his shirt.

Sylvia waved as she walked back to the elevator. A lovely perk to her evening. Nothing like business falling into her lap. She stepped into the elevator and pushed the button. Classical music played in the background while she traveled to her destination.

The doors opened, and Sylvia stepped out into the hallway.

Simply gorgeous. Someone had obviously taken time with the decor. The carpet a thick brown shag that her feet sank into with every step. The walls an expensive wood paneling that spoke of money and power. There were small tables that lined the wall with fresh flowers that spilled over the baskets and onto the tables. The fragrance intoxicated her.

Sylvia touched the tulips closest to her with a smile. She loved them. Always had. Something about the shape and color of the flowers. She rubbed the silky petals between her fingers and smiled.

The portraits on the wall were expensive and floral. Garden scenes lined both walls and set off the fresh plants perfectly.

But there was one that made her stop in her tracks. Four women faced an enormous garden. They each stood with their arms around one other while a slight breeze lifted their hair. The artist painted the portrait so all that could be seen was the

backs of the women. Each woman had a different hair color and dress. But they were linked. She could tell simply by gazing at the entire picture. There was strength and purpose in the quartet. Sylvia reached out before she could stop herself and traced an amethyst flower on the right side.

“Appreciating my art and greenery?”

Sylvia dropped her hand from the portrait and released the tulip with the other one. She stiffened her spine and nodded.

Tristan Calhoun stood there with a manila folder in his left hand and a smile on his face. His white shirt unbuttoned and his sleeves rolled up. He had on a pair of black slacks and black loafers. The cologne he wore wafted over to her.

“I was admiring your decor, Mr. Calhoun.” Sylvia motioned to the walls. “Someone has taken a lot of time with it, and the effect is stunning.”

“That would be Keira.”

“Keira?” Sylvia frowned. *If Keira had such a good eye, why would she leave her wedding up to a planner?* “Keira did this?”

Tristan smiled. “It was her one contribution to the office. She insisted on decorating it herself.” He tapped the folder against his other hand. “Shall we retire to my office?”

“Yes.” Sylvia trailed after him and told herself to keep her eyes above his waist. And that proved to be extremely difficult. She glanced down once and thanked God silently for fitted pants.

“Here we are.”

Sylvia’s head shot up, and she smiled weakly.

Tristan opened the door and ushered her inside.

If the hallway was stunning, Tristan’s office absolutely took her breath. There were solid oak bookshelves on both

sides of the vast window that sat behind Tristan's desk. They were filled to overflowing with leather bound volumes. The furniture all dark brown leather with gold trimming. A large couch sat to her right while two leather chairs sat across from Tristan at his desk.

Tristan's desk had to be a masterpiece. A dark solid oak that curved around him and held a laptop, a Rolodex, and two telephones. There were several papers littering the top and writing utensils strewn from one end to the other.

He motioned to the leather chair. "Have a seat."

Sylvia sank into the plush chair and smiled. "I don't want to keep you any later than possible. She pulled a large folder out of her bag and held it out to him. "We have samples of invitations and flowers. I'm going through bridal shops right now to find the perfect wedding dress." She paused. "There is also the matter of hiring a photographer, a group of musicians for the reception, and finding a caterer." She took a deep breath. "Are you existing in your happy place?"

Tristan put the folder down and exhaled. "I have a time-share. Apparently Jon needs the same thing."

Sylvia laughed and shook her head. "Only a couple more months. Then life will get back to fairly normal. And all this madness will be nothing but a memory."

Tristan flipped open the folder and glanced at the contents. "When do you meet with Keira again?"

"She's coming by Friday. I hope to have the bridal shops by then." Sylvia leaned forward. "But I wanted you to get an idea of the price and what I'll be showing Keira."

Tristan nodded. "I appreciate it. Even though I'm sure we both know that I've put no cap on her spending."

Sylvia's lips twitched. "Music to my ears, Mr. Calhoun."

He glanced up at her, and those brandy-colored eyes pinned her. "I don't suppose we could shorten that to Tristan?"

She shrugged elegantly. "I'm rarely on a first name basis with my clients."

"Hmmm." Tristan cocked his head to the side. "We could set a precedent here."

Sylvia raised an eyebrow. "Are we about to engage in a power struggle?"

"Not a bit." Tristan picked up the invitations and thumbed through them. "I like these." He looked back at her. "You realize that even though we invited five hundred, more than likely there will be at least two hundred more than that?"

"I'm aware of it, Mr. Calhoun." Sylvia smiled at him. She actually planned for three hundred more. It was her job to be aware of all the facets of a wedding. And a Calhoun wedding had a large number potential.

"What other items do you have planned for my lovely sister?"

Sylvia pulled a notebook out of her bag. "The next step is looking for a reception area large enough to hold all the guests. I'll also be canvassing for bridal shops and wedding gowns. And I think it would be a good idea to meet Jon's parents. I like to be sensitive to future mother-in-law ideas."

"You'll love Maude." Tristan smiled and raked a hand through his hair. "She's a pistol. Jon is her only child. Her husband passed more than a decade ago, and she took over the reins of the business."

"And what business is that?"

"Iron." Tristan handed back the invitations. "They've made a damn fortune in it. And Maude has a great head for

business. Jon takes after her.”

“A magnate merging,” Sylvia murmured. *What could be more perfect?*

“Not exactly.” Tristan pushed back from his desk and crossed his arms behind his head. “Keira and Jon met at a fundraiser for cystic fibrosis. Each had no idea of the familial ties. They found themselves at the same table. Jon was enamored. Of course.”

Sylvia grinned. “Of course.”

“The next thing I know, Keira brings him by.” Tristan frowned. “I had no idea how serious it had gotten. Seems to have slipped right past me.”

“How long did they date before talking about a wedding?”

Tristan blew out a breath. “About six months. A short amount of time, I remember telling Keira. But she insisted that Jon was the one.”

A chime sounded, and Tristan stood quickly. “That would be dinner. I’ve taken the liberty of ordering from Charlie’s this evening.” He pressed a button on the desk and spoke.

“Is it dinner, Grant?”

“Yes, sir.” Grant’s voice carried through the room. “And I appreciate you thinking of me, sir.”

Tristan smiled. “Tell that fiancée of yours that I’ll take care of the catering for the wedding, will you?”

“Yes, sir!”

Sylvia could hear the guard’s smile through his voice.

“I surely will, sir.”

Tristan lifted his finger from the button and grinned. “Grant’s a good guy.”

“The guard?”

He nodded.

“Good.” Sylvia smiled. “Because I assured him that I would reserve a planner for him.”

Tristan looked at her sharply. “You told him that?”

Sylvia stiffened her backbone at his tone. “I most certainly did.” She arched an eyebrow and stared at him. “Is there a problem with that?”

Tristan frowned. “I don’t know if Grant can afford your prices.”

She shook her head. “I have reasonable plans, Mr. Calhoun. Though I believe you and I both know your bill will be anything but. However, I’m confident I can give Mr. Cane a wedding that he and his fiancée will love.”

“I’m sure you will,” Tristan murmured. He walked over to the office door and opened it. A delivery man stood there with an armful of bags. Tristan handed him some money and took the bags.

Sylvia smiled at the aroma that came from the bags. She knew her takeout. Lemon chicken. Rice pilaf. Buttery rolls. Sylvia sighed. She’d have to start working out if she kept eating like this. Her body wouldn’t bloom into Tempest’s. *Not bloody hardly*. She’d look like a blimp in high heels.

Tristan turned back around. “Why all the sighing?”

Sylvia shook her head. “If you keep feeding me like this, I’ll have no recourse but to actually join a gym.”

Tristan’s gaze moved from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. “You’re stunning, Sylvia.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Hmph. Nice of you to say. But I’ll never have that effortless sexiness with curves that Tempest seems to have perfected.”

“Ah.” Tristan grinned and set the bags down on his desk. “The Amazon with the black hair?”

Sylvia grinned. "Stands out a bit, doesn't she?"

"A bit," he agreed. Tristan opened a door that Sylvia hadn't seen and took out two dinner trays. He divided the food onto two plates and put the plates on the trays.

Her mouth watered.

"She's new, isn't she?" Tristan took two glasses down and poured a sparkling amber drink into both of them.

"She is." Sylvia cocked her head to the side. All the questions made her leery. "I had a team member come down with a hellacious virus. She needs time off. Tempest graciously offered to step in and help."

Tristan turned and looked at her. "Upset the apple cart a bit, did she?"

"A bit." Sylvia's lips twitched. "I don't do well with sudden changes in my staff."

"I gathered that." Tristan brought a dinner tray over to her and then moved his in front of the other office chair beside her. He held up his drink. "To mergers."

"Mergers," Sylvia echoed and took a sip of the liquid. *Apple juice*. She tried not to choke as the laughter built in her. She set the drink down and looked at Tristan.

"Apple juice?"

He grinned. "Didn't want you to think I planned to get you drunk and take advantage of you." Tristan wriggled his eyebrows.

Sylvia threw back her head and laughed. "Oh my God." It simply hit her as deliciously funny. She couldn't get her breath back for at least another minute. Her sides hurt. And Tristan simply sat there watching her merriment.

"You slay me." Sylvia took another sip to soothe her raw throat. Then she reached down and took a bite of pilaf. Still,

Tristan watched her. "What?" she asked.

"You don't laugh enough, Sylvia." Tristan still studied her and nodded thoughtfully. "There's more of it in you than you think."

She shrugged defensively. "I laugh plenty."

"Sure you do." Tristan took a bite of chicken and chewed thoughtfully. He motioned with his fork. "You don't take enough time for yourself."

"I didn't come here to be dissected." Sylvia took a bite of the rice and took a moment to collect her thoughts. "We're discussing Keira's wedding."

"So we are." Tristan took a sip of his juice. "We'll finish dinner and then discuss what massive plans you have for my sister's nuptials."

They finished dinner in relative silence. When the last container had been packed away, Sylvia took another folder out of her bag. "We need to find a large enough space to hold almost a thousand people. We think we've found a florist and someone to do the invitations. Is there anyone in particular you'd like to hire for the musicians? Perhaps a DJ?"

"You can ask Keira the particulars." Tristan took the folder and opened it. "You've been busy, Ms. Masters."

"That I have." Sylvia smiled. "Four months is just enough to plan this wedding. Any less time, and we'd be scrambling."

"You love it."

She nodded. "I find satisfaction in my work as I'm sure you do."

"What do you do on the weekends?"

Sylvia stared at him. "I keep myself busy."

"That's suitably vague."

"It was meant to be."

Tristan chuckled. "Yes. I imagine it was." He took a sip of apple juice and put the folder down. He looked up and caught Sylvia in the gaze of his eyes.

"I like you, Sylvia."

The familiar panic welled up, and Sylvia fought it down by sheer willpower. "That's nice, Mr. Calhoun. That will make our dealings that much easier."

"Our dealings'?" Tristan frowned. "I think you've misunderstood me."

"I doubt it," she said dryly. "Slow, I'm not." Sylvia met Tristan's eyes and stiffened her backbone. "You want to know if I'll decorate your bedspread with my body." Sylvia's blue eyes blazed. "The short answer is no. The long answer involves several expletives and broken glass."

Tristan held up his hands. "Truce."

"Then quit bringing it up," she snapped. "I've seen your usual. I'm not it. Not by a long shot." Sylvia snatched the folder and stood.

Tristan growled and stood, also.

And then the door opened.

Both heads swiveled.

The young woman stood there in a blue transparent negligee. She couldn't have been more than twenty. Her long blond hair swung just above her ass while her blue eyes were wide with shock. Nothing even remotely covered up. She may as well have been wearing tissue paper. The negligible garment plunged low in the front to her naval. The sheer panties were actually a thong. Or butt floss, in Sylvia's opinion.

The smile slid slowly from the young girl's face as she looked at Sylvia. Then she perked up. "Did I interrupt something?"

Sylvia arched an eyebrow and looked at Tristan, who already made his way across the floor to take the girl by her

arm.

“Gina! What in the hell are you doing?” He scowled down at her.

The girl pouted. “I wanted to see you, Tristan. And you never returned my calls. So I hid in one of the bathrooms until everybody went home.” She batted her eyelashes and smiled up at him. “I wanted to surprise you.”

“That you did.” Sylvia set her jaw. If this is what Tristan’s life was usually like, she really had no use for it. Women hiding in the bathroom for a minute of his attention. It turned her stomach. In more ways than one. She snatched her bag from the ground and swung it up on her shoulder.

Tristan held out his hand. “Wait, Sylvia. Please.”

The girl stomped her foot. “Tristan! I went to all this trouble. And you’re not even going to talk to me?”

“I ought to paddle your behind.”

As soon as the words were out, the girl grinned. “Okay.”

“For the love of God.” Sylvia smacked Tristan’s hand and frowned. “Put some clothes on, Barbie, and call me a damn cab.”

“Sylvia.” Tristan looked at her and set his jaw. “You’re not going anywhere yet. Let me just take care of this situation.”

“This situation?” Sylvia’s jaw fell. “This situation? Are you so immune to this type of thing that you can’t even see what a clusterfuck it is?”

“I know!” Tristan shouted and raked his fingers through his hair. “Damn it all. This isn’t what I had in mind when I invited you up here this evening.”

“Hey!” Gina looked from Tristan to Sylvia. “Is this your new girlfriend?”

“No!” Sylvia shook her head vehemently. “I’m a wedding

planner.”

“A wedding planner?” Big tears rolled from the girl’s blue eyes as she looked at Tristan. “You’re-you’re getting married?” She sobbed into her hands.

Sylvia looked at Tristan and shook her head in reproach. She moved forward and put her arm around the girl’s slender shoulders. “No, honey. I’m planning his sister’s wedding.” Sylvia gently maneuvered the girl away from Tristan and to the brown leather couch.

“Clothes!” Sylvia snapped at him before she turned her attention back to the girl.

Tristan growled but left the room.

“Listen, Gina.” Sylvia lifted the girl’s face and looked deep in her eyes. “Men like Tristan don’t want to settle down and play house. They’re not cut out for it.”

Gina sighed. “I’d make a great wife. I know how to decorate and make everything look great.”

“Really?”

“Sure.” Gina sniffled. “I’m taking classes in interior design. The professors think I have a lot of potential.”

Sylvia warred with herself for a second. “Do you have a portfolio?”

“Uh huh.” Gina sighed.

“Okay.” Sylvia mentally smacked herself but spoke anyway. “How about you bring your portfolio around to me tomorrow or the next day so I can have a look at it? I’m going to be expanding my business soon and will need some new employees.”

“Really?” Gina smiled. “You’d do that for me?”

“Yes.” Sylvia shook her head. “I’m sure there’s a lot more to you than what I’ve seen this evening.” Sylvia grinned. “And that’s a lot.”

Gina blushed. “I’m sorry. I really thought I had a chance

with Tristan. We met at the college. He came to visit one of my professors. He seemed really nice. Gave me a business card and told me to give him a call." She frowned. "But every time I called, he claimed to be busy."

"Tristan's a very busy man." Sylvia bit the inside of her cheek to keep from being extremely hateful. "I'm sure his business keeps him occupied." *As well as trafficking his multitude of women.*

Tristan walked back into the room with a plush white chenille robe. He laid it on Gina's lap. "I had Grant call you a cab. Is there anything else you need?"

Gina stood and slid her arms through the robe and belted it. She lifted her chin. "No. Thank you. And I apologize for my behavior." She smiled down at Sylvia. "I'll see you later." Gina nodded once to Tristan and walked out of his office.

You could have heard a pin drop.

"See you later?" he echoed and stared at Sylvia.

Her blue eyes flashed and darkened. "You're damn right. I'm considering hiring her as a decorator." Sylvia snarled. "It's a hell of a lot more than a robe, you arrogant jackass."

"I had nothing to do with that," he protested and ran his fingers through his hair. "Jesus," he mumbled. "Now I've got to alert Grant to start checking the bathrooms."

The bathrooms? Sylvia's blood boiled. *The son of a bitch worried about his bathrooms?*

"Yes. You should do that." Sylvia advanced on Tristan until she stood a mere foot away from him. She poked him in the chest hard. "Have your guard check the bathrooms for girls who think they stand a chance with you but actually don't." The words were low and disgusted. "Make sure he does a clean sweep of places women would hide to collect on a promise you made and didn't keep." Sylvia clenched her jaw.

“And make fucking sure the next time you tell someone you’ll call them, that you actually do.”

“Sylvia.” Tristan grabbed her arm.

“She’s practically a child.” Sylvia reminded him and shook her arm loose. “And once again, you said something and then utterly dismissed it. You and I friends?” Sylvia snorted and shook her head. “I have too much self-respect.” She turned on her heel and left the office.

* * * *

How could one individual rattle her like that? Sylvia’s blood boiled, and she slammed her way into her house and cursed Tristan Calhoun up one side and down the other. His ancestry, his manhood, and his intelligence took major hits.

Sylvia threw her clothes into the laundry hamper in the bathroom and slid a white cotton nightgown on. She snagged a pint of ice cream out of the freezer and walked back to her couch in the living room.

“Arrogant bastard,” she muttered and spooned a bite of ice cream into her mouth.

How badly had she wanted to believe the words Tristan uttered?

Bad enough to make her feel ashamed that a handsome package could make her forget her principles.

Another bite of ice cream. Another self-loathing lecture.

Sylvia finished the pint and didn’t bother getting up from the couch. She simply pulled a quilt over her and curled up tightly.

Pushing Tristan Calhoun out of her head turned out to be a hell of a lot harder than she originally anticipated.

Chapter 5

“Counting your gold pieces like Scrooge?”

Sylvia brought her head up slowly from the ledger and blinked. Her lip curled into a sneer.

Tristan leaned insolently against the doorframe of her office. His gray suit clung lovingly to him, tailored to every muscle. His hands hung loosely at his sides, and he appeared completely relaxed.

She knew that looks could be deceiving.

“Did you need an appointment, Mr. Calhoun?” Sylvia made a show of picking up her black day planner and thumbing through the pages. “I may have one next week.” She looked back up at him and smiled coldly. “Or perhaps when hell freezes over?”

“I don’t have time for hell to freeze over.” Tristan shrugged lightly and strode into the room. He walked to the side of her desk and stood there waiting.

“You have a life, I presume? A business?” Sylvia stood also. “So why don’t you get back to it?” Her blue eyes iced over as she looked at him. “I have things to attend to. You’re not one of them.” She dismissed him and sat back down. Sylvia pulled the books back to her and wrote another

er figure in one of them.

"You have a habit of ignoring me, Sylvia." Tristan tsked her. "I don't care for it."

"Deflate your ego and see yourself out, will you? Be a good boy." She absently shooed him away from her.

Sylvia had no warning. One minute the books were in front of her. The next, they were on the floor.

"Son of a bitch!" She stood quickly and turned on her unwanted guest. "If you hope to have use of those hands much longer, you will get the hell out of my office." Her voice shook with anger, and her blue eyes shot sparks at him. Sylvia bent down to pick up her books when he lifted her from behind and set her down on her desk.

A second later, Tristan was sandwiched between her legs while her short black skirt rode high on her thighs. His strong hands grasped her hips, and he leaned forward.

"Ignore me now, Sylvia."

The words were dark and filled with promise.

Sylvia's pulse raced at the undertones. She licked her lips and heard Tristan groan. And then his mouth lowered to hers. It was heat and passion that seared her from the mere touch of his lips against hers.

Then his hands were in her hair, and his tongue thrust into her mouth with a promise of wicked things she had never let cross her mind. His tongue teased hers and sucked it into his mouth while he scooted her closer to the edge of the desk. And she responded in kind. A passion she had never felt surging up inside her that almost burned her alive.

His right hand moved down to the opening of her starched white shirt. It lingered where skin met fabric and traced a small symbol on her bare flesh.

She could feel the warmth of his body pressed to hers and smell the distinctive cologne that even now branded her senses as his and his alone.

Sylvia shivered as the sensations flowed through her like molten lava. She burned up. She shivered. And if Tristan ever stopped kissing her, she would surely die.

The alien thought enough for her to break contact and try to regain her bearings. Sylvia could hear her ragged breathing, and it embarrassed her. The lack of control. Putting herself in a position of weakness.

She pushed her hands against Tristan's solid chest. "Get out," she demanded.

"Why, Ms. Masters." Tristan's brown eyes gazed into her startled blue ones. "I don't think you're quite so oblivious, after all." He leaned into her again.

Sylvia slapped him. The echo of it rang loudly in the quiet room. Her voice shook, but she couldn't seem to control it.

"If you ever put your hands on me again, Mr. Calhoun, you won't like the result." Sylvia pushed her dark cap of hair back and tightened her mouth. "Get out of my personal space and go play with a model or actress." She glanced down at her black skirt hitched up indecently high on her thighs.

Tristan followed her gaze, and his hands tightened on her thighs. He looked up and pinned Sylvia with dark brown eyes.

Before Tristan could open his mouth, she held up her hand. "I don't want to be your flavor of the month, you conceited bastard. And if you continue to harass me, I will not be the wedding planner for your sister's wedding. You simply aren't worth it."

Tristan stepped back and raked his hands through his russet hair. "Well. That's simple enough, isn't it?" He smiled a

small smile. "I suppose I'll let you get back to work balancing your ledgers or whatever it is you do besides living." He turned and walked back toward the door but stopped mid-way.

Sylvia hopped down from her desk and pulled the skirt lower so it at least covered her thighs. Tristan turned slowly and looked at her from head to toe. "Some women are made to be loved, Sylvia. And some fight it tooth and nail. But you never know what you're missing until you give it a taste." He nodded curtly and shut the door behind him.

Sylvia's hands trembled as she ran them through her dark hair. *Love? Is he kidding himself?* Tristan would like her on her back. There were no emotions attached. Just a quick roll since he hadn't had her yet.

And he never would.

Sylvia calmed herself with a great deal of effort. She opened another ledger and ran figures for two other weddings that were in the works. Numbers she understood. Tristan Calhoun remained a mystery.

* * * *

The food arrived promptly at noon the next day. The whole office congregated in the kitchen when the delivery van arrived. Sylvia scowled when Liz buzzed her and told her what was going on.

Damn Tristan. Arrogant bastard.

Sylvia walked down into the kitchen, and her bad mood blossomed. The fragrance of fresh chicken filled the kitchen. There were also a dozen handmade salads with a variety of dressings. Three different juices sat chilling in their buckets.

The delivery man saw Sylvia and stepped forward. He gave her a card, tipped his hat, and left.

Sylvia walked over to the kitchen by the window and opened the card while her staff helped themselves to the delicious food gathered on the table.

A bit of food since you forget sometimes.

It was signed T. Calhoun in large slashing letters.

Sylvia tapped the card against her chin. She could be a total bitch and send the food back. But then she looked around the room and saw how much her staff enjoyed the treat.

“Screw it,” she muttered. If Tristan wanted to waste his money ordering food for her staff, then she would certainly let him.

Tempest walked in and noticed the table right away. “Mmm. What have we here?” She picked up a salad and inhaled the fragrance. “Nice.”

“Isn’t it?” Sylvia said wryly.

Tempest looked up and grinned at Sylvia. “I take it this is a gift?”

“You could say that.” Sylvia dropped the card into the trash and smiled at her staff. “Enjoy. Apparently this is a gift from Mr. Calhoun for all our efforts on behalf of his sister’s wedding.”

Liz grinned. “Sure he doesn’t have any other siblings?” She forked a bit of salad into her mouth and closed her eyes in bliss.

“Negative on that.” Sylvia smiled. “And Mr. Calhoun has no need for nuptials.” She turned on her heel and walked back to her office.

Sylvia’s stomach growled, and she cursed it. “Traitor,” she mumbled. She stepped into her office and slammed the

door shut behind her. No food for her. Not a damn bite of it. *Tristan could take his offerings and shove them up his...*

"Hey!" Tempest walked inside without knocking and stood there with two salads in her hand. "I think you forgot to take yours."

"I didn't forget anything." Sylvia's blue eyes turned arctic. "Mr. Calhoun and I seem to be having a war of wills."

Tempest sat down in the chair opposite her and placed a salad on the desk. "You don't say. And here I thought you two were getting along swimmingly."

"Smart ass."

Tempest placed a fork by the salad and opened up her own. She shrugged elegantly. "Sure. He's overbearing and arrogant. Built like a bear with an attitude to match." Her lips twitched. "But seriously. What's not to like?"

Sylvia picked up the fork and pulled the top of the container off her salad. "Everything. Absolutely damn everything." She took a bite of the chef salad and groaned. "You know why he sent this, right?"

"To say 'thanks'?"

"Yeah. Right. Nothing so genial." Sylvia's eyes narrowed. "He sent this to make sure I ate. Can you believe that bullshit?"

Tempest patted her chest to keep from choking since she had just put a bite of salad in her mouth. "My God. The monster."

"Once again. I repeat. Smart ass."

"So. This wedding comes with perks." Tempest paused. "Is he still trying to roll you?"

Sylvia snickered. "Yeah. In his dreams." She took another bite of salad. "Do you know what happened when I had the

stupidity to meet him for a meeting in his office?”

“Do tell.” Tempest swept her hair back and leaned forward.

“Some young girl had actually been hiding in the bathroom until everyone left so she could get him alone.” Sylvia shook her head. “Sad. Very sad. No one should have that power over someone else.”

“Because you don’t let anybody.”

“Damn straight.” Sylvia’s eyes blazed.

Tempest poked around in her salad until she found the perfect bite. “So what happened to this hapless girl?”

Sylvia bit her lip. Well, hell. She did happen to be the one who brought it up. “I might hire her.”

Tempest’s eyebrows rose. “Really?”

“Yes.” Sylvia took a sip of her cold coffee and grimaced. “She’s going for a degree in interior design.” She shrugged. “I told her to bring her portfolio by.”

“Interesting,” Tempest murmured.

There was a knock on the office door, and Sylvia shook her head. “Come in.”

A young girl with a large brown cup walked in and looked around nervously. “Ms. Masters?”

“Yes.”

The girl smiled, obviously relieved. “Your secretary said you were in your office.” She walked forward and put the cup on the desk. “Enjoy.” Then she left before Sylvia could gather her senses.

“Well. What in the blue hell?” Sylvia reached across and opened the lid. The aromatic fragrance of caffeine filled the air. She pushed the lid back down and scowled. “I hate him.”

Tempest nodded. "I can see why. Between the food and the coffee, we could always form a mob and beat him down with stones."

"Don't tempt me." Sylvia tapped her fingernails on the desk and watched Tempest eat her salad. She picked up the coffee and took a sip. God, it tasted good. "I really do hate him."

Tempest smiled and stood. "Enjoy your coffee." Then she took her salad and left the office.

* * * *

Sheer luck that Keira stopped by that afternoon. Sylvia had been ass deep in work and in a foul mood since the delivery incident. When the beautiful blond walked into her office, Sylvia looked up with a scowl.

Her features smoothed when she realized it was the younger Calhoun.

"Keira." Sylvia stood and offered her hand. "I'm so glad to see you. How is Jon?"

"Fine." Keira smiled sunnily and sank into the chair opposite Sylvia. The young woman wore a maroon sundress shot through with gold threads. Matching shoes and gold jewelry at her throat and ears. She tapped her fingers on her knee. "What have we found out about wedding dresses?"

"I have three boutiques I would like you to visit with your bridesmaids." Sylvia found the list and slid it across the desk. "They specialize in unique weddings and can alter a dress into any design you like."

"You won't be there?" Keira frowned as she took the paper.

"Well. No." Sylvia shook her head. "I have three other weddings I'm looking after right now. We're a bit short-handed." A small stretch of the truth. They had three more

weddings, but they were well in hand. The whole truth was that Sylvia didn't want to take the risk of running into one Tristan Calhoun.

Keira brushed her hair back and sighed. She folded the piece of paper without looking at it. "I really don't know what I want. I had hoped you could come with me and steer me in the right direction." She looked Sylvia in the eye. "None of my bridesmaids are married. They don't have a clue about any of this."

Sylvia smiled sympathetically. "Wedding dresses are as unique as brides. When you find the right one, you'll know it. You'll feel it."

"Really?" Keira looked doubtful.

"Really."

Keira bit her lip. "Are you that busy? Couldn't you clear an hour or two to come with me?" She paused. "Please?"

Shit. Sylvia warred with herself for a minute. "It's only and your bridesmaids? No males in attendance?"

Keira shook her head. "Jon is working. So is Tristan." She chuckled. "And I really don't think either would want to come with me anyway."

"What about Jon's mother, Maude?"

Keira threw back her head and laughed. "Maude is always at work. I swear that woman has ink in her veins. She wouldn't be caught dead in a wedding boutique."

"I think I can clear my schedule this afternoon." Sylvia thumbed through her appointment book and nodded. "Perhaps around two?"

"Oh, Sylvia!" Keira jumped up and ran around to the other side of the desk. She hugged her tightly. "Thank you so much!" She straightened and walked to the door. "I knew I

could count on you.” She checked her watch. “I’ll call the girls, and we’ll meet you at the first place on the list at two.” Keira blew kisses as she walked out the door.

Sylvia massaged her temples. Apparently the Calhoun steamroller gene ran tightly in the genetic pool. How in the hell had she managed to have herself roped into going on the great wedding dress hunt?

“Temporary insanity,” she muttered and called Liz to clear her schedule for the rest of the day.

* * * *

Kaello’s was the first boutique on the list. She only kept the best designers on her staff and went above and beyond to meet the expectations of her clients. The owner high on Sylvia’s list for the unique and extraordinary.

Sylvia pulled her red Corvette into a parking place and stepped out. It was a beautiful day. A fact she would never have known if she hadn’t left the office. The breeze lifted slightly and brushed against her. It felt glorious. The sun caressed her bare arms while it warmed her face.

For summer, it wasn’t so hot that her skin wanted to melt off. It almost felt as though fall were right around the corner. Sylvia stopped and looked up at the trees planted in the sidewalk.

The bright foliage intrigued her. She reached up and touched an emerald leaf and traced the main vein from the stem to the tip.

Growing up, she had every kind of tree and flower on her parents’ estate. But Sylvia had never been allowed to touch any of them. Not a one. She had been kept in her room doing her lessons during the summers she was allowed to come home. On the school campus, there had been no greenery whatsoever.

She knew prisons had more grass than the boarding school she attended. There were never any plants in her personal office or her home. But right this minute, she wanted nothing more than to have a plant of her own. Perhaps a couple of trees in her bare yard. Blooms to watch through the year.

Sylvia shook off the feeling and straightened her spine. *Woolgathering*. Not exactly an efficient way to spend her afternoon. The sooner she found Keira the perfect dress, she could be back at the office settling a million other details that always seemed to pop up.

The bell rang over the door at Kaello's as Sylvia stepped inside. Keira already there with her bridesmaids. But all the women simply sat on the sofa with books in their hands. As soon as she heard the bell, Keira jumped up.

"There you are!" She grabbed Sylvia's hand and tugged her closer. "We have no idea what we're doing so we told the saleswoman we would wait for you." Her gold eyes danced. "And here you are."

"Here I am." Sylvia smiled and took her hand back. She walked up to the counter. "Could you please tell Kaello that Sylvia Masters is here? I would like to speak to her if she isn't busy."

The woman nodded. "Yes, ma'am." She hurried into the back.

A mere two minutes later, a statuesque blond strode forward, wrapped in a dark green sari that showed miles of arms and legs. Her shoes were dyed to match, and she boasted green gemstones along the tops of her feet and on her fingernails. Dark green eyes studied Sylvia.

"Ms. Masters." Sylvia caught a slight accent as the woman

extended her hand. "An extreme pleasure to meet you."

Sylvia shook Kaello's hand and inclined her head. "An extreme honor for you to make time to greet us."

Kaello smiled. "You have sent a large amount of business my way. I am thankful."

"Call me Sylvia." She smiled. "And your creations are exquisite."

"Ah, flattery." Kaello smiled. She looked behind Sylvia to the small group of half a dozen women. "Yours?"

"Kaello." Sylvia tugged Keira forward. "Please meet Keira Calhoun. She is to be wed this Christmas. A Celtic themed affair."

Kaello put her hand beneath Keira's chin and turned her face one way and then the other. "Such beautiful bone structure. And glorious coloring." She dropped her hand. "Come back to my private rooms. We shall begin there."

Keira's eyes were big as saucers as she looked at Sylvia. "Kaello? *The* Kaello?"

"The one and only." Sylvia tucked her arm through Keira's as they followed the tall blond.

"And she'll make sure your dress will be the same."

The girls followed silently behind the duo. The usual chatty commentary had fallen silent when they met the owner of the boutique. Kaello was a legend in the fashion industry. A woman who came from nothing and now owned the largest fashion collection in the world. A woman who stayed on top of the richest people in the world list. A woman who defined strong and powerful.

Sylvia settled the girls into the half a dozen chairs that were provided. A woman came and took their drink orders and brought sandwiches for them to snack on.

Sylvia looked around. "Which one of you is Jill?"

A girl with sable brown hair lifted her hand and said, "That would be me."

"Good." Sylvia walked over to her. "Do not, for the love of God, tell Keira that something looks good if it doesn't. She doesn't need that. And paybacks are a bitch." She looked up at the other girls. "You tell her what you think and be honest."

Kaello had taken Keira into the back, and Sylvia could hear the older woman's voice while she waded through the thousands of dresses she kept there.

Fifteen minutes later, after the girls were plied with food and drink, Keira stepped out.

It was a lovely ivory dress with a mermaid fit. There were pearls at the bodice and some that raced down her back to sweep the floor.

"No." Jill shook her head. "It's too much like Morticia Addams."

Sylvia almost choked on her diet soda. *Well*. Apparently blatant honesty wouldn't be a problem with this group.

The next dress, a lovely taffeta in pale white that had an empire waist.

Jill shook her head again. "This isn't the eighteen hundreds, sweetheart. Keep looking."

One of the other girls shook her head and covered her mouth to keep from laughing aloud.

Keira arched an eyebrow. "I am the one picking the bridesmaids' outfits. You might keep that in mind." She stuck her tongue out and swept out of the room.

All the girls collapsed in laughter.

Sylvia chuckled. "Good going," she commented. "Though you could probably be a little more gentle with the comments."

Jill grinned. "Nah. Then she'd know I held back. I've known Keira for years. And besides, she can get me back when she helps me with my wedding."

"Fair enough." Sylvia snickered and thanked God for the millionth time that she would never, ever have to go through any of this crap herself.

The next dress was a bit better, but none of the girls liked it. The sleeves were too puffy, and the train too long.

Then came the dress that fit so tight that underwear could be nothing but a dream.

Jill cocked her head to the side. "Well. Jon would like it. And you could start the honeymoon in the limo on the way to the airport without too much fuss."

Keira blushed and grinned. "Ah, the honeymoon." She smoothed the tight fabric down her lithe body. "I'm counting the days." She paused. "Okay. The hours."

Sylvia took a sip of her drink and didn't join in the ribald comments. The truth was that she didn't have any experience with men or honeymoons. They were both outside the realm of her life.

Keira turned to her. "What do you think, Sylvia?"

The dress was stunning. But Sylvia could see exactly what Jill meant. "It's gorgeous. But I think you should save that one for the reception."

Keira studied herself in the three mirrors. "You're right." She glanced back. "So. Sylvia. What are your thoughts on the honeymoon?"

"What?" Sylvia set her drink down and looked at all the girls' faces looking at her. She fought the blush. "My thoughts on what, exactly?"

"You know." Keira wriggled her eyebrows. "Have you

ever married?"

Sylvia shook her head vehemently. "No. Never."

Keira frowned and then nodded her head. "Okay. Then tell us what the honeymoon is like for your clients. Is it everything that they say it is?"

"They?" Sylvia repeated stupidly. How in the hell could she have trapped herself in a room with a hormonal bride and equally hormonal bridesmaids? *For the love of God*. Weddings made women absolutely crazy. And these young women seemed to have succumbed to the same insanity.

"Honeymoons are nice," Sylvia said lamely and took a sip of her drink.

Keira blew out a breath. "I'm nervous as hell."

Jill stood up and patted her hand. "It's good that you waited, Keira. Think of all the fun you'll have." She grinned wickedly. "And I want details when you come back."

"You waited?" Sylvia set her drink down. In all the weddings she planned, all of the brides had sampled the groom before the wedding. The fact Keira waited touched her heart.

"Well, sure." Keira brushed her hair back. "We agreed that our wedding night would be the first time we'd be together." She blushed. "And that's why I'm counting the hours."

All her friends laughed.

Kaello came out then and motioned to the dress. "What do you think?"

"Reception dress." Keira smoothed the material down. "It's absolutely beautiful."

"But not the wedding?"

"No." Keira shook her head. "Sorry."

"Do not apologize, child." Kaello smiled. "I have a de-

sign I'm working on right now. And I have a feeling it would suit you." She turned to Sylvia. "It will be ready in one week. Will you return?"

"Keira will be here," Sylvia vowed. "Please put her name on this dress. We'll do alterations about a month before the nuptials."

"My pleasure." The blond Amazon smiled and looked at Sylvia. "My door is always open for you, Ms. Masters. In case you decide you would like to walk down the aisle."

She returned the store owner's smile. "Not damn likely," she muttered.

The girls grabbed their purses and left the shop.

Keira paused and took the list out of her purse. "Dunbar's is next on the list."

Sylvia stopped in her tracks and studied the bride-to-be. "You all have a good time. I must go back to my office. Work awaits."

Keira frowned. "Please, Sylvia? Just one more. We need your eye."

"You need Jill's mouth." Sylvia's lips twitched. "Remind me to never invite you to speak your mind again."

The young woman laughed. "I call 'em like I see 'em."

Keira groaned. "Isn't that the truth?"

Sylvia checked her watch. They only spent an hour in Kaello's. She had plenty of time to go with the girls to the next shop. "One more," she said. "Only one more."

Keira clapped her hands together. "Thank you!" She ushered her friends into the limo in front of the curb. "Are you coming?"

Sylvia eyed the limo and chuckled. "No, dear. I'll drive myself, thanks. Meet you there."

“Okay.” Keira ducked into the limo, and the driver shut the door behind her. He doffed his hat to Sylvia and climbed into the driver’s seat.

Sylvia followed the limo to Dunbar’s and parked quickly before someone took her spot. The street that Dunbar’s sat on an exclusive strip of stores for the rich and famous in the town. Sports cars lined the street while limos came and dropped off customers.

Sylvia climbed out of her car and trailed after the girls. They patted their hair and waited outside the door for Sylvia.

She shook her head and opened the door. “They don’t bite, ladies. You can go inside.”

Keira took a deep breath. “I’ve heard they have marble tiles and fountains made of gold. I’m a bit nervous.”

Sylvia’s blue eyes widened. “You’ve never been here?” Did Tristan keep his sister on a tight leash financially? The family was worth billions. It seemed odd that Keira hadn’t wandered down the exclusive shops at one point in time.

Keira shrugged. “I usually shop at The Gap.”

Jill laughed. “She’s not kidding. That or L.L. Bean.” She rolled her brown eyes. “Good luck getting a wedding dress there.”

Sylvia blinked twice. “Isn’t that something?”

The group walked into the foyer and stopped dead in their tracks. Someone hadn’t been lying. A rich marble flooring wrapped in a serpentine pattern wound around lavish leather furnishings and plush ivory carpet. Two gold fountains sprayed water in each corner. A large mirror lined with diamonds sat across from the waiting area.

A thin brunette looked up from her computer and glanced at the group. “May I help you?”

“Yes.” Sylvia stepped forward and knew exactly which buttons to push. “My name is Sylvia Masters. I’m Keira Calhoun’s wedding planner. We’ve come by to try on wedding gowns.”

The secretary actually leaned forward at the Calhoun name. She hurriedly stood and pressed a button on the phone. “We need an assistant to the main area.” She hung up the phone and smiled. “If you’ll have a seat in our waiting room, an assistant will be out shortly. Please help yourself to any and all refreshments.”

The girls sat and giggled at the fawning. “My God, Keira.” Jill snagged a piece of sushi and popped it in her mouth. “Want to adopt me?”

Keira shook her head. “I don’t like this place as much. It’s too snooty.”

“It is.” Sylvia took a stuffed mushroom and studied the young woman. “But they have phenomenal gowns. It wouldn’t do to overlook a possibly unpleasant place in case they have something we want.”

Keira grabbed a small sandwich and took a bite. “Well. The food is delicious.”

Sylvia smiled. “Take a bite of everything. They also have a catering business. These items on the tray could possibly be at your wedding.”

“Hmph.” Keira glanced at her friends. “What do you think?”

“It’s marvelous.” Jill took another appetizer and sank her teeth into it. “By far, the best appetizers I’ve ever had.” She finished that one and grabbed a cracker with a dark green topping. That disappeared, also.

Keira snickered. “We’ll have to let out your bridesmaids’

dresses if you keep that up.”

“Oh, bite me.” Jill took a sip of water sitting beside her. “Better me than you. Because if you gain a pound, that form-fitting piece of fabric you just had on will make you look like a sausage.” She took another bite and grinned around it.

All the women in the circle laughed, and Sylvia joined in. *What must it be like to have that sort of friendship? To be able to say whatever I mean and not worry about being slapped down? To be able to share such a monumental event and know that everyone only worried about my happiness?*

A striking redhead stepped out of the door nearest them and immediately had everyone’s attention.

She wore a red ensemble that included a tight ruby skirt and a vest with lacings that enhanced her assets. Wave after wave of red hair fell across her shoulders. She wore a pair of red boots that hugged her shapely legs and gave at least three inches to her already impressive height. Emerald green eyes studied the group.

“Wow,” Jill muttered. “I want to be you when I grow up.”

The redhead laughed aloud and grinned down at the group. “A lovely compliment, to be sure.” She extended her hand to Sylvia. “I am Wilda. And you are Sylvia Masters?”

“Yes.” Sylvia stood and shook her hand. She brought Keira forward. “And this is Keira Calhoun. The lovely bride-to-be.”

Wilda studied the young woman and then her friends. “What an enchanting group of young women.” She turned around. “Follow me, please.”

The women walked single file behind the assistant. They passed through two more doors before they found the room

where Keira would try on dresses. Each of the women sat down and waited expectantly for the show.

Wilda motioned to Sylvia. "I'll need your help, Ms. Masters."

"My help?" Sylvia repeated. "Why?"

"I understand that Ms. Calhoun has lost her parents. She needs a woman who will act instead of her mother to help with this."

"I really don't think so." Sylvia physically took a step backwards.

Wilda smiled. "I want to help Miss Calhoun in every way possible, Ms. Masters. I need to know what she really wants. Not just what she'll accept." Her green eyes were impossibly bright. "Sometimes we have to push beyond our comfort zone to actually find that which is made for us."

"I'm just the wedding planner."

"You are much more than that, Ms. Masters." Wilda pulled open a curtain and motioned Keira forward. "You are a beautiful woman, Ms. Calhoun. Let's see if we can make your fiancé's tongue drop from his mouth, shall we?"

Keira grinned at Sylvia. "Oh, I like her."

The first dress was an eggshell color with a halter neckline and full skirt. Keira stood up on the pedestal and swung this way and that. "What do you think?"

"Not so much." Sylvia stepped forward and touched the halter. "You have beautiful shoulders, but this draws them in too much. It doesn't accent them. It hides them."

Keira nodded and swung around. "Next."

They waded through a dozen more gowns before Jill spoke up. "Wait!"

Keira turned around. "What, hon?"

“That’s our bridesmaid’s dress.”

Keira studied the dress in the mirror. It was an off-the-shoulder ivory silk with a fitted waist and a smooth flow to the skirt. It was shot through with gold thread and felt absolutely wonderful.

“You like this one?”

“Are you kidding me?” Jill stood up and walked over. She traced the gold thread and smiled. “It’s perfect.”

“Well. I’m glad one of us is getting the dress she wants.” Keira stuck out her tongue.

Sylvia chuckled. “We’ll find yours, Keira.”

“But in the meantime,” Jill reached up and stroked the smooth fabric, “I’ll be styling in this little baby.”

* * * *

They looked at over a dozen dresses more, but none seemed to be what Keira wanted.

Sylvia held up her hands a little before four o’clock. “I have to go, ladies. I’ll wait for a phone call from Kaello about her design. In the meantime, you need to be thinking about caterers, videographers, and cakes.”

“Oh, my,” Keira murmured and smiled. She grinned down at Sylvia from the pedestal. “Thanks for all your help, Sylvia.” Her golden eyes shimmered a bit. “I really can’t thank you enough.”

Sylvia’s heart melted at the sincere words, and she smiled. “My pleasure.” She motioned to the other ladies in the room. “Though I’m sure they’re more than capable of standing in and letting you know what works and what doesn’t.”

Keira twirled in the mirror. “I’m getting married.” She smiled. “Isn’t that something?”

“The best of somethings,” Sylvia promised. A thought oc-

curred to her. "Can you give me Maude's number? I need to check with her about a few things."

"Sure." Keira recited it while Sylvia jotted it down.

Wilda came back and studied the dress with a frown. "This isn't it, is it?"

"No." Sylvia shook her head. "But we've enjoyed the afternoon and finished another chore on the lengthy list. Bridesmaids' dresses."

Wilda clucked her tongue. "I'm extremely disappointed we couldn't find the wedding dress you need." She pulled her titian hair back and then let it swing forward again. Her emerald eyes latched on Sylvia. "But, then again, perhaps there would be another wedding we could help you with."

A small fluttering in her chest had Sylvia pressing her hand to her heart. It was the oddest sensation. Almost a *deja vu* of sorts. "I don't think so," she breathlessly replied.

Wilda nodded slowly. "Just remember that we are always here, Sylvia. You know where to find us." She inclined her head and walked away from the women and into the back.

"If I looked like her," Keira grinned, "I could wear a potato sack and still make a fashion statement."

Sylvia's lips twitched. "If you looked like her, I'd die instantly of jealousy."

All the women in the room laughed and nodded.

"Let's give it another week." Sylvia patted Keira's hand. "Then you can drop by Kaello's and try on her latest design."

The color rose high in Keira's cheeks, and she smiled. "Jon won't know what hit him."

Chapter 6

Sylvia had forgotten all about Gina, but apparently the girl had not forgotten about her. She found the young woman in her waiting room early the next day. The young woman wore a long khaki skirt and buttery yellow button-up shirt. Her shoes were smart and sensible. Not a trace of the young woman in the blue negligee remained. Even Gina's hair had been pulled back in a professional knot. The only nerves Sylvia could see were in the light blue eyes that studied her.

Gina stood and extended her hand. "Hello, Ms. Masters. I've come to show you my portfolio." She bit her lip. "You do remember me, don't you?"

"Certainly." Sylvia shook her hand and motioned inside her office. "Have a seat, Gina." She shut the door and walked to her desk. "You brought your work?"

"Yes." Nervous fingers clutched and released the lovely leather case.

"I'll probably need to see it."

"Oh. Of course!" Gina fumbled with the clasp and almost dropped it. She took a deep breath and lifted her head to look at Sylvia. "I'm sorry."

Sylvia held up her hand and shook her head. "Think

nothing of it," she said.

"No." Gina lifted her chin. "I'm sorry you had to see me in my underwear in what was clearly a major lack of judgment and sense." She paused. "I need to explain that I'm usually extremely levelheaded and steady."

Sylvia sat in her chair and pushed her hair behind her hair. "What happened?"

"The magic and mystery of Tristan Calhoun." Gina sighed. "I should have known better. He was simply being nice. I see that now. But at the time," she lifted her shoulders, "I thought he was interested in me." Her blue eyes flashed. "Stupid, I know."

"Not a bit." Sylvia took the portfolio and set it on her desk. "He has a way about him that makes you think you're special. Probably something he learned at business school."

Gina laughed. "Glad to see you're not immune."

"I wish." Sylvia frowned and then could have bitten her own tongue.

She hurriedly opened the portfolio and was pleasantly surprised. The young woman in front of her had potential. A lot of it.

Designers were both born and made. Some people had an innate sense of style. They honed it and became incredibly successful. And then there were those who had the extreme will to succeed because it was what they loved. Gina had aptitude and talent. It showed in every design.

Sylvia took her time looking through the portfolio. She asked Liz to bring them both coffee at one point in time. When she finally looked up, Gina's nerves showed in more than her eyes.

Her hands were clutched around the coffee mug, and her

eyes were glued to Sylvia's face for clues.

Sylvia shut the portfolio and leaned back. "When do you graduate?"

"Next May, if I take the fast track." Gina's hands shook a bit.

"That's probably a good thing for me."

Gina's mouth dropped open.

Sylvia's lips twitched. "Surely you knew I would see your talent?" She chuckled. "And not to backtrack, but what, exactly, is your last name?"

"Smithers." The word came out as a whisper.

"Well, Gina Smithers." Sylvia stood and extended her hand. "A position will be open at the end of May. Would you care to join Bridal Bliss?"

Gina set the coffee down and took Sylvia's hand. "I'll be the best designer you've ever had."

Sylvia smiled. "Work hard. Listen to me. Do your best. That's all I ask."

Gina scooped her portfolio up and hugged it to her chest. Tears threatened on her lashes. "Thank you, Ms. Masters. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome, Gina. Now go finish your schoolwork and then come back and see me."

The young woman left, and Sylvia sat back down in her chair. A good decision. First meeting circumstances aside, it was picture perfect.

Liz came in and brought a warm cup of coffee. Sylvia looked at the logo on the side and scowled.

"Don't tell me," she growled. "There's a butt load of food in the kitchen that my staff is partaking of as I speak."

Liz nodded.

Sylvia took a sip of the coffee and didn't let the pleasure show on her face. A small victory. "Fine. We'll let Mr. Calhoun feed our staff for the duration." She handed Liz a number. "Call Jon's mother and make an appointment for me, please."

"Would tomorrow work for you?"

Sylvia nodded. "I'm flexible on this. Apparently Mrs. McKee has a large business of her own to run."

Liz glanced down at the number and back at Sylvia. "Maude McKee?"

"Yes." Sylvia waited for her secretary to speak again. "Well. Don't leave me in suspense. What's up?"

"She's a bit of a lion."

Sylvia arched an eyebrow. "And I'm not?"

Liz chuckled. "That's not it. I'm simply wondering if there will be bandages needed after the meeting."

"No." Sylvia smiled. "I'm sure it will be completely painless."

* * * *

Three weeks later, Maude cleared her calendar for a meeting. Her secretary called Liz and left a message. She would meet Sylvia near the end of September at her office downtown. Every bit of the building gleamed. The sun glinted off the huge structure and seemed to caress every beam and window.

Tristan hadn't been kidding. The McKee Building was a testament to iron and its uses. There were large metal sculptures in the front that boasted a huge lion roaring and several other pieces Sylvia were sure meant to intimidate.

Sylvia admired them and moved on. She wasn't here for sculptures. The only purpose of her visit was to ascertain

Maude's reaction to the plans she made for the wedding. Iron out a few financial details. Then she wouldn't have to come across the wonderful mother-in-law until the blessed event. And Sylvia planned to be far, far away on that day.

There were four different guards sitting at the main desk in the lobby. There were also six others who patrolled the first floor.

Sylvia lifted an eyebrow.

None of the couple hundred other people in the lobby seemed to notice. They strode by while listening to their ear-phones or chatting with co-workers about the latest policy and news. A bustling hive of activity.

Sylvia mentally shrugged and approached the guards. "Sylvia Masters to see Maude McKee."

The guard in front of her nodded. "ID, please."

She dug her license out and handed it over. The guard ran it through a machine that made a quick copy and handed it back. "Take elevator three to the twenty-eighth floor. Step out and walk to your right. There will be a desk there. Consult the secretary for directions. Have a nice day." He sat back down and watched the monitors in front of him.

Summarily dismissed.

Sylvia tucked her license back in her small purse and rolled her eyes. She supposed he could have been a complete ass and patted her down. And the meeting would have been canceled.

There was no way in hell that being felt up would be part of a business meeting. Sylvia strode toward the elevators and found number three. She waited with about a dozen other people for the doors to open. The minute they did, she found herself between two gentlemen who would have looked more at home on

a cattle range than in the huge skyscraper made of metal.

Both men wore blue jeans and blue chambray shirts with the sleeves rolled up. They wore black work boots with dust still clinging to the laces.

And for the first time in a long time, not counting Tristan Calhoun, Sylvia felt a spark of attraction.

She glanced at both their hands. No wedding rings. Of course, that may be because of the work they did. Sylvia glanced up and found the man on her right looking back at her. A blush crept into her cheeks.

He was gorgeous. She could admit that. His brown hair cut short and styled in layers. Blue eyes studied her while a generous mouth smiled.

“Ben.” He stuck out his hand and Sylvia took it.

“Sylvia.”

He nodded. “What brings you to the tower, anyway?”

“The tower?” Sylvia chuckled. “How appropriate,” she murmured. “I’m here to see the boss lady, herself.”

Ben arched an eyebrow. “You got in to see Maude? How in the hell did you manage that?”

“I had my secretary call.” Sylvia shook her head. “Is it that unusual?”

“That would be one word for it.” He frowned. “If you don’t mind my asking, why are you here?”

Sylvia mentally shrugged. It wouldn’t be that hard to find it out if he chose to look. “I’m the wedding planner for Jon McKee and Keira Calhoun’s wedding.”

“Ah.” A smile touched Ben’s eyes. “Yes. The Golden Boy got engaged. I remember reading about that.”

The elevator shot upwards. Ben looked at his watch. “How long do you expect the meeting to last?”

“Possibly an hour. More than likely less.” Sylvia’s nerves jumped. “Why?”

“How about a cup of coffee?”

Sylvia nearly swooned. “Coffee?”

Ben chuckled. “I see that’s a good idea.”

“The best.” Sylvia looked at her own watch. “Where will you be?”

“Around,” he said vaguely and winked at her. “Believe me. I’ll find you.”

The doors opened on her floor, and Sylvia stepped out. She wasn’t the only one. All but two of the occupants of the elevator also moved, including the man Sylvia made coffee plans with. He saluted her briefly and took off down the long hall to her right.

Sylvia watched him go and swallowed her sigh. As soon as the meeting was over there would be coffee and a highly attractive man in her future. A smile touched her lips. *Didn’t get much better.*

She approached the large circular desk. A secretary tapped incessantly away on the keyboard, and Sylvia cleared her throat.

The secretary’s head snapped up, and clear green eyes met Sylvia’s.

“Can I help you?”

Sylvia nodded. “Sylvia Masters to see Maude McKee.”

The secretary glanced down and checked a planner. She picked up the phone and pressed one. Then she repeated what Sylvia said. A second later, she hung up the phone.

“You may go in.” She motioned to the huge set of double doors behind the circular desk.

Sylvia braced herself. She Googled Maude McKee last

night and found out what a formidable woman she was. The woman behind those doors was ruthless in her business dealings and suffered no fools.

Sylvia respected that. She strode to the doors, opened one, and stepped inside.

Utilitarian.

The office held none of the warmth that Tristan's had. The walls were a slate gray with a smattering of business degrees. A large oak desk sat in the center that boasted several plush gray chairs opposite it. And behind the massive desk sat a diminutive woman who looked like she would be better suited to baking cookies. Until she lifted her eyes. Maude's skin was smooth and unblemished and only a handful of wrinkles showed about her eyes and mouth. Sylvia would have said laugh lines, but somehow she doubted it. The woman sat ramrod straight in her gray office chair and rested her hands upon a stack of ledgers.

The older woman wore a smart black suit with white dress shirt beneath it. It buttoned up to her throat. No jewelry took away the effect of pure power and purpose.

The cool gray eyes measured Sylvia, and then the woman motioned to a chair opposite her.

"Have a seat, Ms. Masters."

Sylvia inclined her head and sat. "Thank you."

Maude finished writing in the ledger before she closed it and sat back. Those gray eyes studied Sylvia from the tip of her ebony hair to the black suit that molded the curves she had. They moved back up and met Sylvia's blue eyes.

"So. You're the wedding planner." The voice cool and detached.

"Yes, ma'am."

“Tristan hired you.” It was a statement. Not a question. Sylvia simply nodded.

“I have several sons, Ms. Masters. But Jon is the only son I gave birth to.”

Sylvia’s stomach clenched.

“So you’ll see why I needed to meet you and see exactly what you have in mind for my son’s nuptials.”

“Yes.” Sylvia slid a folder from her purse and put it on the desk.

Maude picked it up and thumbed through it. Her face showed no expression whatsoever. She paused in some places and picked through others.

Sylvia waited silently while the older woman sifted through her plans.

Then Maude closed the folder. “This is my copy?”

“Yes.”

Maude nodded. “You’ve done well, Ms. Masters.”

“Thank you.”

“Would you like a drink?”

“Red wine, if you have it.”

Maude nodded her approval. “If you would have said ice water, I would’ve had to kick you out on mere principle.”

Sylvia chuckled.

Maude stood and walked over to the nearest door to her desk and made use of the small bar there. She poured Sylvia a drink and then one for herself.

The wine tasted heavenly, and Sylvia smiled. “If you have any questions, I would be more than happy to answer them.”

“As you are well aware, I will pay for the rehearsal dinner. Jon will pay for all the items the groom takes care of. How goes the search for the wedding dress?”

“Slowly.” Sylvia took another sip. “We have the reception dress.” She arched her eyebrow. “I hope Jon is taking vitamins.”

Maude threw back her head and laughed. “That good, is it?”

“Better,” Sylvia bragged.

Maude shook her head. “I married Jon’s father in a sundress on a hill in the country. We didn’t have anyone there but a preacher, my best friend and his.” She smiled fondly. “I wouldn’t care if Jon had the same type of wedding.” She paused. “But I know that isn’t going to happen.”

“Simple can be exquisitely lovely.” Sylvia nodded.

“But Jon’s beauty wants the whole shebang, doesn’t she?” Maude’s gray eyes measured her again.

“The lot of it,” Sylvia agreed.

“And good for her.” Maude smiled. “It’ll tie Tristan in knots. And that’s a show unto itself.”

At the mention of Tristan’s name, Sylvia’s stomach clenched. “It can be quite interesting.”

Maude leaned forward. “Tell me. Is he losing his mind?” Her gray eyes danced.

Sylvia leaned forward, also. “In more ways than one.” She grinned conspiratorially.

Maude slapped her hands on the desk. “I have about an hour before my meeting. Tell me absolutely everything.”

“Keira is running him into the ground.” Sylvia’s blue eyes danced. “She wants his opinion on everything. The cakes, the decor, the attire. And Tristan has stated that he plans on being a deciding factor in all aspects of the wedding.”

“Really?” Maude’s eyebrows rose. “That surprises me a bit.”

“How so?”

“Well.” Maude cocked her head to the side. “Tristan is as much of a workaholic as I am. We both had no idea of the seriousness of Jon and Keira’s relationship. We both keep our noses to the grindstone at great lengths. I assumed he would turn over the wedding duties to you and wash his hands of it.”

“I wish,” Sylvia muttered.

Maude’s eyes sharpened. “Is he being difficult?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” Sylvia promised.

Maude’s lips twitched. “Oh. I’m quite sure of that, my dear.” Her eyes measured Sylvia carefully. “I have a feeling that Tristan didn’t quite know what he was biting off, did he?”

“Not. Quite.”

“That’s absolutely delightful.” Maude sighed. “I think you may be just what we need to sort this wedding out and throw it together. Keira’s such a lovely girl. And she needs someone to oversee all the details that her dear mother cannot.” Maude paused. “I’m hardly the type to be of any help. I have no experience in this area. More than likely my secretary would be handling all of it. And I have her overloaded as it is.”

“I will keep you apprised of every detail, Mrs. McKee,” Sylvia vowed. “And every time Tristan teeters on the edge of insanity, I’ll tuck away every detail to share at a later date.”

“Wonderful.” Maude checked her watch and winced. “I hate to shove you out the door, but I have to prepare for this meeting I have next.”

“Say no more.” Sylvia stood and extended her hand. “It’s been a pleasure, Mrs. McKee. I’ll be in touch.”

Maude shook her hand. “I’ll make sure my secretary knows that you are always welcome here, Ms. Masters.” She smiled. “And I do have three other sons.”

Sylvia threw back her head and laughed. “I’ll keep that in

mind.” She nodded her head once and left through the same door she came through.

The secretary looked up once and then dropped her head back down to rapidly tap on her keyboard.

No sooner than Sylvia walked past the large desk, than Ben showed up at her elbow.

“Ah, Sylvia. Just the coffee drinker I was looking for.”

Sylvia let him guide her to the elevator and inside. She glanced up at him and smiled. “We are talking great coffee, right? None of that watered down stuff?”

“You wound me.” Ben clutched his chest.

Sylvia snickered. “And what is it you do here that you can come and go as you please and take coffee breaks when you want?”

“I’m in construction.” Ben put his arm around her when the elevator doors opened.

Sylvia enjoyed the feel of his arm around her shoulders and let him steer her through the throng of humanity to the outside sidewalk. “And where are we headed?”

“Just a little cafe on the corner.” Ben smiled down at her. His blue eyes sparkled.

Sylvia inhaled the clean smell of him and ducked her head to smile. It was nice. *And how strange is that?* Usually she avoided men like the plague. But this attractive construction worker wanted to take her to coffee. She had at least another hour before she needed to be back at the office.

Why shouldn’t she enjoy it?

Ben stopped at the corner shop and opened the door for her. Sylvia murmured her thanks and stepped inside. The aroma of coffee beans wafted over to her, and she inhaled deeply.

“Like that?”

Sylvia smiled up at him. "I'm convinced this is what Heaven smells like."

Ben chuckled. "Have a seat. I'll grab us a couple of shamelessly large coffees, and we can relax for a bit. You do have time, don't you?" His blue eyes searched hers.

"Yes. I have a bit of time." Sylvia tucked her hair behind her ear and moved to a booth in the corner.

A lovely shop that catered to the coffee faithful. There were biscotti and cookies in glass jars across the top of the counters. Specialty coffee beans and mugs in a small store to the side. The entire store a lovely light brown that fed into the coffee motif.

There were only a handful of people inside the cafe. The shop obviously supplied wireless Internet. At least three people tapped away on the laptops and inhaled their lattes.

Ben walked over to her and put an enormous cup in front of her with a wink.

Sylvia arched an eyebrow. "Thanks." She dragged the cup over and took a drink. "I suppose sleep is overrated."

"That's the spirit." Ben took a sip of his and sighed in delight.

"This is fantastic." Sylvia licked her lips. But it tasted familiar to her. She knew she'd never been to the cafe. So where did she taste it? It would surely come to her while she attempted to sleep tonight. Sylvia took another sip. "You do construction at the McKee building?"

"Yes." Ben smiled at her. "Maude is a dragon when it comes to her building and details."

"I like her." Sylvia smiled up at him. She traced the rim of the coffee cup. "What are you working on?"

"A couple of offices on the north side of the building."

Ben glanced at her. "So. You buy into the marriage theory?"

Sylvia chuckled. "Why don't you enlighten me? What exactly is this 'marriage theory'?"

"You know." Ben gestured vaguely. "Someone for everyone. Happily-ever-after. All that good stuff."

"I believe in happiness." Sylvia shrugged. "And whatever gets a person there without hurting anyone."

"Ever been married?"

"No. You?"

Ben shook his head vehemently. "Not so much."

Sylvia's lips twitched. She took a sip of coffee. "So you didn't invite me to coffee to discuss nuptials and weddings?"

"Not hardly." Ben blinked once and moved closer. He picked up her hand and stroked the palm of it with his fingers. "I invited you to get to know you better."

The shock ran through Sylvia before she had a chance to stifle it. Ben was interested in her. Sylvia warred with herself. *Is this what happened when people actually stepped outside of their offices? Possible dates?* She found herself excited and nervous. Her limited dating skills didn't prepare her for what may lay ahead.

She opened her mouth to respond when a voice cut through the conversation.

"Well, well, well." Tristan Calhoun pulled out a chair and sat down. "Isn't this cozy?" His tone was mellow though his eyes were furious.

Sylvia recoiled. *What in God's name is Tristan doing at the cafe?*

"Aren't you a little out of your element?" she snapped.

"Aren't you?" Tristan retorted with a quick glance at Ben and their hands.

Ben scowled and moved his back. "And what prompted the great Tristan Calhoun to actually leave his office this afternoon?"

Sylvia glanced from one to the other. This situation rapidly going downhill. An uneasy feeling rose in her.

"You two know each other?"

Tristan looked amazed and then pleased. "Don't tell me Ben didn't introduce himself?" he said silkily.

Ben glared at him over the coffee cup.

"Yes, Ben introduced himself." Sylvia turned to Tristan. "And what business is it of yours?"

"Bravo," Ben murmured with a Cheshire grin. "I can see that this wedding is well in hand."

"Okay." Sylvia blew out a breath. "What's going on here?"

"And do you know Ben's last name?"

"I was getting to that," Sylvia snapped. "My God! Where do you get off? Coming in here and insinuating yourself into the situation?"

"Hmmm." Tristan took a sip of his own coffee. "For one, this is my shop. For two, I wondered if you actually know who you are sitting with."

"It's none of your damn business." Sylvia glanced around. "This is yours?" She thought back to all the mugs of coffee she received. *Well son of a bitch*. The anger grew. "I would be more than happy to discuss whatever you think appropriate at one of our meetings. I am, however, on my own time. Who I see. What I do. That is certainly none of your business."

Tristan inclined his head in agreement. "Yes, Ms. Masters." He turned to Ben. "Shall I tell her? Or do you want to?"

"For heaven's sake! Tell me what?" Sylvia glared at Tris-

tan, then Ben. Her eyes darkened dangerously. "One of you needs to say something."

"I simply wanted to talk to Sylvia." Ben took a sip of coffee. "Get to know her better. I wasn't going to ask if she would make me wear a monkey suit. I'd rather torture Jon."

Maude's words rang in her ears. *I have three other sons.*

Sylvia stood suddenly. "I see." She turned to Ben. "Your last name is McKee, isn't it?"

"Yes." Ben stood, also. "Listen, Sylvia. I'd like to get to know you better. I didn't want to spring my name on you until we had a chance to talk." He sighed. Then he turned to Tristan. "And your timing is impeccable. Always an opportunity to tear something apart. Hell of a gift."

Tristan growled and stood. "I thought it would be useful for Sylvia to know who exactly she was speaking to." He motioned to Ben's clothes. "Not a simple blue collar worker. One of the heirs to the McKee fortune. A member of the wedding party."

Sylvia looked from one man to the other. "Now I'm remembering why I always stay in my office." She held up the coffee and smiled at Ben. "Thanks." She didn't even glance in Tristan's direction as she made her way back to her car.

Her hand with the keys in it shook slightly and jangled as she approached her red Corvette. Another hand closed over hers and took the keys.

Tristan slid the key into the car and unlocked it. He put the keys back into her hand and climbed into the passenger seat.

Sylvia climbed in the driver's side and could only stare at the audacity of the man next to her. "Get. The blue fuck. Out of my car."

“Don’t think so,” he said easily and turned the key over in the ignition.

Sylvia turned the key off and started at Tristan. He looked furious. *Well, good for him.* He wasn’t the only one. She turned in her seat. “I don’t need a keeper. And I sure as hell don’t need you dogging my footsteps and interrogating men I’m having coffee with.”

“Ben McKee is a playboy.” Tristan slammed his hand on the console in front of him. “He glories in finding beautiful women and adding them to his to-do list.” His wolf’s eyes glared at her. “You were next on that list.”

Sylvia lifted her chin. “And if I wanted to be?”

“Son of a bitch.” Tristan took her mouth with his almost violently. Only heat and passion. Strength and domination. His hands moved down to cup her breasts through her black dress and stroke across her nipples. The sensation brought a moan from deep inside her.

Sylvia threaded her hands through Tristan’s hair and pulled him closer. *More.* She was greedy for more of the heat Tristan promised her. The time for wishing it would go away gone.

Tristan pulled back and rested his forehead against Sylvia’s. Their breathing sounded harsh in the silence of the car. Tristan turned the car over and sat back.

“Take me home.”

Sylvia’s blue eyes were wide in her face. She gasped for air. Oxygen a luxury she didn’t have right then. “Take you home?”

“Your home, Sylvia.” Tristan slid his thumb across her bottom lip and into her mouth. “Take me home,” he repeated huskily.

Yes.

Sylvia put the car into drive and drove the fifteen minutes to her home in complete silence. She and Tristan had turned the corner. There was no going back. The promise of his body next to hers blew every bit of common sense right the hell out of the water.

There would probably be recriminations tomorrow. Self-talks of lack of restraint. But for now, she would take the brief time they had and enjoy every damn minute of it.

Sylvia picked up the phone to call her office when Tristan hung it up. "Let them wonder," he said before her crushed her mouth with his. And then his hands were on the zipper on the back of her dress. He unzipped it to her waist and pulled it down over her body.

Tristan groaned at the sight of her black lacy bra and cupped her breasts in his hands.

"I've dreamed of this." He lifted his eyes, and they darkened to a deep brandy that made her breath hitch in her throat. "Of you."

Tristan lowered his mouth and took a nipple into his mouth while his hands moved lower and cupped her ass. Sylvia threw her head back and gripped his shoulders. Little shocks of pleasure raced through her body. He sucked leisurely through the black lace. And then he moved his hand up and freed her breast completely

Sylvia cried out as his warm mouth closed over the tip of her breast. Desire spun out of control as she whimpered and clung to him.

Tristan slid the other bra strap down and lowered his mouth to that breast. "You're beautiful," he murmured softly.

She felt beautiful. Heat raced along her skin while Tristan licked and stroked her breasts. Sylvia pulled his head up and

brought his mouth to hers. Hunger pulsed in the air as Tristan ripped his shirt off and threw it on the floor. He pulled Sylvia closer and groaned as their naked skin touched.

Her nipples grew harder almost to the point of pain. And still Tristan made no effort to rid her of the rest of her dress. He moved his mouth down and nipped at her collarbone while she arched her body into him.

"I knew you'd taste like this," he whispered. "Soft and velvety. Sinfully soft." He palmed her breasts in his hands and bit softly on her neck.

"Tristan," she pleaded.

"Bedroom?" he asked.

Sylvia pointed down the hall. Before she could take a step, he scooped her up in his arms and walked toward the bed.

She trembled in his arms as seconds later he slid her slowly to the floor and dropped down to his knees. Her black dress clung to her hips, and Tristan traced her bare skin as it met fabric. Then he lifted his head and looked at her.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I'm sure."

Tristan put his hands on her hips and slid the rest of the dress to the floor. Sylvia stood there in only her black lace panties and high heels. The urge to cover herself almost overwhelmed her, but she kept her hands to her sides. Tristan leaned forward and kissed her stomach gently. It clenched under his mouth.

Oh, dear God. She would incinerate. Burst into flame beneath his hot, wet mouth. Tristan traced a path from one hipbone to the other. Sylvia kept her hands to her sides as her fists clenched and unclenched.

He smiled gently and unclenched her fists and put them in his hair. "I'd rather have you touch me."

Sylvia stroked his hair as he moved his mouth back to her bare skin. And then his mouth dipped lower to stroke the area just below her naval. Her body throbbed in anticipation. Then Tristan pushed her back on the bed and crawled over to her on his hands and knees.

Sylvia sat up and welcomed Tristan into her arms as he sat on his knees between her legs. She rubbed her breasts against his chest and groaned. Tristan broke the kiss and moved his mouth down to suckle her breasts. His hands reached down to grip her hips. Then he kissed his way down the center of her body and rimmed her naval with his tongue.

She gripped his hair tightly in her hands while he moved lower and lower still. When his mouth brushed against the front of her panties, Sylvia twitched. Surely he couldn't possibly.

"Let me," he murmured. Tristan hooked his fingers in her panties and eased them gently down her legs.

Doubt slammed into Sylvia, and she tried to ease her body back up onto the bed. Tristan's eyes blazed with desire as he looked at her.

"You're beautiful, Sylvia. All of you." He reached down and gently undid the straps on her heels. Then he took them carefully and laid them on the other side of the bed. Tristan sat up again and pulled her closer to him.

Sylvia wrapped her legs around his waist as he pleased her mouth with his. Pleasure built in her until she thought she would die from it. Tristan moved his mouth from hers and grinned wickedly.

"Thought you would distract me, didn't you?" he mur-

mured. Tristan unhooked her legs and pushed her gently back down on the bed. "Not damn likely."

And then his mouth nipped gently on her ankles. Sylvia tried to breathe. And then her breath stopped as he moved up to the inside of her knee. She twitched under Tristan's ministrations. Heat built again as he moved to her inner thigh.

And then breathing proved impossible as his mouth moved over her. Tristan hooked his arms around her legs as he ducked his head and stroked his tongue against her heated flesh. Sylvia thrashed on the bed and moaned as sensations slammed into her. One on top of the other. No room for her to breathe. To think.

And still Tristan was relentless. He stroked and sucked her until her breath sobbed tightly in her throat. Sylvia's body bowed and bucked beneath him. And then pleasure crashed through her with an intensity that left her limp and trembling.

Tristan licked his lips and lifted his head from between her legs. He stood slowly and unzipped his pants and stepped out of them. His boxers came next.

Sylvia watched him with half-lidded eyes. Tristan kicked out of his shoes and then knelt on the bed next to Sylvia. He rolled onto his side and tucked Sylvia close to him.

And then his glorious mouth was on her again. His hands shaped and molded her curves while his mouth nipped and stroked across her bare flesh. Sylvia's fingers dug into his back as again, pleasure built inside of her.

Tristan rolled her onto her back and covered her body with his. Sylvia felt his hardness against her inner thigh and tried to shift her body to accommodate him. He groaned.

"Sylvia," he breathed.

She arched her body closer to his. Tristan moved his hand

down and cupped her while his thumb stroked against her sensitive nub. Sylvia covered his hand with hers.

“Please, Tristan. Please.”

He growled and spread her legs. Tristan’s eyes were dark and intense. He watched her face while he eased his body inside hers.

Sylvia tensed a bit, and Tristan stopped.

“What’s wrong?” He eased a bit further in and then stopped in disbelief.

Startled brown eyes met hers. “Never?”

Sylvia shook her head and looked everywhere but at Tristan. He cupped her chin in his hand and ducked his head to kiss her. While he kissed her, he moved the rest of his body inside hers.

She moaned at the sensation of Tristan’s possession. Sylvia lifted her hips and bit her lip at the pleasure she felt. Too much and not enough at the same time.

“Easy.” Tristan groaned when she lifted her hips again. “You’re going to kill me.”

“Show me.” Sylvia wrapped her legs around him and tugged his body closer to hers. “I want to know.”

Tristan moved inside her while his hands and mouth pleased her entire body. Sylvia trembled when Tristan moved his hand down between them and stroked her. He pinned her arms above her head and drove her body to surrender.

Sylvia’s orgasm snapped through her with an intensity that left her limp and gulping for air on the bed. Tristan growled low and bucked against her one last time before he partially collapsed on her. The only thing keeping his weight off of her was his elbows.

She closed her eyes so she wouldn’t have to deal with

Tristan and her impulsiveness right this minute. He would put up with none of it.

"I know you're awake, woman." Tristan stroked her damp ebony hair and feathered kisses along her jaw. He rolled away from her but still kept her tucked tightly to his body. "Talk to me."

"Nothing to say," she mumbled.

"Not going to extol my extraordinary manly prowess? Wonder aloud how a man my age keeps in such good shape?" His voice sounded disappointed. "Nothing?"

Sylvia snickered and opened her eyes to look at Tristan. "Obviously I don't have a worthwhile comparison to make." She arched an eyebrow. "When that's out of the way, I'll get back to you."

Tristan scowled. "Smart ass. There'll be no comparisons." He touched the tip of her nose. "Keep that in mind."

Sylvia's body still shook with after tremors, and she tried to collect her thoughts. Her actions were reckless. Totally uncharacteristic. And it had been worth it. Every damn second. She moved away from Tristan and pulled the covers over herself.

Tristan maneuvered his way under the covers also and slung his arm around her waist. "You're thinking again. That doesn't bode well for me."

"I'm glad we got this out of the way."

Tristan's eyes narrowed. "Got this out of the way?"

"Yes." Sylvia braced herself for the firestorm she knew brewed. "I think it was wise of us to have sex so we can function as normal human beings now."

Tristan slapped himself in the forehead. "Of course. How silly of me. Just another thing on your lengthy to-do list. How

fucking crazy of me to think otherwise.”

“Tristan.” Sylvia put her hand over his on her hip and looked him in the eye. “That’s not it. But you have to admit that this attraction between us colored our meetings. Now we don’t have to worry about it.”

“Why me?” Tristan shook his head slowly. “You’ve never been with another man. Why?”

“Why was I a virgin? Or why did I pick you?”

“Both, damn it.”

Sylvia took a deep breath and plucked at the sheet with nervous fingers. “I chose to be a virgin. Sex took a sideline to my business. The couple relationships I had weren’t important enough to give my body to.” She shrugged.

“And me?”

She smoothed his hair back from his forehead with a small smile. “I’ve never felt a spark like that with anyone. And the more I tried to fight it, the stronger it became. I was distracted. Edgy.”

“Well. That makes two of us.” Tristan brought her hand down to his mouth and kissed her knuckles.

Sylvia sighed.

“Didn’t quite plan for this, did you?”

Sylvia shook her head. “I don’t want you to think I had sex with you because of who you are. Or the fact I’m putting your sister’s wedding together. It was a choice. That simple.”

“You weren’t trying to get in the newspaper?”

Her temper flared without warning. “Oh. Sure I did. In fact, when you leave, which will be in about two seconds, there will be a dozen reporters on the other side of my door. You arrogant ass.”

“Truce.” Tristan shook his head. “I was only kidding, Syl-

via. A poor joke. But a joke, nonetheless.

“What are we going to do?”

“We’ll continue our business association, of course.”

“Of course,” Sylvia snapped.

“And,” he added, before she could take his head off, “we’ll continue to see each other.”

“I don’t think so.” Sylvia looked Tristan in the eye. “I don’t want to be another nameless chick on your arm while you attend business functions and art galleries.”

“Sylvia, my dear.” Tristan smiled and moved closer. “You’re not another nameless anything.” He brought her mouth down to his and proceeded to prove it to her.

Chapter 7

Sylvia awoke the next morning alone. Her alarm clock went off, and she took a moment to acclimate herself and stretch. She was sore. But it was a lovely “let’s do it again” sore.

Tristan hadn’t left until the wee hours of the morning. After a joint shower and a bit of fun with ice cream.

Sylvia would never look at Ben & Jerry’s the same again.

She slapped the alarm clock and rolled to her side. *It’s a workday, for God’s sake.* She had weddings to plan. Employees to delegate. It was her life she had to get back to. That simple.

Sylvia showered and walked into the kitchen. She poured a large glass of diet soda and leaned against the counter. Things had changed. No disputing that. Sleeping with Tristan could potentially be extremely harmful to her.

She sipped the caffeine and tried not to think of the previous evening. Imagining Tristan in her bed wouldn’t pay the bills or put together a wedding.

More’s the pity.

It cooled off a bit last evening, and the morning reflected that, so Sylvia picked out a cream-colored business suit with matching heels. The sleeves were long and the neck high. A

plus since she had a love bite on her neck that embarrassed the hell out of her. She wasn't a horny teenager. *Damn it.* Though receiving the bite had been heavenly.

"Damn it," she muttered. "I'm a businesswoman. What in the hell am I doing to myself?" Sylvia slammed the soda down and grabbed her keys.

The drive to the office was silent except for the chatty deejay. Sylvia stewed silently. *Bad choice. Poor decision.* God, she really fucked up this time. How could she look her employees in the eye?

A small breeze lifted her hair as she stepped out of her car and locked it. Sylvia took a deep breath and walked up to her doorstep. *Just another day. One of many.* Her hand shook slightly as she fitted the key into the lock. It slid home, and she almost sighed in relief.

Sylvia stepped inside, but before she could shut the door, Tempest was there. "Hello, boss."

The smile felt false, but Sylvia tried it anyway. "Tempest. I'm sorry about yesterday," she said.

Tempest shrugged easily. She wore a pair of slim ivory slacks and a tailored blouse to match. The boots were pale with three-inch heels. Her ebony hair fell in long waves down her back. "We were fine. Though the devil called and said hell had frozen over."

The laugh caught her by surprise, but Sylvia rolled with it. She laughed until tears poured from her eyes. "Oh. My. God." Her blue eyes were watery as she lifted them to look at Tempest. "That was the perfect thing to say." She brushed the moisture from her cheeks.

Tempest smiled. "We can function without you for a day, Sylvia. There are simply times you need for yourself." Her

blue eyes studied Sylvia closely. "I'd say it did you a world of good."

"It did." Sylvia shut the door behind the pair of them and locked it again. "It was a nice break."

"Good." Tempest brushed her hair back and handed Sylvia a stack of notes. "The invitations are ordered. The bouquets are taken care of. We're looking for a reception site and videographer."

"Great." Sylvia smiled and took the stack of papers. "Good job." She paused. "Have you heard from Beth?"

Tempest grinned at her. "She's wonderful. The air agrees with her. She's going to email you sometime soon."

"Good." Sylvia tapped the papers against her leg. "I worried about her."

"I know." Tempest winked and walked toward her office. "Back to the grind," she said and waved.

* * * *

The day turned crazy. Phones rang off the hook as wedding details came together. The Calhoun wedding was coming together surprisingly well. Maude had her secretary call and let Sylvia know her sons were anxiously awaiting their tuxedo fittings. Sylvia made a note and continued her calls to find a suitable caterer.

She looked up from her desk at a knock on her door.

Wilda stood there. She was resplendent in a pair of designer blue jeans and a red silk blouse. Her hair was pulled back into a clip that left loose tendrils to curl along her cheekbones.

Sylvia smiled and motioned her inside. "What can I help you with?"

"I was rather hoping I could help you." Wilda smiled and pinned her with emerald eyes. "I realize we didn't have what

Keira wanted, but I had a design I simply had to show you. In case there's another wedding it would fit."

She opened a large ruby bag and withdrew a picture. Wilda unfolded it and slid it across the desk.

Sylvia's heart raced in her chest. It just happened to be the most beautiful dress she had ever seen. A fairy tale gown. White silk with blue, pink, and gold threads shot through the material. The sleeves were fitted with the shoulders bare. The body of the gown wrapped lovingly around the model. The bodice was a sweetheart neckline with tiny pearls outlining it. The dress fell to the floor with a twelve-foot train of netting behind it. The train had small crystals sewn into the fabric that reflected the glint of the light on them. The white slippers also had crystals sewn into the fabric.

"It's gorgeous," Sylvia whispered. She glanced up at Wilda to see the other woman staring at her.

"It is," Wilda agreed. She stood and motioned to the paper. "Keep it. In case you find someone who would wish to wear this creation."

"Who wouldn't?" Sylvia murmured.

Wilda smiled. "Indeed." She opened her mouth and then closed it abruptly when she caught sight of Tempest in the doorway.

Tempest's blue eyes darkened dangerously, and a small breeze lifted the picture on the desk and pushed it into Sylvia's lap.

"What are you doing here?"

Wilda winked at Sylvia. "Just a bit of business." She tilted her head to the side. "I believe that's only fair."

"You would." Tempest scowled and noticed the picture of the wedding gown. The scowl cleared immediately. "Clev-

er,” she commented. She glanced at Wilda. “But don’t let it go to your head.”

Wilda tossed her red hair and grinned. “When have I?” She waved at Sylvia and stepped closer to Tempest.

The two exchanged words, and Sylvia frowned.

“Do you two know each other?”

Tempest’s lips twitched as she looked at the redhead. “We go way back.”

“Way back,” Wilda echoed and stepped out of the office.

Rather odd.

Sylvia glanced at her lap and at the picture again. “It doesn’t fit Keira’s wedding. But I think we should keep it on file.” Her fingers lovingly traced the lines of the gown.

“Definitely.” Tempest nodded, and her blue eyes were wise. “The bride who wears that gown will be the happiest in the world.”

* * * *

Sylvia drove herself to the point of exhaustion for missing half a day yesterday. Tristan, once again, furnished her staff with lunch and drinks. A special mug of coffee awaited her on her desk. It was thoughtful. But he had been doing that before he crawled into her bed.

She drove the thoughts of that out of her mind and concentrated on hammering out the details for the next weddings on her agenda.

The details for Keira’s wedding had been dispersed among her staff. Tempest now in charge of the bridal shower. Alicia busy with searching for an experienced videographer. Liz made transportation arrangements from her desk.

Everything was coming together wonderfully. But her cynical mind already thought up possible glitches. *What hap-*

pened if a driver became ill? Did they have enough back-ups? Were there guests who had special dietary guidelines? They were looking at Dunbar's to cater.

"What am I missing?" she murmured.

"About ten good hours of sleep."

Sylvia's head shot up, and she blinked to clear the blurriness from her eyes.

Tristan Calhoun leaned against the side of her office door and smiled at her.

The fluttering in her chest was completely irrational and crazy as hell. It had been, after all, just sex. *Right?*

"Ten hours of sleep is a luxury, Mr. Calhoun. Not a necessity."

He chuckled and walked inside. His chocolate brown suit fitted his form effortlessly. The white button-up shirt was unbuttoned, and his tan tie skewed. Tristan sat on the corner of her desk and motioned to the clutter atop it.

"All work and no play makes Jill a dull girl."

Sylvia's eyes narrowed. "It's made Jill a damn millionaire."

Tristan leaned down and brushed his lips across hers. "Even tired, you spark up like a fire on a cold night when I poke at you. I like that."

"Then you're the masochistic sort." Sylvia rubbed her hands across her eyes and sighed. "What makes you darken my door, Mr. Calhoun?"

"Mr. Calhoun?" Tristan shook his head. "That'll never do. I can distinctly recall you calling me by name several times last night."

"For the love of God," Sylvia snapped. "Keep it in your pants."

Tristan's lips twitched. "What has you in an uproar this evening, Sylvia?" He reached over and massaged her neck and

shoulders. "You're tense as hell. You need to relax." His hands moved forward over her shoulders and cupped her breasts. "I'm at your service."

"Oh, I just bet you are." Sylvia fought to not rub against his hands like a cat needing petting. She glanced at the clock. "Is it really nine o'clock?"

"It really is." Tristan rubbed his fingers over the front of her shirt. He unbuttoned one button and looked her in the eye. "Let me take you home. I'll make sure you get..." Tristan rubbed his thumb over her taut nipple, "rest."

Sylvia's body reacted instantly. *Rest. Sure. Right. Like fucking hell.* Her blue eyes darkened to a midnight blue.

Tristan smiled satisfactorily and bent down to brush his lips across Sylvia's. "See. Now you aren't thinking of work. I should probably get you home."

"And naked." Sylvia arched an eyebrow and waited for a response.

"Naked is a perk." Tristan brushed her hair back and threaded his fingers through it. Then he tugged lightly to bring her mouth to his again. "Have any more Ben & Jerry's?"

* * * *

How could something so physical relax her so much? Sylvia nipped Tristan's shoulder, and he groaned theatrically. They both lay naked in her bed with the sheets strewn from one corner of it to the other. An empty container of ice cream lay on the nightstand.

"Give me just a second."

Sylvia bit her lip to keep from laughing aloud. "What about your manly prowess?"

Tristan opened his eyes lazily. Then he hooked his arm around her and flipped her on top of him.

“You do the work this time.” Then he closed his eyes again.

Sylvia stared down at him. *Is he serious?* She straddled his waist and situated herself comfortably on his stomach. The breadth of the man amazed her. His muscles were strong cords that roped down his wide chest to his slender waist.

She reached out and trailed her hand from his neck to his naval.

Muscles spasmed beneath her hand.

Sylvia smiled wickedly and let her mouth follow the same trail. When Tristan opened his eyes and reached for her, she pushed his hands back down.

“I’m doing the work,” she reminded him. “Now lay there like a man and take it.”

Tristan grinned and arched an eyebrow. “Bit of a quick study?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.” Sylvia brushed her breasts against his chest and arched her back to nestle Tristan’s erection between her legs. “Oh. That’s nice.”

Tristan’s smile died away, and he groaned. His hands clenched in the sheets as he lifted his hips.

Sylvia bent her head and took Tristan’s mouth with hers. He tasted strong and masculine. Exotic. She clutched his hair in her hands while she ravaged his mouth. And still, he lay there for her.

Sylvia brushed her lips against his one more time. She sat up and bumped her body against his again.

“Witch,” he murmured in admiration.

Sylvia’s eyes darkened. “You have no idea.” She reached down between them and took him in her hand.

Tristan twitched and muttered.

Sylvia slid down his body and let her hair fall over Tristan's stomach. He tensed and tried to shift, but she didn't let him. She stroked him while kissing his stomach and hipbones. *So much strength.*

Tristan's legs tensed beneath her. "You're killing me," he managed.

Sylvia smiled and then took him in her mouth.

His hips arched off the bed, and the breath whistled in and out of his lungs. "Sylvia," he breathed. "Baby."

She licked him up and down while he moaned and thrashed on the bed. But his hands never left the sheets. When she knew he couldn't take another minute, Sylvia moved up and slid him inside her.

Tristan's hands immediately clutched her waist, and he groaned. "You feel so good."

Sylvia braced her hands on his chest and rocked against him. "Do you like that, Tristan?"

"Yes," he bit out. "Yes."

"Good." She moved his hands up to cup her breasts while she rode him slowly back and forth. "Is this working for you?"

"Jesus, Sylvia." Tristan struggled for control.

The result was heady for Sylvia. To have such a powerful man subject to her whims. To have him beneath her while she controlled the pace. And then all thought left her as Tristan trailed his right hand down and stroked her between her legs.

"You cheat," she gasped.

"Yes." Tristan clutched one of her hips in his hand while the other pleased her. He arched off the bed to meet her.

Pleasure shattered her completely, and Sylvia moaned as Tristan thrust harder into her and shook with the force

of his own orgasm.

She collapsed on top of him and sighed as he stroked her back. "Is it always like this?"

There was a pause. "No."

"Good. I'm glad." Sylvia lifted her face and looked at him.

"No comparison studies."

She lifted her shoulder in a slight shrug. "I don't expect anything from you, Tristan."

"And why is that?"

Sylvia heard the anger. She braced herself. "This is great. But I know you aren't the settling down type. And I accept that."

Tristan shifted underneath her, his voice cold, as he said, "Oh, do you? Accept that about me, I mean?"

"Yes." Sylvia nodded and slid to his side. She tucked herself under the sheet. "I don't need you to change for me. I don't expect it. As long as you don't expect it, either."

"God forbid," he muttered and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Tristan looked back at her. His anger was palpable. "How kind of you to not expect anything but a leisurely fuck."

Sylvia's eyes widened and then narrowed. "That's not what I said. And how dare you twist my words!" Her anger built. She brushed her hair back. "I'm simply telling you that I appreciate our time together, but I don't have any delusions about us."

"Delusions?" A muscle worked in Tristan's jaw. "And what delusions would you have?" He hit the nightstand but kept his furious eyes on her face. "That I care about you? That I like to spend time with you? Stupid shit like that?"

Sylvia's stomach rolled, and she reached out to Tristan.

He stood suddenly and yanked his pants on. "How wonderful to have every bit of your life mapped out. To know everything about what's going on. How fucking great." Tristan shoved his arms through his shirt sleeves and reached down to pick up his shoes. "Hope my unscheduled visits to your body didn't totally fuck up your plans."

Sylvia sat in shock as she heard the front door slam. *Oh my God.* She pressed her hands to her cheeks, surprised to find tears pouring from her eyes. This. This was why she was a workaholic. Why she didn't date. Why she never shared herself with another.

Because it hurt too fucking bad.

* * * *

Life went on. As trite as it sounded, Sylvia found it to be true. Her employees didn't notice that she kept her door closed more often than not. They didn't comment on the fact that Tempest took over a great deal of the Calhoun wedding. No one ever said a word.

Months passed, and Sylvia kept her head down and focused on the bottom line. Really all that mattered. Weddings to book. Details to be ironed out. That was her life.

Until Tempest walked into her office one day and shut the door behind her.

It was a windy November day. The window behind Sylvia vibrated with the gusts. It was a comforting sound of sorts. Sylvia pored over her ledgers for each wedding and made notations in the margins.

When the door shut, Sylvia lifted her head and stared at Tempest. "Did we have a meeting? I don't recall scheduling one."

Tempest shook her head. "There's food in the kitchen.

Mr. Calhoun apparently values this staff. Otherwise, I think he would have quit that little tradition after a month or so.” She held out a plate with a sandwich and a stack of peanut butter cookies on it. “I brought you some lunch.”

“Just set it on my desk.” Sylvia motioned absently.

Tempest set the plate down and waited.

Sylvia looked at her. “What? You’re dying to say something. Spit it out.”

“Ben asked about you.”

Sylvia’s jaw dropped. Of all the conversation starters, that one took her completely by surprise. She had told Tempest to fit all the groomsmen and best man for the wedding.

Tempest nodded. “I told him you were very busy this time of year.” She shrugged. “He asked me to pass along a message.”

Sylvia waited expectantly. “Yes?”

“He said, ‘Tell her the offer still stands.’” Tempest smiled. “I assured him I would.”

“That’s nice.” Sylvia mustered up a smile and bent her head over the ledgers again.

“Tristan was there.”

The pain ripped through Sylvia viciously, and she fought not to recall their last conversation. She kept her face completely blank and glanced up. “I thought he might be. Being the soon-to-be brother-in-law and all.”

Tempest sat down and grabbed a cookie from the plate. “He seemed rather moody. I may have commented on it.”

Sylvia took a cookie and bit into it. “That’s rather unprofessional.”

“It was.” Tempest smiled.

“And?”

"He bit my head off." Tempest chuckled. "Some nonsense about a merger falling through." She shrugged delicately. "I told him these things sometimes happen. He wasn't amused." Tempest met Sylvia's eyes. "In fact, he muttered something about getting his measurements from his tailor and left." She leaned forward. "Now. Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing." The response came out quick and automatic.

"Right." Tempest took another cookie and bit off a piece. "Do you think we don't see you're hurting? That something has upset you so much that you've cut yourself off from everybody? That there are no smiles anymore?"

"You draw the short straw?" she asked sarcastically.

"I volunteered." Tempest tapped her fingernails on the desk. "I thought perhaps I could draw hazard pay."

"You wish," Sylvia muttered.

Tempest laughed softly. Then she leaned across the desk and took Sylvia's hand in hers. "I have something for you, but I don't believe you're ready for it. I'm here, Sylvia. To listen to you. To hear you. And sometimes that, alone, helps."

"You ever made a mistake?"

Tempest arched her eyebrow. "Several. And I'm sure my sisters could list them in alphabetical order. No one is infallible. We all make mistakes."

"I made a large one." Sylvia took a deep breath. "I put myself in a situation utterly over my head and out of my control. And as I made my decisions, I thought they were valid. I thought I was doing the right thing. But apparently, I also screwed that up."

"Hmmm." Tempest took another bite of her cookie. "I understand why you want to blame yourself. But most situations are caused by two people. So you may want to find the

other person and work this out.”

“No.”

“Well.” Tempest smiled gently. “That was rather quick.”

“I appreciate this.” Sylvia sat back in her chair and studied her employee. “You don’t know how much. But the simple fact of the matter is that this was a personal error in judgment. I screwed up.”

“And you’re very hard on yourself. I understand that.”

“Do you?” Sylvia sighed. “This isn’t something I care to go over. I appreciate your generous offer. But I’ll simply have to work this out myself. And quite honestly, I think it’s worked itself out at this point in time.”

Tempest stood and nodded. “If you change your mind, Sylvia, I’ll be more than happy to listen to you. To try and help if I possibly can.” She walked out the office door and shut it quietly behind her.

Sylvia rubbed her temples. So much for thinking she had fooled anybody. *Damn Tristan*. Damn him for getting under her skin and making her care. Damn him for touching her heart and then walking away. *Damn him*.

She grabbed another cookie and slid the sandwich into the trash. A little more sugar. A little more caffeine. And maybe, just maybe, she could make it through another day. Sylvia pulled a ledger over to her and began writing.

* * * *

It was late. Sylvia rubbed her eyes and glanced over at the clock. She must have fallen asleep at her desk. Dark outside, only a single lamp lit her office. After eleven o’clock.

“Great,” Sylvia muttered and yawned hugely.

“Do you ever take care of yourself?”

Sylvia yipped and stood suddenly. Her eyes searched the

dimness of her office until she found him.

Tristan leaned casually against the wall on the other side of her door. His hair ruffled, as was his suit. He stepped into the light, and Sylvia gasped.

He looked tired. As tired as she felt.

Sylvia put her hands on her hips. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see if you've decided to take Ben up on his offer."

Sylvia frowned. "What?"

"Are you going to take the McKee heir up on his offer?"

Tristan strolled forward and slapped his hands on the desk.

Sylvia's hands shook, and she hurriedly stuffed them in her pockets. "You've lost your mind. You know that, right?"

"Yes," Tristan bit out. "Now answer me, damn it."

Sylvia lifted her chin. "I don't owe you anything, Mr. Calhoun. Not an explanation. Not an answer. Not a damn thing." She yawned hugely and ruined the effect.

"Because you're so magnificent at taking care of yourself. Is that it?" Tristan's eyes blazed with fire. "You would actually consider going out with Ben McKee? To take him up on his offer of 'coffee'?"

"Damn you!" Sylvia shouted. "Why are you here? Didn't you say everything you had to say the last time we were together?"

Tristan raked his hands through his hair and glared at her. "How can you absolutely drive me crazy?"

"It's a gift," she bit out.

"I want you," he admitted.

The sound of Sylvia's hand across his cheek was brilliantly loud in the room. Tristan growled and grabbed her hand.

Then he simply lifted her across the desk and against him. His mouth crushed hers, and Sylvia fought for air. A scrap of sanity. Anything that would calm her racing heart and ease her aching body.

“Sylvia,” he breathed against her ear. “Be with me.”

“For tonight?” Her heart ached as she studied the dark shadows of Tristan’s face. “You want me for tonight?”

Yes.” He sighed.

Sylvia bit back the pain. It would be the last time. She knew that. And why shouldn’t she grab onto Tristan with both hands tonight? The last night.

Sylvia unbuttoned her shirt slowly, but Tristan’s hands stopped her. He gently kissed her mouth and undid the buttons himself. He stopped at her waist and pulled her shirt out of her waistband.

She reached up and pushed Tristan’s jacket to the ground. Then Sylvia ripped his shirt open and smiled up at him.

He growled and moved forward. Tristan grabbed her hair and pulled her mouth to his. Sylvia clutched his hair and nipped at his bottom lip.

“Sylvia.” Tristan’s hair whistled in and out of his lungs. “I’m trying to take it slow here.”

“Why?” Sylvia’s blue eyes darkened as she pulled her egg-shell chemise up and over her head. She stood there proudly. “Why take it slow, Tristan?” She pressed her body next to his. “I thought you said you wanted to be with me.” Sylvia moved her hand down his body and cupped him through his slacks. “Parts of you certainly want to be.” Her arms wound around his neck. “I’ve always wanted to have you in my office. On my desk.” She continued to stroke him, and he shuddered against her.

Tristan lifted her suddenly and put her on the edge of the

desk. Sylvia slid her panties off and pulled her skirt up. Tristan growled and unzipped his pants and slid them to his ankles. His boxers came next.

And then, dear God, he thrust inside her.

Sylvia wanted to sob aloud with the pure pleasure of it. Tristan thrust into her again and again while he took her mouth with his. His hands clenched her ass while he drove her up and over the edge of sanity.

The rhythm sped up, and tears leaked from Sylvia's eyes. This was what she had to offer Tristan and him to her. *Sex. Great sex. Maddening pleasure with no assurance of what tomorrow would bring.*

Her orgasm burst through her, and she quivered uncontrollably. Tristan growled and bucked against her until he came, also.

They both breathed heavily against each other.

Sylvia moved her head to the side and wiped the tears from her eyes. Tristan didn't need to know anything but what she let him see. A woman who wanted in his pants like any other. Just another faceless female.

She pressed her hands to her chest and slid off her desk. Tristan leaned down to pull up his pants and finally looked at her. Sylvia made a show of slowly finding her clothes and fixing them.

"I wanted to take my time with you, Sylvia. To enjoy you." Tristan raked his hands through his hair. "Why didn't you let me?"

Sylvia shrugged carelessly and brushed her hair out of her face. "I'm tired. I need to go home. I have a lot of work to do. Most of it for your sister's wedding."

Tristan jerked back as if she had hit him. His jaw

clenched. "And if there are repercussions?"

Sylvia frowned. "What?"

"Children, Sylvia. What if you're pregnant?"

Sylvia smiled tightly. "I'm on the pill to regulate my period. And besides, I think we're safe because of timing." She glanced at Tristan. "You do get tested regularly, don't you?"

"Sure." Tristan's smile appeared bitter. "No need to worry about diseases, Sylvia. I'm clean." He shrugged his jacket on. "Little late to think to ask that though, isn't it?"

A knife twisted in Sylvia's heart, but she kept her voice calm. "I'm a fast learner. Better luck next time, right?"

Tristan gave her a long measured look and opened his mouth to speak, but Sylvia held up her hand. "Don't. Just don't. Let's chalk it up to hormones and be done with it."

"Be done with it?" Tristan nodded slowly. "I suppose it's best. Why would we get involved? You're too busy hiding your heart, and I'm too busy screwing the flavor the month." He narrowed his eyes. "Hell of a combination."

Sylvia slid her shoes on. "Leave, Tristan. And don't come back. If you have any questions, you can fax them to me. I'll make sure Keira and Jon have the wedding of their dreams. You and I need never see each other again. Besides," she made herself smile, "it's not like you'll ever walk down the aisle, now, is it?"

"Why would I?" Tristan looked at her. "I can have anything I want without that little piece of paper." He turned toward the door and then back one more time. "It's been a pleasure, Sylvia." His wolf eyes darkened. "A real pleasure." He walked out the door and out of her life.

Sylvia collapsed in her chair and buried her head in her hands. Her body still thrummed with the feel of Tristan's

body next to hers. But her heart shattered in pieces. Shredded to thin ribbons. And all because she let herself believe in something besides the numbers she knew so well. Tears fell on the covers of the ledgers on her desk, but Sylvia could have cared less. So this is what it felt like. To have a broken heart.

She'd take the safety of the numbers. When they didn't add up, she could find the error. There was no helping the pain in her heart.

Chapter 8

November bled into December, and the weather turned cold and bitter. Rather like herself, Sylvia mused as she looked out her office window. A light snow blew outside, and she shivered. She never warmed up. Her heart as frosty as the panes on her window.

Sylvia turned around in her chair and lightly shrugged. It was fine by her. Just another day in her life.

A knock on the door had her lifting her head. Tempest stood there with a plate full of pizza.

“Are you actually going to eat all that?” Sylvia looked astonished at the large pile of pie on Tempest’s plate.

“Are you kidding me?” Tempest licked her lips. “I love pizza.” She picked up a piece loaded with toppings and took a big bite. “Mmm.”

Sylvia’s lips twitched. “At least he’s switching it up a bit. Not just sandwiches.”

Tempest swallowed the bite and held out her plate. “I’ll even let you have a piece of mine, if you like.”

“No.” Sylvia smiled. “I’m not hungry.”

Tempest frowned. “You’re wasting away, woman.” She sat in the chair opposite Sylvia. “Letting all this delicious food

Mr. Calhoun keeps sending go to waste.” She motioned to the cup of coffee on the desk. “Are you at least drinking some of that delicious coffee?”

“Not so much.” Sylvia put her hands on her desk. “How’s the Calhoun wedding going?”

Tempest’s blue eyes darkened. “Smooth change of topic. I suppose you’re going to expect me to drop my line of questioning.”

Sylvia nodded. “I suppose I am.”

Tempest took a drink of the coffee and put it back down. “Everything is on schedule.” She paused. “Keira asked about you.”

“And what did you tell her?”

“That you were busy.” Tempest took another bite of pizza and looked at Sylvia. “She wants you there, Sylvia. She wants you there very badly.”

“Her family will be there. That’s all she needs.”

“You would deny a bride on her wedding day?” Tempest dabbed at her lips. “That seems rather harsh.”

“Do you do that on purpose? Twist things around until they suit you?”

Tempest smiled. “Usually. It’s what I admired in you when I first saw you. Hell of a trait.”

“At least from my angle.” Sylvia smiled softly. “Not so much when you do it.”

Tempest threw back her head and laughed. “You delight me, Sylvia. You’re incredibly intelligent. But so damn stubborn that I can’t help but admire your single-mindedness.”

“I’m not going to the wedding.”

Tempest tilted her head to the side. “You don’t usually, do you?”

“No.”

“But this is the wedding of the century. With a lovely young woman who wants you there.”

“I don’t like guilt.”

“Who does?” Tempest took another sip of coffee. “You really should drink this. It’s delicious.”

“I’ve lost my appetite.”

Tempest sighed. “I told Keira I would talk to you. And I have. It’s entirely up to you. If you want to disappoint a major client, I suppose that’s your call.”

“I really don’t like you. You know that, right?”

Tempest’s blue eyes sparkled with laughter. “I’ll get over it.” She stood quickly and scooped up her plateful of pizza. She motioned to the coffee, and Sylvia nodded.

“Help yourself, Tempest. You’re going to do what you want to do, aren’t you?”

“As are you, Sylvia.” Tempest nodded and smiled. “As are you.”

* * * *

Liz made sure Bridal Bliss pumped out Christmas Carols twenty four/seven. Sylvia tried to get into the spirit but had a hard time with it. Her office dripped garland and poinsettias. The staff laughed and giggled when a jolly old St. Nick stopped by to give the staff gifts from the Calhoun party.

Sylvia took hers and put it in a desk drawer. Out of sight. Out of mind. She now avoided the newspaper and the television. She made the mistake of watching the news one evening and was treated to the sight of Tristan Calhoun with a stunning blond on his arm. Sylvia immediately turned off the television and went to bed.

And what if she didn’t sleep at night for missing him?

What if she missed the smell of him? The feel of him? It would fade. It had to.

She would simply smother her feelings. So easy. Or it used to be. No laughter for her. Just the numbers. Always the numbers. But even they offered a cold comfort.

The days dwindled down until the week before Christmas. Sylvia made sure her staff had their Christmas bonuses and then closed up shop. It's not as if the holiday held any meaning for her, but she knew the rest of her staff had family to spend time with. People they loved and who loved them waiting to enjoy their company. It only seemed right.

Sylvia went home. She parked her car and walked to her front door. The sight stopped her cold.

Keira Calhoun stood there in a brown leather coat, rubbing her hands together and waiting. As soon as she saw Sylvia, she stepped forward.

"Sylvia!" She rushed forward and hugged her tightly. Keira pulled back and smiled broadly. "Tempest kept telling me that you were busy. I thought it best if I caught you at home."

Shock raced through Sylvia at a dizzying pace. It would be so simple to send her away with lame excuses and white lies. But the truth was that Sylvia missed Keira. The bubbly golden blond brought a smile to her face. Something she could surely use right now.

Sylvia unlocked her door and started apologizing as soon as she swung it open. Her housekeeping skills had gone straight to hell since that night in her office with Tristan. Dishes were done. That was about it.

"I'm not worried about your house." Keira smiled and sat down on the couch. She looked around. "It's a lovely home."

"Thanks." Sylvia hung up her coat, a rarity, and sat beside

Keira on the couch. "I've heard good things about your wedding. How's the dress?"

"It's beautiful!" Keira gushed. She brushed back her hair and leaned forward. "Kaello is a miracle worker." She fished around in her purse until she found what she looked for and showed it to Sylvia.

It was stunning. A creamy white strapless gown with golden threads embroidered across the bodice and down the sides. Sylvia pulled it closer and noted that the threads were actually Celtic knots.

"And look at this!" Keira pulled another picture. It was a golden circlet that would hold Keira's veil in place.

Sylvia smiled. "Kaello certainly went above and beyond, didn't she?"

"I'm so happy." Keira sniffled and put the photos up.

Sylvia patted her shoulder. "It's a bit overwhelming, isn't it?"

"Yes." Keira's brown eyes sparkled. "I'm so ready to be married to Jon, but I'm nervous."

"Why?" Sylvia frowned. "Is it about the honeymoon?"

Keira smiled. "That and a million other things." She sighed. "All my friends just say I'm having wedding jitters. But I'm trying to balance my happiness and sadness all at once."

Understanding hit Sylvia in a flash. She smiled sympathetically. "Your parents?"

"Yes." Keira wiped her eyes. "Tristan is the only family I have here, and I love him so much. But who's going to take care of him when I leave?"

Sylvia's heart lurched. "Tristan is a big boy. I'm quite sure he can take care of himself."

Keira shrugged. "He'd like everyone to think so." She bit

her lip. "And I've come to ask a favor."

Sylvia tried to calm her racing pulse. Surely to God, Keira wouldn't ask her to become a caretaker of sorts for her brother?

"I realize you don't usually go to weddings." Keira looked her in the eye. "But I'd appreciate it if you could come to mine." She held up her hand before Sylvia could speak. "Just for the wedding. You don't have to stay for the reception." Keira put her hands on Sylvia's. "It would mean so much to me."

Sylvia stood and paced behind her couch. She took a deep breath. "I don't know." She smiled down at the bride-to-be. "I usually stay home for the holidays."

"I know." Keira stood, also. "But I want you there, Sylvia." She paused. "Please?"

Sylvia warred with herself. Her last meeting with Tristan had gone badly. Okay, catastrophic. But then she glanced at Keira and knew she would cave.

"Fine, woman."

Keira smiled and rushed over to hug her. "I can't thank you enough, Sylvia. You won't regret it. I promise."

That remained to be seen.

* * * *

A beautiful day. Sylvia bit back the pain with a great deal of effort. Keira's wedding. So many people waiting to see the lovely bride and groom say their vows and begin their lives together.

Sylvia looked around the cathedral and smiled. Absolutely stunning. The vaulted ceilings decorated with ethereal beings. Stained glass windows that showed the best of humanity. *Where better to begin a new life together?*

Guests filtered in with increasing numbers. Sylvia pressed

her hand to her stomach. She was going to be sick.

Tristan hadn't made an appearance yet. Keira preparing upstairs with her bridesmaids. Jon more than likely getting a pep talk from his best man. Sylvia chuckled softly. Some things never changed.

The pain struck her with a viciousness that made her gasp.

What did she expect? A happily-ever-after with Tristan? Sylvia moaned and clutched her ivory clutch tighter. *Like hell. Damn him anyway.* He had gotten what he wanted. So had she, for that matter.

She had to get the hell out of here. *Soon. Now.*

Sylvia backed up against the wall and closed her eyes briefly. Tempest had everything in hand. No doubt, she could single-handedly run every wedding ever planned. She had a knack for seeing what others didn't.

"Are you okay?"

Speak of the devil. Sylvia smiled and patted her cheek. "I'm a little warm. I may be coming down with something. I believe you have everything in place." She grabbed Tempest's hand. "I'm going home. Please give my best to Keira and Jon."

Tempest's blue eyes studied her silently for a minute. "Sylvia, my dear, Ben & Jerry's isn't going to touch this pain. You realize that, right?" She patted Sylvia's hand and smiled. "Aren't you going to at least give Keira your wishes yourself?"

"I can't." Sylvia shook her head vehemently. "I've got to leave."

Tempest leaned in and kissed her cheek. "It will be the wedding of the century." She moved back. "And I have a gift for you, Sylvia." She frowned. "It's not going to be the most pleasant endowment, but you need it." She laid her hands on both of Sylvia's cheeks. "I give you honesty, Sylvia. A truth

that can't be denied or buried under ice cream. And the time to know that we can't fool ourselves. No matter how much we wish it."

Sylvia's body infused with a warmth she had never known. Her feelings rose to the surface with a forcefulness that took her breath. It hurt. All of it hurt.

Tears sprang to her eyes. She blinked them back and looked at Tempest. "What did I say?"

"You said you must leave." Tempest sighed. "I'll take care of everything." Her blue eyes saddened. "You simply take care of yourself. Please."

Sylvia watched her assistant walk away and took a deep breath. She needed to go home. To her sanctuary. Sylvia turned on her heel and stopped in her tracks.

Tristan. God help her. His companion caused her even further heartache. A stunning brunette dressed to the nines in a designer copper dress that hugged every curve of her voluptuous body. It cut low in the front and back. Gleaming bronze skin shone under the church lights.

Tristan ducked his head low and chuckled at something his companion said. Sylvia groaned as her stomach rolled again.

She was about to turn and run for the nearest exit when Tristan lifted his head and pinned her with those brandy-colored eyes.

Shit.

Self-preservation kicked in, and Sylvia turned and strode purposefully in the opposite direction. She didn't get far enough.

"Going somewhere?"

Damn the man and his smooth voice, anyway.

Sylvia turned with a small smile that cost her more than

she would care to admit.

"I actually had plans this afternoon. Please give Keira my best."

Tristan arched an eyebrow. "Plans? Do tell."

She set her jaw. "Plans, Mr. Calhoun. My plans. Be kind enough to give your sister my regards." Sylvia's blue eyes widened as Tristan's companion walked over to join them.

"Darling!" The cover model linked her arm in Tristan's. "You simply left me over there by myself." She pouted.

"My apologies, Vivica." Tristan smiled tightly. "I needed to come over and speak with Ms. Masters a moment."

"Sylvia Masters?" The cover model smiled and showed teeth that an orthodontist would fall down on his knees and thank God for. The woman stuck out her hand. "It's a pleasure, Ms. Masters. I'm Vivica Chambers, a friend of the family. Your work is absolutely stunning." She motioned around. "The colors and scheme are perfect."

"That's our Ms. Masters." Tristan nodded. "Quite the perfectionist. Though I do agree that the overall effect is faultless."

Damn Tristan to hell and back. He simply stood there looking at her while his companion cooed over the flowers and the decor. *Arrogant bastard.*

"I'm glad you're enjoying the outcome, Ms. Chambers. My staff and I put in a lot of hard work to achieve something we know Keira will appreciate for a lifetime." Sylvia nodded her head. "Now. If you'll excuse me."

"Not quite so fast." Tristan's hand shot out and closed around Sylvia's arm. He disengaged Vivica and pushed her lightly in the direction of the open doors. "Find us a seat, Vivica. I'll be there in just a moment."

Vivica studied Tristan and then Sylvia. She shrugged and walked through the doors into the chapel.

"I hate you," Sylvia bit out. Color suffused her cheeks. "You have no reason to speak to me, Mr. Calhoun. Your sister's day will be picture perfect. I've left Tempest in charge. There's no reason for me to stay."

"Isn't there?" Tristan's hand stroked up and down her arm.

Sylvia removed his hand and prayed for the strength to finish the conversation. "I hardly think it prudent for you to be all over me when your date awaits you in the church. Do you?"

Tristan set his jaw. "Sylvia..." he began.

"Don't." She lifted her head and stared him in the eye. "There won't be a next time, Mr. Calhoun. Just keep those models and actresses lined up. They'll service any need you think you have. Leave me alone."

"This isn't over, Sylvia. Not by a long shot." Tristan's voice calm though his eyes were furious. "You're running again. I should have expected it." His voice dropped to a whisper. "It's what you do best." He voice as cold as the arctic. He turned and walked through the same doors that Vivica did.

Well. That was grand. Just how she hoped it would play out.
Fuck. It. All.

She owed Keira. That simple. But God, she wanted to run. To totally ignore Tristan and his date. Maybe she would just stand in the back so she could witness the blessed event. And then she could leave before another confrontation with Tristan.

Sylvia stiffened her backbone and walked behind the last pew on the bride's side. A smile lifted her mouth. It was

stunning.

Large magnolia blooms decorated the end of every pew with a lovely gold rim on each petal. Some of the centers were dyed green to match the ribbons that tied the bouquets and adorned the preacher's podium. The preacher leaned forward and whispered something to Jon. Jon's grin broadened, and Sylvia smiled from where she stood.

Sylvia looked down in the front on the bride's side and noticed Tristan leaned down to say something to Vivica before he straightened and walked down the aisle to retrieve his sister.

Their eyes met for a split second, and Sylvia watched him stumble a bit before he straightened his tie and strode through the doors behind her. He turned at the last minute and gave her a small smile. And then he was gone.

Tempest came to stand beside Sylvia.

"Mr. Calhoun seemed happy to see you."

Sylvia arched an eyebrow. "Is that your professional opinion?"

"That it would be, Ms. Masters." Tempest patted her arm. "And I know Keira will be glad you're here. This is your masterpiece, also. And it's a testament to you and your business."

Sylvia looked at the church with an impassive eye. It was. It truly conveyed both bride, groom, and their future.

A warm feeling blossomed in her chest. This is what weddings were supposed to be. A merger of sorts. Two hearts committing to a life with each other. For better. For worse. Sylvia's throat clogged, and she fought back the tears she felt just behind her eyelids. She'd never cried at one of her weddings. Not once.

The organist started the *Wedding March*, and everyone in the church stood. The bridesmaids were stunning in their cream-colored gowns embroidered with gold thread. Each woman wore a circlet of Celtic rings in their hair. They held their bouquets of ivory roses with emerald and gold tips. The groomsmen wore black tuxedos with emerald cummerbunds.

Jon watched each couple eagerly, but Sylvia could see that his eyes were entirely focused on the doorway where his bride-to-be would join him momentarily.

And then she was there.

Sylvia looked from Keira to Jon, and her heart skipped. Love. It filled the church and made her sigh.

Then it was time. Tristan entered with Keira's arm tucked firmly in his. They walked down the aisle to the harmonious music emanating from the organ. Sylvia smiled sadly when the music and the couple stopped. Tristan took Keira's arm and removed it from his. Then he gently took her hand and put it in Jon's. He leaned forward once to say something to his sister. And then once to Jon. With his words spoken, Tristan bowed once to the preacher and sat down in the front row.

Sylvia watched the wedding while her heart burst to overflowing. It was beautiful. The bride and groom. The vows. There came sniffles from both sides as Jon lifted Keira's veil and kissed her.

That was her cue. She had enough time to hurry out to her vehicle and leave. Sylvia massaged her temple as she stepped out of the church and toward her red Corvette. The heels would have to go. Soon. Or she wouldn't be responsible for herself. *Nope*. Sylvia opened her car door with a shaking hand and slid behind the steering wheel. She kicked off the of-

fensive pieces of footwear with a satisfied sigh. She curled her toes into the car's carpet and blew out a breath.

What had she expected? To give herself to Tristan Calhoun and ride off with him into the sunset on his white stallion?

The laugh came out as a sob. As cynical as she thought she was, yes. *Damn it, yes.* That's exactly what she thought. More the fool her. Sylvia hit the steering wheel and cursed. It would be a hell of a lot easier to drive if she didn't have to do it through the waterworks she seemingly couldn't control.

She'd finally snapped. It had only taken a billionaire magnate with charming words and magical hands.

Sylvia scrubbed her hands across her face one more time. All the walls. All the years. And still the tears poured.

She was breaking in half. Her heart would surely never survive the pain. Sylvia pressed her hands to her chest and bowed her head.

And then she felt herself folded into soft arms that cocooned her. Sylvia sighed and settled tighter into the warmth. There had never been any sort of comfort growing up. Mother and Father didn't believe in displays of affection. Public or otherwise.

"You *will* survive, Sylvia." Tempest smoothed back the ebony hair and clucked her tongue. "You've done a hell of a job so far. Raised yourself. A self-made woman. A millionaire, no less." She chuckled. "I would never have picked a weak woman. You carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. Isn't it about time you let a bit of it go?"

Sylvia sniffled and looked up at Tempest through swollen indigo eyes. "I'm tired." She sighed and let her head fall back.

* * * *

Tempest sighed and eased Sylvia into her bed. It had only taken a thought to bring her mortal back home. The Corvette parked safely in the garage. She still had plenty of time to make it back to Keira's wedding. And she would.

The great Tristan Calhoun would soon be missing a goddess-size chunk of his ass. *Oh yes.* Tempest's blue eyes glowed so darkly they appeared almost black. Time to talk to the man himself.

She timed her entrance back at the wedding perfectly. Keira and Jon held court in the reception area surrounded by family and friends. Tristan brooded on the terrace on the second floor.

Tempest bit back her temper when she saw the pure misery etched on his features. Maybe the male was a bit more shook up than he had let on.

Good.

She walked up the stairs and stopped at the top to study Tristan.

He was gorgeous. That tawny hair. Those wondrous eyes. No wonder Sylvia fell for him. The intangibles had hooked her mortal. That kept Sylvia wondering about the man. What he thought. How he acted. Such a puzzling male for her mortal. Of course, Sylvia's lack of experience didn't lend to lengthy comparisons.

"You show remarkable restraint." Tristan spoke without looking at her.

"Do tell." Tempest arched an eyebrow and waited for the stubborn mortal to meet her eyes.

She didn't have long to wait.

Those brandy-colored eyes met hers. "Not going to hit me with a bolt of lightning, are you?"

The statement startled Tempest, but she kept her composure. "I have no idea what you're talking about." She lifted her chin. "Though I would like to smack some sense into you."

Tristan's lips twitched. "I'm sure you would." He leaned in a bit and smiled. "You're not a mere wedding planner, Tempest. What exactly are you?"

Tempest lifted her head and pinned him with her eyes. "Lightning is more Kendra's plaything. I'm the Wind Goddess."

"Ah." Tristan's gaze swept over her from head to toe.

She put her hand on her hip. "And how exactly did you know?"

"I see things." Tristan cocked his hip on the balustrade and smiled lazily. "You have a way about you." He motioned to her. "The feeling is rather like the one I receive from Sylvia. Stubborn. Intelligent. A little itch under my skin."

"Tread lightly, mortal," Tempest warned.

Tristan threw back his head and laughed. "And that, my lovely immortal, is the strongest tie of all." He turned around and watched the trees sway lazily in the breeze. "No one ever asks how I make my decisions. How I know which stock to sell. Which building to buy." He shot her a glance. "Which woman to date."

"And there have been a few." Tempest arched an eyebrow and smiled at Tristan's chuckle.

"A few," Tristan agreed with a shrug. "Vacuous eye candy. Women who are more pleased with a shiny bauble than hours spent feeding the homeless." He paused. "They're easy. So uncomplicated. So easy to please."

"Not Sylvia." Tempest smiled and enjoyed the man's discomfiture. This turned out to be entirely more fun than strug-

gling on her own.

“Not Sylvia.” Tristan sighed. He lifted his head and smiled at Tempest. “I have everything, Tempest. I don’t need anything. But I need her.”

“She struggles.” Tempest picked through her words with care.

“I know.” Tristan raked his fingers through his hair. “She struggles against herself. And that’s the hardest of all to break through.” He sighed. “I don’t have to worry about lightning bolts or Kendra, do I?” He chuckled wryly. “I seem to have a full plate as it is.”

“We Elemental Guardians work together, Tristan. We also have tasks to finish.”

Tristan rubbed his jaw. “Can you help?”

“What do you think I’ve been doing?” Tempest demanded. The wind stirred with her agitation. Tristan smiled and held up his hands. “Point taken.” His hair rippled with the breeze.

Tempest sighed and moved forward. She placed her hands on Tristan’s shoulders. “I have gifted Sylvia twice. I’m allowed no more. All I can do is guide. Give direction.” The wind picked up farther and whipped Tempest’s hair about her face. Her dark blue eyes pinned Tristan’s.

“Sylvia holds the answers deep within herself. In a place that sunlight and love have never seen. She tucks tighter within herself so none other can hurt her. But she knows not the damage she has inflicted upon herself.”

Tristan drew a shaky breath and stuffed his hands in his pockets as Tempest stepped back. “Do mortals tend to start taking medication after you’ve come to town?”

Tempest arched an eyebrow. “You’re made of sterner

stuff, Tristan Fleming Calhoun. This is what you excel at, isn't it?"

Both turned at the excess of noise below them. Keira and Jon stepped out of the front doors and walked arm in arm down the stairs and to the waiting black limousine. Keira turned and looked behind her before Jon tucked her inside. Her eyes moved up and met her brother's. She blew kisses as she ducked inside. Jon quickly followed, and the car pulled away from the curb to carry Keira and Jon to the airport and their new life.

"Isn't it time for your happily-ever-after, Tristan?"

The words were spoken gently but with great purpose. Tristan nodded and turned back to Tempest.

A slight breeze turned into a wind gust that lifted Tempest from the patio. She wrapped her arms around herself and let the current carry her to her next destination.

* * * *

Is being tired terminal? Sylvia yawned and looked at her alarm clock with bleary eyes. She blinked twice and squinted. *Ten-thirty? But it's dark.* She pushed up from her mattress and cursed softly. *It's ten-thirty in the evening.*

The wedding and ensuing scene came back to her with full force, and she sank back to the bed with a groan. She had never been to a wedding that didn't have a few bumps. But the one today was a veritable land mine. What had gotten into her? Jealousy? Hurt feelings? It was no excuse for rudeness.

She skipped out on the reception. *Damn Tristan and his current eye candy. Vivica.* Sylvia scowled. The name perfect for his latest tryst. The pain ebbed and flowed within her. All no more than she expected. But that didn't make it any easier.

She was the wedding planner. Not bride material, any-

way. *What did it matter who Tristan brought?*

Sylvia covered her eyes with her hands. *It mattered. Damn it all to hell. It mattered entirely too much.* Those hours she spent with Tristan felt right. And she could try to bury them, but they seemed to creep right back up into her thoughts.

Wasn't she ever enough? The thought haunted her as she lay there. Not enough for her parents. She was a complete disappointment. It wasn't as though they wanted grandkids. Her mother would probably stroke out. More small feet to muddy her precious kitchen. And her father would be as distant and cold to them as he had been to her.

A tear slid down her cheek and landed on her right hand clenched on her light blue bed sheet. *Would the waterworks ever stop?*

She wasn't enough for the two relationships she tried to have in college. Both men dumped her after only six months of dating. Sylvia sighed. Maybe those who couldn't do, planned. The reason why she was so damned good at her job. It wasn't meant for her to be the one walking down the aisle.

"I hate this," she whispered.

And there it was. The truth and the pain and the heart of it. Somewhere deep inside she still wanted that fucking fairy tale. The majestic music swelling while the happy couple rode off happily-ever-after into the sunset.

The ice cream nothing but a sweet and empty substitute.

But what if she was incapable of having that? Of reaching that pinnacle of happiness? What legacy did she leave behind?

A moneymaking business and little else.

Sylvia pushed back the covers and wiped the tears from her eyes. "I am a strong and capable woman. I don't have to settle for this." She quickly stood and pulled a suitcase from

her closet. Clothes landed haphazardly inside it while Sylvia hummed. She quickly packed and then took a shower.

The jeans and ivory sweater suited her. Sylvia pulled on a heavy wool coat and put her suitcase in the car. It was warm somewhere. There were beaches and tropical drinks. Swimming pools and sunshine. And damn it all, she wanted that right now.

Sylvia walked back into her house and made a quick phone call. She explained the situation to Tempest and asked her to watch over the office while she was away. After several quick assurances, she hung up the phone and grabbed her purse.

The phone rang, and Sylvia glanced toward it.

“Not anymore,” she muttered as she walked to her car and her future.

Chapter 9

“Where the hell is she?”

Tempest looked up and smiled at the bear of the man in front of her. “Tristan. Always a pleasure.” She took satisfaction in seeing the powerful man harried and agitated. Her blue eyes glowed in pleasure.

“My ass,” he growled and raked his hands through his hair. “Where is Sylvia?”

“Vacation.”

The short word stopped him in his tracks. His eyes widened. “Pardon me?”

“She’s on vacation, Tristan. On a tropical paradise filled with cabana boys and drinks with fruit sticking out of them.”

“Where?” he demanded.

Tempest arched an eyebrow. “I’m not sure I should tell you that.” She tilted her head to the side. “Why didn’t you pursue this after the wedding? Before she left? It’s been three weeks.”

“That’s something I plan on taking up with Sylvia,” he said stiffly. Tristan narrowed his eyes. “You can just zap me over to where she’s at.”

“I could.” Tempest nodded thoughtfully. “But you’re not

my assignment. And I'm not about to blindside a woman I'm very fond of for your ego."

"My ego? My fucking ego?" Tristan slapped both hands on Tempest's desk. "My ego has nothing to do with it. It's my heart that feels as though it's been ripped from my chest. And I'll be damned if I stand aside while some smooth-talking island asshole makes a move on Sylvia."

Tempest blinked and smiled softly. "Why Tristan Calhoun. You may be just what the doctor ordered. But you realize that Sylvia may not want to see you?"

"Just tell me where she's at. Please," Tristan added.

Tempest wrote down the name of the island and slid the paper across to him. "Give her everything you are, Tristan. She won't settle for less."

He nodded once and left the room.

* * * *

Sun was heavenly. Sylvia reclined in her white chaise lounge with a large straw hat and dark sunglasses. The rays caressed her body and warmed her very insides. Decadent and wonderful. She closed her eyes and let the sun move over her. The small black bikini accented the nice tan she acquired.

The white sand felt like powder beneath her feet when she took her nightly walks. The moon shone down on the blue water and lit the gentle waves.

But the days were her favorites. Palm trees hovered behind her and moved softly in the light breeze. She had paid a bit extra to have a spot of beach to herself. There was splashing and laughter all around, but it didn't detract from her own thoughts.

Work seemed so very far away. Tristan only a thought away, she fought with those thoughts several times a day. But

the pain didn't cut as deep. And it wasn't likely she would run into him anywhere. She didn't get out of the house much. And Tristan would never need her services again.

Sylvia sighed.

"Such a lonely sound for such a beautiful place."

It was a fantasy. A trick of her own sadistic mind. She would keep her eyes shut. The voice would go away. It always did.

"Shouldn't you be off with Vivica or the flavor of the month?"

"Vivica is Keira's friend. They've known each other since kindergarten. I've never dated her. Nor will I. She actually goes to weddings to try and find a couple of lonely bridesmaids. She only approached you because she was hoping for more than a bit of chitchat."

Sylvia frowned. This wasn't how the conversation usually went. She kept her eyes closed. "That's nice, Tristan. But don't you have someone else's thoughts to torture?"

"Am I such torture?"

Sylvia sighed again. "You can be. I came here to relax. But thoughts of you intrude constantly. It hardly seems fair."

A low chuckle.

And that's what brought Sylvia's eyes open with a snap.

For the love of God.

Tristan hovered over her chair with the sun behind him. He wore only a pair of khaki walking shorts that hung low on his hips and a pair of brown sandals.

"You're here." Sylvia blinked several times, but he didn't move. Air clogged in her throat while her heart raced. "You can't be here."

"But I am." Tristan bent down and looked her in the eye.

"I've come for you, Sylvia. Across the continents. Just for you." He cupped her cheek.

Sylvia scrambled to a sitting position and frowned. "I have heat stroke. I'm hallucinating."

"Is it so easy for you to think me an illusion rather than a man who's come for you?" Tristan frowned. "That's hardly flattering."

"Oh, go away." She shooed his hand from her and glared at him. "This is my vacation." She stressed the last word. "Isn't that what you constantly threw at me? Well. I took your advice. And that vacation did not include you popping up and talking nonsense."

Tristan stood and looked at her from head to toe. "It suits you," he murmured huskily. "The vacation. And that scrap of fabric they call a bikini."

Sylvia flushed, and her nipples peaked against the black fabric. She wanted him. An easy enough fact to admit. Memories of their time together moved through her. But what number was she? Fifty? Five hundred? There was so much more than physical satisfaction. And she wanted it all.

"How's Keira?"

Tristan's lips twitched. "Happy beyond happy. That's what she tells me. Jon dotes on her. And she on him. It's a good match."

"It is," Sylvia agreed. She reached for her drink and took a sip to have something to do with her hands. "Why are you really here?"

Tristan sat on the end of her chaise and rubbed her ankle. "I've come for you, Sylvia."

She studied him. "Why now? Why me?"

He looked away. "The wedding was not the right time."

And I thought if I gave you time afterward, we could start again. But then you were gone. And you didn't come back."

"I'm taking two months." Sylvia set her drink back down and tucked her hair behind her ears. "I need it. To get myself straight. To find myself."

"And what have you found, Sylvia Masters?"

Her blue eyes pinned him. "I've found I've barely lived these past thirty-something years. I've found I lost myself in the numbers and the job. I became so focused on others' happiness that I neglected my own. It's something I plan to make sure won't ever happen again."

"Good."

The single word startled her. Tristan's wolf eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "I see many things when I look at you. The least of which is your bank account."

"What do you see?" Sylvia whispered.

Tristan's hands continued slow circles on her skin. "I see an overachiever. A woman who excels at everything in her world. A bit of a control freak."

Sylvia chuckled.

"A free spirit stuffed in an adult who made her own way," he continued. "A woman who knows what she wants but is unsure of how to attain it."

"And what do I want, Tristan?" Sylvia asked. "Because sometimes I don't think I know myself."

"You want me, of course."

Sylvia arched an eyebrow. "Good thing you've foregone the straw hat. It couldn't hold that big head if it tried." She tried to laugh.

"And I want you." Tristan bent and kissed her calf. "All of you. Not for a night. Not for a month. For the rest of my life."

"No." The denial came first to her lips. "You can't."

"Do you know why I want you, Sylvia?" Tristan moved farther up the chaise. "I don't need anything. I have more money than one man should have. I can get a date in two seconds. I can travel anywhere in the world."

"Braggart."

Tristan shrugged. "It's the truth, and you know it. But it means little." He looked at the ocean. "I wanted women who wanted little from me. A piece of jewelry. A new silk blouse. A new pair of shoes. They were easy to handle. Almost like a business transaction."

Sylvia frowned. "That's rather cold."

"Tell me about it." Tristan sighed. "And then one day I come upon a woman who reminded me so much of myself. Bent over ledgers. Excelling at business. Controlling her life. And I became hooked." He paused. "I don't want a shadow of a woman when I can have an intelligent female with a mind as sharp as my own. A woman who gives as good as she gets." He paused. "And I rather think Keira had quite a bit to do with this."

"What?" Sylvia frowned. "What do you mean?"

Tristan smiled. "Not only did Keira want you because you are the best, she confided in me after her honeymoon that she was doing a bit of matchmaking."

Sylvia's mouth formed a surprised O. "You're kidding, right?"

"Not about a bit of it." Tristan rubbed Sylvia's leg slowly up and down. "She thought she was clever throwing us together. A couple of people so much alike and yet so alone." His brandy-colored eyes met hers. "She was right."

Sylvia's heart stuttered in her chest. "I can't grasp

this," she murmured.

"What can't you grasp?"

"I don't think I'm what you need." Sylvia frowned. "I'll drive you crazy. We'll argue constantly."

"Do you love me?" Tristan watched her carefully. "Do you love me as you've never loved another?"

"I don't know if I even know what love is," Sylvia murmured. "There wasn't an abundance of it in my childhood with my parents. I don't want to screw things up."

"Are you scared?" Tristan arched an eyebrow and waited for a response.

"Yes. Damn you." Sylvia's blue eyes searched the horizon for answers. "What if you have me and then decide I'm not really what you want? What if I give so much of myself to you that there's nothing left for me?"

"Sylvia." Tristan cupped her chin and turned her head so their eyes could meet. "Listen to me." He paused and took a breath. "I will never take all of you. I would never destroy your spirit or your hope. I will always let you be exactly who you were meant to be." He chuckled. "Argumentative and headstrong. Intelligent and beautiful." Tristan leaned in closer until they were a mere inch apart.

"I love you," he whispered against her mouth.

Sylvia sobbed and threw herself against him. "I love you, too, Tristan."

His strong arms came around her and banded her body closer to his. "Say it again."

"I love you!" she shouted and then pulled his mouth to hers.

Time seemed to stop as the couple wound themselves around each other.

"Marry me," Tristan murmured.

Sylvia pulled back and looked at Tristan in shock. “Marriage?”

“Yeah.” He smiled. “You know. That little ritual that says I can leave the cap off the toothpaste, and you won’t kill me. Or when I use your best doily to wipe the grease off my hands after I work on the car.”

She laughed. “I don’t have doilies. You don’t work on cars.”

Tristan took her hand and put it on his heart. “Same sentiment.” He brushed his lips across hers. “Marry me. Yell at me. Hold me at night. Challenge me. Be there for the rest of my life.”

Tears clogged Sylvia’s throat at his words. “Oh, Tristan.” She brushed a tear from his cheek. “You are my happily-ever-after, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Tristan murmured as he pulled her back to him. “I am.”

* * * *

Sylvia married Tristan on an island in the Caribbean wearing her fairytale dress with Keira and Jon as witnesses. The goddesses watched and cried when the couple said their vows.

Tempest held her arm out as a jade green bracelet appeared on her wrist. She cooed and traced the symbols branded into the metal.

“And aren’t you the prettiest piece of jewelry I’ve ever worn?”

Wilda snickered. “You two need a moment?”

Tempest’s head snapped back up. She glanced at her sisters. All of whom were trying desperately not to laugh. She held her head high and smoothed her dress. “I

worked very hard for this.”

“We know, sister.” Kendra smiled and then looked at Eden. “You are the last.”

“I am.” Eden brushed her thick chestnut hair back from her face.

Wilda walked over to Eden and put her arm around her shoulders. “The wisest of us all.”

Eden snickered. “Well. The oldest. I have a feeling ‘the wisest’ is about to be put to the test.” She took a deep breath. “I have a confession.”

Kendra’s light blue eyes widened. “A confession?”

Wilda arched an eyebrow. “Well. This ought to be good.”

Eden bit her lip. “Oh yes. It’s absolutely great.” She moved away from Wilda and faced her three sisters.

Wilda wore a filmy ruby dress that left her arms bare. She let her hair fall in long waves down her back. Her green eyes fixed on Eden.

Kendra wore a light blue pant suit that clung to her slender curves. Her hair pulled back into a long ponytail tied with a blue ribbon. Her light blue eyes were troubled as she looked at Eden.

Tempest wore a jade sari with her hair unbound. She played with her bracelet and watched Eden carefully.

It was almost too much.

Eden smoothed down her own copper gown and turned from them. She pulled her thick hair back into a simple chignon and gathered her thoughts.

They were bound to be furious. As would their father be, if he ever found out. What she had done was forbidden. But it had been necessary. Hadn’t she gone over her actions again

and again until a headache formed?

Eden turned back to her sisters. "I helped a mortal."

Wilda blinked. "That's what we do."

Eden shrugged her shoulders. "This wasn't exactly along the line of what we do."

"What exactly did you do?" Tempest looked scared but desperately tried to hide it.

Of all the sisters, Eden bore the most responsibility. Always levelheaded. The peacemaker. She was the glue that held the sisters together.

She met each of her sisters' eyes in turn. "I saved one."

Kendra clapped her hand over her mouth. Tempest looked to be in shock. Only Wilda spoke.

"Well, damn it all, Eden!" She strode over to her sister and scowled. "What possessed you? What in the hell were you thinking?"

"I thought she needed to live." Eden's brown eyes snapped in fury. "I thought it was a damn shame an eleven-year-old girl needed to give up her young life."

"Hold up." Tempest paced. "So you stepped in and helped her." She glanced up at Eden. "So what?"

"She would have died."

The sisters gasped. Eden was right. It was forbidden. They could guide. But they couldn't completely alter a mortal's life. And Eden had done just that.

"Oh. Shit." Wilda sank into a seat that appeared under her. She rubbed her temple. "This is bad. This is extremely damn bad."

"I bear full responsibility." Eden held her head high. "I would do it again."

Tempest growled. "Well, that's damn peachy." She

walked over to Eden. "Was she worth it, Eden? To break the rules? To almost certainly be punished by Father?"

"Every damn second."

Kendra spoke. "Tell us what you did."

Eden clasped her hands in front of her. "We always watch them. You know that."

The sisters nodded in unison.

"It was many years ago. I was planting irises. I remember it so well." Her brown eyes softened in memory. "I was down in my knees in the garden when I heard a small cry."

She looked at her sisters. "It tore at my heart. That sound." She gestured helplessly. "It sounded like a soul dying."

Kendra shivered.

Wilda nodded. "Continue."

"I dropped my trowel and willed myself to the clouds. When I looked for the mortal, I was frantic." Eden shook her head. "I don't know how to explain it. I had to find her. I had to do anything and everything in my power to help."

"And you did." Tempest put her hands on her hips.

"She was broken," Eden whispered. "A slip of a girl lying on the ground. She lost consciousness as soon as she fell." She looked at her sisters, her eyes filled with anguish. "Her soul cried out to me. I couldn't turn from her."

"And then?"

Eden looked at Kendra first. And then Tempest and Wilda. "The mortals gathered around her. They knew it to be a horrible accident. Her right leg." Eden took a breath. "It had been crushed. The girl was riding a horse when it occurred. The horse fell and rolled onto her. Her head hit the ground so hard that her brain bled. She would die. And I couldn't let her."

"Why this girl?" Wilda demanded. "Why did you jeopard-

ize who you were for her?”

“She’s a part of me.”

Her sisters gasped. It was no less than what Eden expected. As many mortals as they had helped through the centuries, not one had mattered enough to break the rules for.

“Explain,” Tempest demanded.

“I looked at her. Through her,” Eden explained. “There was a connection between us. A mortal girl who knows nothing of goddesses. And the Earth Goddess who knew nothing of mortal girls.”

“What did you do?” Kendra asked softly.

Eden smiled at Kendra. Of the sisters, she knew Kendra had the softest heart and would understand the best. “I mended her brain tissue. I couldn’t wholly fix her leg because the mortals would have been suspicious. But I healed the leg as best I could. There were so many bones broken.” She dabbed at her eyes. “And I talked to her.”

“I am so disavowing knowledge of this conversation when Dad finds out,” Tempest muttered.

“She needed me.” Eden smiled softly. So I sat by her bed when she fell asleep and talked of nonsense.” Eden frowned. “Her parents ignored her, for the most part. They only came when the reporters did.”

“Reporters?” Wilda frowned. “You took a lot of risks.”

“I did.” Eden acknowledged. “And as I previously stated, I would again.”

“What happened to her?” Kendra asked.

“I’m glad you asked.” Eden stepped to the edge of the clouds and waved them away. Her sisters stepped forward to peer down at the mortal world. And then the woman appeared.

The mortal knelt on a mat in front of her garden with a

handful of bulbs and a trowel. Her short brown hair twisted and clipped in the back to keep it from her face. An old pair of blue jeans and a faded blue T-shirt clung to her curvy frame. She wore gardening gloves and swiped at the sweat on her brow periodically.

The mortal dug with a single-minded purpose. Her dark brown eyes intense on pulling weeds and placing bulbs in the rich dirt. A pitcher of lemonade and a single glass waited for her in the shade.

The garden a beautiful maze of landscaping. A wooden gazebo sat dead center in the middle of the lawn with an amazing handmade picnic table and benches.

“How old is she now?” Tempest asked.

Eden smiled. “She turned forty over the winter. A woman who has lived a full life. A strong spirit that has conquered many fears and believes that all the hopes she had that never came true did so for a reason. She thinks she’s in the twilight of her life.”

Wilda frowned. “That’s nice. But why tell us this now?”

Eden smiled a secret smile. “Her name is May. And I choose her.”

Author's Note To Readers:

Dear Readers,

A woman's worth isn't measured in numbers. It isn't the size of her waist, her bank account, or her shoe size that's important. A woman's worth is measured in her deeds, her heart, and her legacy.

Don't be blinded by how others measure you. Don't let them take pieces of you for themselves and leave you feeling diminished.

Make your life memorable. Embrace who you are with all your quirks and whims.

Sing in the rain. Make snow angels. Play in the mud.

I dare ya.

Crystal Inman

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

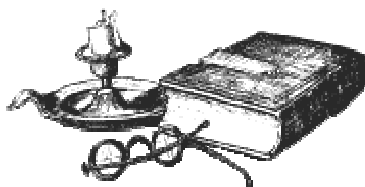
Crystal Inman is a prolific author who likes to push the boundaries of writing. She writes Contemporary, Paranormal, Time Travel, Erotic, and Fantasy Romance. Many of her novels are bestsellers and continue to enchant readers. She's written about love in the world of Virtual Reality. Love that won't be denied even through the decades. Love that conquers the harshest of curses. And love that sees through the façade to the heart of the matter. Crystal lives with her three teenage daughters in the middle of nowhere with a messy desk, pieces of her sanity, and a manic mind.

The writing always calls to her, persistently, and she loves every minute of it.

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