



Hidden Desires
Susan K. Droney

HIDDEN DESIRES

by

Susan K. Droney

WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Published by
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS
Whiskey Creek Press
PO Box 51052
Casper, WY 82605-1052
www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Copyright © 2008 by Susan K. Droney

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 (five) years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Names, characters and incidents depicted in this book are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author or the publisher.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN 978-1-60313-287-9

Credits

Cover Artist: Rika Singh
Editor: EJ Gilmer

Printed in the United States of America

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *HEARTS ON FIRE*

Excellent

This is an interesting love story, with complications that reach down to the emotional levels. The flow is smooth, the characters well described, and well expressed family units of love and caring, with spicy sex.

Reviewed by: Polly

MayReviews.com

Hearts on Fire, is a heart warming and charming tale of four women who have loved, lost and found themselves in a place to love again. The romance between the couples is hot, steamy and incredibly heartfelt. I thought this was a fabulous story that showed the different aspects of relationships, in various stages of development and portrayed them in such a true to life manner that you couldn't help but love them all. Ms. Droney has a style of writing that's smooth, compelling, classy, and leaves the reader feeling satisfied. Reviewed by: Tammy

Fallen Angel Reviews

Hearts on Fire is a richly detailed book. All the secondary characters get their moments of glory as well. There are multiple relationships and secondary storylines running throughout this book. All the storylines are skillfully intertwined, with plenty of emotion running through them all. Romantic and filled with emotion. Hearts on Fire is an ideal book for a cold autumn night, tucked up next to the fire.

Reviewer: Michelle Naumann

Just Erotic Romance Reviews

Hearts on Fire is a passionate, well written novella. The conversations between two of the main characters, Brianna and Chandler, are thought provoking and inspiring. The close ties depicted by Brianna's family shows how most adversities can be dealt with providing they hold maturity, love and understanding within. All in all, Hearts on Fire, is a gorgeous tale that will warm you from head to toe and, most possibly, will drive you to distraction.

Carrie White

[One Reviewer](#)

Susan K. Droney is a fabulous writer with a lot of talent for bringing out her characters and painting their emotions with words. Her writing flows smoothly; the plot twists and turns without losing focus on what is really at stake for Brianna and her friends, as well as her aunt. This reviewer highly recommends this contemporary story. It has all the elements of great romance: sexual heat, love, as well as drama. Although classed as erotic, HEARTS ON FIRE is sex with not only plot, but class. The sexual scenes are well plotted and while they are HOT, they are also dramatic and thought provoking.

Reviewer: Angie

Love Romances

Accepting the faults of your close friends is easy – the hard part is coming to terms with your own. Hearts on Fire provides a very true to life picture of the interaction of many women. The situations that they find themselves in can happen. Mingled through these difficult life lessons is quite a charming romance. When the women finally learn to accept their lives as they are, not as they believe them to be, some very positive changes occur. Be prepared for some spicy sex scenes. Quite an enjoyable and insightful afternoon read.

Reviewer: Naomi

**Other Books by Author Available at
Whiskey Creek Press:**

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Dedication

With much love to my family for your support.
I'd also like to thank my wonderful editor EJ,
cover artist Ginger,
and Whiskey Creek Press for making this book possible.

Chapter 1

Sage stood up and stretched her cramped legs. Sitting in front of a computer screen all day was not her idea of fun, but it paid the bills—well, it paid rent to her parents with whom she still lived. She longed for a place of her own, but rents were high and her income was low. It was one of the reasons she'd handed in her resignation a month ago. She hated leaving this place. It was an easy job with low stress and she enjoyed the friendship of her two co-workers, but if she and Ryan were going to find a decent place to live after they married, she needed a job which paid more. Ryan was doing all he could to further their financial security, but four years of college had left him with nothing but a stack of loans, and no prospects to further his dream of someday becoming a film producer in California. Until they could get out from under the mound of bills, their dream to move to California would be put on hold. That, coupled with the fact Sage really didn't want to leave Buffalo, until she was certain her mother would be safe, added to her worries.

Sage gazed out of the window, longing to be outside in the fresh air as she watched people hurrying up and down the busy street. In a lot across the street four husky teenaged boys shot hoops, while a group of younger children played tag. She shifted her attention to her friends, who were busy at their computers. Heather Sims and Debbie Collins were as different as day and night. Heather was the quieter and more serious of the two, but she had an engaging personality once one got to know her. She was

olive-skinned, green-eyed and plain, and wouldn't ordinarily cause anyone to give her a second glance if it weren't for her long, jet-black hair, which she wore straight and loose. The right men always seemed to elude her, but she never gave up hope that someday soon Mr. Right would come along. Sage knew when he did, he'd find a warm and generous woman in Heather.

Debbie, on the other hand, was outgoing, fun loving, petite, blonde, blue-eyed and beautiful. She knew her looks and sexuality, which she had no problem using to her advantage, could get her just about any man she set her sights on, and she had confided more than once to Heather and Sage that her favorite pastime was sex. If a man couldn't satisfy her, then any other assets he may possess didn't matter. She'd shared intimate details about many of her exploits, not caring whether Heather and Sage wanted to hear. Sage didn't, but Heather seemed eager to hear every detail. Sage, usually red-faced, ignored what Debbie would say, but deep down inside wondered if Debbie truly did all the things she professed. Still, Debbie had a heart of gold and Sage valued her friendship.

Heather clicked off her computer monitor. "I'm glad this day's over. Two days of freedom!"

"You said it," Sage agreed.

"Debbie, did you finish the Fulton contract?" Heather asked. "If not, I'll give you a hand so you're not stuck here too much past five."

"Ten minutes ago, but thanks." Debbie shut down her computer, then turned and looked at Sage. "So, this is really your last day. It's not going to be the same around here without you." She made a sad face.

Sage laughed. "I'm going to miss you two, but if Ryan and I ever hope to start a life together, we need more money and, as much as I love this job, I have to go where I can make more."

"Instead of you paying rent to your parents and Ryan paying rent for his apartment, why don't you two just move in together?"

What's the big deal about having to be married first? I've never understood your reluctance." Debbie wrinkled her nose. "No one waits to have sex anymore. Besides, what if he's not what you expect in bed?"

Sage frowned. "I'm old-fashioned. I don't want to live with him until I'm his wife. I'm sure he'll be everything and more on our wedding night." She couldn't tell them the real truth. She'd tried on several occasions, but the right words always evaded her. They'd probably think her a freak.

Her dreams of making love with Ryan haunted her nightly, but then her father's accusing image interrupted her dreams, destroying her beautiful visions, twisting them into something filthy and ugly, causing her to awaken in a sweat. The truth was the thought of actually making love terrified her. Ryan didn't even know the truth behind her reluctance, and she assumed he went along with her outdated morals out of love and respect for her, but in the back of her mind she worried how long he would wait before needing something more than a few passionate kisses. Or had he waited?

When they were together, she found herself almost succumbing to him as her need, even if she didn't quite understand what that need was, intensified. She always managed to pull back at the crucial moment, with her father's condemning words mentally ringing in her ears. That's all it took to turn her from a hungry, passionate woman into an icy cold creature.

Heather's eyes narrowed. "Come on, Sage, level with us. You aren't still a virgin, are you? Haven't we taught you anything in the past four years?"

Sage rolled her eyes. "Why is it so taboo? It wasn't very long ago it was a virtue to be a virgin on your wedding night."

Heather laughed. "What century?"

“You’ve never even had oral sex or been fingered?” Debbie asked. “I know we tease you a lot, Sage, but come on, tell us the truth. You have to have done something.”

Sage’s face grew warm. “No, I haven’t.” She avoided Debbie’s penetrating eyes. “I think it’s time we changed the subject now.”

“Okay, just one more question first. You’ve at least seen his cock, haven’t you? I mean even if it isn’t big, how he uses it is what counts. Remember that.”

“Debbie, you’re so bad!” Heather squealed as she stared at Sage, apparently eager for her answer.

Sage’s face burned. “Okay, this conversation is officially over.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just teasing. . . well, not about the size thing, but anyway, what are your plans tonight? Are you and Ryan celebrating the end of your old job and the beginning of the new?”

Sage smiled, relieved Debbie had changed the topic. “We’re going out, but not planning anything special. Probably dinner and a movie. Ryan wanted to splurge on tickets to the theater, but I talked him out of it.”

“He must be quite a guy,” Debbie persisted. “I mean—how many men in this day and age would wait until marriage for a little dessert?”

She should have known Debbie wouldn’t let the topic drop. “Ryan understands my values and he respects them. It’s what makes us so compatible.”

Debbie’s eyebrows shot up. “He’s not a virgin, too, is he?”

Sage’s face grew warm again. “Come on. . . back off. This is definitely a forbidden subject. You both knew from the day we met the topic of sex is off limits with me. I’ll discuss anything but sex.” The truth was Sage had no idea whether Ryan was a virgin or not. They had never discussed it, but she had always assumed he was. Now she wasn’t so sure. She envied Debbie and Heather since they’d had the luxury of becoming childhood friends, then secured

jobs in the same company. There didn't seem to be any topic off limits to them.

Heather, who'd been reclining in her chair, leaned forward. "It was until we knew you were leaving. We figured eventually you'd start sharing some details of your sex life with us since we'd become such close friends and shared with you."

"Not going to happen," she said with a wink. "Besides, I never asked either of you to tell me anything. In fact, much of it I wish I'd never heard. And just because I'm leaving this job doesn't mean I'm leaving my friendship with you two behind."

Debbie sighed. "I guess we may as well give up, Heather. She's never going to tell us. So, what are your plans tonight?" she asked turning her attention to Heather.

"I've got to go over to my aunt's house and help clean out her attic."

"Boring!"

"Actually, it's not. She has some cool stuff packed away up there, and I get to take what I want. Who knows what I'll find...could be some mysterious family secrets buried away."

"It still sounds boring to me."

"Maybe so, but if I psyche myself up, I'll be able to get through the night with Aunt Tess. If I hear one more time how Uncle Matt was an unrecognized war hero whom the army overlooked, I swear I'll scream. I have my own suspicions about him, and who knows, I might just find out the truth. Still, it would be nice to find a treasure worth something more than a couple of bucks."

"You're a dreamer." Debbie smacked her lips. "I'm glad I'm going out dancing. There's a new band I've been dying to hear and they're playing at Mandy's. From the publicity they've been getting, I wouldn't be surprised if some big record producer signs them."

“You’re going to Chippewa?” Heather asked. “Tony strikes me as more of a wings and beer kind of guy, hanging out at the sports bars. The last time I saw him at Decades, he looked like he wanted to be anywhere but there.”

Debbie laughed. “Believe me, sports bars are where he likes to be, but since I love dancing, he’s agreed that twice a month he’ll take me to the club to dance. Good music and close dancing always puts me in the mood. Which reminds me, I’ve got to stop at the pharmacy to pick up some condoms.”

Heather laughed. “What doesn’t put you in the mood?”

Debbie feigned shock.

“Tony must be quite a guy.”

“He is—in bed anyway.”

“You’ve been seeing him for awhile now. I think you’ve set a record.”

“He satisfies me totally in all areas, but I don’t need a Tony, Jr., and he can’t be relied on to bring protection.”

“Why do you need condoms when you use birth control?” Sage naively asked.

“I don’t want to catch anything. I don’t know who the hell he may have slept with.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?”

Debbie shrugged, but Sage sensed from the look in her eyes it did. Maybe Tony was the man she’d been searching for. Lately he seemed to be the only guy she ever talked about. To know he was sleeping around had to bother her on some level, though. She’d be devastated if Ryan ever did that to her.

“I’m just happy for the times we are together. He’s not the type of man to be tied down, but if he was I’d hope to be the one he chose.”

“What would you do if you got pregnant?” Heather asked.

“That’s why I use protection. If I did get pregnant, though, I would keep the baby with or without Tony’s help. I may be today’s woman, but I could never destroy something conceived from love.”

“Did you ever consider what Tony’s reaction would be?”

“I don’t know, and hope I won’t find out.”

“I’ve learned a lot from you two, and I’m going to miss seeing the both of you every day,” Sage said.

Heather smiled. “Hey, you’d better stay in touch.”

“We’ll keep our girls night out. Just the three of us like always,” Debbie added. “We’ll need to catch up on all the current news in your life, Sage.”

“Of course.” Sage picked up her personal items and placed them in her bag. Her eyes, brimming with tears, swept around the office for the final time. It was hard leaving the only two friends she’d ever really had. She hoped they’d always remain friends, but she knew how people tended to drift in and out of one another’s lives, meaning to stay forever, but then being uprooted and becoming so busy in the world, time slipped by and those who were once held so precious just became a vague memory.

Heather and Debbie joined her at her desk.

She stood up and scooped Debbie and Heather into her arms. “You two are the best friends anyone could have.”

* * * *

As Sage slowly walked the block home from her bus stop in the early spring sunshine, her heart felt lighter than it had in months. She loved spring with everything fresh and new. It was a time for new beginnings and it filled her heart with the hope anything was possible. When she arrived at her simple but comfortable home, her mother greeted her at the door. Loni Ralston was definitely an old-fashioned woman and had welcomed her home this way ever since Sage was a small child, watching out of the window as Sage bounded off of the school bus each afternoon and even now, she sometimes treated Sage like she was still that child. Loni

had devoted her life to keeping house and cooking fabulous meals for her family. If she'd had any dreams of her own, she'd never mentioned them, and appeared content staying at home taking care of her family's needs. Sometimes Sage saw a sadness, or maybe it was a longing, in her mother's eyes. Had she lost her dreams somewhere along the way?

"Sage, you must be starved! I saved your dinner. Sit down and I'll get it for you."

Sage smiled brightly at her mother. Loni was still slim and attractive with barely a wrinkle, and Sage had always envied her mother's creamy complexion. Sage had gotten her auburn hair and green eyes from her mother. She hoped she'd always be as energetic as her mother still was. She never seemed to tire, and Sage rarely recalled a time her mother wasn't cooking or sewing.

"Mom, thanks, but I'm really not hungry. Heather and Debbie took me out to lunch and I ate more than I should've." She followed her mother into the cramped, dimly lit kitchen. "Did Ryan call?"

"Yes, and he said he'd call back later. How are Heather and Debbie?" She set Sage's dinner on the table as Sage reached for the phone. "They seem like such nice girls. I'll bet you'll miss not working with them."

"They're fine, and yes, I really will miss talking to them everyday." Sage looked into her mother's eyes. Again the longing look was there. Was she lonely? She had to be. She never talked to anyone outside of Sage and Sage's father, Matt. Her parents seldom socialized. If Loni longed for female companionship, she'd never cultivated any friendships, so Sage had always assumed her mother enjoyed, for the most part, the life she had carved out for herself.

She smiled. "I hope you three will stay in touch. Now eat your dinner before it gets cold. Ryan can wait a little longer."

"Mom, I'm really not hungry. I told you I had a huge lunch, but thanks for saving it for me."

“Okay, honey. I’ll wrap it up. If you’re hungry later, just pop it into the microwave.”

“Thanks.” She carried the cordless phone with her into the living room and punched in Ryan’s number. “I’m home now. What time do you want to pick me up? Okay—love you, too.” Sage clicked off the phone with a smile on her lips, then turned seeing her father looking at her with an annoyed expression on his face. “Hello, Dad,” she said with a bright smile.

“Sage, why were you rude to your mother?”

“I wasn’t,” she replied, watching the familiar dark cloud pass over his face. He had his fighting face on, and she wasn’t in the mood. She walked toward the staircase. “I’ve got to change.”

“Don’t walk away from me when I’m speaking to you!”

“I didn’t realize you hadn’t finished.” She turned, facing him.

“I have plenty to say!” His gaze stayed fixed on her. “Don’t you appreciate anything your mother does for you?”

“Of course I do, but I’m not hungry. I don’t see what the problem is. Mom’s not upset.”

“I’m beginning to think you don’t appreciate anything anyone does for you. You’ve had it too easy your entire life.”

Sage fought to control her temper. “That’s the problem, Dad. You and Mom still treat me like a little girl. Look at me...come on, take a good look. Damn it, I’m a grown woman!” She shook her head, then hurried up the stairs to her bedroom. She rummaged through her closet, found a casual outfit, then took a quick shower.

Twenty minutes later, when she came downstairs, her parents were waiting for her in the living room.

“Don’t tell me you’re going out again tonight,” her father said sarcastically.

“Ryan’s picking me up in a few minutes.”

“Call him and cancel. We need to talk.”

Sage let her breath out in a rush. "I don't want to cancel. We can talk later...I'll be home early." She put the palm of her hand on her forehead. "I don't want to argue. I'm getting a headache. I need to get some fresh air."

"I said we are going to have a talk—now!"

"Dad, I'm twenty-two years old! Please quit treating me like a child. When are you going to wake up and realize I've grown up?"

"You are not going anywhere tonight. I forbid it!"

"Dad, I'm an adult. I said we can talk when I get back. Good-night, Dad...Mom." She walked towards the front door. "I won't be too late." As she grasped the doorknob, her father's heavy hands grabbed her shoulders and swung her around.

"You're going to show some respect around here, Sage! You seem to forget whose house this is."

She winced as her father's fingers dug deep into her flesh. "How can I forget when you constantly remind me? I do pay rent, remember? That alone should prove I'm a responsible adult." She tried to squirm out of his grasp. "You're hurting me, damn it! Get your hands off of me!"

"What did I tell you about swearing?" He removed a hand from her shoulder, but before she could turn, the back of his hand cracked across her mouth.

"You bastard!" she cried as her hand flew to her lips. "You promised."

He removed his other hand from her shoulder and, still glaring at her, moved back a few steps. "You'd better watch that mouth of yours."

"Matt, why?" Loni shouted, rushing to Sage. "Let me see."

"Stay away from her," he demanded.

"How could you do this?" Sage tasted the blood from her cut lip. "You've promised so many times, Dad, you'd never strike me or Mom ever again. You're a liar!"

“You made me do it! It’s your fault, not mine! I’ve tried to raise you to be a proper young woman, but you insist on acting like a whore, running around night after night with that good for nothing scum, doing only God knows what.”

“There’s no use trying to reason with you.” She stomped out of the house.

Chapter 2

Loni stared in disbelief as the door slammed shut. “Matt, why?” she cried. “I thought that part of our life was behind us. You gave me your word it would never happen again!”

She’d wanted to lash out at him and comfort her daughter, but had kept her silence as usual. She knew her husband too well and when he flew into one of his rages, it was best to keep quiet. It would have certainly only made matters worse for Sage if she had tried to defend her, but still it sickened her that she hadn’t. What kind of mother was she for subjecting her only child to this insane abuse all these years? But still, if she had defended her, Matt would have only inflicted more abuse on Sage. He wouldn’t tolerate being berated in front of his daughter, even though his behavior was extreme and unwarranted. Did Sage know how much she loved her and wanted her to have more out of life—more than she’d ever had or could possibly ever dream of having?

Matt stood stiff, but showed no remorse. “Let’s see what’s on TV.”

“No, Matt, you and I need to have a talk...right now.”

“I’m not in the mood for any more talking. I’ll deal with Sage when she gets her ass home.”

“We need to go back to therapy.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Just like before...only then I couldn’t defend myself, since you waited until I was too sick to know what you were doing.” His voice was cold.

“Your job was on the line and the department made you go for help. I had nothing to do with the decision. You know it,” Loni stated quietly, masking her growing fear. His eyes simmered. “Your friends were all worried about you, Matt. You kept everything inside and built a wall around yourself. Anything we did was only to protect you.”

“Protect me?” he sneered. “Yeah, some friends I had at the police department...rotten, backstabbing bastards, every one of them! And you,” he said, walking slowly towards her as he jabbed the air with his index finger. “You and Sage made me out to be some kind of raving lunatic! It’s a wonder they didn’t lock me up for good then and there. Accusing me of all sorts of things, when the only thing I was guilty of was providing for my family. I tried to give you and Sage a good life. You were happy until that brat came along!” He stopped, glared at her, and then continued walking towards her.

“We were only trying to help you, not hurt you.” She kept her eyes focused on him as he drew closer. The evil, twisted look on his face terrified her. She’d seen the same look too many times. “I wanted you to be the man I’d married, not the stranger you’d become. What happened, Matt? What went wrong?”

“You betrayed me.”

“No, Matt, I didn’t. I knew what the force meant to you. I didn’t want to see you throw your career away, but that’s exactly what was happening. I was trying to protect you, not hurt you. You keep your anger bottled up inside and when it erupts, there’s no stopping you. Why can’t you talk about what’s bothering you?”

“I’m no different than my father and his father. It’s you women who’ve changed. A woman needs to know her place.”

“A woman has the right to her own feelings and opinions, Matt. A marriage should enhance one another’s strong points and work on the weak ones.”

“You’ve never had to work a day in your life. You don’t know the pressures.”

“Maybe I should’ve gotten a job or a career. I’m lonely, Matt. Has it ever occurred to you taking care of the house isn’t fulfilling?”

“I know a lot of women who’d trade places with you in a minute.”

“Maybe so, if other parts of their life are satisfying.”

His eyes narrowed. “What the hell is that supposed to mean? You’re an ungrateful bitch!”

Loni watched his eyes grow darker. “No, I’m grateful you provide so well for us.” Her bottom lip trembled as she saw his fist clench. “Just calm down.”

“They ended up sacking me anyway. Not once did you stick up for me. You were ready to let me rot in the nut house. You don’t know what it’s like in there.” He shuddered.

“No, I did defend you. I only wanted you to get the help you needed. I told everyone how well you always provided for Sage and me. You’re not listening to me, Matt. You don’t see you are your own worst enemy. You wouldn’t cooperate with any of the doctors. It wasn’t my fault. You know how many times I told you to do what the doctors suggested.”

“You lying bitch! Do you take me for a fool? Not once did you try to fight to get me out! You never wanted me out.”

“I don’t know what I can say to convince you I did everything in my power to help you.” She tried to steady her wobbly voice, but knew his last statement was true. “We don’t need to talk now. We can talk later. I’ll see what’s on TV tonight.” She saw the contempt in his dark, menacing eyes.

“No. You started this and now I’m going to finish it.”

“Please, Matt, don’t!” she screamed.

* * * *

Sage watched Ryan’s car make its way up the narrow street. He’d just braked when she jerked the door handle open and slid in-

to the front seat, slamming the car door shut. She put her seatbelt on. "Let's get out of here." She turned her face to the window. She couldn't let him see her lip. Her father had once again succeeded in humiliating her. Tears stung her eyes.

Ryan stepped on the gas. "What's the matter?"

She sniffed as she faced him. "My father."

"God, Sage, did he do that to your lip?"

She nodded.

His jaw tightened. "I'm sorry, honey." He gripped the steering wheel.

She couldn't hold back her tears any longer. She grimaced in pain as the salty tears fell on her lip. "I think he's off his medication," she said between sobs.

"Don't cry, baby." He took a hand from the steering wheel and gently brushed her cheek with the back of it. "Will your mother be all right alone with him?"

"She'll calm him down. She always does." She wasn't convinced, however, her mother could do it this time. If she couldn't, Sage didn't know what she'd find when she arrived home later. Her mother was certainly no match for her father's over two hundred fifty pounds and six-foot frame. The time had come to have a long talk with her mother and convince her to leave him. He'd never change. The old patterns were coming back to haunt the both of them, and Sage was determined not to live that nightmare again. She refused to live in constant fear of what her father might do. She'd had enough.

Sage also knew part of her own reluctance to move out was her need to protect her mother. Every day now she agonized over her mother's physical safety. Matt Ralston was like a time bomb ready to explode and when he finally did, she was afraid her mother wouldn't survive. Her mother had done a good job of hiding most of her bruises from Sage through the years, but she couldn't hide the ugly shouting matches which went on almost nightly,

while Sage stayed burrowed under her blankets, trying to block out her father's loud, harsh voice. After his strings of insults, it would grow quiet and that is when Sage worried the most. But the next morning her mother would be in her drab little kitchen with a bright smile for Sage, as though nothing unusual had happened the night before.

Sage tried to shake off her disturbing thoughts. Her mother would be fine. In the past she'd always come through his violent episodes bruised and emotionally battered, but she'd survived. Not that Sage thought anyone deserved to live under those conditions, especially her mother, but leaving her father had to be her mother's decision in the end. All Sage could do was talk to her and try to help her to see he wasn't going to change for good, not because he couldn't, but because he didn't want to. By taking his abuse, her mother was condoning his behavior and letting him think he wasn't accountable for his brutality. And it pissed Sage off.

But when she'd look into those warm, gentle eyes, the same eyes that had soothed her when she was sick, had held pride at her accomplishments and sadness at her heartbreaks, she knew she couldn't say anything. Fear was what kept her mother there; fear of the unknown.

Sage had been so lost in her own thoughts she hadn't even realized Ryan had pulled the car into the small lot next to the gas station where he worked as a mechanic. The owner had been kind enough to give him a small room upstairs of the garage which had been converted into a tiny apartment. Ryan had enthusiastically taken it in his quest to save money. He wouldn't have to worry about gas for the car to drive to work. All he had to worry about was paying off his college loans and buying food.

The smells of gasoline, oil and grease assaulted Sage's nostrils as she walked inside the garage to a door near the back. He unlocked the door and she followed him up the short flight of stairs to another door at the top. He opened it and waited for her to enter

before closing it behind them. Even though it was small, she loved this cozy room. It was quite a contrast to the smelly garage below. Ryan had painted the dingy walls and installed some carpeting he'd found at a closeout sale and made it homey and comfortable. The rest of his furnishings came from the Salvation Army. He'd decorated the walls with posters of his favorite movies and some of his own photography.

Looking at his art, she wondered if he'd given up on his dream. He rarely talked about making films or spent any time taking still photographs. In fact, it had been ages since he'd even mentioned moving to California. She hoped he hadn't become complacent with his life and given up on his dream. To Sage, losing one's dream was akin to losing a part of one's self. She vowed to work even harder to make his dream come true. His work was too good to be relegated someday to a stuffy attic and only seen again years in the future when someone happened across it. No, it deserved to be shared with the world.

Ryan walked over to his compact refrigerator and pulled out a can of beer. Since Sage didn't drink, he always kept a supply of soft drinks available for her. "Want a cola?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine. I just need to clear my head." She sat down on the lumpy pull-out sofa which also served as Ryan's bed.

He sat down next to her and put a comforting arm around her shoulder. "Let me see your lip." He studied it for a full minute. "I'm sure it'll heal before you start your new job." He ripped the tab off his can of beer. "I can't believe he hit you! You don't know what I'd like to do to him right now. Give him a taste of his own medicine."

"He's crazy. I hope this does heal before Monday or I won't make a very good first impression with the other employees or my new boss."

“Everyone will love you.” He squeezed her shoulder. “How could they not?”

She sighed, remembering the earlier conversation with Debbie and Heather. Had she become so comfortable with Ryan she hadn’t noticed maybe he wasn’t as happy as she’d presumed? Maybe it was time to take a stand. She’d spent her life listening to her father’s ugly, twisted views of what boys wanted from a girl and had let his views seep into her mind, believing what he’d said as the truth, but Ryan had never been that way. He’d never pressured her or asked for what she wasn’t willing to give him. The only way she could rid her mind of her father was to exorcize him from her thoughts. She’d allowed him to destroy almost every sense of normalcy in her life, and if she didn’t stop him now, he’d succeed in destroying what she and Ryan had been building. Without Ryan, she saw only a bleak, lonely future for herself.

She studied his angular face. His warm smile and beautiful, deep set blue eyes and long lashes had captivated her heart six years ago and even now just looking at him took her breath away. She loved the way his muscles rippled under his t-shirt. She touched his large, calloused hand.

“Ryan, do you ever get tired of me?”

He laughed, then set his beer can down on the crate which served as a makeshift coffee table.

“Where’s that coming from? If I was tired of you, why would I be working my butt off so we can be together someday?”

She frowned. “We’ve never talked about sex.”

“I thought we had. You want to wait, and I agreed.”

“It’s not what I mean.”

“What then?” His forehead wrinkled as he pushed his too-long, curly blond hair from his brow.

“Do you think I’m strange because I said I wanted to wait?”

He smiled. “No. I feel honored I’m the lucky guy you’ve chosen to wait for.”

“Would you have felt the same way about me if I’d slept with someone else?”

He shrugged as he picked up his beer and took a gulp. “Of course, unless it was with my best friend or something. Then it might have made things awkward.”

“So it doesn’t matter one way or another whether I’m a virgin or not?”

“That’s not what I said, Sage. If you’d slept with someone before we met, then it would be in the past. Unless you had a disease or something which affected me now. Otherwise, why should it bother me when we’re together now?” He ran his fingers through her long auburn hair. “Besides, I’m glad you didn’t because, like I said, I think it’s amazing you have the morals you do.”

She sighed again. “What about women who’ve been with several different partners? How do you feel about those women?”

He took another drink of his beer before answering. “Well, if a girl slept around and had a bad reputation, then, in my opinion, I wouldn’t give her the time of day. But everyone is different. Some guys don’t mind. And some of the girls who sleep around end up in good relationships.” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “When it comes right down to it, I think it depends on the two people involved. As long as they are happy and truthful with each other, it’s really no one else’s business.”

“I want to get married right away, Ryan. Let’s just take off this weekend and do it. We can elope. I’m tired of waiting,” she blurted out, surprising even herself.

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Sage, we can’t. Come on...think about it. We need a license and, even more importantly, a place to live. Besides, I know you’ve always dreamed of having a wedding with family and friends. What’s really going on?”

“I don’t care about any of that anymore.” Her eyes swept around the room. “I can stay here with you. I’m tired of waiting. What if we never make enough money?”

He laughed loudly. "Oh, I'm sure you'd love coming and going through that greasy garage every day. Besides, I doubt Mr. Simpson would go for it."

"You could ask him," she persisted. "Come on. Do it for us. He'd understand. It wouldn't be forever, just until we can afford an apartment."

"I could ask him, but I won't. I want something better for you than this place, Sage. You deserve better than this dump."

"Then let's look for an apartment. I've been saving my money, and with the new job, I'll be earning almost twice as much."

"We'd still end up living in a dump. By the time we paid for utilities—don't forget how much it costs to heat a place in Buffalo in the winter—and food, what would be left? My college loans take most of my pay. We'd end up miserable. We'd get stuck in a rut and never get out, especially if you got pregnant or something."

"We wouldn't need much. Just being together is enough for me." Her eyes brightened.

"And if you got pregnant, what would we do while you were off work? If I can barely support myself...how could I support you and a baby? Besides you should want more out of life than being a wife and mother."

His words stung. "I have plans for my life, if that's what you're insinuating," she said coldly. "My life isn't going to revolve only around taking care of a family."

"Look, I want to marry you, but I want to be able to support a family when we decide to have kids. You're upset, as you have a right to be about what your father did, and I don't want you to go back home tonight, but running off and getting married isn't going to solve the problem with your father. I know your mother devoted her life to him, and where has it gotten her?"

"I don't know, but I'm not my mother."

"What if your father walked out on her? What would your mother do? Does she have any marketable skills?"

“She’s never worked outside the house a day in her life as far as I know,” Sage admitted. “I don’t know what she’d do. She’d have to find a way to support herself, and I’m sure she can do it if it came down to that. Why are we discussing my mother’s life anyway?” she snapped. “This is about you and me. Besides, I have always worked and will continue to do so. In this day and age it’s ridiculous to even think any couple can make it on one salary, even if they wanted to, unless they’re rich. If I had a baby, I’d go right back to work, just as soon as I was able to.”

He frowned. “Come on, admit it, Sage, your parents are living in another century. If they hadn’t been so strict with you, we would have done it by now. I’m not complaining, but it seems like you think sex is dirty and disgusting. We’ve been together a long time and most couples are intimate long before this.”

He was right, but she’d be damned if she’d give him the benefit of hearing it from her. From listening to Heather and Debbie’s escapades, sex sounded exciting and the best thing there was in this world, and not at all the way her parents had preached to her. “It does bother you, doesn’t it?”

“Of course it bothers me, but I’ve gotten used to cold showers.” He smiled. “I’m just teasing. I love you and you’re definitely worth waiting for, no matter how long. I mean it, Sage.” He grabbed her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Let’s just drop the topic and celebrate your new job like we planned. So, what do you want to do?”

“How many women have you slept with?”

He cocked an eye. “What does it matter?”

“I want to know, Ryan,” she insisted.

“You never asked me in all the years we’ve been together.”

“Well, I’m asking now.”

He stared at his hands. “I could lie and say none, but since I’d never lie to you, the truth is I slept with one other girl before I met you.”

Sage's heart fluttered. She'd been certain he was a virgin, but now, hearing from his own lips he'd slept with someone before they met upset her. She knew she had no right to be angry for what he'd done in the past. He was human, she had put unrealistic demands on him, and he had loved her enough not to talk her into doing something she wasn't ready to do. Just the same, she was hurt. "Did you break up with her because she slept with you?"

He placed his hands on her shoulders. "No. I broke up with her because we weren't compatible. It was a long time ago. I was a teenager. Come on, honey, why do you want to know all of this? Let's talk about something else."

Sage's heart pounded. "What if on our wedding night I don't measure up. I mean—"

"Sage, you will, trust me." He held her close. "I love you and I want you and only you."

"Make love to me," she whispered. "I want to be with you."

He peered into her eyes. "What's going on with you?"

"Please, Ryan," she pleaded. She placed her hands under his shirt and began stroking his hard chest. "Please make love to me now." She felt the shudder ripple through him. She knew he wanted her as much as she wanted him. She moved her hands to the waistband of his jeans, tugging on his belt, then slipped one hand inside. She inhaled as she felt his hardness. The moisture, accompanied by the deep ache between her legs, drove her over the edge and she yearned for release.

He sucked in his breath as he reached for her hand. "This...this isn't the way you want it, Sage—not for your first time," he said in a hoarse voice.

"Yes, it is." She panted. "I don't want to wait anymore. We've waited long enough."

He grabbed at her hand again. "No. I don't know what's going on with you tonight, but I'm not going to do something you'll re-

gret in the morning. I know you too well. You can't just change your beliefs in the blink of an eye."

She removed her hand and then sensuously ran her fingertips over his cheek. "No, I've been thinking about it, Ryan, and I won't be sorry. I know what I want, and it's making love with you right now."

"As much as I want you, Sage, I can't—not this way."

"Why?" Tears stung her eyes. "I obviously don't measure up. What am I doing wrong? What did that other girl do to make you want her?"

"Stop it, Sage. You're not acting like yourself."

She was humiliated. All the warm sensations she'd been feeling disappeared, leaving in their wake an icy cold emptiness. He'd rejected her. She'd lost not only the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with, but her best friend. Her heart broke. She pulled away from him, her eyes swimming with tears. "I won't throw myself at you ever again."

He ran a trembling hand through his hair. "Sage, no, please understand, baby. It has nothing to do with that other girl. I haven't been with anyone else or even wanted to be with anyone else since I met you. It hasn't been easy, but I'm waiting for our wedding night like you've always wanted. I want it to be as special as you've dreamed it will be."

"It has everything to do with me." A tear spilled from her eye. "There's nothing more to say. Maybe my new job on Monday is an omen...a new beginning and a fresh start for the both of us—apart."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Whatever you want it to mean." She glanced at her hands, too ashamed to look him in the eye. "Please take me home, Ryan. I have a splitting headache."

"I don't want you to go back tonight after what your father did to you. Call Heather or Debbie and ask to spend the night. Or you

can stay here, and I'll sleep in the car. Besides, we need to talk." He tilted her chin.

She refused to look at him. "No. If you won't take me home, I'll catch a bus."

"No, Sage, I think we need to discuss this."

"There's nothing more to talk about. Please take me home."

He angrily grabbed his car keys.

* * * *

Debbie ran her hands over Tony's smooth chest. "This is a better way to spend the night," she purred. "I could stay in bed with you forever."

"You sure you're not mad because I don't want to go to the club? I know you wanted to see that band."

"No," she said, running her hands down his thighs. "I love having you all to myself." She rolled over on top of him and looked into his beautiful black eyes, then to his full, but firm lips. She caught his bottom lip between her teeth.

His hands moved to her ass as she moved her hips back and forth enjoying his erection. She sat up raising herself as she guided his throbbing cock inside of her waiting pussy. She placed her hands palms down on the bed on either side of him, then raised herself up and down in long, easy motions.

He placed his large hands on her hips and lifted her up and then down, increasing his momentum until she was on the verge of climaxing. In one swift movement he rolled her over, bringing her to her knees, then mounted her from behind, thrusting in and out. She screamed with pleasure, pushing her ass back and forth as he rode her. He let out a moan, then spent, collapsed against her.

"You're too much," he panted.

"Only with you," she murmured.

He slid out of her and rolled over onto his back.

She cuddled up next to him and rested her head on his hard chest. "Tony?"

“Hmmm?”

“Have you ever thought about settling down?” She felt him stiffen. “I don’t mean now, but someday?”

He let his breath out. “Maybe, but it won’t be for a long time.” He ran the back of his hand over her cheek. “Things are good the way they are. Aren’t they?”

She listened to the steady beat of his heart. “Sometimes I think about what it would be like to be married to you,” she murmured.

“Deb, we have a good thing going...why ruin it?”

The tone of his voice told her that, as far as he was concerned, the topic was closed.

“I didn’t say I want to get married in the near future, but maybe someday. Besides, marriage wouldn’t ruin anything, only make what we have better.” She lifted her head from his chest and laid her head on the pillow next to his as she took a hand and smoothed the red silk sheet. She’d spent a fortune on the sheets and pillow set, but she loved the feel of it next to her naked body.

Tony propped himself up on an elbow and stared into her eyes. “I thought we had a pressure-free relationship.”

“We do,” she reassured him, seeing the disapproval in his eyes.

He pulled himself to a sitting position. “It doesn’t sound like it to me.” He slid his legs over the edge of the bed and reached for his clothes.

“Where are you going?” She wished she hadn’t said anything. “I thought we were spending the whole night together.”

“I told the guys I’d meet them later. Benny’s guest DJ’ing over at The V tonight.” He stood up.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier? Let me grab a shower.”

“I’m going alone,” he replied, zipping his jeans.

She bit her bottom lip as she watched him dress. “Is it because of what I said about marriage?” She knew by the look in his eyes it

was. “Just forget what I said. I’m happy being with you the way things are.”

“No, baby, it’s a guys’ night out.” He leaned over and brushed his lips against hers. “I thought I’d told you.”

“No, you didn’t. Are you coming back tonight?”

He shrugged. “Depends on how much I drink.”

Debbie watched him pull his t-shirt over his head. She loved his body. She wanted to get out of the bed and run to him and beg him to stay, but she wouldn’t. She knew it was the quickest way to lose him. Instead, she’d wait for him to return, if not tonight, then maybe tomorrow. She knew he slept around a lot; she wasn’t naive. Whenever they went out, she saw the way other women looked at him. What hurt the most, though, was the way he looked back at them.

She wished she could figure out the hold Tony had on her. She’d dated many men, but Tony was the one who had captured her heart, and she was afraid he’d be the one who would break it.

Chapter 3

Sage opened the door and hurried inside, not knowing what to expect. The lamp in the living room cast a soft but not very illuminating light. She glanced towards the sofa, where her mother sat, hands folded in her lap. Her eyes were closed and she looked like she was praying. Sage cautiously gazed around the room and, seeing no sign of her father, tiptoed to her mother's side.

Loni's eyes popped open.

Sage's hand flew to her mouth in shock. "On no, Mom," she cried. "Are you all right?"

Loni's eye was swollen almost shut and welts were forming on her cheeks.

"Where is he?" she demanded. "I'm calling the police. That crazy bastard is going to jail!" She ran to the phone. "Enough is enough!"

As she was punching in the numbers, her mother grabbed her wrist. "No, Sage. You can't call the police. That would humiliate him. He's upstairs in bed passed out."

Sage's mouth dropped open in disbelief. "Humiliate him? What about you? What is wrong with you, Mom? Have you looked in a mirror? I'm not going to let him hurt you any longer."

"It's not your decision, Sage, it's mine. And I want no police here. He's promised to begin therapy again." Her voice was firm.

“It’s a lie, Mom! He’s manipulating you again.” She shook her head. “He’s convinced you you’re to blame for his actions.” She trembled with anger.

“Sage, don’t be too quick to judge. He’s been under a lot of stress. It would’ve been his twenty-fifth year with the precinct this year.”

“And whose fault is that?” she countered, looking into her mother’s tired, lifeless eyes. It was evident he’d managed to wear her down once again. “Please don’t let him convince you it’s your fault.” She took her mother’s hand in her own, stroking it with gentle fingers. “Come on, Mom. We’re all responsible for our own actions.”

She lowered her eyes. “He’s sorry, Sage. He never meant to hurt either of us. It’s just hard for him—”

“That’s why he split open my lip and used your face as a punching bag,” she interrupted. “I’m moving out. I’m not living like this anymore.” She threw her hands up in disgust. “I can’t take any more!”

“No, Sage, please don’t go,” Loni pleaded. “It’ll only upset him further.”

“Upset him? What about us? What about me? Or don’t you care what this is doing to me?”

“Of course I do.” Her lips quivered.

“I refuse to be a part of this sick environment any longer. No, Mom, it’s about time I started leading my own life. Your little girl is leaving the nest.”

“Please, Sage...we can all go to therapy.”

“We tried, and it didn’t work.” Her eyes filled with tears. “I love you too much to watch him kill you in front of my very eyes.” She tossed her head furiously. “Can’t you understand?”

“Oh, Sage, please don’t exaggerate the situation. My mother and her mother before her were sometimes made to toe the line by

their husbands. It's just the way men are. Their wives are an outlet for their stress."

Sage cocked an eye. "What planet are you living on, Mom? It's called spousal abuse. I feel sorry for the women who expected protection when Dad was on the force. He probably patted the husbands on the back instead of arresting them." Her face grew so warm she thought she'd pass out. Her stomach twisted into knots. Why couldn't she get her mother to listen to reason?

"Even if some husbands have always treated their wives like that, it still doesn't make it right," she continued. "No woman should ever have to put up with it. There are laws against domestic violence, and Dad knows it. Doesn't it make you wonder how many men he let go after he was called to a home and found some wife beaten to a pulp? Who then, when the police left, were further beaten for calling authorities in the first place. Do you think they'd ever call again? Why should they, when the protection they sought was refused."

"I don't think your father ever did that. He was a good and respected police officer. Look at all the medals he's received over the years." Loni nodded toward the wall behind the sofa. It was filled with a collage of her father's commendations and awards.

Sage frowned as she peered into her mother's face, wishing she could find a way to get through to her. "It won't bother you if my husband beats me every time something in his life goes wrong?"

"It would devastate me, honey, but some men just have a different way of dealing with their frustrations." She wrung her hands. "I hope you marry a man who'll find a different outlet for his frustrations."

"Forget it. I don't want to hear anymore. There's no reasoning with you. You'll just keep accepting the life you're leading when there's so much more out there."

* * * *

Sage flung herself across her bed and didn't try to stop the tears streaming from her eyes. Her life was falling apart, and there was nothing she could do about it. She wished she could go back to the time she'd first met Ryan. Ryan had entered her life when she thought there was no hope for her lonely, dysfunctional existence.

She was sixteen and Ryan almost eighteen when they met. She'd gone to a high school dance with a couple of her classmates, bored as she watched couples dancing and having a good time while she sat in the bleachers, but it was still better than sitting home with her parents. Her gaze fell on Ryan. He was talking with a group of his friends. She liked the way his mouth crinkled at the corners when he smiled. He was tall and solid, and his curly blond hair glistened under the twinkling lights. She knew who he was. Everyone knew him. Ryan Linden was the most athletic and popular boy in school, and all the girls were after him, but he never dated any one girl exclusive.

When the band began their final number, a slow song, Sage watched him walk in her direction. She looked around herself. Surely he was looking for someone else, but when he stopped in front of her and smiled, she knew it really was her he was seeking out. She shyly returned his smile.

"Would you like to dance?"

Her heart skipped a beat. "Yes, thank you," she replied. She stood up, and he took her hand and led her to the crowded floor. He was an expert dancer, and she prayed the song would go on forever. She'd never felt so happy in her life. When the song ended, he walked her back to the bleachers. She expected him to turn and leave, but he stood staring at her for a few seconds.

"Sage," he said, "I know that this is short notice, but are you doing anything tomorrow night?"

Had she heard him right? Ryan Linden was asking her out? It was a dream come true.

She smiled now at the memory. Several dates later, they knew they wanted to spend the rest of their lives together and spent every minute they could with each other. The only shadow cast on her newfound happiness was her father's accusatory comments. Her parents had over and over again cautioned her how terrible sex was, and to watch herself because that's all any boy wanted from a girl. So she'd heeded their warnings and whenever she felt herself becoming aroused, she'd remember their admonitions.

Now she wondered how Ryan had suppressed his sexual desires all these years. She knew boys masturbated to relieve themselves, so she supposed he did, too. She'd touched herself a few times when she thought about making love with Ryan, and though she liked the feeling, she felt guilty. She wondered if maybe Ryan didn't pressure her for sex because he didn't desire her. Maybe he never did intend to marry her, but that didn't make any sense. Why had he stayed with her for the past six years if he didn't intend to some day make her his wife? Her mind was confused with conflicting thoughts.

If having sex were such a terrible thing, why would any woman want to have it? When she was younger, she assumed it was to reproduce—at least that's what she got out of the church's teachings on the subject the few times she'd attended. When her friends started experimenting, they didn't seem to think it was such a horrible experience, and often shared stories with one another in the girls' room about how much they enjoyed it.

When Sage questioned her mother about those girls who seemed to enjoy the act, her mother's quick reply was that those were the type of girls who were whores and would never see happiness in their lives. Then there was Debbie and Heather. Neither of them seemed to be leading unfulfilling or unhappy lives, and Sage didn't classify them as whores. Nonetheless, she decided she'd wait until her wedding night to find out who was right—her parents or her friends.

Observing her parents through the years, Sage doubted they even knew what love really was—especially her father. She assumed to him love meant control. After all, he'd acted this way ever since she could remember. Her mother was close-mouthed and seldom undermined him in any way in Sage's presence. What she did in the privacy of their bedroom was another matter.

On the odd occasion Sage had seen her mother take a stand, her father's violent outburst silenced her. There was no way Sage would be convinced this was the way her mother had envisioned her life, no matter what she pretended.

Sage got up off the bed and removed her clothes, then slipped naked between the cool sheets. Tomorrow she would move; she'd never go back on her word. If she did, it would mean defeat and her father had won once again. She didn't have a clue where she would go. All she knew was she wasn't going to live in this prison any longer.

The following morning, Sage sat at the kitchen table, observing her parents. As usual, her father acted as if nothing had happened the previous night, while her mother busied herself preparing his breakfast. Her eye, swollen shut, and her bruises looked worse in the harsh light of day. She winced at the sight of her mother.

She caught her father's eye, and he grunted, "What's wrong with you?"

Her eyes widened in surprise, then she started laughing unable to control herself. After she composed herself, she spat out, "You're a master of self-deception, aren't you?"

"Are you on drugs?" His steely eyes scrutinized her. "That grease monkey got you on drugs?"

"I wish I were. Then maybe all of this would just be some obscene drug-induced hallucination."

"You're not making any sense." He shrugged her off. "Loni!" He held out his coffee cup.

Loni grabbed the coffee pot and refilled his cup. She cast a sideways glance at Sage, but said nothing.

“Are you blind to the bruises on Mom’s face and my cut lip? Bruises caused by you! What kind of animal treats his family that way?”

He rolled his eyes. “I pity the poor bastard who marries you.”

“Why? Because I’m not afraid to stand up for myself? You know, Dad, I used to feel sorry for you because of all the pressure you had as a cop, but now I’m glad the force got rid of you. You’re a danger to society. If they had any common sense, they would’ve made sure you were committed for good!”

“Why you ungrateful—”

She set her jaw and stood firm. “If you ever lay a hand on me again, I swear I’ll have you locked up for the rest of your pathetic life.”

“Get out of my house,” he ordered. “I never want to see you again. You’re dead to me. Do you hear me—dead!”

She stood up, scraping the chair across the worn linoleum. “You’ve been dead to me for a long time now.” She walked over to her mother, who leaned against the counter, as though her legs were ready to give out. “Mom, come with me. You deserve better than this and he’s never going to change. The minute you give him another chance, he goes right back to his old pattern. It’s never going to get better, and if you believe it is, then you’re just kidding yourself.”

Loni’s eyes flitted back and forth. “Sage, this is just a misunderstanding. Your father—”

Sage held a hand up. “Quit making excuses for him! Don’t say anymore. I pity you, Mom, but I’m going to pity you even more the day the son-of-a-bitch puts you in the hospital or worse.” She turned again and glowered at her father. “I’ll pack my things and be out of here as soon as possible.”

“Where are you going to go? Over to that grease monkey’s place to shack up? Don’t bother coming back here or calling under any circumstances. You don’t exist!”

Sage didn’t bother replying, but hurried to her room where she grabbed a couple of suitcases and began pulling clothes from the closet and dresser drawers. She stuffed the bags with as much as they could hold. After she was settled in an apartment, she’d ask her mother to send her remaining possessions.

She sighed heavily as she walked into the hallway and over to the small alcove which separated her bedroom from her parents’ bedroom. There were four bedrooms in the house, but two of them held odds and ends and had never been used as guest rooms, since guests were never allowed. She grabbed the cordless phone from the table and took it back into her bedroom. She sat, trembling, on the edge of her bed. She was tempted to call Ryan. No, he’d humiliated her last night and he was one of the last people she wanted to talk to right now, even though she ached for his comforting voice and strong shoulder to lean on. She’d call Heather. Heather lived alone in a small studio apartment. She wasn’t sharing her apartment with anyone, unlike Debbie who had an open door policy where Tony was concerned. Maybe she could stay with Heather for a while until she saved enough money to afford her own place.

Two hours later Sage was seated on Heather’s overstuffed sofa, with Heather next to her and Debbie in a mismatched easy chair across from them. Sage felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders after she’d poured out years of frustration to her friends.

“Wow!” Debbie exclaimed. “Why didn’t you tell us before what was going on with you? We would have set you straight and we wouldn’t have teased you so much. I’m sorry, Sage.”

Sage wrung her hands. “I was ashamed. So many times I wanted to talk to the both of you, but I didn’t know how to broach the subject.” She flushed. “Face it, women my age should know the

facts of life...in this day and age. But when you're armed with the wrong information because it has been pounded into your brain from the moment you're born, it's difficult not to believe what you've been told."

"How can your mother live with your father after what he's not only done to her, but to you, her own daughter?" Debbie asked, wincing as she glanced at Sage's lip. "I do feel sorry for her, though, because it's obvious she's suffered so much throughout her life. Deep down she must be terrified of him."

"He has her convinced if she leaves him she'll end up with nothing--alone and out on the streets," Sage replied. "She has to know I would never let that happen to her. I also think she's afraid of what he'll physically do to her if she deserts him."

"There are laws to protect her," Heather reasoned.

"I know, but I think she's really scared he'll never leave her alone. Knowing him, he'll stalk her for the rest of his life."

"I can't imagine living with someone like that," Heather sympathized.

"I can't believe she lived through the sixties with all the feminists, hippies and free love and still held on to her archaic beliefs," Debbie said, shaking her pretty head. "She must have been living in a cave not to have been influenced by the world around her."

"She led a very sheltered and disciplined life," Sage said. "Her parents didn't allow any modern conveniences in their home. They were middle-aged when she was born, and they raised her like they were living in the forties instead of the sixties. Anything she questioned they had a quick answer for, and pounded their misconstrued morals into her brain. She believed everything she was told."

"That's so sad," Heather said. "I'd give anything to have been a part of the sixties and to think your mother only existed, but never really lived during that era." She patted Sage's hand.

“It must’ve been tough for her in school. She doubtless was teased a lot for her outdated beliefs,” Debbie said. “We all know how cruel kids can be. If you don’t fit in, you’re tortured.”

“She hated school and everyone in it. She told me once that she had no desire to ever see any of her former classmates again. She never spoke about any of them. As far as she was concerned, school was a waste of time for girls, especially for her, since she intended to marry and raise a family, which her husband would support. Her parents, of course, never let her explore any of the opportunities that were opening up for women during that time. They led her to believe, as a woman, she didn’t need any skills other than those of taking care of a house, husband, and children.”

“I can’t believe she didn’t run away,” Heather said. “It must’ve been like living in the *Twilight Zone*.”

“I know...I’ve often wondered the same thing, but where could she have run to? She was living in a world controlled by her parents and grandparents, without friends, and she was their little puppet.” She lowered her eyes. “But who am I to talk? I let my parents do the same thing to me, and the thought of running away was more frightening than staying.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Sage. You did leave,” Debbie reminded her.

“Maybe getting married and out of her parents’ home was, to my mother, the only escape she saw. Once free of her parents’ control, she could pursue her own dreams if she had any. My father must have been a big disappointment to her. She accepted his abuse since she’d grown up seeing her father abuse her mother, and her grandfather abuse her grandmother. It was as normal to her as breathing and eating. She accepted her role as a second-class citizen to her husband. Thank God, I, at least, knew it wasn’t normal or I might have followed the same pattern.”

“How did she end up with your father?” Heather asked.

“They met in church believe it or not, because I’ve only been in church a few times with them. As far back as I can remember, the church was not something either of them seemed to devote much time to. From the little my mother said, they had a very brief courtship and married less than six months after they met. She’d just turned eighteen, and he was twenty-five. His parents had died several years before and he never talked about them.” She shrugged. “As far as I know, he has no living relatives...none I’ve ever met anyway. My mother had a miscarriage before I came along, and a couple after. They were married twelve years before I was born. My father always made it clear he’d wanted a son and resented the fact his only child was a girl.”

Debbie snorted. “As if the woman has any control over the sex of the child. When will men ever get it through their thick skulls, they determine a child’s sex and not the woman? It really pisses me off every time I hear that.”

“Well, at least you know it’s not normal to live the way your mother did,” Heather added. “God forbid if your father would have had a son. We already have enough abusers in this world.”

“I’ll never understand how my mother and grandmother slept, night after night, next to those men who abused them, not only physically, but verbally, mentally and emotionally. I feel sorry for them because they never experienced loving someone and having that love returned without conditions. They were so beaten down they lost all value of themselves and any self-esteem they may have once had, I guess.”

Debbie leaned forward in her chair. “I feel terrible I never took the time to notice you were having problems at home. I should’ve picked up on it since you rarely invited us over and when you did, it was just to pick you up or drop you off. Now I know why we were never let past the front door.”

Sage lowered her eyes. "I never knew what kind of mood my father would be in. I was afraid he'd be in one of his drunken stupors and say something to embarrass me."

"What a horrible way to live."

She saw the genuine concern on her friends' faces. "It's not something that's easy to talk about. I wanted to fit in, even though I knew I never really could, and you two became the friends I'd never had before. I had acquaintances, what I called my in-school friends, but never real friends until I met you two."

"Aw, you're making me blush, and you know nothing ever makes me blush. Heather and I liked you from the minute we met you," Debbie stated.

"Yes, we did," Heather agreed.

"Well, it makes sense, in a crazy sort of way, why your mother told you sex was horrible and evil." Debbie frowned. "There was no way she could tell you it was a wonderful and normal experience when it was so demeaning to her. She must have thought it was the same way for every decent woman, and those who enjoyed it had to be immoral."

Sage's forehead furrowed. "I suppose, but I wish she'd get out and see what she's been missing from life. She's still young enough to find some happiness. Who knows, she might even find a man who'll love her the way she deserves to be loved. She deserves to be happy. She's not a bad person."

"If she sees you happy, it may give her the courage to leave him. Maybe after things calm down you can talk to her again," Debbie said. "I know how worried you are about her. I don't know what I'd do if my father was like yours. I couldn't imagine Dad even saying a mean word to Mom. He's a big teddy bear." A faint smile crossed her lips.

"You're lucky. I always wished my father would just say he's sorry and really mean it." Sage said.

"I wish Dad could've been home more, but he was always working and even though he was a good father, when he was home he was too tired to interact much with the family," Heather said. "But what you went through, Sage, is unimaginable. I think what Debbie said is true, though. If you talk to your mother and she sees you happy, then it might just give her the incentive she needs."

"It hasn't so far, no matter what I've said to try to convince her."

"She'll come around in time," Heather said. "She's your mother, and you know she loves you and always will. How do you really feel about your father, Sage? Was he always like this?"

Tears welled up in her eyes. "When I was a little girl, I loved him so much. I used to wait for him by the window every day and when I'd see him coming up the walk, I'd get so excited he was home. But the minute he'd walk into the house and I'd go running to him, he'd brush me aside. My mother used to tell me he was tired from working so hard all day protecting people and to be quiet and not disturb him. I wanted so much for him to show me a little affection, but he never did. He'd just push me away as if I didn't even exist. The only time he spoke to me was to punish me, and most of the time I didn't even know what I was being punished for doing wrong."

"That must've been hard to understand being a little kid. Well, Heather and I are going to help you in any way we can. I promise."

"I wish I'd known the both of you years ago. Then maybe I wouldn't have gotten so screwed up where sex is concerned."

"Actually, Debbie and I used to order romance novels when we were pre-teens...well, if you want to call them romance novels," Heather said, with a wink at Debbie. "We'd read all the sex scenes and wonder if people really did that. When we got to high school, a girl in our class had quite a reputation. We'd hang out with her just to hear her experiences." She laughed. "Your life cer-

tainly would've been different if you'd known us when we were all teenagers. Debbie and I weren't considered wild in high school, but we did have our moments. Right, Deb?"

Debbie grinned. "We got so many detentions one year, our parents almost forbid us from hanging out together, but they soon realized it would be impossible since they socialized together."

"My parents never socialized. They never went to anyone's homes, and no one was invited to ours. Except for school, I was isolated from the outside world. Summer vacations and holidays were hell. I did read and study a lot, though."

"How was your school?" Debbie asked.

"While you two were having fun and doing all the normal things teenagers did, I was stuck in a very strict private school. Since we wore uniforms, styles were never a problem for me. Everyone looked the same. That was what saved me. God forbid if my mother would've forced me to dress the way she had to. The only good thing about school was meeting Ryan." She smiled widely. "To this day I still sometimes wonder what he saw in me."

"Oh, my God, Sage, you've got to be kidding! You're a beauty. Do you know how envious I am of your beautiful hair?" Heather squeezed her hand. "Ryan sees what everyone sees when they look at you...a beautiful woman."

Sage blushed, at a loss for words. She knew she wasn't ugly, but she'd never considered herself beautiful.

"You've got to start looking at yourself the way everyone else sees you." Debbie peered at her for a minute. "See, there really is a silver lining when you think about it. If you hadn't been forced to go to private school, you may never have met Ryan. Now, Heather and I intend to introduce you to the world you've been missing out on. We'll have you up to speed in no time."

"Ryan tried to so many times, but my parents wouldn't let me out of the house to see him in the beginning. I was surprised they allowed me to see him at all." She shrugged. "I suppose they

thought he was safe since he went to the same private school I did. I know the only reason I was allowed to attend school dances and functions was because they were safe. They didn't seem to understand, even though private and public schools are different, kids are still going to have the same needs."

Debbie nodded.

Sage's face reddened. "I've never even been to a club or bar. I think Ryan got so used to me not wanting to go anywhere, he just stopped asking. As long as I lived under my father's roof, I had to abide by his rules. I was so disappointed I couldn't go when Ryan pleaded with me to visit him at college in California, but my father forbid it. Sometimes I wonder if Ryan believes I wasn't allowed, or thinks I just didn't want to go."

"So that's why you'd never go out with us. We thought you didn't like clubs. We'll have to take you...I know you'd have a good time. After Ryan meets the real you, he's not going to know what hit him," Debbie promised with a toss of her head.

Sage smiled. "Just be patient with me."

"Oh, we will be. When we get through with you, Ryan will be down on his knees pleading with you to let him be your love slave...well, after your wedding," Heather said, a playful twinkle in her eye.

Sage swallowed hard. "It might be over between Ryan and me. After he made a fool out of me last night, I'm not even sure I want to see him again," she replied, but didn't truly believe her words after she'd spoken them.

"Sure you do. You're embarrassed, which is understandable, but he was just confused by your about-face. Put yourself in his place. Once you explain everything that's been going on, he'll understand. You can start over fresh and when you two are married, you'll be free from all the garbage you were told about sex," Debbie said. "It wouldn't hurt to tell him everything you've told us. He deserves to know what's really been going on with you."

“He already knows most of it...I mean, not all the things I was told about sex, but about my morals.”

Debbie cocked an eye. “Then no wonder he didn’t know what to think about your sudden change of heart. You probably scared the shit out of him. If Heather and I had known beforehand, we could’ve taught you the art of subtlety, if you really did want to sleep with him. But what about your morals? Do you think you can compromise them? It’s not easy to do a total about-face after you’ve been brainwashed for so long.”

She clasped and then unclasped her hands. “I do and I don’t want to sleep with him. Does that make any sense or am I just losing my mind?”

Heather patted Sage’s shoulder. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. Do you even know what to expect the first time?”

Sage’s face flamed. “I...I need to satisfy him.”

“Wrong answer, girlfriend! Heather and I have a lot of work to do to change your appearance and bring out all the beauty you’ve been covering up and teach you the truth about your mis-conceived notions about sexual satisfaction. It’s not just the man who should be satisfied.” She leaned back in her chair. “Believe me, I know. And most men, at least the ones I’ve been with, have made sure I was satisfied. If I wasn’t, I had no trouble telling them.”

Sage looked at her friends self-consciously. She knew they were trying to help her and she appreciated it, but still, she was uncomfortable. She had so many questions...but if she didn’t ask them, she’d never know. “You both have so much experience. How would I know what to say?”

Heather patted her shoulder. “Believe me, you’ll know when we’re done.”

Sage’s eyes clouded.

“Debbie has more experience than I do. I haven’t slept with as many guys as she has.” Heather twisted a strand of her long hair.

“Can I ask you both something?” Sage asked uneasily.

“Of course,” they replied in unison.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t think I could sleep with someone I didn’t have feelings for. I can’t even sleep with Ryan and I love him with all my heart, even though a big part of me wants to sleep with him.”

“Guys do it all the time,” Debbie replied with a shrug. “If I see a good-looking guy and we’re attracted to one another, what’s the problem? We’re consenting adults.”

“For me, it’s a bit more difficult,” Heather admitted. “Women have an emotional attachment when they sleep with someone. Men can do it and just walk away. A one-night stand does sometimes upset me, if it is someone I really believed I had chemistry with and he doesn’t call again. I’ve just shared the most important thing with him and he takes it and walks away without looking back, as though it meant nothing to him.”

“Yeah, that does hurt, but hooking up doesn’t guarantee anything. Men are just so opposite when it comes to sex. I’ve learned not to get emotionally involved and to just enjoy the time together, and who knows where it might end up.” Debbie looked at Heather. “And I don’t sleep with every guy who asks me.”

“But most of the guys you sleep with ask you out again.”

Sage felt sorry for Heather. She glanced at Debbie and could see in Debbie’s eyes she did, too.

“But you do tend to fall for the bad boys,” Heather said, breaking the awkward silence.

Debbie raised her eyebrows. “I can’t help it. There’s something about an untamed wild guy that makes me want to pursue him and tame him. It’s the ultimate challenge.”

“Don’t you ever want to settle down with just one guy?” Sage asked.

“Well, I’ve been with Tony for longer than any other guy, but he’s far from being tamed.”

“It sounds like he’s getting there,” Heather said.

“That's what I thought.”

“Did something happen last night?”

Debbie bit her bottom lip. Sage saw the sadness in her friend's eyes. “Let's just say it didn't go the way I'd planned. I'm more into the relationship than he is.”

“Do you love him?” Sage asked abruptly.

Debbie's face reddened.

“Oh, my God! You do!” Heather squealed. “You're blushing! You've never mentioned the love word with any other guy.”

Debbie picked at the fabric of the chair, avoiding their eyes. “Let's just say, if I could choose anyone I'd want to spend the rest of my life with, it would be Tony.”

“I knew it.” Heather grinned.

“Now if he felt the same way, everything would be perfect. Okay, enough about me.” She studied Sage. “I'm trying to think of the perfect hairstyle. Your hair is an amazing shade of auburn, but the style needs to be updated. You've got such beautiful high cheekbones and you should show them off. What do you think, Heather?”

“Let's take her for a complete makeover from head to toe. With the right hairstyle, makeup and clothes, you'll be a knock-out!” She squeezed Sage's shoulder.

Sage grinned. “I can't wait.”

Chapter 4

With confidence, Sage walked into her office. Boylston Electronics was a booming company, started several years ago, that had netted the investors and owner billions of dollars. All Sage knew about the company, was that Boylston Electronics had the edge when it came to new technology.

She hadn't been told she would actually have her very own office. She smiled, ready to take on the world, and her new clothes and makeover gave her self-esteem a much-needed boost.

Heather and Debbie had taken her shopping for new clothes at the Galleria Mall, and a trip to Debbie's favorite salon to have her nails and hair done. When Sage had looked in the mirror, she couldn't believe the attractive young woman staring back at her was really she.

This morning Heather had helped her pick out a suit that made her not only look, but also feel, professional and stylish at the same time. Heather applied her makeup for her and had given her tips on touching it up throughout the day.

Now in her office, Sage's eyes swept over the large, comfortable room and rested on the long desk, which held a computer, telephone, some books, and other necessary accessories. Her name was displayed on an engraved brass nameplate on the desk. The large leather executive chair looked inviting, but would have to wait. It was time to meet her boss, the owner of the company, Charles Boylston.

Her stomach fluttered as she walked down the long corridor past several closed doors, until she reached an office with a sign reading Charles Boylston, President in bold letters on a brass nameplate attached to the door. She entered the outer office, noting the empty desk of his secretary. She didn't want to be late, but hesitated for a few seconds. Should she wait for Mr. Boylston's secretary to announce her, or just knock on the door straight ahead, which she assumed led to his private office, and introduce herself?

She decided not to wait for his secretary and tapped on the door. She was startled when the door was at once opened.

"Come in. You must be Sage Ralston. My secretary, Lyla, is on an errand."

She was surprised with the look of her employer. She'd expected a stodgy, middle-aged man instead of this handsome, young, vibrant one. "Yes, Mr. Boylston. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Please, call me Charles," he said with a wide, easy smile, motioning her inside his enormous office.

She realized Heather's entire apartment would fit in here with room to spare. The office was inviting and relaxing for its enormity, with soft and soothing earth tone colors. A huge fish tank, filled with hundreds of colorful fish, lined almost one entire side wall.

He led her to a stylish leather chair in front of his desk, then rounded the desk and seated himself in his huge chair. He opened a file and studied it for a few seconds. "I'm very impressed with your employment record, Sage," he said. "You seem to get along well with everyone you've worked with."

"I like people," she said with a slight smile. "I'm also punctual and rarely miss a day of work." Her stomach was still twisted in knots. "I'm willing to study to learn everything I need to know about the company. I'll be honest. I know very little at the present time."

“You don’t have to sell me. You’ve already been hired, remember?” He smiled warmly. “In your position, the details of the company are irrelevant.”

She felt her cheeks flush and smiled. “Yes, sir.” He looked her squarely in the eye. She nervously held his gaze.

“I like a go-getter—someone who’s not afraid to work hard. That’s one of the reasons I hired you. Some days I spend more time in this office than I do in my home,” he continued, “so I need someone who is able to work whatever hours I require.”

“That’s no problem.” The knot in her stomach tightened.

He laughed. “Okay, now I’ll bet you’re wondering why I’d offer you this position without meeting you first.”

She continued to look into his warm brown eyes. “The thought has crossed my mind,” she admitted.

He picked up a pen and tapped it on the desktop. “My team scouts for only the best employees—those who’ll be an asset to the company. When your resume came in, it was immediately brought to my attention.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You understand I don’t have a college degree.”

“To me that’s a big plus in your favor.” He set the pen down and folded his hands on top of the desk. “I believe a college education is important, but it’s not for everyone. I don’t want someone coming in here waving a degree in my face and believing he or she knows what’s right for my company just because some economics professor says so.” He smiled again. “Now, don’t get the idea I am anti-college, because that is the furthest thing from the truth. I’m a proponent of higher education and have set up several scholarship programs, even though I never attended college myself, and barely made it through high school.” He chuckled.

“I don’t understand. Most businesses today won’t even give someone a chance without at least a bachelor’s degree.”

“You’ll find out very soon I’m not like most businessmen. I started my business from scratch, with a lot of hard work and little money. There’s no textbook answer. My accountants and lawyers handle the legal aspects of the business.” He leaned forward. “For that, yes, I do require they have a degree.”

Sage flashed a weak smile at his obvious attempt at humor. Charles Boylston would be an interesting man to work for. He had a natural charm and charisma that, coupled with his vibrant energy, she suspected drew people to him. His boyish face and the enthusiasm in his voice made her hang on and believe every word he spoke. Yes, he definitely had a magnetic personality, and like a fragment of metal, she felt herself being drawn to what he was saying.

“You’ll be looking out for my best interests.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “I’m not certain I understand.”

“Can you be trusted, Sage?”

“Of course.”

“The future of this entire company will depend on how well you do your job.”

Sage frowned. “Mr. Boylston—”

“Please call me Charles,” he interrupted.

“Okay...Charles,” she said. She wasn’t comfortable calling her employer by his given name or of being told that the future of the company rested on her shoulders. “I’m not certain I’m the right person for this position. When I was hired, I was told my duties would consist of basic secretarial responsibilities.”

He nodded. “That’s correct. You were told what I wanted you to be told. No one in the company will suspect you’re anything but my personal assistant.”

“But in reality I won’t be your assistant?” Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t think this position is for me.” She stood up. “I thank you for the offer, but no thank you.”

Charles surged to his feet and hurried around the desk. "Please, wait, Sage. It's not what you think. My business isn't some kind of front for illegal activities, but I fear that's the way I came across." He gestured to the chair. "Please sit back down and I'll explain."

She reluctantly sat and kept her eyes fixed on him as he walked to the large window and gazed out at the bustling city below. His wide, muscular shoulders seemed to sag a little under his expensive tailored suit. She waited for him to speak. After a minute, he turned back towards her.

"I had nothing growing up, Sage, except a suitcase full of dreams." His arms hung limp at his sides. "We lived in a small house in a little town outside of Lubbock. There weren't many career opportunities, and the few jobs that existed didn't offer much in the way of advancement. It was only survival. I wanted something more out of life than what my parents had. They were good people, but I couldn't stand watching them working their fingers to the bone, day after day and year after year, to support my older brothers and me.

"No matter how hard they worked, we never got ahead, but they kept on. They had no choice. In the end, though, all they received for years of backbreaking menial labor were premature deaths." He looked down at his hands, then back up at Sage. "I'm sorry," he said with a pain-filled laugh. "I tend to get melancholy when I speak of my parents."

Sage was unsure how to respond as she looked at this complicated man and wondered if he even expected a response.

"Anyway, I was determined to make a better life for myself. I began this company from scratch and made it the successful business it is today. It hasn't always been easy, but my parents instilled such strong work ethics in me that most of it seemed to come easily. My only regret is they didn't live long enough to reap some of these benefits. Their lives should've been so much better."

“I’m sure your parents would be proud of your accomplishments. This company is amazing.”

“Thank you. I intend to do what it takes to keep its integrity intact. That’s where you come in.”

“I still don’t understand,” she admitted.

“No, of course you don’t. I’ll lay it on the table for you. Someone within my employ is sabotaging me and the company.”

“Why would anyone do that?”

“It’s a competitive world, Sage. Trust is not something that holds much value today. People are filled with greed, and some will do anything to make a quick buck at the expense of another.”

“Just how do I fit in?”

“I need you to get as close as you can to the employees, without arousing suspicion, to see if anyone is acting strange or making derogatory comments about me or the company.”

“You’re asking me to be a spy?”

“In a sense.”

Her body grew rigid. “I don’t think I can do it. I can’t pretend to befriend others just to seek information. I’d be found out in a minute. You need to hire a private investigator to do something like this.”

“Please just try it. If you can’t handle it after a month, then I promise you I’ll find you another position within the company, and no one will ever know why you were really brought here.”

“Why me?” she asked. “There must be much more qualified candidates for the position. All I’ve ever done is office work. This sounds more along the lines of private investigating.”

“Sage, I’ll level with you. I had you thoroughly investigated before I even considered offering you this position.”

“What right—”

He held a hand up. “Please, don’t be angry. It’s common practice today. Potential employees are often unaware a background

check is being performed. I know you're kind, honest, and possess an integrity not often seen much today."

Sage stared intently at him. "Thank you for the compliment, but I'm still not certain this position is something I'd feel comfortable in."

"Give it a try. You may be surprised at what you're capable of doing."

"I don't like betraying people, and that's exactly what I'd be doing—gaining friendship in exchange for information."

"Remember, the person giving the information is the bad guy, not you. You'd be saving the company and hundreds of jobs."

She was thoughtful for a minute. "I suppose I could give it a try."

"That's all I'm asking you to do." He pulled some papers from a file on his desk. "Here's your contract. Sign on the dotted line," he said with a broad smile.

She took her time reading over the contract, which stated her rate of pay, medical package, and other employee benefits. Everything was plainly spelled out, so she signed the papers, then slid them back across the desk to him.

He signed them and handed her a copy. He placed his copy in a desk drawer. "You do understand, Sage, you can't tell anyone, even outside of the company, what your position is. Not your family, closest friends or your boyfriend."

She nodded. "I understand."

"Good. As far as anyone around here is concerned, including my personal secretary, Lyla Bevons, you're my assistant. Remember everyone in the company, excluding Lyla, is suspect until proven otherwise. If you dig up any information on anyone that seems questionable, don't breathe a word of it inside the building, unless it's here in my office. Since we'll be working close together, no one will think anything of it when we often have lunch or dinner

together. Even though I consider my office safe, I'd still prefer any intense discussions we have be held outside the building."

Sage let the details of her duties sink in, then finally asked, "What if an employee suspects what I'm doing? How will I defend myself?"

Charles leaned back in his chair. His jaw was set. "The chance of it happening is too remote to cause any worry. You're young, innocent and just trying to make a decent living in this dog-eat-dog world. You'd be the last person in my organization to ever be suspected of being a plant. But if you are, contact me at once."

"Okay. I'll do my best."

"That's all I'm asking you to do."

"Won't others wonder why my office is so far away from yours?"

"Why should they? You need space to work, and there are no other offices at present available."

Sage wanted to turn, run, and forget she'd ever been here, but another part of her was intrigued by what Charles had said and the confidence he had in her. Still, she had a nagging feeling in the pit of her stomach something wasn't right.

* * * *

Charles smiled smugly as he placed Sage's file in a desk drawer, then locked it. He liked her. She was young and innocent and her naivety amazed him. He'd thought it would have taken much more convincing to get her to accept the position. She was perfect.

He walked over to the window. He loved looking down at the city, above all at night. It made him feel less alone. He'd fallen in love with Buffalo long before he'd made it his home and soon became an avid football fan, rarely missing a Bills game. His face suddenly darkened. He had it all: power, wealth, intelligence, but not the love of the only woman he'd ever wanted. He'd had her once and he was determined to have her again.

What the hell was the matter with women today, he wondered. Wasn't it every woman's dream to be pampered and have everything her heart desired without having to lift a finger? Not the woman he'd set his heart on. She was creative and would never be happy having any part of her suppressed. If only she'd devoted as much time to him as she had to her creative endeavors. He'd strayed and that was something she refused to forgive.

His jaw twitched. He couldn't help himself. Innocent, naive women challenged him, now more than ever since he'd lost the love of his life. Sage Ralston would be a challenge, and it had been too long since he'd had just such a confrontation. She'd led a sheltered life, had few friends, and a strict upbringing--all the ingredients to mold her into the woman who'd be perfect for him. He'd show her a world she'd never known, and once she entered his world, she'd be eager to stay.

She was a beauty. Her slim body, slightly rounded breasts, small hips and those clear green eyes, as she innocently looked at him, made him grow hard. He imagined running his hands through that beautiful auburn hair as he laid her on the bed and mounted her. It would be soon...very soon. She would make him forget all about the other woman...at least for a while.

Chapter 5

Ryan wiped his greasy hands on a worn rag, then stuffed it into the back pocket of his coveralls. He took another rag from his front pocket and mopped the sweat from his brow as he handed the key of the car he'd just finished working on to his boss, Walt Simpson. "It's finished. It was a clogged carburetor."

Simpson took the key. "Well, Mrs. Carson will be glad to hear that." He slapped Ryan's shoulder. "Take a break," he said. "You deserve it."

Ryan nodded, then walked outside and sat down on a bench. He snatched at a piece of grass. "Damn you, Sage," he muttered. She hadn't called him since their disagreement Friday night, and he was damned if he was going to call her, even though he was worried sick about her, especially after what her father had done.

She was a stubborn woman when her mind was set on something. In the six years they'd been together, she'd never even broached the subject of sex. When they'd reached the point in their relationship where he thought it was time to take the next step, she'd let him know in no uncertain terms she wasn't going to have sex with him, or anyone for that matter, until she was wearing a wedding ring.

He'd found her morals refreshing, even if at times very frustrating. He loved her and would do nothing to tarnish her strong convictions. He'd wait for her for the rest of his life if necessary, even if his friends thought him crazy. And most of them did.

He had hoped when he went away to college in California some of her rigid views would relax, but they hadn't. She still refused to go dancing at the clubs when he came home on his breaks, and didn't want to attend any of his college functions, much to his dismay, even though he had offered to send her a plane ticket. He came home at every opportunity and regaled her with stories of campus life and all the fun and activities available, but still she refused to visit. He doubted her parents would have allowed her to anyway, but he wished she'd at least asked them.

He'd had plenty of opportunities for a fling with the young women on campus, but he couldn't cheat, even if he'd wanted to. Sage had his heart. He'd spent the majority of his free time on campus watching old movies, taking still photos, and making his own short films, furthering his dream to someday become a film producer.

He wanted to give Sage the kind of life she deserved; a life filled with peace and love—a life he knew she didn't get from her parents. He sighed. They'd never gone this long without talking, and it was ripping him apart.

"Damn you, Sage," he muttered again.

"You know what they say about people who talk to themselves. You look like you just lost your best friend. What's the matter?"

Ryan looked up, slightly embarrassed. "What's up, Billy?"

The older man squeezed his overweight body onto the bench next to Ryan. "I'm taking my break early. If I don't, I may not get one." He pulled a somewhat bent cigarette out of a crumpled pack, then struck a match and lit it. "So what's wrong?" he asked, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

"Nothing...just life. No matter how hard I try, nothing ever works out." He frowned as he looked at Billy, puffing on his cigarette. He liked Billy. He'd been a mechanic for over twenty years and knew every inch of any car, no matter the model, and taught

Ryan everything he knew. Billy lived a simple life with his wife and two children, whom he adored and spoke of often.

"I promised the wife I'd quit these damned things." He threw his cigarette to the ground and crushed it out beneath a steel-toed shoe, then turned and peered into Ryan's face. "Sounds like woman trouble to me. I can see it in your eyes."

Ryan looked at him. "It shows, huh?"

Billy carefully eyed him. "You and Sage have a fight?"

"Not what I'd call a fight. She's acting like someone I don't even know any more. That's the strange part. I do what she always asks me to do, then all of a sudden she changes her mind, and now I'm in trouble for respecting her wishes. I can't win!"

Billy laughed loudly. "She sounds normal...for a woman."

"Just the same, she sure makes me wonder sometimes."

"They all do. Take my word for it. In a couple of days she'll act like nothing's wrong and wonder why you're so upset."

Ryan cocked an eye. "What do you do when your wife acts like that?"

He tugged on his chin. "I keep very quiet and stay out of her way. I never bring up the topic again, and if she does, I try to talk to her calmly about it. If all else fails, I buy some flowers and candy. Works every time." He pulled himself to his feet. "Well, I'd better get back to work."

"Thanks for the advice, Billy."

After work, Ryan drove to the mall and picked out a box of candy and a dozen red roses, then hurried home and took a quick shower. He checked his answering machine, but there were no calls. "Damn it." He grabbed the phone and punched in Sage's number. "Hello, Mr. Ralston, may I please speak to Sage?"

"Sage doesn't live here," Matt Ralston barked. "I assumed she moved in with you."

"Why would she?"

"You tell me! Don't call here again."

The phone clicked in his ear as Ralston slammed it down. Ryan slumped onto his sofa and put his head in his hands. "Where the hell are you, Sage?"

He imagined all sorts of horrible things. What had happened after he'd dropped her off Friday night? If anything tragic had happened to her, he didn't know what he'd do. He tried to shake off his disturbing thoughts, but only managed to replace them with worse ones. What if she'd decided to throw caution to the wind and go out, and had hooked up with some guy? He knew his thoughts were ridiculous, but just the same, he couldn't shake the feeling she might have gotten herself into something she'd later be sorry for. She hadn't been herself. He'd never seen her like that before, in a place where he couldn't reach her, and it unnerved him.

After a few minutes, anger set in. She hadn't called him to tell him she'd left her parents' home. Where did she go? He'd offered to let her spend the night; he certainly would have found a safe place for her to live until they figured things out if she didn't want to go back home. If she'd had another run-in with her father, why hadn't she called him? He'd always been supportive of her family problems. Why hadn't she called to tell him how the first day at her new job had gone? There was no way he could reach her now. She didn't own a cell phone. He was cut off from her until she decided to call him, and the more he thought about it, the more it pissed him off. If she wanted to play head games with him, then fine.

He stood up, grabbed the roses and candy, and yanked open the cabinet door under the sink, then deposited them in the garbage can.

Chapter 6

Sage lay stretched out on the sofa with her head propped up on one hand as she looked at Heather. "I'm exhausted! What a day."

Heather, dressed in a pale blue sweat suit, had just come in from a run. Her eyes twinkled as she waited for Sage to tell her more. "Come on...out with it! I want every detail. What's Charles Boylston really like in person?" She pulled the hair tie from her hair, letting it fall.

"Well," Sage began, "he's not what I expected. He's much younger than I thought, too. He's in his early thirties, I'd guess. He's very good-looking, nice and pleasant. I was a nervous wreck, but he put me at ease. I've never met anyone quite like him before. At times, it's difficult to remember he's the owner of the company and not just another co-worker." She smiled. "He's so down to earth, and cares about what's going on in his employees' lives. It's almost like one big, happy family there...kind of like too good to be true."

"So, what are your duties as his personal assistant?"

She made a face. "The usual boring stuff," she answered. "Setting up his personal appointments and things like that. It's not a glamorous position, if that's what you're thinking." She wished she could tell Heather the truth. She hated lying, but consoled herself with the fact the answer she had given Heather was the truth. Spying definitely wasn't going to be glamorous.

"I wasn't thinking that," Heather said with a smile. "Okay, maybe I was. After all, you have a great title. Tell me about your co-workers. What are they like?"

"The people I met were kind and supportive. I'm new, so only time will tell how I fit in, but it'll take forever to meet everyone who works there. The company is huge compared to Olman's tiny little building." She pulled herself to a sitting position. "So, how's the new girl? Is she nice?"

Heather's eyebrows shot up. "She's annoying. I don't think Debbie and I have anything in common with her. She came in acting like she's in charge of the office and she's so pushy."

"Give her a chance. Look at me and how we three ended up as friends, even though I am the opposite of you two. I'm sure you and Debbie will soon find some shared interests with her."

"There's a huge difference between you and Ruby." She rolled her eyes. "You're not gray-haired and in your fifties, with an open Bible propped up on your desk. I doubt we'll ever have much in common."

Sage laughed. "Are you serious?"

"I wish I wasn't. I can't believe Olman hired her. Debbie and I must've pissed him off big-time, and this is his revenge."

She laughed again. "How'd Debbie react?"

"I thought she was going to have a stroke when she met Miss Ruby White. Ruby's a widow and insists upon being called 'miss' instead of 'missus'. She explained, since her husband is dead, she no longer wants to be referred to as a 'missus,' unless she has a living, breathing man by her side." She wrinkled her nose. "She has these really outlandish views, and will not back down or even listen to another viewpoint. She quoted scriptures all day long. Debbie and I have nothing against religion, but there's a time and a place."

Heather spent the next five minutes imitating Ruby.

"That's too funny, Heather," Sage squealed. "I wish I could've seen the looks on your faces."

“Did I mention Ruby is active in her church, and the church is what her life revolves around? She has a son and daughter-in-law living in Florida, but she worries her son will leave the church because his young wife doesn’t follow the teachings of the church to the letter. Ruby’s a fanatic. Whenever we mentioned something she presumed to be a sin, you could hear her sputtering and then another mumbled prayer was sent up.”

“Looks like you and Debbie will have to tone down the conversations a bit. Debbie’s renditions of some of her escapades could definitely warrant an X rating at times.”

Heather nodded emphatically. “Anyway, enough about us.” Her voice grew serious. “You haven’t mentioned Ryan. Don’t you think it’s time you called him?”

“I will in time.”

“Come on. He’s got to be out of his mind with worry. If he called your parents and they told him you’ve moved out, he’s going to go nuts not knowing where you’ve gone. I’m not taking sides here, but you did do an about-face. You have to commend him for not taking advantage of you when you threw yourself at him.”

She sighed. “I suppose I should let him know I’m alive and well. I owe him that much.”

“Yes, you should.” Heather peered into Sage’s eyes. “I can tell how much you miss him, even if you don’t want to admit it. So what’re you waiting for?”

“I do miss him, but I don’t know what to say to him. Everything’s so screwed up.”

“You’re embarrassed, but he’ll understand. Imagine his confusion. Come on,” Heather prodded. “The longer you let this rift between you two build, the harder it’ll be to mend. You can’t throw away six years of your life. Besides, you know he loves you, and you love him.”

“Maybe Ryan never really loved me the way I thought he did. Maybe he only felt sorry for me.”

“For six years? Give me a break. You don’t really believe that.” She paused. “Or maybe it was for the sex,” she added, half-joking. “It’s obvious, Sage. He stayed with you because he’s in love with you.”

Sage blushed. “I’m ashamed for throwing myself at him the way I did.”

“It shows how much he respects you by not taking advantage of you. Tell him the truth... you were stressed out because of your parents’ situation and starting the new job. Trust me. He’ll understand.” She patted Sage’s shoulder. “Tell him everything you told me and Debbie.”

“You’re right. The longer I put it off, the worse it’ll be.”

Heather handed her the phone. “I’m going to grab a shower.”

Sage nodded as she dialed Ryan’s number. She was startled when he answered on the first ring.

“Ryan, it’s me,” she said. “We need to talk.”

“Where are you?” he demanded. “I called your house and was told you’d moved out.”

“I did. I’m staying with Heather until I can afford my own place.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were moving? Why didn’t you call me? Did it ever occur to you I might be scared shitless about what might’ve happened to you?”

Sage put a shaky hand to her throbbing temple. “I’m calling you now. I needed to clear my head first.”

“The way you acted the other night made me wonder how well I really know you. Maybe that’s the problem...I don’t know the real you. No matter what I did or said, it wasn’t right. You put me in a no-win situation.”

“Yes, you do know the real me, Ryan. I’ve been under so much pressure. I—I don’t know what came over me. I’m sorry.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me what was going on? That’s what couples are supposed to do. Maybe I could’ve helped. At least I could’ve offered my support.”

“I don’t know,” she answered truthfully. “It was wrong of me. I should have, and I’m sorry I didn’t. I had no right to treat you the way I did.”

“Do you think it would’ve been better to throw away everything you stand for, all your morals and integrity?”

“I said I was wrong and I’m sorry, Ryan. I wanted to be someone else for a change...anyone but who I am.” She began to cry. “We need to talk about it, but not on the phone.” She sniffed.

His voice softened. “Please don’t cry, Sage. I was just so scared something terrible had happened to you. We do need to talk face to face. Do you want to go out tonight for a cup of coffee? Or maybe you’d like to come over and we can just talk. You can tell me about the new job and why you moved...and everything else.”

She took a ragged breath. “It’s late, Ryan, and I’ve had a long day. As much as I want to see you, I’m just too tired to do anything but get some sleep. Can we go out tomorrow night? We have a lot to talk about, and we’re going to need more than just an hour or so.”

“You’re right. I didn’t realize it was so late. What time should I pick you up tomorrow?”

“I’ll call you when I get home. My hours are a little erratic, and I’m not sure what time I’ll finish.”

“Okay. So, how did the first day on the new job go?”

“It was interesting. Everyone was very nice and helpful. Because I was so overwhelmed with the size of the company, I kept getting lost.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure you’ll do fine. I feel better since I know you’re okay, so maybe I can get some sleep. I love you, Sage, and I can’t wait to see you.”

“I love you, too, Ryan.” She hung up the phone with a lighter heart.

* * * *

Ryan clicked off the phone, still not convinced Sage really was okay, but he was relieved to have heard her voice. She had called him, too, so she had made the first move to set things right between them. She did care. He pulled on his work boots. Now that that weight had been lifted from his shoulders, he decided to take a run over to the house of one of his old high school buddies to look at the old clunker he was restoring.

Chapter 7

Sage finished reading the last from the stack of employee profiles Charles had placed on her desk this morning, then closed the folder and turned off her computer. Her eyes burned from all the reading she'd done today. She glanced at the clock as she stretched her tired arms. "Looks like I'll be out of here at a decent hour," she said, happy and grateful she'd be able to keep her date with Ryan.

The words had barely left her lips when Charles Boylston tapped on her office door, then walked inside. "Glad I caught you before you left for the day, Sage. I need you to go over the rest of these profile reports right away, and we'll discuss them in a couple of hours." He laid them on her desk.

She nodded, pasting a bright smile on her lips to mask her disappointment, and watched him leave as quickly as he'd entered. She'd agreed to work long hours, and he was only expecting her to do what she'd said she would. Now she was sorry she had made such an agreement.

She dialed Ryan's number, and when his answering machine clicked on, said, "Ryan, I'm sorry, but I have to cancel tonight. I've been asked to work late. Can we reschedule for tomorrow? Please let me know if it's all right. I forgot you don't have Heather's number. It's 555-2124. I'm sorry because I do want and need to talk to you. I love you. 'Bye." She hoped he'd hear the sincere disappointment in her voice.

She tilted back in her chair and picked up a folder, holding it out as she read the name typed on it. She leaned forward and set

the folder on the desk, then one by one picked up the others and opened them, seeing each contained the same detailed records as the ones she'd just finished. She sighed as she began to read, taking notes as she did.

Two hours later, Sage found herself seated in a quiet corner across from Charles at the Star Cove Lounge. She was shocked as she read the prices on the menu. She'd never dreamed she would ever find herself dining in such elegance. This place was reserved for the rich and elite, not for a common office worker like herself. It would cost her almost a week's salary to have dinner here with Ryan. She was dressed in her work attire of a flattering new skirt, blouse, and pumps, but she sensed her attire was not appropriate as she gazed at the women in their beautiful cocktail dresses. Her eyes swept around the room taking in the breathtaking décor, then settled on the groupings of pictures of all the famous patrons who had dined here.

"You'd be surprised how many notable people have stopped here through the years," Charles said, as though reading her mind.

"It's impressive." Sage turned her attention back to her employer.

"Are you certain you wouldn't like some wine?" He motioned to the bottle on the table.

"No, thank you. Have you met many of them?" she asked timidly, turning her attention back to the photographs.

He nodded, then told her interesting stories about those he knew personally. "I hope I didn't bore you," he said when he'd finished.

Her eyes widened. "No. I'm in awe. It must be so exciting."

"They're no different from you and I. They got here the same way and they'll leave the same way." He chuckled. "I suppose we'd better get down to business or we'll be here all night. Did anything in the reports give you cause for suspicion?" He watched her.

Sage pulled some notes from her briefcase. "Everyone seems dedicated to you and the company, but I have a question about one particular employee."

He smiled as he held up a hand, palm out. "Don't tell me," he said. "Connor Michaels."

"You already know?" Sage was puzzled. "There's very little personal information in her file, unlike the others. Why doesn't her profile contain as much information?" She noticed the faraway look in his eyes at the mention of the woman.

He frowned. "It's complicated. We'll get into that later."

"I don't understand."

He sipped at his glass of wine, then set it down. "She's slick and keeps her tracks well covered. I need to find out if there's anyone in the company she's unusually close to. You'll have to become her closest friend and confidant."

Sage cocked an eye. "What if she doesn't want to become my friend? I can't force my friendship on her."

"She will," he replied, "because she'll want to know why I've hired a personal assistant. Curiosity about it has got to be eating her up."

"If that's the case, then she may try to persuade me to share company secrets."

He nodded. "It's what I'm hoping she'll do, and you will share those secrets, but we'll always be one step ahead of her, and she'll never be the wiser for it."

"I don't know how I'll be able to pull it off without arousing her suspicions."

"I'll be telling you what information to feed her. It will take time, though, to win her complete trust and confidence, as she's a very private person."

"What if I can't gain her trust? It sounds so easy sitting here now discussing it with you, but in reality it may not be so easy."

“We’ll cross that bridge if we come to it, but I don’t think we will. If I know Connor, she’s already hatching a plan of her own. She’s as slippery as they come.”

“None of this makes any sense. Why don’t you fire her if you can’t trust her?”

“I can’t right now. I told you, it’s complicated.”

Sage shifted uncomfortably. Charles’ penetrating eyes unnerved her. She didn’t like this; something wasn’t right. Apprehension gnawed at the pit of her stomach.

“Soon it’ll all make sense. Trust me.”

* * * *

Ryan’s heart sank when he heard Sage’s voice canceling their date. He missed her, and as much as he wanted to see her, he knew it would be unfair to pressure her now since she’d just started her new job. Besides, by the tone of her voice, she did seem truly upset. He popped a frozen dinner into the microwave, then grabbed a beer from the compact refrigerator.

After he’d eaten, he dialed Heather’s number. “Hello, Heather, is Sage home from work yet?”

“No, Ryan, she’s not. Can I give her a message?”

“Yes. Tell her I’ll see her tomorrow night at the same time.”

“Okay, Ryan. I know she was looking forward to seeing you tonight.”

“Not as much as I was looking forward to seeing her.”

After he hung up, he stretched out on his sofa, his feet hanging over the arm. He closed his eyes, but he couldn’t get Sage off his mind. He wondered what would have happened if he’d made love to her last Friday night.

He flicked on the TV. If he didn’t find something to take his mind off of her, it would drive him crazy. He groaned as he got up and retrieved a second can of beer from the fridge. He gulped it, trying to squelch the fire burning within him.

* * * *

Heather showered, then picked up the hair dryer, standing naked in her tiny bathroom. She switched the hair dryer on, her attention focused on the mirror as she studied her reflection. She wasn't ugly, but she wasn't pretty either; more like plain. As a teenager, it had bothered her and she'd spent a fortune on products trying to improve her looks as she watched the boys always flocking around Debbie, who was perky, petite, and beautiful. As she grew older, she learned how to compensate for her less flattering features with her positive features, in turn becoming comfortable with herself.

She'd slept around, but one-night stands now left her cold. She wanted one man exclusively, but she'd yet to find him. The optimist in her knew he was out there and the day would come she'd find him, but she was lonesome and hoped the wait wouldn't be too long.

After her hair was dry, she clicked off the hairdryer and set it on the counter. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply as she thought about her last one-night stand. Chas had the most intense eyes she'd ever seen and a wide, sensual mouth. She'd made eye contact with him all night and when he'd made his way over to the table where she and Debbie were enjoying their final drinks of the night, Debbie patted her on the shoulder and excused herself.

A soft moan escaped Heather's throat and her pussy became wet, as images of Chas' long, hard cock thrusting in and out of her as her nails dug into his back, consumed her. She kept her eyes closed as she slipped a finger inside of her now-dripping pussy and rubbed her clit, quickly bringing herself to an orgasm.

Chapter 8

Sage busied herself most of the day taking notes and doing research on her computer. During her breaks, she introduced herself to whomever was in the break room, then afterwards went back to her office to search her files for the name. Charles popped in from time to time to see if she needed anything.

She still wasn't convinced this job was right for her and had an uneasy feeling about it which she couldn't shake, but she did like the people she'd met so far. They were dedicated employees, appeared to enjoy their jobs, and had only good things to say about Charles.

Charles still overwhelmed her. He was such a complex man. After they'd finished discussing business last night, they'd spent the next two hours talking about everything from politics to favorite books and movies. He tried to get her to open up about herself, but not being a sophisticated person, she stuck to safer topics. He was a wonderful conversationalist, and there didn't seem to be any topic with which he wasn't familiar. She listened, enraptured, as he reminisced about his childhood. He seemed lonesome, though, and it bothered her for some strange reason. He was a man who had it all—looks, money, and power, so why did she get the impression something was missing from his life? Today in the office, however, everything was back to business as usual, as though the conversation of last night had never taken place.

She stood up and stretched, then walked to the break room. She'd worked through her lunch hour and needed something to

sustain her until dinner. Only a few employees occupied the room, with most coming in to grab a snack from the various vending machines and then departing. She sat at a table nibbling on a cardboard-tasting sandwich and sipping from a bottle of water as she watched everyone who came and went. Any one of them could be the culprit, or was Connor Michaels the guilty one?

Sage's eyes were at once drawn to the door when a striking woman entered. Connor Michaels was more beautiful in person than in her employee profile photo. The woman walked with an air of confidence and grace. Sage watched as Connor's gaze swept around the room as she walked to the vending machines, made a couple of quick selections and then settled herself at a vacant table near Sage's.

Connor looks like a model. Her slim waist and long legs caught the attention of the few men seated at the surrounding tables, but if Connor noticed, she didn't appear to care one way or the other.

Sage continued to eat her sandwich, occasionally glancing in Connor's direction. Connor unwrapped her own sandwich and popped the lid from a steaming cup of coffee. When Connor caught Sage's eye, Sage smiled and nodded to the empty seat. Connor picked up her lunch and carried it to Sage's table.

"Thank you for inviting me to sit with you," she said in a soft voice. "It's much more pleasant to have a companion to lunch with."

Sage smiled. "I've just begun working here, but I don't believe I've seen you before."

"Unless you happen to be on the other side of the building, you'll probably only run into me in here. I work in research. I'm Connor Michaels."

"It's nice to meet you, Connor. I'm Sage Ralston."

She nodded politely. "Is everyone treating you well, Sage? Charles prides himself on his employees having a healthy rapport with one another, like one big, happy family. Though, I must say,

the rumor mill has been speculating as to why he felt the need to hire a personal assistant. He's gotten along fine without one for all these years." She looked at Sage.

Sage recalled what Charles had said about Connor's curiosity being piqued. "Everyone has been very helpful and friendly. I think I'm going to enjoy working here."

"Good," Connor replied. She took a napkin and dabbed her lips. "What are your duties as personal assistant?"

Sage searched her mind for a quick answer. "Actually, it's a glorified title for gofer," she replied with a laugh. "I'm afraid the title makes the position sound much more glamorous than it is."

Connor smiled. "Charles is a remarkable man and never holds himself in a higher esteem than those who work for him. He lets his employees know without them, his company would be nothing. His humility is refreshing. It seems odd he'd need a personal assistant. His secretary must be able to do a lot of what you do, but I guess he's the boss."

Sage observed Connor as she talked. She was twenty-eight years old, single, lived alone in a modest apartment and socialized very little. Sage had memorized the report. "He's not what I expected," she agreed. "It's easy to sometimes forget he's the boss."

Connor laughed again. "I remember the first time I saw him. I think I fell in love that instant. He has an insatiable hunger for knowledge." She lowered her voice. "He's insatiable in bed, too."

Sage's cheeks grew warm. She couldn't believe Connor would reveal such intimate details of her life to a total stranger. Maybe Connor was testing her. She had to keep her guard up.

"Level with me, Sage. When you first saw him, don't tell me you didn't imagine what it would be like to fuck him." Her eyes stayed focused on Sage's face.

Sage's face burned. If Connor was testing her, she was doing a good job of it. "No, I didn't," she replied stiffly. "He's my employ-

er, and that's the only relationship I care to have with him." She fought to keep her voice under control.

Connor raised an eyebrow. "It doesn't have to be." Her gaze swept over Sage. "You're a beautiful woman, Sage. It's only a matter of time," she stated. "He's very persuasive. He never stops until he gets what he wants."

"It doesn't matter how persuasive he is. I can't be swayed."

"He'll seduce you right into his bed before you even realize it's happening. You'll never meet another man with his charisma."

"No," Sage replied emphatically. "I'm involved with someone."

"It doesn't matter." Connor smiled. "Charlie is enigmatic. He always gets what he wants, and he always wants what he can't have. In the end, he finds a way to get it. He won't be able to resist you." She stood up. "I've got to get back to work. It was nice talking to you, Sage. Good luck with Charlie."

"I hope we can talk again."

"I'm sure we will."

Sage watched as Connor's curvy body slowly moved towards the exit, her high-heeled shoes making soft tapping sounds across the tiled floor. Sage was confused. If Charles Boylston had indeed had an affair with Connor Michaels, why had he left that out of his report? It would certainly be an important piece of information, as to motive. Or was Connor smarter than Sage gave her credit for, trying to plant seeds of doubt in her mind about Charles by making up wild tales about him?

She sat for a few minutes, wondering what to do next. The worst part of it was she couldn't share her thoughts and doubts with anyone. She wished she could talk to Heather and Debbie, or especially Ryan, about it. Ryan had always been her sounding board and offered a strong shoulder to lean on when the going got rough, but even if she were able to tell him, there was still a rift between

them. Tonight she intended to rectify their shaky relationship and try to put things back on track.

She picked up her half-eaten sandwich and deposited it in the garbage bin, then wandered back to her office. As she stepped inside, Charles was waiting for her.

"I was on a break," she apologized.

He smiled. "I just popped in for a minute to let you know I'll be back later to go over your reports. I have a meeting across town." He consulted his wristwatch. "I should be back in about three hours."

Sage nodded, masking her anger and disappointment. What would Ryan say when she canceled yet again? *Damn this job and this company.*

She rubbed her aching temples, then picked up the phone. She left brief messages for Heather and Ryan, but this time she didn't reschedule with Ryan. She'd call him later tonight. She hoped she'd be able to make him understand the position she was in and he'd realize she was caught between a rock and a hard place as far as her working hours were concerned. She hoped Ryan realized it was tearing her apart not being able to see him.

Two-and-a-half hours later, Charles summoned her to his office. When she entered, she saw a tray containing two cups of coffee and two oversized sandwiches sitting on his desk. "I took the liberty of ordering some dinner for us." He popped the lids off the coffee containers.

Sage watched him, contemplating how she'd broach the topic of his affair with Connor Michaels. Of course, looking at him and now having met Connor in the flesh, made it obvious to see why they'd been physically attracted to one another.

"So, what have you found out?" he asked, then took a bite out of a sandwich.

Sage toyed with the lid of her coffee container. "I met Connor Michaels this afternoon."

Charles wiped his hands on a paper napkin. "Good. How did you two hit it off?"

"Quite well. She's beautiful and very personable."

"Yes, she is," he agreed, then looked sharply at her. "Is something bothering you, Sage? You look uneasy. Has something happened to upset you?"

"No," she answered. "I've just been trying to piece together what she told me, with the information in the report on her. There's still so much I can't figure out."

"Well, what has you puzzled?"

She kept her eyes on his. "Why did you hire her?"

His eyes twinkled. "She's one of the best researchers in the country." He took another bite from his sandwich.

Sage frowned. What was he not telling her? "I don't mean to sound ignorant, but I'm missing something here."

He raised an eyebrow. "Did she tell you she and I were involved for a while?"

"Yes, she did." She was relieved he'd brought up the subject so she wouldn't have to. "Didn't it complicate your working relationship?"

He laughed. "No, but it did complicate her affair with a local film producer. He was working on a documentary about Chafon at the time. You're aware Chafon is my biggest competitor?"

Sage had done some preliminary research and, even though she understood little of what she'd read, the name Chafon had come up often. "Yes, I am. Did she ever share any of Chafon's secrets with you?"

"I questioned her about anything she may have gleaned about Chafon from her boyfriend. I'm not certain if she even knew anything worth sharing, and if she did, she kept it to herself, but I doubt Tim McGill told her anything. She never worked for Chafon, so she knew none of the inside information."

“Wasn’t she compromising herself by dating someone who was involved with Chafron?”

His forehead creased. “She had no control over McGill’s documentary. It’s just one of those things that happen. Besides, I hired her knowing this information. She volunteered it at her interview. Nevertheless, I kept a close watch on her, and nothing happened to cause me any alarm.”

“Why did you hire her when you knew she was dating the man who was doing a documentary on Chafron?”

“I hired her because she’s one of the best in her field. There was nothing suspicious in her background to warrant any alarm. Her former employer in Los Angeles assured me her integrity had always been above board. She wouldn’t have left LA, but her mother had become very ill and she needed to come back to the east coast. I’d have thought she’d have moved her mother to LA, but she wanted to keep her mother in familiar surroundings.” He sipped his coffee.

Sage took a bite of the roast beef sandwich as she waited for him to continue.

“As I stated, Connor voluntarily told me she was involved with McGill and that he was working on the documentary, so she knew the bloodhounds would be monitoring her while the documentary was being made. I knew McGill was meeting with the CEO of Chafron quite often, and Henry James would do anything in his power to gain some of our secret formulas. At the time the documentary was filmed, his company was fledgling.”

“During that time she never revealed any information?” Sage was thoughtful for a minute. “Why suspect her now? She appears to be one hundred percent loyal to Boylston.” She ran a hand through her hair.

“Our relationship ended almost as soon as it began.” He sighed.

“Why did you keep her on the payroll? Wouldn’t it have been wiser to let her go if you thought there’d be a problem?”

He spread his hands out palms up. “How could I fire her? Our brief affair had nothing to do with her work performance. She’s damned good at what she does and I know she could get a position anywhere she wanted to. The last thing I wanted to do was turn her loose to my biggest competitor after I’d just jilted her. I don’t know she wouldn’t have changed just a few minor things in the formula--enough to have it look like it wasn’t stolen--to further my competitor’s aims. Fighting a case like that in the courts, with the exposure and risk of losing, could have set my company back so far we may have never gotten back on track. I couldn’t chance it. As soon as her contract is up, though, I don’t intend to renew it, unless her current project isn’t completed. The project is in a critical phase right now and her expertise is needed.”

“Did Chafron Systems ever offer her a position?”

“She never mentioned it if they did.”

“When she’s finished here, won’t Chafron be the first place she’ll go looking for employment?”

Sage watched as a sinister smile crossed his lips. The look on his face chilled her.

“Not if you get me the information I’m after. With the report I’ll be placing in her files, no one else will touch her with a ten-foot pole.”

“I thought you said she’s the best in her field. I’m not following this at all.” Sage’s eyes narrowed.

“She’s seeing Tim McGill again. I have to wonder if she really did end it with him as she’d told me when we got together. The two of them may have planned this from the very beginning. I know McGill has become good friends with Henry James and socializes with him. It’s only natural he escorts Connor to those social functions. If I can prove she’s planning to go to Chafron before her contract even comes up for renewal, that’ll give me even more le-

verage to use against her in court if she is leaking information. And it would put James in an awkward position.”

Sage tried to comprehend what he was saying. “It still doesn't make sense. You think because she’s upset at the demise of your relationship she may be doing this as an act of revenge? But it doesn’t make sense if she was seeing the both of you at the same time. She’d have no reason to seek revenge against you because of a fling.”

He tensed. “I’d like to think that what Connor and I shared was more than just a fling. I had very deep feelings for her and wanted the relationship to work. She wanted something different.” He cleared his throat. “Enough of this. So, what ideas do you have?”

Something still didn’t sit right with her and, the more she thought about it, the more uncomfortable she became. “Maybe she’s being blackmailed by someone at Chafron.”

“That’s a good theory, but as I’ve stated, I can’t prove anything. That’s why I need you to get close to her and become her confidant. Maybe you can break her down.”

“Now it sounds like you’re defending her, instead of accusing her.”

He frowned. “I’m trying to grasp at any straw, hoping she isn’t the one betraying the company.” His eyes shifted. “I still care for her. Gain her friendship, Sage.”

She tried to make sense out of everything he had said. One minute he was out to destroy Connor’s future and the next he was defending her. What was she missing? “That may be easier said than done. Even if I manage to befriend her, what makes you so sure she’ll confide in me? If she’s committed a criminal act, I’d be the last person she’d want to tell.”

“Not necessarily,” he countered.

“I’m your personal assistant. She’s already questioned why, after all these years, you need one. Her curiosity is aroused, and I don’t think it’ll make her decide to come clean to me if she’s

committed a crime. I think I'm the last person on earth she'd trust."

"You said she was friendly toward you. She's not usually friendly with someone she's just met."

"She was, but that doesn't mean we'll become bosom buddies." She shifted in her seat. "I can't do this. I've tried, but I'm not the right type of person for this job. I told you that at our first meeting, I can't continue to lie to the people I care about. I'm just not cut out for this."

Charles stared at her with a peculiar look on his face. He tapped a fingertip on the edge of the desk. "You can't quit now. You know too much," he snapped. "It would seem odd if my personal assistant quit after just a few days."

Sage kept silent.

"Listen to me, Sage," he said in a softer tone. "You can do it. It won't be for long. Besides, you did sign the contract."

"I know, but I wish I hadn't."

He stood up and walked over to where she was sitting, then placed his large hands on her shoulders and proceeded to gently knead her slim shoulders. "You're tense. Let me give you a massage. I'm the best."

"No, I'm fine," she replied, shrugging off his hands. Her own hands were trembling as she clasped them tightly in her lap. Was he coming on to her? Hadn't Connor warned her? Charles dropped his hands, then returned to his chair. "I didn't mean to offend you, Sage. Please accept my apology if I did."

She swallowed hard. Maybe he had only been offering to loosen up her tense muscles, but it was still inappropriate as far as she was concerned. It could even be considered sexual harassment. "I need to tell my boyfriend what I'm doing here."

Charles' jaw twitched. "I told you no one can know."

"He needs to know."

His eyes grew dark. "I see. You're having problems, so you think by revealing the true nature of your employment it'll endear you to him. Listen to me, Sage. If you don't have trust, then you have nothing. Does he trust you?"

"He has no reason not to," she replied defensively.

"You're a loyal person, and I don't think you want to risk compromising my company and jeopardizing hundreds of jobs, just to appease your boyfriend."

"It's not like that. Besides, he wouldn't tell anyone."

"You're young, Sage," he said impatiently. "In time, you'll look back and wonder why you put so much energy into someone who doesn't have your best interests at heart."

Sage's jaw dropped. "You have no right—"

"Let's get back to work," he cut in. "I'll disregard your outburst, but expect you'll have no more."

She fumed. "I quit!"

"If you do, Sage, what will you do? You have no money. This assignment will probably be over in a couple of months. Where will you go and be able to make the salary I'm paying you? If you break your contract, I could take legal action. I'm not saying I would, but if my lawyers decided to, what would you do?"

"Is that a threat?"

He laughed. "Let's get back to work."

Chapter 9

Ryan angrily opened a can of beer, then plopped down onto the sofa. Again, Sage had canceled and he was pissed. As much as he loved her, he was damned if he'd let her make a fool out of him. She'd better have a good excuse this time, because he was reaching the end of his rope. As he watched the minutes crawl by, he became more incensed. When the phone finally rang at ten forty-nine, he waited for a moment, seeing Heather's number displayed on his caller ID, then snatched the phone from its cradle.

He put the receiver to his ear, but kept silent.

"Ryan? Are you there?" Sage's voice was soft, but anxious.

He slowly let his breath out. "I'm here," he replied coldly.

"I'm sorry about tonight."

"Whatever. I guess we shouldn't plan any more dates."

"No, Ryan. I promise you this is not how my job is always going to be. I'm just learning the ropes. Things will settle down in time. I'm only doing it for us—for our future."

"So you've said, but it seems to me like you're pushing me further out of your life every day, instead of bringing me closer."

"That's not true. I love you, Ryan, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you," she said. "I want to talk to you about my job."

Ryan shuffled his feet. "Tell me about your new boss. Isn't his wife upset he's spending so many late hours at the office with his beautiful young assistant?"

"He's not married."

"You mean single, as in his wife died so he fills his time at the office?"

"No. He's never been married. I don't want to talk about him, Ryan. I want to talk about us."

"Hmmm. So he's an old, die-hard bachelor who's a workaholic and has probably spent his entire life building his company and now expects everyone else in his employ to work the same ridiculous hours he does."

"Not exactly," she replied. "He's not much older than thirty."

Ryan's jaw twitched as his anger mounted. "So let me guess. You're working till ten or eleven every night and there's nothing going on between you two? I'm not a fool, Sage."

"You're jealous! Give me credit, Ryan. I love only you. Besides, he's my boss. If I was going to do anything, it would be with you."

"Are you trying to convince me office affairs never happen? Especially working so late at night? Is he good-looking?"

"You're being ridiculous. Yes, he's good-looking, but I don't care what he looks like. I'm not interested in anything more than having a decent paying job."

He was silent for a minute. "Do you really expect me to believe nothing's going on?"

"Yes, that is exactly what I expect you to believe, because it's the truth," she shouted. "I can't believe you're making these unfounded accusations. Don't you trust me?"

"Maybe it's him I don't trust!" Ryan lost his temper.

"Ryan, you know I've never had sex with anyone, and if I was going to, it would be with you. If you and I weren't together, I still wouldn't be interested in my boss. I don't know what more I can say."

"Put yourself in my place, Sage. How would you feel if I was spending fifteen hours a day with some young, hot woman?"

"I'd trust you."

“Right! There’s no talking to you. You’d better think about what you really want out of life. When and if you find a place for me in your busy schedule, let me know. If your boss will let you. I’ve got to go. Goodbye.”

* * * *

Sage didn’t know whether to cry with frustration or let the anger bubbling against Charles out. She wanted to tell Ryan everything. She needed his support now more than ever, but she was trapped. If she quit her job, she didn’t know what Charles would do. If she stayed, she’d compromise her own integrity and her relationship with Ryan. She wished she’d awaken and find out this was all a horrible nightmare.

“What’s wrong? You look upset.” Heather touched her shoulder.

“It’s Ryan. We had an argument.”

“What happened?”

She propped her head in her hands. “He’s accusing me of having an affair with my boss.”

“He’s just feeling insecure since you’ve canceled your date again. He’ll cool off.” She ran a brush through her hair. “Cheer up! Tonight is girls’ night out! Debbie just called my cell and she wants us to meet her at Decades.”

Sage’s eyes clouded. “Tonight? Isn’t it kind of late to be going out? Besides, I don’t go to clubs. You know that, Heather. I’m going to take a long, hot bath and try to get some sleep.”

Heather’s eyes brightened. “It’s not too late! Nothing ever gets going until after ten. You need to have some fun. You’ll feel better if you let yourself unwind...you can’t spend all your time working. The old you didn’t do clubs, but remember, you’re a new woman who’s left the old Sage behind.” She grabbed Sage’s hand. “Come on...get ready. It’ll be good for you to get out and forget your problems for a while...including Ryan.”

"I have to work tomorrow," Sage replied, looking for an excuse.

"Debbie and I have to work, too. Come on," she prodded. "We'll only stay for a little while. I promise. You're the one who said we needed a girls' night out since we wouldn't all be working together anymore. Remember?"

Sage grimaced. "You're not going to let me off the hook, are you?"

"What do you think?" Heather winked.

Sage accustomed herself to the loud music and even louder voices trying to compete with one another and found herself slowly relaxing and even began to enjoy herself. She smiled at her two friends and, by the looks on their faces, saw how much they enjoyed and blended in with the nightlife. They were attired in skirts Sage deemed too short and wore too low cut blouses, showing more cleavage than Sage would have been comfortable with showing. Too much makeup and jewelry didn't seem to bother them either.

As Sage gazed around the stuffy room, she noticed her friends were dressed just like every other woman in the club. No matter how much she wanted to change, she doubted she could ever dress like her friends. All in all, though, she still had no regrets about not coming to the club before now. She couldn't see herself making a habit of it, but then this was only her first time here and she didn't want to be too harsh a judge. After all, she was still trying to get used to her new makeover and clothes.

Debbie held up her glass. "Here's a toast!"

Heather and Sage held up their glasses of rum and Coke, only Sage's was minus the rum.

"What're we toasting?" Heather asked.

"We're toasting Sage's new life. She's finally escaped from prison and is now basking in her newfound freedom," Debbie shouted jubilantly.

“Here, here!” Heather exclaimed, raising her glass higher.

Sage laughed and clinked her glass against Debbie’s and Heather’s. “Thank you both for rescuing me from my boring, humdrum life and making me into the woman I was always meant to be.”

“How about adding a little rum to that Coke?” Debbie coaxed. “Just a little.”

Sage hesitated. “No, I don’t think so. Maybe some other time. I still need to take baby steps while I explore my new life.”

“Come on. Just try it. We’re not going to turn you into a raging alcoholic or anything like that,” Heather said. “Just taste it.”

Thoughts of her father in his drunken rages invaded Sage’s mind. When he was drunk, he was disgusting and saw himself as someone vital to the world, with all of the answers to the world’s problems. He would grow mean and cruel, stomping anyone who dared to challenge him. She banished his image from her mind.

“I’ll have a sip of Heather’s,” she finally agreed. With a trembling hand, she held Heather’s glass to her lips as Heather and Debbie did a countdown.

She sipped at the drink and then set the glass down. “That wasn’t too bad,” she said with a grimace, “but I don’t think I’ll ever acquire a taste for the stuff. If you don’t mind, I think I’ll stick with my cola...at least for now.”

Heather laughed. “Okay, you’re off the hook. At least you tried it.”

“Now there’s one more test,” Debbie announced with a gleam in her eye.

“Come on, haven’t I been tested enough for one night? I agreed to come, and I tasted alcohol.”

“This will be fun!” Debbie exclaimed. She smacked her lips together and swayed slightly to the music. “Come on, Sage. It’s disco time!”

Sage’s eyes grew wide. “Uh...uh!”

Debbie motioned to the crowded dance floor. "Let's see what you've got. It's dance time!"

Sage chuckled as she held up a hand. "What I have, believe me, no one here wants to see. I'm a disaster on the dance floor."

Heather grinned. "Come on!" Her eyes swept over the couples. "Just do your own thing. It's seventies night."

"I don't know what my thing is. Besides, I haven't danced since high school and, believe me, it was nothing to brag about."

Before she could further protest, Debbie and Heather had risen from their chairs and were standing behind her, forcing her to her feet.

"We'll all dance together," Debbie said, taking Sage's arm and pulling her to the dance floor.

Sage stood nervously for a few seconds as Heather and Debbie moved to the music, encircling her and tilting their heads towards her. Sage gathered the courage to let herself relax enough to let the music seep into her body. She closed her eyes, imagining herself as someone, anyone but who she really was. She began to loosen up and was surprised when three handsome young men joined them and partnered off with them for the next two dances.

Back at their table, Sage exhausted, sank into her seat as Heather and Debbie did the same.

"I think you've been holding out on us, Sage. It looked to me like you've gone dancing quite a bit," Debbie said, impressed.

"No...I never danced much. I have to admit, though, it was fun."

"So, do you still think coming to clubs is some evil sin?" Heather asked, picking up her drink.

Sage laughed. "Okay, I'll be the first one to admit I was judging something without knowing anything about it. I had this image in my mind all clubs were some sleazy, dirty dives, where all sorts of illegal activities went on."

Debbie's eye widened. "Wow! You must've had a very low opinion of Heather and me."

Sage's cheeks burned. "No. In fact you two don't know how much your conversations about your social lives made me question my beliefs...or should I say, my parents' beliefs."

"Lighten up," Debbie said, patting her hand. "I was just kidding."

Three drinks were set on their table. "Compliments of the gentlemen over there," the server said with a smile as she tilted her head in the direction of their dancing partners.

The three women looked in unison at the smiling faces of the men.

Debbie held her drink up in thanks. "Did either of you get a number or get asked for yours?"

"I did, but I turned him down." Sage picked up her glass of cola.

"Troy gave me his number," Debbie said.

"The grass may not always be greener," Heather warned. "Besides, I thought Tony was the one."

"Aren't you and Tony exclusive?" Sage asked.

"We enjoy being together, but we've never made a commitment or agreed not to see other people." She shrugged. "I'd commit to him in a minute, but he won't."

Heather frowned. "What are you going to do, Deb?"

She shrugged again. "Nothing. Tony's still keeping my bed warm most nights."

"I don't think I could ever go out with anyone else," Sage said.

"That's because you and Ryan have a commitment."

"How can you sleep with Tony knowing he's with other women? And how can he sleep with you knowing you've been with other men?" Sage asked.

“We don’t have a commitment like you and Ryan have. If we had, then no, I’d never cheat, and I wouldn’t tolerate being cheated on.”

“Do you really want a commitment from him?” Sage looked at her pretty friend.

“More than anything in the world,” Debbie admitted, “but I doubt it’ll ever happen.”

Chapter 10

Ryan took a large swallow from his beer, looking at Clint's car. "It's a beauty."

Clint stood, beaming, next to his freshly waxed vehicle. "I knew we could get her running from the day I first laid eyes on her."

He chuckled. "Yeah, she's taken quite a chunk of your time." He set his beer down on a crate. "So now what will you do with all your time?"

His friend shrugged, stuffing his hands into his jeans' pockets. "I don't know...probably find another beauty who needs a little fixing up." He looked around his cluttered garage. "Or maybe clean this place up. That could take a year or two," he joked.

"Why not find a real live beauty to start spending your time with?"

Clint looked at Ryan. "I don't think I'll ever trust a woman again." He shrugged again. "I was thinking about building a deck this summer," he said, changing the subject. "What do you think?"

"Yeah, a deck would be great. I'll lend a hand." Ryan gazed out the open garage door, enjoying the peacefulness. "You were lucky to find this place. Who'd have thought something like this existed so close to the city. You've got the best of both worlds."

Clint flashed a weak smile. "Win some, lose some."

Ryan assumed he was thinking about Stacey. He remembered the day Clint had put the down payment on the property. Stacey had sniffed when she saw the property, found fault with every de-

tail of Clint's restorations, and reprimanded him about the decision to work from home.

On the rare occasions Ryan and Sage had gone to dinner or a movie with Clint and Stacey, he'd sensed Stacey thought she was better than all of them. Sage would barely say anything, out of fear of being ridiculed by Stacey. Clint and Ryan maintained their friendship, but Ryan avoided almost all get-togethers which included Stacey. He never said anything to Clint, but he knew Clint understood.

"God, I love it here!" Ryan exclaimed. "I'm jealous, buddy."

"Sometimes it gets a little lonely, but I'm still glad I bought this place. If Stacey hadn't hounded me to get a house, I never would've found this place. It's too bad she didn't see the potential. When I can afford to finish the remodeling, it's going to be something."

"Maybe Stacey doesn't know what she wants."

Clint shifted his feet. "Well, I heard she's got herself a doctor now." He cleared his throat. "In fact, they're getting married."

"You're kidding!" Ryan exclaimed. "Talk about a short engagement." He shook his head. "I don't know what to say, man."

"It's for the best. I'd never be able to give her the things she wants. I love what I do, but being the wife of an accountant just doesn't hold the prestige she's seeking. It's as though all the years we were together never happened." He snorted. "Her fiancé's old enough to be her father, but she's got her mansion and money." He exhaled loudly. "I hope she's happy. I don't wish her any ill will."

Ryan knew it was eating Clint up inside. He'd tried to please her in every way, but when his resources dwindled, she'd disappeared. "You know what they say--money can't buy happiness."

"Not according to Stacey."

"The right woman is out there somewhere, Clint."

He sighed. "I don't think there's another woman I'll ever care that much about again."

“Sure you will. You’ll see.”

Clint popped open a can of beer. “What’s going on with you and Sage?”

Ryan’s smile faded. “That’s a whole other story.” He took a long swallow of beer and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Is she worth it?”

“Most of the time.”

He smiled. “I hope everything works out. I like Sage.”

“Yeah, she’s one of a kind. I just wish she hadn’t taken a new job. I never get to see her.”

“Are you still on shaky ground?”

Ryan let his breath out, then brushed his hair from his brow. “We haven’t had a chance to really talk. I tried, but she’s always working or too tired to get together.”

“So...you two aren’t even speaking?”

Ryan frowned. “No. She’s left messages, but I’m sick and tired of trying to have a relationship over the phone.”

“Maybe things will slow down soon with her job.”

“Her boss is everything I’m not.”

Clint’s jaw dropped. “You don’t think Sage is screwing around with her boss, do you? Come on, Ryan, this is Sage we’re talking about.”

“What am I supposed to think?” His broad shoulders slumped. “She’s not too tired to go clubbing with her friends. Bobby Cowell said he’s seen her almost every Wednesday night at Decades.”

“Clubbing? Sage? Wow, she must’ve really changed.”

His eyes narrowed. “She has, and I don’t think it’s all for the good. According to Bobby, she doesn’t even look the same and guys are all over her.” He slid off the crate he’d been sitting on. “Let’s take this baby out for a spin.” He needed to take his mind off of Sage. Thoughts of her out having fun doing things she’d never do with him drove him crazy.

Charles drew the curtains in his study, shutting out the brilliant sunlight spilling into the room. His mood was dark and he intended to keep it that way...at least for a little while. Sage Ralston unsettled him. Had he made the right decision by threatening her when she mentioned quitting? Since the conversation, she'd grown distant. She completed the tasks set before her, but he sensed he didn't have her full loyalty.

He sat in the large leather chair next to his fireplace. He loved this room and it was where he spent the majority of his time when he wasn't holed up in his office. Most of the rooms went unused. The only time they were entered, was when his housekeeper and cook Wanda Miller cleaned. He only used her culinary expertise when he entertained, but he paid her well to be at his beck and call.

He'd purchased this house the same day he bought the building for his company. He'd gotten both at a fraction of their true value. Working long hours with the top designers and architects had restored the mansion and office complex to their original beauty. Buffalo had proven to be the opportune city to settle down in and offered him almost everything he wanted at a much reduced price. He loved the city and had spent hours visiting the art galleries and museums, but most of all Niagara Falls. Connor loved the theater district and they'd spent many enjoyable nights having dinner and seeing the latest plays.

He inhaled sharply at the memory of Connor and him returning here after a night on the town, tearing one another's clothes off as they rushed to his bedroom, where they'd made love for hours. He'd loved the lingerie Connor wore and how she'd seductively run her hands up her stocking-clad legs, teasing and tantalizing him with her bedroom eyes and sultry voice. He'd nuzzled her neck, loving the light scent of her perfume as he'd tied her wrists to the bedposts. With her lying there spread eagle, innocent and trusting,

he'd become the master of her body and he'd come alive with the power he'd lorded over her.

He'd loved her body and took his time licking every inch of her, teasing her as the wet juices from her cunt left tiny droplets on his silk sheets. She'd become almost delirious with desire, pleading with him to fuck her...and fuck her he did.

He grew hard as he remembered how wonderful it felt ramming his rock-hard cock into her hot pussy as she screamed for more.

His forehead creased. But Connor had ruined everything. Why couldn't she have just enjoyed being a woman who had all the comforts she could ever want and a man who knew how to fuck her the way a woman should be fucked? But no, she had to have a career. When he'd voiced his opposition, she'd become angry.

His jaw twitched. Some day she'd be sorry for walking out on him. Now he had a new conquest and once Connor found out, she'd beg him to come back to her. In the meantime, he'd enjoy everything Sage Ralston had to offer. She was putting up a good fight, but she'd be worth it in the end. He licked his lips. Soon she'd be his. Her defenses would come tumbling down and when they did, she'd succumb to him just as all the others had. He had to take his time with Sage, though. He knew that now. He'd moved too quickly and it had angered her into wanting to leave the company. But he wouldn't allow it to happen. He had to use a softer tactic with her.

He thoughtfully tapped his chin, then picked up the telephone.

* * * *

"Wow! Look what was just delivered." Heather carried a huge bouquet of roses to where Sage was standing at the small kitchen stove stirring a pot of stew.

Sage set down the spoon and turned to Heather.

"Those must've cost a fortune," exclaimed Debbie, there for dinner.

Sage smiled, her heart becoming lighter than it had in weeks. "They're beautiful!" Ryan did care! She tore open the attached card. Her heart sank as she read the message.

"Well?" Debbie asked. "What did Ryan say?"

"They're not from Ryan." Sage's voice was flat.

"Who?" Heather asked.

"My boss."

Debbie's eyebrows shot up. "Your boss? Why would your boss send you flowers?"

"The card says for doing a wonderful job." She crumpled the card and tossed it into the garbage can under the sink.

"What's going on, Sage?" Debbie's voice grew serious. "You're not—"

She saw the look that passed between Debbie and Heather. "Of course not," she replied. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Hey, come on. We're your friends. We know something's wrong...and it's not just Ryan."

Heather took her arm, led her to the sofa and sat down next to her, while Debbie settled in the easy chair.

"Sage, you haven't been yourself. And the hours you work aren't normal. I've never heard of a job that requires you to work weekends, too, unless you're in an executive position. Level with us. Now the flowers?" Debbie shook her head. "If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were having an affair."

Sage laughed hollowly. "He'd be the last man I'd sleep with." She looked down at her hands. "The job requires more time than I thought it would." She sighed. "I wish I could turn back time. I never should've taken this job."

"He hasn't made sexual advances toward you, has he?" Debbie's jaw tightened.

Sage blushed. "No...he tried to massage my shoulders once, but that's all."

"That's weird. Just quit," Heather advised. "It's not worth it. You know you can stay here. Take your time and look for another job."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

Sage met Heather's kind eyes. "I signed a contract. I should've read it through first."

Debbie leaned forward. "I know a lawyer...well, actually my cousin's husband is a lawyer. Let him look the contract over and see what he says."

"That's a good idea," Heather agreed. "It's not like you're CEO of the company, so I don't see why Boylston wouldn't just let you leave if you're not happy."

"He won't."

"You've asked him?" Debbie said.

She nodded. She wished she could tell them everything. She hated lying to her friends, but she couldn't say anything just yet. Someday soon she hoped to tell them. "I don't really want to talk about it." She stood up. "Come on, you two, it's not every day I have an evening off. Let's forget about work. The stew should be ready in a few minutes and I'm starved," she said, as she walked to the stove.

"Sage, why don't you call Ryan?" Heather asked.

"No. He's not interested in talking to me. He hasn't returned any of my calls. He's obviously moved on with his life." A tear slid from her eye and she wiped it away, but not before her friends saw it.

They encircled her in their arms. "Whatever's going on, you know you can count on us," Heather said as Debbie nodded.

"I know." Sage sniffed. She looked at the roses lying on the tiny counter. "Please throw them away."

Chapter 11

Sage sat, deep in thought, sipping at a cup of lukewarm coffee. Time was passing too quickly and she was worried about Ryan. As the days slipped by, turning into weeks with no contact from him, she feared he'd gone in a different direction with his life. A life that didn't include her. Several times she called him, but he never returned her phone calls. She didn't blame him for being angry, but she needed him. Her job wasn't worth losing him. She'd take the consequences where Charles was concerned. Ryan was going to know the truth about her job and what she'd been hired to do.

Her concern about her mother added to her stress. She was guilt-ridden for leaving her mother alone with the monster she called her husband. She felt like she had abandoned her, even though her mother was a grown woman and quite capable of making her own decisions about her own life. Sage knew she should pick up the phone and at least let her mother know she was thinking about her, but she was afraid her father would answer.

When she'd called to give her mother Heather's number, she'd heard the pain in her mother's voice, even though she'd tried to disguise it. Sage knew Loni's cool answers to her questions were born out of the fear of her father, who was probably standing tight to her side as she conversed. As soon as things calmed down, she'd call her and have a nice long talk.

She'd been so busy with work she barely had a chance to catch her breath. The only socializing she did was going to the clubs with Heather and Debbie almost every week. She was grateful for

Heather's companionship and loved sitting up late at night talking. Heather had proved to be a good friend and when Sage did move out, she knew she would miss her company and the cozy apartment.

There was no one in any of the profiles who could even remotely be connected with sharing company secrets. The only red flag was Connor Michaels possible relationship with Henry James, but that, of course, was only if her boyfriend did take her to the James' social functions, and only if Connor shared company secrets.

"Hello, Sage. I was hoping I'd run into you again. I'm not interrupting, am I? You seem to be deep in thought."

Sage looked up startled, then smiled. "No. Please sit down, Connor. You're not disturbing me. I was just taking a short breather."

"You've been here for a few weeks now. How's everything?"

"Fine. I'm learning the ropes."

"Good." Connor looked anxious as she pulled out a chair and sat down. "I'm on a break, too. I'm in the middle of a difficult procedure and thought I'd pop in for a quick cup of coffee."

"Well, I'm glad you did. It's nice to see you again." Sage watched as Connor clenched and unclenched her hands. Her motions were jerky and her brow was creased with worry. "Is something wrong, Connor?"

She nervously glanced around herself, then dropped her voice to a whisper. "I'd like to talk to you in private, Sage. Somewhere outside of the company." She continued to look around the room.

"Of course," Sage replied. "Just tell me when and where."

"How about eight o'clock tonight?" She hesitated for a few seconds. "Would you mind meeting me at my apartment?"

"Okay." Sage took the card Connor thrust into her hand, as she searched Connor's large, penetrating eyes.

"Please don't tell anyone we're meeting...especially Charles."

Sage nodded. "I won't."

* * * *

At ten minutes to eight, Sage stood outside Connor's apartment door. The building was only a little bit above rundown and in a poorer and dirtier section of the city. Sage had nervously hurried up the two flights of stairs, avoiding two drunken men in the lobby standing near the elevator. She kept her eyes straight ahead and shuddered at the thought of Connor living here.

According to the information in her employee profile stating her annual salary, Connor was financially secure. She should've been living somewhere trendy and safe, but it was none of her business where Connor chose to live. She was only here because Connor had asked her, and if it hadn't been for Connor's urgency, she doubted she would have come. Of course, she reasoned, this might make her closer to Connor as Charles kept insisting she become. If Connor wanted to talk to her as a friend, she decided she would not divulge the information...not even to Charles. Instead, she would try to convince Connor to come clean. No matter the outcome, the conversation she was about to have was off the record. She knocked on the door.

The door was opened and Connor ushered her inside, but not before glancing down the dimly lit hallway. The apartment was small, sparsely decorated, with very few comforts, but it was spotless. Sage wondered what the woman did with her money. Maybe she had a drug or gambling problem.

Connor motioned her to the sofa. "Can I get you anything, Sage...coffee, tea, soda?"

"No, thank you, Connor, I'm fine." Sage sat on the lumpy sofa.

Connor kept her eyes on Sage as she paced back and forth across the uncarpeted, worn wooden floor for a few seconds wringing her hands. "Thank you for coming."

She stopped pacing and whirled to face Sage. "I didn't know to whom to turn," she confessed in a frightened voice. "I know I'm going out on a limb here, but you seem so kind and sincere." She swallowed hard.

Sage's eyebrows knit together. "What's wrong, Connor? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

She nodded, then raised her eyes to Sage's. "I'm being blackmailed," she whispered hoarsely.

"My, God, by whom...why?" Sage presumed if Connor was doing something illegal in the company, she had been found out. Was that where her money was going? Maybe this mess would be brought to a quick conclusion and Sage could quit her job and get on with her own life. "How much?"

"Money isn't what I'm being blackmailed for."

"What then?"

Connor chewed her bottom lip as she stared at Sage.

"Have you contacted the police?"

"No. I can't go to the police!"

"Why not? What's this all about?" Sage asked as she watched Connor's terror-stricken eyes. "Why do you think I can help?"

Connor ran a trembling hand over the side of her face as though she had forgotten she'd pulled her hair back and wanted to now push it from her face. "My life has been threatened," she said in a wobbly voice. "I'm going to be murdered."

"Oh, my God, Connor!" Sage's hand flew to her throat. "That's all the more reason to go to the police," she cried.

"No!" she shouted, then apologized. "I'm sorry," she said in a weak voice. "No one will believe me."

"Why not? What aren't you telling me?"

Connor drew a heavy breath. "It's complicated." She sank into a chair. "I don't even know where to begin." Her hands trembled and she clasped them together.

Sage's insides turned to jelly as she watched Connor. "Complicated" was Charles' answer to every question, too. An icy chill swept through her body. She wanted to bolt out the door and forget she'd ever been here, but she couldn't. Connor had trusted her enough to tell her. It was what Charles had wanted. She'd gained Connor's trust and now she had to see this through. She couldn't just walk out on her now.

Why had Connor chosen her to confide in? They barely knew one another. That question couldn't wait for an answer. She had to know now. She had the right to know.

She met Connor's frightened eyes. "Why me, Connor? How do you think I can help?" she asked again.

"I know how I'm gossiped about at the company. The women don't trust me, and many of the men don't take me seriously because I'm a woman. They don't give me credit for having a brain." Her lips trembled. "I've never found it easy to make close friends. I've tried," she said. "Never mix work with pleasure," she cautioned. "That was the biggest mistake I ever made. Anyway, you seemed different...not like the usual gossipy type. You're a loner, too. I sensed it the minute I met you, Sage. I hope my trust in you hasn't been in vain. If it has, then the joke truly is on me."

"There must be someone outside of the company you can discuss this with."

She shook her head. "No. I'm a very private person. I've spent most of my life working toward my goals. I told you I don't have any close personal friendships."

"What about family?"

"All I have is my mother." Her eyes glistened with tears. "She's in Glendale Manor."

Sage's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Glendale Manor was usually only inhabited by the very wealthy.

“I don’t care what it costs. My mother deserves the best. I live very frugally so my mother can live out the remainder of her years in the style she deserves.”

“Why Glendale? There are many much more affordable facilities with excellent care,” Sage reasoned.

“No, this is my choice. I want only the best for my mother,” she replied with a note of finality in her voice, then smiled wryly. “If my mother had a choice, she’d never allow me to spend so much money on her.”

Sage hesitated, then asked, “What does any of this have to do with your life being threatened?”

“If something were to happen to me, I don’t know how my mother would survive. I’m all she has.” She bit her bottom lip. “You remember I told you Charles and I had a brief affair.”

Sage nodded. “I remember.”

“I also had been involved with someone else at the time I met Charles—Tim McGill.”

“Is Tim McGill threatening you?”

Her eyes shifted. “No. Tim knows nothing about any of this. He’d have bodyguards protecting me if he knew.”

“I’m not following any of this, Connor. Being protected sounds like a good option.”

“The rumor mill had everyone believing I was seeing both men at the same time, but contrary to whatever anyone thinks of me, I’m not a player. I stopped seeing Tim when I began having strong feelings for Charles. I never thought anything would come of those feelings, but little by little and without warning, Charles literally swept me off my feet. At the time, I’d hoped it was destined to be forever, but he changed soon after we got together.”

“In what way?”

“He never wanted a committed relationship.” Her eyes clouded. “He became controlling and possessive. When I wouldn’t bend to his demands, he began cheating. I was crushed.”

She frowned. "Why did you stay with the company?"

"I'm locked into an iron-clad contract."

"Couldn't you have found some clause to get out of it?"

"No, and without my salary, my mother would have had to leave Glendale. Charles was well aware of that fact."

"Did you ever think about asking for a position with Chafron?"

Her eyes narrowed. "No. Tim had worked on a documentary for Chafron and became good friends with the CEO in the process. It would've violated the terms of my contract with Boylston Electronics. There's a clause in my contract stating if I leave the company, for any reason, before my contract is up, I can't work for any like company for at least five years. Once my contract is up, though, I can work where I please. It's legal and fully understandable due to the nature of my work. My only option was to stay and finish out my contract with Boylston."

"Wouldn't Charles have let you out of your contract under the circumstances?"

"No. We were at a crucial stage in our research."

"Are you seeing Tim McGill again?" Sage knew the answer, but needed to hear it from Connor's own lips.

She nodded. "We, not long ago, got back together. Before we'd really had no commitment to one another...it was an open relationship." She cast a wary eye. "It wasn't the type of relationship I would ever recommend. It took me a long time to realize how much I love Tim and always had. Charles was only an infatuation." She smiled, then walked to her desk and brought out a small box. She flipped it open and, beaming, thrust it towards Sage.

"Congratulations, Connor! But why are you hiding your engagement?" Sage stared at the beautiful diamond.

"We want to keep it quiet until my contract ends."

"It must be difficult to keep silent."

"It is, but as soon as this project for Boylston is completed, about the same time my contract expires, we'll plan our wedding."

“Are you planning to stay in Buffalo or move back to the west coast?”

“We plan to stay in Buffalo. I’m going to stop working for a while. Tim and I want to start a family as soon as we’re married. I want at least a dozen children,” she teased, then grew serious. “It was difficult at times being an only child.”

Sage knew only too well how lonely it was. “I’m happy for your engagement, Connor. I truly am, and I don’t mean to take away from your happiness, but how can you be sure Tim McGill isn’t using you for information to pass on to Chafron?”

“He’s not that type of man. In fact, Tim has never asked me anything about my current research or anything pertaining to my work.” She threw her hands up. “Contrary to what many may say about Tim because of his friendship with Henry James, I personally know Tim has nothing but the utmost respect for me and what I do. He’d never hurt me or anyone.”

“Who is threatening you, Connor? Do you have any idea?”

Connor looked at Sage for a full minute before speaking. “Someone inside Boylston Electronics.”

“You’ve got to tell Charles,” Sage exclaimed. “He’ll be able to help you.”

“No! Charles can’t know anything about this. Promise me you won’t say a word to him,” she pleaded.

“If you won’t go to the police or talk to Charles, then what’re you going to do?”

“That’s why I asked you to meet with me, Sage.”

“How can I help?”

“You can, Sage, if you want to. Of course, that decision is up to you.”

“How do you know I won’t go back to Charles and tell him everything you’ve told me?”

Connor smiled weakly. "If you do, then I've made a big mistake in my judgment of you and have sealed my fate. But I don't believe I'm wrong about you, Sage."

Sage's cheeks grew warm. "You make me sound like some kind of saint, but believe me, I'm far from it."

"With today's standards, not as far as you think. I've heard nothing but complimentary things about you from the gossip mongers."

Sage studied Connor's facial expressions and body movements as she spoke. Her eyes were clouded and filled with pain. She was a complicated woman. She lived meagerly in order to give her mother a life befitting a queen and when Connor spoke of her mother, the love she felt for the woman was evident. Still, Sage wondered why Connor hadn't confided her worries to her fiancé. None of it made any sense, but Sage knew she had to help in any way she could to determine if any of this tied in with Charles' fear of a plant in his company.

Connor was friendly and likeable, and Sage liked her and felt an affinity with her. Connor trusted her and becoming Connor's friend wouldn't be just an assignment. She couldn't explain it, but she felt drawn to her and wanted to help her.

"Connor, I don't know what I can do, but I'll try. I promise."

Connor jumped to her feet and flung her arms around Sage's neck, surprising Sage.

"Thank you, Sage. I knew I could count on you."

She felt Connor's tears on her cheek. "Who's doing this to you, Connor?" she asked softly.

Connor was quiet for a minute. "Lyla Bevons."

Chapter 12

Sage pulled the blanket to her chin and squeezed her eyes shut, but as they had for the past hour, they soon popped back open. She rolled onto her side and grabbed her pillow, fluffed it, then put it back under her head. Her mind was cluttered with one thought drifting into another, but none giving her the answers she sought. She didn't know what she could do about any of it, but her mind refused to let her rest until some solution was found.

Connor Michaels was one of the prime reasons for her lack of sleep. Sage had spent hours trying to dig up any information, no matter how trivial, on Lyla Bevons, which would connect Lyla to extorting Connor, but nothing added up. Sage had little contact with Lyla, and on the few occasions when she passed Lyla's desk, the woman never acknowledged her.

Lyla was a plain, mousy-looking, middle-aged woman who seldom said two words to anyone and appeared disinterested in any kind of social contact, rarely even cracking a smile. Sage had found out from a few workers that Lyla lived with her mother in a comfortable, middle-class home in a middle-class neighborhood, the same house she had grown up in almost fifty years ago. Her social life revolved around her church, where she taught Sunday school and sang in the church choir. Her record was lily white, with not even the blemish of a parking ticket to mar it.

What was her motive? Could Connor be wrong?

Sage longed for Ryan's wisdom. He had an uncanny knack of putting things into perspective. She needed him to help her sort out

this mess. She sighed. No, she couldn't tell anyone what was tormenting her. She would never break her promise to Connor and then, of course, there was Charles. She couldn't betray him either, even though she had vowed to tell Ryan everything at the first opportunity. The truth was she was afraid to tell Ryan because she couldn't be certain Charles wouldn't seek revenge against him, too. She'd tell him when this was all behind her.

She had to see this through to the end. She wouldn't betray Connor, but could she truly trust her? On their first meeting Connor had been so blunt about her affair with Charles. She'd been a poised, self-confident woman, but in her apartment Sage saw none of that strength, only a frightened woman who didn't know where to turn. And she liked her. If Connor really was the spy Charles thought she was, then she was a good actress. Now Lyla would be someone no one would ever suspect of doing anything underhanded. She'd have to prove Lyla was blackmailing Connor and leaking information to make it look as though Connor was doing it. But first she had to figure out what Lyla's motive was.

She gave up on trying to fall asleep and sat up, snapping on the lamp. As the light came on, she watched Heather tiptoe past the sofa, then stop.

"I thought you were sleeping. I didn't wake you, did I?" Heather asked apologetically.

"No," Sage replied. "It's been one of those days. I'm so tired I can't sleep."

"Is there anything I can do? Would you like some warm milk?"

"No, thanks." She smiled. "I don't know what I'd do without you. You've done so much for me."

"Don't get all mushy on me," Heather teased. "I like having you here. You're good company and you'd do the same for me."

"You know I would." She yawned. "I'm not good company for anyone these days with my work schedule, though."

"You're working too hard. Can't you ask for more reasonable hours? You're too young to turn into a workaholic. Besides all work and no play—"

"I know." She rubbed her tired eyes. "Believe me, after I finish the project I'm working on, I intend to slow way down. I just wish I could get some sleep, but my mind is wired, even though the rest of me is exhausted."

"Your boss hasn't done anything inappropriate, has he?" she asked.

She shook her head. "No. Everything has been all business."

"Good. I don't mean to pry, but are you ever going to talk to Ryan again?"

Sage's heart lurched. "I miss him so much, Heather, but he still refuses to return my calls. Even if I could start over with him, I wouldn't know how to begin." Her forehead creased. "I worry about the widening gap between us. I'm afraid the day will come when it's too late for us and we'll end up like strangers going our separate ways. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, and that's why you need to reach out to him. Does he know everything about your home life? I mean all the bad stuff?"

"He saw how dysfunctional my family is on the few occasions he stopped to pick me up for a date. My parents were very standoffish with him. He was never invited to dinner or allowed to come over to study with me, but he was always there for me no matter how my parents treated him." She slowly exhaled. "When he went off to college I was terrified I'd get a letter from him saying he'd met someone else. After all, the girls in California could offer him the fun times I wouldn't."

"I figured once he got a taste of campus life he'd never want to come back to straight-laced, sheltered me. But he did come back to me." Her face grew warm. "I wanted to be with him the night before I moved here, but for all the wrong reasons, and now I may have lost him."

“No. You’re just letting your job get in the way.” Heather squeezed her hand. “I don’t think you’ve lost him. If he didn’t love you, he wouldn’t have stayed with you all these years. Call him tomorrow and patch things up. Make a date and keep it this time. Tell your boss you have personal business to take care of and don’t let him talk you into working late.”

“I won’t. Ryan’s got the notion in his head I’m interested in my boss.”

“If he knew about the roses he’d have every right to think that, but he doesn’t know, does he?”

Sage shook her head.

Heather raised her eyebrows. “Like I said before, he’s confused. Think about how you’d react if the situation were reversed.”

Before Sage could respond, the phone rang, startling them both. Sage looked at the clock. Who would be calling at almost one o’clock in the morning? It was bad news. A chill ran up her spine, as she looked at Heather, too afraid to look at the caller ID for herself. The look on Heather’s face confirmed Heather was as uneasy as she was.

Heather peered at the caller ID. “It’s Ryan,” she said, relief evident on her face. “He must be having a sleepless night, too. Take it as a sign.” She grinned.

Sage’s heart thumped loudly in her chest. She could hear the blood pumping through her eardrums almost drowning out any sound. She took the phone from Heather with a trembling hand. “Hello, Ryan,” she said trying to control her nerves. “I’m glad you called. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Hi, Sage...I’m sorry to call so late.” He paused. “Something’s happened.”

“Ryan, what’s wrong?” She gripped the phone.

“Sage, please stay calm.”

His own voice sounded anything but calm. She shuddered. "Ryan, what's wrong?" she asked again, this time her voice rising in fear.

"I just received a call from the hospital." He hesitated. "Your mother gave them my number. I'll be over as soon as I can to pick you up and take you to the hospital."

"What happened to my mother, Ryan?" she asked in a strangled voice. "Was she in an accident? What about my father?"

"I don't have any details. They wouldn't give me any information since I'm not a relative. The nurse said your mother gave them my phone number and asked them to contact me to notify you. Maybe she misplaced Heather's number. I thought you'd rather hear it from me than the hospital."

"Thank you, Ryan," she said, then put a hand to her mouth to muffle her sobs.

"I'll be there just as fast as I can. 'Bye." The phone went dead.

Heather had been listening to Sage's end of the conversation and now wrapped her arms around Sage, holding her trembling body close. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"My mother's in the hospital." She sniffed, setting the phone down. "Ryan's on his way over to get me."

"I'm so sorry, Sage. What happened?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, but I'm sure my father has something to do with it. I've got to get dressed." She threw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

"I'm coming with you."

Sage flashed her a weak smile. "You've got to get up in a few hours for work, but I do appreciate the offer."

"I'm coming with you, and I don't want any argument," she insisted. "I'll call Debbie from the hospital and she can cover for me with Olman."

* * * *

Sage rushed into her mother's hospital room and over to her bed. The sight that greeted her eyes ripped her heart wide open. Loni had bandages wrapped around her head and her arm was encased in a cast. Her blackened eyes peered helplessly at Sage. Purple welts were visible on her pale cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "Your father—"

"No, Mom, I'm the one who's sorry," Sage interrupted grabbing her mother's hand. "I should've made sure you were okay. I never should've left you alone with that lunatic."

"No, honey, there was nothing you could do. There was nothing anyone could do. I never saw him so out of control. He wasn't even human. Before, he always managed to stop himself, but not this time."

Sage listened as her mother spoke, pausing between words. "You're in so much pain and I wasn't there to help you." Tears spilled from her eyes.

"Yes," she whimpered. "I'm in pain, but my pain's easier to bear than the pain I let him inflict on you...my only child."

"Where is he?"

"In jail. I pressed charges, but they're taking him to the hospital for a psychiatric evaluation."

"Good. I hope he stays there for the rest of his miserable life."

"He snapped. I don't know if the psychiatrists will even be able to help him now."

"He doesn't want help, Mom. He refuses to recognize he ever does anything wrong. As far as I'm concerned, I hope he rots in jail." Her jaw tightened. "How can anyone do this to someone he promised to love and take care of?"

She sighed, then winced in pain. "He'll never touch me again. It's over. As soon as I get out of here, I'm filing for divorce." She struggled to smile. "I'll need to figure out a way to support myself."

Sage patted her mother's shoulder. "Don't worry about that right now, Mom. Everything will work out, and I'll be here to help you. Things can only get better now." She hoped her mother would look forward to the future with optimism, but her eyes told Sage a different story.

"Time for your medication, Mrs. Ralston."

Sage watched as a nurse, a cheerful, older woman, bustled over to her mother and poured a cup of water, then carefully placed the cup in Loni's hand.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Sage whispered. She bent and lightly kissed her mother's pale cheek.

Heather and Ryan jumped to their feet as Sage approached. Worry lines were etched on their faces. "She's going to be okay." She watched the tension melt from their faces.

Ryan put an arm around her protectively. "Thank God. I was so nervous I thought I'd wear a hole in the floor with my pacing."

"That's wonderful news," Heather added. "What happened?"

Sage winced. "She's been beaten."

"Oh, my God!" Heather's hand flew to her throat.

"It was my father," Sage answered as Ryan's arm tightened around her.

"I'm so sorry, Sage," Heather whispered. "I can't even imagine—" She broke off.

"She has a broken arm and some cracked ribs. Not to mention all the bruises and welts. She has to stay in the hospital for a few days to be certain there aren't any internal injuries. This is the worse he's ever—"

"Where's your father?" Ryan demanded, interrupting her, his fingers pressing into her side. Sage realized he wasn't even aware of it.

"He was arrested."

He nodded. "Good." He relaxed his grip on her.

Sage swallowed the lump in her throat. "I want to thank you both for being here. You don't know what it means to me. I—I don't think I could've handled this without you."

"Sage, I wouldn't be anywhere else," Ryan replied.

"Honey, we're friends and I agree with Ryan. You can lean on me, too."

"Thank you both for the support." With a trembling hand, she swept a strand of hair from her face and tucked it behind an ear. "I'm going to spend the night here, just to make sure she's comfortable. She's in so much pain; it's so hard to see your own mother in that condition." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "No human being should ever be subjected to what she's been through." She drew a shaky breath. "Since she's going to be all right, you two should go home and get some sleep."

"I'm staying. I don't want you to be alone. Besides I've all ready called work," Heather said.

Sage patted her friend's arm. "Thank you, but there's really no need. If anything changes, I promise to call you."

"You shouldn't be alone," Heather protested.

"I'll be fine. I promise."

Heather paused for a few seconds. "Will you call if you need anything?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Okay," Heather replied. "I'll grab a cab then. But you know I'd feel better staying."

"I'll be fine, but you don't know what it means to me that you were here." She hugged her.

"I'll drive you home, Heather," Ryan insisted. "Then I'll be back to keep you company tonight, Sage."

"I appreciate your offer, Ryan, but you have to work in the morning." Sage's heart was light as she looked into his clear blue eyes. He still loved her.

He shook his head. "Don't worry about it. Billy will cover for me." His eyes narrowed. "I'm not going to argue about it...I'll be back."

Sage walked back into her mother's room, tiptoed over to her bed, and peered down at her. She was sleeping. Sage was relieved, for a little while at least, her mother could escape the hell she'd been through. She sank into a chair listening to the rhythmic breathing of her mother. For the next hour, she sat quietly, her mind fluctuating between different emotions.

Maybe something good really does come out of misfortune she told herself. She'd heard that expression many times, but had never had reason to attribute it to her own life until now. Her mother was finally leaving her father, Ryan had come to her aid, and now she had the chance to try to make things right with him. She *would* make it right. She couldn't bear being away from him and would let nothing get in the way ever again. Through her mother's beating, they had both been given second chances. She'd never let anything come between her and Ryan again. She hoped her mother now would have the life she'd been deprived of.

She yawned, stretched, and stood. She glanced again at her mother's sleeping face. She looked peaceful, and Sage hoped she was dreaming of a new and happy life.

She walked back to the waiting room and found Ryan waiting for her. He had two steaming cups of coffee in front of him. He picked one up and handed it to her.

"I thought you could use this. I stopped at Starbucks on my way back."

She smiled. "Thank you, Ryan." She sat next to him.

He picked up his cup and held it in his large hands. "Is your mother okay?"

"Yes, she's sleeping. The nurse said she'll sleep through the rest of the night, but I still want to stay."

"I'm not going anywhere." He patted her hand. "It's been a while since we've talked...so, how's your job going?"

"The pay is good, but the hours are ridiculous." She stared into her coffee cup. "I don't intend to stay there very long." She raised her eyes to his. "The sacrifices just aren't worth it."

His eyes searched hers. "I hope I'm one of those sacrifices."

She touched his hand. "I miss you, Ryan. I'm sorry for the way I acted the last time we were together. I...I can't explain what came over me."

"Sage, if I didn't care about you so much, I'd have made love to you. You don't know how much I wanted to. But I know how important your values are to you and I think by waiting it's going to be so much more special. I'd wait forever for you."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"We can talk about all that later. I was acting like a jerk, too, but I was scared. That's why I didn't return your calls. I knew you'd never cheat on me, especially with your boss, but hell, when your mind is all screwed up, all sorts of strange things start getting conjured up. What's important is we're together now and I never want to let you go. Let's put the past few weeks behind us like it never happened." He snapped his fingers. "It's all forgotten."

She smiled. "I love you so much, Ryan."

He took her coffee cup, then set both cups on the table. Before she could say another word, he pulled her into his comforting arms. "I love you, too, Sage."

All of her pent-up emotions gave way and she sobbed against his hard chest.

He stroked her hair. "I'll always be here for you, Sage. Always. Everything's going to be all right now."

Chapter 13

“How’s your mother, Sage? I was sorry to hear of her hospitalization. Is there anything I can do?” Charles asked.

“She’ll be out of the hospital in a couple of days.” She put a finger to her brow. “I’m going to need time to take care of her. I’ll still be able to maintain my position here, but I won’t be able to work all these late hours.”

“That’s understandable. Family should always come first. Take all the time you need.” He leaned back in his chair. “Have you had any luck with Connor Michaels?”

“Yes, and I like her.” She peered at him. “I find it hard to believe she could be capable of harming the company. She’s much too dedicated to her work.” She shrugged. “She may look like the obvious culprit, but I don’t think it’s her. In fact, I’d stake my life on it.”

“She hasn’t said anything at all to raise your suspicions?” he asked, surprised.

“No. My gut instinct tells me her sincerity is genuine. Like I said, she’s dedicated to the work she’s doing here.”

“Maybe that’s just a part of her strategy to throw you off her scent. She can be cagey.” His eyebrows knit together. “You need to keep one step ahead of her at all times. Don’t let your guard down. Don’t trust her.”

“It doesn’t add up.” She wasn’t going to let Connor take the fall for something her instincts told her she hadn’t done.

“Well, stay close to her. I’ve got a meeting, but if anything comes up you know where to reach me.”

She nodded, then left his office without another word.

* * * *

Lyla Bevons looked up from her magazine as Sage approached. “Is there something I can do for you, Miss Ralston?”

“Yes. For starters, you can call me Sage.” Sage peered into the woman’s small, beady eyes, seeing the phony smile pasted on Lyla’s taut thin lips.

“I don’t call you by your given name because it is not proper to do so in business.”

Sage chuckled. “Times have changed, Lyla. Besides we’re co-workers.”

Lyla’s eyes flashed, then she regained her rigid composure. “That’s a sad commentary on our times. I don’t believe respect is taught anymore,” she replied. “Children aren’t taught to respect their elders.”

Sage observed the woman’s old-fashioned hairstyle. Lyla was attired in a plain white blouse with a sweater draped around her shoulders and held together at the neck with a brooch. She wore a long black skirt and black shoes—the kind Sage had seen many elderly women wearing. Lyla was a throwback to the fifties, like the vintage TV shows Sage sometimes watched late at night. “Don’t you think it’s better to drop the formalities with those you work with?”

“No, I don’t. I’m paid to do a job, not socialize. What anyone chooses to do in his or her personal life is none of my business,” she retorted.

She smiled. “We may find we have some common interests.”

Lyla looked down her long nose at Sage. “I doubt my life would interest you. As for common interests, due to our obvious age difference, I doubt we’d find any common ground there either.”

“Who knows? Besides, by getting to know one another, it makes the work environment more pleasant. After all, seeing the same people day in and day out almost makes them become a part of your life. Don’t you agree? Face it, the people you work with share more hours of your day with you than your friends or family.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t care for personal relationships. I have a full life outside of my employment and when I depart from here every evening, I leave this place and the people in it far behind,” she answered lowering her eyes back to her magazine, dismissing Sage. When Sage made no effort to leave, she brought her eyes back up and level with Sage’s. “Is there something else?” she asked in a chilly voice.

“When do you take a break? I’d love to buy you a cup of coffee and we can chat. Wait, I’ve got an even better idea! Let me buy you lunch. We can go to the deli next door, grab something and eat in the break room or find a restaurant close by. Your choice.”

Lyla sighed. “I bring my lunch to work every day. Truthfully, Miss Ralston, I’m not interested in getting to know you. Now, if there’s nothing else, I need to get back to my work.”

“I’m just trying to be sociable, Lyla. I never see you talking to anyone around here. I thought you might be a little lonely.”

Lyla’s jaw twitched. “Please call me Miss Bevons.” She eyed Sage. “I’m not interested in your friendship, or anyone else’s for that matter.”

“May I ask why you don’t like me?” Sage persisted.

Lyla looked at her. “Does there have to be a reason?”

Sage smiled. “I’d like to hear one.”

“If you insist on knowing the truth, I don’t like the type of woman you are. You’re arrogant and an upstart. I’ve never cared for pushy, nosy people. It is a trait I find very repulsive, in women. You’re full of your own self-importance, and I find nothing in common with you. I suggest you look for someone else to befriend

because I do not care to see you any more than this job requires.” She snapped her magazine shut. “Furthermore, I’m not lonely. My days and nights are filled to the brim and loneliness would be a luxury.”

Sage’s eyes shifted to the cover of the magazine. It was a popular women’s magazine filled with makeup tips, dieting, and relationship matters. The lead story on the cover announced sure-fire tips on how to keep the man in your life happy. She was surprised Lyla Bevons read this type of magazine. Maybe Lyla had a secret lover.

“That’s a wonderful magazine,” Sage said, nodding towards it. “I’ve got an idea. Why don’t we get together and try out some of those beauty tips? It’d be fun. You could get a new hairstyle and a facial.”

“I’m not interested in such juvenile pursuits. I’d like to finish the rest of my break alone.”

“I didn’t mean to be a pest.” She moved away from the lunch table. “I’ll stop back later, Lyla, just in case you change your mind about lunch.”

Sage smiled as she walked down the long corridor, then turned the corner toward her own office. Lyla Bevons wasn’t going to budge an inch, but she’d find some way to wear her down. There had to be something she was hiding, and Sage wouldn’t give up until she pried it out of her.

As she neared her office door, she was surprised to see Connor waiting for her. “Hi, Connor,” she said quickening her pace. “Would you like to come inside?”

Connor shook her head as she grabbed Sage’s hands. “Sage, I was so sorry to hear about your mother. I pray she’s going to be all right.”

“Thank you, Connor. Yes, she’s going to be fine. Her body will heal, but I’m afraid her emotional healing will take more

time.” Seeing the puzzled look on Connor’s face, she added, “It’s a case of spousal abuse.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too, but she’s strong and in time she’ll overcome this,” Sage said. “I’m surprised to see you on this side of the building. I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch. Is everything okay?”

Connor scanned the corridor. “Can you meet me at my apartment tonight?” she whispered.

“Of course. Has something happened?”

Connor’s complexion paled. “I’ll tell you tonight,” she replied.

“I’ll be there about eight.” Sage watched Connor disappear down the hall. Was this about another threat on Connor’s life? Why wouldn’t Connor go to the police? Of course, if Lyla Bevons was making the threats, Sage doubted the woman would carry them out and assumed Connor also believed that, which was part of her reluctance to contact the police. But there was more—Sage had the feeling Connor wasn’t telling her the whole story.

* * * *

“How’s Clint’s car coming along?” Sage asked as Ryan popped the last bite of pizza into his mouth.

Ryan swallowed and wiped his hands on a paper napkin. “It’s great. You’re sure you don’t mind me going over there tonight?”

She shook her head. “I’ve got a few things to take care of.”

“What’s wrong?” He peered into her eyes. “Come on, Sage. You know you can’t hide anything from me.”

She bit her bottom lip. “My boss has sworn me to secrecy, but it goes against everything I believe in.”

“Is he doing something illegal?”

“No. He’s asked me to spy on someone in the company. I’m not supposed to talk about it to anyone.”

“I’ll listen if you want to talk. You know I won’t tell anyone anything you tell me.”

"I know." She twisted her hands together as she unburdened herself to him. When she finished, she swept her hair from her brow. "I don't know what to do."

He was thoughtful for a minute. "It sounds like your boss has a personal vendetta against Connor. You need to tell him your suspicions about Lyla and especially the threats she'd made to Connor."

"I promised Connor I wouldn't tell."

"You're getting caught in a web. How do you know who you can trust in the company? How do you know you can really trust Connor?"

Her eyebrows knitted together. "I can't explain it...it's a feeling I have. I like her, Ryan."

"So, you're worried about not telling your boss what Connor's told you and in turn helping Connor."

"Yes. No matter what I do, I'm betraying someone."

"And you can't quit because he's holding you to your contract."

"That's right. I know my first alliance should be to Charles, so you can see how torn I am."

He grabbed her hands. "Honey, I know no matter what you do, it'll be the right choice." His eyes narrowed. "I'm just worried about Charles putting you in this position. He wasn't exactly truthful about your duties until you met him. You went into the job expecting to be doing general office work."

"But I signed the contract agreeing to do what he asked. I wasn't forced into it. And now I've already withheld from him my conversation with Connor and have told you what I was hired to do."

"You're worrying too much. He's never going to know that you told me and if Connor's trustworthy, she's certainly not going to tell him."

"I feel horrible that this job has turned me into a liar."

"I know that's not what you are deep down inside. And to be honest, I don't know what I would do in your situation. It's a tough call." He squeezed her hands. "Do what you need to do. I know that whatever you decide, it will be for the right reasons. Just be careful."

"I will."

* * * *

Sage rubbed her forehead. "What's Lyla's motive? It doesn't make sense. She has a decent-paying job. If it's not money, then what is it? I'm not saying I doubt you, Connor, because I wholeheartedly believe you. I'm just trying to put it all together and try to make some sense out of it."

Connor had been pacing back and forth and now stopped. "Isn't it obvious?"

Sage frowned. "Not to me. What am I missing?"

"It's jealousy."

"I'm sure there are many women who are jealous of you, Connor. My God, I'd give my eyeteeth to look like you. It just doesn't add up with Lyla. Even if she's jealous of you, then that's a pretty weak motive. What would she get out of it?"

"People have been known to do many uncharacteristic things when they're jealous." She clasped her hands together. "She's in love with Charles. Did you know that?"

Sage's eyes widened. "You've got to be kidding! It explains the magazines she's been reading. My God, she's old enough to be his mother. She can't believe he'd even remotely be interested in her."

"She'll need more than the tips from those magazines," Connor replied. "But she is in love with Charles. She was in love with him when I first came to the company and most likely even before that."

"How did you find out?"

“At first she hinted in subtle ways and then later made it blatantly clear she intended to be Charles’ one and only. I just shrugged it off because it was so ludicrous.”

“What did Charles say? Certainly he’s not interested in Lyla in a romantic way.”

Connor laughed. “No. He was flattered, but, to me, is a typical response from a man. I tried on numerous occasions to warn him of her possessiveness where he’s concerned. He brushed it off, seeing her only as a sad, lonely, middle-aged woman living life through her fantasies and her romance novels. He thinks she’s harmless.”

“Why did he hire her? Everyone else in the company is young and personable...she doesn’t fit in.”

“She reminds him of his late mother. He was very close to his mother, and I don’t think he ever got over her death.”

“Why is Lyla doing this to you now? She has no reason, since you’re no longer involved with Charles.”

Connor was thoughtful for a moment. “As long as I’m employed at Boylston I’m a threat to her. Who knows how her sick mind works. I’m here and as long as I am, she’ll never be convinced I have no romantic inclinations towards Charles.” She shook her head. “I pity the woman Charles does becomes serious with, if he ever does. I’m surprised she doesn’t consider you a threat since you’re working so close with him. Maybe you’d better start watching your back, too.”

“You mentioned before he’s been involved with several women. Did Lyla threaten them, or do anything to jeopardize their positions in the company?”

“I know a couple of them were let go for reasons only known to the company. Charles never did say why, and I had no reason to question him, but now I’m wondering what Lyla may have had to do with their dismissals.”

“What about the others?”

She was thoughtful for a minute. "There was one woman who, it was rumored, was destined to become Mrs. Charles Boylston. It was before I knew him. He was enamored with this woman and then she broke off the relationship and moved out of town with no explanation to anyone."

Sage thoughtfully pulled on her chin. "Do you think we could find out who these women are and track them down?"

Connor absentmindedly twisted the cross she wore around her neck. "That could work. But how will we get access to the employee records?"

"Leave that to me," Sage replied with a wry smile. "There's still something I don't get, though. How is Lyla getting the information from the research lab? Do you think someone is in on this with her and is leaking her the information?"

Connor sat on the sofa. "No, I don't think so. Somehow she's sneaking into the lab after hours."

"Could Lyla be passing on information to Chafron herself?"

"No. She wants Charles to think that I am, though, and as she continues to plant more and more seeds of suspicion in his mind, the only logical conclusion he'll be able to come to is it must be me. Nothing has ever been passed on to Chafron by me or anyone."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Chafron wouldn't risk their reputation. Henry James is a down-to-earth, hard-working man. He's also a lay minister in his church. I've never met a man with such solid values and integrity. If Charles and Henry ever merged, I think the company those two developed would become one of the most powerful in the world."

"Do you think that's a possibility?"

"No. There was some speculation in the trade papers a few years ago, but Charles wants to be the only man on top. He doesn't like sharing and he doesn't like competition. I think he was actually relieved when Chafron was having problems and secretly hoped they'd go under. Of course, this is only speculation on my part, but

I was with Charles when Chafron was burdened with financial upheavals. From what I've been reading in the industry papers lately, Chafron has strengthened and, by the end of the year, plans to unveil a product that will rock the computer industry. Charles is undoubtedly worried, even though he has no reason to be. There's plenty of room for the both of them to succeed."

"Has Charles ever asked you if you know any of Chafron's secrets?"

"He's asked, but why would I know anything? Henry James has never talked business around me and has never asked me about my work at Boylston."

"So you don't believe Lyla is doing anything to sabotage Bolyston?"

"Not intentionally. I mean if she is doing it, it's not to hurt the company, but to cast blame on me so I'll look like a traitor. The ultimate revenge would be to destroy my chances for future employment in my field. I'd be washed up. She's putting all our research at risk if she's figured out a way to gain access to the lab, though. The research is confidential and if anything she retrieves from there falls into the wrong hands, it could finish off the company. Charles has risked a lot for this project."

"The first time you mentioned Lyla as your blackmailer, you were terrified." Sage frowned. "Why the sudden change?"

"My fear was what she wanted to see that somehow I was playing into her hands. I've been doing some on-line research about people like her and it is unlikely for them to become violent. They use intimidation and the recipients of the threats usually back off out of fear."

"What if she fits into the small percentile of those who do become violent?"

Connor grimaced. "I hope she doesn't."

"Still, why not go to the police? She obviously needs some psychiatric help."

"I can't prove for certain it's her. Besides, I want to see how far she'll go. Charles has to be convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt it's her behind this. I need more proof than the notes. I need evidence she's been entering the lab."

Sage was thoughtful for a moment. "There's something I've wanted to ask you."

"What is it?"

She sighed heavily. "Why did you come on so strong about your relationship with Charles when I first met you?"

Connor laughed. "I'm so sick and tired of the gossip around here I thought I'd tell you directly. I must admit, though, I didn't intend to make it sound so crude."

"It did take me by surprise."

"He has quite a reputation with women and it was my off-handed way of warning you, in case you were interested in him."

"He's definitely not my type."

"He hasn't made any inappropriate moves toward you, has he?"

Sage lowered her eyes. "Nothing that can be proved."

Connor studied her cautiously. "Be careful." She continued to stare at her. "My God, Sage, he's threatened you, hasn't he?"

Sage shifted her eyes. She knew she shouldn't be confiding so much to Connor, but it felt good to unburden herself to someone who understood the position she was in. "He won't let me quit. At least not until I complete the assignment he hired me for."

"Which is to bring me down."

"To bring down whoever is sabotaging the company. If he found out I've told you what I have, I don't know what he'd do to me." She peered at Connor. "By siding with you, I've put myself in an awkward position. I've turned into someone I barely know anymore since I started this job. I've compromised my values."

“I know you have and I hope I can prove to you, your trust in me isn’t misplaced.” She smiled. “What made you decide to trust me?”

Sage shrugged. “I went with my instincts. Granted, I don’t know you well, but I’ve found I really like you as a person.”

“Thank you, Sage.” She smiled broadly. “Now, we’ve got to think of a way to outsmart Lyla.”

“If we catch her red-handed, she won’t have an alibi, since she has no reason to be in the lab.”

Connor slowly shook her head. “It’s too dangerous at this point. I think we should start by checking out Charles’ former lovers.”

“I want to follow Lyla to see what sort of life she really does lead outside of work. Maybe that’ll give us some clues.”

“It’s a good idea. What does good, old Lyla do with all those lonely, empty hours, besides daydream about Charles?”

“Doesn’t she realize that even if you left Boylston, she still doesn’t have a chance of being with him?”

“In her delusional mind she thinks she does. As long as I’m still here, she may think there’s the chance Charles and I will get back together. Think about it. Her plan is that the day will come when she’ll be able to implicate me. Since she’ll be instrumental in bringing me down and consequently saving the company, Charles will be so grateful he’ll see what an asset she is to him and, just like in a fairy tale, fall madly in love with her.”

Sage chuckled. “I can see it now, the two of them riding off together into the sunset.” She grew serious. “Before we do anything, why don’t you tell Charles what you’ve told me? I’ll back you up. I still think it’s the best way to go. We’ll convince him it has to be her. Maybe he can keep an eye on her and catch her in the act. If he sees her in the research lab after hours, she’ll have no logical explanation for being there and this whole mess will be settled

once and for all. Don't forget, she's threatened your life. We still can't let her get away with that. She's blackmailing you."

Connor was silent for a few minutes, deep in thought.

Sage stood up and walked to the window, staring at the dark, threatening sky. She hoped the rain would hold off until she was safely back at Heather's. It was bad enough standing at the bus stop in this neighborhood without being drenched in the process.

Finally, Connor broke her silence. "He won't believe me, and I doubt he'll believe you either. She's all ready planted the seeds of doubt in his mind. Plus he'll know you and I are working together if I go to him. Remember, you're supposed to implicate me, not help me."

Sage turned from the window and faced Connor.

Connor continued. "If you were Charles, would you believe me? Lyla has been his loyal secretary ever since he began the business and is always at his beck and call. She's never given him any reason to doubt her. She's loyal and trustworthy...to him. And what proof do we have? He'll think I had someone write the notes threatening my life to set Lyla up."

"I'll tell him about our suspicions about Lyla. I'll plant my own seeds of doubt in his mind about her."

She frowned. "It won't work. I told you he idolizes Lyla, like he did his late mother." She curiously eyed Sage. "Can I ask you something? I'd appreciate a straight answer."

"Of course."

She slowly exhaled. "What did Charles tell you about me, Sage?" She kept her eyes glued to Sage's face. "Is this part of the plan? Have I said too much?"

Her question caught Sage off guard. "I'm not sure I understand the question, Connor," she replied as the blood rushed to her face. She wished Connor would quit staring at her like she was trying to look into her soul.

As she watched, Connor's eyes filled with pain, a pain so glaringly intense it sickened Sage. Connor was her friend and she deserved the full truth. After all, she'd put her full trust in Sage and she deserved no less from Sage.

"You're an intelligent woman, Sage. You know what I'm talking about."

"Connor, I'm not playing games." She twisted her hands together. "You know I was hired to spy on company employees--mainly you--to find out who was sabotaging the company. I knew from day one you couldn't be the guilty party."

Connor nodded. "Thank you."

"My friendship is sincere, Connor. No one else knows why I was hired, and I wouldn't have told you if I didn't trust you." She walked to the sofa and sat back down.

"I'm not the only one who knows."

Sage's eyes widened in disbelief. "Who else knows?"

"Lyla. She told me today. She's never spoken to me unless she's had to, so obviously I was shocked. Maybe she thinks you and Charles have something going on and she wanted to see my reaction. I have no idea what her motive is." She stood, arms hanging limply at her sides, waiting for Sage's reaction.

"Lyla! But it was supposed to be top secret. Charles and I are the only ones who know. At least that's what he told me." Anger boiled in her surging to the surface. "He told her of all people! He needs to be told Lyla notified you. Now he'll *have* to believe us. We can't let Lyla get away with this any longer." She jumped to her feet. "I'm going to tell him everything. He'll see Lyla for what she really is, and if he doesn't, he's a fool," she angrily retorted.

Connor grabbed her wrist and pulled her back down. "No. He won't believe you. Lyla will convince him *you* told me. She's conniving and manipulative. Let's beat her at her own game. If we work together, we can come up with a plan to outwit her." She

smiled faintly. "It's nice to have a trusted friend. It's been lonely going through this by myself."

"You're not alone anymore, Connor."

"Good friends aren't that easy to come by nowadays and I have very few I'd count as true friends. They come around when they need something, but aren't there when a catastrophe strikes. You know what I'm talking about...fairweather friends." She shrugged. "Well, now we've gotten that out of the way, we need to plan our next move. As soon as you get forwarding addresses for those women, I'll track them down and see if they're willing to tell me why they left Boylston and under what circumstances. In the meantime, you can check out Lyla."

"Tomorrow I'll get on it. Sunday I plan to pay a visit to her church as a new parishioner." She grinned wickedly.

"Good. We can do this, Sage."

She watched the stress leave Connor's beautiful face. "We'll get her, Connor."

"Damn right we will. How about some coffee? I'd offer you something stronger, but I'm not much of a drinker."

"I'd love some coffee. I'm not a drinker either."

Sage relaxed against the back of the sofa while Connor fixed the coffee. A few minutes later, Connor returned with the coffee and a plate of cookies.

"So, Sage, tell me about yourself. Where did you work before Boylston?"

Sage spent the next two hours sharing her history, the good and the bad, with Connor and, in turn, Connor opened up about her own life. She was surprised Connor had come from an almost poverty-stricken background with little money for luxuries. Her mother had worked long, hard hours just to put a meal on the table every night. Now Sage understood why Connor wanted only the best for her mother. She also saw the connection between Charles'

and Connor's upbringing and wondered if that was what had initially attracted them to one another.

"I can't wait until you meet my fiancé."

Sage smiled. "It would be great if he and Ryan hit it off."

"He's a connoisseur of old classic films like Ryan, so I'm certain they'll have plenty to talk about. My only wish is that we can end this mess soon and get on with our lives."

"We will, Connor," Sage promised.

"I feel terrible you've been put in such an unpleasant position. The stress must be unbearable."

"Gaining a new friend makes it all worthwhile."

Chapter 14

“The doctor says you can go home tomorrow,” Sage announced brightly. She saw the apprehension in her mother’s eyes. “Isn’t that wonderful news? You must be sick and tired of this place. I’m moving back in,” she added, “so you needn’t worry about money or taking care of things.”

“Thank you, Sage,” Loni replied, brushing a tear from her eye, “but I can’t let you disrupt your life for me. You’ve finally gotten out on your own and it’s not fair for me to burden you with my problems.”

“Mom, my mind’s made up, and you’re not going to talk me out of it. How can you even think you’re a burden? I love you and I want to help you like you’ve always helped me.” Her eyes narrowed. “You’re not thinking of taking him back, are you? Is that what this is all about?”

“No, of course not, honey. As soon as I’m able, I’m filing for divorce. I just don’t want you to give up any more of your life. God knows you hadn’t had a chance to really live until you left home.”

“I want to do this, Mom.” She grabbed her mother’s hand. “What’s wrong? I thought you’d be happy.”

“I am happy, but I’m so sorry, Sage, for what you’ve been through. I wanted you to have a better life than I did.” She blinked back tears. “Lying here has given me time to think. Many times when you were growing up you asked me what my life was like, but I was too ashamed to tell you the whole truth.”

Sage squeezed her mother's hand. "I figured it out a long time ago. That's why I quit asking. You don't need to tell me anything, Mom, and you have nothing to be ashamed of. How you were raised is not your fault."

"How I allowed you to be raised is my fault. I should've stopped it at the very beginning." Loni took a deep breath and then slowly exhaled. "I want to tell you about my life, Sage. You have a right to know. Besides, I think it'll do the both of us some good. Please let me get this off my chest."

"Okay, Mom, if it'll make you feel better." She pulled up a chair.

Her mother's eyes clouded as she peered at Sage. "Your father insisted on raising you the way I was raised. He was convinced my upbringing was normal. Normal to him was a wife who was submissive to him, obeying his every command. I thought he'd see things differently once you were born and not want his daughter to be submissive to any man or anyone, but he didn't. He wanted you to follow in the same footsteps. He has no respect for women." She sighed heavily.

"Why did you stay with him all these years? Why didn't you pack up and leave when you saw his true colors?" Sage searched her mother's eyes.

"I've asked myself that question a thousand times and the only answer, the truthful one, I come up with is fear. Fear is a horrible motivator. I was afraid to stay with him and just as afraid to leave him. How could I face life on my own, even if he allowed me to leave him? I knew the option of leaving would have never been given to me in the first place. He'd have seen me dead before he'd allow himself to face the talk that comes with divorce." She grimaced.

"So I stayed and year after year it only got worse. I didn't have a clue how to live life on my own. I couldn't talk to my family. They'd have thought I was ungrateful for all Matt provided as a

husband. I was lonely, and there was no one I could share my problems with. I wasn't allowed friends in my youth or as an adult. I hated my life and wondered what I'd done to deserve such an appalling existence." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "I'm ashamed to admit it, but I even considered taking my own life." Her eyes drifted to the stark white wall behind Sage's chair.

Sage's jaw dropped. "Mom, I don't know what to say. I-I—" A tear slid from her eye, dripping down her cheek.

"It's okay, honey." Loni sniffed. "I made it through because I had you to live for. You gave me hope." She squeezed Sage's hand.

"You don't need to tell me any more, Mom," Sage whispered.

"I need to get it off my chest." She took a shuddering breath. "When I first met your father, he didn't give me the impression life with him would be even worse than it was with my family. He led me to believe I was going to have a beautiful life filled with children, friends, love and happiness. He had no living relatives and so it was only natural, I thought, he'd want us to make the family he'd been robbed of.

"We attended church every Sunday, and I had no reason to doubt he'd be anything but a loving husband and father. When you came along, he acted like a doting father in public, but at home, it was a different story.

"But I don't need to tell you that," she admitted sadly. "We just continued along in our perfect, make-believe family until one Sunday I put my foot down and refused to attend church any more. I couldn't take the pretense any longer. He'd had the few friends I'd managed to make there convinced I suffered from delusions and depression and was being treated for it. He attended a few times after and I suppose he told them my condition had worsened and that was why I was unable to attend. That's why you never had much of a religious background. I tried to teach you the basics, the best I could."

“I’m sorry, Mom.” She dabbed at her eyes. “You did teach me the proper values.”

Her taut lips drew into a smile. “My bright spot was you. When you were born, I had someone to love, who truly loved me back. I was determined you’d have everything I never did, but your father wouldn’t allow it and his abuse became even worse if I tried to stand in his way where your upbringing was concerned. I succumbed to him so he wouldn’t take his anger out on you. But that didn’t stop him—he still took his anger out on you.” Her lips trembled. “When I was younger I hated school and dreaded each morning when I had to go because it was my worst nightmare day after day and year after year. I was taunted relentlessly and made fun of. I’d see groups of girls chatting and giggling, just having a good time, and I ached to be a part of their group, but I was an outcast. I was the one they’d stick a foot out to trip when I made my way to the blackboard or pass nasty jokes about around the classroom.”

Sage’s heart broke and shattered into a thousand pieces as she listened.

Loni blinked rapidly, but a lone tear escaped and coursed down her cheek. “One day, one of the popular girls sat down next to me in the lunch room, acting like she wanted to be my friend. I was so excited. She invited me to meet the group after school at the local burger joint. I couldn’t wait for the bell to ring. Even though I knew I’d get into trouble for not coming right home after school, I didn’t care. I had a friend for the first time in my life and any punishment I’d get would be worth it.” Her voice broke.

“What happened, Mom?” Sage couldn’t bear the pain in her mother’s eyes and the look on her face as it crumbled with her painful memories.

“When I walked in, I spotted the girl in a booth with a group of her friends. Well, I walked over and thanked her for inviting me. To make a long story short, she acted like I’d made the whole

thing up, ridiculed, and taunted me, while her friends joined in. I ran home, crying all the way, but instead of sympathy, I received a beating within an inch of my life for not coming straight home after school. My parents told me it was my just punishment what those girls did to me because of my disobedience. After that day, I never trusted anyone again. I tried to develop a thick skin and the taunting eventually died down. Then I was ignored as though I didn't even exist. I suppose they tired of me and went on to someone else."

"That's horrible. How can people be so cruel?"

"I suppose the only way I kept my sanity was knowing I'd finish school. I used to dream of the day I'd move out and be on my own. I wanted to get a job. I didn't care what type of work I found, just so I could take care of myself and have a few of the things that had been denied me growing up. Obviously that didn't happen the way I'd planned. I'm sure the shrinks would have a field day sorting all of this mess, I call my life, out."

"Mom, please don't do this to yourself. None of it is your fault. You can't help the way you were raised or how your husband treated you. You've always been a good mother. You did what you had to do. Look at me. I think I turned out pretty good, but I wouldn't have, if it weren't for you."

Tears trickled down Loni's pale, hollow cheeks. "I never wanted you to suffer the way I did. I didn't want you to end up all alone with no one. It's so scary, honey, to feel so alone."

"You're not alone, Mom, and you never will be. You'll always have me and I'm not alone either. I have Ryan and some good friends I can't wait for you to meet. I want you to get to know Ryan, too. You're going to love him! My life is good and I am happy." She took a tissue and gently dabbed her mother's cheeks. "You're going to have a good life, too. You'll make friends and enjoy everything you've missed. I promise you. I'll be there by your side to help you."

"Thank you, Sage." She sobbed.

"Now we've settled that, I'd like to run something by you." She saw the worry come into her mother's eyes. "This is something good, so don't worry."

"What is it, honey?"

Sage's eyes lit up. "What do you think about renting out one of the spare rooms?"

She hesitated. "It would have to be someone we both could trust, since the boarder would have access to the entire house—and us."

"I have the perfect person in mind, but I haven't mentioned it to her until I got your approval."

"If it's someone you know and trust it'll be fine with me, Sage."

"It's Heather. She's kind, trustworthy and about the sweetest person I've ever met. I think she'll be thrilled with the news. I know you and she will get along great."

"It would be nice to have some life in that house." Her eyes brightened. "I don't know her, but from all you've told me about her over the years, I feel as though I do." She pulled a tissue out of the small box sitting on the tray and blew her nose. "She sounds perfect!"

"You'll love her, Mom."

* * * *

Sage picked up her possessions and stuffed them into her suitcases. Her mother was being discharged from the hospital tomorrow and she couldn't wait to freshen up the house. What she really missed was having space. As much as she enjoyed rooming with Heather, the apartment was barely suitable for one person, let alone two. She smiled as she looked at Heather. She couldn't wait to ask her if she'd like to move into the house. She was sure Heather would be ecstatic having a large house to roam around in after living in such cramped quarters.

"I'm going to miss you around here," Heather said, snapping one of the suitcases shut. "It's going to be awfully quiet and lonely."

"You're going to be seeing so much of me you won't have a chance to miss me."

"It won't be the same without you here to talk to every night," Heather complained. "When we couldn't sleep it was nice sitting up and hashing out our problems. I never realized before how much fun having a roommate could be. We're so compatible." She looked around her tiny apartment. "Even in this closet."

Sage grinned as she stared at her friend. "Actually, I have a great solution...one that'll benefit both of us."

"Okay, what idea have you hatched?" She raised an eyebrow. "Come on...out with it."

"My mother's house is large—four bedrooms and two baths. It has a big, old-fashioned, wraparound front porch and a huge backyard." She saw the longing in Heather's eyes.

"It sounds beautiful," Heather wistfully said. "I grew up in apartments. I always prayed for a house with grass instead of concrete to play on, but my parents were lucky they could afford the rent on our small apartment." She laughed. "I guess that's why this place never bothered me much. You can't miss something you never had."

Sage sensed by the look on Heather's face she did miss what she'd never had.

Heather shrugged. "Debbie's family had a small house so we spent a lot of time there...there was even a small patch of grass in the tiny backyard."

"My house never had much life in it. It never lived up to the potential of what a home should be—it was only a house. So many times I wished I could've invited you and Debbie over, but because of my father, I couldn't."

"We knew something wasn't right, but we didn't want to pry. Believe me, it wasn't easy for us."

Sage beamed. "I want to ask you something. You don't have to give me an answer right away...just think about it." She cleared her throat. "How would you like to move into the house and help to make it a home?" She waited for Heather's response.

Heather stared at her in disbelief. "Are you serious?" she squealed. "What about your mother? How does she feel about it?"

Sage grinned at the delight on Heather's face. "I've already discussed it with her and she's as excited as I am."

"I...I don't know what to say," Heather stuttered. "I don't want to get in your or your mother's way or invade your privacy. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure or I wouldn't have asked," Sage assured her. "It'll be your home, too, and you can invite your friends over as much as you want to. Besides, you can help me set my mother on the right track. I want her to have the life she never had and it'll be good for her to have people around. She's never had that."

Heather's eyes surveyed her cramped apartment. "It sure will be nice to get out of this shoebox. A real house, wow!"

"And don't forget delicious home-cooked meals every night. My mother is a fabulous cook."

Heather's eyes lit up. "When can I move in?"

"Grab your suitcase, girl."

* * * *

Ryan helped Loni get settled on the sofa, stuffed a pillow behind her back, and then carefully placed one behind her head.

"Thank you, Ryan, but you needn't pamper me," she said with a grateful smile.

He grinned. "Everybody can use a little pampering now and again. Besides, I like to make myself useful."

Sage carried in a tray of sandwiches and tall glasses of iced tea. "Is there anything you need, Mom?" She set the tray on the coffee table.

"No. Ryan is taking very good care of me." She cast an eye at Sage. "He's definitely a keeper."

Sage felt her cheeks grow warm. "Mom, you're embarrassing me." She handed her mother a glass of iced tea.

"I agree with your Mom, Sage," Ryan said, with a wink aimed at Loni. "You should keep me."

She playfully poked him in the ribs. "I intend to do just that, so there, wise guy." She handed him a glass of iced tea. "Do you have to work tonight?"

"Just for a couple of hours," he said as he reached for a sandwich.

"Good because I'm planning a celebration for Mom's homecoming. Heather's moving in this afternoon, and Debbie and Tony will be stopping over, I hope."

"I meant to ask you earlier, but would it be okay if I asked Clint to join us, too? He's been in the dumps lately and this might cheer him up a little."

"That's a great idea! I intend to spend the afternoon cooking up a feast."

"Do you realize this will be the first time I've ever been invited to dinner?"

Loni's eyes clouded. "I'm so sorry about that, Ryan. Matt never invited anyone over, nor were Sage or I allowed to. I should've insisted Sage be allowed to have her friends over, but I was afraid of what he'd do. I knew how special you'd become to her, and I wanted to get to know the young man who meant so much to my daughter. I thought Matt would have wanted to, also."

"That's in the past now, Mrs. Ralston, and I know you had nothing to do with it."

"The past is dead, Mom. We're going to fill this house with happiness and love from now on."

"That's what's been missing for all these years," Loni stated. "I feel like I've been given a brand new life."

Sage glanced around the living room. "I've been thinking of doing a little remodeling. I'd like to start with the kitchen because I know you've dreamed of a new one for years. Then we can do something in here. We need to brighten this place up a bit...it's so dark and gloomy." She walked around, pointing out the changes that would make the room stylish and welcoming. "We could have the house we always dreamed of," she said excitedly, turning once again to look at her mother and Ryan.

"Oh, honey, as much as I'd love it, that's much too expensive. Maybe down the road we can afford it. I need to find a job and we still have the expense of keeping the house up as it is now."

"I'm making good money. By updating, it'll save money in the long run, too. It doesn't have to be extravagant, and I really want to do this for you."

"I can do some of the labor," Ryan offered. "That'll cut down on the cost. Sage is right about the updates saving money."

Loni's lips trembled. "What did I ever do to deserve all of this?"

"You survived, Mom."

* * * *

Heather hugged Debbie. "Can you believe I'm actually living here?" she said, grabbing Debbie's hand and pulling her into the living room. "Later I'll have to show you my bedroom!"

Sage walked into the room carrying a platter of appetizers, which she set on the coffee table. "I'm so happy you came, Debbie!" She threw her arms around her friend. "Where's Tony?"

"Parking the car...he'll be here in a minute. Wow! Everything looks fantastic! This is a beautiful house."

Sage beamed proudly. She and Heather had spent the afternoon cooking and baking. Loni had insisted on supervising, even though Sage would've preferred she rest, but Loni wasn't the type of woman to stay put. Anyway, it was only a broken arm, Loni had

argued. Sage was also thrilled Heather and her mother had hit it off.

“I thought Ryan would be here by now, too,” Sage said.

“He is,” Ryan’s voice boomed from behind her, as he slipped an arm around her waist.

Sage squeezed his hand, then noticed Clint hanging back, looking uncomfortable. “I’m glad you could make it, Clint.”

He smiled. “Thank you for including me.”

Tony joined the group, and Ryan and Debbie made the introductions.

Sage smiled as the group began chatting. Debbie was right about Tony. He looked like he’d just stepped off a cover of a magazine. He was soft-spoken and charming, and she could see why Debbie was so taken with him. She hoped everything worked out for them. They looked like a perfect match. She chatted for a few minutes, then excused herself and hurried to the kitchen.

“Mom, everyone’s here. I can’t wait for them to meet you. Come on.”

“Do I look all right?” Loni asked, nervously smoothing her skirt with her good hand.

“You look amazing!” She took her mother’s elbow and led her into the living room. After she’d introduced her mother to Debbie, Tony, and Clint, she stood back, watching a light come into her mother’s eyes as she chatted.

Sage walked back into the kitchen, checked on the roast, then set the dining room table. When she came back into the living room, Tony and Ryan were talking animatedly about cars, Loni and Debbie were laughing and chatting, and Heather and Clint were seated on the sofa talking quietly.

Her heart swelled with a joy and peacefulness that had always been lacking. She had friends and her mother was going to be okay. Her life was coming together, and if it weren’t for her job, life would be perfect. Tomorrow she’d attend Lyla’s church. She hated

spying, but it had to be done. Connor's life was in danger and Lyla would crack eventually under pressure. She couldn't keep up her charade forever. Sage chased away her gloomy thoughts. She intended to enjoy every minute of today.

Chapter 15

Sage slipped into a pew and sat. The young woman next to her smiled pleasantly and handed her a hymnal. She flipped to the page the pastor quoted, then stood up with the rest of the congregation. She moved her lips, but not being familiar with the hymn, didn't sing as those around her did, some in flat and others in loud, melodious voices. Her eyes roamed around the choir members standing at the front of the church and came to rest on Lyla. Except for her dark blue choir robe, she looked the same as she did in the office. She stood rigid and stony-faced between two rosy-cheeked women and her thin lips moved, but there was no trace of joy. Her hair was pulled back severely, making her features look more stern than usual.

After the hymn, Sage settled herself into her seat and sat through the pastor's long, dry sermon. Her mind drifted as she gazed around the small, plain, but homey church. When the pastor dismissed his parishioners, she hung back until she spied Lyla. A few worshippers came up to her, introducing themselves and welcoming her to the church. She smiled and nodded politely, then courteously excused herself when she saw Lyla exiting the building.

When she reached the broad-shouldered, pot-bellied, white-haired pastor, he grabbed her hand in both of his. As he spoke to her and she introduced herself, she watched Lyla out of the corner of her eye.

"Welcome. It's nice to have you worship with us, Sage."

"Thank you, pastor."

“Are you here with anyone?”

“No. I’m by myself,” she answered, “but I do know someone from the congregation. I work with Lyla Bevons.”

“Lyla and her mother have been worshipping here for years. Excuse me for one moment.” He called out to Lyla and she stopped abruptly and glanced over her shoulder, then, with her customary stony countenance, walked back to where Sage and the pastor stood.

“Sage was just telling me you and she work together, Lyla.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Lyla replied awkwardly. “I’m surprised to see you here, Miss Ralston. I didn’t see you or I would’ve welcomed you.” She pasted a phony smile on her thin lips.

“I hope you’ll worship with us again,” the white-haired man said. “If there’s anything the church can do for you don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you. There’s so much I don’t understand, I’m afraid.” She looked into his kind eyes. Deep lines etched his sallow jaws and narrow forehead. “I was raised with very little religion in my life,” she admitted.

“Well, it’s never too late to come to the Lord. What’s important is you’ve made the decision to do so now. I’m here to help you in any way I can.” He smiled at her. “I’m certain Lyla will also be willing to help with any questions you may have.” He touched Lyla’s shoulder. “Since you two work together, maybe you can meet in your free time there. Lyla, you can give her some copies of our Sunday school lessons to start with.”

“Yes, Pastor Harris, I’d be happy to help Miss Ralston find her way to the Lord,” she replied, but her cold eyes revealed her contempt as they bore into Sage’s.

“Lyla, we really must be going. It’s almost time for my medication. You know what happens if I don’t take it on time,” the elderly woman, who’d been impatiently waiting, complained in a

nasal voice as she turned her motorized wheelchair towards the direction of the parking lot. "We must leave this very instant."

Sage's jaw almost dropped. She was an older version of Lyla, with the same hairstyle and fashion sense. The only difference was her physical body was thinner.

"Now, Mona, Lyla always makes certain you have your medication on time. How are you feeling today?" Pastor Harris asked. He bent down and gently patted the woman's shoulder.

"Not well, I'm afraid, but who cares? Maybe when I drop dead Lyla will see I needed my medication administered at the proper time." She sniffed.

"Now, now, Mona, don't talk that way. You would be sorely missed, and I know for a fact you're not going home to the Lord any time soon. Have you met our newest parishioner?" He stood up and tilted his head in Sage's direction. "This is Sage Ralston."

"Mrs. Bevons, it's nice to meet you," Sage said, turning towards the woman. "Your daughter Lyla and I work together."

The woman gave her the once over and, from the icy look in her eyes, it was obvious to Sage she didn't meet with her approval. "Lyla never mentioned you," she retorted, dismissing Sage as she turned her attention back to her daughter. "We must go now!" she demanded.

"Yes, Mother," Lyla replied quickly. "I'll see you at the meeting Tuesday night, Pastor Harris." She nodded to Sage.

"Don't forget about the study lessons for Sage," he reminded her.

Sage watched Lyla's shoulders stiffen as she walked next to her mother. She wondered what made her angrier—her mother's demands or Pastor Harris' request for her to do religious studies with Sage. A part of Sage felt sorry for Lyla. Life with her mother couldn't be a picnic, but it still didn't excuse what Lyla was doing to Connor.

* * * *

“Sage, what’s going on with you and Lyla?” Charles demanded the following morning. “She claims you’re prying into her personal life.” His jaw was tight and his lips drawn taut as he waited for her answer.

“I’m doing what you’re paying me to do,” she countered in an even tone of voice as she looked into his stormy eyes.

“I told you Lyla is not suspect. Back off her,” he insisted. “She is not the enemy. Nothing in her life or background is cause for suspicion.”

“How much do you really know about her?”

“I know everything I need to know about Lyla Bevons. She was investigated thoroughly, as is everyone, before being offered a position. She’s been with the company since the day we opened. There’s nothing sinister in her background if that is what you are implying.”

His blazing eyes bore into her, but she refused to back down. “Don’t you find it odd she goes out of her way to be unfriendly to everyone she comes into contact with within the company? A little friendliness on her part would go a long way. As your secretary, she should have a more pleasing personality, since she’s the one who first meets those you deal with. She has no people skills.”

“She’s been here long enough for my clients to understand she’s an efficient, professional worker. That’s all that really matters. I can overlook her personality quirks for that reason. She lives a very sheltered life and spends the majority of her free time taking care of and supporting her elderly mother. The rest of her personal time is devoted to her church. She has no social life, but I commend her for being a devoted daughter.” He eyed her sharply. “It’s a shame the younger generation doesn’t take a page from her book. Instead, today’s generation downgrades their parents for what they didn’t receive growing up, instead of appreciating what they did have. It’s easier to blame their parents whenever something goes

wrong in their lives than taking responsibility for their own actions.”

“I trust you’re not including me in that judgment?”

“Of course not. It’s obvious you’re a devoted daughter, but I hope the world won’t change you twenty or thirty years from now.”

Sage was annoyed he was treating her as though she were a child and he was a much older, wiser man when he was only about ten years older than she. “I believe every situation is different and people do what is best in the end for all concerned parties.” She held down the anger building in her and turned the conversation back to Lyla. “There’s still something that doesn’t make sense to me. You’d think Lyla would want friends to avoid the monotony of her life. Come on, everyone needs a sounding board once in a while. No one can be mentally healthy without someone to talk to.”

“Why do you assume she has no friends? You don’t know that. Besides, it’s a wonder she has any energy left at the end of each day. She’s a very private person and her church gives her solace. I’m sure she has close friends there. I’d appreciate it if you’d back off Lyla and concentrate your efforts on the only person who seems to have a reason to sabotage me.”

“I’m trying to cover all the bases. To me, everyone is suspect until proven otherwise.” She inhaled sharply. “I’m still not convinced Connor Michaels is the person behind this. The real suspect, I think, is using Connor to hide his or her identity.”

“You’d better start being convinced about Connor.” He pushed a folder across his desk to her. “I’ve been receiving these.” He gestured to the folder. “In the beginning, I got them every few days, but now I’m finding an email every morning with info on what Connor has been copying in the lab.”

Sage leafed through the folder. After a few minutes, she pushed it back across the desk to Charles. “This doesn’t prove it’s

Connor. It could be anyone in this company.” Her brows knitted together. “Why doesn’t the person who is sending these to you, if he or she is so positive it’s Connor, just come out with the proof once and for all instead of intimating it without proving anything? Maybe this person is setting Connor up. Did you consider that possibility?”

“What’s the motive?”

“What motive does Connor have?” Sage countered.

“Plenty. She may be feeling scorned by me. You know the expression.”

Sage became incensed. It was bad enough having to put up with Connor being falsely accused, but now she had to listen to his pompous remarks. She wanted to tell him off, but bit her tongue. She intended to do that later after she fulfilled her duties. “That doesn’t make any sense. Why would she jeopardize her reputation and integrity for a failed relationship? She’s gone on with her life and, from the conversations I’ve had with her, I didn’t detect any animosity toward you. In fact, she only has had good things to say about you.”

“Many times we only see the side the other person is willing to show. Keep an eye on her, Sage. She’ll suck you in and, before you know it, you’ll believe her lies and become convinced she’s innocent. She’s a player and she won’t quit until she gets what she wants, and she’ll do anything and use anybody to make that happen.” His voice was bitter.

What had happened to cause him to loath Connor, a woman he had once loved so deeply? Nothing added up. What had really happened to set him so staunchly against her? Would Connor tell her? Or was this just another mind game Charles was playing? In any event, she didn’t intend to let Lyla off the hook and wanted Charles’ mind to open up enough to let the idea Lyla may not be the woman he thought she was to seep in, casting the shadow of doubt.

“Maybe that’s what Lyla’s been doing,” Sage said.

“This is the last time I’m going to say this, Sage--back off Lyla!” His face turned purple with rage. “She’s never given me any reason to suspect her of any wrongdoing in all the years she’s worked for me. In fact, she’s also keeping her eyes open and trying to track down the perpetrator. She is nothing but loyal to this company and to me. I will not tolerate you turning this around and trying to lay the blame at Lyla’s feet. Case closed!”

“I thought the truth about my employment was only between you and me,” she stated coldly. Would he ask her how she’d found out he’d told Lyla? What would she reply?

“Lyla needed to know.” His voice was calmer now as he looked at her.

Sage was outraged. “Then why do you need me? Why not let Lyla be your spy?” she shouted.

Charles held up a hand. “Calm down.” His eyes softened and his jaw relaxed. “Sage, this is a full-time position, and Lyla doesn’t have the resources or time at her disposal you do. Besides, you and I are both in agreement she’s not a sociable person. The employees would know something was up if she suddenly tried to befriend them after years of shunning them.”

“Why did she need to be involved in this at all?” She was surprised he didn’t seem concerned with how she’d found out Lyla knew her real position at Bolyston.

“Because she works so closely with me, I thought it best to let her in on what was taking place.” He threw up his hands. “Who knows, she just may overhear a suspicious conversation. She’s not the enemy, Sage, and the quicker you realize that, the better off we’ll all be.”

Sage almost rebutted him, but changed her mind. “That makes sense,” she lied. From the satisfied look on Charles’ face, she knew she’d succeeded in appeasing him, at least for now. “For the record, though, I was only trying to be friendly with Lyla.”

“Is that why you began attending her church?”

She shrugged. "I was raised without any religious background and I decided it was time to learn about the teachings of the church. I assumed Lyla would be pleased. After all, isn't that what good Christians are supposed to do? Lead those lost souls to church? At least that's what I was led to believe."

His eyes narrowed. "Why Lyla's church? This is Buffalo so it's not like you don't have choices. You don't expect me to believe it was a coincidence, do you?"

"No, I don't. My only motive is I thought it might bring us closer. I can understand her better and maybe bring her out of her shell. Also, I thought it would be nice to worship where I already know someone." She kept her composure as she met his eyes, which had now softened considerably. "Am I not allowed to worship at a church of my own choosing?"

"Of course you can worship wherever you choose to. Just stay out of Lyla's way. She doesn't want to be your friend, and friendship can't be forced."

"That's not what you said about Connor. I'm forcing my friendship on her."

"Connor and Lyla are not cut from the same cloth." He folded his hands. "That is quite obvious."

"I'll try not to bother Lyla, but Pastor Harris instructed her to give me some study lessons so I have to speak to her."

"Fine. Just do what you need to do and nothing more."

* * * *

Charles stood, deep in thought, looking out the window. The clouds thickened; rain was in the air. He breathed deeply. He loved storms; he always had. Watching the lightning zigzag across the sky excited him. The bigger the storm, the better. His thoughts wandered to Sage. He couldn't stop thinking about her. She was becoming almost an obsession. It was all he could do not to leap across the desk, sweep everything off it, and fuck her right there. He hadn't bothered getting up when she left. He couldn't have if

he wanted to or his erection would have been evident to her. Her fiery anger set him on fire. She was a cat and, when her claws came out, he imagined the passion she portrayed in her business life would be even more powerful in bed.

He'd angered her and he had to be on guard and tread lightly where she was concerned if he hoped to break her defenses down. There was one thing he was sure of: one way or the other he was going to have her. Once she saw all he could offer her in and out of bed, she'd drop that useless grease monkey like a hot potato.

He'd move in slowly, so slowly she wouldn't know what hit her. He'd romance her little by little, drawing her into his own private web. Once he had her, he'd make certain she'd never want to leave, but he doubted she'd want to. He smiled. He could see it now: her hot, naked luscious body dripping with desire, begging him to fuck her as he teased her into total submission. He intended to give it to her. It wouldn't be long now. He'd been hatching a plan. He'd insist she work late one evening this week. How could she refuse? He'd been more than generous with her by letting her take all the time she needed to help her mother the past few days.

He'd begin his seduction. He'd convince her it would be safer to work from his house. From there, it would be a piece of cake and she'd be beating a path to his bedroom before the night was over.

His heart thudded as he imagined running his hands down those shapely, stocking-clad legs, then slowly feeling his way to those perfect hips, where he'd ease her down onto his hot, throbbing cock. He'd ride her hard and fast, enjoying the feel of her tight, wet pussy clamped around his cock, never wanting to let it go. His balls ached with desire.

He walked over to his office door and locked it, then notified Lyla he wasn't to be disturbed. He shuddered as he unzipped his pants and reached inside.

* * * *

“Lyla certainly knows how to play Charles. She knows every button of his to push and when to push it,” Sage fumed. “He’s blind to any wrongdoing on her part. I can’t believe he let her in on what my position is in the company, when I was strictly forbidden to breathe a word of it to anyone.”

“You’re right. There’s no way he’ll ever believe she’s behind this,” Connor agreed. “He has nothing but the utmost respect for her.”

“Why is he so obstinate where she’s concerned? There has to be more to it.”

“It’s really not that complicated when you look at it from Charles’ point of view. Lyla is the dutiful daughter sacrificing her own happiness to take care of her elderly mother. In his eyes, anyone who’d do that should be commended, not condemned.”

“What about you? Why isn’t he giving you the same praise? After all, you’ve sacrificed to give your mother the best care available because of your devoted, loving bond with her. You didn’t have to put her in one of the best facilities in the country, but you did.”

“He doesn’t know.”

Sage’s eyebrows rose. “Why not? If he really knew you, he’d see the type of woman you are, instead of being blindsided by Lyla.”

“I knew the deep affection he held for his parents. He’d talked so much about them I almost believed I knew them, too.” Connor looked at Sage. “He’d never approve of anyone sending a parent to a nursing home under any circumstances, so Lyla is doing everything right in his eyes. She’s keeping her mother at home with her and sacrificing her own happiness by doing so.”

“That’s ridiculous! Few of us have the resources to keep loved ones at home if a catastrophic illness warrants more care than we can afford or handle. I know that, God forbid, if my mother was in the same situation as yours, I’d do the same thing.”

“Lyla can. Her salary more than covers her mother’s nursing care while Lyla is working. As far as her mother’s medical bills are concerned, Charles has covered those, too. He’s added her mother to her medical benefits.”

Sage clenched her hands into fists. “I’m more determined than ever to expose her for the lying leech she is.”

“But she’s the poor woman whose only social life is her church,” Connor replied mockingly. “By the way, when do you start the study lessons?” she asked, a trace of laughter in her voice.

Sage rolled her eyes. “During her lunch break tomorrow.” She shook her head. “I still can’t believe she ran to Charles about me going to her church.”

“Maybe you’re making her nervous,” Connor reasoned. “You’re invading her territory and the church obviously is her safe haven. Have you talked to any of the other parishioners to get a feel for their impressions of Lyla?”

“Not yet. I didn’t want to start asking a lot of questions about her my first few visits.”

Connor sipped her coffee. “Lyla’s been attending that same church since she was born, so there has to be someone who can and will dish the dirt on her.”

“Oh, I almost forgot the reason I came over.” She pulled a list from her jacket pocket. “Here are the last known addresses and telephone numbers of the women who were suddenly dismissed. I ran them through this afternoon so they’re current.”

Connor glanced over the list. “Thank you.” She smiled. “We’ll get her, Sage. Lyla Bevons is about to fall.”

“Charles will soon find out his loyalty in Lyla has been misplaced.” She patted Connor’s hand. “As many times as I’ve wished I hadn’t taken this job, now I’m glad I did.”

“I shudder to think what someone else in your position may have done to me. Even though I know I’m innocent, it’s nice to have someone else believe it, too.”

"I'm hoping some of the women on this list will talk to you. I'm sure they've been holding it in all this time, just waiting for the opportunity to share the truth about their dismissals with someone who'll believe them—and that person is you," Sage said.

"In the meantime, you have your bible study meetings with Lyla to occupy you," Connor teased.

"It's going to take all my resolve just to sit through one of her lessons. She'll probably be as dry and boring with the lessons as she is at work. Oh, before I forget, the church is having a potluck a week from Saturday, if you'd be interested in attending," she joked.

"I think I'll pass on that one. You'll need to fill me in on it," she replied with a laugh.

"That'll give me the opportunity to ask a few questions about Lyla. I'm hoping to come back with a lot of juicy gossip," she said, then grew serious. "Connor, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course."

"Why is Charles so bitter where you're concerned? Do you even know?"

She was thoughtful for a minute before speaking. "No breakup is ever easy, no matter who initiates it, and we weren't an exception. I loved Charles, but we wanted different things out of the relationship and out of life." She frowned. "An ambitious woman isn't the type of woman he'll settle down with. He won't be satisfied until he finds a woman who mimics his mother in every respect, I'm afraid. She has to be totally submissive to him and definitely not a career woman."

Sage gazed at Connor. "I think he's still in love with you and that's why he wants to believe you're behind this."

She cast a wary eye at Sage. "That's a little farfetched, don't you think?"

"No, not at all. Just hear me out. Wouldn't it be easier for him to blame you to justify, in his own mind, you're not worthy of

his love? Yes, you may be the opposite of what he's always wanted a woman to be, but his heart won't let him totally release you. His heart and mind are at war with each other."

"You've been reading too many romance novels," Connor said grinning. "It would make sense, except for the fact Charles was never in love with me the way I thought he was."

"That's the point."

"Okay, now you've lost me."

"He was in love with you, but he couldn't admit it to himself, let alone you, because it would go against everything he believed a woman should be. So he had to end the relationship before his feelings for you swept him away. Your strength scared him. In you, he'd met his match." Her eyes widened. "Connor, Charles is in love with you. Plain and simple. He tries to hide it, but I've seen the look in his eyes when he mentions your name. He may sound angry, but his eyes are filled with affection. I don't think he even realizes it."

"If what you're saying is true, then he's an even more complicated man than I thought."

"When you renewed your relationship with Tim McGill, it must've knocked the wind out of him. Not only did you find someone else, but someone you already have a history with, and who you originally left for Charles."

Connor let her breath out in a rush. "If he's feeling all these different emotions, as you seem to believe he is, then it does make sense in a twisted sort of way."

"Don't forget, he's got Lyla feeding him the ammunition. In any event, the truth is going to come out about Lyla Bevons, and when it does, I hope he realizes what he's lost and moves forward with his life."

"My wish for him is that someday he'll find someone who makes him as happy as Tim makes me."

“You’re so forgiving, Connor. Others in your situation might not be as generous.”

“Life’s too short. I want to live my life the way my father and mother always taught me. The Golden Rule. I believe what goes around comes around.”

Chapter 16

Sage shut down her computer, eager to get home. Debbie and Tony were coming over tonight, and if Clint wasn't working late, he was going to join them. Ryan now spent more time at her house than he did at his apartment, and Sage wouldn't have it any other way. They were finally back on solid ground and she wouldn't do anything to jeopardize their relationship. They'd grown stronger in the past few weeks and even though she hadn't told him the whole truth about her job, she would explain to him later why she'd been compelled to keep her secret...she couldn't betray Connor.

She grabbed her bag and walked to the door. As she placed her hand on the doorknob, she felt it already turning. She removed her hand and quickly stepped back as Charles burst into her office.

"Sage, I need you to work late tonight. I know this is short notice, but it's urgent we go over a couple of files."

"But I—"

"I'm sorry, Sage, but this has to be done tonight. I haven't asked you to work late since your mother was released from the hospital and I wouldn't now if this wasn't vital."

"Okay," she said flatly. "I'll meet you in your office in a few minutes."

"No. We'll be going out. Is there anyone you need to call?"

"I need to let my mother know."

"When you've finished, meet me in the lobby."

Ten minutes later, Sage joined him in the posh lobby. He smiled as he took her elbow and escorted her to his BMW. He set-

tled her into the passenger seat, then got into the driver's seat and started the engine.

He maneuvered the car down unfamiliar streets. She assumed he had another favorite expensive restaurant he was taking her to. He made small talk as he drove, then turned on the CD player. Her mind wandered as she listened to the classical music. She'd been looking forward to spending the night with Ryan and her friends. Ryan had been upset, but understanding, and did a poor job of hiding his disappointment from her. Heather was more outspoken with her displeasure, but promised to let Debbie and Tony know.

"Here we are," Charles announced, startling Sage.

The car was stopped in front of a tall, ornate wrought iron gate. He took a small device from his pocket and punched in some numbers. The gate swung open and he drove through. The gate clanged shut behind the car.

Sage craned her neck looking from one side of the two-lane driveway to the other, admiring the breathtaking view. It was paradise! Bright flowers bloomed in front of trees lining both sides of the long, slightly curved driveway, which ended in front of a small mansion. When she realized Charles had brought her to his own home, apprehension set in. She was on his turf and didn't know what, if anything, he might try. He hadn't done or said anything inappropriate in weeks to cause her worry, but still she had to keep her guard up.

Charles parked the car, hopped out and walked around to the passenger side. He gently took Sage's arm and led her to the entrance to his mansion. He opened the massive door and ushered her inside. The entrance hall was enormous, with a ceiling so high Sage became dizzy looking up at it. She felt like she'd just stepped into a palace as she followed Charles to the living room, her eyes taking in the elaborate furnishings in the rooms they passed.

He removed his jacket and threw it over the back of a chair. "Sit down and make yourself comfortable, Sage. Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you," she replied. She sat on one of the two black plush sofas and watched as he removed his tie, loosened his collar, then rolled up his sleeves before sitting down on the opposite sofa. A long, wide coffee table separated them. At the other end of the room, matching plush chairs were arranged in cozy groupings.

Charles pulled some files from his briefcase and laid them on the table.

Sage glanced around the rest of the room. It, too, was elaborately decorated and the walls were adorned with what she assumed were priceless paintings and other art. She wondered how many rooms were in the house.

Why would anyone want or need such a huge house? As gorgeous as it was, she'd never feel relaxed living in a house half the size of her street. For all of its magnificent beauty, it was cold, lacking a homey atmosphere. She shivered, then looked back toward Charles and found him staring intently at her.

"Are you chilly?" Before she could answer, he picked up a remote and aimed it at an enormous fireplace. Instantly, the fireplace was filled with bright, crackling logs. Her eyes widened.

"It's electric." He chuckled. "I get the effect of a relaxing fire without the mess. Now, shall we get down to business?"

She nodded. He picked a folder up and thumbed through it, then stood up, moved to the other side of the coffee table and handed it to her.

"Go ahead and read it," he urged. He seated himself next to her.

Sage opened the folder, aware of how close he was. She felt crowded. She caught the scent of his cologne and wished he'd go back to the other sofa, but he didn't budge. Instead, he stayed glued to her side as she tried to read. He shifted his weight and his

thigh touched hers, distracting her even further. When he still made no effort to give her some space, she unobtrusively inched over.

“What do you think?” he asked. “This further confirms my suspicions about Connor.”

Sage sighed heavily. “This is nothing more than what you’ve already told me. I don’t see that it proves anything. There’s nothing new here.” She tossed the folder on the coffee table. She clenched her teeth, angry she’d had to give up a night with her friends for Charles’ ridiculous, unfounded suspicions about Connor.

“What is it going to take to convince you?” he asked.

She bit her tongue, fighting the urge to tell him she knew it wasn’t Connor, but his precious Lyla. “This report says the same thing as the other—the only difference is the wording.”

“Okay, let’s take it apart piece by piece.”

His piercing eyes bore into hers. She looked away.

He placed a hand on her arm. “Has she said anything to you about the project she’s working on?”

“Of course not!” She stared at his hand, silently trying to will it away from her arm. As if he could read her mind, he removed his hand, but not before running it down her arm. He placed his hand on his knee.

“We may be here for a while,” he said. “Let me fix you a drink.”

“I don’t drink.”

“Of course. Would you like some coffee, juice or a soda?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

He glanced at his wristwatch. “I didn’t realize it was so late...you must be famished.”

“I can get something later. I’d just like to finish working so I can get home at a decent hour.”

“I promise not to keep you too late.” He stood up, rubbing his hands together. “Well, I’m starved! Let’s see what I can find in the kitchen.”

Sage reluctantly followed him. She’d keep her guard up, and if he made any more inappropriate moves, she was out of here.

His kitchen was equipped with every modern convenience and appliance available. She watched as he opened the stainless steel refrigerator door, pulled several items out and set them on the counter, then grabbed a large frying pan from a cabinet under the island. He peeled an onion and diced it, then added a few other ingredients to the frying pan.

The food smelled delicious, and Sage felt the rumble of hunger pains. “Can I help with anything?” she asked, feeling guilty for letting him do all the work.

“Everything’s under control,” he replied with a broad smile as he poured some whiskey into one glass and soda into another. He handed her the soda.

She sipped her drink as she watched him work.

“I hope you like pasta. This is one of my favorite recipes. My mother used to make this sauce when I was a kid. At the time, I didn’t know the reason it was meatless was because she couldn’t afford the meat to put into it.” He shrugged.

He finished his drink and refilled his glass. The more he drank, the more he talked.

Sage listened intently and every now and then offered a comment. Maybe he’d loosen up enough to listen to her concerns about Lyla.

He set the table, placed two heaping plates of spaghetti on it, then took a bottle of wine and set it next to his glass.

Sage stood as he held her chair for her. This didn’t feel right. She was in her boss’ kitchen and he was cooking dinner for her. He had dimmed the lights and now the candles he had earlier placed on the table glowed brightly. She remembered Connor’s warning

about how Charles tried to lure women into bed with his charm and charisma. He was charming and handsome, but Ryan was the only man she wanted.

She sat down and, with a trembling hand, picked up her fork. She twirled some spaghetti onto her fork, then tasted it. "This sauce is delicious," she said, hoping to break the awkward silence that had enveloped them. Charles stared intently at her.

"Thank you." He beamed, pouring himself a generous glass of wine. "Now let's get back to Connor. I have a gut feeling about her."

Sage kept silent as she ate.

"Don't be so trusting of everyone you meet, Sage. That was my downfall. I trusted her, and she betrayed me."

"There's nothing on her, but Lyla, on the other hand—"

He slammed his fist down on the table. The bottle of wine toppled over. "Dammit, Sage! Lyla is not the enemy! What is it going to take to get that through your head?"

Sage sat focused on the wine bottle from which the wine was slowly splattering onto the floor.

Charles grabbed the bottle, set it upright, then shoved his chair back, stood and rushed to Sage. "I'm sorry," he softly said, patting her back. "Let's not talk business."

Sage stiffened. "It's getting late." She pushed her chair back.

He removed his hand from her back. "You haven't finished your dinner."

"I'm...I'm not very hungry. I need to get home."

"Well, let's have dessert."

"No, thank you." She stood up. "I really need to be getting home."

"Please sit down, Sage," he said. "We need to talk. Please?"

She sat back down reluctantly. "Just for a minute."

"I have a weak spot where Lyla's concerned." He returned to his own chair, then poured what was left in the wine bottle into his

glass. He took a long swallow. "I look up to her as a mother image."

Sage saw the adoration he felt for Lyla etched on his face and knew nothing she said would ever change the way he felt about the woman. Only solid proof would convince him. And maybe even that wouldn't do it.

Charles abruptly stood again. "Let's relax in the living room." He walked over to Sage's chair, then took her arm.

She stood up and with Charles holding firmly to her elbow, let herself be lead back into the living room.

Charles motioned for her to sit, then proceeded to the bar. "Can I get you anything?"

"No," she answered warily, watching as he poured a generous amount of whiskey into a glass. When he finished fixing his drink, he sat down next to her.

Too close, Sage thought wondering if he'd ever get the hint she wasn't interested. Or did he really believe his money could buy anyone he wanted?

He carelessly flung an arm around her shoulder, giving it a little squeeze. Sage shifted and tried to move away from him, but his hand held to her shoulder.

"Please don't touch me." She pulled herself to her feet. "I need to go."

Charles laughed. "Don't be silly. I have a spare room. I have loads of spare rooms. Pick one. I'll awaken you early so you can go home and change for work. After all, we wouldn't want tongues to wag if you were seen showing up in the same clothes you wore today."

His speech was slurred and he was in no condition to take her home.

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

Charles jumped up and grabbed her arm, steadying himself. The closeness of him sickened her. She took a few steps back, but he refused to relinquish her arm.

"I like you, Sage," he whispered close to her ear. "I like spending time with you outside of work." He bent down, staring into her eyes, as his mouth moved close to hers.

She turned her head and the wet, sloppy kiss landed on her cheek. Without a word, she pulled her arm from his grasp, grabbed her things and ran to the heavy entrance door. She yanked it open and hurried outside. He called after her, but made no attempt to follow her.

Once outside, she leaned panting against the door for a few seconds, then retrieved her cell phone from her purse.

* * * *

Charles smiled smugly to himself. "Fucking bitch. I'll have you yet." He stood by the window and watched Sage make her way down the driveway. He staggered to the bar, grabbed a bottle of whiskey, then stumbled to the sofa.

* * * *

"It's strange just the two of us for dinner tonight," Loni said.

Heather nodded. "Dinner was delicious as usual."

Loni set her napkin down. "Thank you. I've noticed you haven't socialized much since you've moved in. I don't want you to think you have to stay here every night with me."

She laughed. "Believe me, I used to be out almost every night, but ever since I moved here, I've just been enjoying being a homebody."

"I don't mean to pry, honey, but you've seemed preoccupied all evening. Is something bothering you?"

"No. I was just thinking about Sage." She frowned. "For the past few weeks, she's really cut down on the overtime, so tonight seems unusual for her to be so late."

Loni nodded. "I'm worried about her, too. I hope she gets home soon. I've never heard of a company forcing such odd hours on an employee."

"Me either." She didn't tell Loni she was worried about Charles' inappropriate advances toward Sage. On the rare occasions Sage and she had found some time to chat, Sage hadn't mentioned any further problems with him, but she sensed something wasn't right. Sage was distracted and talked about her work in only vague terms. Heather wondered what was really going on with her.

Chapter 17

Lyla read slowly in a dull, nondescript voice. Sage stifled a yawn as she tried to keep her mind focused on the Bible lesson. Lyla finished the passage, then peered over the top of her glasses at Sage. "Did you understand that?"

"I think so." She drummed her fingers lightly on the table in the conference room, hoping the lesson would soon be over. Lyla's voice was getting on her nerves.

The older woman closed her Bible. "We'll continue tomorrow where we left off. If you have any questions, just jot them down." She stiffly pulled herself to her feet. "I'm going to go back to my desk and eat my lunch."

"Let me buy you lunch," Sage offered.

"I've told you I prefer bringing my lunch."

"Tomorrow, why don't we bring our lunches and eat while we're studying?"

She stood up. "That's not good for digestion. Now, if you'll excuse me." She picked up her Bible and folder and walked to the door.

"Lyla, wait! Can we talk for just a few minutes?"

Lyla turned on her heel. "Is there something you don't understand?"

"Yes, but it has nothing to do with the study lessons. What I don't understand is why you refuse my friendship."

Lyla's beady eyes swept over her. "I don't like you, Ms. Ralston. It's as simple as that."

* * * *

“Wow! That was a fantastic dinner, Mrs. Ralston,” Ryan said, setting down his fork.

“Thank you, Ryan, but I really wish you’d call me Loni,” she chided gently.

He grinned. “I’ll try to remember.”

Sage tenderly patted his arm. He’d gone out of his way to take care of the chores her father had done around the house. In her heart, he was the new man of the house, even though he didn’t reside there. She knew, when they married, he’d be the perfect husband.

His tousled hair hung loosely over a brow and he swept it from his face. He was in desperate need of a haircut. He placed his large, calloused hand over Sage’s and gave it a little squeeze, then looked at her with a contented smile. She knew he was as happy as she was. Once she left Boylston, life would be perfect.

She was still unnerved about what had happened last night. Charles had been business as usual today, almost making her wonder if she’d read more into it than had actually been there. No, he had tried to kiss her. She should have confronted him today, but then would he have even remembered after all he’d drunk?

“It’s so refreshing to have all this laughter and conversation around the dinner table,” Loni said in a choked voice. “All of you have brought so much joy into my life. Joy I never knew existed except in movies and books.”

Heather’s eyes misted. “I never had this growing up either. Very rarely did anyone in my family ever have the time for family dinners together, except for holidays. Every day was rush, rush, rush and dinner usually consisted of grabbing something quick and sitting in front of the TV.”

“I’m grateful for all you and Ryan have done for Sage and me, Heather, and I want you and Ryan to know I consider you two a part of this family.”

"Thank you." Heather sniffed. "I think I'm going to cry."

"Don't you dare," Sage teased. "This is a new beginning for all of us." Her voice grew serious. "No more tears in this home. We've had too much sadness and pain, and now we're going to have nothing but peace and laughter."

"I second that," Ryan agreed. "Now, as part of this family, it's time for me to mow the lawn."

"You must be exhausted after working all day, Ryan, and you already do so much around the house. I'll call one of the neighborhood boys," Loni said.

"No, I feel more energized than I have in a long time. Besides, I have to work off that meal," he said, patting his stomach. "I love doing yard work. It'll get me in shape for the big projects coming up. Next week we begin work on your new kitchen."

Loni swiped at the tears falling onto her cheeks. "I don't know what I ever did to deserve all of you," she sobbed.

Sage walked over to her mother and hugged her. "You deserve everything good, Mom. You always have."

She squeezed Sage's hand. "Thank you, honey."

Ryan cleared his throat. "Well, I'm going to get started on the lawn."

Sage saw the emotion on his face that he was trying to conceal. "If you're going to mow the lawn, then I'm going to do the dishes."

"Let me help," Heather offered, wiping tears from her cheeks.

"No, you and Mom made dinner, so the dishes are my responsibility."

"All I did was hand her things and she put it all together."

"Without your help, Heather, we wouldn't have had any dinner. Until I gain a little more strength in my arm I don't know how I'd have lifted those heavy pots and pans either."

"Thank you, Loni." She smiled. "How about I give you that new hairstyle and makeover we were talking about while we were fixing dinner? After all, tomorrow is a special day."

“What’s going on tomorrow? It’s nothing to do with the divorce, is it?” Sage asked uneasily.

“No, honey,” Loni assured her. “The divorce is going to happen, whether your father wants it to or not. He can’t stop it. After his last outburst in jail, he’s been sent back for further psychiatric evaluation. I don’t think he’s going to be out for a long time, and by the time he is, I’ll have gone on with my life.” She frowned. “From what I’ve been told, though, he’s gone almost completely over the edge and most likely will be spending a very long time in the psychiatric hospital.”

“Are you all right with everything, Mom? I mean, he was your husband.”

Loni took a deep breath. “I feel like I’ve been let out of a cage.” She gently touched Sage’s hair. “I’ve never felt better. I’m optimistic about my future, thanks to all of you.”

“Good,” Sage replied. “Then what’s happening tomorrow?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Loni answered, with a sly glance at Heather. “I promise.”

“I can’t wait to hear what you two are scheming.” She scrutinized her mother. “So, you’re going to let Heather give you a makeover?” She was pleased. “She’s the best,” she said, fluffing her own hair. “She’ll make you feel like a brand new woman.”

Ryan had been leaning against the doorjamb, listening to the conversation. “I definitely have to agree with that. I was blown away when I saw Sage’s new look. You should open a shop, Heather,” he said enthusiastically.

“You’re making me blush,” Heather said. “Besides, Debbie did most of it. Not that Sage needed any help with those perfect high cheekbones and beautiful green eyes.”

“Well, whatever you did, I like it,” Ryan said. “You girls get on with your makeover stuff while I cut the grass.”

“It’ll be exciting to have a new look, instead of this frumpy one I’ve been living with for most of my life,” Loni replied.

“Go for it, Mom.”

Later, Sage walked into the living room and stood at the edge of the room watching her mother giggle like a school girl, while Heather held a mirror in front of her face. Loni had never looked so relaxed or at peace. The tension was gone from her face, along with the dark circles and puffy bags that had always been prevalent under her once hollow and lifeless eyes. Now those clear blue eyes shone brightly, making Loni appear much younger than her years. The frumpy woman was gone and in her place was a beautiful, vibrant one.

Sage slowly walked to where her mother was sitting in a straight-backed chair. “I’m in awe! You’re stunning, Mom. Heather, you’ve done a fantastic job.”

Heather blushed proudly. “Thank you, but the beauty was already there, only hidden. I think I matched the perfect makeup, to bring out the color of her eyes and accent her delicate features, without being too overpowering. Her hair only needed a trim and style.”

“I can’t believe this is my mother,” she squealed. “You’re gorgeous, Mom.”

“She’s ready to take on the world,” Heather announced. “Watch out, world!”

“Stand up, Mom, and let us get the whole effect.” Sage nodded approvingly as a warm glow radiated from her mother’s face.

Loni stood, walked shyly across the room, then turned on her heel, retraced her steps, and stopped in front of Sage. “I feel so alive!”

With tear-filled eyes, Sage embraced her. “Mom, I can’t believe this is really you. You’re beautiful! Now please tell me what’s going on tomorrow.”

Loni’s lips trembled as she held Sage close to her. “I’m ready to look for a job. Tomorrow’s the day.”

"I managed to get her an interview at Olman's," Heather said. "Ruby turned in her resignation."

Sage eyed her warily. "Now you and Debbie didn't have anything to do with that, did you?"

"Of course not," Heather said with a mock look of shock on her face. "But we aren't terribly disappointed either." She laughed.

Sage laughed, too. "I'm sure Mr. Olman was disappointed, since she hadn't been there that long and was probably just learning the ropes."

"I think he's as relieved as we are. She preached to him every day, but he was too polite to admonish her, even though he complained to us. So I don't think he'll be mourning her leaving. But Debbie and I didn't chase her away. She told us several times how much she missed her son since he was transferred to Florida. Her son and his wife are expecting, and she's going to live with them and take care of her grandchild after it's born so her daughter-in-law can continue working."

"From what you've told me, I sort of feel sorry for the daughter-in-law. But since you and Debbie had nothing to do with her leaving, I'll let you off the hook." She turned her attention back to her mother. "You must be so excited, Mom."

"I am, but I'm worried. I don't know anything about office work," she replied, her nervousness showing in her tone of voice. "All I know is how to cook and take care of a home."

"Not to worry. Debbie and I are going to train you, and evenings we can work together on the laptop. In no time at all, you'll be able to run the office single-handed," Heather assured her. "Until you're stronger, though, you won't be doing anything too strenuous, mostly answering the phone."

"That's if Mr. Olman hires me. He may want someone experienced, and I wouldn't blame him."

"He'll want you," Heather replied confidently. "He's a good guy, and he knows what you've been through." Her face reddened.

"I wasn't gossiping about you or anything, but he often asks about Sage. He's always talking about Sage's abilities and devotion to her work. You're her mother, so I'm sure he sees she wouldn't have those qualities if it weren't for you."

"Thank you for everything, Heather. I do appreciate it and I know you well enough to know you wouldn't gossip about me." She smiled warmly.

Sage grinned. "Well, I'll be. Mr. Olman seldom gave me a compliment to my face, as far as my work was concerned, when I worked for him. I'm glad he thought that highly of me."

"You know how he is. Gruff on the outside, but a teddy bear on the inside. It's just another one of his lovable quirks," Heather said.

"I remember some of those quirks. He's going to love you, Mom. He really is a good guy and won't expect you to learn everything right away. So don't worry."

Loni nodded. "I hope so. Anyway, I'll find out soon enough. I didn't know how nerve-wracking looking for a job is."

"Is that you, Loni?" Ryan walked into the living room. He gave a long, low whistle. "You look fantastic!"

"Heather's been helping me to prepare for my job interview tomorrow morning."

"And tomorrow night we're planning a big celebration in honor of her job," Heather informed him.

"Good luck on the interview. I'll definitely be here to celebrate."

"Thank you, Ryan. Sage, I hope you'll be home at a decent hour tomorrow night, just in case there's something to celebrate."

"You can count on it, Mom." Sage assured her.

* * * *

The following day Sage kept her distance from Lyla, except for their Bible study lesson, but the woman was not far from her thoughts. Who was feeding her the information she was transfer-

ring anonymously to Charles to frame Connor? If there was no one else involved, then how was Lyla getting the information? Sooner or later, the pieces of the puzzle had to fit. What was she missing? She was close, but not close enough, and it frustrated her.

Charles was growing impatient with her. He didn't come right out and say so, but hinted she wasn't pressuring Connor enough. If only she could convince him his loyalty to Lyla was misplaced. This morning she'd found a memo on her desk alerting her that he was going to be out of the office all day. She was relieved. After the encounter at his house, she was determined to keep any meetings strictly in public places. If he made any further unwarranted advances, she'd decided she'd file a sexual harassment charge.

She sighed heavily. She couldn't wait until this was over so she could hand in her resignation and get on with her life. Her thoughts turned to her mother. She wondered how she was doing with the interview. She waited anxiously for her cell phone to ring giving her some news one way or the other, but it remained silent. She'd at last entered the modern world and purchased the phone a couple of weeks ago. The phone gave her the assurance that, in case Lyla had somehow tapped the phone lines in her office, Lyla wouldn't be privy to her private conversations.

At five o'clock, she shut down her computer and left the office. She arrived home to find Ryan hanging streamers.

"Hi, babe," he said enthusiastically. "Hand me that balloon, will you?"

"Sure." She handed him the large, multicolored balloon. "I was hoping I'd get a call letting me know whether Mom got the job or not." She grinned. "I take it she did." She watched while he attached it, then climbed down from the ladder.

He flashed her a bright smile. "Yeah, it's great, isn't it? Heather called a couple of hours ago. It was slow at the station, so Billy said he'd cover for me. I picked up Heather's key and we decided I'd get the decorating done, and Debbie and Heather would keep

your Mom occupied. She thinks we're just having dinner and doesn't know we've turned it into a full-blown party. We were going to call you, but figured you wouldn't be able to get off early to help and if you did, we didn't want to risk that you'd have to go back later to make up the time," he explained.

"I'm not going back to work tonight." She looked around the brightly decorated room. "You've done a beautiful job, Ryan. Where was Mom all day anyway? I thought the interview was this morning."

"Mr. Olman was so impressed with her he hired her on the spot. She's been working all day."

"Great! I'm so proud of her. What can I do to help?"

"I've got everything just about ready." He put his arms around her, drew her close, then kissed her. "This is nice," he whispered against her hair.

"Yes. This is the way it's supposed to be."

He kissed her again, then said, "If I have anything to say about it, it'll always be like this."

* * * *

Tears streamed down Loni's cheeks. "Thank you all so much for this party."

"You deserve it, Mom." Sage grabbed her mother's hand.

"I'm so relieved you're not going back to work tonight, Sage."

"Me, too. And soon I promise I'll be here every night."

"We miss you around here."

"I miss being here, but the workload is winding down. Right now, though, I want you to enjoy your party and not think of anything else."

"I am, Sage. It looks like Heather is, too."

Sage followed the direction her mother was looking. "Clint is a nice guy. Who knows? Maybe he and Heather will hit it off."

"I hope so. She deserves a nice man. She's such a sweet girl."

"They don't come any nicer than Clint... with the exception of Ryan."

"I couldn't have picked a better man for you myself."

"I know, Mom." She hugged her. "Now it's time to cut the cake."

Later, Ryan and Sage took down the decorations. Loni had, happily exhausted, gone to bed.

"It's too bad Tony and Debbie had to leave so early," Sage said. "Where *did* Heather and Clint go?"

Ryan grinned. "He's really interested in her."

"She said the same about him."

"Looks like a match then."

"I thought you didn't like playing matchmaker," Sage teased.

Ryan stuffed the last of the decorations into a garbage bag. "Usually I don't, but if someone hadn't intervened, those two would never have gotten together."

She playfully poked him in his ribs. "You old softy. So where did Heather and Clint go?"

"Clint said he was going to take her to the Coffee Hut."

"Heather must be on cloud nine." She sank onto the sofa. "All done. Would you like a soda or beer?"

"No, thanks." He sat next to her. "It's nice to have you for an entire night." He kissed her tenderly.

Sage felt the thudding of his heart and ran her hands across his firm back. "I want you to make love to me, Ryan," she whispered hoarsely.

He tensed. "Honey, we've been through this before." He peered into her eyes. "It almost destroyed us."

"It's different now, Ryan," she replied. "We're not the same. At least I'm not."

"You know I don't mind waiting."

She stood up, then took his hand. "You've waited long enough."

He looked questioningly at her as he got to his feet. "Sage, are you really sure?" he asked softly.

She nodded as she led him up the stairs and into her bedroom.

Once behind the locked door, he sat on the edge of the bed, his eyes glued on her as she slowly removed her clothes. She stood naked in front of him. He sucked in his breath as he stared at her.

Sage blushed self-consciously, wondering why Ryan was just sitting there instead of tearing off his own clothes and taking her. "Ryan," she whispered quietly, "are you disappointed?"

"No. My God, you're beautiful! I knew you would be, but you're even more beautiful than I imagined." He stood up and pulled her into his arms, caressing her with trembling hands as his lips hungrily sought hers.

A tremor tore through her when his hands cupped her breasts. She moved her hands under his shirt, digging her fingers into his muscular back.

He broke the kiss and pulled his shirt over his head, then removed the rest of his clothing.

Sage watched him take a condom from his wallet and slip it on.

He again pulled her naked body close to his own, pressing her so close to him she could feel his erection as his hands gripped her ass. She timidly reached for his erection, feeling the pulsating hardness of it. He shuddered as she stroked it, then he inserted a finger inside her. Her pussy clamped around it with a want she didn't understand. All she knew was she never wanted the feelings he was triggering to stop. He pushed his finger deep into her, and she found herself moving rhythmically as his finger slid in and out of her. Her juices flowed freely.

"That feels good," she murmured, her breath coming in small pants.

He removed his finger and scooped her into his arms, then laid her on the bed. She arched her back, waiting for him to enter her,

but instead he got to his knees, then spread her legs wide. When his tongue touched her clit, she clenched her teeth tightly together to avoid screaming out with desire. She climaxed quickly.

Ryan's fingers traveled to her pubic hair as he stretched out next to her. "Are you okay?" he whispered.

She smiled contentedly. "I never dreamed I could feel so good."

"I love you, Sage."

"I love you, too." She ran her hands over his chest, then down to his throbbing cock.

He moaned as he moved his mouth to her breasts, sucking one, then the other.

Sage was on fire again. She needed to feel him inside of her. She gently urged him to his back, then rolled onto him and eased herself down against his throbbing cock, teasing her clit with the tip of it.

Ryan laid still as Sage pushed him inside her, then moved up and down. He placed his hands on her hips, making sure he didn't hurt her, as she rode him.

His breathing became heavier, and Sage watched the changing expressions, then felt him erupt inside of her.

Later, they lay side by side as he ran his fingers through her tangled, damp hair. "I didn't hurt you, did I?" he whispered.

She smiled. "No...it was perfect."

He exhaled slowly. "No regrets for not waiting until our wedding night?"

"My only regret is not making love to you before this." She laid her head contentedly on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

Chapter 18

Sage busied herself in the church kitchen, offering her assistance wherever it was needed. She made small talk with several of the women until most of them drifted into the make-shift dining room. She stayed behind in the kitchen with two elderly women who appeared to be as good of friends outside of church as they were in. The two friends were as different as day and night. One was short and heavy, dressed plainly, with short-cropped, bluish white hair. She wore no jewelry or makeup, but her joy and friendliness was etched into her pleasant, round face. The other was tall, slim and with perfectly coiffed snow-white hair. She was dressed in a stylish skirt and jacket with beautiful gold earrings, which matched her necklace. Her fingernails were manicured and her makeup perfect.

When all the dishes were warmed and set up on two long tables in the outer room, Sage relaxed and took a seat with the two women at the kitchen counter. "Where's Lyla Bevons tonight?" she asked. "I haven't seen her. I hope she and her mother were able to attend."

"She's here," the plump woman who introduced herself as Ava Smithson replied. "Mona Bevons would never miss a free meal."

"You're terrible, Ava. Remember where you are," her companion Sybil Gardner admonished, then laughed. "We don't want Sage here to think we're nothing but a bunch of old gossips."

Ava chuckled. "I'm sure Sage knows we're not as pious as we may like to think we are. Of course, you're bound to meet some

here who'll disagree with that. I'm too old to pretend I don't enjoy a good gabfest now and then. If that's all I'm guilty of, then I'm not too worried about the hereafter."

Sybil shifted in her chair. "That's what I like about you, Ava. You tell it like it is." She smiled warmly at Sage. "We're not really as bad as Ava would lead you to believe, but I must admit that the Bevons women have a way of bringing out the worse in us."

Ava sighed. "That's right. I've known Mona Bevons for most of my life, and she's about as wacky as the day is long. And Lyla," she said distastefully, rolling her large brown eyes, "what a waste of a life. It's a wonder Will Bevons kept his sanity living with those two, may he rest in peace."

Sage sat listening intently. "Is there something unusual about Lyla and her mother?" she asked, masking the enthusiasm in her voice.

"I could write a book about those two," Ava said seriously. "Mona was always a strange woman from as far back as I can remember. She believed she was better than everyone else, and the truth is, she had no basis for her beliefs. She was pompous and still is. She'd walk around with that nose of hers stuck way up in the air, strutting around and never cracking a smile for anyone. She is a humorless woman. She was too good for this town in her estimation and on the rare occasion she did speak, she let it be known. She talked of leaving and the positions she'd been offered in faraway cities, but she never did leave. The truth was no one had offered her anything."

"Until she married Mr. Bevons?" Sage asked.

"Heavens, no! She didn't marry Will until years and years later. Poor Will. He was a vibrant, friendly, humorous, fun-loving man until Mona got her claws in him. She beat him down until he barely had an identity of his own. Talk about a hen-pecked man—that was Will Bevons. His lifelong friendships were destroyed. Any

time Mona saw him chatting and getting too chummy with the men in church, she soon squashed it.”

“What was her reason?” Sage asked. “You’d think she’d have been proud he was so well-liked. Wouldn’t that have given her the perfect opportunity to make friends?”

“Not when it left her on the outside,” Ava went on. “Mona had never been popular with anyone, and I suppose she felt threatened by Will’s popularity. People weren’t going to welcome her with open arms after she’d snubbed everyone for years. Maybe she thought Will would see that he’d made a mistake and end the marriage. Who knows?” She shrugged.

“When Lyla came along, she was the light in her father’s eyes. And it made Mona secure. Now she’d never have to worry about Will leaving. He’d never abandon his child. Everyone thought Mona would bend a little and, with a child, her rough edges would be softened and she’d want to share her joy with the world. As far as we were concerned, a baby definitely changed everything. Everyone was friendlier to her and willing to let bygones be bygones.

“We all tried to get close to her, but she’d have no part of us and refused to let anyone touch or come near her child. It wasn’t normal, but we backed off and it wasn’t long before Mona dug her clutches into that poor, innocent child, molding her into the same sick, twisted woman she herself was.”

“It’s even worse,” Sybil chimed in, narrowing her deep blue eyes. “Mona had and still does have a vicious jealous streak in her. She used to accuse Will of having an affair with anyone he even acknowledged. It didn’t matter to her if it was a man or woman. Mona’s moods were unstable and she lashed out at anyone who came to Will’s defense. Eventually, for his sake, and not because we wanted to, we stopped chatting with him.”

“That poor man! Why did he stay with someone who treated him like that?” Sage looked intently at Sybil.

Sybil toyed with the edge of the counter. "Will was a very religious man and took his marriage vows seriously, as everyone should. He believed once those vows were made, it was until death." She sighed. "The pastor talked privately with him on several occasions I know of." She flashed a sheepish smile. "It came down through the church grapevine. Anyway, he explained to Will there were circumstances that would make divorce acceptable and he would hold Will, as would the church, in the same high esteem if he opted out of his marriage.

"But Will wouldn't hear of it. We knew it was because of Ly-la. He'd stay with Mona for better or worse, but it looked like all he was getting was the worse. He'd married Mona late in life, and he was much older than she was. Before Mona, he'd been happily married for twenty years to a kind, sweet woman. Everyone loved Jane. She and Will were a perfect match and were the type of couple others modeled themselves after. The only sadness in their union was Jane was barren."

"What a shame," Sage said.

"They were so much in love with one another it showed in their faces when you saw them together. They were a very sociable couple and were the life of every party. It was a shame they weren't blessed with a child of their own since they had so much love to give. She and Will, though, became foster parents for years. When Jane was diagnosed with cancer and succumbed to it less than a year later, Will was devastated. In fact, everyone who knew Jane was. We all tried to help Will through his loss, but he was inconsolable. Jane had been his best friend and when she died a piece of him died with her.

"People poured into the funeral home to say their goodbyes and all of their former foster children came. They'd stayed in touch long after they'd grown and begun families of their own. They stood by Will after Jane's death, until he became involved with Mona. She chased them out of his life, too."

“What a beautiful love story,” Sage quietly said.

“Yes, it was. Will poured himself into his work and the church, but the haunting emptiness never left his eyes.” She shook her head. “Little did we know he’d begun keeping company with Mona about two years after Jane’s death. We knew they worked together on several church committees, but no one would’ve dreamed Will would take a romantic interest in Mona. As we’ve said, she’d never been friendly with anyone and never kept company, to anyone’s knowledge, with any man. She still lived at home with her aging parents. Besides, she was the kind of woman men didn’t give a second glance. We assumed she’d end up a spinster.”

Ava vigorously nodded her head. “You can imagine our shock when they were married six months later. I’m convinced his loneliness turned him into a desperate man. Will had whisked her away one weekend and when they returned, they were man and wife. I was surprised they hadn’t married in the church they’d both attended all their lives, but we figured Will didn’t want to marry Mona in the same church he’d married his beloved Jane,” she said emphatically.

“That’s so sad,” Sage replied. “I didn’t even know him and I pity him.”

Sybil continued, “After the marriage, she kept everyone at the distance she always had. He appeased his new, but homely, middle-aged bride,” she sarcastically emphasized the last part.

A thousand questions went through Sage’s mind, but before she could speak, Ava continued the thread. “The only time anyone saw a spark of life in Will was when he talked about the impending birth of his child. After Lyla’s birth, he was the happiest man who walked this earth...for a little while anyway.”

“How can anyone be so cold and heartless?” Sage whispered. “How long has it been since Mr. Bevons died?”

“Almost twenty years now,” Sybil answered. “Shortly after his death, Mona had a stroke, which partially paralyzed her, putting

her in the wheelchair. Lyla has devoted her life to taking care of her mother.”

“Didn’t Lyla have any boyfriends?”

Sybil grinned. “Look at her, honey. Have you ever seen a homelier woman? Of course Mona convinced Lyla she was a raving beauty and to hold out for the right man. The right man would give her security and comfort. But not only did the right man never come along, the wrong men didn’t want her either.”

Sage chuckled in spite of herself. “She’s not an outgoing person. I’ve tried to befriend her on several occasions, but she pushes me away.”

“She shuns everyone,” Sybil said. “She’s content to live in her own little world with fantasies of her own self-importance. Look.” She pointed to the other room where the parishioners and guests were eating and mingling...all except for Mona and Lyla, who were sitting with their backs to everyone. “After they’ve had their fill, they’ll leave. They only speak if forced to and then usually only to brag or put another down. Every Tuesday, Lyla shows up for choir practice, but doesn’t mingle before or after.”

Sage watched the two women huddled together in their own private world, or was it their private hell, she thought. “What’s going to happen to Lyla when her mother dies? Her mother must be in her eighties.”

“She’s eight-nine next birthday. Same as us.” Sybil nodded toward Ava.

Sage’s jaw dropped. “I don’t believe it! I thought you two couldn’t be more than sixty-five.”

“Thank you, sweetie.” Sybil chuckled.

“Lyla will never survive in this world all alone. Her mother has been her life. Lyla is antisocial and, I’m afraid, a few cards short of a deck.” Ava’s eyes clouded. “When Lyla was younger, she used to tell us fantastic stories about her many beaux, but everyone knew they only existed in her imagination, just as Mona’s job offers

had. Occasionally she'll still, in a round about way, drop hints to Pastor Harris about why she was late to a meeting or choir practice. According to Lyla, her employer has taken an interest in her and she's suggested that wedding bells may be ringing before the year ends. She works with you, Sage. Is there any truth in what she's saying? Is she sociable at work?"

"She stays in her own little world at work, too," Sage said with a laugh. "I can't believe she'd make up such a preposterous story about our boss. There's not one shred of truth in it."

"I didn't think so." Ava pushed back her chair and gripped the edge of the counter to pull her plump body to her feet. "We'd better get out there or there won't be any food left for us."

Sybil rose. "Thank you for helping out tonight. I hope you won't think badly of us, Sage."

"I don't. I enjoyed talking with you two and getting to know you both better." She smiled.

"Let's eat. I'm starved," Ava said as Sybil grabbed Sage's arm. "We'll fill you in on some of the other Godly worshippers, but none will be as intriguing as Mona and Lyla, I'm afraid."

Sage let the women lead her to the food-laden tables. She could barely concentrate on what they were saying. She couldn't wait to tell Connor what she'd learned about Lyla and her mother.

Chapter 19

“We need to tell Charles what we’ve got,” Sage announced excitedly. “He’s got to believe us now. He’d be a fool not to!” She sat on the edge of Connor’s sofa, eagerly awaiting Connor’s response.

Connor shook her head. “No. Let’s hold off for just a little longer. Two of his ex-lovers, have agreed to come forward and tell Charles how Lyla threatened them and twisted the facts so Charles would fire them.” She narrowed her eyes. “I still don’t think it’s enough to convince him, though.” She wrung her hands. “We’ve got to find out how Lyla is getting into the research lab or who is feeding the information to her and why. To get in, she’d need a special identification card and have to know the security code. There are only three of us who have those cards and we’re the only ones able to enter the secured area. The others work in the main part of the lab.”

“Is there anyone in the lab who’s acting suspicious?”

“No. I doubt anyone in the lab is giving Lyla information.”

Sage scratched her head. “Well, besides you, who else has the authority to enter the lab?”

“Karl Woods and Charles.”

“What about Karl? He might have another agenda. Maybe you should keep an eye on him.”

Connor laughed. “No. Karl is about as honest as the day is long. I trust him with my life. He’s definitely one of those good guys so rare in today’s world. He goes to work everyday and gives

his best, then goes home every night to spend time with his wife and kids. He dotes on them. He'd never jeopardize what he has by taking a bribe. In fact, if he was approached, he'd be the first one to report it."

"Is there anyway someone could get their hands on one of the security cards and make a copy?" Sage knew she was grasping at straws. "Someone's giving Lyla the information."

"It's impossible to copy them. Besides, one would still have to know the code. Mine is ingrained in my memory. I don't have it written down."

"Someone must have it written down somewhere."

"Not that I know of. We all have different codes. It was decided at the beginning of the project to issue different codes in the event something like this were to happen."

Sage walked the length of Connor's living room, then turned with glowing eyes as she snapped her fingers. "Charles! Where does he keep his card?"

"I suppose he keeps it locked in his office safe."

"Where does he keep the key to his safe?"

"I don't know. Maybe he keeps it locked in one of the desk drawers in his office. When we were together he used to keep it with him at all times, but he worried about what would happen if his key chain was ever lost."

"Why didn't he lock it up at home?"

"He worried about break-ins." She frowned. "The safest place would be in his office with all the security in the building." She raised an eyebrow. "Where are you going with this?"

"Who has complete access to his office?" Sage felt like she would burst. "Lyla!"

Connor broke into a wide grin that illuminated her face. "My God, it was in front of us the whole time and we never saw it."

Sage laughed. "That's because it was too obvious. Who looks for the obvious?" She jumped up and impulsively threw her arms around Connor's neck. "We're going to bring Lyla down!"

Connor hugged her back. "Now for the plan. How do we catch Lyla at her own game and turn the tables on her?"

"Easy," Sage replied. "We'll stake out the company."

"Good...good, I like it. No one will think it unusual if you or I come back at night."

"They may if we're seen entering the building at night together. A better idea may be to just stay and not leave," Sage said slyly.

"I'm loving it." Connor grinned. "I'm going to have to think of something to tell Tim to explain my absence. He's already complaining about our lack of time together."

"I know," Sage agreed. "I'm going to have to come up with a good one for Ryan and my mother, too. They think it's odd I work on Sundays, but I can't tell them I'm going to church or they'd wonder why I don't invite them to join me. It has been difficult keeping these erratic hours without telling them what's really going on. I don't like lying."

"I've got an idea. Why don't you tell Ryan and your mother you've got a business meeting out of town? I'll tell Tim the same thing."

"I don't know why I didn't think of that."

"It was too obvious," Connor said with a smile. "I've been meaning to ask you, how's your mother?"

"She's doing better than I expected. She's found a job...actually, it's my former job, and she's making new friends. I've never seen her happier. She's come a long way after the hell my father put her through."

"Good. You must be relieved."

"I am." She smiled. "How's your mother, Connor?"

“Not good, I’m afraid.” She bit her bottom lip. “The doctors don’t give her much hope. I wanted her to see me married and settled down, but I doubt that’ll happen before she passes.”

“I’m so sorry, Connor. If there’s anything I can do, please let me know.”

“Thank you,” Connor said in a wobbly voice, “but short of a miracle, there’s nothing that can be done.”

Chapter 20

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” Ryan asked with his paintbrush poised. “I love having you around, but it seems like every weekend you have somewhere you have to be for your boss.”

Sage smiled broadly at him. His curly, dirty blonde hair was speckled with paint matching the paint streaks on his coveralls. Without his endless hours of work on the kitchen, she knew the project would have been financially impossible. Ryan’s energy was boundless. He worked long, hard hours at the gas station, then hurried over here to spend even more hours working. Her heart swelled with love and admiration for him. “Nope. I told you I’m free for the entire weekend. I am yours.” She shot him a sly wink. She couldn’t wait to get him alone. She loved laying in his strong arms after making love.

“Well, in that case, let’s get this paint party rolling!” Debbie exclaimed. She turned up the stereo, swaying her lithe body to the beat as she bent and dipped her brush in the paint can.

Sage was grateful Debbie and Heather had insisted on helping out also. Not only did it give her time to spend with her friends, but it also seemed to have changed Debbie. Debbie didn’t head out to the clubs every night like she used to, but instead came to the house to hang out, seeming to enjoy the quieter atmosphere. She’d come over whether Sage or Heather was at home or not. She still dated Tony, but had confided to Sage she’d cooled it because Tony seemed more interested in partying than in planning a future with

her. And a future with one man was what Debbie wanted. And Sage knew her friend hoped that man would be Tony.

Loni poured some paint into a tray. "I can't believe this is the same kitchen. It's so spacious, and I love the new cupboards," she marveled, running a hand over the surface.

"You haven't seen anything yet. Wait until the new appliances are installed tomorrow," Sage stated. "They're top of the line. This kitchen is going to have everything any chef could want and, Mom, that category fits you to a tee."

"I've got to admit," Ryan said, "the remodeling certainly went smoother than I expected. Usually there are annoying things that come up, but not in this house. This house is well built. The head of the remodeling crew said he wished all of his jobs went this smoothly."

Sage nodded. "Their price is right, too, thanks to the work all of you are doing. I never dreamed, though, that a group of carpenters could come into this kitchen and within a few days transform it so beautifully. I'm going to call them when we're ready for the other rooms to be done."

"I told you they were the best. Billy swears by them," Ryan said. He glanced at his wristwatch. "It should only take us two or three hours to finish the painting if we get right to it."

Sage grinned. "Okay, slave driver. Let me help you with that bucket, Mom." She saw a tear slide from her mother's eye. "What's the matter, Mom? Are you okay?"

Loni wiped her eyes on her paint smock. "I'm fine. These are tears of happiness. You kids are something else, and I don't know what I'd do without any of you. You've brought so much life to this old house. I never knew life could be so wonderful, and I've never felt so alive and excited about life."

Debbie walked over to her and touched her shoulder. "I don't know how we got along before we met you, Loni. You're like a

second mother,” she said softly. “I’m just sorry I didn’t meet you sooner.”

“Thank you.” Loni gave Debbie’s hand a quick squeeze. “If circumstances had been different—”

“I know,” Debbie gently interrupted. “Did you tell Sage about the compliments you’ve been getting from Mr. Olman?”

“No, I haven’t,” she replied, as her cheeks reddened slightly. “But he compliments everyone.”

“Oh, yeah? Since when? Mr. Olman doesn’t freely give compliments,” Sage said, looking curiously at her mother. “He didn’t when I worked for him.”

“Well, he does to Loni,” Heather piped in. “If you were home more often, I’d be able to fill you in on all the goings on down at the office.” She winked at Loni.

“It won’t be too much longer before my assignment is completed and then I’ll have regular hours and be able to be home at a decent hour every evening. It looks like there’s a lot I have to catch up on. Right, Mom?”

“Oh, stop,” Loni said, a laugh in her voice.

“Heather says you have to go out of town. How long will you be away on your business trip?” Debbie asked.

She shrugged, hating lying. “One night...two at the most, I think.” She quickly turned the topic back to her mother. “Is there something going on between you and Mr. Olman?” she teased. “I’d like to be prepared just in case.”

Loni’s face turned crimson. “Of course not. Don’t be silly. Jack’s just been very kind to me while I learn the operation of the office. He’s given me a few compliments on my progress, that’s all.”

“I see,” Sage said, nodding her head. “There’s nothing more?” She glanced at Debbie and Heather.

Debbie laughed. "He has been taking more care with the way he dresses. He's also wearing new cologne. You can smell him coming from a mile away."

Heather giggled. "He gets this funny look on his face and sometimes even becomes tongue-tied when he talks to Loni."

"Yeah, you know the look." Debbie screwed up her face in an imitation of her employer.

"I do believe he has a crush."

They all laughed as Loni's face flushed an even deeper shade of red. "Oh, stop. He doesn't."

"Sage, you should see him and you'd know what we're talking about. He is definitely not the same Mr. Olman you remember," Heather said with a smile, then turned and looked at Loni. "What do you really think of him, Loni?"

"Well...I," she stammered. "I think he's kind, generous and a wonderful employer."

"What about his looks?" Sage persisted. "Do you think he's good-looking?"

"He's nice enough looking, I suppose." She picked up a paint roller. "We'd better get back to the painting."

"Would you go out with him if he asked you?"

"Oh, Sage." She sucked in her breath. "If he asked me, I may not say no. I enjoy talking with him. He's a very interesting man."

"See, what did I tell you?" Debbie said.

Sage saw the sparkle in her mother's eyes. "Good for you, Mom." She grinned. "Mr. Olman. Who'd have figured?"

Heather scratched her head. "Not me, that's for sure. I guess he was just waiting for the right woman to come along, and it looks like she has."

"Oh, you girls are too much," Loni said.

Debbie giggled. "Okay, we'll quit teasing you...well, for now. Hey, Sage, you never did tell me much about your job."

"She doesn't tell anyone," Heather jumped in. "I think she's working for the FBI or CIA or something. Everything is top secret."

Sage laughed. "Believe me, it's not glamorous and that's why I don't say much."

"Well, there must be something world-shattering going on for you to be working so hard with all those crazy hours," Ryan said.

"Actually, it's very boring and time consuming," she replied evasively.

"Well, I think working for one of the biggest companies in Buffalo is thrilling," Debbie said.

"I'd much rather have some free time. I want to have every weekend off to spend time with you guys."

"You don't get enough sleep or eat properly, Sage, and I don't like you being out so late at night." Loni's voice was worried.

"I know, Mom, and as soon as this assignment is finished, things will be changing. It won't be much longer, I promise."

"I certainly won't complain," Ryan said. "I miss having you around." He kissed her cheek. "Well, we'd better get back to work. Loni's promised us a feast tomorrow night, and I, for one, can't wait."

"Remember to invite Tony and Clint," Loni said.

Heather blushed. "Clint's already accepted."

"Tony, too," Debbie added.

"Good. We'll have a party. You'll be here won't you, Sage?"

"I'll try, Mom." Sage knew she wouldn't be home, but she didn't want to spoil the mood.

Chapter 21

“What if Lyla doesn’t show up tonight?” Sage whispered.

“Then we’ll just have to come back night after night until she does,” Connor whispered back.

“We’ll do whatever it takes to put an end to this.”

“Is the micro recorder set?”

“It’s ready to go.”

“Good.” Sage took a deep breath, then fell silent as she and Connor waited in the shadows of Charles’ outer office. Her legs cramped and she was about to stand up and stretch them when she heard the door slowly open.

Both women shrank even further back into the shadows. Someone stepped inside and quickly closed the outer door. Sage strained her eyes, trying to make out the mysterious intruder, but all she could determine was the indistinguishable figure was too tall and broad to be Lyla.

She fearfully grabbed Connor’s arm as the intruder slipped into Charles’ office. “What should we do?” She barely breathed the words.

“We’ll wait until whoever it is comes out and then follow him or her. It can’t be Lyla,” Connor replied. “It looks more like a man to me.”

“That’s what I was thinking. Maybe security?”

“No, I don’t think so. They’d only come in here if an alarm was tripped.”

“The alarms in here aren’t activated until nine to give everyone a chance to leave if someone is working late. That’s why I figured Lyla was coming before nine, so she wouldn’t accidentally trip the alarm,” Sage explained.

“The lab alarm is on twenty-four hours a day. Without proper access, it’ll go off.”

They fell silent and listened, but could hear no sounds coming from the office. A few minutes later, the tall, broad figure came out of the office, closing the door, then hastily exiting the outer office.

“Now,” Connor ordered.

They cautiously opened the door, then stole down the corridor. When they reached the research lab, Connor glanced around herself, then swiped her card. They crept into the huge room, then lay in wait in a darkened corner behind some cabinets, but with a view of the security door.

“Do you think someone’s in there?” Sage asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe whoever was in Charles’ office walked down the hallway opposite the lab and never entered. Let’s just wait here for a little while to see if anyone comes out.”

After what seemed like an eternity, the lab’s door opened.

Sage’s mouth dropped open. “What’s he doing here?” she asked in hushed tones as the light from the secured room splashed down on him. He swiftly closed the door.

“He may just be checking operations. We’ll wait until he leaves, then follow him.”

Charles glanced around himself, then walked from one side of the room to the other. “Who’s here?” he called out into the darkness.

Sage froze, wondering if he’d heard them whispering. They waited with bated breath.

After a few seconds, he shrugged his shoulders and shifted the folder he was carrying to his other arm and exited.

"He's supposed to be out of town," Sage said.

"Maybe he forgot something," Connor reasoned.

"Does he usually take folders from the lab?"

"Not that I know of, but then I'm not often here at night unless there's something urgent going on. Every morning everything is always where it should be. That's the first thing Karl and I make certain of."

"Something doesn't feel right." An eerie feeling crept over Sage.

"It's just nerves. After all, what we're doing is dangerous, more so if it backfires on us. We'd have a lot of explaining to do, and I haven't come up with a plausible excuse for us being here together."

"Lyla's not going to show up with him here," Sage said, disappointment in her voice.

"What if she does? Then Charles can catch her red-handed and finally see his loyalty has been misplaced. She doesn't have any reason for being here at all and especially at night."

"I didn't think of that," Sage said, brightening a little. "Do you want to stick around?"

"Of course. We've come this far. Like I said, the night is young, and Lyla may make her appearance later."

"Let's go back to Charles' office to see if Lyla shows," Sage said.

Once again, safely inside Charles' outer office, the women observed a light coming from under his slightly ajar office door. In the darkness, they crept closer, making sure not to bump into anything and alert him to their presence.

If they were caught, they'd have no logical explanation for being here. Sage peered into the room, getting a view of Charles. He was bent over the folder he'd taken from the lab and appeared to be deep in thought. The file was open, its contents spread out on his desk. He picked up a paper, got up, and walked over to his copy

machine. After he'd made the duplicate, he walked back over to his desk and slid the copy into a separate folder, scribbled something on it, then closed it. He put the original back into the folder he'd taken from the lab, then stuck it under his arm. He ran his hand over his chin, then opened the folder with the copy. Leaving the file open on his desk, he walked to the door.

Sage hurriedly crept back into the shadows next to Connor. She trembled as beads of perspiration popped out on her forehead. Neither of them moved a muscle until they heard the door click shut.

Sage breathed a sigh of relief. "Connor, if my suspicions are right, this is worse than I imagined."

Connor was bewildered. "What did you see, Sage?"

"Come on!" She grabbed Connor's arm and pulled her into Charles' office and over to his desk. With shaky hands, she gripped the edge of his desk to support her wobbly legs. "Look," she whispered hoarsely.

Connor's complexion paled. "My God, why?" she moaned as she read the almost childlike scribbling.

"This is the same handwriting in every piece of so-called evidence Charles has shown me. He wasn't using his normal writing."

"This is the same writing on the threats I've been receiving, too. The way they were worded, I assumed it was Lyla. He said things that led me to no other conclusion. He's been using her, too."

Sage's heart pumped wildly in her chest. "We've been targeting the wrong person."

Connor drew a shuddering breath. "None of this makes any sense. He hired you to bring me down with evidence he planted himself, but why?"

"I don't know, but we need to get out of here as fast as we can. Later we'll figure out what to do. I'm getting the creeps just being here now."

"Is there something I can do for you, ladies?" Charles' deep voice asked as he closed, then locked the office door.

"No...no, I was just—"

"Just what, Sage? What are you doing snooping around in my office at this time of night?" He sat down in his chair and folded his hands, then placed them on top of the folder. "What are you doing here, Connor?" he asked bitterly.

"I thought you were away on a business trip, Charles." Sage clenched her sweaty hands.

"Yes, I suppose that's what I told you." His eyes darkened as they swept over Connor. "You haven't answered my question. What the hell are you two doing in my office? You'd both better have a good explanation."

Sage watched as Connor, keeping her eyes fixed on his, unobtrusively slipped her hand inside her coat pocket. Sage prayed she was pressing the record button on the micro recorder. She cleared her throat. "I'm doing what you're paying me to do...looking for the perpetrator. I thought Lyla might show up." She tried to keep her voice steady as her insides quaked.

"I told you to leave Lyla alone. How many times do I have to tell you that, Sage? Why is Connor with you? She's the one you're supposed to be watching. Are you in on her little scheme to sabotage my company, Sage? What did she offer you?" His jaw tightened.

"Charles, you know me too well to think I could be capable of such a horrendous act. Why would I want to hurt you? What would be my motive?" Connor asked.

"I don't know you at all, Connor. As for a motive, that's quite clear."

"It's not clear to me."

He chuckled. "Oh, Connor, there's nothing like the revenge of a scorned woman."

"I wasn't scorned, and I'm certainly not vengeful. I went on with my life, Charles, and hold no ill will towards you. Why did you set me up?"

His eyebrows knitted together. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That!" She jabbed her index finger at the open folder upon which his still folded hands rested. "You've been doing this all along. The only thing I haven't figured out is why."

A faint smile crossed his lips. "To destroy you, Connor."

"But why? Do you hate me that much, Charles?"

"On the contrary." He shrugged his wide shoulders. "Why should Tim McGill have what is rightfully mine?"

"You're not making any sense. You didn't want me because I wasn't willing to give up my career. That's why our relationship ended."

"Oh, that's where you're wrong, Connor. I wanted you, but I wanted you to tell me where your true place was. I patiently waited, but you never said the words I needed to hear. You said everything but those few words, which would have made the difference."

"And what exactly are those words, Charles? Quit talking in riddles and tell me now."

His eyes grew distant. He unfolded his hands and toyed with the edge of the folder, rubbing it between his thumb and index finger. "I would've married you in an instant if you'd agreed to give up your career. A woman should know her place. My mother knew hers. It disgusted me when she had to go to work. She was supposed to be home taking care of it and her family, but money was tight and my father's salary didn't cut it. A real man should be able to support his family."

"Did you resent her for working and leaving you, Charles?" Connor asked. "She did what she had to do. Maybe she enjoyed

working. Maybe she wanted something more out of life than to be stuck home day in and day out.”

He slammed his large fist down on his desk. “No! It put crazy ideas into her head. She listened to the other women talking about equal rights for women and started attending meetings and listening to all that feminist propaganda. Those women were men haters and the more my mother listened to them, the more discontented she became with her life.”

“So she stood up for her God-given rights. That’s not a bad thing. Women deserve equal pay and the same rights as men. Your mother showed courage and strength by standing up for her beliefs. You should’ve applauded her.”

“No! A woman’s place is to be an obedient wife and mother. Women need to stay home and raise their children instead of sending them off to babysitters and daycares to be raised by strangers.”

“I didn’t know you were so archaic, Charles. Women have as much right to a career as men do. The man should take equal responsibility for caring for the home and children and if he’s so inclined, then let him stay at home and his wife can work if that’s what they want to do. It should be a decision they both agree on and no one is any less than the other. They’re equal partners in marriage. In today’s economy, though, I doubt many couples can make it on only one salary. Look around, Charles. Most times, they aren’t even making it on two salaries.”

“A weak man lets his wife become the breadwinner. A strong man provides for his family. I don’t accept any excuses.”

“Are you talking about your own parents, Charles?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he replied bitterly. “My mother refused to quit working, even when her salary was no longer necessary. She claimed she enjoyed her job.”

“I didn’t know you disapproved of your parents’ choices,” Connor said. “I was under the impression they were the two most beloved people in your life.”

“How dare you imply that I loathed my parents!” His face turned purple with rage. “I loved them, but they were miserable. I loved them enough to put them out of their misery.”

Sage’s legs wobbled. She glanced at Connor, who appeared to be in control. Charles’ demeanor frightened her and all she could think of was escaping. She could bolt for the door, but what if he came after her? What would he do to her and Connor? What if the security guards were making their rounds at the other end of the building, or had he sent them somewhere else? Would anyone hear her if she screamed? Could she even make her vocal cords work? She stayed frozen to the spot.

“You never told me how they died, Charles,” Connor continued. “I always assumed they were killed in a car accident from the little you said. What really happened to them?”

He smiled, as though the memory of his parents’ deaths was a pleasurable event instead of a tragic one. “It was painless and they are both together in the hereafter as they deserved and wanted to be. Their deaths were listed as a double homicide, and their killer has never been found. It’s a cold case file—no fingerprints, DNA—nothing.” His eyes narrowed. “Who would understand that this was what they wanted? It was quick and they never knew what hit them...a bullet to the back of their heads. If they could have, I know they’d have thanked me.”

Sage gagged and placed her hand over her mouth. She looked at Connor, whose complexion had turned a deathly white. She turned her attention back to Charles. She had to think fast. She had to force her mind to overcome her paralyzing fear. All that mattered now was survival. “Charles, I suppose my work here is finished,” she said in a voice that didn’t even sound like her own.

Connor grabbed Sage’s arm and turned her towards the door.

“Stop! You two aren’t going anywhere. Do you take me for a fool, Sage?”

Sage felt like wooden pegs had replaced her legs as she slowly turned around.

Charles stood at the front of his desk with his feet slightly apart. His stormy eyes glared at them as his extended arm revealed a gun pointed straight at them.

Chapter 22

Sage screamed.

Connor grabbed her hand. "Keep your cool. Don't let him see your fear. He's sick and he thrives on one's weakness. If he knows you're frightened, he'll shoot you in the blink of an eye," she whispered.

"What's the matter, Sage?" he taunted. "I guess you're not as tough as you thought you were, are you? You must've felt mighty powerful with the position you were given. I used to enjoy watching you strut around like you were something. Twenty-two years old and you had a position many would've given anything to have." He laughed. "You're too easy to con, Sage. You really need to develop some street smarts. No one in his right mind would have accepted this position without a slew of questions. I must say I've enjoyed your performance, though."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I'm not afraid of you, Charles." She thought she would pass out at any second. Her nerves were like live wires. She wished she could control her fear as well as Connor seemed to be with a gun aimed at their heads. She shivered, her body visibly shaking.

He threw his head back and laughed louder. "Of course you're not. Connor, I'll bet you're quaking in your shoes, too."

"Actually I'm not, Charles, because you're not holding the trump card."

"Hmmm, it appears to me that I am." He waved the gun to make his point. "Two for the price of one. How would you like it,

girls? Would you like to look me in the eye as I put a bullet through your forehead, or would you prefer to turn around and I can get you in the back of the head?" He raised his eyebrows. "Come on, how do you want it?"

"What motive do you have that justifies shooting us?" Connor asked. "You'll never get away with it."

"I have motive. The authorities will see I had no choice. After all, you two broke into my private office in a conspiracy to steal documents, which I, of course, assumed were going to be given to my competitor. Oh, I'll tell them how you two pleaded with and tried to bribe me not to turn you over to the authorities. When that didn't work, you tried to convince me someone else was the culprit, in order to cover your own tracks." He smiled smugly. "Yes, I have it planned right down to every word. They'll see how horrified and devastated I was."

"They'll never believe you. In their eyes, it still doesn't give you the right to shoot us. You'll go to prison or be executed."

"They'll believe me when they see my ransacked office and my physical condition from being brutally attacked by the both of you. I had every right to defend myself when I feared for my life."

"That's ridiculous. There's no way you'll get away with it, Charles. I kept the letters you sent trying to blackmail me and making me believe it was Lyla."

He laughed. "If Lyla was sending you threatening letters, that's something *she'll* have to answer to."

"You wrote those letters, Charles. The handwriting is altered somewhat on the letters I received and in the file you gave Sage, but I'll bet any handwriting expert will be able to prove that they're all written by the same person. You wanted Sage to think it was me and me to think it was Lyla."

"Well, there you go." He looked at Sage. "It was Lyla after all—if the writing matches. I'll be damned. I suppose you want an apology for my not believing you."

"Damn you, Charles. You'd let Lyla take the fall for what you've done?"

"Poor, ignorant Connor. Lyla would do anything for me. You do know she's secretly in love with me, don't you?"

"You get some kind of sick pleasure out of using women, don't you? Deep down, though, you're afraid of women, Charles, because you know we're strong and you can't bring us down without a fight. You have the need to control, and when you can't, then you just dispose of the person. It's your way or no way. You're not capable of giving or receiving love. Love to you means having total control and possession of another person."

"Shut up!"

"Face the truth for once in your life, Charles. You need help. You're sick!"

He shook his head. "Say what you like. You're just stalling, but it looks like time has run out. No one knows anything about the true reason for Sage's employment with me. It's been only between us, and every single person in the company assumes she's just my assistant doing some research." He toyed with the gun for a few seconds. "No, Sage has been loyal. No one knows what she's really been up to working all these late hours. Her mother and boyfriend will be shocked when they discover the double life she's been leading." He laughed again. "But then she became involved with you, Connor, and everything she was and believed in was destroyed by the greed you opened her eyes to."

Sage stared at him, listening as he talked about her as though she weren't even present. She drew a shaky breath. She had to say something. "I did tell," she lied. "I'm not the type of person to keep secrets from those I love. I needed someone to talk to about the pressure this position was putting me under."

His jaw twitched. "Who did you tell? How dare you betray me."

"Everyone," Sage replied. "I told everyone who's close to me."

“Damn you! You were instructed not to tell a soul.”

Connor squeezed her hand. “So, Charles, it looks like it’s over. Whatever it was you hoped to gain from this was all for nothing.”

“McGill can’t have everything! He’s a punk. He doesn’t know what a struggle it is to build a company from the ground up. He’s been talking to Henry James, but James will never succeed. I’ve heard about the new policies he’s instituting at Chafron. I suppose you go along with them, don’t you, Connor? Changing hours around for working mothers and even incorporating a day care center in the work place!”

“You’re not making sense, Charles. What Chafron does has nothing to do with Tim or me. I do commend Chafron, though, for implementing some programs to make it easier for working parents. Did you know their programs have actually upped production? You’re blaming every working woman because your mother wanted a better life for herself. She deserved a better life. What about Lyla? Do you hate her? She’s a working woman.”

He scowled. “Her good-for-nothing father should’ve provided better for her and her mother. Lyla works because she has no choice.”

Sage recalled the conversation with Ava and Sybil and knew he didn’t have the true facts where Will Bevons was concerned.

“Your mother had no choice at the time,” Connor continued, “but later found she enjoyed working outside of the home. I’m sure Lyla enjoys working to relieve the stress of being cooped up day in and day out with her invalid mother.”

“She worships her mother. I’ve had several talks with her, and she never once gave me the impression she felt her mother is a burden.” He fixed his eyes on Connor. “I did some checking on you, Connor. You never told me the truth about your own mother. At least Lyla didn’t dump her mother into a nursing home so she could run around thinking only of her own pleasures.”

"There are circumstances no one knows about," she answered. "I made the choice that was best for my mother and me. My choice was made out of love."

"That's debatable," he stated.

Connor threw her hands up. "Whatever. You respect Lyla so much you'd let her take the blame for blackmailing me. You sicken me. I personally don't care what you think of me, Charles. Your opinion of me is inconsequential. Now if you don't mind, I'd like to leave."

"Do you think I'm a fool? You can't leave."

"You're a fool if you pull that trigger. You have no credible alibi. Don't you think a handwriting specialist will determine everything in that folder was written by you?"

"Not if I destroy all the evidence. Later I can search your apartment, Connor, and get rid of those letters."

"The truth will come out. Sage has some of the files hidden outside of the office. Don't forget she's told others about her position here."

His eyes darkened. "Where are they?" He glared at Sage. "Tell me where they are!"

"Never! They're safely locked away. I have everything documented about the work I was doing for you. If anything happens to me, the contents of those documents will be revealed, along with the copies from the file you gave me."

"You had no right to do that. Those documents were not handed over to you for your personal use. Where are they?"

"Only I and one other person know."

"You..." he sputtered. He pulled on his chin as his eyes nervously flitted back and forth. "Work with me, Connor. We'll get rid of Sage. Let me think of something. No one will ever know." His eyes softened as he looked at her. "Remember the passion we once shared? We can have it all again. This time things will be different. I promise. You won't work anymore and we'll bring your mother

to live with us and get her out of that hideous nursing home. She belongs with us.”

“You’ve left out a very important fact, Charles.”

“What’s that?” A puzzled expression crossed his face.

“I don’t love you. I’m marrying Tim. If I’m found murdered, you can bet your bottom dollar you’ll be the one he comes looking for.” Her lips drew tight. “And how dare you think I’d be a part of any scheme that involved murder.”

His eyes flickered. “You love me. You wanted to marry me and settle down. Have you forgotten? You practically got down on your knees and begged me to marry you.”

“No, I haven’t forgotten. I’m thankful you said no. I could never be happy staying at home because my husband demanded it. With Tim, I have a choice, and no matter what I choose to do, I have his full support.”

“It’s over, Charles. Just let us go.” Sage was banking on the fact the lies she and Connor had told him about the hidden documents would force him to see he had no other choice. “I promise I’ll give you the copies I made. We can spend the entire night arguing back and forth, but it won’t get us anywhere. Let me go get the copies.”

“Are you crazy? I can’t let you two go. What will happen to me?”

“Probably nothing,” Connor stated. “You haven’t broken any laws, so nothing will happen to you.”

He was silent for a few seconds as he sat, nodding his head. “That’s right. I have nothing to fear.” He eyed the gun in his hand. “How can I be certain you two won’t go running to the police to file a report?”

“It would be your word against ours. Now who do you think they’d believe?” Connor asked. “You’re a pillar in the community with all the charitable grants and programs you’ve instituted.”

He exhaled confidently. "Yes, that's right." He stood up and moved toward the door. "Tonight never happened. Right?"

"That's right." He was going to set them free. Sage breathed a sigh of relief.

He placed his hand on the doorknob.

Sage and Connor glanced at each other, smiling faintly.

Suddenly, he removed his hand and swung around facing them. "My parents!"

"What about them?" Connor asked.

"Don't play dumb with me! I told you I shot them. If I let you go, you and Sage will run straight to the authorities. I'll be finished." He looked down at his shoes, then raised his eyes to theirs. "No one will believe I did it only because I loved them. I couldn't stand people laughing at my father because he was a failure for not being able to support his own family. I knew my mother was sorry she'd put him in that position. I think deep down she even sometimes regretted not stopping work when he began receiving a decent salary, but something wouldn't let her stop."

"Who's going to believe a preposterous story like that from Sage or me?" Connor asked. "You are an upstanding citizen in this community and on the boards of many organizations. They haven't suspected you in all these years, so why should they now?"

"Let me think a minute," he said.

Sage fearfully watched Charles' expression. He looked like a deer caught in the headlights. He was trapped and didn't know which way to turn. A lump rose again in her throat. Connor's and her lives were hanging by a thread. Fear, once again, wrapped around her heart.

His eyes flitted back and forth and then his stony expression suddenly turned to fear. His face puckered up. "They'll lock me up," he whispered in an almost child-like voice. "I wouldn't be able to stand being locked up."

“No, they won’t, Charles. Just let us go and we won’t say anything,” Connor said in a soothing voice. “I promise.”

“I only wanted them to be proud of me. I work hard so I won’t end up like my parents.”

“Please open the door, Charles.” Sage’s thumping heart drummed in her ears drowning out her own voice. His conflicting mood swings unnerved her even further. Whatever was going on in his mind could make him snap without warning. She stared into his eyes knowing in his right mind the fear in her own eyes would be revealed to him, but he wasn’t in his right mind.

He slumped to the floor with his back against the door. “I don’t know what to do,” he whimpered. “All the money one man could ever want and I’m still not happy.” Tears streaked his face. With the back of his hand, he roughly wiped them away.

“Charles, everything will be okay. You’re a good person and you have so many wonderful qualities. Many women out there would love a man like you and to not have to worry about going to work every day. You need to talk to someone, Charles, about everything that’s bothering you,” Connor whispered.

He sniffed. “No, it’s over. My credibility will be gone. I’m a failure. No one loves a failure.”

“You’re not a failure, Charles,” Connor said.

“Yes. I’m a failure in every area of my life. Do you hear me? I am a failure,” he screamed, then jumped to his feet, pointing the gun wildly.

Startled, Sage and Connor ran, seeking cover behind his desk as they clutched one another.

Images of Ryan and her mother flashed through Sage’s mind. A tear slid from her eye as she thought about her future, a future she might never get to live. She chastised herself for ever getting involved with this scheme of Charles’. Charles had used his charm to convince her otherwise and, of course, the money had been too good to pass up.

She prayed someone would hear Charles' rantings and come to investigate. She looked at Connor. Her complexion was a sickly white and she looked like she was ready to pass out. Sage gripped Connor's hand, holding it tightly.

She heard Charles slowly moving toward the desk. Her heart caught in her throat. Abruptly, he turned and walked to the back of the desk, then stopped. She wanted to look up, but she couldn't take her eyes from his very polished black shoes inches from her. She drew a shaky breath. She felt the sweat from Connor's palm in her own hand and knew Connor was as frightened as she was. Time seemed to stand still.

Charles shuffled his feet until the tips of his shoes were abutting Sage's leg. Her throat constricted. They were going to die and there was nothing either of them could do about it. She squeezed her eyes shut keeping her death grip on Connor's hand.

The sudden blast from Charles' gun sent splatters of blood cascading over her and Connor. She screamed as Charles' body fell across them.

Chapter 23

Sage lay in bed staring up at the ceiling. It didn't seem possible three months had passed since Charles had killed himself. The memory of that night would haunt her for the rest of her life. Sometimes late at night she still had visions of being trapped with a gun pointed at her head and would wake up in a cold sweat, shaking with fear. The media had gone wild with the story and for weeks afterward, she and Connor were hounded relentlessly.

She hadn't seen Connor after the police concluded their investigation, but had often talked with her on the phone. Connor was having as much difficulty as Sage was getting back to a normal life, but day-by-day, things were starting to regain some sense of normalcy.

She didn't remember much after Charles had pulled the trigger. She'd fainted and the next thing she recalled was waking up in the hospital. They told her she'd gone into shock and kept her for two days for observation. She spent the following weeks resting and trying to make some sense of the nightmare.

Her mother, Ryan, Heather and Debbie became her support team, listening to her talk about the events of that horrible night and letting her cry or angrily scream when she needed to. They held her and soothed her when she chastised herself for her own ignorance. Jack Olman insisted she come back to work at the company when she felt ready. Working for strangers at another company was something she didn't feel capable of being able to do, at

least not now, so his offer came as a welcome relief to her already overburdened mind.

Thank God Connor had taped their whole ordeal. Charles' parents' murders were finally solved. In his office safe, a signed confession and tape was found outlining his reasons for murdering them—the same senseless reasons he'd given Connor and Sage. Neither the police nor the media could understand why he had signed a confession, but the gun he had used on himself was the same gun he'd used to murder his parents.

Sage's counselor, whom she'd agreed to see with her mother's and Ryan's gentle urging, speculated the confession might have been a way for him to make peace with himself since his mind had probably already fragmented into two separate identities. She advised Sage not to try to figure out the complexities of Charles Boylston. His mind was twisted and he may not have had a true sense of right or wrong. He could function flawlessly in his working environment, but when it came to personal relationships, he was a failure. He loved and hated his parents at the same time. There was no middle ground.

She stretched leisurely and got out of bed looking around her familiar bedroom and knew she was safe. The nightmare was over. She was ready to put the past behind her. A lot of changes had taken place in the last three months. Tony had at last made the commitment Debbie had been praying for, Clint and Heather had fallen in love, but the biggest change was her mother. She was happy in a way Sage had never seen when her mother was married to her father.

Today was a special day and Sage was excited. There was no room for negativity. Connor and Tim were coming over for a barbeque. This was the first time she'd be seeing Connor since their ordeal and she'd be meeting Tim.

* * * *

“Connor, I’m so happy to see you!” Sage exclaimed throwing her arms around Connor’s neck. She smiled at the handsome, reddish blonde-haired man by Connor’s side. “You must be Tim. I’m pleased to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine, Sage.”

He had a wide easy smile. He was tall and lanky, but well built. His gray eyes sparkled with love as he gazed at Connor. Sage couldn’t help but notice the toll that had been taken on her friend. Connor was pale and had lost weight.

“Come on in. I can’t wait to introduce you two to everyone.” She led them into the living room, where Heather, Debbie, Ryan and her mother were sitting, chatting casually. After the introductions were made, Heather and Debbie excused themselves to set up the patio.

Loni seated herself across from the couple. “I want to thank you, Connor, for helping Sage through that horrible incident at Boylston’s. I still have nightmares when I think what you two girls went through. It’s one of those things you see in the movies, but never expect could happen.” She shivered. “But thank God you’re both safe and sound.” She waited until Sage was out of earshot, then in hushed tones said, “Connor, this has been such a difficult time. Thank you for coming. Sage’s friends and I thought a gathering might do the both of you some good.”

“I agree,” Connor said. “Sage is the most honest person I’ve ever met, and I know the lies she had to tell you about her job tore her apart.”

“Under the circumstances I realize she had no choice.” She patted Connor’s hand. “Now please, I only have one rule and that is you and Tim call me Loni.”

“It’d be my pleasure, Loni,” Connor said.

Tim tilted his head. “Loni, has the media left Sage alone?”

She sighed. “We still get a phone call once in a while from a magazine wanting to do a story, but Sage and I have explained to

them that she doesn't want to talk about what happened and only wants to put it behind her and move on with her life."

"Just let me know if they start up again and I'll make sure they leave you and Sage alone," he promised.

"Thank you, Tim," she replied gratefully.

"Everything's under control. Ryan had to check on the coals and will be back in a few minutes," Sage announced as she sat next to her mother. "So what have you three been talking about?"

"The media and how they hounded you and Connor, until Tim put a stop to it," her mother answered.

Sage rolled her eyes. "At least they've quit calling me." She drew a deep breath. "If it weren't for you, Connor, I doubt I'd be here right now. You saved my life. I wasn't as calm as you were."

Connor shook her head. "No, Sage, what you did went beyond heroic. I'll always be grateful to you for believing in my innocence and risking yourself to vindicate me."

Sage felt her cheeks grow hot. "I don't deserve all this praise."

Tim put an arm around Connor's shoulder protectively. "You, do, Sage, and I thank you, too. Connor told me how you told Charles you had secretly hidden copies of the files. If he hadn't believed that, then God only knows what he might've done."

"Connor came up with the idea. I only went along with it. As I said, Connor was the one who kept everything in control."

"No matter what, I'm just thankful it's over," Tim said, pulling Connor even closer.

"Did either of you ever have any suspicions Charles was not the man he appeared to be?" Loni asked, looking intently at Connor and Tim.

"No," Connor replied. "He was the kind of man one liked at first meeting. He could be domineering, but that was in his personal life, not his business life. When I dated him, I never saw that dark side of him."

"The few times I'd encountered him, he was all business and had a knack for drawing people to what he was saying. He'd have made a good politician," Tim replied.

Sage nodded. "He was the last person I ever would've suspected of any wrongdoing."

Loni shuddered. "What would drive a person to kill his own parents? According to the papers, their murders would never have been solved if he hadn't killed himself. Of course, his tape-recorded confession was the proof they needed, along with the weapon."

"I can't imagine carrying that guilt around for all those years," Sage mused.

"Obviously, in his mind, he didn't do anything wrong. He was smart enough, though, to realize the police wouldn't see it that way. The sad part of it is he was brilliant as a businessman, but a failure, when it came to relationships."

"He certainly had more affairs than I ever imagined," Connor said. "No woman was capable of satisfying him, though, unless she gave up control and submitted to him one hundred percent, and I don't know any woman who'd ever do that."

"Not with his twisted beliefs and demands," Sage agreed readily. "Well, it's over and life goes on." She smiled at Connor and Tim. "We need to try to put it behind us and move forward."

"That's right," Ryan said, joining them. "From now on, Sage can leave the detective work to someone else."

"You don't have to worry about that," she said, grinning up at him. "I'm perfectly content being back at Olman's. And it's fun working with Mom."

"Yes, it is." Loni smiled, then turned to Connor. "Sage has told me about your mother, Connor. I'm so sorry. If there is ever anything I can do, please let me know."

"Thank you. But thanks to Tim, there's new hope."

“Oh, Connor, that’s wonderful news! What’s happened?” Sage’s eyes widened.

Connor glanced lovingly at Tim with a smile spreading over her face. “There’s a new drug...it’s not guaranteed and is still in the experimental stages. It’s very expensive and there’s no way I could ever afford the treatments, but unknown to me, my wonderful husband-to-be took care of everything.” Tears glistened in her eyes. “With only a few treatments, she’s doing better than anyone expected.”

“Connor, that’s amazing!”

Connor cleared her throat. “It’s so refreshing to see the closeness you and Sage share, Loni. My mother and I used to be close like this before she became ill. Now I have hope I’ll have her back again.”

“The doctors are confident we might even be able to bring her to the wedding ceremony,” Tim said. “That’s my wedding gift to Connor.”

Sage blinked back tears. “What a blessing that will be for all of you.”

“Sage, speaking of our wedding, I’ve been meaning to ask a favor of you,” Connor said.

“Of course. Anything I can do, you know I will.”

“I’m hoping you’ll agree to be my maid of honor.”

“Are you serious? I’d love to,” she squealed.

Heather and Debbie walked over to Loni. “We have another guest,” Debbie said.

Sage’s eyebrows lifted. “Who is it?”

“Mr. Olman’s out on the patio waiting for you, Loni,” Heather said, flashing a grin at a blushing Loni.

“Please excuse me,” Loni said, the pleasure evident on her face.

“Is there romance in the air?” Connor asked as Loni hurried off.

“I think so.” Sage beamed. “I don’t know when I’ve seen my mother so happy.”

Tim leaned towards Ryan. “Ryan, I understand you studied film production in college.”

“Yes, producing films was my big dream, but now I’m content to stay in Buffalo instead of moving to California.”

Even though he tried to hide it, Sage could see the longing in his eyes. She still held onto the hope that someday they’d be able to go to California, and Ryan could pursue his dream with her love and support.

“Why can’t you produce films here? Buffalo’s a big city and many brilliant documentaries have been made right here.” Tim looked closely at him.

Ryan frowned. “I’ve checked out a few of the companies, but they have no openings and won’t even look at some of the shorts I produced. Unless I’m well known or have something to show them that’ll knock their socks off, they won’t give me the time of day. Even though California has stiff competition, there are more companies to pursue. I believe my odds are still better there than here. I’m trying to put together another piece. What I’ve been working on is the expressions of faces. Most of those I’m taking with a still camera. Well, that’s what I’m tentatively calling the piece—*Expressions*. I’ve filmed hundreds of faces in varying degrees of emotions. I’ve gotten release forms from everyone I’ve filmed.”

Sage saw the light that filled his eyes as he spoke. “He’s fantastic,” she said. “He knows how to get just the perfect angle. Some of his work sends chills up my spine.”

“Aw, come on now, Sage, you’re making me blush,” he joked, obviously thrilled by her comments.

“So the options are better in California?” Tim persisted.

“Yes and no. If I can get my foot in the door, I’m hoping to someday be able to produce the types of films I love, such as documentaries and independent films. I could do that here in Buffalo,

but until I get a break and get some hands-on experience and some credits on my blank resume, it looks grim. California has more opportunities for beginners. Maybe in a few years something will open up here, but until then, I'll keep trying and hope someone will give me a chance. But funding is difficult to come by. No one wants to invest in an unknown."

Tim leaned back. "Hmmm. A station I've done some work for has branched out into several areas. They've even produced a few documentaries and shorts, mostly environmental pieces that've gotten excellent reviews. If you're interested, I can arrange an interview. I'd also love to see what you can do. I'm going to be shooting a couple of new ecological projects and, even though I can't promise you this will make you a famous film producer, it will give you something to put on that resume of yours."

Ryan grabbed Tim's hand, vigorously pumping it up and down. "Are you serious? Thank you! You don't know what this opportunity means to me."

"Ryan, this is amazing!" Sage grabbed him, holding him close. "I'm so happy for you!"

Ryan picked her up in his strong arms and danced around the room with her.

Connor and Tim laughed.

He set her down and laughingly said, "Believe me, Tim, I am serious when it comes to my filming."

"I can see that." He grinned. "I understand you love the classics, too...the old silent movies?"

"Do I ever! I think I've seen most of them at least fifty times."

Connor turned her attention to Sage as Tim and Ryan began a discussion on various movies they'd seen. "Whatever happened to Lyla Bevons? I only saw her name mentioned briefly in the newspapers. It's like she dropped off the face of the earth. Have you heard anything about her, Sage?"

Sage raised her eyebrows. "Don't worry about Lyla. She's doing okay. She got a full-time job as the church's secretary. She hasn't said anything to me about what happened, but the other day in church, she actually smiled at me, a real smile, not the pretentious one, so I think there may be hope for her yet."

"I still feel guilty for accusing her."

"I do, too, but Charles left us no choice. If she ever does have a normal conversation with me, I intend to apologize to her. I'm sure she knows anyone, not only us, would have come to the same conclusion once you were ruled out, Connor. She's probably more upset over the fact Charles used her like he used everyone else."

"I suppose you're right. I didn't know you were still attending her church."

"I was going to stop, but I got close to some of the women there. I found myself enjoying the various church functions and many of the parishioners, especially two older ladies, Ava and Sybil. I told you about them. They're a couple of characters. Ryan and my mother have even started attending church with me."

"Everyone is great and I never thought I'd enjoy going to church, but I look forward to it," Ryan said, coming in on the end of the conversation.

"That's nice," Connor replied.

"So many unexpected changes in so short a time...but all for the better," Sage replied.

"Yes, and things will only continue to get better." Connor rubbed her hands together. "Can I help with anything?"

"Ryan's going to be barbequing, but there's always something to do in the kitchen." Sage took Connor's hand.

"I'll give Ryan a hand with the barbequing, if you don't mind?" Tim asked.

"I can use the help and the company. You can see how surrounded I am by women around here," he teased. "Our friends To-

ny and Clint will be here this evening, but until then, we'll have to hold down the fort for the men."

"Don't let him kid you, Tim. He loves it," Sage shot back.

* * * *

Later, after they'd eaten, they sat around the patio, chatting as they enjoyed the late summer night. Soon the warm winds would be replaced by the icy chill of winter, but for now Sage intended to squeeze every last ounce out of what was left of summer, trying to make up for all she'd missed the past few months.

"I don't know when I've had such a good time, Sage," Connor said. "Thank you again for inviting us."

"No, thank you both for coming. We're going to have to do this more often."

"If that's a standing invitation, then we accept," Tim answered.

"You both are welcome here anytime," Loni said. "I mean it. You'd better not be strangers around here."

"We won't be, I promise." Connor grinned.

"I have an announcement to make," Ryan said. "Could I please have everyone's undivided attention?" He waited for everyone to quiet down, then dramatically cleared his throat. "Sage, would you please join me?"

Sage glanced at her friends with a look of bewilderment on her face as she walked to where he was standing next to an empty chair.

"Please, sit here."

After she was seated, he put his finger to his lips, motioning everyone to stay silent. Without warning, he dropped to one knee in front of her.

A gasp escaped from Loni's throat.

Sage's heart thumped in her chest.

Ryan took her hand in his. "Sage, I've loved you from the first moment I set eyes on you. We've had good times and bad times

and came through the bad times stronger than ever. Even though we've been unofficially engaged, I'd now like to ask you again, in the presence of your mother and our friends. Would you now do me the honor of becoming my wife?" He opened the small box he held in his other hand.

"Yes!" she cried, flinging herself into his waiting arms.

With a shaky hand, Ryan slipped the ring onto her finger.

Sage met his lips, never wanting the kiss or this moment to end.

They were immediately surrounded, hugged, and kissed, as Sage showed off her engagement ring.

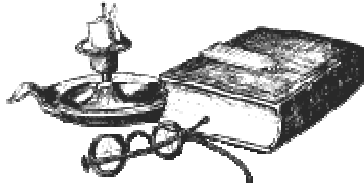
Loni enclosed them both in her arms. "This is the happiest day of my life," she whispered as Jack Olman shook Ryan's hand, keeping his other arm securely around Loni's waist.

"Mine, too." Sage smiled through her tears into Ryan's loving eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan K. Droney is the author of many novels, short stories, and articles. She was raised in western New York and currently resides in New Jersey. She has two daughters and a grandson. Her passions, aside from writing, include traveling, cooking, gardening, walking, and reading.

*For your reading pleasure, we invite
you to visit our web bookstore*



WHISKEY CREEK PRESS TORRID

www.whiskeycreekpresstorrid.com