



*Be
With You*

Marie Rochelle

Red Rose Publishing

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By

Marie

Rochelle



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Dedication:

I want to thank all of my fans

For being there for me.

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Chapter One

Music played softly around Sage Nicole while couples danced on the floor. It was supposed to be a celebration but she didn't feel much like partying. All she wanted was for this night to be over so she could go upstairs to bed. She had spent half her paycheck on this dress to finally get Rally Teveare to notice her, but it hadn't work.

She was usually a strong and confident woman, but when it came to Rally all her common sense went right out the door. He told her a quick congratulations before his stunning date dragged him away from her and held his unwavering attention for the rest of the night. However, it never failed that Rally focused more on the woman in his arms than her. It had been that way for as long as she could remember. Why was she even staying in this house after so many years?

She tossed back another tequila shot and sat the glass down on the table, next to the half-empty bottle. She had lost count how many of them she had in the past hour, but she wasn't drunk because she'd been munching on the plate of food someone brought to her earlier.

Couldn't Rally at least pull himself away from Aponi long enough to ask her how graduation went? After going to college for six years, she had finally graduated with a double major in Public Relations and as a Management Consultant. Rally wasn't even courteous enough to even show up to her graduation. Was an hour out of his day too much time to waste on her? She hated acting like a lovesick teenager, but she was so in love with Rally that she couldn't think straight, and that had to change.

“It’s about time I figure out if I’m going to stay here in Arizona or move on with my dream,” Sage muttered to herself. Seeing Rally with other women was beginning to tear her apart and she deserved better.

“You’re going to leave a hole in Rally’s back if you don’t stop staring at him,” Shawn, Rally’s brother teased.

“I’m not staring at that idiot brother of yours,” she denied reaching for the liquor bottle. “I’m just sitting here having my own private party.”

“See, that’s the problem, Sage,” Shawn scolded taking the bottle away from her. “I’ve never seen you take a drink before, what’s wrong?”

Moving away from her, Shawn placed the liquor bottle on the table behind them and she rejoined her. “Aren’t you happy to finally be out of college? I know how hard you worked to get those extra credits to get out early.”

“Nothing’s wrong with me,” she lied. “I’m enjoying my graduation party.” Sage took another stolen glance at Rally and his date. “She’s very beautiful isn’t she?”

Shawn grabbed her chin making her look at him. “My brother doesn’t know what he has when it’s staring him in the face. Sage, you’re intelligent, sweet, kind to a fault and very loving.”

“Which are all the codes words for ugly,” she sighed. Smiling at her friend, she couldn’t believe how much he had matured in the last couple of years.

They had been best friends since Rally took her in after her parents died. Shawn always found a way to cheer her up but tonight wasn’t going to be one of them. She was in a deep funk tonight and nothing was going to pull her out of it.

Removing Shawn’s hand from her face, Sage placed it on the table, “I know I’m not the type of woman Rally would ever be interested in and I’m fine with that. I’ve been keeping my feelings a secret for this long, so what’s a couple of more years?”

“A couple of more years,” Shawn frowned.

“Haven’t you heard the latest rumor? Sage asked, “Rally is going to marry Aponi. She’s his other half. Everyone knows that. She’s stunning and your family would be pleased with his choice.”

Shawn linked her fingers with his and held them against the table. “My brother wouldn’t marry Aponi just to keep the family on his good side. You know him better than that, he’s his own man and makes his own decisions.”

Leaning across the across the table Sage placed a small kiss on Shawn’s mouth. He was such a doll. But they both knew Rally would marry Aponi if he wanted to and it wouldn’t have anything to do with keeping the two families at peace. That was just the excuse she came up with. Rally never looked at her the way he did other women and he never would.

Sage slipped her hand away from Shawn’s light grip and laid it on her lap. “Thank you for trying to cheer me up but be honest with me. Rally and Aponi are the perfect couple. They complement each other so well. Rally is tall and muscular which only brings out Aponi’s slender model like figure.”

“Rally is a proud Native American man and he’ll only want the best for himself and his future family. Aponi can give him that and more,” Sage sighed.

She waited for Shawn to refute what she just said but he couldn’t and they both knew it. The look in his eyes told her everything she needed to know. Rally was the oldest and it was on his shoulders to keep the family going with his future children.

“Sage, I’m so sorry, but Rally is fond of you. He’s always talking about how smart you are and how you’ll be able to get anything you want,” Shawn said, trying to make her feel better.

“Whatever, but we both know how Rally truly feels about me. He hated how your parents were my Godparents and got saddled with me after mine died in the house fire.

I can still see him standing there yelling at his parents about how they didn’t have enough room or food for another mouth to feed.”

“Shit, Sage, Rally was about to go off to college and thought our parents were too old to have a ten-year-old in the house.”

Shawn jumped in trying to deny his brother’s actions. After a while he got fond of you and liked having you around the house.”

“Yeah, like a stray off the street,” she muttered under her breath. “Rally never liked me and he never will.”

“Is that why you tried to run away when you were sixteen?”

“I had graduated high school and I thought your parents had done enough for me. I wanted to give them a break,” Sage shrugged. “It wasn’t a big deal. I came back didn’t I?”

“Only after Rally found out and went out looking for you. I never saw him that mad in my life. Over the years my brother learned how to control his quick temper, but the day Mom called him at college and told him about you not coming home will be a day I’ll never forget.”

“Rally was pissed that I upset his mother and nothing else. I was trying to ease their burden of having me around.”

“My parents never saw you as a burden, Sage.” Shawn corrected her. “They loved you from the second you got out of that car with those two ponytails and your glasses slipping down your nose.”

Smiling at the memory, Sage leaned across the table pushing up her glasses with her index finger. “I haven’t changed much over the years have I?”

“Yes, you have.”

“Sure, I’m just drop-dead gorgeous with a line of men waiting to date me,” Sage sighed tired of this conversation.

“I think you only want one man and we both know who that is,” Shawn said looking at his brother on the dance floor.

“Am I that transparent? Maybe I should try to get a job in another state. The time away from Rally might do me good. What do you think?”

“Hey, I’m not in this. You have to talk about Rally about that one, but you know he believes in family staying together.”

Sage gave Shawn a sad smile as she stood up from the table. “See, that’s were you’re wrong. Rally has never seen me as family, just as a nuisance that came into his life when he didn’t want it.”

Shawn got up from his seat. “How about we stop talking about my brother? I think you owe me a dance.”

“Not tonight,” Sage sighed with a shake of her head. “I’ve had a long day and I’m going to bed. Tell everyone I said thanks for coming.” She spun on her heel and turned away from Shawn leaving the room without looking back in Rally’s direction.

* * * *

Out on the dance floor, Rally Teveare only half listened to Aponi as she kept talking about how the people she worked with was envious of her. He brought her to Sage’s party because most of the time she was good company, but she was getting on his nerves tonight.

He did feel a little guilty that he hadn’t danced or even said more than maybe five words to Sage. This was a party for her graduating early and she wasn’t even having a good time. He noticed her looking in his direction as if she wanted something from him.

He spun Aponi around just in time to see Sage getting up from the table and leave the room. His brother was yelling something at her but she only shook her head and kept heading for the door. What was that all about? Where was she going?

“Aponi, I’ve to see about something,” Rally said as he stopped dancing. “I think I see one of your friends over by the band. Could you talk to her for a few minutes? I won’t be gone that long.”

“Sure, but I hope you’ll be back. I want to tell you about the amazing advice my boss gave me yesterday.” Aponi gave him a quick kiss on the mouth and then strolled in the direction of her friend.

Striding away from the dance area Rally went out the door in search of Sage, he didn’t need her getting into any trouble. It seemed like everywhere that girl went, trouble followed her. Rally caught the shadow of Sage’s body going up the steps as he rounded the corner. Why is she going upstairs?

Going behind Sage he watched as she went into her bedroom and closed the door.

Rally spoke low, “What is she up to now? There better not be some guy up there waiting for her. I’ve told her about that more than once.” His long strides carried him the remaining distance to Sage’s room. He knocked on the door once and then went in.

“Sage, please tell me you aren’t hiding some guy up here.” Rally demanded slamming the door closed behind him. “I don’t have time to be kicking anyone out of the house tonight.”

Shrieking, Sage spun away from the closet and gave him the same pissed look he was getting used to.

“I hate when you do that. I never have any privacy in this house. What if I had been getting undressed instead of looking for a change of clothes?”

“You weren’t, and furthermore, you’re not going to get it unless you start acting like an adult. Now, is there a guy in here?”

“I don’t answer you to Rally,” she uttered crossing her arms under her breasts. “Answer my question or I’ll search every inch of this room until I get an answer.” Rally snapped back taking a similar stance as Sage’s. She was pushing his buttons a lot lately and he didn’t understand why it was bothering him more than unusual.

“I don’t have to answer to you. Get out of my room.”

Rage simmered as he unfolded his arms and walked across the room until he was standing over Sage’s shorter frame. He knew she hated when he did this and that’s why he was doing it now.

“You do have to answer me because you’re living in my house. I paid a lot of money for this party and you’re up here with some college jock instead of downstairs. Now tell me where he is and all of this will be over.”

He didn’t know what it was but ever since Sage turned sixteen she had been testing him. . He thought it would end once she hit her twenties, but she had only has gotten worse. She was slowly driving him insane.

Defiance flashed in her gorgeous sienna eyes behind her glasses. He loved how they made her eyes so big and inviting. It was another thing that was beginning to worry him. Sage was staying in his mind was too much lately. The sooner he got her out of the house the better off he would be.

“Don’t test me,” Rally growled before Sage could open her mouth.

“I really hate you.”

“The feeling in mutual,” he tossed back tired of the game they always played.

“Now where is this guy and I’ll leave.”

Throwing her hands up in the air Sage moved away from the closet to the middle of the floor.

“I’m the only one up here. I haven’t brought a guy to my room since I was in high school. I was so embarrassed when you walked in on us that I never thought about trying it again.”

Lying wasn’t one of Sage’s best traits so he knew she was telling the truth.

“I’m glad that I did. I wasn’t going to let your first time be in this house with a guy you barely knew. My parents wouldn’t have allowed it, and neither was I.”

“Rock wasn’t a bad guy, but after the lecture you gave him. He never looked in my direction again at school.” She sighed moving over to the window.

“Good, he proved my point. If he couldn’t wait until you graduated then he wasn’t the man you needed in your life.”

Rally joined Sage by the curtains and glanced down at her bent head. “Now, do you want to tell me why you’re up here and what my brother was talking to you about?”

“Shawn’s a sweetheart and I just came upstairs because I wasn’t enjoying the party. All of those people downstairs were yours and Aponi’s friends, not mine. You just made it into a party for me, but we know whose party it really was.”

“How did you find out? Was it Shawn? I told him to keep his mouth shut.”

“No, Shawn didn’t say a word to me. I’ve known all along. Aponi’s got a promotion at work and wanted a party. Why wouldn’t you give her one?”

Rally felt bad for lying about the party, but he still thought Sage wouldn’t mind sharing her graduation party with Aponi.

“I’m sorry. How about we have another party for you next weekend and you can invite all of your college friends?” He was trying to make amends.

“No...thank you. This was good enough for someone like me.” Sage answered moving away from him.

“If you don’t mind could you leave? I’m tired and I need to get some sleep.”

Someone like her, he wondered as he headed back towards the door. *What was she talking about?*

“We aren’t finished with this. I want to discuss this some more at breakfast tomorrow.” Rally paused in the doorway and looked back over at Sage standing in the middle of the room.

“Sure...just not tonight.”

He wanted to say something more, but he could tell that she was done for tonight and he didn’t want to push things. In the last year, Sage had grown a lot more distant towards him than in the past. She seldom wanted to spend any time around him, so he was really surprised when she accepted the job he offered her.

“See you tomorrow.” He tossed out before exiting the room.

“Night, Rally,” Sage whispered but she doubted her even heard her.

Chapter Two

“Rally was really mad that you weren’t at breakfast this morning. He almost went upstairs to get you, but I told him that you needed your beauty sleep,” a cultured voiced taunted her as a model perfect body gracefully lowered into the seat at the front of her desk.

“Good morning to you too, Aponi,” Sage answered, wishing she was anywhere but here at the moment.

Rally’s girlfriend loved to rub it in her face how she wasn’t a part of the Teveare family and he wanted her gone but was too nice to say it.

“Morning, little spice girl.”

She held her tongue at the nickname Aponi placed on her the moment she learned her name. She hated it with a passion and Aponi knew it.

“Rally, isn’t here. He’s gone to a meeting. Is there something I can help you with?”

“Not unless it’s lesson in panting after a man who doesn’t want me, or even worse doesn’t even know that I’m alive.” Aponi flung back at her.

Sage hated that Aponi caught her staring at Rally once when he didn’t know it. Now she wouldn’t let her live it down and tossed it in her face every chance she got.

“I’m tired of telling you that I don’t want Rally. He took me in when I needed a home and all I feel for him is gratitude and nothing more. Why can’t you believe that?”

“Because everyone in town knows that you’re in love with Rally. God, the second he enters a room you’re all over him. It turns my stomach to see how you look at him. I know for a fact that he doesn’t like it.”

“That’s a lie and you know it!” Sage shouted then lowered her voice when Aponi smirked at her. “I only see Rally as a close friend.”

She wished that the floor would swallow up Aponi and make her disappear. Rally’s girlfriend has been nothing but a thorn in her side since the day she meet her.

“You want Rally so bad that you’d do anything to get his attention.”

Sitting up straighter in the chair, Sage waited for Aponi to continue with her accusations. Because it wouldn’t do any good to leave, once Rally’s girlfriend got started nothing shut her up. So, it was better to get it over with now than later.

“What are you talking about? What have I done to get Rally’s attention recently? He spends his every waking moment dealing with you and your motor mouth.”

Aponi flung her a look that could have melted butter. “That little show you put on last night. Did you really think that Rally would let you run from the party without checking on you?”

The nerve of her!

Sage bit her tongue not to tell Aponi not to confuse her needing time alone with the stunts that she usually pulled to get his attention. She never left the party hoping that Rally would follow her.

“You know that isn’t true. I left the party early because I wasn’t feeling good. Not to attract your boyfriend’s attention.”

“No one believes those lies but you,” Aponi snickered, flipping her silky, long, black hair over her shoulder.

“Even Rally laughed about the crush you have on him. He had been wondering for a while did you like him, but Shawn confirmed it the other day.”

Sage swallowed down her hurt. It was hard for her to know that Shawn had betrayed her trust and Rally felt nothing for her, but for Aponi to throw it in her face was the worst blow.

“I don’t believe you about Shawn. He doesn’t talk about people behind their backs,” she commented. “Besides, do you really think I care about Rally and his opinion of me? He hasn’t been fond of me since his parents took me in when I was a kid. I still don’t know why he didn’t let me leave all those years ago.”

“Rally takes his obligations seriously and you were tossed at him. So he felt that he had to find you and bring you back here. However, I know you only did it to get some free time with him. You’re so sad and pathetic going after a man who sees right through you.” Aponi continued her rant.

“I don’t care how hard you try,” Aponi taunted with a smirk. “Rally is never going to look at you the way you want him to. He doesn’t want someone like you when he has me.”

“Do you really think I have a romantic interest in Rally?” Sage questioned despite the fact she already knew the answer.

“I don’t have to think I know that you do, but let me tell you something my little spice. I’m not going to let you have him. I’ve worked too hard and far too long on Rally to lose him now.”

Sage was getting tired of this conversation. Aponi’s surprise appearance wasn’t to see Rally, but to pick on her. She was fed up. Aponi had no reason to treat her like she was beneath her.

“Listen Aponi, because this is the last time I’m telling you this. I only see Rally as a friend. He doesn’t want me and I sure as hell don’t want his arrogant ass. Why are you so concerned about me anyway? Has Rally given you any reason to doubt his love for you?”

Rising out of her seat, Aponi's black eyes snapped with unleashed anger as she glared at her.

"No, he hasn't and I'm not telling you again to stay away from him before he does. That helpless act you constantly do is going to wear him down."

She was getting tired of Aponi and all of her casting the blame. She wasn't going to be a doormat for her.

If Rally's girlfriend was having problems with her relationship with the aloof Rally it wasn't her fault. Aponi needed to stop blaming her.

"Stop accusing me if there are problems going on between you and Rally. Did you ever think that you could be the reason his attention is wandering? Why don't you take a look in the mirror? Maybe after all of these years, Rally is finally tired of looking at you. Did that tiny thought ever cross your mind?" Sage demanded rising up from behind her desk. "How about he's had it with your constant need to show off to your family and friends?"

"You little idiot!" Aponi hissed.

"I'm not the idiot." She hurled back finally glad to tell Aponi what she thought of her. "Have you ever thought about taking the blame for your failing relationship? You need to shoulder some of it....Hell, why don't you take all of it?"

"You ungrateful little bitch!" Aponi snapped jumping from her chair. "How dare you talk to me like that? I can make Rally get rid of you like you were yesterday's trash. He'll do anything that I tell him to."

Did Aponi really think she possessed the ability to make Rally do something that he didn't want to?

"Do you think Rally's a fool when it comes to you? I know he has more common sense than that. He'll come to his senses soon enough and chuck you to the side."

“Are you calling Rally a fool when it comes to me?” Aponi questioned then took a quick glance over Sage’s shoulder. “I won’t say that about him. He might get upset with you.”

“I can call Rally a fool if I thought he was acting like one.”

Brushing her hands down the front of her blouse Aponi fixed the hem of her shirt. “You shouldn’t call Rally a fool. He’s a good man that has done nothing but be nice to you. How could you take his kindness like that and then refer to him as a fool?”

A part of Sage wondered about the change in Aponi’s demeanor, but she was too caught up in the heat of the conversation to give it a second thought. She wanted to get this entire situation out in the open so this woman would stay out of her face.

“Rally is a pushover if he can’t see you for what you really are.” Sage pointed out oblivious to the smug look that passed over Aponi’s face.

“Sage, stop hinting around and just tell me what you honestly think of me. I can handle whatever you’ve got to say about me.”

Sage didn’t want to say it. The one thing she remembered about her parent was they always told her not to say anything bad about another person, but it was hard for her to keep her mouth closed with Aponi challenging her like that.

What would it hurt?

Once the truth was out hopefully, Aponi would think twice about getting in her face again.

“Aponi, you’re a spiteful woman that would use any opportunity she could to make things better for yourself. I didn’t like you the first time Rally introduced us and I’m still not fond of you. I seriously doubt my opinion will change.”

The office door slamming behind her made Sage practically jump right off her skin. Spinning around her eyes locked with Rally’s furious one.

“In my office now!” he shouted.

“Rally, how long have you been standing there?” she gasped taking a step back.

Great, the one time she stood up for herself with Aponi and Rally would have to walk in on her part of the conversation.

Good God, when was she going to get a break?

Now Rally had another reason to hate her.

Shoving past her, Aponi threw herself into Rally’s arms. “Did you hear those horrible things Sage said to me?”

Looking over at her Aponi stared at her with crocodile tears in her eyes then redirected her attention back on Rally.

“Do you think I’m like that?”

Jealousy mingled with disbelief shot through Sage’s body as she watched Rally tip up Aponi’s face and then plant a soft kiss on her full lips.

“No, I don’t think that about you, my love. You know that Sage is just jealous of you Why don’t you go to that boutique you love so much and charge something pretty to my account? I’ll take you out tonight for an early dinner after work.”

Sage silently cursed Rally for not being smart enough to see Aponi was just using him.

He wouldn’t know if a woman was in love with him, if it hit him square in the face. How could he be actually think Aponi wanted him and not his money?

“I don’t feel like shopping,” Aponi pouted stepping back from Rally. “I’m just going to go home.”

Don’t fall for that! Sage’s mind screamed. Rally, I know you’re smarter than this. She wants you to feel bad for her and make me the bad guy.

“How about you just go and look around?” Rally suggested gently touching the side of her enemies’ cheek with his finger. “I’m positive after you get there that you’ll find something that will look amazing on your perfect body.”

Unable to hold her tongue any longer Sage blurted out. “Please, don’t fall for those fake tears. She’s only using you.”

Pivoting away from Aponi, Rally stormed up to her took her by the arm, dragged her into to his office, and shoved her inside.

“You never did know how to listen. Stay in here until I’m done with my girlfriend,” he released his grip then slammed the office door shut in her face.

With every fiber in her being, Sage wanted to yell at the closed door, but she was too mature for that, however, she was so livid that she could feel the blood pounding in her ears.

One of these days Rally is going to realize that he was with the wrong woman and when he came looking for her it was going to be too late!

Chapter Three

“What is your problem with Aponi? She’s a wonderful woman and you’re always jumping in her face.”

Rally’s words hung in the air as he slammed his office door with such force the pictures rattled on the wall.

“I’m tired of coming into the room and finding the two of you at each other’s throats.”

Sage bit the inside of her cheek not to tell Rally about his precious Aponi. She wasn’t the wrong party here, but he would never believe her. Since he laid eyes on the long haired beauty she was all he ever thought of.

“Don’t just stand there looking at me.” He snapped moving across the room until he was right in her personal space making it hard for her to breathe.

“You don’t have a clue about what is going on between your girlfriend and me.” She retorted praying Rally wouldn’t notice her undying attraction to him. “You’re so into Aponi that you can’t see what’s right in front of your face. I never thought of you as an idiot before, but when it comes to her you are.”

Don’t lose your cool. Rally kept repeating that to himself over and over, as he tried not to shake Sage. She was pushing him to the limit more and more each day. He could usually overlook her outbursts, however lately just the sight of her started to bother him and he didn’t understand it.

“Mr. Teveare, don’t you have anything to say to me? I can’t believe that you’ve been silent for this long.”

“Sage, you’re a spoiled brat and I’m not going to baby you anymore. If I find you fighting with my girlfriend again you’re out of my house,” he threatened knowing that Shawn would kill him if he actually kicked her out.

Stepping closer to him, Sage tilted her head back giving him a close view of her killer bedroom brown eyes that flashed fire at him. “You would never do that to me. I’m part of your family and you take family very seriously.”

Bending down so they were eye to eye he snapped, “I’ve never thought of you as a part of my family. My parents pitied you and took you in because you wouldn’t have ended up in foster care after your parents died. They never wanted you around. I heard them arguing about you one summer when I came home from college. Did you honestly think my mother wanted another mouth to feed in the house?”

Tears burned Sage’s eyes as she stepped back from him until her back hit a table. “I told Shawn you hated me and now I know it’s true.” She whispered holding her tears at bay. “I don’t know why I ever thought the two of us could be friends.”

She slipped past him and out the door before he could stop her or apologize.

Rally stayed glued to the same spot after Sage left and cursed himself for losing his temper with her. She hadn’t done anything to him, but he jumped down her throat anyway. He wasn’t expecting to come back to work to find her and Aponi with claws out fighting about him again.

He was tired of constantly breaking up fights between Aponi and Sage. He wasn’t as dumb as Sage thought he was. Without a doubt, Aponi was the one starting the fights with Sage and it was partially his fault.

Because lately he had been noticing Sage in a different light. However, he would be able to fight it off. Hell, why wasn’t he being honest with himself? He

kept taking Aponi's side because he was still didn't want to face that he was starting to feel something deeper for Sage.

Sage had a little hero worship of him because he had been there for her over the past several years. There wasn't anything more to it than that. She saw Shawn like a big brother. He lost count of how many times he would find the two of them outside doing something they shouldn't.

Shawn was the one that always got the harder punishment from him, but he was three years older than Sage. He was supposed to protect her and not lead her into a life of crime. Besides, Sage would look at him with those big brown eyes and crooked glasses and he never had any steam left in him to yell at her.

"I'll talk to her later on. I haven't taken her out to lunch in a while," Rally muttered to himself as he took a seat on the settee by his office door.

Sage had talked him into getting the darn thing and he hated to admit it, but he loved working in the soft leather. Sometimes after a long day, he'd kick back sneak in a catnap.

Rally tried working on the reports for a while, but Sage kept popping in and out of his head. He shouldn't have said those things to her because none of it was true. She didn't know Aponi was driving him up with wall with her control issues.

In addition, Shawn wanted to take some classes he had never heard of overseas for the next six months. His brother was constantly trying to find his place in the world, yet always failed. Sage was the only person who knew what she wanted and went for it.

It was one of the qualities that made him so proud of her. Ever since she came to live with them all those years ago, he only saw her cry about her parent's death once. After that, she buckled up and tried her best to not make trouble for the rest of them. He was already a senior in high school with only two weeks left to graduation. So, when Sage was dropped into their laps he wasn't very nice to

her. Yet, she looked up at him like she could see straight into his soul. The wisdom behind her eyes scared him and he didn't go around her unless he had to.

“What am I going to do with her?” he mused running his hands over his hair.

He secretly wondered did he intimidate Sage like he did other people.

At six feet four inches, the muscle he packed on by working out everyday made him unapproachable to most people, but he didn't care. If they couldn't see past the outside to the man he was on the inside those people shouldn't be a part of his life.

“God, I need to stop daydreaming and get to work,” Rally muttered closing his eyes and resting his head against the couch. He was only going to take a quick nap and then he would get back to work.

* * * *

Sage stood next to the couch and stared down at Rally, fighting by the urge to run her fingers down the side of his cheek. He would probably knock her hand off and then snap about how her touch bothered him. Or worse, go and tell Aponi about her slip in judgment and she wasn't ready to for that attention hog to be back in her face again.

Taking one last look at Rally, she turned away and placed the latest stock reports on his desk. As she made her way to the door, she heard a noise behind her.

“Sage, where you going to leave without checking on me again?” Rally asked.

“I have no reason to be concerned about you. I saw you were breathing so I knew you were fine,” she answered spinning around so she could look Rally in the eye.

Grass green eyes stared back at her, something that Rally had inherited from his mother's side. When she first saw Rally's eyes, as a little girl, they amazed her, she would think of anything to ask him just to get him to look at her.

“If I hadn’t been breathing would you have giving me mouth to mouth?” he asked sitting up.

Sage’s knees almost went weak at the thought of her mouth on Rally’s but she would never let him know that.

“Honestly, I don’t know. After the way you treated me earlier, I might have left you there.”

“Brat...I have no doubt that you wouldn’t have,” Rally laughed. “My parents and Shawn spoiled you way too much. You don’t know how to respect people.”

“I always respect my elders, Rally,” Sage uttered back as he walked in front of her.

Rally pinned her with a look at should had her making a run for the door, but she stood her ground and glared back up at him.

“Do you have something to say to me?”

“Sage, you need to stop pushing my buttons. Every time I say something, you’ve a comment. Can’t you just let it go sometimes?” Rally complained, staring down at her. “I’m busy with work and Aponi. I don’t have the extra time to baby you the way my brother Shawn does.”

Baby her? Is that how Rally saw the rare times they got to spend together?

Sage wondered when she was going to learn that Rally truly didn’t want her around. The only time he requested her presence in his company was when it dealt with business. He couldn’t make it any plainer for her if he tried. It was time she stopped with her hero worship when it came to the gorgeous man in front of her. He would never see her as a woman he could fall in love with.

“Rally, I’m done. I promise you I won’t push your buttons anymore. For the longest time I held out hope that we could be friends, but now I see that I was totally, wrong about you. I’ll be out of your hair as soon as I can find another place to live. I should have moved when I first started going to college, but I didn’t.”

Rally ran his hand over his hair and growled underneath his breath. “I’m not telling you to move out of the house. There’s enough room for us to live there together. Besides I don’t like the thought of you living alone.”

“What you want really isn’t any concern of mine anyway!” Sage snapped back as she stood her ground while her heart was breaking. “After I’m gone, Aponi can move in and you’ll have everything you’ve wanted out of life.”

“How do you know what I want out of life?”

“I’ve no doubt I know the one wish you’ve had for several years now,” Sage stated feeling like she was growing up right in this moment. The pain she was experiencing was intense, but she had to let go of her crush on Rally and find a man who wanted her.

“Okay...tell me what I’ve wanted,” Rally demanded like he didn’t believe she knew.

“For me to be out of your life and you’re going to get your wish.” She promised as she brushed past Rally and headed for the door. She had a lot to do in the next few days and standing here talking to Rally wasn’t even on her top ten.

“Sage, wait we have to talk more about this. Shawn will kill me if he thought I kicked you out of the house,” Rally yelled after her, but she kept going was out the door and away from the man she had been in love with since she turned sixteen.

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He couldn’t imagine coming home and not finding Sage there singing off key in the kitchen or running through the house in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt that he didn’t approve of. She had been such a big part of his life for so long that he couldn’t think about her not being there.

She isn't going to move out. Sage is just having one of her moments and after she cools off she'll be back to her old self. I've nothing to worry about besides if I can't keep her from leaving I know Shawn will. He's just as protective of her as I am.

Walking across his office, Rally rested his shoulder against the doorframe and studied Sage working at her desk. She had changed so much in the last two years that it was hard for him not to notice the difference. Sage was still curvy in all the right places like a woman should be, but the way she moved her body was more confident. She looked him straight in the eye now instead of past his shoulder.

A confidence poured from her, attracting him more than it should and he lashed at her because of it. Dropping his eyes down, he couldn't look away from how the white wraparound dress displayed her full breasts making him want to do things he shouldn't. For God sakes, he was practically her guardian. He wanted to know, did her lips taste as good as they look.

"Do you want me?" Sage's soft voice whispered making his cock spring to life inside his fitted pants.

"What?" He choked out glancing up and finding Sage's dark eyes watching him with a curious expression.

"Are you coming or not?" Sage's soft voice questioned.

If she kept talking to him like that, he would be coming and her hot little body wouldn't be far behind his, Rally thought as he envisioned taking Sage on top of her desk.

"Rally, are you listening to me?" Sage yelled, drawing his wandering mind back to her and not his fantasies.

"You don't have to scream at me. I can hear you just fine," he snapped stepping away from the doorway. Rally wasn't proud of the road his mind was taking when it came to Sage lately. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if she moved out

of the house. Her smooth mahogany skin was driving him insane and it was getting hard to fight the tempting sight of her. This is good!

“Hey, I thought when a man got older the first thing to go was his hearing.” Sage grinned back at him.

“You aren’t still mad at me about what happened in my office?”

It amazed him how quickly Sage changed around him when he wasn’t being an asshole to her.

“Rally, I’ve been around you since I was ten years old. I’m used to your mood swings by now. Besides, I won’t have the pleasure of your company for much longer, so I’m going to enjoy it while I can.”

“I was thinking about what we discussed in earlier and maybe it would be for the best if you did move out. Aponi does have a problem with you still living with me. She thinks that you’re in love with me and that’s why you don’t want to leave,” Rally said, trying to get Sage away from him before he acted on his urges.

“Of course, she does,” Sage sighed, as she turned off her computer and reached for her purse. “Aponi has a jealousy streak a mile long and three inches thick. She is clueless about what’s going on between us.”

Rally’s mouth went dry at the thought of something happening between him and Sage, but he wouldn’t ever allow that to happen. Sage was practically like his little sister. He remembered teaching her how to drive when she turned sixteen and that one moment he lost control and did something that he shouldn’t have. Rally swore that he’d never let that happen again. If Shawn hadn’t came looking for them in the garage things might be different between the two of them now.

He wasn’t a man to lose control, but that day Sage had been pushing his buttons and he almost came into enticement. Sage still didn’t know that was the reason he kept such a distance when it came to her. Things could never be the way

she wanted. He would make sure she stayed far away from him no matter what measures he had to take.

“Aponi shouldn’t be jealous of you on any level. She’s a breathtaking woman and you’re a girl who doesn’t know how to live her life. You’re so focused on me that you aren’t trying to find a man for yourself. I’m sure you could get someone if you spent some time away from me.” Rally stated, wishing that he could find a better way to make Sage get over her crush on him.

“I agree with you Rally,” Sage smiled. “I’ve wasted too many years dreaming about you in ways that I shouldn’t have. Shawn told me once that you would open your eyes and see me for whom I am, but he was wrong. You’re a proud man and you wouldn’t ever do anything to disgrace your family name.”

Leaf green eyes narrowed as Rally tried to figure out what Sage was telling him. He wasn’t following her line of thinking.

“What in the hell are you talking about?” he snapped, worried Sage was reading more into this conversation than he wanted her to.

“Aponi is the kind of woman your family wants you to marry. I know that your grandparents weren’t happy when your father went off to college and came back married to your mother.”

Rally was speechless.

How did Sage find out about that his grandparents views on his father’s marriage?

“Who told you that?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she sighed. “I just know you think you have to right this wrong by being with Aponi and I don’t blame you. She’s the perfect woman to make the rest of your family happy.”

“Stop avoiding my question. Who told you my grandparents weren’t happy my father didn’t marry a Shawnee woman? My father kept that to himself for years. I didn’t even know about it until I turned about thirteen years old.”

“I won’t tell you.”

He didn’t have to think long about it. Sage only spent time with one other person besides him and he was going to kill Shawn the next time he saw him.

“My brother told you didn’t he? Rally questioned. “He never knows when to keep his mouth shut. I should have never confided in him.”

“Don’t you go blaming Shawn for anything. He was only trying to help me understand you better. Now that I see the bigger picture I understand why you’ve got to be with Aponi.”

“I’m in love with Aponi,” Rally defended.

“Of course you are and I’m going to fall in love with someone too,” Sage smiled. “It’s only a matter of time before it happens. We both deserve to be happy.”

“You can’t stop how you feel about me that quickly and you know it.”

He wasn’t fond of how his heart clenched at the thought of Sage not having a crush on him anymore. He liked how it felt and the way she looked at him.

“Rally, we both know my crush on you was childish and uncalled for. You told me when I was sixteen that I would never be in your life like that and I should have listened to you.”

Rally’s pulse leaped at Sage’s words. She remembered the garage incident too. How often did she think about it?

“You remember what we were about to do when I told you that?” He asked, coming around the desk until he was blocking Sage in with his much larger body.

“No,” she whispered looking up at him.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not lying to you,” Sage muttered dropping her eyes. “I only hear you saying I was a kid and a man like you wasn’t interested in a brat like me.”

“You believed me didn’t you?” Rally inquired, surprised that Sage didn’t know the true reason he pushed her away all those years ago. Her age was a huge factor, but much more was involved.

“Why shouldn’t I?” She demanded her stunning eyes glared at him. “You made it very clear in front of Shawn what I meant to you. Your dislike for me is known by practically everyone who knows our names.”

“I don’t dislike you,” Rally corrected.

“That’s right, you think I’m a burden and can’t wait to get rid of me.”

“You do test my sanity and sometimes I want to find ways to silence that smart tongue of yours.”

I’m so tired of being so predictable. I want to know what it feels like to have Sage’s luscious body pressed against mine. Shit. I’m going to give in just this once and damn the consequences.

Rally ran his thumb across Sage’s full bottom lip and she gasped at his seeking touch. His cock sprung to full attention at the soft noise. He wondered what else he could bring from Sage’s mouth.

Chapter Four

“Do you know what you did after I helped you with your driver’s lesson?”

Rally continued running his thumb over Sage’s mouth. He leaned closer to her body, slowing breathing in the new fragrance she was covered in. The light scent pushed him to take what he craved and show Sage how much he truly wanted her.

“No, I don’t know what I did,” she answered as her cool breath caressed the back of his thumb.

“Yes, you do. If I didn’t forget about it neither did you,” he challenged. “Come on, brat confess and I might go easy on you.”

The devil on his shoulder had finally won over. He was finally was going to do what he had been dreaming about. He had been fighting doing this for days and he was going to give in to what he needed for once. Rally leisurely traced the shell of Sage’s ear with his tongue and then drew it between his mouth for a long slow suck

“I thought we weren’t ever supposed to mention it again. It was a secret just between the two of us.” Placing her hand on his chest, Sage moved him back from her personal space.

“Secrets have a way of coming out and I want you to bring this one out in the open.”

Rally wrapped his hands around Sage’s shoulders and pulled her up from her chair. Spinning her around, he pressed her back to the table behind them.

“Have you told Shawn about what happened?”

A pink tongue came out and licked the top of Sage's lip. "No, I never said a word to him."

"Why not?"

"I wanted to keep it special and the only way to do was for only us to know about it," she answered tracing the side of his face with her cool fingers.

Rally tried to ease in his long legs between Sage's thighs and then growled deep in his throat when her straight skirt prevented it. Grabbing a handful, he shoved it up until he got what he wanted. He rested his knee against her soaked underwear and ran it back and forth.

"Do you still want me like you did back then? Do you still call my name out in your sleep?"

Sage's body jumped at his words and she tried to move away, but he held her waist making her immobile. "How did you know about that?"

"Did you forget that my room has a connecting door to yours? I was working late one night in my bedroom when you were about twenty-one and I heard you crying out in your sleep. I went to check on you and got the surprise of my life."

"Please don't say anymore," Sage begged, wiggling in his light grip.

"I tried to leave I honestly did, but I couldn't," Rally muttered removing his leg replacing it with his hand.

"How often did you do that in your sleep?"

He traced the outer edge of Sage's silk panties with the tips of his fingers.

"I was asleep. I don't know," her voice broke on a sob as he dipped two fingers inside of her.

"Brat, you had kicked the covers off the bed and were lying naked in the middle pleasuring yourself calling out my name. My cock got so hard I thought it was going to rip through my pajama bottoms."

“Rally, please,” Sage whimpered as her body responded to the caress of his fingers.

“You cried out the same words that night too, do you remember?” At Sage’s silence Rally continued. “I closed the door and came further into the room. Your beautiful body was glistening with sweat as your fingers pumped inside of your thrashing body.”

“You’re lying. I wouldn’t ever do anything like that,” she whispered panting softly.

“My words are true and you know it. I was unable to resist a closer look so I sat down on the bed. I traced a line of moisture that started at your breasts and went down into your navel. God, your skin was so warm and soft.”

“None of this happened,” Sage denied, wrapping her fingers around his wrist stopping the movement of his hand.

“How would I know about it if I wasn’t there to witness it?” he countered, shaking off her touch and then removed his drenched fingers. “You were dying with need to have my cock inside of you. Shit, my self-control was clawing at me to give you what you wanted. That kissed you planted on me at sixteen with nothing compared to watching you about to orgasm while thinking about me.”

Sage shoved him away from her body and fixed her clothes.

“Rally, why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?” He murmured yanking Sage back to his throbbing body, kissing his way down the side of her neck. “I thought you wanted to have sex with me and I’m giving it to you, aren’t you happy about it?”

Grabbing a handful full of Sage’s tight ass, Rally rubbed his erection against her. “How many of those college boys did you give it up to before you realized they weren’t me?”

“You smug bastard!” Sage screamed, shoving him back so hard that he almost fell over the chair behind him. “How dare you say I was sleeping my way through college? I worked hard at getting my double degree, so I could come and work for you.”

Rally shoved down the part of him that felt bad for doing this to Sage, but he had to make her get over her crush of him. It would never work out between him. He wasn't ready to deal with his growing obsession for her. He saw the hurt in her eyes and closed his mind to the words he was about to say.

“The only reason you got a double major was to be around me more than you already were. You knew that I would give the job opening to you because I wouldn't have any other choice. Don't you think people who were more qualified applied for the position? I was about to call and give a man the job when Shawn stopped me.”

“Shawn told you to hire me,” Sage mumbled as tears filled her coffee eyes. “You really don't want me around.”

“No, I want to be able to date Aponi without you continuously finding a way to make her look bad in my eyes. Aponi is the woman I want to be with. She's everything that I've been looking for.”

Spinning around, Sage grabbed her purse off the floor and slid it on her shoulder. She hurried past him without saying a word and raced toward the office door.

“I've to go. I can't stay here any longer.”

“Where are you going?” Rally asked, bothered by what his words had done to Sage. He couldn't let her go and get behind the wheel of a car distraught as she was.

“As of right now, Mr. Teveare, what I do with my time is no longer any of your damn business. I’ll be back later to gather up my belongings. While I’m gone you can call and give this job to the rightful person.”

Chapter Five

Sage had made it halfway down the hallway toward the elevators when the realization of the situation hit her. Rally had finally found a way to make her ashamed of her innocent crush on him. Why did she ever think he wouldn't take her upon what she was secretly offering him? He had been blowing her off for years but she ignored it. Hoping a part of Rally might want to give them a real chance, but that was water under the bridge.

She wasn't going to involve herself in his life anymore, business or personal. Her parents bless their souls wouldn't want her wrapping her life around one man. Especially a man who attentions were plainly written in black and white, Rally was tired of having her around and wanted her out of his life.

Stopping in front of the elevator Sage cursed when she noticed the out of order sign, "Damn it! What else could possibly go wrong for me today?"

"Has Rally finally driven you so insane that you've to talk to yourself in a deserted corridor?" a rich voice chuckled.

Twirling around, Sage was about to blast the person behind her for meddling in her business until she looked into a pair of clear gray eyes.

"Julian," she screamed and ran into the waiting arms of the hunk she loved as much as Shawn.

Wrapping his strong arms around her, Julian Messener, her other best guy friend, spun her in a complete circle. "Hey gorgeous!" he breathed by her ear. "What has gotten you so turned in knots?"

“I can’t believe you’re back in town. I thought you weren’t coming back until next week. I was going to cook a special dinner and invite you out to the house,” Sage exclaimed leaning back in Julian’s embrace.

“I’m sorry I missed your graduation, short cake.” Julian apologized, standing her back in front of him. “I couldn’t get away from the seminar any earlier, but I did bring you something back.”

At least he was sorry that he missed my graduation.. Now wasn’t the time to get into her disappointment about the way Rally treated the most important day in her life.

She couldn’t hold back her excitement. Julian always gave her the most unique gifts. Over the years, she had filled up her hope chest with them.

“Where is it?” Sage ran her hands all over Julian’s body, but came away empty handed.

“I thought you said that you brought me a present,” she pouted, smacking his arm.

“I did,” Julian laughed grabbing her hand and planting a soft kiss in the palm. “It’s back at my house. I thought you might like to have a belated graduation dinner with me tonight. I was going to give it to you then.”

Julian was such a good guy, Sage thought silently as she studied her friend from underneath her lashes. Maybe it was time to see him as more than a shoulder to cry on when it came to her problems about Rally. He had become her best friend when he took over her driving lessons from Rally. Julian was a few years older than Rally, but he acted so much younger which made him so much fun to be around.

She constantly focused on how drop dead gorgeous Rally was, but Julian was a handsome l man and it was about time she started looking at him with new eyes. For the past five years, she had tunnel vision for Rally Teveare and never

noticed the shoulder she had used for her problems belonged to a hunk. Standing six foot two inches, Julian Messener was most women's fantasies come true with his rugged good looks. Dark brown hair that almost looked black was cut close to his head making his eyes more hypnotic.

What she loved the most about him was that Julian was truly clueless about how attractive he was. He acted more like an average Joe than the hottie everyone else saw. How could she have not seen it sooner and fallen in love with Julian instead of Rally, but maybe this was her second chance to find a new love and get over crush at the same time.

"I would love to have dinner with you tonight," she grinned.

It wasn't like Rally would voice an opinion anyway. He spent every night with Aponi while she stayed at home alone. "You can tell me how that special project of yours is going."

The shock on Julian's face was crystal clear as he gazed at her. "I'm surprised that you remembered me talking about my mentor program," he exclaimed, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

"I love listening to you talk about your job. I wouldn't be who I am if Rally hadn't taken me in. He has been a perfect mentor. It's because of him that I went to college and graduated with a double major."

"So, you only think of Rally as a mentor and nothing else," Julian asked squeezing her shoulder. "I heard you had an enormous crush on him and hated the sight of him with Aponi."

Brushing Julian's arm off her, Sage took a couple of steps back from him. Shit, did everyone know about her feelings for Rally? She hadn't done a good job at keeping them well-hidden.

“I never had a crush on Rally,” she lied. “He’s been really good to me and I appreciate that. I guess people mistook my gratitude or fondness for him as something it wasn’t.”

“Do you believe that lie?”

“I’m not lying.” Sage denied, wanting to end this conversation sooner rather and later.

Julian couldn’t know about her stupidity when it came to his best friend. She valued his respect too much and didn’t want to lose it.

“If you say so,” Julian chuckled. “Where’s that old timer at anyway?”

Sage glanced back over her shoulder at Rally’s office and fought down her pain at what happened between them. She didn’t doubt he was probably in there figuring out what he was going to do with her room. Hell, once Aponi found out that she was gone she would be one-step from moving inside the house. Then it would only be a hop, skip and jump for her getting Rally down the aisle.

“He’s still in his office working. I’m taking an early lunch,” she replied, staring back at Julian. “Go on in. I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you. He wasn’t expecting you back this soon.”

“He can wait a little longer. I want to know what’s up with you. You aren’t acting right.”

“I’m fine. Its best you go now before Aponi comes back from her shopping trip and drags Rally’s attention away from you. You already know how much she hates to share him with anyone.”

“Some things never change,” Julian exclaimed, shaking his head. “I’m gone for six months and the two of you are still fighting over Rally. Does he know how lucky he is to have two gorgeous women wanting to spend time with him?”

She appreciated that Julian thought of her as gorgeous. Sure she was cute and a little sassy. Plus she possessed such wonderful qualities that her attractive,

but she knew she wasn't in the same league as Aponi and her exotic beauty. She loved herself but no where now as much as Rally's girlfriend did.

"I'll pay you later for saying that," she teased Julian as she slipped around him and headed for the steps.

Taking a step to the right, Julian blocked her path.

"Stop being so hard on yourself all the time. You're gorgeous...hell, you're ten times better looking than Aponi with your spunk and dry humor."

"Spunk and dry humor isn't what men want," Sage complained knowing it was the truth. "I'll bet those two things aren't on most men's top twenty lists."

"Don't worry about those guys. You're a wonderful woman."

Sage was having a difficult time swallowing the bad line Julian was trying to feed her. He was just as bad as Rally. She hadn't forgotten that they were called Double Trouble back in the day. They would sneak girls into Rally's house when his parents would go out on a date. When she was a little girl, she would sneak downstairs when Shawn every Friday night and watch Rally make out with his current girlfriend of the moment.

"Don't you dare lie to me," she uttered. "You were a part of the Double Trouble team. Back then neither you nor Rally was interested in spunk or dry humor. I remember Candy and that other girl that was your weekend dates."

Julian's dark eyebrows arched mischievously over his gray eyes. "We were kids. Rally and I didn't know any better, but we're adults now and we both know the value of finding a good woman."

Sage adored Julian, but he wasn't going to make Rally's attitude toward her look any better. Rally was a man who got pleasure from having pretty things and that's why he was so drawn to Aponi. She was a perfect addition to the league he wanted to start with his family. She really didn't think it matter to Rally how ugly

Aponi was on the inside. Right at this moment, Aponi had Rally were she wanted him in her bed and more importantly at her side.

She hated herself for thinking about Rally especially after the way he had just treated her, but it was hard to shove down the emotions she had for him. Damn it! Why did Rally have to be her first love? However, first love or not something had to change between the two of them. .

“Julian, you might have changed, but Rally is still the same guy. He doesn’t want any substance in his woman. He wants someone who can keep his family proud of him. His choices were that imperative when he was younger out there having fun, however now since he’s older Rally has changed his tune.”

The loud growling of Sage’s stomach made her realize that she had spent a better part of her lunch break talking with Julian. She was still starving, so she had better leave or she wouldn’t get anything to eat.

“I hate to cut this reunion short, but I need to get something to eat. I skipped breakfast and now I’m so hungry I’ll sell my new purse for a candy bar.”

“Hey, I wasn’t trying to keep you this long. I only meant to say hi and then go see Rally, yet you looked so alone and lost when I came out of the stairway. You didn’t resemble the spitfire Sage I was used to.” Julian stated. “I had to find out what was going on.”

“Nothing new is going on with me when it comes to Rally. Just the same old same old and that’s it.” Sage knew deep down that things weren’t going to ever change when it came to her and Rally.

“You know what, short stuff,” Julian exclaimed. “I’m going to have a change of plans.” Wrapping his hand around her upper arm, he tugged her towards the steps. “I’m going to treat you to lunch because you still aren’t acting right and I want to get to the bottom of it.”

Sage hated for Julian to spend all of his time with her and not go see Rally after he came all of this way. The youth center where Julian worked was almost an hour drive to Rally's stockbroker's firm.

"Are you sure? I can wait and tell you about my problems over dinner tonight."

"My mind is made up. I want to know what's going on in that pretty head of yours. So, do you want healthy or junk?"

"Junk of course," Sage grinned. "I want a double cheeseburger, crispy fries soaked in ketchup and vanilla malt."

"Throw in a side of onion rings and I'll take you to Taylor's," Julian teased moving his hand to the middle of her back.

"Lord, are you trying to make my butt bigger," Sage laughed, poking Julian in his washboard stomach with her elbow.

"I think your ass is perfect as the rest of you." Patting her on the butt, Julian pushed opened the door to the stairwell and ushered her out.

* * * *

Neither noticed Rally standing in the open entranceway watching them with more than a dash of anger mingled with jealousy in his jade-colored eyes.

"I don't know what you're up to Julian, but Sage isn't going to be a part of it. She's too naïve and I won't let you take advantage of her innocence."

Chapter Six

“How was your lunch? Did you have a good time? You were gone for a while. Did you even think about bring me something back?” The words came out more as accusations than questions.

Hanging her purse on the coat rack, Sage peeked at Rally from the corner of her eye and wondered why he wasn't having lunch with Aponi. It was usually part of his daily routine. He was never back at the office this time of the day.

“I thought you would be out with your girlfriend, so it didn't cross my mind to bring you anything back. I'm not a mind reader or a psychic, sorry.”

“Sure, you are,” Rally snickered closing the distance between them. “Did you have fun with Julian? Or weren't you going to tell me you even had lunch with him?”

What was up with Rally? Why was he up in all of her business like this? He never cared in the past when she had lunch with Julian. He was coming off like a jealous boyfriend or something.

Sage smiled at her thought and then quickly wiped it from her face. It wouldn't do any good to let her mind think about something that wasn't true.

However, he did wondered what Julian talked to Sage about over lunch, because he had known for a while his buddy found Sage very beautiful.

Had Julian finally made a move on her?

No! He wasn't going to think about that. Sage was a smart woman and there was no way in hell she would fall for Julian's practiced charm.

“I'm not going to ask how you knew I was with Julian. For someone who wants me to say out of his personal life. You're sure are in mine all of a sudden.

What's up with that?" Sage demanded, shoving past Rally as she went over to her desk and dug underneath it for a box.

Placing it on small table next to her, she started picking up her personal items and placed them inside. Sage ignored the look Rally was giving her while she worked at getting the space cleared of any memory of her. She had been at it for about ten minutes before Rally interrupted her.

"What are you doing? It's the middle of the day. I don't think this is the best time to be cleaning."

Was he serious? Had he really forgotten what he said to her that quickly?

"I'm not cleaning, Rally," Sage sighed, placing the four leaf clover paperweight with the other items in the banker's box.

She held back a moan as Rally's arm brushed against her when reached around her body and picked up the paperweight. Lord, would she ever be able not to want him? Rally was like the breath she breathed, but she had to let him go with a clean break. He wasn't interested in her. Julian could prove to be the man of her dreams. Lunch was wonderful. Julian was attentive, the perfect date.

"I can't believe you still have this," he said, pitching it into the air and catching it. "I gave this to you on your sixteenth birthday. That was the year you were into green and having good luck."

Taking the four-leaf clover away from Rally, she placed it back where she had it.

"Yeah, it was for the collection I had in my room or did you forget?" Sage stole a look at him and cursed how her heart jumped at beat when Rally winked back at her.

"No, I didn't forget," Rally replied, placing his hands on her shoulder bringing his delicious body warmth with him. Rubbing his nose against the back of her head, he whispered. "I'm sorry Sage for what I did earlier. Please stay. You

know how I am. You never used to take my words so seriously when you were younger.”

Shutting down her emotions, Sage shook off Rally’s touch; she was going to stick to her decision. It was time she showed him that she could be on her own. Rally let Shawn move out years ago and it was past time she did the same thing.

Maybe being with Julian, giving him a chance was a step she was ready for and needed to take.

“Rally, I know you and you do want me out of the house. Hell, when Shawn wanted to move out you helped him find a place and even paid for the rent and deposit. Plus, I’ve been holding on to something that wasn’t there. You’re going to want some privacy with Aponi in your life now. I know a lot of times you want to bring her home and can’t because I’m there.”

“You’ve nothing to do with the reason I don’t bring Aponi home more,” he denied. “Sage, are you alright?” Rally spun her around and forced her to look him in the eye. “Has something happened that you doubt my wanting you in the house with me, because you know that I’m always threatening to toss you out? I’ll never do that.”

She was dying inside and Rally had no clue, but she wouldn’t ever let him see it. She had gotten so much better at hiding her feelings over the years.

“I think it would be best for all if I lived by myself. Shawn isn’t as mature as I am despite the fact he’s older. I won’t have a problem taking care of myself. It’s past time you didn’t have any more responsibilities.”

“Shawn is a guy. He should be out on his own. It’ll help him become a man,” Rally said, pushing her glasses back up her nose. “He needs to be able to carry his own weight.”

Frowning, Sage jammed her finger into Rally's chest, "You can't be like that. I should get the same respect as Shawn. He isn't that much older than me," she complained slipping out of his embrace.

Moving around Rally, Sage strolled into the small kitchen and found her coffee mug. She paused and fought back tears as the memories rushed her. Her favorite recollection was when Rally surprised her and she splashed coffee down the front of his new expensive white shirt.

"That shirt you ruined was worth over two hundred dollars," Rally complained behind her. "You weren't even working here yet and you were already driving me crazy," he laughed.

Hmmm...I won't be a thorn in your side much longer, Sage thought as she moved back over to her work area and finished packing up her belongings. This was supposed to become her home away from home, but Rally and his attitude made sure that didn't happen. Her respect and love for him was fading. Why was he suddenly touching her? Now it just pissed her off.

"Did you get a chance to call the guy about this job?"

Rally stood back and watched Sage while she cleared out the last of her things making the office look as if she was never there. If leaving this job was killing her this bad then how was she going to handle moving out to the Teveare house? He had been a constant in her life since she was ten years old, however she was twenty-seven now and it time she found out if she could fall in love with a man who wanted her.

"Rally, will you answer me? Are you going to interview for my position since you didn't call your first choice?" Sage asked wondering why he was giving her the silent treatment all of the sudden.

If she didn't know, any better Rally was acting like he was upset about her leaving. She quickly banished the thought from her mind. Rally must just be missing Aponi and she was reading more into it than there was.

"Julian said something to you, didn't he?" Rally accused, breaking the silence in the room. "What did he say that has you so eager to leave me? I've threatened to toss you out before and you laughed it off. After one lunch with him and now you're packing as if your life depended on it. Tell me what occurred between the two of you."

Shocked, stunned, and amazed weren't the words she could use to describe how taken back Sage was by Rally's behavior. He usually handled situations better than this. Now, Rally wasn't the type to keep his opinions to himself, but Julian was one of his closest friends and for him to jump on him like this floored her.

"Julian didn't say a word about you. He listened to me while I talked for God sakes. He's your best friend. He would never talk behind your back and you know this is true. What's the deal with you today? You haven't been right since you came to work this morning."

Rally continued to stare at while trying to conceal the ashamed look that passed over his handsome face. Sage let her eyes have one last pleasure and boldly ogled him for the last time, but she wasn't going to even pay attention to the speech Julian gave her over lunch. Rally would marry Aponi to make his family happy. Hell would freeze over first before Rally ever expressed any kind of romantic interest in her.

"I need to go and get my stuff over to the center." She informed Rally, waiting for the bomb to drop. He wasn't going to be pleased when he found out where her new job was located.

"What center?"

“Julian’s center,” she replied. “I’m going to work from him. He needed help and I offered mine since I no longer work for you.”

“The hell you are going to step one foot in that place,” Rally growled fiercely. “You aren’t used to working with trouble teenagers and especially young men at that. Call and tell Julian that you aren’t going to take the job.”

Sage was tired of Rally ruling her life saying what she could and couldn’t do. She wanted this new experience and she was going to take to. Rally was just going to have to learn she wasn’t a little girl anymore he could order around.

“Children First is one of the best shelters in town for runaway teenagers and Julian is well-known and loved through the community for the stupendous work that he does. He’s the mold of the perfect mentor a kid should have. I’ve so much respect for him and I’m honored he invited me to become a part of his staff.”

“I told you that you can’t do it and that is the end of it.”

“Rally, Julian is looking for a capable assistant and he thinks I fit the bill. I know this job isn’t what I graduated from college for, but it’s going to give me a purpose. I’m taking it and you can’t stop me. I’m not a child you can rule anymore. I’m an adult and I’ll live my life as I please.”

“Brat, I’m not trying to rule your life. I do not understand why you’re doing this, but there’s another way to substantiate your value. Children First is located in the hardest part of town and I know why Julian placed it there, but you shouldn’t be working there with him on a regular basis. How about you volunteer there on the weekend?”

He wasn’t going to win this argument with her. She couldn’t let him continue to think she was that sixteen-year-old girl who thought the world was wrapped around him, despite the fact it was still true. She knew Rally wouldn’t like her choice of a new job, but she never imagined this. She loved being around

children of all ages and now she had a chance to give these unfortunate kids the love their parents couldn't.

“No, I'm not doing that.”

“Sage, listen you need protection. You aren't used to being on your own. I know what's best for you.”

“Rally, you don't need to protect or worry about me anymore. I'm an adult and I can watch out for myself.”

“How can I not be worried about you?” Rally inquired. “I lose my temper with you and now you're going to work with Julian. You're important to me. .”

Sage smiled faintly.

“Thank you for your concern. I really appreciate it, however I'm too old for a big brother or a protector and the times I did need one, Shawn was there for me,” she said back watching Rally's jade gaze narrow on her face. “Look, Julian is waiting for me. I've got to go. I'll be home later tonight.”

Picking up the box, she went out the door without looking back.

Chapter Seven

He wasn't going to let her do this! Sage didn't have the toughness to deal with the children that hung out in Julian's center. She was still so sheltered when it came to so much and he was partially to blame. If he hadn't been fighting his real feelings for her and started using Aponi as a roadblock none of this would be happening.

Sage wanted things from him that he wasn't prepared to share yet. Her fresh and optimistic way of looking at life was getting to him. She never seemed to have a down moment until he started pushing her further away, but he had to do it. That was the only way he could survive being around her.

Was there something wrong with him? How could he not give Sage the chance she wanted with him? He wasn't blind, he saw how she looked at him when he was in the room or the times Aponi came somewhere with him. Sage and Aponi were like night and day.

His little brat was so full of life and experienced things at such a deeper level. Sage wasn't the type of woman a man could love and leave. She possessed the qualities a man looked for when he wanted a mate to spend the rest of his life with.

Why were all of these entanglements hitting him now? Did it have something to do with seeing Sage so happy with Julian in the hallway? She never smiled at him like that and for some reason it pissed him off. Sage was supposed to think that he was the one who had everything going on. She had idolized him since she was a kid and he never thought another man, particularly Julian, would take that away from him.

An unfamiliar sensation formed in the pit of his stomach and spread throughout his body. He couldn't lose Sage. Just the thought of her not being in his house or at the office bothered the hell out of him.

He wasn't handling Sage's walking out of his life well. He needed her around him. She was his right hand not Julian's.

"I'm going to get her back. We can work through this like we always do," Rally said, spinning on his heel he stalked towards the door.

He hoped to catch Sage before she got out of the parking garage. He was about to open the door when it was flung open from the other side.

"Hey, baby. Where are you going?" Aponi asked, kissing him on the cheek as she brushed past him with three designer bags swinging from each arm.

"I'm going out for a while," he answered trying to move past her, but Aponi's hand flew out and wrapped around his wrist. "No, you aren't. I need you to help me pick out something to wear for dinner with my parents tonight. Or did you forget they were taking us out? I think they're hoping to hear that we're engaged."

"Why would your parents think we're engaged?" Rally asked, removing Aponi's hand from his body. "I never told them that."

Shit, Aponi wouldn't make a good wife for him after he thought about it. He had never thought about it before, but with the way, Aponi spent money she would have him in the poor house in less than a year.

Moving away from him, Aponi tossed her bags on Sage's empty desk.

"I might have hinted it. Was that so wrong? We have been together awhile now. There's nothing else left for us to do but get married."

"You shouldn't have told them that," Rally complained. "I haven't brought that up to you. You know that we're together, but I never said there was a wedding in our future. I've too much going on right now to even think about making that kind of commitment to anyone."

You would marry Sage in a heartbeat, if you finally admit that you're in love with her, his mind taunted.

Aponi rushed up to him and poked him in the chest with her finger.

“Don’t pull that shit on me. You know that we’ve talked about getting married because I would make a good supportive wife. Why have you changed your mind all of a sudden? Is there something going on that I need to know about?”

The accusation hung in the air between them and Rally wondered how to answer her.

“Aponi, I’ve changed my mind.”

“No, shit,” she snapped. “Why do I think Sage has something to do with this? Has she been bad mouthing me again? You know she’s jealous of what we have and by the fact that you’ll never want her. I don’t how you’ve put up with her this long. Isn’t it past time she moved out of the house and made her own mark in the world without your help?”

“Stop it now,” he demanded, pissed at the way Aponi was disrespecting Sage. He was still mad at himself for not taking up for Sage earlier today. “She isn’t in our relationship. She does have a life of her own. Not that it’s any of your business but Sage quit working for me today and is on her way to her new job.”

Rally hated that Aponi pushed him to tell about Sage leaving as Aponi’s face lit up with pleasure.

“Little Spice is gone? Where did she go? Who’s she working for? Is she gone for good?”

“Julian, at his shelter,” he bit out roughly. “She quit today.”

“Lucky girl,” Aponi purred. “Julian is one sexy man. If hadn’t laid eyes on you first he would have been my second choice. I wonder how long it will before he asks her out on a date.”

Jealousy ate at Rally as he thought about Sage about Sage going out with his laid back friend. With their similar personalities, they would be an unbelievable match for each other. No, it wouldn't happen. Sage wouldn't go out with Julian. Not when she had feelings for him.

"Julian doesn't see Sage like that. He has almost known her for as long as I have."

Aponi snickered at him as she picked her bags back up.

"I'm not Sage's friend and I'll never like her, but she is a nice-looking girl. Julian wouldn't have given her a job this quickly unless he was attracted to her. Surely, you don't think he offered her a job out of the kindness of his heart?"

Rally was so stunned that he couldn't think. Julian was attracted to Sage? That wasn't possible. Julian was older than him. He just celebrated his buddy's fortieth birthday last month. Fuck, he wasn't going to let this happen. Aponi didn't know what she was talking about. She was only taking another shot at Sage to upset him.

"You're wrong. Julian is just giving Sage a helping hand. He's a good guy like that. Besides Julian isn't Sage's type. She would never go for a guy like him."

"Julian is every woman's type," Aponi corrected as she brushed past him. "He's understanding, sweet, successful and has a killer body. That man can fill out a white t-shirt better than a Chippendale's stripper can. Sage might have a new boyfriend in her future. Which I think is a good thing."

"Why is it a good thing?"

"Sage's hero worship of you was getting a little obvious. I'm surprised she didn't have a crush on Shawn with the amount of time they spent together and he's closer to her own age."

"You've got to stop with all these assumptions. Sage is only going to be Julian's employee and nothing more. Furthermore, Shawn has only seen Sage like a

little sister and nothing is going to change that. He'll be very pissed off if he knew you said anything else. My brother is too reckless for Sage to have any romantic feelings for him.”

“Sure, whatever,” Aponi tossed back with a cool look over her shoulder as she opened the office door. “I’m done talking about Sage. I’ve I have to drop these packages off at home and then head back to work. Don’t forget dinner with my parents is at six o’clock sharp. I’ll expect you at my house by five o’clock,” Aponi sauntered out the door snapping it shut behind her.

Rally started after Aponi, swore, and then stopped. He raked his fingers through his hair. How did his day start out so damn bad? Sage left him for a job she was overqualified for. Aponi tricked him into a dinner date with her nosy and pushy parents. Shit, he wanted to be back home in bed.

Chapter Eight

“Okay boss, where do you want me?” The question was spoken softly behind him, but Julian knew who it was without turning around.

“I’m surprised you’re here. I thought Rally would have stopped you from coming,” he uttered spinning around in his chair.

His mouth almost fell open at the sight of Sage dressed in a hot pink t-shirt and a pair of jeans. She looked so young and relaxed. Totally different from the upset woman he saw a few hours ago. He liked how the pink brought out the rich brown of her skin tone. Her chocolate eyes sparkled behind her glasses.

He had always been attracted to Sage, but kept his feelings hidden because he knew she was in love with Rally. However, since she wasn’t working for him maybe he’d have a chance to get to know her better.

“You look very cute in your outfit. Are you ready to learn the ropes? Don’t let the guys intimidate you. They love giving all the new employees a hard time.” He glanced down at his watch and then back at Sage. “I think they should be back from their field trip in about an hour. So, how about I’ll go over the paper work with you? After we finish I’ll introduce you to the rest of the crew.”

“Sounds good to me,” Sage said, sitting down in the chair next to his desk.

Sage watched Julian while he gathered up all the paper work he needed for her to fill out. She had known him forever. He was really one of the last good guys left in the world. Julian definitely wasn’t a bad guy, so she didn’t understand why he wasn’t already settled down with a house full of kids. Any woman would be lucky to land a man as patient and considerate as Julian. He was probably the kind of man that would write his wife a love letter every day before work.

“Julian, is there a reason you aren’t married?”

Julian ran his eyes over Sage's and then hunched his shoulder.

"I don't know. I guess the right woman hasn't come along yet. Just when I think I've a winner something happens to ruin it," he replied. "What about you? Have you finally given up on Rally?"

"I don't want to marry that arrogant ass," she sputtered. "He has Aponi and he doesn't want me anyway."

Folding his arms on his desk, the material of Julian's shirt stretch across his chest, "Does he knew you've tossed him to the side? I've known Rally since we were teenagers and he doesn't take rejection well."

"Rally could care less that I'm moving on from my crush on him. I have to find a man who'll want me for who I am. Rally still sees me as that little girl who was dumped on his parent's doorstep. He can't seem to understand I'm a grown woman now."

"That's part of the reason I decided to take your job offer. I'm not going to get any independence if I keep depending on him for everything."

"Was Rally happy with your decision to leave him for me?"

Sage tried not to laugh at Julian, but at the moment, he sounded like Rally. "You know how he is. He wants it his way or nothing," she replied remembering her conversation with Rally before she left. "He wasn't pleased with my choice and he let me know it. Regardless, I packed up my stuff and left. I'm even going to move out of the house."

His left eyebrow rose a fraction at her words, "Rally, isn't going to allow you to live on your own. He's very protective of you if you haven't noticed."

Sage wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "Rally just doesn't know how to let go. He does like for things to stay the same. He's really into a routine. I've never known him not to follow the line."

“You’re right,” Julian agreed. ‘I used to tease him about that all the time at college. He said it was a part of him.”

He couldn’t help but noticed the smile that came across Sage’s face. “Rally is a proud Native American man. He believes that his word is his bond. His family always comes first and he tries his best to make them proud.”

Leaning back in his chair, Julian listened quietly at the admiration in Sage’s voice for Rally. It was hard to believe she wasn’t still in love with his old buddy. All the signs were there, so why was she trying to deny it.

“You’re part of his family. He’d be there for you too.” He tossed in.

One corner of Sage’s mouth twisted up in a sad smile. “I’ve been told by Rally enough that I’m not a part of his family and it has finally stuck in my mind. He’s not going to be there for me if I need him and that’s fine. I’ve to make my own mark in the world.”

“I’m sure you misunderstood him. You know that he has been under a lot of stress lately with his business and Aponi pushing him for an engagement ring. Maybe you just caught him at a bad moment.”

Sage took a deep breath and then grinned at him.

“Thanks for that, but we both know Rally meant every word, but I’m cool with it. He has his life and I’m going to have mine. I think I can really do something here at Children First. It’s a wonderful organization.”

“Thank you,” Julian couldn’t keep the pride out of his voice. He had worked hard getting Children First to the place it was. “I’ve spent the last five years working towards this. I had to do something to make up for that night.”

“Stop,” Sage whispered, touching him on the hand. “That wasn’t your fault. How many times do I’ve to tell you that? You didn’t know.”

Julian didn’t want to relive the past, but it was hard not to. It was his fault no matter how many times Sage told him it wasn’t. He was being young and dumb.

His foolishness caused it to happen. If he had only left when Rally had suggested it, things would be so different now.

“I know that I shouldn’t still feel the pain, but I do. I can still close my eyes and see it.”

“Julian, we aren’t going down this road again. I love you and I want you to get past this. Now, how about you show me around?” Sage suggested standing up. “I haven’t been here since you remolded the place.”

Getting out of his seat, Julian pulled his arms above his head and stretched. Sage was a jewel. She always saw the positive; however, he wasn’t going to brush what he did under the rug. He was going to find a way to make up for his past if it took the rest of his life.

“Let’s go. I think you’ll enjoy seeing the library first.”

Coming around the desk, he placed his hand in the middle of Sage’s back and led her from the room.

* * * *

“Aren’t you supposed to be at work?” Rally snapped, tossing his briefcase down on the table as Shawn and his girlfriend broke apart on the couch. “Furthermore, why are you making out on my furniture instead of your own? If my memory serves me correctly you no longer live here.”

“Sorry, big brother,” Shawn uttered, wiping Monica’s lipstick off his mouth. “My cable is out and we wanted to see this movie, so I came by here. Besides, my hours got changed at work and I’m working the night shift now.”

Rally swung his eyes over to Monica who was fixing her clothes and trying to avoid making eye contact with him. He wasn’t fond of his brother’s young girlfriend. She was just a sophomore in college and acted two years younger.

“Monica, I would appreciate if you left. I need to talk to Shawn in private.”

“Sure, Mr. Teveare,” Monica said as she jumped up from the couch. “I’ve a class in twenty minutes anyway. I’ll call you later Shawn.” Monica brushed past him and out the door closing it loudly behind her.

“I don’t want her in my house again. God, Shawn why are you dating girls like her? She isn’t right for you.”

“Rally, I don’t want to hear this,” Shawn groaned. “I can date anyone I want and right now that girl is Monica. Sure she may be a Pamela Anderson copy cat, but who cares? I’m young and she’s young. All we are doing is having fun. Have you thought about doing that?”

“I’ve a responsibility to keep the family going. Mom and Dad are gone, so that leaves me to make sure everything is as it should be. I didn’t think that you would still need watching over. I thought you were mature enough to be on your own. That’s why I let you move out.”

Falling back on the sofa, Shawn rested his arms along the back.

“Rally, I moved out because you were getting on my nerves constantly telling me what to do. I’m an adult now and I can do anything I want. You need to understand I may be your baby brother, but don’t need you leading me anymore.”

“You say that, but I come home and find you making out with Monica like a couple of sex-depraved teenagers.” Rally complained taking a seat across from his brother. “I only want the best for you. You’re family and I have to look out for you.”

“Thanks, but you can let me go and experience life. I’m going to make mistakes and I’ll learn from them.”

“Why make mistakes?” Rally asked. “Just listen to what I tell you and everything will be fine. I know a lot more than you think.”

“Okay, I’m going to leave before I say something I regret. I love you but you can’t give me advice when your love life is out of control.”

Getting up from his seat, Shawn patted his brother on his shoulder. “Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Without a backward glance, Shawn walked out the front door leaving him alone.

“My love life isn’t out of control. I know what I’m doing.” Rally grumbled taking off his tie tossing it on the loveseat. “I’m happy with Aponi. I don’t need another woman in my life.”

Why am I lying to myself? I know who I want but it isn’t going to happen.

Sage is too young for me and I have to keep my word. I promised myself years ago not to get involved with her...

Stalking over to the family photos displayed across the fireplace, Rally picked up a photo of Sage and ran his finger across the glass.

“Why are trying to drive me crazy?”

He knew Sage was partially in love with him, but he couldn’t encourage her behavior . behavior. She had been a part of his family since she was ten years old.

He couldn’t play fast and loose with her. She would take it as a commitment on his part. Plus, he didn’t have a doubt in his mind Sage was a virgin and he wasn’t the kind of man who messed around with virgins. Whoa...what was he doing? He shouldn’t be thinking about Sage like that not when he was dating Aponi.

Yet, he couldn’t the memory out of his mind how well Sage responded to him back at his office. She made him want to show her true passion was and not amazing foreplay. Shit...he was getting too old for this.

“I’m losing my mind,” he mumbled placing the photo of Sage back on the banister. “Sage must not of have felt the same thing as I did because she quit on me and went to work for Julian.” Rally hated that he was jealous, but his was. Sage

had spent most of her life looking up to him and now she was gone. Julian had stolen her away and he wasn't pleased by it.

"Hey, is anyone home?" The sound of the front door opening and closing made him stroll into the entranceway.

"I thought you wouldn't be back here after the way you stormed out of the office."

Resting his shoulder against the doorway, Rally couldn't get over how cute and young Sage looked in her t-shirt and jeans. He tried not to pay attention how her breasts pushed against the fabric making his mouth water for a taste.

"Stop being so dramatic," she sighed shaking her head at him. "I had to come here to get some of my clothes. I swear I'll be out by the end of the week."

He should have been jubilant that Sage was moving out, but he wasn't. He was a little hurt that she was trying to completely shove him out of her life. What happened to the girl that was always trying to find a way to kiss him?

"Are you sure that you want to leave me?" he asked. "You can stay here as long as you want. I don't mind."

Sliding her hands into the back pockets of her jeans, Sage tilted her head to the side and stared at him.

"Rally, how many times have you said it's time for me to grow up and stop being your shadow? I'm finally taking your advice and you're mad at me."

Pushing his body away from the wall Rally walked up to Sage and tucked his finger underneath her chin. He moved her head until he could stare down into her eyes.

"I'm not mad, but I don't want you going out there acting crazy. Here I can keep an eye on you."

Sage's eyes lingered on his mouth making his cock stand at attention. His body always told the truth when it came to Sage, why couldn't his mouth? She

was sweet, giving and spunky as hell. She probably would be the perfect match for him in the bedroom if she wasn't still a virgin.

"You don't have to worry about keeping any eye on me anymore. I'm going to be in good hands."

Sage answered touching the back of his hand with her cool, small fingers. The slight touch sent his blood racing and his erection about spilt through his slacks.

"What do you mean by that? Who are you going to be moving in with?"

Sage was so trusting of people because his parents never taught her not to be. She could be moving in with a serial killer for all she knew.

"Julian...."

"The hell you are!" he snapped cutting Sage's words off. "He'll have your legs spread and be inside of you before the weekend is here. I'm sure in the hell won't let that happen."

"You're vulgar." Sage hissed as she slapped his hand off her face. "Julian isn't like you. He knows how to treat a woman with respect."

"I've known Julian far longer than you little girl, and he loves women. You might not be the kind he usually dates, but he won't turn you down if you pant after him the way you do me."

Rally hated what he was saying to Sage, but the thought of her in bed with another man killed him. However, the thought of Julian teaching her the things he should just plain drove him crazy. He had to make her think that Julian would never want her in that way.

Gasping, Sage took another step back from him. She wouldn't meet his eyes.

"I'm trying my best to get away from you. Why are you making it so hard?"

"I know you want me," he said harshly. He quickly closed the distance between them and caught her arm roughly. "Julian, will be a poor substitute for

me. If you want the real thing stay here and I can give you pleasure like you never dreamed.”

Tears filled her eyes as Sage stared up at him.

“I know you really don’t want me. Why can’t you leave me alone? I’m getting out of your hair as fast as I can. You have Aponi and everyone knows you’re going to marry her. She’s the perfect woman for you.”

Her pain cut at him. Rally didn’t know why he couldn’t leave Sage alone, but she was leaving him and moving in with another man. The need to have her was eating at him. He couldn’t count the last time he had made love to Aponi.

Anytime she tried to seduce him into the bedroom it wouldn’t work. He wasn’t getting aroused by her anymore, but all Sage had to do was walk in the room and his cock jumped to life.

“How do you know she’s the perfect woman for me? Maybe I’m with her just to pass away the time. Aponi wouldn’t give me anything that I wanted, but you would.” His grip tightened on Sage’s arm and he tugged her closer until her breasts touched his chest.

“This isn’t right,” Sage whispered running her tongue along her lips.

“Do you think it’s right what you do to me? You’re always around tempting me and having me craving things that I shouldn’t.”

“That isn’t true,” she denied. “You don’t want me.”

“I don’t?” A dark eyebrow arched over green eyes a split second before Rally’s mouth swooped down and captured Sage’s in a white hotwhite-hot kiss.

Growling deep in his throat, he let go of Sage’s arm and his hands moved down to cover her denim covered ass. He ground her against the erection that had been plaguing him since she strolled through the front door.

How was it possible that a virgin could make him this rock hard and an experienced woman couldn’t?

Despite the passion of the situation, a small laugh escaped his mouth and Sage froze in his arms.

“This isn’t funny, Rally.” Sage shoved at his chest until he let her go.

“It isn’t? You’re barely a woman and I can’t think about anything but making you one. For God sakes, you’ve been a part of my family since you were a little girl. I can’t be thinking about you like this.”

“I know you hate that I used to follow you around and get on your nerves. I’m working on finding a situation to it.”

“Work a little faster,” Rally uttered, pissed he rather be kissing Sage again instead of fighting with her. “Aponi is tired of seeing you a step behind us. She wants some peace and so do I.”

Holding back tears, Sage snatched up her keys off the table, “Well...let me get out of your sight now. I can pick up my clothes later or have Shawn bring them to me.” Spinning on her heel, Sage flung open the front door before he could stop her and ran smack into Aponi on the other side.

“Sage, Damn damn it! Wait a minute!” he yelled hurrying after her. He couldn’t let her leave like this.

“Hey, little spice,” Aponi’s voice taunted as Sage ignored him and shoved past his girlfriend without saying a word.

“Sage...come back here. We aren’t finished talking.”

Rally tried to get past Aponi in time to stop Sage, but she got into her car and drove off before he could reach her. Fuck! He hadn’t wanted things to end like that. Sage wasn’t the problem he was, and the sooner he came to grips with that the better off he would be.

Chapter Nine

The sound of chair being knocked to the floor had Julian and Sage rushing out of his office to the game room located right outside his door. Sage stopped in her tracks as Julian pulled one of the younger teenagers off a boy at least three years older than him.

“Jay, what is going on?” she asked touching the younger boy on his shoulder. “Haven’t I told you about fighting all the time? Do you want Julian to kick you out of here?”

“Bitch, keep your mouth shut!” Mario, the older boy screamed at her. “I’m going to kick his ass and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Mario, that’s enough.” Julian shouted. “You better leave on your own before I toss you out. I won’t have you talking to Ms. Nicole like that.”

“Julian, it’s okay. I know Mario is upset and didn’t mean anything by it.” Sage uttered trying to keep a bad situation from getting worse. Mario was a good kid most of the time. Something must have happened to make his go off like this.

Mario calmed down instantly and stared at her. “Ms. Nicole, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. Please, tell Julian that I want to still to be able to come here after school.”

“See, Julian? Things just got out of hand. I’m sure Jay and Mario will be able to work things out,” she suggested. “But if the two of you get into another fight with each other or anyone else, both of you will get banned from coming back, understood?”

“Are you sure, Sage?” Julian inquired letting go of Mario’s arm he took a step back. I can give them a temporarily suspension for two weeks. They both know that no fighting is one of the top five rules.”

“NO!” Both boys screamed and then looked at her for help.

Sage hated to punish both boys so harshly for their first mistake, but they did need to be taught a lesson about breaking the rules.

“Julian, I don’t think they need to be suspended, however, I think they should have the kitchen duty. They still need to learn that breaking the rules is wrong.”

“I think that’s fine, but if the guys don’t agree, we’ll go with my plan,” Julian stated.

“We’ll agree,” Marion and Jay uttered at the same time.

“Good, now go and find something constructive to do before I change my mind.”

The boys took off so fast to the back room Sage covered her mouth with her hand. She couldn’t let them hear she was trying not to laugh at them. She removed her hand after they were out of sight.

“What are you going to do when they find out your secret?”

“What secret?” Julian frowned as he picked up the fallen chairs.

“That you’re really a nice guy and this tough man routine is just an act?”

“Hopefully, never,” Julian laughed dropping his arm around her shoulder.

“How did you get so smart only after two weeks of being here?”

Jabbing Julian in the ribs with her elbow, Sage laughed when he dropped his arm and held his side.

“I’m wounded. You’re kicked out for two weeks.”

“Do you think you can really make it without me for two whole weeks?” She teased.

“Nope,” Julian grinned. “You’re my right hand and I couldn’t live without you.”

For a moment, Sage wished she had heard those words from Rally, but he was so damn stubborn he hadn't spoken to her since she raced out of his house. She had gone back to the house later that day and surprisingly he was nowhere to be found.

"Earth to Sage," Julian waved his hand in front of her face regaining her attention.

"Stop it," she mumbled swatting Julian's hand out of her face. "I'm listening to you."

"I think your mind was a million miles away and on a man named Rally. Are you still in love with my friend?"

"Can we not talk about him?" She still was hurt by the way he treated her at the grocery store yesterday.

Did he really have to leave when he saw her coming towards him? God....it wasn't like she was going to jump his bones right then and there.

"Stop avoiding the question. I knew that you had a crush on him for a while. Is it still there?" Julian asked cautiously. "I mean would any guy have a chance at getting to know you better?"

Sage's breath caught in her throat. Was Julian asking could he date her? She liked Julian a lot, but she wasn't interested in him romantically. He was a wonderful friend. However, Rally still held a huge part of her heart. It wouldn't be fair to lead Julian on. Just to find a way to purge Rally from her system. She wanted a man to love, but she didn't want to lose Julian as her friend.

"Hmm...Julian, I like you a lot," she started out wondering how not to hurt his feelings.

"But you're still in love with him," Julian finished for her.

“Honestly, I don’t know how I feel. Rally is such a complex man. He tells me one thing and then does another. He has me on an emotional roller coaster and when I want to jump off. He always finds a way to pull me back on.”

“I’ve a suggestion.”

“What?” Sage would love to hear how she could finally purge the sexy Rally Teveare out of her system because he was never going to give in and fall in love with her.

“Let me be your rebound guy.”

“You can’t be serious,” she gasped eyeing her boss like he had an extra head. “Julian, you’re a gorgeous man. I know you don’t have any problems attracting the opposite sex. I’ve seen how some of these mothers look at you.”

“I know and I don’t want that. You’re so different from them and I need that right now. Come on. You know it’s a good idea. We can go out and have fun while you try to get your mind off Rally. I love the guy and if he’s too dumb to see how perfect you are then he’s a dumb ass.”

Sage tried to think of a reason to say no. It would be nice to have someone to do things with besides Shawn. He hung out with her when he wasn’t with Monica. Rally wasn’t about to go out on a date with her.

“Okay...I think it a great idea.”

Julian gave her a huge smile making his gray eyes even more amazing.

“Good...how about we have our first date tonight? I’ll pick you up after work.”

“I live right across the hall from you,” Sage laughed. “You don’t have to travel that far to get me.”

“Hey, at least let me seem like I’m cooler than I am.” Julian chuckled. “I’m glad you were able to get the place. Sometimes the waiting list for my building can be over two months long.”

“All right, Mr. Messenger. I guess I can play along with you, but remember I don’t want any funny business.”

“I swear I’ll be the perfect gentleman. Scouts honor.” Julian held up two fingers and smiled at her.

“You were a Scout?” She asked, doubtful.

“For about two days and then I got kicked out,” he answered.

“Do I want to ask why?”

“It’s better if you don’t. How about we go outside for the picnic and have some fun?”

“Let’s go.” Sage replied. She followed behind Julian as he headed outdoors, but her mind was on Rally and what he would think about her going out with Julian.

Chapter Ten

Rally thought the meeting would never end as his employees filed out the door and the last one closed it behind him. He was working so much now that even Aponi was showing genuine concern for him, which was surprising. But he was doing what he loved, yet it wasn't fulfilling him like it used to. He had decided his last year of high school he wanted to become a stockbroker and went for it.

He had taken all the classes he was required to: Economics, Business, Finance and Accounting. He still remembered the night he stayed up last study to make sure he had the best grade in the class. His parents had been so proud of him when he graduated at the top of his class and got a job right out of college.

Three days after his graduation, he started out as a trainee with a firm of stockbrokers. The recruitment process with the psychometric and aptitude tests about did him in, but like always he passed them with flying colors along with the interviews. Besides, how could they not have hired him when he had a MBA.

It was almost time for him to go through another training course so he could keep up-to-date with all the new procedures and regulations coming out next year. However, this year his mind wasn't on that.

Sage was the only thing he could think about. She was purposely avoiding him. The last time he saw her was at the grocery store when he had moved away from her, but he had been with Aponi and didn't want the two of them getting into it.

Yesterday, he was having dinner with a client and saw her coming out of a restaurant across the street hand in hand with Julian. It bothered him so badly that he almost left his meeting, but he got his jealousy under control just in time.

How could she be around town with Julian when everyone knew she was in love with him? .

Leaning his head back against the leather seat, he drummed his fingers on the conference room table. He had been fighting a losing battle for a while when it came to Sage. She was so sweet and sexy. Her innocence called to the deepest part of him and he wanted to cherish her forever, but could he go back on his word?

He promised his grandmother that he would marry the woman she had seen in a dream. His grandmother told him this woman would be strong, independent and keep the Teveare heritage going. She would love him like no other ever had despite problems they may face.

Sage wasn't Native American. She couldn't keep the Teveare legacy going, so Aponi had to be the woman his grandmother was referring to when he was younger. Aponi may not love him, but that didn't matter because he wasn't in love with her either.

Closing his eyes, he let out a deep breath and tried to make himself believe he could spend the rest of his life with Aponi, but he didn't see it happening. His need for Sage grew daily and he was fighting a losing battle. It was time for him to give it up, break things off with Aponi and admit defeat. Hopefully, Sage would be in a giving mood and not make him beg for too long.

"Hey, are you working so hard now that you have to take a nap at work?" A soft familiar voice joked from the doorway.

Rally's eyes opened open and swung over to the left. He couldn't keep the grin off his face at the sight of Sage standing there. She looked gorgeous in her wrap around dress. It displayed her hourglass body magnificently. Things couldn't have worked out any better for him. There wasn't anything like the present to see where things stood with Sage.

“You’re always so concerned about me,” he said sitting up. “I like that. So, what brings you by here? Shouldn’t you be at work?” He was still trying to think of a way to get Sage to come back and work for him.

“I’m at lunch and I wanted to stop by and see if you wanted to come over for dinner today. Julian and I are hoping to have a small little get-together. I’m such a good person you can even bring Aponi.”

“Why are you having a party with Julian? What do the two of you have to celebrate?” He stood up and slowly made his way over to Sage. He wanted to be up close and personal when he got this news. Surely, she hadn’t done something stupid.

Sage seemed all confident until he got within touching distance and she jerked back from him. He tried to not let his pain show. He had hurt her so badly that she no longer wanted him close to her.

“Julian and I are going to try and give it a shot,” she answered, quietly.

“Give what a shot?”

“Dating, we’re both single and decided why not.”

How can you date him when you want me? Rally thought bitterly, but he didn’t say it. Instead, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks pulled the fabric tight across his thighs.

“Whose idea was this?” he asked.

Sage frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Did you come up with this fictitious relationship or was it Julian?”

“My God, I can’t do anything right in your eyes, can I Rally?” Sage exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air. “You tell me to get out of your life and I do it, but it isn’t fast enough. I’m trying to build a relationship with another man, yet you think it’s a lie.”

“Sage, I didn’t mean it like that,” Rally said trying to apologize, but he couldn’t let her ruin her life with Julian. Julian had too much baggage from his past to be placing on Sage.

She was such an optimistic, friendly and upbeat person. If she stayed around Julian too long, Sage would lose that part of herself while helping him through his trial and tribulations.

“Julian is too old for you.”

“You’re older than Aponi, but you’re dating her,” she tossed back.

“Five years and ten years are two different things. Julian has lived through so much compared to you. I just think it would be better if you didn’t start anything with him.”

“I see why Shawn moved out now. You can’t control our lives anymore. I’m going to date whomever I want. Dinner is at six o’clock. I hope to see you there.”

Sage gave him a little wave and went out the door.

Shit! What in the hell was he supposed to do now? He was ready to give things with Sage a chance, but it was too late. She had started the process of placing him out of the boyfriend category to something he wasn’t interested being in. He had to fix this problem and quick.

Chapter Eleven

“You’re alone.” Sage uttered, stepping back from the door allowing Rally to walk through. She was trying not to think how gorgeous he looked in his white shirt and jeans. The light scent of his cologne filled her nostrils making her want to take a closer sniff.

“I didn’t think you would not bring Aponi with you.”

“No, she had to work late and I didn’t want to cancel on you.”

Rally stood to the side while she shut the door and tried to calm down her racing nerves. She could do this. Rally wasn’t going to seduce with his green eyes, dark complexion and sexy as hell grin.

“Thanks for coming. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome, brat.” Rally answered.

Bending down he kissed her on the mouth running his tongue along the side. She gasped at the sudden kiss allowing Rally to slip his tongue in for a quick lick.

“Hmmm...you taste good.” He growled low in his throat.

“What is wrong with you?” Sage hissed looking around for Julian.

“Nothing, I only gave you a kiss. Is there something wrong with that?” He asked innocently.

“You know I’m with Julian. Your tongue has no business in my mouth,” she retorted low so Julian wouldn’t hear her.

“Fine, I’ll just have to find another place to stick it before the night is over.” Rally replied winking at her.

Sage’s felt her face turn beet red at the thought of Rally’s tongue anywhere on her body, but she shoved down her feelings. He was just kidding with her. He

may have kissed her like that and came on to her every now and then, but Rally was a natural flirt.

“Come on, Julian is in the kitchen.” Sage turned on her heel and led the way.

“Why did you let me think you were moving in with Julian?”

“You didn’t give me a chance to tell you I wasn’t. As usual, you jumped to the wrong conclusion,” Sage answered looking back over her shoulder. “That’s just how you are.”

“I can show you a lot of things if you will allow me.” Rally whispered and then ran his fingers down her back.

“Will you stop?” She slapped at Rally’s wandering hand and walked a little faster. She wasn’t sure what had gotten into Rally, but all this flirting and teasing was getting to her. She needed Julian to help her calm down.

* * * *

Walking behind Sage, Rally noticed how the dress hugged her nice full ass. How did he ever think he could make it through this ridiculous dinner without his cock getting hard for her?

He was semi-erect before she even opened the door to Julian’s house. All he could think about on the way over here was how it would felt to slip into her tight, wet body. How he would go slow making her stretch to accommodate his erection until the both of them screamed from the pleasure of it.

Rally couldn’t help but smile to himself. Sage was going to be so shocked when he admitted defeat and asked her out on a date. First, he still had to break things off with Aponi, which wouldn’t be too hard at all. Then he would get Sage to dump Julian and they could be together.

“Sage, we need to talk.”

“Not now, Rally.” Sage walked into the kitchen and planted a kiss on Julian. It took all his self-control not to push his old college roommate in the face.

“Glad you could come, Rally. It has been a while. Where’s Aponi?” Julian asked wrapping his arm around Sage in a possessive manner.

He saw red and almost jerked Julian’s arm off Sage.

“Yeah, I’m glad Sage invited me over. Aponi had to work late, so I decided to come solo. I hope that was okay?”

I don’t give a damn if it wasn’t. I was coming to check out my competition.

“Rally, we have plenty of food. Sage is too good to me. She makes sure I’m well-taken care of,” Julian replied.

Well taken care of better mean out of the bedroom and not in it, he thought.

“Sage is so giving like that. I think it’s one of the reasons that Shawn and I love her so much. She’s such a people person.”

“It’s hard not to love someone as fantastic as Sage. She’s one of a kind and I’m glad she’s with me.”

Only for the time being, old friend, Rally thought. I’m going to get her back in my life.

“Guys, how about we start to eat before the food gets cold,” Sage suggested.

“Sure, baby,” Julian grinned. “I’m sure Rally doesn’t mind helping me take some of the plates into the dining room.”

“I don’t mind at all,” he answered grabbing a dish of mashed potatoes off the table and followed Julian while Sage stayed behind in the kitchen. He was pissed he wasn’t able to get another moment alone with her, but he would before he left.

* * * *

Sage pushed her food around of her plate trying to keep her eyes from looking at the skin exposed by Rally’s shirt. He came here out of spite just to taunt her with that muscular body of his. Rally knew how much she loved it when he wore white shirts. Furthermore, where in the hell had he purchased those jeans?

They filled out his thighs and the little hole in the knee only added to his sex appeal tonight.

She could barely answer any of the questions he was tossing her way. Julian had even touched her a couple of times and asked if she was all right. She must have given him an answer that satisfied him because he left her alone.

“Rally, how are things going at work?” She asked, joining the conversation.

Rally swung his eyes away from Julian over to her. They looked like green, polished jade. “I’m not going to lie. I wish you were still there. This new guy is good, but he isn’t you.”

“I wasn’t there that long enough for you to feel like that,” she replied.

“Time length isn’t what’s impressive to an employer, but how well the employee handles the situation. You were quick to respond to anything that I wanted. You enjoyed working at a fast pace. I never had a problem with you not giving me enough detailed descriptions. God, your mind is like a snapshot. I showed you something once and you knew it.”

“You’re only saying that because we’re family.”

“No,” Rally denied. “I’m giving you a compliment and every word I’ve said is true. I never worried about you not taking deadlines and schedules seriously. I miss how organized and easy you made my life. I only had to worry about my problems not everyone else’s.”

“He’s right you know,” Julian agreed as he chimed in. “I see the difference at Children First since you came on as my assistant. You’re such a task oriented person and I never made list until you came.”

Leaning over, she kissed Julian on the cheek.

“Thank you. I’m trying my best to get you in order over there. You’re such a mess.”

“I’m becoming less of a mess since you entered my life.”

Julian opened his mouth to say something else, but his cell phone cut him off. Picking it up, he answered it and then looked back at her.

“Do you mind if I take this call?” Julian held the cell phone against his chest, looking back and forth between her and Rally.

“Go ahead. I can clear the table and get dessert ready,” Sage replied.

“You’re a doll.” Julian kissed her on the head and left the dining room for his bedroom. A second later his bedroom door closed and she prayed Julian wouldn’t be gone too long.

“Does he do that a lot?”

“What?” She stood up and started gathering up the plates off the table. Taking them into the kitchen, she placed them in the sink.

“Leave you alone to answer phone calls. This is your first dinner party and he left you alone with me,” Rally answered behind her. He was so close that she could feel his breath on her neck.

“Can’t you just leave it alone?” Spinning around, she fell back against the counter as Rally boxed her in with his body. “God...what is your deal?”

“Nothing,” he grinned. “I only wanted to see if you needed help with the dishes.”

“It isn’t possible for us to wash dishes this close together,” she whispered.

“I’m sure I can think of something else,” Rally assured her as his finger pulled down the strap on her green dress. “Do you know how much I’ve been fighting not to kiss you all night right in front of Julian?”

“Rally, stop,” Sage moaned as he exposed her breasts to the cool air in the kitchen. “We can’t do this.”

“What are we doing?”

“You’re trying to seduce me with my boyfriend not twenty feet from us.”

“I’m not seducing you. Flirting...yes, but no to the seduction,” he answered then ran his tongue across her swollen nipples.

She bit down on her bottom lip to keep from screaming out. It wasn’t fair that Rally could make her come alive like this. Her body shivered as Rally shoved her dress up past her hips.

“Fuck,” he growled looking down at her. “I didn’t know you weren’t wearing any damn underwear.” He brushed his knuckles over her damp curls before slipping two thick fingers inside.

Her breath hissed out between her two front teeth and she grabbed a handful of the white shirt Rally was wearing. “I couldn’t with this dress.”

Lord, she was going to hell for this.

Julian could come out any minute and catch them. “We’ve got to stop,” she uttered trying to regain her common sense.

“In a minute,” Rally answered removing his fingers leaving her empty and wanting more. Before she could move, Rally lifted her up on the counter. He placed his hand on her thighs and spread them apart. She didn’t have a time to react before Rally dropped to his knees and placed his face between her legs.

Covering her mouth with one hand, Sage grabbed onto Rally’s shoulder with the other as his tongue licked at her. Some of the strokes were long and fast while others were slow and tempting. As quick as it had started it ended as quickly as Rally lifted her off the counter and fixed her dress.

Sage blinked and tried to regain her senses as Rally moved away from her. What in hell just happened? One minute Rally was between her legs licking her like an ice cream cone and the next, he was halfway across the room.

The sound of feet pounding down the hall shook her to her senses. Rally stopped because Julian was coming back. She almost ruined her friendship with Julian because of her sexual attraction to Rally.

You're lying to yourself. You're more than sexual aroused by Rally. He has made you fall head over heels in love with him. The love you felt for him never went away it only grew stronger.

"Sage, I've incredible news," Julian uttered as he rushed across the corner and pulled her into his arms. "You'll never believe what happened."

Grinning, she leaned back in Julian's arms. "I don't have a clue, but why don't you tell me."

"I got some extra money so we'll be able to have that charity donation drive like I wanted to at Children First."

"Oh, Julian," she mumbled. "That's wonderful! I'm so happy for you. Is there anything I can do?" Please God let there be something because she had to get the feel of Rally between her legs out of her mind.

"I need to start making a list of everyone I want to invite and get an idea for an invitation," he suggested.

"I'll be on it after I escort Rally to the door. Give me a few minutes and I'll be back." Sage moved in the direction of the door and prayed Rally would follow.

The time it took for her to get from the kitchen back to the front door seemed to take forever because Rally keep brushing his hand over her butt giving it a little squeeze here and there. It was all she could do not to slap his hand away and draw Julian's attention.

Sage opened the door and shoved Rally into the hallway and she shut the door behind them.

"Have you been hitting the hard liquor or something? You aren't acting like yourself."

"How do I usually act around you?"

“Distant and unfeeling,” she answered. “Like you’re counting the minutes until I was away from you. Honestly, I hate you more than Aponi and you knew she’s at the bottom of my people to dislike list.”

How could she be out in the hallway talking with Rally so calmly after where his mouth and tongue had been?

* * * *

It would have hurt less if Sage had said he was like something she found on the bottom of her shoe. How could she say she hated him more than Aponi? Yes, he had been hard on her lately, but that was because he was trying to fight his attraction for her. Did she not remember where his mouth was a few minutes ago?

His face hardened.

“It beats having you in my face all the time telling me how much you loved me. Don’t think what happened in there meant anything to me. I haven’t slept with Aponi in a couple of days and I needed something.”

“You bastard,” Sage hissed. “You have done and said a lot of mean things to me, but that has to be the cruelest. I don’t want you coming around me anymore. If you see me on the street, turn the other way.”

Rally flinched at his cruel behavior. Sage was so loving and he just ripped her to shreds because he was to the point of no return. He had to fix things with her. She couldn’t run to Julian and cry on his shoulder. It might lead to things he didn’t want to think about.

“Sage...”

“Don’t even think about it.” She whispered. Reaching behind her, Sage opened the door and walked inside closing it behind her.

Rally touched the door with the palm of his hand while calling himself a thousand names.

“I’m sorry, Sage.”

He would go by Children First tomorrow and beg her if he had to. She might push in away at first, but after he pleaded his case so would have to understand why he pushed her away all of these years.

“I’m going to win you back,” he whispered touching the door one last time and then walked away.

Chapter Twelve

The newspaper was starting to get old and torn, but the memory of what happened was fresh in his mind like it happened yesterday. Julian was doing everything in his power to make up for the past, but it still didn't seem like enough. If only he hadn't made that dumb ass suggestion his whole life wouldn't have changed like it did.

Rally never let himself get talked into this back then, but he was always the one who took the dare. Why didn't he leave when Rally suggested over and over? No, he wanted to be the big man and have everyone like him. Confidence had never been his strongest quality. Most people thought his arrogance was a sign of high confidence in reality. He was constantly wondering if people really liked him or dealt with him because they had to.

"I can't believe it's about another anniversary. What am I going to do this year? I've tried so many things to make up for my wrong, but none of them seem to work."

"Has this place finally driven you to talk to yourself?"

Julian shoved the paper inside his desk and slammed it shut as Sage came further into the room carrying several bags.

"Did you buy the store out or something?"

Grinning at him, Sage sat the bags on the floor and then came around his side of his desk. Taking a seat on the edge, she gave a cute wink.

"I was out Christmas shopping. I saw some things that I couldn't resist."

“I forgot that it’s almost Christmas time. I usually don’t start until the last minute anyway.” There was too much going on with him to think about buying any Christmas presents this year. However, he wasn’t going to ruin Sage’s fun.

“I typically start a couple of weeks early. Rally always teases about that, but he won’t have a chance this year since I’m not living in his house.”

Reclining back in his seat, Julian rested his hands on top of his stomach. He wasn’t dumb. He knew something happened between Sage and Rally when he was in the bedroom. However, whenever he approached the subject Sage would change it.

“I thought the dinner party went well last night, don’t you?”

Sage’s eyes darted around the room trying to avoid making eye contact with him. “It was okay,” she replied, squirming on his desk.

Now, he knew something was up. Sage never acted nervous like this.

“I thought it was better than okay. You and Rally weren’t at each other’s throats. That has to be some kind of record doesn’t it?”

Sage hopped off his desk and shrugged her shoulder.

“Maybe he was on his best behavior because you were there. I know it wasn’t for my benefit.”

“Nope, I think it was for you. He even left Aponi at home.” Julian tossed out trying to gauge Sage’s reaction.

“Rally didn’t leave Aponi anywhere. You know who she likes to be successful and get promotions. She really probably had to work late and thought the dinner wasn’t all that important since Rally wasn’t going to be alone with me. For some odd reason, she thinks Rally is going to start having romantic feelings for me.”

Julian wasn’t going to get into this any further with Sage. Was he seeing something that wasn’t there? Why was he shoving Sage towards Rally anyway? He

had wanted to date her for a while and now he was getting his chance. It was best to change the subject and leave well enough alone.

“Did you get me something? Can I see it?” he asked, getting up from his seat.

Rushing over to the bags, Sage picked them up.

“Hey, don’t you dare. Christmas isn’t until next month and I don’t want you snooping early. It will ruin the surprise.”

“I’ve been a good boy,” he uttered moving closer to Sage. Pausing in front of her, he ran his thumb over her full bottom lip. “Sage, I really like you. I’ve had feelings for you for a long time.”

Sage touched his hand and removed it from her mouth. “I like you too, Julian. I enjoy the time we spend together. You mean a lot to me.”

As a friend or a boyfriend, he wondered.

“That’s good to hear.” Julian kissed Sage before she could move. The kiss wasn’t mind-blowing, but it was slow, sweet and perfect, just like Sage. It was like everything that he had thought it would be and more...

Soft fingers touched his face as Sage move back from him.

“What was that for?” she whispered stepping back.

“I couldn’t resist. You looked so kissable. Do you mind?”

She shook her head. “No, it was nice. I liked it a lot.”

That was a positive sign Sage might be willingly to give him a chance,

“Enough to try it again?” Julian took the bags from Sage and placed them back on the floor. “Let’s try and see if we can make it even better.” Wrapping his arms around Sage, he tugged her back to his body and captured her mouth with his.

* * * *

Caught up in the kiss neither saw the pissed off man standing in the door with the bouquet of flowers held in his hand. Stepping back, he rested his back

against the wall. Rally gripped the wildflowers so hard that the stems broke in half. He had practically broken the laws of gravity getting over here to Sage.

He wanted to apologize for his behavior last night and ask her out on their first real date. Now here she was making out with Julian of all people. What else was Sage doing with Julian he didn't know about?

“I know she isn't sleeping with him.”

No, she was too hungry for him last night to be having sex with Julian. Unless, he wasn't fulfilling her needs in the correct way. Pushing his body away from the wall, Rally tossed the flowers into the trash and stormed back towards the exit. He would get answers later when Julian wasn't around.

Chapter Thirteen

“Are you sure you can handle being here alone while I’m gone?” I can stay if you want me to.” Julian asked her for the fourth time.

How many times did she need to tell him that she would be okay without him for a few hours? No one was going to bother her. So, it was safe for him to leave for his lunch meeting. He needed the extra investors to help with the additions he wanted for Children First.

“Julian, I think it’s wonderful that you want to add an education center in here for the students that have dropped out of high school. Go to this lunch and work your magic. I know those stiff shirts won’t be able to tell you no.”

“Have I told you how superb you are lately?” Julian asked picking his briefcase. “I swear I’ll try to be back before the kids get back from the field trip.”

“Not a problem. I know to usher the older kids outside to the basketball and tennis court and the younger kids upstairs for reading time. I can do this. Plus, I have to start making calls about the upcoming charity event.”

“I guess you do know what you’re doing. If I’m going to be late I’ll call and let you know.”

“Julian, you were lucky enough that these people agreed to meet with you on a Friday, get going before you’re late.”

Sage uttered trying not to laugh. Julian was really worried about this meeting, but she had no doubt how he would have them eating out of his hand.

“Okay, I’m leaving.” He gave her a quick wave and rushed out the door.

Sage stared at the empty doorway for a few seconds to make sure Julian wasn’t coming back and then she got down to work. She had about twenty places to call and set up things for Julian.

* * * *

“Have you ever had a man?”

The low whispered words almost made Sage fall out of her seat. She quickly got herself under control and laid the pencil down on top of the report she was reading. What in the hell was going on? First, she overslept and then got a ticket for speeding, but she didn't tell Julian about that earlier. Then it took her almost twenty minutes to make Julian leave for his meeting.

Now Rally was calmly sitting in front of her looking sexier than any man had to right to look asking her about her sexual experiences. Was she getting a prank pulled on her or something? Shit, she was so into taking care of this charity event for Julian that she hadn't even heard Rally come into the office.

“What did you just say?” She doubted Rally would repeat what he said.

“I asked have you ever had a man,” he uttered loud and clear, looking straight into her eyes. “I want to know.”

She was outraged! How dare he ask her something so personal when she couldn't ask him hardly anything? It wasn't any of his business how many sexual partners had been in her bed. Well, there hadn't been any because her dumb ass had been waiting for him, but Rally didn't need to know that.

“That isn't any of your business and I think you've overstayed your welcome. It's time for you to leave.” She waved her hand towards the door and tossed Rally a hard look before going back to her report.

“I'm not leaving until I get an answer. I want to know if you're sleeping with Julian.”

The sound of the chair scraping across the floor brought her eyes back up to Rally and her mouth dropped open. Rally was standing in front of her slowly unbuttoning his shirt, revealing a wide muscular chest dusted with a light covering of black hair.

Sure she had seen Rally without his shirt before but she was never prepared for how fucking good he looked with it off. Yet, this wasn't the time or the place for him to stripping half-naked... Had he done lost his mind? The kids could be back any minute for the field trip or Julian could walk through the door.

"Rally, what are you doing?" Her voice squeaked as he tossed his shirt into the chair and came around the desk. "This is my work place not a strip club. You need to put your shirt back on and leave."

A dark look came into Rally's eyes as he pulled up her from the chair and pressed her body into the wall behind them. "Not until you tell me if you have let a man between these silky thighs of yours.

"That's none of your business," Sage uttered trying not to moan and Rally's hands shoved her skirt up around her waist and brushed his knuckles across her damp underwear.

"Oh, I believe it is," he growled as one finger slipped underneath and played with her moist curls. "Do you get this wet for another man or is it just me? Has someone else seen how you look when you're about to come? Remember the time I caught you in your bedroom and you had your fingers inside of your wetness?"

"Yes," she panted. "I remember."

"Would you like to feel my fingers inside of you, Sage? My fingers will make you stretch to accommodate my thickness."

He gave her curls a gentle tug while he waited for her answer. She was on the brink of losing her mind, but she couldn't do this with Rally. He was just playing with her like he always did.

"No." Sage muttered wondering had she lost her mind.

Rally's fingers stopped their movements as his free hand cupped her chin making her look him in the eye.

"Did I hear you correctly?" The disbelief was oblivious in his strong voice.

“Yes, you heard me. I’m not going to play this game with you anymore. You don’t want me, so why do you keep playing with my emotions?”

“I don’t want you,” Rally snapped. Grabbing her hand that was pressed against the wall, he wrapped it around his thick erection.

“Does this feel like I don’t want you? I wake up every morning too hard to even get out of bed. I’ve had to laid lay there and get rid of this before I can even think about going to work.”

“I go to bed with your name on my lips, and I wake up thinking about ways to seduce you into my bed,” Rally confessed as he slipped two of his long, thick fingers inside her body.

She squirmed at the snug fit while Rally’s breath hissed out between his two front teeth.

“Babe, you’re so fucking tight. I can feel you sucking at my fingers.”

“I hurt,” Sage whimpered totally lost in the moment as her fingers stroked Rally through his pants. His cock jumped and swelled even more beneath her fingers.

“Where...here?” he asked moving his fingers in and out of her dripping body.

“Yes...but another place too,” she whispered low rubbing her swollen nipples over Rally’s defined chest.

Chuckling, Rally removed his hands from hers at the front of his pants and quickly unsnapped the front of her shirt and made quick work of the front snap on her bra. Her breasts sprung free and she heard Rally curse under his breath.

“You’re breathtaking,” he bend his head and tugged her right nipple into her mouth sucking it with a rhythm that like her breathless. His fingers sped up inside of her until she couldn’t think straight. She couldn’t believe all of this was happening in the middle of the day at her job.

She had dreamt about Rally doing these things to her for so long, but the reality was so much better than the fantasy in her bed at night. However, she wanted something more.

“Rally, stop,” she whispered letting of his erection. Sage wrapped her hand around Rally’s wrist and pulled his hand from her body.

He let go of her nipple with a loud pop and blinked a couple of time clearing the desire of his gorgeous eyes.

“What is it? Were you nothing enjoying yourself? I swear I can make it better.” She heard the promise in his voice and it brought a smile to her face.

“Yes, I was enjoying myself, but I want you to do something for me.” Sage felt her face turning red and was glad for her darker skin so Rally couldn’t see how embarrassed she was.

“What do you want?”

“I want to know what it feels like.”

“How what feels?” Rally asked, rubbing his thumb across her bottom lip. Slipping her hand back between their bodies, Sage cupped Rally’s heavy cock in the palm of her hand, “I want to know what it feels like to have you inside of me. I read in a book that you can only slip in the tip. Is that true?”

Rally felt like he had been punched in the stomach as Sage’s words echoed in his head. She wanted him to put the tip of his cock inside of tight, virginal body?

Hell, there was no way he could only slip half in and not want to find a way to sneak in the rest. There was no doubt in his mind now that Sage was untouched and prime for a man...no, him to show her how to make love.

Lord...what made him come over here in the first timeplace.? This was getting way out of hand. He couldn’t do this...could he? If he said no, would she go and ask Julian for the same favor. ? His blood ran hot at the thought of his friend’s

hands anywhere on Sage's hour glasshourglass body, however the respect he felt for her won out.

"Sage, baby...I don't think that would be a good idea." It would only lead to a lot more trouble like him losing control and making love to her without a condom. He wanted Sage so bad that his body ached from it, but he didn't want to treat her like a tramp. She was too special to him for that. He was starting to develop deeper feelings for her. Lost in his own thoughts, Rally stumbled back in shock when Sage shoved him away from her body.

"I can't believe I just made a fool of myself like that. I should have of known you would do me like that. Dumb old Sage, falling for one of Rally's tricks again," she hissed as she fixed her clothing. "You need to leave before Julian comes back. I don't want him to find you here when he gets back."

Stalking past him, Sage snatched up his shirt of the chair and flung it at him.

He caught it in mid-air and tossed it on her desk.

"I don't give a damn about Julian. I want to know when he comes back are you going to ask him to slide his dick inside of you?"

Folding her arms over her breasts, Sage tried not to flinch as they brushed her swollen nipples. She loved and hated the way her body responded to Rally.

"You don't have any right to ask me that question. What I do with Julian is none of your damn business. Now for the last time put on your shirt and go!"

Rally's long legs ate up the distance between them.

"Are you nipples still hurting? Do you want me to suck them again? They tasted so good in my mouth. I could nibble at them too, if you like." His low, soothing words made a pool of moisture gather between her legs.

"I know Julian doesn't make you cream in your panties like I do. I make you burn for every kiss and lick I place on your body, don't I?"

Taking her by the hand, Rally escorted her back over to her work area. He picked her up and sat on the top of her desk before she could utter a word, he removed her soaked underwear. He took a quick whiff and pitched them on the floor.

“Take off your shirt and bra.” He barked out the order while his hands moved to the front of his slacks.

“Why?” Sage whispered as she watched Rally pulled out his massive cock. A drop of moisture was at the tip and he brushed it away with the pad of his thumb.

“I want to suck on your nipples while I’m inside of you.”

Pleasure lit up Sage’s face as she quickly got rid of the clothing Rally wanted.

“You’re going to do it.”

She gasped as Rally fell into her seat and then lifted her above his thick erection. Looking at it now, she could probably only take the tip. Rally was much more of a man than she ever expected. Her body went hotter at the thought of Rally throbbing inside of her, even if it was only for a short period of time.

“Yes, but when I say enough is enough. I don’t want any lip out of you.”

Sage couldn’t think about anything but having Rally inside of her. She would agree to anything that he had to say. “I promise, I won’t give you any problems.”

Leaning her forward, Rally gave her nipples a quick lick.

“Excellent, now lift up your skirt as high as it will go. I want to see the moment my cock enters your body.”

Sage’s heart pounded in her chest as she shoved her denim skirt up as far it could go.

“It won’t go any further,” she whispered.

Rally’s nostrils flared and his tongue came out and licked his lips.

“You smell so damn sweet. I could make a meal out of you, but first things first. You’re only going to get the head and nothing else. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, I understand Rally,” Sage answered, secretly wondering if she had enough control not to beg for more.

Nodding, Rally slow slid her down until she felt him slip inside her body. She sucked in a deep as her body stretched to the feel of him.

“Oh, you’re so thick and hot,” she mumbled bracing her hands on his shoulders. She squirmed trying to get used to the sensation Rally’s cock was causing inside of her body.

“Holy shit!” Rally growled tightening his hands on her waist. “Don’t do that.”

“I can’t help it. You feel so good. Biting her lips, she tried to slide down a little further, but Rally stopped her.

“No...Sage...baby, you have to stop. I’m trying not to lose control here,” Rally whispered as he drew her swollen nipple into his warm mouth. The sucking made her inner muscles squeeze him even tighter.

Rally let go of her breast and his head hit the back of the leather chair.

“Fuck! Sage...didn’t I tell you not to move again ?”

“I didn’t,” she swore. “But can’t I just move a little? I promise I won’t ask again. You’re just so warm and I still feel like I’m missing something.”

Don’t do it, his mind screamed, but his erection had other ideas and right now, he wasn’t listening to his mind. However, he had to do it slowly since Sage wasn’t used to having a man inside of her. He knew what she was missing, but he was trying his hardest not to give it to her. That was her gift to give to her husband on their wedding night, not his to take in a fit of lust.

The second before he slipped in another inch his conscience set in.

“No, I can’t do this. If you want to learn anything else, it can’t be from me. This isn’t right. You were raised up in my home.” Rally was about to lift Sage off his lap until she ran her tongue across his collarbone.

“Please, Rally,” she begged cutting into his heart. “I promise to be a good girl after this and not ask you for anything else, but I want to know how it feels to have you deeper inside of me. I’m twenty-seven years old and I’m tired of reading books. I want to know what the real thing is like.”

Why did she have to sound so hot and sweet at the same time? Rally was fighting the urge to give Sage everything she wanted, but he wouldn’t...no he couldn’t. So, he gave her half.

“I’ll going to go deeper, but you can’t keep squirming around like that. It’s going to make me lose control and we both can’t have that.” Hell...he wanted to lose control right now so bad, but he couldn’t. At least not with Sage she was way too innocent and he didn’t want to scare her out of his life.

“I won’t move no matter how good you’re making my body feel,” Sage promised as she sucked her bottom lip into her mouth.

Holy Shit! His cock grew even harder at the thought of Sage sucking on something else that needed more than her lip. Swallowing, Rally slid Sage down his erection until he felt the barrier and then slammed down the need to really make her his in every sense of the word.

“This is where we stop. I can’t move anymore without causing you some pain and that isn’t going to happen.” ,” Rally uttered the words and was trying desperately not to break them, but Sage was so damn smug and his erection was begging to finish the job.

Purring the back of her throat, Sage tried to move, but the death grip he had on her hips wouldn’t allow it.

“Oh, Rally, I can feel you. It’s so good...” she moaned tossing back her head. “Can’t I move just a little? Just having you there is driving me crazy.”

Yes!!! He wanted to yell the word at the top of his lungs, however he knew Sage was just feeling her first taste of passion and he wasn’t going to ruin her right to a beautiful wedding night.

“No, baby you can’t.” He uttered lifting Sage completely off his throbbing body. Standing her in front of him, he planted a soft kiss on her wet curls and then pulled her skirt back down.

“I gave you wanted you want and kept my word.”

This was one time in his life that Rally hated being a man of character. Grabbing Sage’s shirt off the floor he quickly placed it back on her and snapped it back up before he lost what senses he had left.

Sage opened and closed her mouth several time before words finally came out.

“I can’t believe you stopped.”

“I had to,” he sighed running his fingers through his hair. “I didn’t have to right to make love to you.”

“I wanted you to,” she whispered. “You still want to.” Sage glanced down at the erection he hadn’t bothered to cover up and then back in his eyes. “You’re still hard.”

Chapter Fourteen

Rally thought he was going to lose his mind. He was fighting not to touch Sage on the desk and make love to her until they both couldn't stand. Why did she have to point out that he was still rock hard? Did she not know how perfectly her body fit his?

"Honey, can you just give me a minute or two?"

He blew out a deep breath out of his mouth and tried to get his body to relax so he could get dressed and leave. The door was standing wide open, anyone have walked in on them. Was he that desperate for Sage that he couldn't have locked the door for some amount of privacy? Sure, the place was deserted but that didn't mean it would stay that way.

He could have gotten Sage into a very embarrassing situation with Julian and her other co-workers. She didn't need a reputation for being easy when she wasn't.

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" Sage reached towards his cock and he quickly grabbed her wrist.

"No, don't," he whispered. "I'm alright. Just give me a few more seconds to calm down. It's not every day a woman asks me take her virginity."

Cocking her head to the side, Sage eyed his body and then grinned. "Really, I thought you have them lined up at the door." She whispered moving back from him.

"Can't say that I do," he uttered.

Standing up, Rally slid his semi-erected cock back into his slacks and watched as Sage worked on fixing her shirt back into her skirt. Her breasts pressed against the fabric making him make want to suck them all over again.

“Cat-tu-oui ni-yah.”

“My body is far from perfect, but thanks for the compliment,” Sage answered.

Rally picked up his shirt and shoved his arms into it. Leaving it open, he went over to Sage and cupped one of her breasts in his hands. It felt heavy and full like a woman’s should.

“Psai-wi uske-to-ma-ke,” he mumbled brushing his thumb across the swollen nipple. “Your breasts are like perfect melons. Ripe and full I could spend all day loving them while I made love to you.”

Sighing, Sage removed his hand and shoved her hands into the back pockets of her skirt.

“Rally, are you ready to make a commitment to me?”

“Yes,” he answered. In his own way he was as long as she didn’t ask too much of him.

“Do you still believe the worst thing you could do was marry a woman that wasn’t Native American? I know you may love me on some level and that’s wonderful. But I love you dearly, so much that I would die for you.”

Why did she have to tell him that?

“Sage, my feelings for you and loving my heritage are two different things. Do you know the hard time my parents had? My mother wasn’t pure Shawnee. Her father was white and I got my green eyes from him. When she was young, she was called names since my father was full-blooded Shawnee. He loved her so much that he left and moved here.” I don’t want that for my children. I have to bring our heritage back by getting married to someone who is Shawnee.”

“You mean Aponi. Do you love her?”

“Sage, I’m not sure I can answer that. I’ve never looked at Aponi like that.”

“Oh, I’m beginning to understand now,” Sage mused wrapping her arms around her waist. “You want to marry Aponi and make her the mother of your children. So, you only see me as the sad, desperate woman you can sleep with until you get married.”

Rally felt like a knife had been shoved into his gut. Sage sounded like he thought she was a whore or something. He never saw her like that. She just didn’t understand the pressure he was under.

“Sweetheart, I never...”

“Don’t. I can’t listen to anymore of your excuses, Rally. I wish you the best of luck with Aponi. With the way things are going you should just forget all about me and propose to Aponi. You can get everything set up and be married by Christmas.”

A Christmas wedding to Aponi why did the sound of that make his blood run cold? He never thought about actually how it would be if he made that ultimate commitment to Aponi. She wasn’t loving or giving to him. How could she express that emotion with kids? Honestly, he wasn’t sure if she even let the idea of being a mother had ever entered her mind.

“Can we go somewhere and talk about this?”

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Sage retorted. “You make made your choice. I might not have heard it at first, but I hear you now. Pselo, Rally.”

Twirling around, Sage slowly went out the door like she had finally washed her hands of him.

Rally buttoned up his shirt and started after Sage until he glanced at clock on the side of the wall. Fuck! He only had thirty minutes to get back to halfway across town to meet with a new client. This man came highly recommended from one of his clients that he had been with for over six years. A businessman wanted

his help with some financial reports. His last stockbroker had been stealing from him and he was looking for a younger, more established man to deal with.

It was bad enough that he decided to start working with commodities two months ago. That alone kept him at the office for longer and more irregular hours than he cared for, but the money was excellent.

“I’ll deal with Sage later. She can’t possibly get into too much trouble within a twenty-four hour period.” Rally dashed out of the office hoping he wouldn’t be late.

Chapter Fifteen

In the days that followed, Rally tried to find ways to get Sage alone so he could talk to her about what happened at her job, but she wasn't having it. If he came to her job, she found ways to brush it off on Julian and leave. When he went to her apartment, she wouldn't answer the door despite the fact her neighbors told him that she was home.

He was disturbed by the fact that Sage had brushed him out of her life so easily. Even Shawn and Aponi noticed how Sage wasn't around like she used to be. Of course, Shawn was concerned while Aponi was pleased and hinting for an engagement ring. He had been all geared up to marry Aponi and settle for the life she could give him until Sage opened her mouth.

Did she really love him enough to die for him? Well, she wasn't proving it now by spending all her free time with Julian. Earlier in the week, he had thrown a party at the office for landing a new account and invited Sage. Julian had shown up and wished him good luck, but Sage had been a no show. Yesterday, he was driving past the bowling alley and saw the two of them coming out hand in hand.

He was going to put a stop to this. Sage couldn't avoid him like this. They lived in the same town. People were bound to notice she was going out of her way to avoid him. He never thought his life would feel this empty without Sage around to tease him. She was such a constant in his life that he felt like a part of him was missing, but he didn't know how to get her to even talk to him.

"I'm not going to worry about it. I'll find a way to get Sage alone and when I do she isn't going to leave until everything is out in the open."

* * * * *

“I see you must have found a new hobby?” Aponi taunted placing the designer purse back on the shelf.

Sage hoped that she could get out of the store without Aponi talking to her, but she wasn't so lucky. “I don't know what you're talking about?”

“Come on don't play dumb. You're a very intelligent girl. You've finally given up on Rally and it's about time. He was trying his best to be nice to you, but his patience was wearing thin.”

She wasn't going to show how Aponi's words upset her. Did Rally tell her about what happened in Julian's office? No, he wouldn't do that. She was sick at the thought of Rally and Aponi laughing at her.

“I'm involved with Julian now. I was never trying to land Rally,” she lied. “He's a wonderful guy, but we don't have that kind of relationship. What are you doing here anyway, Aponi?”

Tossing her silky black hair over her shoulder, Aponi grinned at her. “I'm shopping for my Christmas presents. Rally usually gives me anything I want and I want a new Gucci bag. I think the one on the wall it screaming my name.”

“That's a five thousand dollar bag. You can't be serious.”

Sage wasn't going to believe that Rally would buy Aponi something like that. It just didn't make any sense.

“Oh, I'll get it for me and a lot more if I give him what he wants. Rally is a very sexual man. Sometimes we make love five or six times a day. I know what he likes.”

Sage stepped back from the rack of shirts she was looking at and shook her head at Aponi.

“Why are you doing this? You have Rally all to yourself now. I'm not around anymore, so why bother telling me all of this?”

Aponi levered her eyebrows at her.

“I don’t have Rally in any sense of the word. Sure, we have been dating each other for a while. However, I don’t have a ring on this finger. I’m hoping now since you aren’t in his face at every turn. He’ll start thinking about his future with me.”

“Aponi, I wasn’t preventing Rally from proposing to you, but he’s yours now. I’m dating Julian and we have a wonderful relationship.”

She didn’t give Aponi a chance to taunt her anymore as she hurried from the dress shop almost knocking down Monica as she came through the door.

* * * *

For the rest of the day Sage went through the motions of helping the younger children with their homework at Children First and telling the older ones to take the horseplay outside, but her mind was still on what Aponi told her. It was a hard blow to know the man she had been in love with since she was sixteen thought so little of her.

Julian coming into her life when he did was a stroke of luck. She wasn’t about to lose such a good man on the slim chance Rally might come to his senses. It was time for her to grow up.

“Have you seen the floor plans for the party? I want everything to be perfect.”

Moving away from the office window, Sage looked at Julian. Today, he was wearing a dark blue shirt with a pair of black jeans. He didn’t make her breath caught in the back of her throat like Rally, but Julian was a very handsome man.

“I think they’re on your desk in your office.”

“God, I’ve been so busy running errands that I haven’t even been there yet. We have over two hundred people coming to the charity event and I’m nervous as hell,” Julian confessed. “I want this to go well, but I’m going to donate half of the money to her from the event.”

“Did you send her an invitation?” She asked coming to stand by Julian. Placing her hand on his arm, she gave it a small squeeze. “I really wish you would stop punishing yourself about this.”

“I can’t stop trying to make amends for what I did. I killed her son, Sage,” Julian muttered. “God, he was only three years old.”

“It was an accident. You didn’t know he’d run into the street that time of night.”

Julian frowned. “Do you think she cares about that? I should have left the club the same time as Rally, but no, I let Evan talk me into drag racing down that street.”

“You were found innocent of killing him. It was an accident. He opened the door and ran outside into the street. You didn’t intentionally plan on hitting him,” Sage uttered, trying to reason with the distraught man beside her.

“Do you think that makes me feel any better? I saw how his mother looked at me in court. I swear I thought she was going to pull out a gun and shoot me. I know I might have done something to the man that killed my child.”

“Does Ms. Raymond know why you founded Children First? Has she stood still long enough for you to tell her?”

“Would you stay still for me?” There was a critical tone to his voice like Julian was never going to forgive himself for what happened.

“Yes, I would because I would understand I wouldn’t be able to move on until I finally put this horrible incident to rest.” She answered, hoping she was giving Julian some good advice.

Taking her hand off his arm, Julian’s gray eyes darkened as he held her gaze. “You’re such a good woman. What did I do to deserve such a good friend like you?”

“Hmmm...I think if you make me some of your famous chocolate chip cookies I might be able to tell you,” she grinned.

“How about you help me start Christmas shopping for Children First next week and I’ll make you some,” Julian teased back, but he wasn’t fooling her. She could still see the shadows in his eyes.

“Julian, I’ve a good feeling this Christmas is going to turn out better than either one of us thinks.”

He shot her a twisted smile. “I’m not holding my breath, but I won’t give up hope. Maybe you’re right.”

“I’m always right. You should know that by now. How about we go and find those floor plans and then you can treat me to lunch?” Taking Julian by the hand Sage pulled him from the room.

* * * *

Two days later, Sage stood in the back of the crowded room and watched as Julian performed his magic on the guests attending the charity event. She couldn’t have been prouder of him. He was a good friend and she only wanted the best for him. He was holding the past so close to his heart that he wasn’t ever going to move on.

Most of the people in town thought of her and Julian as a couple now and it didn’t bother her. The facade gave her a chance to go around without everyone wondering about her and Rally now.

She spotted Rally the second he waltzed through the door with Aponi draped on his arm wearing a white dress that made most of the men stop in the room and stare. Rally looked more handsome than usual in his tuxedo.

The dark fabric enhanced the richness of his skin and even his hair looked sexier since he was letting it grow out. It was almost to the back of his neck. She had really hated when he had cut it off, but she wasn’t about to give him a compliment. They hadn’t spoken since she practically....she begged him to make

love to her over a week ago. So, she had been finding ways to stay out of line of vision and so far, it was working to her advantage.

“You look very beautiful tonight,” Rally complimented behind her shocking her so bad that she couldn’t move. “I’ve been trying to come over here and tell you that for most of the night, but everything I came your way you went in the opposite direction.

Sage placed her glass on the table and faced Rally. She swallowed down the moan at the sight of him in a tuxedo. It looked gorgeous with the white, crisp shirt against his dark skin and it was tailored to fit him perfectly. Not a line was out of place; he could have been on the cover of magazine and sold millions.

“Thank you, but I wasn’t avoiding you. I had to take care of some things for Julian. You know that this charity function is a huge thing for him tonight and I want it to go perfectly for him.”

“Everything will go fine. Children First will get a lot of support, so Julian has nothing to worry about.” Rally moved closer and she fought the urge not to step back. “He’s very lucky to have you working for him.”

How could they be talking to each other like that day never occurred? Did it really mean so little to him?

“No, I’m the lucky one. Julian offering me this job was a blessing in disguise. I feel like I’ve grown so much since I came here. Julian is an extraordinary boss and I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

She was trying to tell Rally that she wasn’t dependant on him anymore, but was he getting her clues?

“Are you and Julian more than just boss and employee?”

Unconsciously her brow furrowed, “I really don’t think that is any of your business, Rally. I’m not sure to discuss my personal life with you. I don’t go around asking about what you do with Aponi. I thought we had moved on from that.”

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “You better believe it’s my business. I’ve known Julian for a lot of years and he’s loves the thrill of the chase. However, once he has won you, it’s over for him. I don’t want him to break your heart.”

Sage spoke with light bitterness. “Julian doesn’t have the power to hurt me. Only one man had that power and I’ve made a vow to never let him do that to me again. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to find Julian and see if he needs my help.”

She stepped around Rally’s hard body and started to walk away when he grabbed her arm.

“Sage, wait. We need to talk.”

Shaking off his touch, Sage shook her head.

“Not now, Rally. I’ve things to do. I’ll see you later.” She made her way through the crowd and congratulated herself for not looking back no matter how much she wanted to.

* * * *

Was she sleeping with Julian now?

Rally’s eyes clung to Sage’s curves as she made her way across the room. She had actually left him to go and find Julian. She was changing, becoming more mature and less dependent on him. He couldn’t count the last time she had come to him for advice or stopped in for a surprise visit at his work. The old Sage always found ways to be around him. From waiting outside by his car after work or appearing at a restaurant where he was having dinner with Aponi.

He hated to say it, but he missed how Sage thought she couldn’t go a day without seeing him. Back then it had gotten on his nerves a little because she was getting to him. Now that he didn’t have her around he missed her like crazy. Aponi wasn’t like Sage. She wasn’t able to finish his sentences or know what he was thinking, just from a look. She never asked how his day went or volunteered to fix

him a home cooked meal. Aponi always wanted him to make her the center of attention.

“Sage looks hot,” Shawn uttered standing next to him. “She’s really turning into a looker isn’t she? I wondered if Julian has noticed.”

“Julian and Sage are only friends. I don’t know why you would think anything different.”

“Sage may think that, but look at how Julian is looking at her. Only a man falling in love looks at a woman like that.” Shawn retorted. “With a little more time I think Sage may get over her crush on you and give Julian a chance. I can see the two of them together.”

“Why would you say something like that?” Rally growled, shooting his brother a hard look. “Sage doesn’t belong with Julian.”

“Why doesn’t she? He doesn’t seem like he would mistreat her and she would finally be out of your hair. Isn’t that what you wanted? For Sage to finally be gone so you can marry Aponi and keep our heritage going? She’s the perfect woman for you.”

“Aponi isn’t perfect,” Rally replied as it finally started to sink in that the perfect woman for him might be with another man.

“Oh, you could have fooled me with the way you keep shoving her down everyone’s throat. I don’t hate Aponi, but I would hate it if she became a permanent part of our family.”

“Aponi isn’t a bad woman.” Rally felt the need to defend the woman he had been dating the past three years. “She does have some good points.”

“I’m sure she does. I’m never going to stay around long enough to find out, but I think there’s a better choice out there for you.”

“Would you like to tell me who that is?”

“I think you already know. You’re just are afraid to let your guard down and go for it. I only have this to say. I wouldn’t wait too long or she might be wearing another man’s ring.”

Shawn patted him on the shoulder and then left leaving him with his thoughts.

“Shawn is totally off his mark with this one. Sage isn’t going to marry Julian. She hasn’t known him long enough to make a decision like that. She’s just being a good buddy to him and that’s all. She would never marry a man she wasn’t in love with.”

How could she have gotten over him that quickly?

Sage was still crazy about him and all he had to do was prove it. First, he would get Sage back where she belonged and then he would talk to Aponi. Things just weren’t working out between the two of them. He couldn’t concentrate on making a life with her when all his thoughts were on Sage and whether or not she was sharing Julian’s bed.

“I can’t stand this. I need to talk to her. She’s spending way too much time with Julian and I don’t like it.” He wasn’t able to move two steps before Aponi appeared out of nowhere and directly in his path.

“Hey, baby,” she whispered and then kissed him on the mouth. “Did you miss me? I’m really sorry that I’ve been mingling with other people. I promise I’ll make it up to you later,” she purred sliding her hand down his chest.

He grabbed Aponi’s hand for it got any further. “This isn’t the time or place of that. Stop it.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Aponi asked. Her dark eyes snapped with fire as she snatched her hand away.

“This is a charity event. It’s in bad taste that you’re trying to come on to me. I thought better of you.”

Rally wanted to be anywhere but here at the moment. He was dying to know what Julian was saying to Sage. He was having a hard time keeping his eyes off her.

She truly did look gorgeous with her thick hair pulled to the side resting on her shoulder. The black dress hung perfectly to her body. Her beautiful dark caramel skin seemed to glow. Like she had a secret and was daring every man in the room to guess what it was. He wasn't going to let any other man find out that secret. It was his and his alone because Sage was the woman he was falling heads over heels in love with.

"I know what this party is about tonight," Aponi complained making him look away from Sage and back at her. "I just donated five thousand dollars in our name. Besides, I wasn't coming on to you. You're my boyfriend and I don't think anyone in here cares I was kissing you."

Aponi glanced over at Sage and then back at him. "Well.....there was a time Sage might have cared, but since she has Julian now she doesn't focus on you much."

He already knew that Sage was starting to change towards him, but Aponi and Shawn didn't have to keep shoving it in his face at every turn.

"Aponi, just drop it. I'm not arguing with you tonight. I want to socialize with a few people and see how much Julian is lacking to meet his goal. I guess I can ask Sage if I have to, since she is Julian's right hand now."

Placing her hand on her hips, Aponi took her defensive stance like she usually did when he mentioned Sage.

"Oh, I see what the problem is now. You want to go and talk to your little pet. Can't you ever spend some time away from her? She is with another man now."

“Aponi, did you forget that Sage is a part of my family? I can speak with her anytime I want.” He wondered. He wondered if Aponi believed him.

“Do you really think I’m falling for that?” She scolded. “You want Sage. Since she’s with Julian, now you want her.”

Rally couldn’t let Aponi guess the truth. Not yet. Not until he had a chance to think about things and let Sage know what he was feeling now. Or rather what he had felt for a while, but didn’t want to admit to.

“I don’t want Sage. I have no clue where you ever got that idea. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I’ve to talk to her about a donation. I’ll see you later.” Rally left Aponi without a backwards glance.

Stalking across the room, he came up behind Sage while she was in a deep conversation with Julian. Sage flinched when he wrapped his fingers around her elbow and glanced at Julian over her shoulder.

“You scared the hell out of me. What do you want?”

She never asked him that before. She was always happy to be in his company. Julian’s presence was changing her and he didn’t approve of it, not one bit. “We need to talk and I don’t want to take no for an answer.” He glared at Julian almost daring him to argue.

“Sage, go ahead.” Julian answered returning his look. “I’ve a few things I have to take care of. You can use my office for privacy.”

Sage looked back and forth between them like she really wasn’t too sure about going with him. Her actions made him wonder how close she was already to Julian. Was it too late to plead his case and see if she wanted to give them a try as a real couple?

“Okay, but I’ll be back later so we can leave together.”

Rally hated how Sage's words cut at him, but he pushed them down. He would deal with all of this once he got her alone. It could be all an act since he had been so rough with her lately.

"Wonderful, let's go." Taking Sage by the hand, he took her through the crowd back to Julian's office. Inside, he shut the door locking it behind them. Sage let go of his hand and stood in the middle of the room.

"Are you trying to ruin this night for Julian or what? I know whatever you had to say could have waited until another time."

He had forgotten how adorable Sage looked when she got her anger up. Her eyes sparkled behind her glasses and her breasts heaved drawing his eyes down to them. After a long stare, he raised his eyes back up to hers. Yeah, he wanted Sage and he wanted her bad.

"I want you to leave Julian and come back working for me. I can give you more than he does."

Sage caught herself in time before she fell over from shock. She was beginning to find a way to put Rally behind her and now he pulled this shit on her. What was she supposed to say to him? Did he want her falling into his arms especially the way he had treated her?

"No," she uttered, shaking her head. She wasn't going to fall for his games anymore.

"What do you mean no?" Rally questioned. "I said that I needed you back at work. We're family. Family is there for each other."

"We aren't family. Shawn is your only living family, ask him for help. I'm staying here with Julian. He needs all the extra hands that he can get. I'm not leaving him high and dry."

"What kind of help are you offering him? Is it business or personal?" Rally demanded softly.

“That isn’t any of your damn business. You have no say in what I do. I could have a house full of kids with Julian and there’s not one thing you could do to stop me.”

Sage knew she really wouldn’t do that, but Rally wasn’t the boss of her anymore. It was past time he started understanding that.

“Come here,” he said, his voice deep and rough.

She had never heard Rally talk like that to her before, so her feet were frozen. His gaze was hot and glittery as he stared at her from across the room. It was like he was trying to undress her with his eyes and see straight to her soul at the same time.

“Damn it, I said come here.”

Slowly Sage made her way across the room until she was within reaching distance of Rally. She didn’t want to get too close because her self-placed control was slipping. Rally had a way of making all other thoughts leaving her mind but him.

“When I tell you close.....I mean close,” Rally stated before snaking his arm around her waist and jerking her body to his.

A soft gasp flew from her lips and her breasts brushed against Rally’s hard chest. The heat of him burned her through their layers of clothes. How was it possible for one man to ooze so much sex appeal?

“I love you in your glasses, but they’re going to be in the way.” Rally stated as he took them off and laid them on a stand by the door. “I want to be able to touch you.”

Running a finger alongside her face, Rally traced her cheekbone and then placed his hand under her chin. Titling her face back, he stared into her eyes.

“You aren’t going to have children with Julian. He’s your friend and nothing else.”

Sage couldn't focus on anything but how good Rally's body heat felt against her. He was the man she longed to be with, but it wasn't going to happen. He was just teasing her and they both knew it. He wanted to keep the Teveare line going and that wouldn't happen with her.

"Do you know how much I want to kiss you? Learn the taste and shape of your mouth?"

"You've kissed me before," she whispered getting lost in his emerald gaze.

"I know but that was out of anger and power. This kiss will sorely involve need and passion. I need to sample you."

Bending his head, Rally ran his tongue along the side of her mouth.

"I remember the first time you kissed me and you tasted like strawberries," he breathed.

"It was my lip gloss. I haven't worn something like that in years," Sage answered. The intoxicating scent of his rich cologne swam around her making her senses shoot into overdrive. "I remembered what you tasted like, Rally."

"How do I taste, honey?"

"Like power...sexy and potent."

"I think I want to change your opinion of my kisses," Rally whispered the second before his mouth captured hers.

He moved his mouth over hers, devouring its softness. The kiss sent new spirals of ecstasy through her. Moaning, she wrapped her arms around Rally's neck and pressed closer. The masculinity of him engulfed her making her feel wanted. She should be shocked at her own eagerness at returning his kiss, but she wasn't.

"Open your mouth," his lips brushed against her as he spoke. "I want to taste you."

"No, this is wrong." Sage whispered trying to come to her senses.

“Baby, this is so right my body is alive from wanting you.” ,” Rally uttered a second before his tongue traced her mouth and slipped inside.

Her fingers curled into his chest as she pushed all of her arguments to the back of her mind. Rally was making her body hot and achy. She didn’t want it to end. He was doing everything she had ever wanted since she turned twenty-one. Blood pounded through her veins, her heart pounded in her chest, and made her knees weak.

“Sage,” Rally moaned hungrily.

The sound of her name on his lips shocked Sage out of whatever trance she was in. Shoving Rally away from her body, she placed some distance between them. “What has gotten into you? You’ve a girlfriend. You shouldn’t be kissing me like that. It’s wrong.”

“Honey, listen to me. We have some things we need to discuss. Let’s leave here and go home. After we finish you’ll see why I kissed you like that.” Rally reached for her, but she slapped his hand away.

“I don’t have time for any of this. I’m going to sum up that kiss as you had too much to drink. Now move out of my way. Julian is waiting for me. I have to make the announcement for the money we raise tonight.” Easing around Rally’s body, she made it to the door and opened it.

“I’ll let it go for tonight, but we’ll set things straight tomorrow,” Rally uttered behind her as she went out the door.

“I’m not going to let him use me as a distraction. I’ve a life and I’m not giving it for a hot kiss.” Sage hurried down the hallway as if the hounds of hell were after her. She was finally having some independence and Rally wasn’t going to ruin that for her. Maybe Aponi was giving him a hard time and he was looking to burn off some steam, but it wouldn’t be with her.

* * * *

“I knew that you dumped Rally out of your life, but did you have to get rid of me too? I thought we were so close.” The light teasing sound of Shawn’s voice made Sage stop watching the kids on the playground.

“Hey! What are you doing here? I thought you would be at work this time of day,” she answered giving him a hug.

“After the way Rally came storming out of Julian’s office last night I thought I should come and check on you. Are you okay?” He asked easing down on the top of the picnic table. “I’ve never seen him that steamed before. I thought he was going to follow you, but he changed his mind at the last second and left with Aponi.”

Sage pushed down the jealousy that welled up in her chest. Why did he always run to her after they had a disagreement?

“I’m not involved in that anymore. I’ve moved on. I have a new job and I seldom see Rally now unless he stops by here unannounced.”

“Is that what you want?” Shawn asked leaning back on the bench. “I remember a time when you couldn’t get enough of Rally.”

“It has to be this way. My hero worship of him has to end. Didn’t you leave the nest and get a job?”

“Hell yeah, but I still go and see the dumb ass. He’s my brother and I love him despite the fact he can drive me up the wall with all his complaining about Monica. I’m not about to marry her, but he doesn’t seem to understand that. Why don’t you go and see him. I know he’ll love it.”

Why was Shawn pushing so hard for her to go and see Rally? “I can’t. I’ve plans with Julian.”

“Sage, I know Rally hasn’t been nice to you lately, but I think he’s seeing the light now and wants to apologize. But how can he do that if you’re avoiding him at every pass?”

“Stephen, don’t you dare dump sand into Cindy’s hair!” Sage yelled at the two children in front of her. She loved working here and wasn’t going to give it up for Rally. She already had a small clue as to why he wanted to see her.

“Shawn, I love you like a brother and you know I would do anything for you. However, I can’t keep getting my heart broken by Rally. I’m trying my best to move past him.”

“With Julian,” Shawn uttered. “You can’t be serious.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Julian and we get along wonderfully,” she defended. “You like Julian, so why are you bad mouthing him now?”

“I do like Julian and I think Children First is an outstanding organization, but are you getting fulfilled here like you would be working with Rally?”

Standing up, Sage pulled her shirt down and slid her hands into the front pockets of her khaki shorts. This was her job now and if Shawn couldn’t accept it then she would have to break ties with him too.

“Shawn, I love you, but if you start acting like a smaller version of your domineering brother than I can’t be around you anymore. I’m meant to be here and I’m not leaving.”

“Whoa, I wasn’t trying to tell you what to do.” Shawn apologized jumping up from the table. “I was only asking. If you’re happy here then stay here as long as you want. However, the only thing I ask is you don’t shove Rally out of your life completely. He may not know it yet, but he needs you and you need him.”

“I don’t need him.”

“Sure you don’t kiddo. Tell Rally I said hi when you stop by tonight.” Shawn said, kissing her on the cheek. He gave her a quick wink and headed back towards the front of Children First. She watched Shawn until he was out of sight.

“God, I wish I was the only child,” she mumbled under her breath.

Chapter Sixteen

Sage didn't know how long she sat outside inside her car staring at Rally's house. It was no longer hers since she moved out weeks ago. Could she still walk right on in without knocking on the door? Or would Rally expect her to knock or ring the doorbell now? Honestly, she didn't know why she was being such a coward. She could go inside without having another slip in control.

She shouldn't even be thinking about Rally like this. She was attracted to Julian. Wasn't she? Rally was just a small part of her girlish dreams was having a hard time parting with. She was going to walk through that door and act if nothing was wrong. .

Every time she got around Rally lately, she seemed to fall for his charming, sex appeal, but today wasn't going to be that day. Shawn wanted her to come and see Rally, so here she was hiding out like she was scared or something.

"Lord, Rally would love to know that I was nervous about seeing him. I need to get my ass out of this car." Opening the door, she got out and made her way up the steps. Without bothering to knock, Sage went straight inside and closed the door behind her.

Traces of Rally's Native American heritage were found throughout the house from the rugs on the floor to the Shawnee paintings on the wall. Rally had always been so proud of his legacy. She remembered how he constantly talked about how he wanted to keep his bloodline going, so why did she ever think she had a chance with him?

"Are you going to stand there looking around like you never lived here or did you come here for a reason?" Rally's voice blasted from behind her making her body shiver. Turning around, Sage eyes widened as Rally came down the steps

wearing a pair of black slacks and matching shirt opened at the collar. A lock of raven black hair had fallen across his forehead. The look made him even more mouth-watering delicious. .

Whoa girl....calm down. You can't look at him like that anymore. He's off limits.

“I came to check on you. Shawn paid me a visit yesterday and told me I should come and see you. So, here I am.”

“He shouldn’t have done that. I’m fine,” Rally said, walking around her into the den. “You can leave now and go back to Julian.” He told her.

Swallowing down an instant comment, she strolled behind Rally into the room.

“Okay, what’s wrong? I know you usually aren’t home this time of day. Are you having problems with Aponi?” She secretly wished Rally would come to his senses and break it off with the self-centered witch Aponi. He deserved someone who cared about him. .

Stop lying to yourself. You still want Rally for yourself. Why don't you stop denying it?
Her mind taunted as her body responded to his presence.

Rally pivoted so fast that she ran smack into the middle of his chest. Grabbing her by the arms, he held her against him.

“Are you willingly ready to give up this pretend relationship with Julian? You want to be with me. Give me the word and I’ll end things with Aponi. I can see how she really is and I’m man enough to be without a woman. You, on the other hand, are a different story.”

She tried to move out of Rally’s grasp, but he wasn’t letting go.

“We have been over this. I want a commitment from you. I can’t be with you or any man who doesn’t want kids with me. I want to be a mother.” Sage stared into his eyes and waited for him to respond.

“God, Sage. You know how I feel about this,” Rally uttered, stepping back from her. “Why can’t we just be together and leave it at that?”

How dare he ask her something like that after she had poured out her heart to him so many times? Why would he think she would agree to such terms? She was too special to only have a part of Rally and if that was all he had to offer, than she would just leave him alone.

“If I can’t have all of you, then I won’t live with only half. I’m not like that. I give one hundred percent to everything I do. How can you ask me to only have fifty percent? I’m not made like that. I want all of you, Rally.”

“You’re willingly to let me go to be with a man you only see as a friend,” Rally demanded.

What was he talking about?

“Rally, I never had you. For as long as I can remember, you found ways not to be around me. From working late at the office, to numerous out of town trips I can’t let you go because you aren’t mine.”

“I’m only looking after your best interests here and we both know it,” he challenged.

“I’ll let you keep telling yourself that lie, but we both know why you want me to break –up with Julian.”

Rally eyed her like he didn’t believe she knew. She couldn’t wait for him to take the bait. So, everything could be out in the open. Sage knew this was going to be something that stayed with her for a lifetime.

“Alright, I’ll ask the question. Why don’t I want you with Julian?” Rally tossed back.

Swallowing down her shout of triumph, she grinned at Rally. She was going to get him yet. It would only take a little more time.

“You’re jealous that he’s going to give me everything you can’t: Love, commitment, and most of all, children.”

Chapter Seventeen

It took everything within him not to prove to Sage how wrong she was. If she wanted all of those things, he could give them to her in abundance. Just the image of her being in love with another man set him off. However, the thought of her having children with Julian didn't sit well at all. He didn't want her walking around pregnant by anyone but him.

If you feel that way why don't you make it happen, his mind taunted. Sage isn't going to wait for you forever. She's a very sexy, attractive and healthy woman that wants to start a family with or without you being the father of her children.

"How do you know that Julian even wants children? He doesn't seem like the daddy type."

"We have talked about it. Julian has a lot more depth to him than you give him credit for," Sage answered as she walked into the other room and took a seat. "People who are dating usually talk about stuff like that. Don't you discuss having children with Aponi?" She continued as he took a seat across from her.

Of course, he had tried in the past, but Aponi always found a way to change the subject to something else. He had a sneaky feeling that Aponi was waiting to pop the no children thing on him any day now.

How could he have let this situation get this far? Sage was showing signs of giving up on him... He was having problems with several clients at work. Plus, Shawn was threatening to break ties with him if he didn't start treating Sage better.

Too much was being heaped on him all at once. He was falling in love with Sage. No one knew that he was thinking about selling his business. Furthermore, Shawn would be surprised if he knew that his older brother was jealous of him in

so many ways. His little brother was like Sage when it came to going after things that he wanted and now he was going to take a page out of their book.

But what if they could, he thought. What if he could give Sage everything she wanted: the ring, a warm, loving home and the house full of children? It would be sheer bliss.

Sage loved so unconditionally and with everything she had in her. She told him all the time she was so proud of his accomplishments. When it came down to it, he just loved being around her. Could he drop his expectations of fulfilling the family bloodline and accept his love for Sage as a woman? Wouldn't his parents want him to be happy?

"The subject of having children has never come up," he answered honestly. If it was left up to Aponi, the conversation never would.

"Really...?" One of Sage's eyebrows raised a fraction. "I find that surprising especially since you're marrying her solely for that purpose."

"I'm done talking about this because neither one of us are going to agree about our relationship," Rally exclaimed. "Have you started making plans for Christmas? Are you coming here for our annual Christmas party?"

Sage's face broke out into a wide smile. "I haven't been banished from the Christmas party this year because of Julian?"

Unbelievable, Rally thought shoving his hands into his slacks.

"You want to bring Julian to the party? Are you sure he doesn't already have plans?" He wanted this time with Sage away from Julian to prove they could have a relationship.

He thought back to how she would wake him up and pull him downstairs to open all the presents. Yet, one-year things went wrong. Sage was home from college and his attraction to her back then was at a fever pitch. Every time she came into a room his body was go into overdrive and he couldn't stand it, so he could

make up an excuse and make a quick exit. Everyone thought it was because he didn't want to be around Sage. That was so far from the truth that it almost made him laugh.

"Do you remember the last time you came into my room on Christmas Day?" he questioned easing closer to Sage until he boxed her in with his body.

"No," she whispered, "staring into his eyes.

"Liar, Liar," Rally responded. "You damn well know what happened, but since you're acting forgetful I'll refresh your memory." "I was lying in bed hard and horny after having a very erotic dream about you. You came busting through the door wearing a short white nightgown that barely covered those beautiful breasts. You jumped on the bed and asked me was I ready to go downstairs and open presents."

"While you were talking I was trying to keep my mind on how you still got excited about Christmas at twenty, but in reality I was thinking about how good your breasts looked."

His body grew even harder when Sage flattened her hand against his chest. "You need to stop."

"Why?" he asked, lifting her smooth hand off his shirt. He quickly unbuttoned it and slipped it on the inside against his heated skin. "Does the memory of what we did still make you hot?"

"Yes," she moaned running her hand over his skin. "I still think about it."

His cock stirred and swelled against the front of his slacks.

"Which part? Tell me."

Shaking her head, Sage rested it above her hand inside his shirt. She didn't utter a word, which meant he would have to speak for the both of them.

“I asked you for a Christmas kiss and you started to kiss me on the cheek until I moved my head. I knew the second our lips connected I was in trouble. You tasted so sweet and fresh like spring water. I was addicted and wanted more.”

“That was my first French kiss,” Sage muttered lifting her head. “I thought I would go crazy with the way your tongue moved in my mouth. It was driving my body crazy.”

Mixed feelings surfed through him at Sage’s confession. Maybe he was the one that encouraged Sage’s attraction to him with that exploratory kiss, but he couldn’t help it. She was turning into such a gorgeous woman and he only wanted a little sample. However, it had been like opening Pandora’s Box. With that one innocent kiss, he had found everything he wanted in a woman. He shouldn’t have kissed her in the first place and that’s why two weeks later he started dating Aponi.

“I think that was the changing point in our relationship,” Sage told him.

“Changing point in what way?” He asked taking a step back. He couldn’t be that close to her and keep a clear mind.

“I started to fall deeper in love with you and you started resenting me because of it.”

Chapter Eighteen

The quality of the air in the room seemed to change after Sage's statement. The truth hung in the area between and he hated it. He had to started to resent her, but not for the reasons she thought.

He was a little jealous that she knew how to go after what she wanted with both hands. He didn't doubt that Sage never second guessed her love for him the second she realized it. He knew that he controlled his emotions more than he should, but he wasn't a live by the seat of his pants kind of person. Julian did have him beat in that department. However, he could learn how to be that away with a help from Sage. All she had to do was invest the time and effort into him.

"Are we finished here?" Sage muttered massaging her temple, "Because if we are I need to get back to work." She dropped her hand and moved away from him.

As Sage turned to leave, Rally raked his mind with a way to stop her. He was lonely now out here now all by himself. He missed the companionship she gave him and he loved spending time with her. She filled that part of his soul that was hollow. He was about to give up until an idea came to him.

"Are you going to still help me with the Christmas party this year?"

He loved the time he spent with Sage decorating the house last year for the holidays. Her smile had lit up the room and the sound of her sweet laughter made him join in.

Since she had moved out, he hated coming home to a big empty house. He didn't know how much he loved being in a routine with her until it was snatched from him. He missed Sage at work too, but he could drown his misery in work.

It was the times that he would come home and Sage would be waiting up for him or the smell of something good baking in the oven hit him as soon as he opened the door. In some ways, she was more of his girlfriend than Aponi and he honestly didn't have a problem with it. This should be his turning point with no going back.

"If you don't have a problem with it, I'll love to help you," Sage replied. "I think Julian could be a huge help to us this year."

"NO!" I don't want him involved in this. It's our time together and I want it to stay that way. I'm sure Julian will have enough going on with Children First to keep him busy with his own holiday plans." Rally's heart pounded and he slowed his breathing to calm himself.

"Christmas isn't until next month. Julian hasn't mentioned needing my help with anything, so I'm all yours."

Oh, you're mine in more ways than you ever imagined, Rally thought.

This was his chance to figure out the direction his future was going . Was it going to be with Aponi or Sage? However, once his mind was made up there was no changing it.

"Wonderful, when do you think you can be back here? We need to get started on a list. I want to do some things different than last year."

The more time he could get Sage to spend with him, the less, she would be around Julian and his charm. Julian was way ahead of him in the department of Sage's feelings, so he had a lot of catching up to do.

He waited patiently while Sage pondered his question for a while before she finally answered.

"I can't come back until Friday. Tomorrow I'm having dinner with Julian and his family. Then Thursday we're going to work late going over the budget for Children First."

He didn't want to ask, but he had to. "You're having dinner with Julian's family?" He was worried he might be too late at winning Sage back. "What's the special occasion?"

Sage shrugged one shoulder. "Julian wanted me to meet his family. Honestly, I can't wait. He's always talking about his crazy brothers," she replied with a grin. "I think they'll be a lot like Shawn."

How did his relationship get so ruined with Sage? He didn't want any more Shawn's or Julian's with Sage.

"Julian's brothers aren't like Shawn. They're very flirtatious and they mean what they say. How about you skip Julian's family gathering? I can cater a small dinner for you, Shawn and myself."

More than anything in the world, he wanted Sage to say yes. He missed seeing her gorgeous face across the dinner table.

"I don't think Aponi would like that. Besides, Julian is my boyfriend and I would have to invite him. The same way you couldn't leave Aponi out of the dinner."

"No, you don't," Rally snapped.

"Don't yell at me."

"I'm sorry," Sage's glare at him, warned him to be careful. "I didn't mean to snap at you."

"Rally, Julian is a part of my life now. I enjoy being around him. He makes me laugh. I feel so relaxed and comfortable around him."

Laughter is all that he gives her: What about passion? What about the things that make a woman fall in love with a man?

"Are you in love with him?" He moved closer and ran the pads of his fingers over the side of her smooth face.

“You know that I’m not and so does Julian, but it doesn’t matter to him. He loves me and it feels wonderful.” She answered, removing his hand off her face.

“How can you say that it feels wonderful? You aren’t in love with him. You love me.” He wasn’t going to stand for Sage living in this dream world.

“Rally, I want you to listen to me. I’m done chasing after you. I finally got the message loud and clear. You aren’t going to put a ring on my finger. So, now I’m going for a man who will.”

Standing on her tiptoes, Sage brushed a soft kiss across his mouth.

“I’ll see you later. Maybe you can get Shawn to help us plan the Christmas party this year.”

Moving back, she stared at him for a few second without saying a word and he wondered what was going on in that beautiful head of hers. It was so hard to read her now.

“Can you stay and talk a little more?”

“No, I’ve gotI’ve got to go.” Sage gave him a small wave and then hurried from the room before he could find a way to stop her.

Chapter Nineteen

“Should I be worried that I haven’t seen you in over a week? You didn’t even come and pick me up from the airport?” Aponi pouted before kissing him on the cheek.

“Sorry, but I didn’t realize you were gone. You know this time of year is very busy for me.” Rally answered leaning away from Aponi.

“I left a message on your cell phone and answering machine. Didn’t you get them?”

“No, I haven’t checked my messages today. I had other things on my mind.”

Truthfully, his conversation with Sage had been on his mind a lot lately. She brought up so many good points. They were making him rethink the way his life was going and who he wanted in it.

“What things?” Aponi asked as she glanced over his shoulder at the notepad on the table. “Are you planning a party? Oh, let me see. I used to be a party planner I know I can make this party the talk of the town. With your money and my skills we’ll have the neighborhood so jealous of us.”

She wasn’t going to like what he had to say, but it had to be done. This party was his last chance to get Sage to spend some uninterrupted time with him.

“Thanks for the offer, but I already have some help.”

He watched Aponi’s thick black ponytail swing between her shoulder blades as she cocked her head to the side.

“Who’s going to help you or do I even need to ask?”

“Sage,” he responded instantly and he didn’t miss how his heart skipped a beat after saying her name. Lord, he was actually counting the days until he got to see her again.

“How much longer is she going to keep coming between us? I’ve tried to deal with the way you feel about her, but I can’t do it anymore.”

He waited, challenging her to go through with it. He had a good idea of what Aponi was going to say even before the words left her mouth. This had been building up for a while.

“It has to be her or me,” Aponi demanded. “I don’t know what kind of power she has over you, but she makes you into a man I don’t recognize.”

Placing his hands on the flat surface, Rally pushed his body up from the table.

“I don’t know what you mean. Why don’t you enlighten me? Sage has never tried to change me the way you do.”

They stared at each other across the ringing silence as Aponi’s eyes darkened as he held her gaze.

“Don’t ever make me choose my family or you. I can promise you won’t like the outcome.”

Aponi’s lower lip trembled at his harsh words, but she quickly regained her composure.

“See, that’s the problem. Sage isn’t a blood relative, and that’s why you’re falling in love with her.”

Hearing the words aloud shook him, especially coming from Aponi, because she didn’t mince her words.

“I’m not in love with Sage,” he denied, but even the words sounded weak to his ears.

“You know what, I hope Sage cuts you down like you did me and gets married to Julian. It would serve you right to feel some of the pain I am,” she snapped shoving past him.

“Sage wouldn’t marry Julian. She’s in love with me,” he yelled after Aponi.

Stopping in mid-step, Aponi looked back over her shoulder at him.

“Why wouldn’t she? Julian is successful, handsome and head over heels in love with her. Poor Sage thinks you hate her. This is the perfect opportunity for Julian to snatch her away from you.”

“You’re wrong,” he uttered.

“Why don’t we wait and see, but I bet before Christmas Sage will be wearing a ring and I’ll bet everything I have, it won’t be from you.”

“I’m done talking about this. Sage hasn’t known Julian long enough to get married and it happening before Christmas is just plain ludicrous.” “

Aponi’s mouth pulled into a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Goodbye Rally, I hope Sage will give you what you’re searching for even if I couldn’t.”

Standing in stunned silence, he watched as Aponi left him. He wanted to feel sadness, but he didn’t. All he felt was a huge sense of freedom. Now all he had to do was get Sage to believe he was in love with her.

* * * *

“Are you having a good time?” Julian asked, handing her a glass of red wine. “I think my family was shocked when you walked in with me.”

Taking the glass from Julian, she sat it on the stand next to her.

“Your parents were more shocked than your brothers. Did you tell your brother’s about us first?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t help it. They knew about the crush I had on you for years. I got teased a little, but they’re happy for me,” Julian said.

“You had a crush on me,” Sage peeked at Julian from the corner of her eye. “I never knew that.”

“I’m good at keeping my feelings hid because Rally wouldn’t let me within twenty feet of you if he had known.”

Why was everyone so scared of Rally? He didn’t look all that tough in her eyes. “How many times do I have to tell you that Rally isn’t my boss? I can do anything I want.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Julian’s question came to her while she was watching his family interact around the grill. They were laughing and teasing each other about who was burning the meat. The night air was cool, but not chilly. . It felt good to be in a family setting again.

His family made her want one of her own even more. She was tired of living on dreams of Rally falling madly in love with her.

“Yes, I’m positive,” she replied, finally answering Julian’s question.

“Okay, then come with me.” Linking their fingers together, he took her back through the patio doors back into the family room and placed her on the couch.

“Honey, I know that you aren’t in love with me, but I do know you care about me. However, I love you so much and I think we will be unbelievable together. I might not be in the same league as Rally, but I know I can make you happy.”

She couldn’t help but notice how nervous Julian was. What was wrong with him? She had never seen him like this before.

“Julian....”

“Please don’t interrupt me. I’m nervous enough,” he said, then grinned at her. “I’ve been working on making Children First bigger and better than it is. But I don’t want to do it alone. I want and need you at my side. Will you marry me?”

If someone told her to write down twenty things that would happen to her tonight Julian proposing marry wouldn't have landed on the list. Sage felt like the wind had gotten knocked out of her. What was she going to do?

"I know this is sudden and we haven't been dating all that long, but I can't wait any longer. I want to place a ring on your finger. If you say yes, we can have a Christmas wedding and spend the New Year on our honeymoon."

Leaning forward, she grabbed Julian's hand and pulled him down in front of her.

"You know that I'm not dying with love for you. How can you want to marry me?"

He brought the back of her hand to his mouth and ran his lips across her knuckles. "See...I'm dying with love for you and I can't think about being married to anyone else but you. Please, say yes."

She was feeling guilty for the first time since she started dating Julian. He was too good of a man for a marriage like this. She didn't love him, but she was fond of him.

"I don't know about this. What would your family say?"

"Nothing, because they wouldn't know the truth," Julian replied.

Was this the sign she had been asking for to put Rally in her past? This had to be it. A house full of kids with Rally wasn't going to happen. It was time for her to become a woman and put her girlish dreams away forever.

"I've always wanted to see Cancun," she whispered, softly.

"You'll marry me?" Julian asked.

She nodded.

Sighing, Julian drew her into his arms. "I swear I'll make you the happiest woman in the world. We can go and pick your ring out tomorrow after work."

“I know you will and I promise to be a good wife to you.” She whispered against his shoulder.

Goodbye Rally. She was closing the door on her past, opening another to the future with the man who had her wrapped in his arms.

Chapter Twenty

“What time are you coming over to the house tonight? I can fix us something to eat. How about Chicken and Pasta? I’ve got a lot of ideas down for the Christmas party.”

Sage stole a quick glance at Rally standing next to her looking eye-catching wearing a dark blue shirt and crisp white shirt. He was the only man she knew that would wear a thousand dollar suit to a Children shelter and not look out of place.

“Give me a minute and we can talk.” She finished handing out the lunches before she removed her apron. “Follow me and we can talk somewhere else. I have something that I need to tell you.”

Placing the apron on the hook by the door, she went out with Rally at her heels. She kept walking until she got into the small copying room. Going inside she turned on the lights and waited while Rally closed the door behind them.

“Why are we meeting in here?”

“I was hoping it might drown out your yelling after I tell you my news. I want you to be happy for me and not give me a lecture.”

“What news?” he frowned.

“Now, don’t try to act all demanding on me because I’m not going to change my mind. It’s a done deal. This is what I want.”

Sage was scared to even say the word because without a doubt Rally was going to hit the roof.

“What’s a done deal?” Rally inquired, his voice calm, his gaze steady.

“I want to tell you about this before Aponi or anyone else had the chance.”

“Did the two of you get into another fight? Haven’t I warned you just to let her insults go over your head?”

Sage shook her head. “No, that’s not it. I wouldn’t care about your opinion when it came to that. Aponi and I are never going to get along.”

“Fine, if that’s not it then tell me what has you so apprehensive,” he asked, gently. “I swear whatever it is I can handle it.”

Blowing out a deep breath, she let the words roll off her tongue. “Julian asked me to marry him and I said yes. We’re getting married at Christmas.”

“What in the hell did you just say?” Rally growled. His anger echoed through the cramped space they were in.

“I’m getting married.” Sage answered with more bravo bravado than she actually felt.

“No, you aren’t.” Rally’s tone was velvet, yet edged with steel. “If you marry Julian I’ll disown you out of my life. I’ll even tell Shawn not to have anything to do with you.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Sage gasped, not wanting to believe the threat.

“It’s not a threat. I won’t speak to you again if you walk down that aisle and ruin the rest of your life. Where’s Julian? I need to speak with him.”

Snatching the door open, Rally left the room leaving her alone.

After the shock wore off, Sage hurried after Rally like the place was on fire praying she would catch him in time. She couldn’t let them get into an argument over her.

“Rally, wait,” she screamed racing behind him. But Rally made it into the room before she could stop him and slammed the door shut. She tried to open the door, but it was locked.

“Oh my God,” she muttered wiggling the handle again. “They’re going to kill each other.”

* * * *

“I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing but you aren’t going to marry Sage on Christmas on any other day of the year. She doesn’t love you and she never will,” Rally growled.

“What degree do you have in determining how Sage feels about me? I proposed and she said yes, end of story. We’re going to have a Christmas wedding and there’s nothing you can do about it,” Julian shot back jumping up from his seat.

“The hell there isn’t. Sage won’t walk down that aisle with you. You’re my friend, but I’ll use everything in my power to keep the two of you apart.”

“Try it and you’ll lose Sage forever. She’s too much of a free spirit to be caged by you and all of your rules.”

He was taken back. Did Sage really think that about him? Had he pushed her so much that she would marry Julian to get away from him? He had come here today to apologize for his behavior and try to see if they could have their first real date.

“Did she tell you that?” All of the anger suddenly left his body. Aponi was finally gone from his life. He was single and ready to settle down with Sage. But he couldn’t now because she engaged to another man.

“She didn’t have to. The whole town knows how you just kept Aponi around to make sure Sage stayed a safe distant away from you.”

Rally wondered how many people would be surprised by the real reason he dated Aponi so long. It wasn’t to keep Sage away from him, but to prevent him from acting out his most hidden desires for her.

“That’s a lie,” he countered.

“Rally, let Sage go,” Julian uttered retaking his seat. “She deserves to be happy.”

He grimaced. Was Sage running to Julian because she was unhappy with her life and his treatment of her? Suddenly he wanted to prove how wrong everyone was. He loved Sage more than he could ever think possible.

“I’m sorry I can’t. Sage is meant to be with me. I’m not unselfish enough to let her go to marry you. I’ll find a way to get her back.”

“Don’t do this,” his friend begged him.

Turning away, he unlocked the door and thoughts of Sage not being in his life rolled through his mind. He wouldn’t be able to live without her. He would become a shell of a man.

“I have to, she’s everything to me,” he answered and then went out the door without looking back. .

Chapter Twenty-One

“If you wanted to piss off Rally you’re doing a damn good job. Have you lost your mind? You can’t marry Julian. You’re supposed to marry my crazy, overbearing brother who’s in love with you.” Shawn complained walking past her into her apartment.

“Nice to see you too, Shawn.” Sage sighed closing the door behind them. “I’m doing well. How are you?”

Coming back to her Shawn gave her a quick her and kissed her on the cheek.

“I would be doing a lot better if you weren’t driving Rally up the wall.”

The sounds of Jingle Bells played through the house while Sage wondered if Rally’s attitude was just an act to make her feel bad. Or was he really upset about her upcoming wedding. Christmas was fast approaching and so was her wedding. All of it seemed so surreal, so now wasn’t the time to let Rally get her off track.

“Why does he care? I’m tired of living for your brother. He wants me out of his life and I’m doing just that.”

“You know how Rally is,” Shawn stepped back from her. “He likes to be in control and you don’t let him have that power over you. You drive him crazy and he loves it. That’s why he was trying so hard to stay away from you.”

If only his words were true.

“Shawn, you know I love you, but Rally and I are never going to be together. I want kids and Rally has made it clear that he doesn’t want that with me.”

Wrapping his arm around her shoulder, Shawn pulled her against his body. “All I’m asking is that you don’t jump into a situation with Julian just to get away from Rally.”

“My engagement to Julian isn’t a situation. I like him and enjoy his company. We’ll be a good match,” she answered moving away from Shawn.

She was still having a hard time with her decision and didn’t need a lecture from him. He would still take Rally’s side over hers every time because they were brothers.

“Being a good match isn’t a reason to get married. I’m a good match with Monica, but we don’t want to get married. Please just think about this before you make an enormous mistake. You know Santa is watching and if you’re a very good girl he might give you what you want this Christmas.”

“Have I told you lately what a wonderful brother you are?”

“Not lately, so why don’t you praise me as you walk me back to the door. I don’t want to be late for my date. Monica is taking me shopping for a secret present.”

“Lord...I don’t know if I should since you’re not happy I’m getting married,” she muttered.

“I would be more exultant if I thought you were marrying Julian for the right reasons and not to make Rally jealous.”

When would people stop thinking everything she did was for Rally’s approval? She was finally becoming her own person and it felt damn good. Besides, Julian didn’t possess the power to break her heart like Rally.

“Shawn, do you mind showing yourself out? I’m running late for another appointment and I need to change.”

“Sage, don’t be like this. I didn’t mean to upset you. I love you and only want you to be with a man who loves you,” Shawn said, reaching out to touch her.

“I’m not upset, but I need to change. Please, close the door behind you.” Spinning around, she hurried towards her bedroom with the sound of the front door closing behind her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Are you sure that you know what you’re doing?”

Sage placed the wedding dress back on the rack and glared at Rally through the mirror. Why was he here anyway? Hadn’t he disowned her and vowed to never speak to her again? So, what had happened that Rally came all this way to see her?

“I thought you weren’t talking to me? She chose another dress to hold up against her. “Isn’t Aponi going to be upset that you aren’t with her?”

“I’m not worried about Aponi , ,” Rally answered taking the dress out of her hand. He hung it back up before she had time to react.

“Why are you here? I thought you had your own wedding to plan,” she tossed back getting off the changing display.

“Is that why you accepted Julian’s proposal? You wanted to make sure you got married before me?” Rally, folded his arms across his chest. “You shouldn’t get married if you aren’t in love with the person.”

She was tired of all these hot and cold emotions when it came to Rally. He wanted to be there for her one minute and back in another’s woman the next. Julian was a good man and she cared about him. Maybe with time it would go into something deeper, but she’d never know until she let Rally go.

“How do you know that I’m not in love with Julian?”

If it was possible Rally’s green eyes grew even darker at her words shocking Sage into taking a step back from him.

“I’ll show you why you aren’t in love with him,” Rally reached for her.

“Hey gorgeous, here you are. I was getting worried about you.” Julian’s said, coming through the shop door interrupting them. “Did you find the dress you wanted?”

Sage saw how her fiancée stole a look at Rally.

“I saw a few I liked and I happened to run into Rally, who’s waiting for Aponi to show up,” she lied. “Isn’t that right, Rally?”

She started to squirm while she waited for Rally to answer her. What in the hell was he trying to prove by standing there looking at her like that? Didn’t he realize Julian might start to get the wrong idea?

“Yeah...I was killing time waiting for Aponi. You know how it is to plan a wedding,” Rally answered looking at her instead of Julian. “It can turn out to be a big mistake when you get married to someone you don’t love.”

“It sure can,” Julian agreed. “That’s why it’s so good Sage is so in love with me and vice versa. I’m one lucky man to have someone like her in my life.”

Sage waited for the eruption to happen because Rally looked ready to explode at any minute. She wasn’t dumb and neither was Rally. He knew that Julian was throwing his loveless relationship with Aponi into his face.

“Just make sure Sage doesn’t get stolen away from you before the wedding,” Rally challenged before he brushed past them and strolled out the shop’s door.

“Sage, is there something you need to tell me?” Julian asked as she stared after Rally.

“No, ...there isn’t. How about we leave and grab something to eat? I’m starving.”

“I thought you were going to put your feelings for Rally in the past and focus on us.”

Sage swung her gaze back to Julian and expected to see hurt simmering in his eyes instead she saw compassion.

“I promise I’ll make you a good wife. Rally won’t come between us after we’re married. He’s a part of my past that won’t go away. I’ve tried so hard but he keeps showing up...”

“We need to talk.” Taking her by the elbow, Julian led her out of the bridal shop and back across the street to Children First...

Back inside Julian took her to the back room and gave her a seat.

“Sage, you know that I love you, but I can’t have this Rally thing hanging between the two of us all the time. I’ve tried to disregard it, but I can’t.”

“Julian, I’m not going to lie to you. Yes, I’m in love with Rally.. However, I deserve the right to be happy with a man who loves me and won’t find fault in everything that I do.”

“Sage, if I still agree to this wedding. I don’t want Rally making trouble for us. He needs to understand that things are over between the two of you.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got to see Shawn tonight and I’ll have a talk with Rally. He isn’t going to ruin this for me.” She would do everything in her power to break the connection she shared with her first love.

“I hope he’ll listen to you,” Julian sighed...

“Oh, Rally isn’t a stupid man once he sees that I’m serious about being with you. He’ll leave me alone.”

* * * *

“Where’s Shawn?” Sage couldn’t believe she came all this way and Shawn wasn’t even around.

“He left about an hour ago with Monica. She wanted to see some new movie that just came out,” Rally said staring at her from the couch. “Why don’t you have a sit and stay for a while? Surely, you’ve time to visit with an old friend, or does Julian have you on a leash? ”

“First, we were never friends and I’m sorry that it took me so long to realize that. Second, I’m not a dog and Julian respects me. He would never try to control me. Like you have.”

“If Julian isn’t concerned that you’re here with me than he doesn’t love you as much as he says he does,” Rally smirked. “I would never let you be around the competition this close to the wedding.”

“See that’s where you differ from Julian. He’s a good man that is sure of himself. He has never seen you as a threat. On the other hand, you can’t have a good day unless you’re bringing someone else down to your level.”

“Babe, don’t get upset because I speak the truth. I’ll give you that Julian is a good man. He was always the go to person when we were younger and that’s a wonderful quality to have. However, he isn’t the man that will make you wake up in the middle of the night from having a wet dream. I am and you know it.”

“Shut up. How dare you speak to me about that private moment?” Sage wanted to move but she was rooted to the spot.

“Are you saying I’m a liar?”

Rally got up and made his way over to her.

“Has he made you so hot that you want to take your clothes off to get some relief?”

“Yes, I’m attached to Julian. What woman wouldn’t be? He’s a gorgeous man.” She tossed back.

“Being attracted to him and wanting to make love with him until neither one of you can stand are two different things.” Rally whispered as he brushed his thumb along the side of her lip. “Has he made your nipples hard just from a look like I do?”

“You don’t make my....” Sage groaned as Rally’s long fingers pinched one of her swollen nipples through her shirt.

“Why lie? We both know that you’re attracted to me and I find that very arousing. I never had another woman respond to me the way you do.”

Dropping his hand, he moved it to cup her butt and drag her closer to his body.

“See, I’ve the same problem. When you walk into a room my cock gets so hard I think it’s going to split my pants.”

Sage struggled against Rally. She wasn’t going to let him do this to her again. He only wanted sex from her and nothing else. Julian respected and cared about her. She wasn’t about to give that up for a night in Rally’s bed no matter how much she desired it.

“No, you only want to have sex. You don’t want a commitment with me. Julian does and I’m not about to lose that for fifteen minutes in your body.” She tried shoving at his chest, but he wouldn’t let her go.

“Fifteen minutes,” Rally uttered above her. “I’m insulted. It would take me longer than that to enjoy this beautiful body of yours.”

“I know you’re lying now,” Sage uttered. “How many times have you told me to be more like Aponi.Aponi? All sleek and trim. In addition, you said that my curves were a turn-off and a man would be crazy to ever think about wanting me. In so many words, you said I was fat.”

“Are you really that naïve when it comes to men?” Rally stepped back from her. “I was jealous after you left me for Julian and I wanted to lash out at you. You’ve a perfect body.” Reaching out, he cupped one of her breasts in his hands.

“Have you forgotten how I sucked and licked at your nipples back at Children First? They tasted so good in my mouth, like warm chocolate.” He whispered as he undid her shirt and bra tossing them to the floor.

“Rally, stop,” She murmured. “We can’t do this. I’m engaged to another man. I’m getting married soon.”

“Not if I can help it, you’re not,” Rally growled before her pulled a taut nipple into his mouth sucking until Sage felt her legs give way.

Picking her up, his mouth never left her breast as he carried her through the door and down the hallway to his bedroom.. He laid her down on the bed and covered her with his body. He let go of her nipple and started licking at the other one.

“Tell me that you don’t want me and I’ll stop.”

Sage tried to focus on getting the words out and not how her body was dying for Rally’s. She could do this.

“I don’t want you.”

Green eyes locked with hers as Rally stood up and before she could move, he quickly stripped her out the remaining of her clothes. Spreading her legs wide with one hand, he eased three fingers inside of her body.

“You’re a liar, Sage.” He gloated as her wet entrance coated his fingers with moisture. “You want me.”

“My body doesn’t know any better.”

“Do you hate the fact you’re attached to me?”

“Yes, I do,” she answered honestly. Sage bit a moan and lifted her body as Rally joined her on the bed. . He was driving her crazy with his touches.

“Why?” He asked as his tongue ran down the side of her neck. “You know that I’m just as much into this as you are.”

“Yeah...but you don’t care about me. You’re not in love me. Hell, I don’t even think that you like me.” Sage turned her head away from Rally so she won’t see the honesty in his eyes.

“Sage, look at me,” he uttered.

She kept her head away from him.

“Baby, look at me.” Rally cupped her chin and turned her head until she made eye contact. “Sage, I love you. Don’t you see that’s why I was always trying to find ways to push you away from me? I died inside when you announced you were

going to marry Julian. I can't let you marry him. You're my world and I'm going to do everything in my power to prove how much you mean to me."

Sage knew Rally was only telling her this because he wanted her. Rally wasn't capable of love, but she wasn't going to miss this experience. She had waited years to make love with Rally and now this was her chance. After she was married to Julian, this memory would maintain her.

"Then show me how much you love me. Wipe all of those bad memories out of my mind."

Chapter Twenty – Three

Rally caught his breath because it felt like his heart literally stopped in the middle of his chest. Did he hear Sage correctly? She wanted him to make love to her? He couldn't ruin this. It had to be perfect because Sage was everything to him. It had to be perfect because Sage was everything to him.

"Are you sure?" he asked, placing small kisses along side of her neck. The softness of her skin was almost his undoing.

"I'm positive," she whispered, tracing the side of his face.

I swear I'm not going to blow this, he promised himself. Extricating his body from Sage's, he stood up and slowly stripped his shirt from his body. He ignored it as it floated to the floor behind him. He was only focused on making this night memorable for Sage as possible.

"You're so beautiful," she whispered, sitting on the bed. Her small fingers reach out to touch him but he jerked back before she made contact.

Catching her hand before it landed on the bed, he placed it in the middle of his chest. "Sweetheart, touch me anyway you want. I want your hands on me."

His body vibrated with need as Sage trailed her fingers down his chest until she stopped at the bulge threatening to spill out of his pants.

"Do you promise not to pull out this time or say anything to destroy it for us?"

Lord, he wasn't an idiot.

"I swear the only thing I'm going to do is take it slow," he whispered. Rally gently removed Sage's soft touch before he lost control. "Baby, you've got to stop or I want be able to continue."

Taking off the last of his clothes, he stood there naked and let Sage's chocolate eyes traveled over him. He felt his cock swell and get heavier. He felt exposed being naked in front of her searching eyes. However, he wanted her to see that he was willingly to do anything for her.

"Are you scared?" he asked, joining her on the bed.

The breath rushed from his lungs as her body connected with the warmth of his. He heard the small tortured sounds as they escaped Sage's throat as she wiggled underneath him.

"No, I'm not," she finally whispered caressing his back with the tips of her fingers. "Please Rally; make love to me like you mean it."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm going to make love to you like you're the finest piece of China."

Slipping his knee between her warm thighs, he gently eased them apart and placed the tip of his cock against her wetness. He felt her instant withdrawal.

"Don't panic. I want you to get used to the fill of me. Remember I've been inside of you."

He didn't want any misunderstanding now it wasn't a time for mistakes. Tonight was going to bind them on a deeper level than she knew.

Cupping her face in his hands, he nibbled softly at her sensual lips, "You're mine. I'm not going to let Julian have you."

"I'm yours as long as you want me." Sage breathed then pulled his mouth down for a slow, soft kiss.

As much as he tried to hold on his control, it snapped. Grabbing Sage's by the wrists, Rally gently pulled them above her head. His eyes zoned in on how the position made her breasts perfect for his mouth.

He kissed the valley between them and then took each nipple into his mouth to taste and suck.

Sage shocked him by throwing her leg over his.

“Please Rally. Baby, I can’t stand it. I need you inside of me.” She squirmed against the sheets begging him to take her, but he held back wanting her crazy with desire for him.

Letting go of her wrists, he skimmed his hands over her sweaty body. Masculine pride filled him as he realized he was the one who brought Sage’s body to this point. Rally dropped his fingers lower and traced her wet folds to make sure he could give her everything that he promised and more.

“Oh, I need...something,” she cried in one breath and panted in the next. “Please....Rally.”

He kissed her swallowing down her words and thrust three fingers inside. Her body sucked and his cock grew another inch. He was beyond ready to make Sage his in every sense of the word.

Needing a few more minutes to rein his control back in, Rally kissed Sage unleashing the passion, he had been holding in for months. Slipping his tongue inside, he traced every spot in there, foreshadowing how he wanted his hard body to mingle with her softer one. He slowly left her mouth and spread kisses all over her face, enjoying the feel of her hands as they roamed lightly over his back.

“Oh, Rally....love me. Love me tonight like this will last forever,” Sage begged pulling at his hips. She reached between their bodies and stroked him.

Biting back a curse, he gripped her hand and pulled it from his throbbing body. Rally’s entire being trembled with the raw need to take Sage, but he didn’t.

Instead, he worked his way down her body pausing to cherish every part that he found sexy and worthy of his attention. However, he left the part she wanted loved the most alone.

Sage's nails clawed at his back. Her cries echoed around them, as his body was about to give her what she finally wanted. He took a minute to regain his composure before he settled his body between her silky thighs.

"Sage, look at me," Rally whispered.

Soft brown eyes locked with his.

"This is going to be different from the last time. You're going to feel me to the deepest of your soul."

Not giving her a chance to respond, Rally captured Sage's mouth with his and entered her with one long sure stroke.

Her virginal body flinched at his sudden entry, but he held her to him and kissed her slowly trying to ease the pain from her.

"I'm so sorry, baby," he breathed by her ear. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Are you okay?"

A single tear slid down Sage's smooth brown cheek making his heart catch in his chest. Her silence was scaring him Sage was usually so vocal. He had hurt her and she was in too much pain to tell him.

"Sweetheart, answer me. As much as it would pain me I can stop." He started to pull out when Sage wrapped her legs around his hips. The slight movement pulled him deeper into her moist body.

"No, I'm fine. I don't want you to stop." Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled him down and kissed him.

That was all the encouragement that he needed. Slipping his hands underneath her hips, he pumped his body in and out of hers marveling in how perfectly they fit together. Sage tore her mouth away from his and her head fell back against the pillow. Soft cries left her mouth as he sped up his thrusts. He was determined to burn this memory into her mind forever.

He didn't even flinch when Sage grabbed a handful of his hair and screamed as her orgasm rocked through her body. It only made him harder. Unwrapping her legs from his hips, he held them apart and plunged into her warmth as far as he could go before he erupted pouring his seed deep into her womb. He deliberately didn't use a condom, further proof of his love for her.

Collapsing on Sage's body from blindsiding pleasure, Rally couldn't speak for a few seconds. He got lost in the feel of still being inside of Sage and the sound of her soft breathing beneath him.

"That was fucking unbelievable," he groaned withdrawing from her.

He pulled her to his side and planted a kiss on her temple and then tucked her head under his chin. After that experience there was no way Sage would marry Julian. She was his now and forever.

"Sweetheart, we need to talk," he whispered.

Leaning on his chest, Sage pressed her fingers against his lips. He gave them a quick nibble before she moved them away.

"Can we not talk? I just want to savor this. I never thought it would happen."

Rally almost objected. He couldn't let her overanalyze them making love, but he would do as she asked. They had the rest of their lives to figure things out.

"Alright, how about we take a nap and then we can talk later about Julian?"

Sage stared at him like she was going to say something, but changed her mind at the last minute.

"Hmmm...okay we'll talk about him after our nap, but not now, okay?"

"Fine," he agreed.

He quickly covered them with a comforter and wrapped Sage up in his arms. He was never going to let her walk away from him again.

“Sage, I love you. This is going to be the best Christmas ever. Would you want to spend the last of it up at the cabin with me?”

Seconds passed while he waited for Sage to acknowledge his statement, but nothing came. Glancing down, he noticed Sage was already asleep.

“I’ll let you rest because I’ve plans for us later.”

He gently pushed a lock of hair off her forehead and then joined her in a blissful sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rolling over in the bed, Sage looked at Rally sleeping peacefully next to her. One arm was thrown across his washboard stomach and the other one was by his head. Despite the fact the sheet was twisted around his hips, she could still see the outline of his erection. It was hard and ready. A lock of his raven hair rested against his forehead. He looked so beautiful with his copper skin against the stark white of the sheets. She was going to burn this image into her mind, because she was never going to see it again.

Those hours she spent in his bed was for her and her alone. No one could ever take this from her, however, she needed to move on with someone who could be there for her. Rally didn't have that quality. He liked to give orders and expected them to be carried out. She couldn't blame him for being like that because that is one of the things that drew her to him in the first place.. Honestly, it was past time she grew up.

She lightly planted a kiss on Rally's mouth.

"I love you."

Sage quickly got out of bed and grabbed her clothes off the floor. She dressed and then rushed out of the room to get her remaining items that were left downstairs. Finding what she needed, she was out of the house in less than ten minutes.

On the way, back to her house, Sage thought about what she did with Rally and it was eating at her. She was a good person and she couldn't get married to Julian without telling him the truth. He deserved to know that she cheated on him a week before their wedding and if he called it off she would understand.

* * * *

Rally twisted around on the bed and a low moan left his mouth as the sheet brushed over his morning erection. He hadn't felt this good in years and everything that happened last night came rushing back to him.

Sage was with him and not Julian. He finally told her that he was in love with her. She wasn't going to leave him and get married to another man. He was finally rid of the pressure to keep his family going by marrying someone he wasn't in love with. He could start the life he had always dreamt about with Sage.

She might not have believed him last night, but there was no way he was going to let her leave this morning without knowing he meant every word that he said. A pang of guilt hit him as Julian entered his mind. His best friend might be hurt by the news Sage wasn't going to marry him, but he couldn't let Julian have the woman he was in love with.

After he fixed Sage and himself something to eat for breakfast, they would go and see Julian together like he promised her last night. He couldn't stop the smile that covered his face. It felt so good to finally be with her like that. Sage gave him everything and he was touched she saved herself for him.

"Sage, sweetheart wake up," he said stretching. He rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes. "What do you want for breakfast?"

He knew what he wanted. A little morning quickie sounded perfect, but he could wait if Sage wasn't up to it. They made love four times last night and her body might be sore this morning.

"Sage, come on. Get up." He reached over to touch her and jumped up when his hand touched a cold, empty bed... "What in the hell?"

Dropping his hand from his face, Rally sat up in the bed and his gaze swung over the left. Sage wasn't there. He quickly glanced around the room and his heart clenched in the middle of his chest when he noticed that her clothes were gone. .

“Don’t panic,” he told himself. “Maybe she went downstairs to get breakfast started.” But he knew that Sage wasn’t inside the house, it felt empty and cold like it had since she left him months ago. “I know she isn’t going to do something crazy.”

He flung the sheet off and climbed out of bed.

“I’m not going to let her run back to Julian. She’s out of her mind if she thinks last night was just a quick roll in the hay. Sage’s is meant to be with me and I’m going to get her. Julian better stay out of my way or he’s going to wish he hadn’t.”

Rally dressed in record time and made his way out the front door, so he could go and confront his friend. He was going to fight tooth and nail to get Sage away from Julian.

* * * *

“I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing, but it will end here. You aren’t going to steal Sage away from me. She’s mine and I’m never going to give her up, so you better just get used to it.”

“Rally, Sage isn’t yours. She has a right to decide who she wants to be with and she chose me. Why don’t you calm down and work things out with Aponi? How long have you tossed Aponi in Sage’s face? She finally got tired and decided to leave you. Don’t blame me for your failures. Sage was around you most of her life and it wasn’t until she was gone that you realized what you had. Sorry man, I’m in love with her and we’re going to get married.”

Julian wasn’t backing down like he thought and Rally was infuriated. “Sage isn’t in love with you. She loves me.”

“That’s okay. I love her enough for the both of us and with time, her feelings for you will die. I don’t mind waiting until she looks at me the way she looks at you. Sage is the kind of woman you do that for.”

“SHIT!” Rage growled. “You aren’t listening to me. Last night Sage spent the night with me and she didn’t stay in the guest room. She wouldn’t have made love with me if she were interested in being with you. Julian, I don’t want to hurt you, but Sage is the woman I’m meant to be with. Remember when we were younger and my grandmother told me I would meet a woman I would give everything up for to be with?”

“Yeah, she was very persistent and made you promise to not to forget,” Julian uttered.

“Sage is the woman my grandmother was referring to. You know how she was always having those dreams. I didn’t tell you but I hadn’t forgotten and I kept waiting for that woman to come and when she hadn’t I was going to settle for Aponi.”

Rally had to get through to Julian so he wouldn’t go through with his wedding to Sage. He couldn’t stand by and let Sage marry the wrong man out of neediness or misplaced compassion. He had the same inspiring qualities as Julian, and he would show Sage if she gave him the chance.

“What about all that stuff you told me in college about how you were taught not to injure your friend or neighbor because you’re really injuring yourself?”

Rally was shocked and pleased that Julian had retained that piece of information.

“I’m not trying to harm you, but I can’t let Sage marry you. How can you expect me to be in the same town as you and see you every day with the woman I love? Or am I supposed to see her pregnant with your kids instead of mine. ? Man, I can’t do that. It would kill the deepest part of my soul.”

“Rally, I’m sorry, but I don’t believe Sage slept with you. She wouldn’t do that to me. We’re getting married in less than a week. I know she had unrequited

love for you for such a long time, but it's over now. She's with me and the sooner you come to grips with that the better off you'll be."

He stared at Julian. The hell I will let you take Sage away from me. I'm in love with her and I'm going to do everything in my power to keep the two of you apart.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“What are you doing here?” Isn’t it bad luck for the groom to see the bride the day before the wedding?” Julian laughed, pulling her inside of his apartment.

God, she felt bad. Julian had been so good to her and sleeping with Rally was how she repaid him . him. She had been avoiding talking to him, but she couldn’t do that anymore. Pure guilt had made her avoided telling him the truth.

“We need to talk.” She whispered holding tears at bay.

“Sage, what’s wrong?” Julian, reached for her, but she moved back, she didn’t deserve his understanding.

“Don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what?” Julian frowned, clearly confused. “Sage, what is wrong with you? I tried to reach you last night but you never answered your phone.”

She really hated to hurt Julian. He was such a wonderful man. Why couldn’t she be in love with him instead of Rally.

“I was with Rally,” she whispered.

“I’m not following you. I called you half the night. What were you doing all night long with him?”

“I don’t know how to tell you this.”

Julian stared at her and then took a step back from her. “Sage, I know you didn’t sleep with him. When he came and saw me yesterday, I told Rally that you wouldn’t do anything like that. You told me you were over him.”

The hurt in his voice almost made her cry.

“Rally told you?” She wanted to be surprised but she wasn’t. “I’m so sorry. I thought I was over him, but I can’t seem to get him out of my system. I do care about you and I’ll understand if you want to cancel the wedding. I don’t expect

you to still want to marry me now.” She turned back towards the door to leave when Julian’s voice stopped her.

“Sage, wait. I still love you and I still want to marry you tomorrow.”

Spinning back around, she looked at Julian and wanted to be happy, but she felt like she was making the biggest mistake of her life...

* * * *

The sound of the door slamming behind her made Sage twirl away from the window. The long satin hem brushed against the top of her matching shoes. Holly Jolly Christmas played in the background inside the church’s dressing room.

Smoldering green eyes glared at her from across the room. “You shouldn’t be in here. Julian would be upset if he found you.”

“Julian isn’t the reason I’m here and you damn well know it. I’m here to stop you from making the biggest mistake of your life. He can’t make you happy the way I can,” Rally uttered. “For God sake, we made love a little over twenty-four hours ago.”

“Rally, I never said I was going to leave Julian. I can’t base my life on declarations of love whispered in the heat of passion,” Sage sighed.

“You don’t think I’m crazy in love with you,” Rally demanded stalking across the room.

“No, you’ve you have Aponi,” she replied above her pounding heart. “She’ll give you the perfect children that you want and Julian will give me mine. You’re the fairy tale I can’t believe in anymore.”

Rally moved close enough to her that she could feel his warm breath on her face.

“First, I broke up with Aponi weeks ago. I wouldn’t have slept with you if she had still been in the picture. Second, you aren’t going to have any children with Julian because I’ll kill him before he laid a hand on you. Last, does this look

like a fairytale?” Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a velvet box and popped it open.

A flawless four-carat diamond ring winked back from the comfortable interior. It had to be the most perfect thing she had ever laid eyes on, but why was Rally showing it to her?

“Sage, I wrestled with my feelings for you for so many years because I was afraid of what you made me feel. I used Aponi and the children thing as a shield to keep you away. I thought I was happy living a lie until you left and got engaged to Julian.”

“After that rude awakening I realized how much I wanted to be with you. Sage, I love you more than my life. I would die for you. I know I may not have shown it, but I can’t live without you. When I look into the eyes of my children I want to see yours looking back, will you make my holiday perfect? Will you marry me?”

Why did this have to happen to her now? Why did Rally have to pull one last trick on her wedding day?

“Rally, I can’t marry you,” she whispered blinking back tears.

“Why not?” Rally demanded snapping the ring box closed.

“I can’t risk my heart on you changing your mind down the road. Julian’s love is a sure thing.” Stepping around Rally, she hurried towards the door. “You have to leave. I can’t let anyone find you here.”

Opening the door, she stepped to the side and waited for Rally to exit her life for the final time.

“Do you love me?” Rally asked.

“Didn’t I already answer that question? Of course, I do. How can you ask me that?” Sage replied as Rally came toward her.

“I love you, too. So, , That’s that’s why I’m going to leave. I know you’ll make the right decision and come to me at the cabin. Christmas has always been our holiday and this year isn’t going to be any different.”

Before she could move, Rally wrapped her up in his arms and placed a slow, sweet kiss on her lips. It had to be the most romantic kiss she ever experienced.

“I’ll be waiting,” he breathed against her mouth before moving away and went out the door.

Standing at the entrance of the door, Sage watched Rally until he disappeared around the corner, totally oblivious to the hurt filled gray eyes watching her from across the room.

* * * *

“Go after him. He loves you.”

Sage froze at the sound of Julian’s voice behind her. He wasn’t supposed to see her with Rally.

“Julian, I can’t. He’ll break my heart,” she whispered, fighting the urge to run after Rally and the future he promised.

“No, he won’t. I saw how he looked at you. He truly loves you. Now go and catch him.”

“What will you tell all of the guests? They are expecting a wedding,” she exclaimed, pivoting to look at Julian.

“They’ll get one in the near future, but it won’t be us. I love you, but Rally is the love of your life.”

“I do love you,” Sage admitted wondering how she got such an understanding man on her side. She took off the beautiful ring Julian gave her and held it out to him.

“Yeah, the same way you love Shawn and that isn’t enough for me,” Julian sighed, taking the ring from her.

Julian ran his hand down the side of her cheek and then winked. “Goodbye, Sage.” Turning on his heel, Julian walked away from her and never looked back

“Thank you, Julian,” she whispered and then rushed to the front door after Rally.

Sage didn’t flinch at the cold air hit her in the face. She raced down the snow covered steps and looked around for Rally, but he was nowhere in sight. Her heart sank to the pit of her stomach.

“I can’t believe he really left,” she mumbled looking up and down the empty street.

Her hopes were crushed she really expected Rally to be out her waiting for her and he wasn’t.

“Are you searching for me?” a deep voice inquired behind her.

“I thought you had left me,” Sage answered slowly facing Rally.

Snow started to fall around them, but neither noticed as Rally pushed his body away from the side of the building. Sage’s eyes followed him as he came down the steps closing the distance between them.

“Sage, I wasn’t going home for Christmas without you at my side. I was on my way back in when I saw you running towards the door.”

“How did you know I was coming after you?”

“I only asked Santa for one present this year and it was you.” Rally confessed then smiled. The sight made her heart sped up.

“Aren’t you too old to believe in Santa?” Sage grinned.

“Not when he brought me the one thing I wanted most for Christmas, but I was scared I wasn’t going to get her.”

Pulling the ring box from his pocket, Rally flipped it open for the second time that day. “Sage, I love you more than anything in this world. Will you make my Christmas wish come true and become my Ni-wa?”

“Yes, I’ll be your wife.”

Holding back tears, Sage held out her hand and tried not to tremble as Rally slipped the stunning ring on her finger. She tried to get herself back under control before Rally wrapped her up in his muscular arms.

“I thought I had lost you,” he whispered. “God, I almost lost my mind when I saw you in that wedding dress. Would you really have gone through with it?”

Titling her head back, Sage stared into the eyes of the man she had being in love with half her life and immediately knew her answer.

“No, because like you, I only wanted one thing for Christmas and it was you,” she confessed.

“Merry Christmas, sweetheart. I love you.” Rally said softly in her ear and rested his cheek against hers.

“Merry Christmas, Rally.” She answered getting lost in the love in Rally’s voice.

This was one Christmas that she wasn’t going to forget because this year she could finally mark the most hard to get present off her wish list.

The End

SHORT AUTHOR BIO

Marie Rochelle is a bestselling author of interracial romances featuring black women and white men. Marie first started writing IR books about two years ago and it has been nonstop for her ever since.

Her first best selling IR romance was entitled Taken by Storm. In addition, Marie has a very successful series called The Men of CCD and right now she's working on the much awaited third book in the series: Tempting Turner. Marie has enjoyed writing from a very young age and is happy she decided to turn her career toward the IR market; a market that she had enjoyed for years herself. She has always dreamt of being a writer and now is truly happy to see her dreams becoming a reality.

Lastly, her first book published through Red Rose Publishing entitled Beneath the Surface became a bestseller. In addition, she had other books published through Red Rose Publishing, which include Pamper Me, Be With You, and Cover Model, and With All My Heart. Some may still be under the Coming Soon Page, so keep an eye out for them.

Marie loves hearing from her fans. Please drop her an email at marierochelle2@yahoo.com or visit her website @ www1.freewebs.com/irwriter/. She also has a discussion group fans can join and talk about her current releases.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MarieRochelle2/>. Or you can visit her website and join her regular yahoo group.

Marie Rochelle books Coming Soon

The following books are out or coming soon:

Red Rose Publishing:

Beneath the Surface-Available Now

Pamper Me- Available Now

Be With you – Available Now

Cover Model – Coming Soon

With all my Heart - Coming Soon

Love Play – Coming Soon

Cobblestone Press

Special Delivery- Coming Soon December 2007

Midnight Showcase:

Blindsided – Coming Soon March 2008

Taken by Storm- Coming June 2008

Phaze

All The Fixin- Coming January 2008

My Deepest Love-Coming February 11th, 2008

A Taste of Love: Richard – Coming Soon March 2008