



# *Behind Blue Eyes*

Copyright © November 2007, Pat Cromwell

Cover art by Mariya Krusheva © November 2007

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this novel are fictitious or used fictitiously. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

Amira Press, LLC

Baltimore, MD 21216

[www.amirapress.com](http://www.amirapress.com)

## *Dedication*

To Jonas Sr., who taught me to never give up, and Jonas Jr.,  
whose spirit never leaves me—guys, job well done!

## Chapter One

She could drown in those eyes. It was cliché to think it, but his eyes were bluer than the ocean and as mysterious as the sky above. Whenever he looked at her, she felt as though he was looking into her very soul. His eyes were penetrating, deep, sexy, at times distant, but always haunting. His somber and brooding glance intimidated most people, but not Seine. She saw beyond the piercing looks and dominating manner that had become his trademark. Seine saw the shadows of pain and hurt, much like that of a little lost boy. His eyes held a mystery that she was intent on discovering and replacing with a more satisfying one.

Preferably of her.

She had fallen in love with him when she was sixteen. She did not delude herself into thinking that anything would ever come of it. She was smart, and being the smart girl that she was, Seine told herself that it was just a phase, a typical schoolgirl crush. However, as she got older, the feelings did not go away. If anything, they got stronger. Seeing him was the highlight of her trips home from school.

He was what she wanted. The feelings that began as a schoolgirl's crush transformed with age into a feeling so strong that at times she actually cried because it seemed hopeless that he would return her affection.

As she got older, her feelings matured, and with the love came lust. Big time! Her fantasies were more erotic. He was every sexy hero in every romance novel she had ever read, the beginning and ending of all things big, bad, and dominantly male. He was Hollywood gorgeous. His six-foot frame was pure perfection. From his broad shoulders and lean yet muscular arms to his perfectly flat mid section, narrow hips, and hard thighs, she wanted him. The man was perfect. His looks and his voice combined made her think of a dark, secluded, sinister, and forbidden place like Romania. His faintly tanned skin made the blackness of his hair all the more dramatic and sexy. His chiseled features and meticulously groomed goatee afforded him an overall bad-ass boy look.

Her best friend, Lynda once said, "Damn! His mother should be proud." Seine agreed with that statement. Sure, she wanted him in the biblical sense, but she also knew that there was more to him than his good looks. Seine knew that he was more complex of a person than his sexy outward appearance revealed and that there was a lot of barriers to be broken down to reach the real man inside and ultimately gain his trust and his love.

\* \* \* \*

She walked into her father's study, hoping that this time Michael O'Neal, her father's number one man at Simmons Publishing, would notice her, praying that he would look up from his papers and be struck by the same bolt of lightening that had pierced her heart.

He sat relaxed in the oversized chair facing her father's desk, his right ankle crossed over his left knee to create a receptacle for his papers. He wore jeans with a perfect crisp crease down the center, a simple black turtleneck, and very expensive black leather Italian shoes. While commenting to her father about the documents they were reviewing, she noted that he enunciated his words deliberately with his deep voice. She loved the sound of his voice.

It was quite unexpected when he glanced up and half smiled at her while she walked past him. Her next movement was so awkward that she nearly tripped. When he reached out quickly to keep her from falling, the spark between them was so electric and surprising that they stood stunned, their gazes locked on one another for a fraction of a second. Then, spellbound, his eyes followed hers as they perused first his lips then slowly moved down his

body to the bulge between his legs where they lingered much longer than they should have. She quickly looked up at him and moaned at the look of total captivation that she saw in his eyes. He was looking at her, finally, as she had always wanted him to: as a woman.

She watched the play of emotions on his face and she knew the exact moment that he saw her as someone other than the boss's daughter. Seine took note of the shadowed look in his eyes and gave Michael a bemused smile.

He arched one eyebrow and pursed his lips as if thinking "Oh Shit! I am so screwed." Moreover, by the reaction his body was having to simply touching her, holding her so near, his thoughts had to been just as carnal as hers. In that moment, they both regressed to a basic instinct of awareness of the other. The air rushed from her lungs and her legs grew weak. She took a deep breath hoping to calm her nerves. Things had definitely changed! She began to see the light at the end of the tunnel. She felt victorious. It was a beginning. He was interested. It did not matter to her when he cleared his throat and gently pushed her away. The foundation had been laid. She compared it to a master-card moment, priceless, because he continued to stare at her.

"Are you just going to stand there honey?" Lawrence Simmons asked sarcastically, snapping her out of her reverie. She looked at her father who was staring at her with mocking disgust.

Lawrence Simmons gave Seine his ultimate look of disapproval. She hated that look. Seine translated the look to mean that her father was not in the mood to watch his twenty-year-old daughter bumble around and develop brain fever as she always seem to do whenever she was in Michael's presence. Seine was well aware that half the women at Simmons Publishing lusted after the man and equally well knew that Lawrence despised the fact that his daughter was one of the lovelorn. From the corner of her eye, she saw her father frown and take an exaggerated breath when she had not moved. She stood mindlessly staring up at Michael like a deer caught in the headlights.

Seine bit her lower lip, shifted her gaze between the two men, and watched the silent reprimand that Lawrence was giving Michael, who was unsuccessfully pretending to be oblivious to the ridiculous scene that was unfolding. There was a visible tenseness in Michael's features but under the scrutiny of her father's gaze, Michael's body seemed to be relaxed. Seine knew that the last thing her father wanted and would tolerate was Michael acknowledging Seine's crush. He had told Seine repeatedly that he had big plans for his only daughter and nowhere in those plans was there room for Michael O'Neal. He had also made it abundantly clear to Michael that Seine was absolutely off limits and was not to be touched.

"Seine!" He said once more, this time breaking thoroughly whatever spell had so trapped her. Seine walked slowly over to her father, positioning herself strategically so that as she leaned over to kiss her father lightly on the cheek, Michael had a very good view of her cleavage. As she righted herself, she asked her father for his American Express Card. Michael shifted slightly in his chair, his eyes captured by hers.

\* \* \* \*

Michael watched her watch him. He had known her for years and had always thought of her as a sweet kid. She was very intelligent and he admired that. The conversations they shared were always enjoyable and he often thought that she had a maturity about her that most kids her age could not claim. He had even found himself looking forward to running into her because he felt so relaxed around her. That is why he felt blindsided today. There

was no confusing her for a kid. She was a beautiful woman with a boyish haircut that complimented her thin facial frame perfectly.

*He was scared.*

This new feeling that he was experiencing for her was totally out of left field and it scared him. He withheld a moan at the thought that it was not merely her body that he was reacting to, but the whole woman. He was so lost in those amber brown eyes of hers. He wanted her, all of her, mind, body, and soul – especially her soul.

His gaze slowly wandered from her doe-like eyes past her patrician nose, to her full, luscious lips. Her skin was the shade of café au lait and he imagined that it felt just as smooth and tasted just as sweet while still bold and strong. Just the way he liked it. Without conscious thought, his eyes perused her body and he saw in her something he had purposely denied seeing in the past. He saw a desirable woman; Seine had grown up.

Then she moistened her lips. It was an action so innocent and one he had seen her do on many occasions, but today it took on a completely new meaning. Curiosity gave way to an emotion that he had clamped down on years ago - need. A simple swipe of her lips with that perky little tongue and he knew he was lost. He wanted to characterize what he was feeling as nothing more than a reaction to a sexy girl, but he could not. Of the women he'd known, and there had been plenty, not one had ever affected him like that.

He felt Lawrence's eyes narrow on him. Every instinct of survival told Michael to look away, but damn! She had a sexy little smile on those lips that caused the blood to rush to his little head. Finally, he thought, familiar territory. Lust he could deal with and control. Need and overwhelming desire were areas he preferred not to embrace.

He adjusted the papers quickly in his lap, looked at Lawrence and then back at her. There was a sparkle in her eyes that was different from the looks she had given him in the past. There was a look of triumph on her face and it scared the shit out of him. It also pissed him off because he had entered an arena that he would never be able to conquer. He was staring at someone who could potentially mean more to him than everything he had thought he wanted. He eyed her, shell-shocked by the moment.

He had made a promise to himself years ago that nothing would keep him from success and leaving behind all the drama and heartache of his youth. His eyes locked back with Lawrence's; Michael smiled his "whatever" smile, and resumed his review of the documents he now clutched like a lifesaver.

He would not look up at her again. No matter how badly he wanted to, he would not. There was too much at stake and he would not gamble away his future for anything. *Oh Yeah*, he thought, *you keep telling yourself that*. With credit card in hand and a look of satisfaction on her face, Michael followed her movements with his eyes as she left the room.

\* \* \* \*

From that day forward, he avoided her like the plague. The few times he went to the house, and he saw her, the same feelings of want overcame him. He wondered how the hell he was going to get through the party tonight. It was a big event and he had to be there. Seine would give him that look that immobilized him so efficiently. He knew that she knew what he was feeling. His looks were of curiosity mixed with desire. Nevertheless, he never approached her. He kept his distance.

He told himself that he had to remain focused. Wanting Seine, loving her, being with her was not a part of his overall plan. However, as the days turned to weeks, it was becoming more and more difficult. Tonight would be the biggest challenge.

He had worked for Lawrence for the last eight years and while no doubt he had learned a lot, there were times he found Lawrence Simmons to be an obnoxious, stereotypical, racist bore. Michael found Lawrence's use of colorful terms to describe people outside his race, and sometimes those within, sickening and repulsive. Among Lawrence favorite victims of his sick sense of humor were ill-fated analogies of hillbillies from Kentucky, Lungers of West Virginia, and the poor occupants of the Ozarks.

That was particularly distasteful for Michael, considering that he was a product of the Ozark Mountains. As a child, Michael was labeled as "Poor White Trash." Michael knew from experience that in America, for some white people, being black was infinitely better than being what Michael was called. For white people, the poor white trash population was a constant reminder of where they came from and for blacks they were the bane of their existence.

After all, in all the movies like *Roots* and *Mandingo* when a black man was hanged or a black woman raped, the culprit was inevitably some southern-talking, dishevel-looking, poor white trash uneducated man. A man like his own father: a man so full of hate that his greatest accomplishment in life had been to die, but not before crippling his mother and damn near killing Michael in a drunken rage.

Oh yeah, his father deserved the hatred that the people in the small Tennessee town lavished on him. He had been a drunk, an abusive father and spouse, some whispered rapist, and was most definitely a racist.

Unfortunately, the saying "shit runs down hill" is true. When his father died, Michael was freed from his father's insane mental and physical abuse, only to be branded an outcast, shunned, and literally spat on by the people of the town simply because of the man his father had been.

For his whole life, Michael wanted to escape that label and all that it implied and being at Simmons Publishing was a major step for him towards that goal. Mentally, he knew that involvement with Seine would lead to his downfall at Simmons. Nevertheless, sometimes, especially late at night when he was utterly alone, he had an overwhelming urge to take the risk. Deep down inside, he wanted to be loved and to give love in return. However, the nightmares of his youth and the thought of his mother's pain were stronger and so far had won out in the end. He had to succeed.

In a strange way, he felt a connection to his boss. Lawrence had left behind the stigma of what society had placed on him at birth just as Michael was attempting to do. Lawrence was a black man in America who was a total contradiction to what America deemed a black man had the right to be. He was a success outside the accepted traditional realm. He was not a sports superstar, an entertainer, or a civil rights leader. He was a man with a brilliant business mind, succeeding in an area normally reserved for the well-bred, born-with-a-silver-spoon-in-his-mouth, Ivy-League, white man.

As he checked his appearance in the mirror, he thought of his mother. Michael's mother had believed in him. She said he was gifted, and smart, and he was. She encouraged him to rise above his circumstances, to set a goal, to be a success and never let anyone deter him from it, and so he did. He swore he would never give up his dreams as his mother had done, especially for something as uncertain as love like his mother had done. She loved a knight who turned into a dragon. *The pinnacle of evil.*

He set his goals and worked very hard and quickly to achieve them. He studied non-stop and at the age of sixteen, graduated valedictorian of CrownMar High School before entering college. With ACT and SAT scores that put him in the first percentile of all high school students tested that year; Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were among the schools that

accepted him. He opted for Harvard because it offered the most valuable financial package and there he was able to complete his MBA within four years in lieu of five. Then the recruiters began calling. Headhunters from Trump to Sebastian Enterprises to Microsoft were knocking at his door. Everyone wanted the boy genius!

The Who's Who of the business and financial worlds were flabbergasted when he chose to work for Simmons Publishing. Sure, Simmons Publishing had ranked in the top 50 on the Forbes list, number 49 the year he graduated, but why would someone so brilliant pass up Trump and Microsoft for number 49? When his roommate questioned him about his selection, Michael's response was simple and well thought out.

"If Michael Jordan were still playing for the Chicago Bulls and you were the number one draft pick, would you want to hoop for the Bulls? Would you want to be simply in his shadow? I'll never be Trump at Trump or Gates at Microsoft, at least not while they're breathing. But I can be the Ray Kroc of McDonalds at Simmons Publishing."

"Who the fuck is Ray Kroc?" His roommate asked. Michael looked at him with annoyance and said,

"Are you sure you're graduating with a business degree you fucking idiot? Ray Kroc is the entrepreneur's icon. You know, like Marilyn Monroe and James Dean. Anyway, he's an icon man! Most people don't know that McDonalds was a two-bit restaurant in San Bernardino, California. Mac and Dick McDonald opened it in 1954. Then along came this guy, Ray Kroc. Ray went in and bam! Within 5 years, he was opening the hundredth store. Imagine, in 1954 there was only one restaurant. By 1959, this guy was opening the hundredth franchise! He was brilliant. The Biography Channel has never profiled Mac and Dick McDonald. They're an afterthought in the story of Ray Kroc, and that's what I'll be at Simmons. I will be the Ray Kroc of Simmons Publishing. Right now, they have a couple magazines and that cable channel that produces hip-hop videos and black history programming. Just wait 'till I get in there. Give me five years and we'll have Ted Turner begging us for a job! And someday, Lawrence James Simmons will be an afterthought in my biography."

He arranged for his mother to join him in Atlanta and leave behind the stench that their life had been there. However, that was a dream that never was realized. She died, just as she had lived: alone. With her death, Michael's entire demeanor changed. While he was considered cold in his business dealings before, often referred to as Lawrence's henchman, following his mother's death his presence in a room brought about a chill. He isolated himself and his emotions. There was room for nothing and no one on a truly deep and emotional level. He shut himself off completely.

He was well known in the industry, and he was definitely a force with which to be reckoned. This pleased him and he was content with the knowledge that he was so much a part of transforming number 49 on the Forbes list to number 15. He got a rush every time the company eked a point closer to number one. He got a bigger rush knowing that everyone out there was making statements like, "Lawrence was a smart one for snatching that young man up!" He had more money than the law should allow. For him, success at Simmons Publishing had been nearly as gratifying as sex. More satisfying was the thought that his mother would have been proud of him. To Michael his success was her success as well.

At the end of his fifth year at Simmons Publishing, the companies had acquired four independent cable companies, twelve magazines and were producing major made-for-television productions. He was second-in-command only to Rafael Simmons, the son and apparent heir to the media conglomerate.



Michael disliked Rafael with a passion. The feeling was mutual. Both men were arrogant but Rafael was also cruel, not to mention the unfortunate fact that he had no real sense of business. He relied heavily on others to make him look good. There was a malevolence about him that was borderline-psychotic. Rafael had never known what it was like to fight for anything, he had always been accepted by others, but he was very good at taking and crippling.

Michael suspected that Rafael was into drugs and other illegal activities. That possibility alone lent credibility to the fact that Rafael was crazy. It was inconceivable that someone with so much would shit it away for a short-term thrill. He could not prove the illegal actions or obtain hardcore proof of the rumors of Rafael's involvement with underage girls. For years, Michael had made discreet inquiries and had even spoken in confidence to the authorities about Rafael, but nothing ever came of it. Michael suspected that Lawrence was behind the protection of his son by use of bribery to the authorities and intimidation against the victims. Still, Michael persisted and kept careful documents of the actual events and the speculated transgressions. He knew that eventually either Rafael would trip up or someone in the police department would not be afraid to follow through. Then, Rafael would finally be held accountable. Despite admiration for Lawrence as a businessman, he firmly believed that the man was a total asshole in the parenting department. Rafael needed help and Lawrence was not supplying it in the right way. Rafael became the image of everything despicable that Michael had ever known. He would make Rafael pay for all the shit he had done.

The knowledge that Rafael was systematically trying to ruin Michael at the company did not faze him at all. In the end, Michael knew that he would be the last man left standing. He had no qualms or attack of conscience in his pursuit to bring Lawrence's only son crashing down. If anything, he slept easier at night knowing that someday, his own mechanism would bring about the demise of Rafael Simmons.

He climbed into his silver Jaguar and started the engine. He sat back and enjoyed the comfort of the smooth leather seat. He loved this car. Sleek, elegant, and smooth, very much like the woman he knew he would inevitably cross paths with tonight. "Shit," he murmured into the stillness of the night, "I'm a goner."

## Chapter Two

Lawrence James Simmons, of the Atlanta, Georgia, Simmons, was hosting the thirtieth annual Simmons' Black Excellence Awards Benefit. Anyone and everyone associated with the media were there. What had begun as a dance in the basement of a makeshift publishing house that bore the name Simmons Publishing, had transgressed to a major social event that demanded the attendance of media moguls nationwide. There she stood, the 20-year-old daughter of one of the wealthiest and most admired and influential black men in America, staring haplessly as usual, at Michael.

Her emotions ran amuck when he was around and jealously always reared its ugly head when he showed up at the house accompanied by a female on his arm. She studied the type of woman to which he was attracted. They all had the same physical attributes, including her: medium height, small build, short hair, brown eyes, and a caramel-colored skin tone. She categorized what they all had in common and quickly took note that he was seldom with the same woman twice.

She stood off to the side, listening and observing the banter around her. She spotted Lynda across the room and was about to move to join her but stopped in her tracks when she heard Michael's name mentioned. She wavered a moment, and then settled in to eavesdrop on a conversation that seemed juicy. She recognized their voices. It was Michael's administrative assistant, Diane, and one of Simmons Publishing receptionists name Margie. They were talking about Michael and Laurel, the woman Michael had brought to the party. Her other claim to fame, according to the grapevine at Simmons, was the fact that she had managed to go out with him a record six times.

"I suppose some men go for that type." Diane commented.

"You mean the skanky bitch type?" Margie chimed in.

"Oh yeah, girl, you know the one and only time I went out with him, I was sweet and demure. I thought Michael, being the big bad macho type that he is, would appreciate the little damsel-in-distress routine. Boy was I wrong! Never heard from him again except to take a letter or bring him coffee. I swear girl, I expect him to ask me to fetch his dry cleaning any day now." Diane said.

"Well he does have that reputation of being a one night stand kind of man to protect."

"No shit! If he weren't so up front and honest in the beginning about not being interested in 'happily ever after' then he would be a major dog. How can you be pissed at a man that is so open and up front?"

"I feel you. If more men would just lay it out in the beginning then there would be less heartache. I never said he was a hound dog. I'm just wondering what it is about Laurel that has held his attention for...what, five dates?"

"Six, and you're right. Why her? I don't understand it. She's such a bitch. Why do men go for that when they can have this? I mean look at her. She's so skinny it's like you want to feed her! Quick, somebody call Burger King because she is so in need of a calorie boost and carbohydrates. Lord, don't let me get started on her hair. I mean can she not say weave for God's sake?" Diane said.

"I think her hair is cute. Actually, I'm considering giving up my hundred-dollar horse hair and investing in the stock market or something. Only kidding! But all things considered, I have to give her some play. That is one fine-ass white man and she is the only one who's made it this far. She must be doing something right."

"True, but I still think that she is just part of a fantasy that he has going in his brain. I think he gets off on mind-fucking. He likes the idea that you want him more than anything,

but he also wants a woman who is as strong as he is. Lord knows, Laurel has a strong personality. It just occurred to me that he is probably the type that gets off on the thought that he is the center of your universe and no one else. That he is it, period. I bet he secretly lusts after the Scarlet O'Hara type, you know that wishy-washy, strong as hell, bitchy type. That was the attitude that reeled Rhett Butler in."

Seine smiled and walked slowly away. As she made her way across the room, she analyzed all she had heard and thought that maybe Diane and Margie were on to something. It made perfectly good sense. "Hell," she muttered, "I can play Scarlett O'Hara with little to no effort."

She had loved this man for so long that she was willing to try anything. Logically, there were only two things that would prevent him from approaching her. Seine dismissed the 10-year age gap issue since it would eventually cease to be an issue. The bigger obstacle was her father. She quickly hammered down that roadblock; she would deal with that later. After all, she thought, quoting her new favorite role model Scarlet O'Hara, "Tomorrow is another day."

Ultimately, she reasoned, the way to a bad boy's heart was through his need to possess the girl he loved, and the nature of a girl obsessed was to be possessed.

"What'cha doing, Princess?" The voice came from behind her, startling her. She jumped, spilling white wine down the front of her white, very flimsy spaghetti-strapped Versace dress.

"Oh shit Seine, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you girl!" Lynda said and began dabbing at the stain with a white cloth napkin.

"That's okay but don't call me princess! You know I hate that. Oh well, no one will notice. You know, white on white?" She laughed. She really did not care about the dress and as she and Lynda wiped at the stain, she looked around intently, hoping to catch another glance of Michael. When she had him in her sight, and had his full attention, she did something so blatant that she shocked not only him, but also herself.

\* \* \* \*

He stood watching now as Seine and Lynda wiped at the spill on Seine's flimsy dress. In a slow seductive motion she brushed her hand against her breast, paused, and then repeated the motion. He felt the blood rush to his groin, surprised that he was aroused so quickly by such a simple, yet highly suggestive, gesture. The sensation in his lower area heightened as she tilted her head slightly to the side and laughed.

He was mesmerized by the sight of her running the napkin along her slender body, glancing at him as if for approval of the show. Anyone else observing would think nothing of her actions, but Michael recognized what she was doing and, based on his body's reaction, absolutely appreciated her show. Her sensual display definitely had the desired effect he was sure she was hoping to elicit. He could not believe that she would do something so brazen. She definitely was not the same straight-as-an-arrow girl he had known. He smiled slowly and nodded to her. He approved. Once more, she smiled and with those kissable lips mouthed the words "thank you." He pursed his lips, frowned, and looked away. He admonished himself and fought her pull, but he was weakening and he knew that she saw his inevitable surrender to her wants and his need.

He pretended to be engrossed in the conversation he was having with Lawrence but his mind wandered and his eyes strayed to hers again. For weeks now, she was all he could think about. His fantasies of her ranged from sweet romantic dinners to deeply sensual and feral

evenings. She was strikingly sexy in a can-you-handle-this sort of way. She elicited sex appeal without really trying. She was the kind of woman that a man killed for and women usually disliked. She was a woman that, once a man had her, he would go to great lengths to keep and never let go: protect and cherish at all cost.

Underneath that cool, self-assured, exterior he imagined was a panther ready to strike. Her previous bold displayed verified that. *Seeking his approval.* Oh yeah. She would be, no, she was perfect for him in everyway: bold, brash, smart, and sinful. She was an intellectual equal and a shameless hellcat to boot, that is what she reminded him of, a gentle cat on the outside, ferocious and deadly on the inside. The tightness in his chest transcended down to his groin. The combination of good and bad intrigued and aroused him. It was becoming a habit, imagining what she was like in bed, imagining what he would do to her, and better yet the freaky things she would do to him.

"Seine is looking very lovely tonight. And so is Lynda." Michael added quickly. The last thing he needed was Lawrence getting any ideas that his statement meant more than a simple observation.

"Yes, she has grown up hasn't she? She's quite the young lady now."

"Will she be here for the entire summer, or are you shipping her back off to Paris?" Michael asked as nonchalantly as possible.

"She's leaving in a couple more weeks. She and Lynda share a flat in Paris. Even if I wanted her to, she would never make America her home again. She thinks of Paris as her home now because of all the years she lived there." Mr. Lawrence paused and then added with a hint of melancholy, "She'll never be the sweet little girl I sent off all those years ago. She grew up on her own over there. She's older in spirit than her years; she grew up so quickly." He was silent for a moment, as if he suddenly was aware of the mistake he had made with her, and how he would never have that innocent little girl back who doted on his every word.

"What does she do over there, model?" He assumed so because of her unique look.

"She thinks she's on the verge of being the next Alicia Keyes. She and Lynda have a little singing group. They play at some pubs in the city. They have a little following overseas, nothing major."

"Can she sing?"

"I suppose she can sing, but Lynda is really the better of the two. She's got a beautiful voice. She and Seine sang in the choir at church when they were younger. That's how she and Seine met. Lynda's father was a deacon at the church and a respected man, but he got off track. He indulged in the wrong things. Drugs! The Devil in America is drugs! And Lynda's father is the devil's disciple, so we took her in when he disappeared. She had no other family, never knew her mother. She was a sad little girl; she only lit up when she sang. She's very beautiful, wouldn't you agree?" Lawrence turned to look at Michael and followed Michael's gaze to Seine.

"She is very beautiful," Michael responded. By the change in Lawrence's posture, he knew he had erred. He instantly regretted the comment.

"I was speaking of Lynda."

"As was I."

"I don't think so. Don't you get any ideas!" Lawrence's voice changed, the lightness had gone, and Michael knew he was serious. "I'm saving her for something a little bit better than a Simmons' employee, even one that kicks ass like you." Lawrence said, slapping Michael on the back. Michael took a sip of his drink. When Lawrence saw that Michael was not going to reply, he added, "I see Lucas McCabe has finally arrived. We should get to him before

Turner's people do. You work your magic and do what you do best. After all, that's what you're here for." Lawrence downed his drink and sat the empty glass down.

"I'd never let you down. You know that." Michael said, his voice unwavering.

"Oh, I know that, without a doubt. I know I can always count on you. As far as my daughter, you've manage to avoid succumbing to Seine's puppy-love advances in the past. I know that you will continue to."

"Of course."

"Besides, Seine is simply just trying to get my goat. She has it in her head that I abandoned her when I sent her away to school. She's a lot like me. She'll try to find a way to make me pay for the wrongs she thinks I did her, when in reality all I did was see to it that she received the best education in an environment that was conducive to her future. People in our circle are impressed by foreign head starts. Snagging you would be the ultimate slap in my face. She knows how I feel about any type of relationship she would enter into with you. But I don't have to worry about that do I?"

"Like I said Lawrence, I am perfectly clear on the situation."

"Good. It's in your best interests to keep that in mind. You have a bright future and I'm obviously in a position to see you go far at Simmons Publishing. I'd hate for my daughter and your hormones to trip you up."

"You're beating a dead horse here, Lawrence. There isn't a chance in hell I'll do anything to jeopardize my future at Simmons." He lied, adding, "I've come too far to be sidetracked now."

"Excellent. Very good, that's what I wanted to hear. Are you coming? I believe McCabe is heading for the veranda."

"I need to make a couple calls first. I'll join you when I'm finished."

"That's fine, but don't take too long. Use my study and make it quick. It's best fishing at dawn." He laughed and walked away.

\* \* \* \*

"Are you listening to me, Seine? Who are you looking at?"

Seine realized that she had not heard one word her friend had said. She glanced into the crowd once more and than blushed, dropping her head slightly, but not before Lynda caught a glimpse of the man that made her blush.

"Oh, great! The Beast also known as the Wolf!" she remarked in her usual teasing manner. "Are you sure this is just wine on your dress, Seine, or did the sight of the man make you wet?"

"You are so nasty!" Seine responded.

"Don't look now, but he's looking this way." Lynda half whispered. "If I didn't know better, I'd think something was up with the two of you." Michael was staring at Seine as if mesmerized by her. Then, as had become the norm, he frowned and looked away. Seine signed.

"I wish, but he has erected this big iron door between us, and he has it locked. It's not just any old lock. It's a damn deadbolt with chains at the top. Sometimes I think I'm wasting my time, but then I see him looking at me like he was, and I know that it's just a matter of time," Seine said wishfully.

"I hope so. You've been fixated on him and stuck in your fairy-tale fantasy for so long that you're due a break."

"I hate it when you refer to my feelings for him as a fairy tale. Give it a rest."

“Girl, you know you got that whole Little Red Riding Hood and Beauty and the Beast scenario down pat!”

“Okay, Lynda. That’s a new analogy to me. I’ll bite. What the hell are you talking about? I mean why not compare me to Cinderella or Snow White?” Seine asked.

“It’s simple. Cinderella needed rescuing, which you don’t, and Lord knows Michael is no Prince Charming. He’s stronger than you are, Seine. That’s why you like him. Snow White had issues. I mean, a girl with the Snow White syndrome needs the attention of every man around her, and she usually gets it with her ‘Oh Poor Me’ attitude, which, I am so glad to say, you do not have. Besides, her charm would never work on the Beast or the Wolf. They prefer their woman to be sexy, strong, and smart. I mean, honestly, there is only one man for Beauty, and she’s the only one who was able to tame the Beast. And point blank, the wolf gobbled up every one in his path, except Little Red Riding Hood. And those were two strong-as-hell women! Just like you.”

“Thanks, I think. So what about you, Ms. Psychoanalyst? Who are you, and what’s your type?”

“Me? I really am Shirley Temple in *The Little Princess*, wandering around trying to find my daddy. Always taking the wrong corridor—he’s so close yet so far away. But I digress. We’re talking about you and him. I mean, you are so obsessed with the idea of this man! You two would probably kill each other if given the chance. You have your idea that obsession and love are one and the same, and he is probably just as freaky and screwed in the brain on that point too.”

Seine laughed and tried very hard to concentrate on Lynda’s nonstop chatter, but her attention wandered to the man standing across the room from her. She felt overwhelmed by his scrutiny of her. His gaze was so intent that she momentarily felt paralyzed. She was suspended in time as she returned the look. She stared intently and wanted to burn that moment in her memory. He was like the extra piece of pie that you cannot have as a child. He was like everything that was bad but also very good.

Tonight, his hair looked purposely uncombed, and he wore the slightest bit of morning stubble on his face. She imagined the roughness of his face against her cheek and his lips bathing her with kisses.

He was standing next to her father, but Seine could tell Michael was not really listening to him, just as she had drowned out Lynda’s voice. His gaze was fixed on her, and she blushed. The nerve endings in her body pulsed uncontrollably. She had to remind herself to breathe. Immersed in his stare, she lost total control and shivered. She quickly looked away when her father paused in his conversation with Michael and looked at her and then at Michael, who immediately dropped eye contact with her as well.

She knew deep down that a part of her found him so attractive and so appealing because he was everything that her father and brother were not and everything that her father did not want for her. Following the scene in the study, her father had once more attempted to eradicate all thoughts of Michael from her mind. He stressed Michael’s unsuitability to any woman, especially her and reiterated about Michael’s long procession of broken hearts, stressing that Michael was dangerous and lacked scruples. After all, her father concluded, any man who is so cold-blooded in business is just as frosty in his personal life. Seine, as usual, ignored her father and concentrated instead on Michael’s good qualities. Seine strongly believed that there was goodness hidden so deep within Michael that only the love of a good woman, such as herself, could bring it to the surface. She saw him as a man who had been hurt and it was her intention to make him better.

She knew that her father had designs of marrying her off to a man who carried as his credentials what her father categorized as paramount: an excellent social status and financial security with a history to back it up, in other words, old money. She smirked and thought her father's plans for her were a pipedream. It would never happen.

"Are you listening to me?" Lynda nudged Seine to get her attention. "He's staring at you like you're chocolate, no pun intended. Girl, you know your daddy would kill him!"

"Maybe he's looking at you, Lynda," Seine said jokingly.

"That's bullshit, and you know it! He would kill Michael if he saw him looking at you like that. I mean, all things considered, your Daddy has made it clear that Michael is at the absolute bottom of the food chain!"

"I really don't care what my father thinks, you know that," Seine said firmly, and she meant it.

"You should, Seine. He is your father, and he's given you a lot."

"Yeah, right. He shipped me off to Paris when I was twelve and allowed me home during school holidays. Why? So I can be more marketable on the marriage block. Sure he cares. I'm just one of his assets, or so he thinks. His plans for me will not happen, period. Something more interesting is on the horizon."

"What's going on? Is something going on between you and Michael? I mean, there are those looks passing between the two of you and that last comment you made was very cryptic. What's going on? You would tell me if something had changed?" she asked suspiciously.

"Of course, I would tell you if, you know. Between Michael avoiding me like I have the cooties, and my father's interference, how could there be? Pops has made a point of keeping him away from the house whenever I'm home. I'm surprised he's here tonight."

"I think that happened because you are so obvious about how you feel. You need to learn to keep your emotions in check. Anybody with half a brain can tell how you feel about him. And it's like I said before, he is not what your father has in mind for his little princess."

"Why? Because he's not black? He's good enough to make us millions, but that's it? It sounds like somewhere along the way my Daddy adopted a racist stuck-up attitude!"

"It has nothing to do with race but everything to do with status. Your father's not a racist and you know it. Position motivates your father. Position and money!"

"Michael's got money. So that problem should be solved."

"Seine, your father has an issue with where he *doesn't* come from. The two of you together would be like the queen of England marrying her butler. Look, if he were old Southern money, your father would be throwing you at him! You and I both know how the social chain works around here. Old money plus old money is grounded blue blood money. Old money plus new money is good money, but new money plus new money is want-to-be good money unless it's first-generation new money which is always welcomed-at-the-front-door money!" They laughed at the analogy.

"Well, I guess it will just be up to Rafael to secure the Simmons' family on the Atlanta, Georgia, Social Register. I'm marrying for love."

"That's another thing, all this love talk. You don't even know the man, and if you gave yourself a chance to get to know someone else, then maybe you'd save yourself a lot of heartache and disappointment."

"I don't want to get to know anyone else. I feel it in me. It's him, Lynda. I know it's him. What's so wrong with that?"

"I'm telling you, the path you are creeping on is going to be rough. And it's not about what people think or what your family thinks or even what I think. That guy's got a crazy

glint in his eye. I know you, Seine, and once you set your mind to something that's it. Okay, so years ago I gave up telling you that you're living in a fantasy." Lynda paused and nodded her head in Michael's direction.

"And by the look of things, your persistence is paying off. He's looking at you like a man wanting a woman. I don't think he sees you like some infatuated, silly little school girl anymore. It's going to happen for you, what you think you want! But it takes a special woman, I mean a strong-as-hell woman, to love a man like that. They consume everything about you, and there is no room for anyone or anything else."

"And you know this based on what?" She was annoyed with Lynda.

"All the romance novels and movies I've seen."

"You're making these asinine statements based on characters in books and movies? Give me a friggin' break."

"They're fiction, but all fiction has a trace of reality to it."

"A book! Jeez, Lynda, be real," Seine spat, shaking her head in disbelief, refusing to lend credibility to the statements Lynda was making. "You think I'm some simpering little girl?"

"Wrong, I never said that. You are your father's daughter. Once you put your mind to something, you go after it. Lord knows that for years you've been after that, him, whatever. I think you should take off those rose-colored glasses, and take a look at what's really going on here."

"Suppose you tell me what's really going on here, Lynda?"

Lynda could not help but notice the sarcasm and irritation in her friend's question. "Okay, now you're angry at me. If you think I'm going to say I'm sorry, you're wrong. I have known you too long, and I love you too much. I think that whenever your father says no about something, or in this case, someone, you are more determined than ever to have it. That's where Daddy Dearest screwed up years ago. If he had encouraged instead of discouraged your infatuation for Michael, you'd be over it. Instead, his discouragement increased your feelings. Daddy said 'no' so you have to have it. That's an immature attitude, but we both know that it's true. People always want what they can't or shouldn't have."

Seine digested what Lynda had said. "So you think my father is right that Michael isn't good enough for me or that I am too young to know what it is that I want? You think I should just crawl up in a corner and die? I should just forget about the way I feel about him? I should just forget about him?"

"Girl, there is no 'you and him' right now, and you're just being dramatic. You crawl in a corner and die? When hell freezes over, you'll crawl in a corner and give up!" She laughed. After a second, the tension between them was eased.

"Maybe you're right. I don't know. Maybe you are right, Lynda. Maybe it is about having what I can't have. Or it's the thrill of really pissing off her father." In her heart, Seine did not mean it. She just wanted Lynda to shut up.

"Or maybe it's just plain lust! The man does look fine, for a white boy! I suppose if you're going to go that way, he's a good specimen to go with."

"All you see is how yummy he looks in that suit, but I see something more." Seine paused and admired him before adding in a husky voice, "He does look good in that suit."

"I bet you're imagining him out of it too." Lynda said.

"Oh, hell yeah!" Seine reached out to Lynda and hugged her, and then whispered, "I've got to get out of here! If anyone asks, tell them I went up to my room to change or something."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"If you came with me, then how in the world could you make my excuses?"



“Okay. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Seine looked at Lynda and smiled. “I’m fine! I’m going to take a break. I’ll catch up with you latter. Besides, I do believe my dear brother is coming this way, and I know he’s not coming to talk to me.” With that, she turned and headed toward the hall, stopping briefly to speak to her mother.

Her intention was to go to her father’s study. She knew it would be quiet, still, and dark in there. She could be alone with her thoughts. No one ever went in there and she felt an undeniable need to be alone with her thoughts. The way Michael had looked at her both excited and confused her. She entered the study and lay down on the sofa to think. She decided that tonight, if the opportunity presented itself, she would push the envelope and raise the stakes. One way or another, she would find out where she stood with him.

\* \* \* \*

He took a sip of his drink and watched Seine as she eased away from Lynda and headed for the exit. He looked around the room to make sure both Lawrence and Rafael were occupied. He did not see Lawrence but saw Rafael with Lynda. He felt uneasy seeing Rafael being so chummy with her. He hesitated and wondered if maybe he should intervene and then decided that he was overreacting. There was no way Rafael would try anything with her.

His assistant, Phillip, interrupted his thoughts. He did not care for Phillip at all and Michael kept him around mostly for amusement. Michael knew that Phillip and Rafael were close and that Phillip reported to Rafael anything and everything that Michael did.

“Excuse me, Michael, Mr. Simmons asked that you join him immediately on the west veranda.”

“Tell Mr. Simmons that I was sidetracked and that I still have some calls to make. Tell him I’ll be with him when I have finished them.”

“But—”

“That will be all. Please deliver my message.” Past experience had taught Michael that when dealing with Phillip a firm remand was necessary or Phillip would maneuver a conversation in a direction that ultimately resulted in Michael on the defensive end. Tonight, Michael did not want to play that game with Phillip.

Michael watched Phillip back up slowly, turn, and walk away. *Poor guy*, Michael thought, *it must be tough to be caught between a rock and a hard place, how ironic*. That was exactly where Michael himself was positioned as well, between a rock and a hard place, with his career and future with Lawrence on one side and his desire to have Seine on the other. Amused, he smiled and watched Seine make her way through the large double doors to the hall. As he followed her, he rebuked himself for taking such a risk. As his feet moved, as if of their own accord, he listed mentally all the reasons he should not follow her. Still, he followed her into the hall. He watched as she entered her father’s study. He stood in the hall, staring at the closed door. How ironic that she would enter the very room Lawrence had directed him to use. He sipped from his drink. *If I enter that room, there will be no turning back. I will have nothing. But if I don’t, I still will have nothing*. After much debate, he set his drink on the large oval table that occupied the center of foyer and leisurely made his way to the study.

Desire and need won out.

As he entered Lawrence’s study quietly, his eyes took in the room and for a moment, he thought perhaps she had exited through the doors to the right of her father’s huge mahogany desk. Then he heard a sound. He turned slightly, in time to see a flash of her. From where he stood, he could barely see the top of her head over the back of the sofa. He

smiled slightly and walked at a snail's pace to the desk. He stood with his back to her and then reached for the phone.

He dialed a number and then moved, once again slowly and deliberately, to the side of the desk. All the while, his fingers toiled with the phone cord. He pressed several more numbers into the phone and listened intently as he retrieved his voice mail. He bent his head slightly so that he could watch her from the corner of his eye. He was aware that her gaze were fixed on him. He smiled to himself while she looked at him as if undressing him. Blood rushed once more to his groin. He bent his head purposely away from her.

Suddenly he felt very uncomfortable and trapped. He realized the mistake he had made. How would he get out of the room without her noticing his situation? *Shit!* His hands felt clammy and sweat beaded on his forehead. *Fuck, I'm fucking sweating!* The thought of being discovered by her made his heart race even faster.

It seemed like hours instead of seconds as he stood there with phone in hand, half listening to message after message from his voice mail. He felt trapped and angry with himself for allowing her to make him feel so lost and off balanced. *What the hell are you doing in here, Michael?*

"Oh fuck!" he yelled. He heard the words come from his mouth, and he stood petrified in disbelief. *Did I just say that?* he thought and turned quickly and slammed the phone down into the cradle. He spread his hand flat on the desk and turned his head toward her.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" He braced the desk to steady himself. After a couple seconds of silence, he moved quickly to the large leather chair. He felt hidden now, literally, once seated at the desk.

"Hello, Michael." She spoke softly almost in a purr.

"Did you hear me?" He knew he was playing a dangerous game, but he did not care. He felt an overwhelming urge to touch her. He saw in his mind's eye her darker skin against his white flesh. The thought of the contrast in color somehow was dazzling, erotic, and burning.

"What are *you* doing in here?" she countered seductively. "I believe I have more right to this room than you, after all, it is my father's house, not yours."

There was a bemused look on her face, sexy as hell and, as usual, very inviting. He suppressed a moan and steadied himself. What he wanted to do was narrow the space between them, wipe the smirk off that little face of hers, and replace it with a glow of submission.

He laughed and said, "Okay. Now that we've established we're not related, and that you have rights that I don't, or so you think, I ask again, what are you doing in here?"

"I was bored, thought I'd take a break from the socializing. And you?"

"I was checking my messages." He willed himself to relax.

"Sure you were."

"What's that supposed to mean?" There was an amusement in his tone.

"I think you followed me in here."

"Now why would I do that?"

She just smiled.

"What are you up to?" he asked.

"Up to?"

"Yes. You've been playing a very dangerous game all evening. What are you up to? And don't play coy or shy or make like you don't know what I'm talking about, not now. What are you after?"

"You."

He sat stunned. "What do you mean me?" he asked as if he did not know.

"I think you know. I think that you have always known. It's just taken you a while to figure it out. I think that the little head has finally communicated to the big head what the deal is."

"Jesus, what a bad girl you are. Does your father know you talk like this?"

"My father has absolutely nothing to do with this, and I'd rather not introduce him into this conversation, considering the direction it is going. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Seine," he pronounced her name almost breathlessly.

"Michael," she said with a curt little smile on her face.

"I imagine you're pretty pleased with yourself right now." It was more of a statement than a question. He scrutinized her as she shifted in her seat.

"I guess it all depends on what you mean by 'pleased with myself.' Have I accomplished a goal here, Michael?" She smiled, arched her back, and relaxed on hands, resting them either side of her legs. She smugly sat on the edge of the sofa with her legs crossed. The gown she wore was split up the center to just above her knee, and the way she sat, a good deal of her thigh was exposed. Her long, perfectly proportioned legs were motionless. She wore a diamond tennis bracelet on her left ankle. His gaze began at her thigh and continued down to her ankle.

"That performance you gave out there, what were you hoping to achieve?"

"I thought we had covered that, but okay, I'll repeat myself. I don't mind. After all, you're worth it. I'm not going to feign ignorance, act like a silly school girl, and say I have no idea what you're taking about. Once more, I want you."

"Me?" he said faking astonishment. "Okay, I get it. You are still carrying that childish crush. You have quite a staying power to have held on to it so fiercely after all this time."

She stood up and walked to him slowly. She leaned against her father's desk. He dropped his gaze to her breasts, narrowed his eyes, and parted his lips slightly. She sat down on the edge, never taking her eyes off him. They stared at one another briefly in silence.

"It's not a school girl crush."

"Then what do you call it?" His voice was strained and husky.

"The same thing that you call it."

"And what might that be?"

"It is what people like you and me dream of."

"People like you and me?"

"Yeah, people missing their other half, the person that makes them whole."

"Where did you read that bullshit? I'm complete. I've got what I need."

"Sure you do. That's why you followed me in here."

"I told you—"

"I know, you came in to check your messages, but the truth is I bother you in a way that you've never been bothered. You don't like it. It scares you, right? You'll get used to it. I've had more time dealing with it than you. But now, well, now I am sure it's real. It's love and so much more. It's what love is supposed to be, but for so many people never is. It's an aching and a caring that is physical and emotional and uncontrollable. It's a toxic feeling, and it makes you want to die with it and without it. It consumes us."

"That sounds like lust."

"Lust is just a physical attraction. What I'm talking about is beyond that. Lust is a strong part of it, but it is way beyond that. It's more than being in love or just loving. And you know what I'm talking about."

"What makes you so sure?"

“Like I said, you followed me in here. I saw the way you looked at me out there, and it wasn’t just because of anything that I did or didn’t do. I’ll always remember the moment that you realized that I am the one. I’ll never forget the moment that you realized that you had to have me, not just physically, but totally and completely. The best part about that realization is that you know that I want you too. I want to possess you and have you just as you badly as you want to possess and have me.”

“Are you insane?” He laughed at her.

“Shouldn’t I be the one playing hard to get? Shouldn’t you be the hunter and I the weak prey? Is that what you want, to chase me? I’m coming on too strongly, aren’t I? I make you uncomfortable because of my honesty. That’s the only thing that can break us you know—dishonesty.”

“Break us? There is no us.”

“Yet, that’s because being the type of man that you are. You will fight it with everything in you. In the end, you’ll have no choice, you’ll seek me out. It’s important to me that you understand that I will wait. For you, to seek me out, I mean, and don’t worry: I am not an emotionally unbalanced stalker. I’m not going to call you fifty times a day and leave dead flowers on your doorstep. I’m too busy in Paris to bother with something like that. Stalking is a full-time job, and I have a full-time job. I do give you permission to send me flowers: lilies, roses, or violets. No marigolds, though, ever, I don’t like marigolds. I promise you I will wait for you. I’m very patient.”

“And very naughty too! You’re a fanatic!”

“Would you find me as interesting any other way?”

“I have a feeling that no matter what you say or do, I’d find you interesting,” he said sincerely and honestly.

“And intriguing?”

“No.”

“I’m not intriguing?” she asked, obviously unsure if that was good or bad.

“The word that comes to mind is not intriguing. You’re a very smart girl, but you still have a lot to learn.”

“Another reference to my age. When are you going to look at me as a woman instead of that stupid little girl that gushed ridiculously over you? Can’t you see I’m sincere?”

“You sound as if you’re negotiating a deal! I don’t doubt your sincerity, but at this moment, you are just more obvious than intriguing. What would your father say if he heard you speak like this?”

“My father again,” she said with exasperation. “Well, that’s just ridiculous. I’d never say anything like this in front of him. I imagine you wouldn’t be leering at me thinking dinner if he were here right now either. Why do you keep bringing him up? Unless of course . . .” She tilted her head slightly as her voice trailed off.

“Unless of course?”

“You really are afraid of me. That’s it, isn’t it? You’re afraid of me and you absolutely hate the way I make you feel, but at the same time, you really are intrigued by me, even if you say you aren’t. Why is that? Why do you pretend that you don’t want me?”

“I never said I didn’t want you. You’re very sexy. Only a deaf, dumb, and blind man would not want you, but I’m not stupid. You’re a dangerous girl, and a liability I can’t afford.”

“How do you know unless you try it? I might just be worth the risk.”

“No,” he said with conviction, more to himself than to her. “Besides, you’re a very precarious little girl aren’t you?”

She laughed. "Because you feel it necessary to refer to me as a little girl only proves my point: That you are definitely afraid of me and of what you're feeling right now about me. It's as if you have to remind yourself of how young I am, which is ridiculous! I'm twenty years old, you're thirty. We're both adults. I've lived on my own for years in Europe. I have a career, albeit a young one still, but it's promising. I am independent of my father financially. Well, not totally, but I am free of him mentally. I am sure he would not agree with that statement. He thinks he can own me and bend me to his will. But he's wrong thinking that, Michael. Dead wrong. I have my own agenda for my life, and it is not the same as his. I am not a pre-pubescent teen, so the moral dilemma that you've suddenly found necessary to adopt can be put back away in that part of your mind that you never visit. You're playing the role of the gentleman and it really isn't necessary. You should just do what is it you really want to do."

"I have been called many things in my life, but never a gentleman." He laughed.

"I would imagine not. You know, that's one of the things I . . . I admire and find..." She paused for a moment and said, "Stimulating about you." He stared at her and thought about her statement, particularly the double innuendo that she tossed out so casually. Unable to speak he took in the curve of her lips and her slender neck. Her skin shone and looked intoxicatingly moist, soft, and warm. She was good. He was so hard he thought he would explode from the need to come. There was no shyness or speculation about what she was saying, no hidden implication. He found that very refreshing.

"Now that is a very interesting word choice, stimulating. Any other man would consider this an invitation and take advantage of your naivety. You might find yourself in a situation that you would not like being in."

"I would never talk to another man the way I'm talking to you right now." She stood and walked slowly to him. He could not move. His mind was racing. When she stopped in front of him, he wanted to reach out and touch her. He wanted to grab her and kiss her and never let her go. She stood over him for a moment and looked down at him. He realized that she thoroughly enjoyed standing over him, forcing him to look up at her. It was a position of power. He had enjoyed that same stance on many occasions.

She knelt, her eyes never leaving his, leaned in close to his face, and said, "Do you have any idea how long I have waited to be absolutely and totally alone with you? I have imagined for so long what it would be like to be alone with you like this; it is everything I knew it would be. Your eyes are burning me," she said and then she kissed his lips.

She brought her hands to the back of his head, pulled him closer, and kissed his lips quickly, softly, and gently. "Do you believe me now?" she asked as she pulled away from him. "Did you feel that? The spark, the electricity? Has any other woman ever made you feel the depth of emotion that you are feeling now? It feels like you're falling. I feel like I am falling. I have been falling forever and will 'till the day I die when I think of you, when I touch you, when you touch me or just look at me. I'll feel that feeling of falling. And you can't catch me or save me, because the thrill is that I love the feeling and you are the only man ever that will make me feel like I am falling."

He looked deeply into her eyes and threw caution to the wind. He knew he was lost. He knew it was over for him. He had no control. He did not want any control. All he wanted was Seine. Michael knew at that moment that if there were a God, he would let him have her and that his last thought in life would be of her.

In one swift motion, he had his hands on her shoulders and roughly pulled her into him. This time when they kissed, she parted her lips. He wanted to explore every inch of her mouth. His tongue did a wild dance on the inside of her mouth. She moaned as his hands

slid along her shoulders crossing to her breasts. He cupped them and marveled at the feel of her hardened nipples.. He moaned into her mouth and wrestled for restraint.

“Oh God, Seine, what are you doing to me?” He lowered the straps of her gown and then roughly lifted her so that her breast met his lips. He sank his mouth over a breast and suckled, his thoughts shattered. He wanted to taste her, inhale her. She pulled away and he instinctively sought out the curve of her neck and roughly pressed her against him again.

“What am I doing here?” he mumbled. She ran her fingers through his hair and said his name repeatedly. He was lost in the feel of her. He felt suspended in time. He had never felt such an arousal and a need to take a woman as he did now.

“I love the way you touch me,” she said breathlessly. “I have never let another man touch me and I promise you I never will, ever! There isn’t a woman in this world that will feel like me or will excite you or love you like I will. I’ve waited for you. I belong to you.” She gasped. He ran his fingers soothingly along her back.

“Touch me, Seine,” he whispered. She straddled him, her hands reaching for the zipper of his trousers. She twisted wildly in his grip as his teeth grazed her skin.

“I want you right now,” he said. “Right . . . here.” He slid his hands past the barrier of her panties. “You’re so wet. I want you right now. Touch me,” he moaned against her lips.

“I have dreamed of this moment.” She responded with a voice so sultry that he thought he would lose all reason. He inhaled her scent and rested his head against the comfort of her neck.

“Are you sure, Seine? Are you sure this is what you want? There will be no turning back. Are you sure?”

She cupped his face in the palm of her hands and responded with absolute conviction, “I’ll always belong to you. There is nothing anyone can do to change that! Not even my father. Especially not my father.”

He froze.

Four words.

Four stupid words changed everything. “*Especially not my father.*” With the utterance of those words, he froze. The shield she had managed to remove up to that point was back in full force.

“What did you say?” he asked breathlessly. His mind raced at the implications of what he was doing. He looked into her eyes. *Beautiful.* Damn, she was so beautiful, and the promise in her eyes made him tremble, but her words were like a knife in his heart, waking him from a dream.

“Beautiful,” he said aloud, shaking his head, “but still a dangerous, spoiled, albeit sexy little girl with an agenda. Everyone has an agenda. I think I have just figured out yours.” The reality of the situation and of what was happening became clear. “I must be out of my fucking mind.” He gently pushed her away.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, looking confused.

He shook his head hoping that the movement would expedite his release from the dazed state. He did not want to believe it, but he knew it was possible that somewhere in that pretty little head of hers she actually thought she could use him as a weapon against her father, possibly as a means to punish Lawrence for the years he had not been there for her. He stood abruptly, bringing her up with him. In one quick motion, he spun her around, pushed her down into the chair, and then adjusted his clothing.

“What are you doing? Did I do something wrong?”

“Say it again, Seine. I want to hear you say it again.”

“Say what?” she whispered.

“Why are you really here? Do you think that you can play some sort of game with me and by doing so stick it to your daddy at the same time?” For once, he hoped Lawrence’s words from earlier in the evening would not ring true. They stared at one another.

“I’m here right now because of you, Michael, no one else.”

“Your father has plans for you, and they don’t include someone like me. It’s common knowledge, I know it, and you know it. You want to punish your daddy. God knows you have plenty of reasons to. He’s a brilliant business man but a complete moron when it comes to you and your brother. So punish him, that’s okay by me, but find some other poor jerk to do it with. Don’t think that you can use me.” He registered the surprise look on her face and thought for a moment he might be wrong, that he was overreacting out of fear for wanting something, no, someone so badly that he’d allow himself to lose all reason.

“I’m not using you to get back at him. Jesus Christ! You’re the one obsessed with him, not me. You’re the one using him as a roadblock to this, us, whatever! My God, contrary to popular opinion, I do not want to get even with my father. Why would I? The man has given me everything. He’s got nothing to do with this, with us!”

“He gives you things, Seine, and there is no ‘us,’” he said and then with lightning speed his hand shot out and took hold of her shoulder. “Thanks to you and your very obvious infatuation with me, he’s done everything but sent me a memo with the subject line being stay away from his daughter. So I ask you again, what the hell is this about? What the hell are you up to?”

“You’re right. You’re not his idea of a prince for me. *His* idea. *His* prince. But I’m not interested in his version of my prince, because you’re mine. *You*. You’re my prince.”

“Jesus, you are your father’s daughter all right. I’d be the perfect mark to get even with him. All that bullshit about hearts and flowers. So what’s the plan, sweetheart? Upset Daddy and all his plans by fucking the hired help? Have an illicit affair with the one man who would piss him off the most? It’s not very original, but convenient and quick. The only problem with it is that I’d be fucked in the end. And I don’t mean in a good way.”

“You’re paranoid on that subject. And obviously, you sick bastard, there isn’t going to be any fucking in here tonight so let go of me now . . . you’re . . . hurting me!” She practically spat at him and jerked free of his vice like grip, landing roughly in the chair. She did not whimper or retreat in the chair as if afraid of him. She stared into his eyes and stood.

He took several steps back. He recognized that look in her eyes. He had seen it before from several women. It was the glimmer they get when they are about to strike. Her arm flew in the air with every intention of slapping him. However, she was not fast enough. He caught her wrist and held it firmly in his grip. His strength overpowered hers, and she fell back into the chair.

“I hate you!”

He smiled down at her. “A moment ago you were professing your undying love for me.”

“That was before I realized that you’re a pig! A stupid, ignorant pig!”

“Oh, you hurt my feelings. You wounded me.” He said mockingly.

“You don’t ever have to worry about me making that mistake again ever. I hate you. I hate you so much right now!”

In all his life, he had never wanted anything or anyone as badly as he wanted this girl that stood so perfectly before him. He slowly smiled as she uttered insult after insult at him. Her anger was as erotic and unbearably sexy as her confession of undying love had been. If he were a sentimental man, he would go so far as to call it a Kodak moment. Nevertheless, he never gave into sentiment. He was not the type of man to sing “Auld Lang Syne” on New Year’s or watch the fireworks on the Fourth of July.

“Do you do this sort of thing often? Throw temper tantrums when you don’t get your way?”

“You can go to hell,” she spat at him as she walked past him. He grabbed her arm and swung her around. Starting at the back of her neck, then running unhurriedly down her back, he massaged her with his free hand, stopping finally at the base of her back, right above her buttocks. He felt her stir and knew that she did not want to respond to his touch. Her body betrayed her and she pressed herself against him.

“Not so fast, you little tease.”

She did not move. She just stood there, staring at him with those sexy bedroom eyes. He leaned in very close to her and his lips brushed against her lips. Ever so slightly, gently he trailed a string of kisses along her perfectly smooth cheek, stopping just beside her ear. He stood absolutely still for a moment just holding her, taking in her scent, marveling at how well her body molded to his. He held her, waiting for her body to relax and the tension in his to subside.

He truly was torn. It was very disconcerting and he felt off-balance as he struggled with the war that raged within him. He wanted her, and he knew he had to believe her words and not Lawrence’s crap. When it came to Seine, Michael realized his brain turned to mush, and all sense of reason vanished. He held her tighter. He wanted her.

His body ached for hers even though he knew that her father would go ballistic and would move heaven and hell to destroy him professionally. His arms tightened compulsively around her. She was a risk, a liability. He thought about his mother and of how she had given up everything in the name of love.

At that moment, he knew without a doubt what he had to do.

He whispered, “I’m sorry.” He ran his fingers slowly along her shoulder and inhaled her aroma once more. He gently pushed her aside to walk away. This time she reached out and grabbed his arm.

“Some things are worth the risk,” she said almost desperately.

“And some things aren’t.”

“Michael, can’t you just trust that it’s right?”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve never been burned. You’ve lived in a nice ivory tower all your life. You have no idea what it’s like avoiding the heat. When you play with fire, you inevitably get burned. And I left my fireproof gear at home,” he said pointedly.

“Sometimes you play with fire just to get burned. I’m not a delicate little flower, and I don’t break easily.”

“You see,” he said, shaking his forefinger at her. “That is precisely the sort of thing a nice girl like you shouldn’t say. If I were a bad man, a very bad, bad man, I wouldn’t care about the consequences of taking what you are so very good at offering. But I do.”

“I’m not trying to use you. I wouldn’t do that.”

“It really doesn’t matter what your motives are. This ends. Whatever this is, it ends. I cannot afford you, the cost is too high.”

“Too high? Jesus, Michael! How can you say that? I know you feel what I feel. And I’m not talking about sex. I . . . I would never hurt you, ever. It scares you, but you know what it is.”

She let go of his arm and walked to the door. She stopped, turned to face him. “I’ll never let it end, and neither will you. It’s like I said, I am very patient and next time you’ll come to me, but I don’t want to be so foolish as to turn you away. I’m very patient, and I will wait for you.”

She smiled and added, “It is ordained.” With that, she walked out the door.



\* \* \* \*

Phillip bolted from the door when he heard her approach. He moved quickly to the far end of the foyer and prayed that he would not be spotted. She flung the door open, stood for a moment with her face in her hands, and then ran her hands through her hair before slowly walking back toward the party. Next, he saw Michael emerge. A slow smile came across Phillip's face, and he was inwardly jubilant that he had been sent to the study to "fetch" Michael for Lawrence.

At first, he had been pissed when Lawrence told him to find Michael. After all, it was a party! Everyone was enjoying themselves except Phillip. His job that evening had rapidly de-escalated from invited guest to errand boy. It was the second time in less than ten minutes that he had been given the same order.

"Tell him to cut the call short and to get his ass out here ASAP!" had been Phillip's latest directive from Lawrence. As he made his way to the study, Phillip knew that, as usual, Michael would be his normal, arrogant self-righteous self and would belittle and dismiss Phillip.

Michael always found a way to humiliate and degrade Phillip. He and Rafael often joked about how they would bring him down someday. For years, they had conspired to see an end to Michael O'Neal at Simmons Publishing. Phillip had begun to think it would never happen. Michael had no skeletons in his closet. There were no vices waiting to be exposed. Michael was always very careful, cautious, and discreet. *Until now!* Phillip thought, marveling at this change of events. The man who was so calculating and precise with everything had finally made a grievous error!

By the grace of God, and Phillip's gut instinct, he did not fully open the door to the study. Instead, he held onto the doorknob with sweaty palms and listened intently to the conversation inside.

He had first hoped to overhear a phone conversation that would prove embarrassing to Michael. His eyes widened when he heard the girl. He recognized that voice, that tramp from Paris, Rafael's stuck-up, spoiled little sister! That little tease that looked down on Phillip every opportunity she got. She was so flagrant with her lust for Michael. That bothered him mostly because Michael was not a black man. Living high and mighty in Paris, the uppity black girl probably never looked twice at a brother! He closed his eyes and imagined what was happening when their voices became muffled and muted.

Still hidden in the corner, he watched as Michael walked away and Phillip knew from Michael's stride that he was watching a doomed man. That little bitch had him walking on cloud nine, thinking he was in seventh heaven. Women like her were trouble with a capital T. If you did not stop them in their tracks, they would stop you. That perplexed Phillip the most. *Didn't Michael know better?*

He had to find Rafael. Michael and the boss's daughter! If Rafael did not kill Michael, Mr. Simmons would! Philip always knew that it was a matter of time before that girl ripped down Michael's defenses and he would be just another fucked up lunatic speaking gibberish, giving up everything just to have another piece of her ass. *Black Women!* Phillip thought. *She was so obvious! The little flirt!* That Michael had avoided tapping that ass for as long as he had amazed Philip. He stood a moment more, making sure they had been gone a sufficient amount of time. He sneered at the image forming in his mind of that little bitch playing Cleopatra to his doomed Caesar and Mark Anthony. Michael just did not know it yet.

\* \* \* \*

Lynda listened to Seine recount every detail of her meeting with Michael in the study. "So now what?"

"I don't know. It's hard to say. I understand why he's so hesitant. If I were in his shoes, I would be too. My father can make things difficult for him, and that would affect us. The worst-case scenario is that we're together and he loses his position at Simmons. The best case scenario is the same thing, we're together and he loses his position at Simmons."

"But he's resourceful. He can get another job. And he's rich as sin already."

"True, but it's not about the money. It's more about power."

"He can get that anywhere."

"Not like he has at Simmons. He's Daddy's right hand man. Rafael thinks he is the man at Simmons, but everyone knows that it's Michael. You know my father, Lynda. He would pull out all the stops to blackball Michael. Even if my father didn't sabotage him, Michael has screwed so many people doing my father's bidding that no one would be inclined to welcome him. I kept hearing him say that that the cost is too high. The cost of being with me is too high. I have to hope that he was trying to convince himself and not me."

"Give it time."

"Time . . . right, time. I've come this far, right? I can do that." She stood up, walked to the window, and looked down at the grounds. It was a peaceful night, contrary to the turmoil she was feeling, the uncertainty of what her future held. She was so close, closer than she had ever been.

"He's got to choose me," she said.

Lynda walked over to her and nudged Seine. "Hang in there."

"You don't get it, Lynda. I'm so close. If I could just show him how much I love him. If I could just make him see how much more valuable I am than that company and my father's approval. If I could just get him to choose me."

"It will work out. If it's meant to be, it will be okay."

"If?" Seine repeated, astounded that Lynda would voice any doubt about the inevitability that she and Michael would be together. "I'm getting what I want."

"Yeah, I think you will. After all, your motto is to prepare for the worst and expect the best."

"You always keep me grounded, don't you, Lynda?"

"Lord knows I try."

"I don't know what I would do without you," she said playfully grabbing Lynda's arm and leaning into her.

"As long as you're sure that this is really what you want, then I am on your side. But make sure. Michael is . . . he's different. He doesn't strike me as a man who will appreciate games. Be sure that this is really what you want. Be sure, Seine."

"Here we go. I was wondering how long it would take before you start your lecture."

"Excuse me?"

"You know the routine. You're just standing there itching to tell me that I don't know what I am feeling. I mean, how can I possibly know what I really want, right? You're dying to tell me the same bogus bullshit you always spew."

"You are so off-base here, as usual."

"I think you're jealous."

"Of what? Your immature behavior?"

"That I'm getting what I want," She yelled. She and Lynda were very close, like sisters. With that relationship firmly grounded, neither was afraid to say what was truly felt and believed. Like any big sister, Lynda was very protective of Seine and was always telling her what to do.

"The only way I'd be jealous is if I wanted him too, which I don't. You know, you say dumb shit like that, and that is why I am the only female friend you have. Women don't like that shit! Me jealous of you and him? Girl, please, he's not even close to being my type. I have never been jealous of you or of anything you have. Get that thought out of your head *now*. I know you're scared as hell right now but step back and get that shit out of your head. You've got more to concern yourself with."

Seine was silent for a moment and then smiled at her. "Sorry."

"You should be. If you didn't have me, you wouldn't have a conscious." Lynda laughed, then seriously added, "Seine, I'm going to ask this again and do not go off the deep end on me. Are you sure this is about him and not your father? Because I saw the way he looked at you tonight. I also think that he's the kind of man that plays for keeps. And I don't think he will want less than all of you."

"Okay, I have issues with Daddy, I know this. Hell, years of therapy and my own common sense confirms it. I wish when I had been growing up that I had been with him instead of thousands of miles away. I know that he thinks he was trying to protect me, to protect us. But this is important. I am not fixated on Michael as a way to get my Daddy's attention. This is not about Lawrence. It never was."

"But on some level, it is true that you have chosen this man because your father would not approve?" Lynda asked quietly.

"Yes. I mean no! Shit, you're confusing me. That's not the only reason. It adds to my attraction to him, but he is so much more. I can't explain it. He's just so much more. He always has been."

"Then as far as I am concern, you can run off into the sunset together, have lots of mulatto babies, and live happily ever after. We just have to get him to see it and by all account, you have opened his eyes and set other parts of his body on fire. Seine, I want this to work for you. He's so..." Lynda's voice tailed off unable to find the right words to describe what she saw between them.

"Yeah I know. He's my 'Beast'!" She smiled.

"Yes. He is your Beast." Lynda said sincerely. Then they laughed, but it was short-lived. A call from Lawrence and the announcement, or proclamation, that he had booked a flight for Seine and Lynda's immediate return to Paris interrupted their relaxed mood. Moreover, the trip was nonnegotiable.

\* \* \* \*

He stared at the ceiling of his bedroom and reflected on the evening. Everything had changed. All his dreams had shifted. Without his permission everything had changed. He glanced over at the woman who, like him, lay naked in the bed. He sat up, his back supported by the headboard. He shook his head absently.

"Jesus Christ!" he whispered. He was annoyed. He reached out to touch her but stopped. Somehow, it seemed wrong to touch her. He grabbed his cigarettes from the nightstand and lit one. He carefully moved to the edge of the bed and grabbed his silk boxers. He stepped into them, walked to the huge picture window, and marveled at the view.

The city was so quiet. *A person could be lost out there and never found. They could be falling and never reach the bottom*, he thought. He smiled at his paraphrasing of Seine's statement. He leaned against the window and whispered her name again.

*Seine, what have you done to me? What have I let you do to me?* He pushed himself away from the window, turned, and looked at the girl who lay sated in his bed. How he had managed to satisfy her still amazed him. It was meaningless to him. He had come, but only to end the entire act. He could not even remember her name.

"Who cares!" he said aloud. He felt so empty and disgusted with himself. He hated the feeling, but it was there, and he could not shake it. Even when he was making love to—correction, fucking—whatever her name was, he felt nothing. He had gone through the motions, but he had felt nothing. Worst of all, when he reached the height of the act, he had called out Seine's name. The girl stopped moving instantly but never said a word. Then she began gyrating quicker, her long legs wrapped viciously around his back. She moved quickly as if to hurry up and finish the act. He wanted it to end quickly too, so he did not complain or tell her to slow down. The act became a marathon, and Michael had struggled to the finish line. He felt remorse as his body succumbed to the spasm that had overtaken him because he had called out another woman's name while making love to the woman who lay in his bed. Laurel. Her name was Laurel, and she did not deserve that.

"There isn't a woman in this world that will feel like me or will excite you and love you like I will," Seine had said to him. *The little witch has possessed me!* He felt relaxed suddenly because he was thinking of her. He did feel like he was falling, just as she had said. He liked it but felt constricted by it. He knew he would never feel pleasure again if he did not do what he had to do. He had to have her, but how? Lawrence would rather see him dead than with her. He would lose his job and his position. Everything that he had hoped to achieve would all go up in smoke because of the burning in his chest for a girl that he really did not even know.

*This is absolutely insane!* he admonished himself. He had to think, and quickly! He had to do something.

"Shit!" he whispered. He closed his eyes, and there he saw it: the cartoon! He was falling down a hole. There was nothing onto which to hold. He was endlessly falling. *Fuck!* Once more, he cursed his family for the position they held in life and had now forced on him. If he had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he could have her. *How ironic*, he thought. He would think of something, he always did. He looked once more at the girl that lay in his bed, concluding the first thing he would do was to take Laurel home.

He roused his guest and asked her to get dressed. She did not argue. She was smart and knew the score, but she was quite pissed. Without fuss, she said she understood and watched him grab his pants and make an exit from the bedroom. He did not blame her and he was grateful to make himself scarce while she got dressed. She worked for Simmons Publishing in the accounting department, so she knew whom he was thinking about when he uttered Seine's name at the worst possible moment.

"I'll meet you downstairs. Take your time." He glanced at his Rolex hoping the gesture was received the way it was meant, to hurry the fuck up. She grabbed her clothes and sat on the edge of the bed.

\* \* \* \*

“Fucking bastard!” she whispered. That is when she felt the vibration of his cell phone by her ass. She reached for it and saw “S Simmons” on the caller id. She smiled and answered the call.

“Hello.” She said, intentionally sounding as though the caller had woken her from a much-needed rest.

“Who is this?”

“Well who is this?” She questioned in return, silently admonishing herself for sounding too chipper.

“May I speak with Michael please?”

“Sorry honey. He’s indisposed at the moment. Wait your turn darling, he’s mine tonight.” She closed the phone with a deliberate snap. She looked over at the door and then down at the phone. A devious smile on her face, she adjusted the volume to silent and slid the phone under the mattress.

“Fucking bastard.” She said with a note of satisfaction. “Now I’m ready to go.”

“What did he say when you told him that your Daddy’s sending you back to Paris on the red eye?” Lynda asked as she walked back into the bedroom with a bowl of popcorn. She came to an abrupt stop when she saw the look on Seine’s face.

“What is it? What happened?”

“Apparently he was in fact otherwise occupied. I guess being my father’s puppet is worth more to him, and he’s not interested in what I’d cost him.”

### Chapter Three

Monday morning he walked into Simmons Publishing's main office area and instantly knew that something was wrong. He crossed to the receptionist's area to retrieve his messages, taking note that his secretary was not at her desk. Jennie, the receptionist, looked at him quickly, smiled, said hello, and then turned abruptly to her computer screen.

Now he knew something was very wrong by the lack of the usual banter and harmless flirting. She did not say another word. He let it pass and headed to his office. No one made eye contact with him. *What the hell is going on?* He felt like a condemned prisoner making that last walk down the green mile.

Inside his office, he closed the door softly and locked it. Why he locked the door, he was not sure. He flung his briefcase to the leather sofa positioned directly in front of a fireplace. He ran his hands through his hair. The previous day, he had decided that he would call her Monday. His intentions were to come into the office, call Seine and get everything straight. He had to make sure she was not playing a game with him before he allowed himself to be pulled into a bad situation. To hell with Simmons Publishing, he had to have her at any cost. He just had to be sure of her motives. Nevertheless, something was not right at work. He could feel it.

The sound of his phone buzzing interrupted his thoughts. He practically snatched the phone from the cradle.

"Yes?" he said quickly, hoping it was Seine.

"It's Laurel. I . . . well, I thought I should warn you."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I had Sunday brunch yesterday with Phillip, and well . . . I don't want to get him in trouble, but I just think what they're planning is . . . well, it's reprehensible."

"Once more, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Well, Phillip said that Mr. Simmons's kids were concern with the direction that you are taking things. They feel threatened by you and your relationship with Mr. Simmons. So, they took matters into their own hands."

"They?" Michael prodded.

"Rafe and his sister, although Phillip refers to them as the spoiled rich kids."

"Now why would Phillip tell you that? He and Rafael are joined at the hip."

"To gloat, I guess. I mean he hates you more than he likes Rafe, and I guess he thought that it would make me feel better. All things considered, if you know what I mean."

He did but nonetheless took the bait. "Why would information about my planned demise here make your day?"

"Because I cried on his shoulders about Saturday night. You do remember Saturday night, don't you?"

"You're pissed because I sent you home?" He inhaled sharply, all patience gone. "I thought we had an understanding?"

"Yes, Michael, we have, or I should say we had, an understanding. That's not why I was crying like a baby to Phillip yesterday. I was upset because while you were in bed with me you were wishing it were Seine. And when you called out her name...did you actually think that wouldn't hurt?"

"I didn't give it much thought." He lied. "Besides, where I come from whores never had hearts that bleed." With that, he hung up the phone, angrier with himself than with Laurel. He was wrong to have treated her so badly on Saturday night, and his words to her just now compounded the remorse and inner turmoil assailing him. The last thing he wanted to do

was to hurt Laurel. She did not deserve it, no woman did. It was this thing with Seine; it had to be resolved.

\* \* \* \*

"I thought for sure you'd blow it," Phillip said to Laurel as she dropped the phone onto its base. "I'm very proud of you for holding it together." Phillip, who stood next to her like the snake he was, had observed Laurel's negative body language during her conversation with Michael. He had feared that at any moment, she might succumb to her basic instinct and tell Michael what she really thought of him. So, he had gently caressed her cheek, smiled and nodded at her, encouraging her to continue with the script and to not deviate from it.

"You have no idea how badly I wanted to tell Mr. High-and-Mighty to go fuck himself." Laurel smiled at Phillip.

"I'll make sure Rafael knows whose team you're really playing on. He was concerned there for a while that maybe you had been blinded by O'Neal."

"No way! I caught Michael's attention and held onto it for one reason only—to stick it to those uppity bitches on the top floor. They all think he is the top of the food chain so I ate my fill. I hope he rots in hell." Her voice was so full of venom that Phillip eased away from her as subtly as he could.

"Your claws are out, darling. Chill out. In about thirty minutes or so, we'll both be rid of Michael O'Neal."

\* \* \* \*

He was *not* thinking clearly. *How the fuck did everything get so messed up and complicated?* Saturday morning his life was fine, and now it was spinning out of control because of a girl he had known and managed to ignore for years. *Shit!*

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, determined to rein in his emotions. *Now is not the time to panic.* He grunted at that thought. Panic was the last thing he would do. He would formulate a plan. First thing on the list was to find out what the hell was going on in the offices today. Second, deal with his asinine treatment of Laurel and check out her story, into which he refused to put much stock. Seine could give two shits about this company, and Rafael was an asshole who could not maneuver shit in a toilet. Phillip, the prick, had brains but no constructive reasoning power, which made him a liability and a threat. The third item to handle before close of business today, fire Phillip and eliminate that parasite for good.

Finally, he needed to contact Seine and settle what was going on between them. He had put up a valiant fight, but he knew in the end what the outcome would be. For the past twenty-four hours, he weighed the pros and cons of any involvement with her. The cons were without a doubt heavier, but in the end, he did not care. For her, everything else be damned. He loved her. He smiled at the thought because it had happened in a blink of an eye.

"I love her," he said aloud, "and I will have her." He considered it the icing on the cake. His thoughts were interrupted by the phone again. This time he let it ring a couple times, and picked it up on the third ring.

"Mr. Simmons would like to see you immediately in the conference room," spoke his secretary, who had conveniently been away from her desk when he walked in. He hung up without acknowledging her statement. He took a deep breath and mentally prepared himself.

He stood for a moment and calmed himself. There was no way he was going out that door without being ready for whatever was about to happen.

\* \* \* \*

He knocked twice on the closed conference room door and then walked inside. His eyes took in the occupants quickly, the stoic expression on his face unflinching. He noted that Lawrence sat at the head of the table, with Rafael to his left. The third occupant at the large conference table, Phillip, surprised him.

"Have a seat, Michael." Simmons waved for him to take a seat. Michael pulled out the chair at the opposite end of Lawrence.

"That will be all, Phillip. You can leave now." Lawrence said dismissively, never taking his gaze off Michael. He attempted to read Lawrence's face. Instinctively, he knew that this was all about Seine. Of course, this had to do with her. Michael leaned forward slightly and returned Lawrence's intense gaze.

"Michael," Lawrence began, "I'm troubled."

Rafael rolled his eyes and said, "You're troubled! Well, I'm pissed!" Rafael yelled at Michael.

"Shut up, son. Michael, I am troubled by events that took place at my home Saturday night. I need you to set me straight on a couple things."

"Did someone run off with the silver?" he said mockingly, staring at Rafael.

"No, motherfucker, but someone was messing with something that doesn't belong to him! And I think you know who that someone is, don't you, hotshot?" Rafael retorted.

"One more word and you're out of here. So sit there and shut up," Lawrence interjected.

"Why? So you can play cat-and-mouse games with this guy!" Rafael stood up, looked at Michael, and said, "What the fuck were you doing with my sister Saturday night? Who the fuck do you think you are?"

"Is that what this is about?" Michael laughed his most effective condescending laugh.

"For the last time, Rafael, sit down!" Lawrence yelled at his son, who quickly took his seat. Lawrence directed his attention once more to Michael.

"I was told that the two of you were alone together for quite some time Saturday night. The next day she was visibly upset and very edgy. At first, I thought it was because I arranged for her to leave earlier than she had planned. She left yesterday afternoon for Paris but wasn't schedule to leave till Wednesday. I thought it best she leave earlier when I saw the not-so-subtle glances between the two of you. You thought I didn't notice, did you? I did. I thought we had an understanding about her. I don't want any surprises. Suppose you tell me what took place between the two of you."

"You can't be serious. With all the work to be done around here, you want to discuss what your daughter and I discussed for all of ten minutes in your study?"

"Humor me. Put my mind at ease."

"Nothing."

"Bullshit!" Rafael yelled.

Michael sat very still. He steadied himself and waited for the next accusation. He purposely remained cool to unbalance both Lawrence and Rafael.

"What the fuck did you do to my sister?"

Lawrence grabbed Rafael's arm and pushed him into the chair.

"Why don't you ask her?" Michael spat back.



"I told you! Look at him. Pops! He's trying to cover his ass! I say kick him out of here right now! And call the police to escort his sorry ass off the premises!"

"There is nothing I can say to convince you that I didn't take advantage of your sister. So why should I bother. Talk to her if you want to know what we innocently discussed alone in the privacy of your study."

"Like I said she's gone," Lawrence said.

"Paris isn't exactly a third-world nation. They have phones, call her."

"You're one cool son-of-a-bitch, aren't you? I can throw your ass out of here." Lawrence was at his breaking point, and Michael sensed it.

"I have a contract," Michael reminded him.

"Contract's are made to be broken."

"On what grounds are you going to break my contract? There is no clause saying that I would be dismissed if I spent more than five minutes alone with your daughter. I would never take advantage of her. I find her . . . intriguing, and I assure you her virtue and her virginity are both still intact. I am a lot of things, but rapist of little girls is not one of them." He shifted his gaze to Rafael. "I know that the practice of respecting another person's body is a concept that is foreign to you, particularly in light of your penchant for girls half your age. You're notorious, Rafael, in that degenerate, morally corrupt group that you belong to," he said maliciously. Rafael made a movement as if he were going to punch Michael. Michael stood quickly and said, "If your Lolita-loving, woman-beating, coke-using son touches me, I will destroy what's left of his reputation." Rafael stopped as if a wall had come up between them.

"Pops . . . I—"

"Rafael, get out of here now! We'll talk later, but for now get out of here." Lawrence eased down in his chair.

"Michael, please sit down," Lawrence said once Rafael had exited the room.

"I apologize, Lawrence. That was the last thing I intended to happen."

"Forget it," Lawrence said shaking his head.

"No, Lawrence, I can't." Michael continued with false sincerity. "I know that the last thing you want is for the skeletons jangling in your closet to be exposed. I assure you, your son's questionable activities will remain a secret with me." He lied. "I can't think of anything that you would do or say that would make me expose it. It would cause you a great deal of an embarrassment and would jeopardize not only your good name, but also the standing of your family in the community as well as every aspect of this company. I know how important those things are to you. I know that this is a family business, and a great deal of our revenue and ventures are based on that very philosophy. I would never do anything to jeopardize that." Michael spoke slowly never taking his eyes off the older man.

"How long have you been aware of my son's . . . how did you phrase it?"

"Penchant for young girls," Michael supplied the words to him without pause.

"Yes, of course. How long?"

"Quite sometime now, he's very . . . discreet."

"Obviously not enough, somehow you managed to find out," Lawrence said.

Michael did not respond. He simply shifted his body to a more relaxed yet dominating position.

"And you never said anything?" Lawrence asked.

"That would be a topic difficult to work into casual conversation and completely inappropriate for me to approach with you." Michael paused briefly before continuing his fabricated story of unconcern to Rafael's deviousness. "It was, frankly, none of my business.

Just as what transpired between your daughter and myself is none of your business. My goal is not to hurt her.”

“So something did happen! In my home for God’s sake!”

“You’re jumping to conclusions again. I would never disrespect you like that, nor would I jeopardize all that I have achieved here. After all these years, you should know how I feel about my future here and how much I admire you. I would never jeopardize it on a whim.”

The expression on Lawrence’s face was priceless. Michael read it all; regret for the day he had brought Michael into the company, the power Michael had, and that Michael was the one who was trying to ruin his son.

“Fair enough! Fair enough! I apologize. I overreacted. It’s just that, well, Michael, she is just so very precious to me.” Lawrence’s sudden and unexpected shifting of gears wasn’t lost on Michael, and he braced himself for whatever Lawrence was up to.

“I understand,” Michael said with false sympathy.

“And I apologize for Rafael’s behavior.”

“Lawrence, there really is no need to apologize. He was just being a brother protecting his sister. I suppose I would react the same way, if I had a sister. You can assure him, Lawrence, that my intentions are honorable. I will never hurt Seine.”

“Of course not. How can you hurt someone that you will never see again?”

Michael thought for a moment. He had come this far and he intended at this point to make sure that Lawrence understood the claim he had decided to stake.

“But I do intend to see her again, Lawrence, if she is so inclined.” Michael said matter-of-factly and without hesitation.

“Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear. I do not want you to see my daughter. I do not want you to call my daughter. With my blessings, stay as far away from her as possible. Do I make myself clear?”

“Lawrence,” he began, “I am not the worst thing that could happen to her. She’s grown, and she will make her own mind up about whom she sees. Not you, and not me.”

“Over my dead body, her dead body, and your dead body you arrogant son of a bitch!”

“After all I have done for you, all we have accomplished together, you can say that to me?”

“Yes, I can say that to you,” Lawrence said matter-of-factly, unaffected by the coldness of Michael stare or the fact that his speech was void of emotion. “And, you have no choice but to accept it. It would never work anyway. You are too different.”

“You mean because I’m white and she’s black? Or is it because I was born poor with nothing?”

“Yes. To all of your reasons that you expressed so eloquently, I am saying yes. I want better than you in her life! Besides, you should be thinking about your future. She won’t help you to get what it is that you crave—power, position, acceptance, and wealth! Those four things feed your libido. You will never get them with her. Despite my position, she still has none of those!” Lawrence calmed himself for a moment then continued. “Michael, marriage is a business, son. It should be negotiated to the benefit of both parties involved. You can’t afford to invest in the wrong partner. You’ve come too far.”

“So this is what it feels like.”

“Excuse me?”

“To be told that no matter what you do, how much you are a success, or what you have in life, that you are still not good enough. Is that how you felt when year after year, your application to the country club was denied? Is this how you felt? You’re talking to me like I’m dirt, the shit on the bottom of your shoe that you’re afraid to touch. Like filth! So this is

what it feels like to work your ass off to become more than what your mother and father were, only to be told that you still are not good enough!”

“Yeah, and welcome to the real world! Keep your ass away from my daughter. You concentrate on doing what you do best, fucking people! You concentrate on being what you are, a soulless, fucking, conniving little bastard! You got a thing for black women, fine. There isn’t anything wrong with that. Black men have been stealing your women’s booty for years. Turn-about is fair play, but not my daughter!”

Michael shook his head trying to digest everything that Lawrence had said. He wanted to remain calm, but he could not. The man that sat before him talking to him like shit had it coming to him. There was only one thought running through Michael’s mind: *This guy has got to pay.*

“Look, Michael,” Lawrence rattled on, “there are plenty of beautiful black women. There is a smorgasbord here at Simmons Publishing alone! Take any of them, all of them! I don’t give a shit. Just not Seine. Forget it, just forget about my daughter! Go on out there and indulge yourself. Have a good time, but not with my daughter!”

Michael could not believe what he was hearing. “Let me make sure I have this right. If I understand you correctly, you are saying that it is okay for me to fuck any of the women here, black or white, but not your daughter. In addition, while I am screwing this woman that I randomly select, that I should also be checking out resumes from women who can count among their achievements the knowledge that their ancestors came over on the Mayflower. Have I got it straight, you motherfucker?”

“Of course you know that you have just fired yourself. I don’t give a shit about a contract. I want your ass out of here now.” Lawrence spoke just as threateningly as Michael had, both men sat unflinching.

“You have just made the biggest mistake of your life, Lawrence. You should have just blessed my wishes with a smile. I’m fired, but you have just fucked yourself. You have no idea what you have done, do you?” Michael stood up.

“Oh, I do. I know that I have a fight ahead. I know that you are going to walk out of here all high and mighty with one goal, to take me out and bring my company down. I think I know you well enough, you piece of shit! You think you’re going to teach this bad guy a lesson?”

“No. I’m the bad guy, and I will teach you a lesson.”

“Fuck you and your two-bit threats. I don’t have time for this pissing contest! Get out of here. Do not go to your office. Just get out. I’ll arrange for your personal belonging to be sent to you. Better yet, I’m going to call security and have your ass thrown out like the garbage that you came from!”

“Don’t bother, Lawrence. I came in unescorted, and I intend to leave the same way.”

“You’ll never get this.” Lawrence waved his hand indicating the room as a symbol of his company. “You’ll try. I wouldn’t expect anything less. Now get out of here!”

“How did you ever raise such a daughter? It amazes me that any part of you is in her.”

“Listen, you son of a bitch, you don’t know anything about my daughter, except that she is my daughter and you get a hard-on when you think of her. So don’t stand there judging me. You ask me for something that you know I’d never give. You don’t even know her so don’t stand there like I’m keeping Romeo from Juliet. You’re not in love with her. You don’t even know her. You don’t even want her. Only your dick does.”

“My dick could have had her a long time ago, but that’s in the past. You’re right, Lawrence. I am leaving here with the thought of what I will do to you. You’re going to regret what you said to me. Someday all of this and more will be mine. I intend to make you

wish that you had never laid eyes on me. I intend to take it all and dispose of it piece by piece, you self-righteous, arrogant motherfucker. I will disassemble everything you have created, and I do mean everything that you created. And so there is no misunderstanding, it will be more than your company I'll be taking."

Michael turned to walk away. Lawrence jumped up and yelled after him, "What the fuck is that suppose to mean?"

"I intend to take your company and your daughter. You won't like that at all. And I'll make sure she doesn't either."

## Chapter Four

His first order of business when he entered his apartment was to contact Stephen Lays, the corporate financial officer for Sebastian Industries, second only to Time Warner in the media industry. Michael knew in order to catch the big fish. He would need a bigger fish of his own.

"Stephen, this is Michael O'Neal," he said to the man on the other end of the phone. Stephen did not respond immediately.

"What can I do for you O'Neal?"

"Please, call me Michael."

"I'd rather not."

Another uncomfortable silence, Michael leaned back in his chair and imagined Stephen doing the same. "I want to meet with you."

"Not a good idea. By the way, where did you get this number? It's private and unlisted."

"I have my sources. Trust me, this meeting will be worth your while."

"Cut the crap, O'Neal. What does your boss want?"

"You mean Lawrence? He's no longer my boss."

"Okay," Stephen responded. The shock in Stephen's voice did not surprise Michael, and he knew that he had piqued Stephen's interest by this news. "When did that happen?"

"Within the last hour."

"So you want a job. Is that it?"

"No, that's not it. I'm not wasting my time making another motherfucker rich and I think you feel the same way."

"I'm listening?" Stephen said after a moment.

"Meet me at my place here in Atlanta, and we'll talk about it."

"In Atlanta? I'm supposed to drop everything and fly to Atlanta to meet with you?"

"I'm not flying out there," Michael said adamantly. "Give me an answer now. Listen, Stephen, you're the first name on my list of potential . . . investors at Sebastian, but you're not the only name on my list. Do I cross your name off and call someone else?"

"I need more than innuendo to catch the red eye."

"Okay, how's this name for an incentive. Rafael Simmons."

More silence. Michael imagined that Stephen was mulling over in his mind's eye the thought of smashing Rafael into a million little pieces.

"What about him?" Stephen finally asked.

"Rafael Simmons fucked over your little sister in the worse possible way. He has a thing for young girls. Your sister Eliot just happened to be one of them." He spoke slowly and chose his words very carefully. He needed Stephen in order to have Sebastian.

"We both have a score to settle. My mind tells me that to settle that score, it should be done in a rational, methodical, and orderly manner. To achieve this goal, I need help, and I need a brain that thinks like mine. That would be yours. If we get fucking rich in the process, then we consider it icing on the cake. Do we have an understanding? Is that motivation enough for you to make the trip?"

\* \* \* \*

They sat on the terrace, pre-victory grins adorning both of their faces. The contrast in their skin color was the only difference between the two men. Michael's was tan and taunt in the moonlight while Stephen's dark complexion shone. They had reached an understanding

and formulated a plan. Several hours past midnight, they lifted their beer glasses and toasted the future success of their endeavor. They joked and patted one another on the back, pleased with what they considered a very profitable partnership.

"You're one devious white man!" Stephen laughed.

"Don't give me that shit," Michael said lightly. "We don't own the patent for doing business like this or anything else that some people consider morally corrupt. Most of what I know, I learned from Lawrence. This isn't a black-and-white thing. Besides, a devious mind is not inherent to the white male. Look at you!" Michael laughed.

"Yeah, but my motives are legit. That guy needs to be taken out." Stephen said.

"So the money, position, and power mean nothing to you. All you want is revenge against the man that . . . well, you know what he did. I get to keep everything else."

"What the fuck do you think?"

They laughed.

"Stephen, in order for this to work, you have to think outside the box."

"Like you are?"

"Exactly."

"Bullshit. How do I know that you can keep it together? I know that girl. I've seen her. She is sweet but women like that . . . you can't trust a woman like that. I don't care how good you are in and out of the bed to them. Women like that are dangerous."

"We won't talk about her. Okay?"

"We will talk about her. We're partners. You voice your concern, I voice mine. I hate Rafael. That can screw things up, so I try to leave my hatred out of this. I agree with you. Because when it is all said and done, then I can deal with that hatred and crucify the fucker. Can you do the same thing? I want to see Rafael pay. But you love this girl."

"Who says I love her?"

"That gleam in your eyes. She does not have to be a part of this. We can get Rafael and Lawrence and leave her out of it."

"No. She started this, and besides, the thought of me fucking her will fuck Lawrence up more than anything else I could ever do. I worked hard, Stephen. I worked my ass off to pull myself out of CrownMar. Then thirty minutes with her, and I lose it all. Why? What do I have now? Nothing, there's not a company that will touch me. Lawrence will see to that. You know and I know that he has already put the word out. I poured my life into Simmons Publishing. I was with Lawrence all the way, and together we made that company more powerful in the last ten years. All the dirty shit that took place I did willingly because I admired Lawrence. I truly admired and learned a great deal from him. I respected him. And he repays me by reminding me of where I come from and that I'd never be good enough for his daughter. Hell, for all I know, she was conspiring with Rafael to bring me down."

"But you don't know that for a fact. You can't trust the word of that chick Melissa."

"Laurel," Michael corrected.

"Who gives a fuck about her name? She is probably just a pawn in Lawrence's attempt to keep you away from his daughter. That I'll never understand. Then there's Rafael. Although he's not the brightest bulb in the box, he's still a prick and very much capable, as you know, of playing a game like that. You really should talk to Seine before we go forward this plan."

"Ah, but you see, Stephen, she left. She professes an unyielding devotion and then she just disappears. At her father's insistence, absolute bullshit. She's an adult. It was her choice to leave, and without a word to me. The whole thing stinks of a set-up."

"Those were his words, not hers. You're not even giving her a chance to tell you why she left. You're taking Lawrence's word for what happen. You're assuming exactly what her father wants you to assume."

"Not really. I have nothing to give her now."

"And if all she wants is you?"

"She left. What does that tell you?"

"Maybe she likes playing games. God knows, women are very good at that. She expects you to chase her."

"I can't afford to do that. Mentally, I can't. I have to get back what I lost. She is . . . dangerous to me. She is, man . . . I can't afford to let her in my mind. I have to make Lawrence pay. I have to. It's a gamble, but in the long run, Lawrence will pay with his company and his daughter. I will take what he does not want me to have, with or without her approval. Make no mistake, I will have her. It's ordained."

"Ordained? That's the kind of shit that worries me. Ordained?"

"Can we just forget about this and drop the whole thing? Are you going to be my partner in business or my advisor on love? Is that what you want? For me to give her a chance to fuck with my mind more than she has already? Do you know her? Is there something you want to tell me? Just how many fucking times have you seen her around? Why do you care so fucking much about her?"

"I don't give a fuck about her! She's not my type, but I do care about seeing this through without any road blocks. Your feelings for her are a liability. I don't want to be put in the position of collecting any debts from you," Stephen said coldly.

"Is that a threat?" Michael said slowly.

"I'm like you, Michael. I don't make threats. We both know that threats are childish and get you nowhere. We make promises to ourselves, promises that we keep."

"I'm aware of your reputation, Stephen. That's why I called you. You don't scare me but I'd rather be on your side than not. Make no mistake, I never run from a fight, and I avoid situations that can be potentially hazardous to my end goal. The one time I didn't cost me ten years of hard work and careful planning. I will never make that mistake again."

"Are you sure you can keep your feelings for her locked away?"

"That's why I am going to stay the fuck away from her. How many times do I have to say that? Why are you pushing this issue?" He paused and added, "I will have her, but first we concentrate on securing Sebastian Industries for ourselves. Lawrence is an asshole and a sadist. He expects me to strike immediately, but we'll go slowly. It will be smooth. He'll let his guard down, and all the while we will be collecting and putting together dossiers on every crooked endeavor Lawrence and his perverted son have made, going back to the day they were born. With the financial security of Sebastian Industry and the position it will afford us, we will take over Simmons Publishing and destroy the Simmons family personally and publicly. We will crush that fucker Rafael. We will crush Lawrence, and I will have his daughter."

"By hurting her? By building up her career, toppling it, and forcing her to depend on you?"

"I know what I want," Michael said. "And you know I can get it or you wouldn't be sitting here with me right now."

"There's a song that says it's a thin line between love and hate. I think that the anger you have right now is going to dissipate and then we'll be in trouble."

“This is it. I’ll say it one last time. I know what I want, I will have it. It would be easier, more accessible and a hell of a lot more fun getting it if you are my partner, but fuck you if you can’t trust me to go the distance.”

“I’m flattered that you recognize and understand that I’m your best bet and that you’d enjoy working with me. For the record, the feeling is mutual. I guess our reputations precede us both. With that said, understand that I will not be made a fool, and I will not risk all I have for no one. That’s the difference between me and you. There is no way I would have followed that girl into that room knowing that her father would go ballistic. I wouldn’t have followed the Virgin Mary, Mona Lisa, or a thousand naked ladies into that room if there had been a fraction of a chance that I’d take a fall. No one’s worth that.”

“Yeah, right. Have you seen her? Really taken a look at her?”

“Like I said, she is not my type, but clearly she’s yours. She’s in your blood, and when you get her, you will wish that you didn’t have her. To keep her you’re going to have to give up a part of yourself. Dead man walking. In the meantime, I’m going to trust that you will stay away from her. I know that your energies will be on what we have to do. I believe that. I don’t doubt you. I just don’t want you to have any regrets. You have to stay as far away from her as you can. This will work. We are going to have it all. Shit, this plan is fool-proof except for her and what she means to you.”

“Trust me, Stephen, we are partners. Our motives are the same.”

“I need a guarantee.”

“I don’t respond to ultimatums very well. You should know that.”

“Drop the tough, white-boy act with me. It’s like I said, I’m putting a lot on the line here, and I’m not going to risk it all without a promise from you.”

“What?”

“Starting right now, stay away from her. I’ll handle what happens to her and her career. You’ll remain strictly in the background until the time is right.”

“Even if I wanted to see her, I wouldn’t.” Michael lied.

Stephen frowned at the obvious lie and lowered his head.

“And in turn, you leave the demise of Rafael Simmons to me until the final blow,” Michael added.

“Agreed.”

“Agreed,” Michael said. With a slow, wicked smile, he added, “And we both do Lawrence.”

“Of course.” Stephen laughed.



## Chapter Five

### *Five years later*

Michael slid into his seat and waited like everyone else for the show to begin. He glanced around the room, unimpressed by the celebrity-filled audience. It was the typical crowd of red-carpet bodies. All the musical superstars and actors, rich and famous attended. It was a black-tie affair to benefit AIDS research, the first event that his company O'Neal Media, formerly Sebastian Industries, had produced and underwritten exclusively. The media frenzy surrounding it was mind-boggling.

He had called in many debts and had extended just as many favors to ensure success and draw the attendance of all major players. His greatest coup was the headliner, none other than the hottest rising star. This most sought-after female entertainer of the time, Seine held, without her knowledge, his heart and soul in the palm of her hand.

He sat rigid in his seat and mentally prepared himself for the inevitable rush he always experienced whenever he thought of her. She was still, and always would be, his obsession. He toyed with the idea of her being his salvation too. He did not like what he saw when he looked in the mirror; he saw coldness. He was hollow inside. He hated himself even more today than he did when they parted years ago. He did not like the feeling. He hated it, hated himself, but whatever it was that made him react and do the things he did had become second nature to him. He told himself, once more, that soon it would be over. He would have his salvation. He would have her.

Many times, he wanted to give up his quest. He would sit for hours thinking of his plan, going over it detail by detail. He would make Lawrence pay, Rafael pay, and Seine. In his mind, she had betrayed him. He had adopted that scenario to keep from going mad with his need for her. Viewing her as the enemy made it easy to avoid her. Still, she invaded his thoughts when he did not want her to. He had developed a love-hate fantasy of her. He had convinced himself that she had wronged him, and therefore, he wanted to make her pay. He had fallen into her trap. Those thoughts kept him safe, sane, and out of Paris. Those thoughts allowed him to concentrate on his plan of vengeance.

Once Stephen and Michael had finalized their partnership, their first order of business had been taking over Sebastian Industries. Old Man Sebastian had not seen it coming. The poor sucker had been really pissed when he realized that he had opened the door to the snakes that bit his neck. Nevertheless, Old Man Sebastian bowed out gracefully. After all, Sebastian Industries had been founded by him in very much the same way.

After great debate, they had changed the name of the company to O'Neal Media. Stephen balked initially about the name, but Michael commented that Lays Media conjured up the image of pornographic movies or couch potatoes.

With their newfound resources, they had created a star. Of course, she had no way of knowing the head of O'Neal Media was the primary reason she waltzed seamlessly into the position of mega-star. He had orchestrated the first recording contract. His people had pressured radio stations to flood their airways with her songs. He had started the silent campaign for the Grammy nomination and various other awards before the release of her song. He had footed the bill for the remaking of her video, and he had arranged the meeting of Seine and Lynda with Jesse, the man who now managed her. He had continued his quest to bring her to the pinnacle of success in the industry.

Now his plan had come full circle. He knew he had to get his emotions in check. He could not afford for old longings to interrupt or interfere with the progress he had made to date. He had a personal mission to fulfill. He knew that Lawrence thought everything was all

well and good, that Michael had abandoned any notion of interfering with Seine or Lawrence, especially since Michael had made no attempt to contact her.

If things went well tonight, and he had no reason to believe otherwise, the final nail in his nemesis's coffin would be placed. He starred intently at the opening act that pranced across the stage of the Jackie Gleason Theater of the Performing Arts in Miami, but his mind was elsewhere. Within a week, it would be over. He just had to maintain his emotional detachment of the entire situation. He could not allow his feelings for her to interfere. The very beautiful woman who sat beside him touched his shoulder and leaned in to speak to him, interrupting his thoughts. He smiled at her and listened as best he could. It was incredibly loud in the place. Pillar made an off-the-wall comment, and he laughed.

He liked Pillar. They too had a partnership and understanding. Men all over the world admired her beauty and charm. She and Michael were good for one another's public image. She was his front, considered his "great love." Although he was a celebrity in his own right, a household name like Bill Gates and Donald Trump, having Pillar kept Michael in the limelight, and in Seine's mind, he hoped.

If people only knew, he mused as his eyes perused her. Pillar would sooner slit her throat than sleep with him, or any man for that matter. His mood began to lighten slightly and thought how the two of them, he and Pillar, were constantly hiding their true natures. Instead, they, allowed other things, celebrity for her, revenge for him, to keep them away from what they desired most. By being in one another's company, her status of drop-dead sex goddess was secure, and his persona of smitten male was safe. *It is all about image*, he thought. That is what had started this whole thing, image—Lawrence's image of his status, and Michael's image of self-worth.

At exactly nine o'clock, as scheduled, she took the stage.

He sat back and enjoyed the show.

\* \* \* \* \*

Seine entered the after party with Lynda by her side. She was still in a state of bewilderment from seeing him. He was with Pillar Humphrey, and that made her nuts. They were always together and the green-eyed monster crept up her spine. Did he know even after all these years that he belonged to her, with her? She repeated her favorite mantra. *Soon*.

She attempted to move quickly past the press but Lynda had lagged behind. A reporter with ON! TV, as in O'Neal TV, slipped before her, bringing her to a dead halt.

"Seine, how are you doing this evening? You were marvelous on stage tonight."

Seine faced the camera and prepared herself for the interview. She glanced at Jesse for guidance. He smiled his "Publicity, publicity, and more publicity!" smile. That meant the interview was on.

"It felt good up there tonight. I was very much honored to be among the performers. Many people do not know that this cause is very personal to me. During the last three years, two very good friends have been affected by this disease."

"Yes, of course," the interviewer wanted to leave the melodrama and sad stories behind and go for the dirt. "So are you here with anyone tonight or are you solo?" Seine knew the drill. Jesse had told her repeatedly, always keep them guessing. Never answer yes or no.

"Well, I might be." She said this as spitefully as possible. That simple statement would have them clamoring and wondering who she was seeing.

"Come on, tell us who the lucky guy is! There are rumors that you have been seeing Guy Daddy Long. Is it true? Your fans are dying to know." Guy Daddy Long, aka Kiss and Tell,

Seine mentally retched at the mention of the hip-hop artist. She glanced toward Jesse for help.

"It's not Guy Daddy Long. He's someone . . ." She froze when, from the corner of her eye, she spotted him. He whispered something to Jesse and then started moving slowly toward her. She stood motionless as he approached, and as he neared, everything and everyone around her disappeared. There was so much that he was saying to her by way of his eyes that she forgot to breathe. His gaze held her fast and her body cried out to him. He definitely was throwing out caveman vibes. He was coming to claim her, and she was the hunter's willing prey.

It was such a surreal moment, as if the last five years had never existed and she had always been by his side and him by hers. It did not matter that Pillar was glued to his side. All she saw him. The tension in her body quickly gave way to an unbridled lust that slammed her with such an intense urgency that she physical swayed slightly when he came to an abrupt stop before her.

"Seine," he said. It was almost a whisper, barely audible. Then he leaned in toward her, very slowly and pressed his lips against her eyebrow. He lingered a little longer than customary for the innocent gesture, thereby turning it into an intimate act.

"Seine," he repeated as he stepped away from her and smiled. Her hand involuntary reached out and took hold of his arm. "I missed you more than you'll ever know."

"Michael, it's been a while," she said, hearing the words but unsure of how she manage to speak.

"Yes, it has." His hands circled her waist and he held her close to his side.

"Michael, where are your manners," Pillar chimed in, well aware of the media interest focused on them. She nudged Michael aside and kissed Seine on both cheeks.

"You look simply beautiful as usual," Pillar purred.

"Thank you," Seine responded feeling somewhat uneasy by Pillar's familiarity.

"You're right. It has been a while, but now that the benefit is over, you two can get back to your life, as can I. I trust you can take it from here darling," she said to Michael, and then, rather loudly, she said to Seine, "If you need me, call me. It was a pleasure." She smiled and walked off.

"What was that?" she began but before she could finish his mouth descended on hers. Taken aback by the initial contact of his lips, she was transformed. She inhaled the richness of his scent and was lost in his physical assault of her lips. This was what she had wanted, for which she had longed and dreamed. This kiss was fiery, sensual, and owning. Her heart skidded, and her body tingled because she was finally in his arms.

"I think we should get out of here," he whispered to her.

"I agree." She moaned against his chin. He took her hand and led her through the crowd toward the nearest exit. She noted tongues waging. Whispers being shared. She was sure she heard one of her rivals for new artist of the year say, "Virgin, my ass!"

However, none of that mattered. Jesse could handle the bad press that came from the evening's event. He was the greatest manager and an even greater spin-doctor. Therefore, nothing mattered. She held firmly to his arm, glued to his side as he led her to the exit. A million thoughts ran through her mind.

*"What the hell are you doing? Five years without a word from him, just like that he materializes and stakes a very public claim on you, and you're leaving with him?"*

*"Yeah..."*

*"And you accept it without question?"*

*"Hell yeah!"*

Tonight would be the beginning of all her dreams coming true.

\* \* \* \*

They sat opposite one another in the stretch limousine. Neither sure of what to say next and suddenly shy of each other. He instructed his driver of the location and then pressed a button to raise the window between them and the driver.

"So, here we are alone, at last."

"Yep, here we are," she responded.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? You seem nervous." He moved from his seat to sit beside her, his thigh grazing hers.

"That's probably because I am." She said. Sensing her discomfort, he reached out and took her hand in his.

"Well, don't be. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. We can go anywhere you like. I don't care much for nightclubs, but if you'd feel more comfortable in a crowd, just say the word. Tonight is for you, Seine, and it is long overdo. I can have the driver turn around if you have any doubts"

"Oh God, no!" She reached out and placed her hand on his cheek. "If you ditch me again, I swear Michael O'Neal, I will never forgive you." He smiled and turned his face into the palm of her hand, brushing his lips along it.

"Michael," she whispered breathlessly. He pulled her to him and kissed her. That slow lingering kiss was full of the passion that had been missing from his life for five years. They fed off each one's need for the other. He cupped her face between his hands and seductively showered her face with kisses, all the while whispering her name.

"How do you do this? Baby, you make me forget everything that I have to do."

"Love me, Michael." She moaned into his mouth, hugging him and pressing them as close together as possible. He loved the way she responded to his touch; it was as if she did not want him ever to stop touching her.

"You make me crazy and off-balance," he heard himself say between kisses. "Years ago, I lost my heart to you. Without warning, you were inside me. I wanted only you and not the things for which I had worked so long and hard. I will never forget that moment that you became so important to me. I don't understand this. You make me crazy, Seine, and I am empty without you. Five years without you, it wasn't until tonight that I realized how much I have missed you, how much I want you. I would give up everything for you. You're my obsession baby."

"So why didn't you come to me? I waited for you in Paris. Why didn't you come for me?"

He pulled away from her and looked intently into her eyes. "You know why, Seine. You were very young. Then there was your father. He had plans for you and they did not include me."

"My father," she said. She sat back and looked at him with a bittersweet smile full of love. "It always comes back to my father with you, doesn't it? When it's not about my father, it's my age. I will concede that back then I probably was too young for you to take me seriously. Not that I was illegal then, but I'm older now. I understand now. But back then, I didn't understand, and then my father forced me to leave."

"What do you mean he forced you? I thought you just left."

"Of course not! That night . . . I thought that night was the beginning of something special for us. I even tried to contact you. I called you, and some woman answered. I was pissed. Really pissed and jealous and then depressed. I reacted like a brat, a kid, very immature, not at all like a woman. I was too young, I realize that now. A grown woman would not have walked away the way I did. The truth is, it wasn't very hard for me to get on that plane. Hell, I guess I gave up a little. If I could do it all over again, I never would have let Lawrence send me back to Paris. I would have stayed and fought for what I have always wanted instead of running away. But I was young and stupid. I just walked away. A part of me fantasized that you would come after me, but you didn't. I wanted you to but you didn't come. I'm older now, no games, Michael. I'm not going to walk away again."

He looked at her and saw the honesty of her words. He shook his head.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I just realized how insane I am."

"What do you mean?"

"We should turn around," he said abruptly. He reached for the phone to notify the driver, but she reached out quickly and covered his hand with hers.

"Not again. There's nothing stopping us. Don't do this, please."

"You shouldn't be here with me. There are things you don't know. Seine, I can't protect you. There are things happening that I can't protect you from. I don't want to hurt you, I never did. I know that now, but it's too late. I can't protect you."

"What the hell is going on?"

"I need to take you back. Trust me on this."

"Just talk to me. Is this about my father and the fight for Simmons Publishing? If it is, we can work it out. I mean we can separate ourselves from it. I know it will be hard, but I'm not a child. Please give us a chance."

"I don't want to hurt you, Seine."

"Then don't send me away. Trust me, please."

"I have done some terrible things. I'm not proud of them. At the time, I justified everything in my mind, but now, being here with you, I realize I was wrong. The only way to fix it all and to stop anything more from happening is to get away from you. We can't do this now. I can't do this now."

"Oh, hell!" She dropped her hands to her side and leaned back in the seat, "Why am I not surprised by that statement. It doesn't matter if you take me back to the party or drop me at the nearest corner. I guess I'm not as grown up as I said I was, because right now I am so fucking pissed at you I can't think. You waltz your ass up to me after all these years and I melt in your arms. I follow you blindly, and now here I sit once more rejected. When is it going to be our time? When are you going to trust that I don't give a damn about my father's plan or this thing between the two of you? When are you going to trust that it is just me in it? Just me, and that I love you? I really do. When are you going to see that I can give you everything, that I want to give you every part of me?"

"I want to believe you. You don't really know me. You don't know the things I am capable of."

"I think I do. People see you as cold and detached. Your reputation is built on that persona, Michael. But behind those cold blue eyes is the key to my soul, my heart, my life. I love you. Trust me, and let me love you." She kissed him.

"It's still here, isn't it?" She sighed. "There is a magic between us. It's not just my imagination or wishful thinking. There really is something between us, and it's real. Do you

still feel it?" She put her arms around his neck and kissed him again, contorting her body so that it fit like a glove against his.

"It's still here. Seine, I have thought of you over the years, when I knew I shouldn't have. I stayed away from you because I knew I would hurt you. I'm not the bastard people make me out to be. If I were, I would have come to you a long time ago. But I'm no saint either."

"I have no choice but to finish this thing between your father and me. I have no choice. If I don't, he will always be between us. It's complicated."

"Actually, it isn't. You're making this complicated, even now. You're pulling away from me again. Just as you did five years ago, and you are using him as the reason for this withdrawal. Jesus," she said bitterly. "Why are you letting him in here now! You said you're obsessed with me? Bullshit! He is your obsession, Michael, not me."

"You're my obsession," he said and added quickly, "I need you too much. I don't think that I would ever be able to let you go. That's a very dangerous feeling, very dangerous."

"I would never want you to let me go," she said softly. She moved closer to him and ran her hands along his chest, moving slowly to his erection.

"What about your father?" he asked. "What about the business between us?"

"I have nothing to do with any of that. Please don't look at me like I'm being naïve. I love my father but I am in love with you. There's business between you two, it's not personal. What's between us is personal. I grew up, sort of, around him. He's just as ruthless as you are. Michael, you're not the first person nor will you be the last person that has come after Simmons Publishing. My father will not keep me from you. Only you can do that, only you."

"I want to believe you Seine." He whispered. He cupped her face between his hands. He pulled her to him and rested his head on her forehead. The electricity paralyzed them both and neither one moved.

"Do you want me Seine?" He asked.

"Oh God, yes, yes, yes . . . I have always, always wanted you!" She buried her face against his chest. He kissed her forehead.

"I've waited so long for you to be mine, only mine," he whispered. "I will never let you go. I'd die first. I will never let you go again. I'll never allow you to go. You belong to me." He held her, squeezed her very tightly. He wanted her so badly. He could not think. He ignored his mind's urging of caution. She was his lifeline. She could get him out of the darkness that had surrounded him since he was a child. He would lie in her arms and love her. He lowered his lips to hers and she met them hungrily. On some level, he had anticipated this moment since his partnership with Stephen had begun. His thoughts lead him to believe that she wanted to die in his kiss and that knowledge drove his actions to a desperate pitch. He reveled in her unguarded, passionate, and eager response to his touch.

He reached down and pulled her dress up to her waist. In the next second, she was straddling across him. She moved seductively, sinfully, and teasingly against him. This created a fever pitch so intense that he feared he would explode if he did not bury himself in her immediately. The total look of unabashed hunger in her eyes mirrored his own overwhelming need and cemented his desire to claim her completely. Her face was filled with lust and added to his need to claim her completely.

"Do you understand what I have said to you? Are you sure this is what you want? You have to be sure, Seine," he whispered to her. She was breathless, and merely nodded. He inwardly smiled at the anticipation he felt vibrating through her. She closed her eyes and crushed her body against him.

"This is so what I want." She whispered in his ear. "I want you so badly. I have always wanted you, Michael." Not thinking it possible, the sound of her voice saying his name drove him crazy with desire. He kissed her and slid his hand to his zipper to release himself. Her hand met his and with a moan, she reached inside his pants. With the first touch of her fingers on his manhood, he had no choice but to lean back and let the sensation enfold him. He thought he would lose it; he prayed that he would not make a fool of himself and cum just from the touch of her hand stroking his throbbing erection. She straddled his thigh and continued to caress him, smiling as he pushed into her fist.

"I want to feel you inside me, stretching me, loving me," she whispered. "Michael, please help me with this ache. Only you can stop it. Please help me." Her voice was that of a seductress intent on having her way. "I need you so badly."

"Ahh, God . . . Seine," he whispered against her swollen lips. He knew he could not wait any longer so he flipped her onto her back and lay on top of her, supporting his weight with his arm. She wrapped her gorgeous, long legs around his waist and moved in perfect rhythm to his movements.

"Faster!" She requested, and he complied. He entered her quickly. She cried out, not in passion, but in pain. He froze. The realization that she was, or had been, a virgin hit him squarely in his gut. Her breathing was labored and forced and her body grew rigid beneath him. She brought her hands to his chest and tried to push him away but he refused to be moved. He held her tenderly and burrowed his head against her lower chin and spoke soothingly to her, gentle words that he hoped would alleviate the mixed emotions and scattered feelings that he imagined she was experiencing. After a moment, he raised her head and looked at her, and then gently he wiped away a lone tear and replaced it with a tender brush of his lips.

"The pain will pass, . It's going to be okay," he said meaning to soothe her and, at the same time, hoping to relieve himself of the guilt gnawing at him. He felt a deep remorse for having caused her *this* kind of pain instead of the kind to which lovers consent. Given the circumstances, he knew it was inevitable; his regret was that he had not known that she was a virgin because then he could have been gentler.

She flexed her fingers, slowly opened her eyes, and met his gaze, his beautiful blue eyes were glued to her. His eyes were laden with desire, love, guilt, and something more. There was a question in his eyes. She licked her lips seductively; her chest rose as she took a deep breath and she nodded her head yes.

"Baby, why didn't you tell me?" He buried his face in her hair. "Jesus, I hurt you. Seine, I hurt you. I could have . . ."

"I'm okay. I'm all right. Just give me a minute," she responded quietly, stroking him with such loving caresses that he began to relax.

"How . . . why Seine?"

"Because you were not here, and it had to be you. It was always you."

"Oh God, what you do to me! I don't deserve you." He was not sure what to say. He held her tightly, willing her pain away.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

She smiled up at him, rolling her bottom lip between her teeth. "Finish it, I've waited for you, Michael. Finish it." She closed her eyes and moved her fingers over his warm skin. She lifted her hips and gave herself to him without reservation. This was the moment that had been a long time coming—she and he becoming one at last.

Unable to control himself, he did as she asked. Michael leaned down, captured her nipple with his teeth, and moved in her, stretching her. Seine was lost in the pleasure. There were

no words in the English language that could begin to describe the culmination of an act that was this long in coming. Then, slowly, he withdrew and cautiously, deliberately he reentered her, the way clear of all barriers.

"Look at me. Always look at me when I make love to you. Always look at me," he whispered to her, commanded of her. She opened her eyes.

"Oh God!" She moaned.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked, once more halting his actions.

"No, oh God, no! What are you doing? Why are you stopping? Don't stop!" She dug her nails in his back and pushed her hips forward to meet him. This was overwhelming for him. He had never known a woman like this. He never wanted to know another woman...ever. She was at that moment, in all ways, the other part of him. Greedy and eager, she accepted all of him into her. She was so tight and wet; he knew that he was on the verge of losing all control.

As his orgasm approached, he cried her name and professed his love for her, his words in harmony with the ripples that raked his body. He had thought to allow her to set the pace for this, their first time, but he had no control. His true nature to dominate propelled him forward like a caveman. He fondled her intimately, lingering at her center, desperate to insure that she would be satisfied, that the memory would be as gratifying to her as he knew it would be to him. He gave her all he had and then some, making love to her by action and word.

Slowly their momentum changed and they moved more frantically in their claiming of one another. With her encouragement, he slammed into her, losing himself in the knowledge that no other man had been where he was, consequences be damned.

"Oh my God," she cried out to him, her fingers and toes curled. She clung to him as if she were falling from a cliff, and he was the only one capable of saving her. Her body convulsed as she came hard and long. The pleasure was so intense, the orgasm so rapturous, that she actually cooed. He stroked her, plowed forward, and soon found his own release. He saw colors when he reached his peak, jetting forward, his heart accelerating at an alarmingly fast rate. He was lost. He had never climaxed so hard and long before. He thought he was spent, but her nonstop movement hurled him forward. He groaned and found that he had more to give.

"More!" she cried out. "I want all it, all of you," she begged. That is what he did; he gave her more. Moving at a frenzied pace, he claimed what was his, branding her and making her his for all time. He moved quickly, at a pace that surprised them both; the tempo of her lover's velocity was unrelenting, his words and actions once more driving her over the edge.

"Come again for me, baby. Do it, Seine, give me all of you. Take all of me, baby, every fucking drop, all of me," he demanded, and she did. The second orgasm raced through her just as quickly as the first. Her muscles clenched his shaft and milked him for all he was worth. No way would he ever experience this again. He gritted his teeth and with one final assault, he drove deeper inside her, deeper than he thought possible. With his release, totally drained, he collapsed like a limp wet rag on top of her, breathing laboriously, sated and free. He lay flaccid within her, unable to move.

Finally, her breathing held, and her body stiffened. Light tremors assuaged her body in the aftermath until finally totally fulfilled and content she too stilled. They held one another stroking and whispering their affection and love of one for the other.

It had been too long since he had been able to feel the rapture that overtook his body and shocked his mind. Never before had it been so earth shattering and mind altering. Sex had become a meaningless act that gave him no real satisfaction but merely a release. This



was different. He loved the feel of her body against his and the way she moved with him. He attempted to move off her but she held firmly onto him, her legs still wrapped tightly around his waist. Once more, he showered her with kisses.

\* \* \* \*

He stared into her face and marveled at the look of total ecstasy on it. They lay intertwined and motionless. She slowly lowered her leg, brought her hands to her face, and covered her eyes. Unfortunately, reality reared its ugly head and against her wishes, the full ramifications of everything hit her squarely. He recognized instantly the minute her attitude changed. He had a sinking feeling, a notion as to the reason for her 180-degree mood change so he cautiously questioned her.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing; God...everything.” She whispered suddenly embarrassed and ashamed. He rested his forehead against hers.

“I’m sorry. That couldn’t have been very pleasant for you. I promise it will be better.” He pulled away from her slowly.

“It was perfect. It was everything I had imagined that it would be. What about you? Was I all right?”

“You’re joking, right? My God, Seine, you are wonderful, beautiful, more than I had thought possible! You were perfect.” He enveloped her securely in his arms.

“We wasted so much time, but all of that is behind us now. We are finally going to have a future. Nothing will get in our way,” she said hesitantly. She closed her eyes and held back the tears, but one lone tear escaped.

“What it is? Are you sorry that you’re here with me?”

“Of course not! No, Michael, that’s not it. Don’t ever think that,” she said. He reached over to help her sit up. He helped her adjust her clothing, and then he took care of his own. Hell, he had not bothered to undress. Everything happened so quickly, much too quickly and far too fast. She had been a virgin, which made him happy in the typical macho-man mode. Nevertheless, he had hurt her. He stilled when another thought entered his mind. He had not used a condom. Being a child of the eighties, he always, always wore protection. He looked at her. Disease of any kind was not a concern. However, what if . . . what if she walked away from tonight with his child? He smiled at the thought.

“I love you, Michael. I love you so much. I love you.” She kissed his eyes, his nose, his cheek, and finally his lips. He pulled her onto his lap and nuzzled his face in the small of her neck.

“I love you too much,” he said. She cupped his face and just smiled at him. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. When she looked at him again, he felt panic. A real sense of panic overwrote the euphoria he had been feeling. She had a look in her eyes that was totally unfamiliar and new to him.

“We have to be careful, the press and publicity.”

He pulled away from her, relieved by her words but totally surprised as well. What was she talking about? Of all the things she could say, that was not what he expected. Did she know something? Did she have an inkling of the plan that he was relatively sure was about to end?

“What do you mean?” Damn, he actually stammered.

“We’ll be the talk of the town by morning. For both our sakes, we have to be careful what we say and do.”

"You mean for your sake. I don't have a career that is directly tied to public opinion. Granted, I make tabloid news, but nothing compared to you. Are you suggesting that we not be seen together?"

"Of course not."

"Good, because it's a little late for that. We left the benefit together in a very public way. I think it's too late for you to avoid that particular scandal. I don't think I can be your sinful little secret for long."

"That's not what I mean and you know it," she fired back at him. "I don't want anything or anyone to interfere with us. But because I am Lawrence's daughter and the fact that the two of you are engaged in a very public pissing contest, you know that there will be people ready to speculate on what our relationship is built on."

"I see. So your concern is that they may suggest that you're fucking me for your father's sake. Jesus, Seine. You're concerned about your career after what just happened between us?" This time, there was no mistaking the sarcasm or malice of his words.

"Actually I was thinking that the talk may very well be that you are using me to get to my father. Based on your reputation, this is exactly the type of underhanded, despicable, shitty thing that you do. Stupid me, I was concerned about what might be said about you!" The righteous indignation in her voice gave him pause. He looked at her in a whole new light. Here sat the woman he loved, a marvel to him. She was very much his equal in many ways particularly her quick thinking and double-handed compliments.

"You're worried about my reputation? They can kiss my ass. The fact that Lawrence and I are mortal sworn enemies and that I am battling him for control of his company will not be an issue in any article, entertainment show, etc. Between your father and I, we control damn near forty percent of the market, and we know a lot of people. They will think twice before crossing either of us. As you know, Seine, everyone scratches everyone's back in this business. It's only the wimps that lose, and while I can't stand your father as a person, I do respect him as a business man. He is not a wimp or a loser . . . yet."

"You think it's going to be that easy? The press thrives on building you up so that when they bring you down, it is more profitable and sensational."

"I know it's going to be that easy. Unless you are here with me, right now, thinking to save your father's company for him. Are you?" He had asked without thinking and just as quickly regretted the question immediately.

"Don't even joke about that. You know better."

"Do I? Forget I asked that. Damn it, Seine! Baby, I'm saying all the wrong things now. I know that. Be patient with me because this is new ground that I'm treading on. Even now, especially now, I am finding it hard to believe that I am here with you. I'm confused, because I had everything made up in my mind, nice, neat, and compact. Now being here with you, experiencing what we just had is contrary to what I had lived since I last saw you. I'm mixed up about a lot of things right now."

"Including me?"

"Especially you. I think too much. I examine everything too deeply and question people's motives. Seine, I long for a simple life and I see it before me, but it is never within my reach. I long for it, like I long for you. I feel like I'm at a crossroad. One wrong move, and I can lose it all. I can lose you, and I am not sure which road is the right one to take. I want it to be with you."

She pressed closer to him and said, "Choose me, Michael. You make me crazy, but I want you. I understand your hesitation. I know where you came from and I don't care.

That's what I'm feeling right now; no one would believe that I love you for you. Hell honey, you don't even believe that I love you. People can be so vicious."

"Listen to me, look at me." He said lifting her chin to face him. "I'd never let anyone hurt you. Do you understand? I will never let another person ever hurt you."

"Another person? What about you? This is about trust, right? News flash, baby, I trust you. I love you. I know you won't hurt me. I just have to get past that wall that you have built up when it comes to anything Simmons. I'll do whatever it takes and one day you'll believe, really believe that I am yours and my father will no longer be an issue between us."

"You keep saying things like that and I might start thinking that it is possible. At any rate, it's too late now. You're mine Seine. All mine." She put her arms around his neck.

"Yes I am. Just as I have always wanted to be. I think I should talk to my father, and soon. He needs to know that this is it, you and me. He can't change it or stop it. Before our relationship becomes public, I mean really public, I need to talk to my family...to my father. Please know this, Michael, and believe me when I say to you, there is nothing he can do to end this because I have made up my mind. I want the whole world to know how happy I am. I don't want you to just be my sinful little secret. I want everyone everywhere to know that I am with you because I love you and not because of Simmons Publishing and your plans for it."

"Your father is going to go ballistic. He hates me."

"No shit he hates you, especially after the way you left Simmons."

"What did he tell you about my leaving?"

"Just that you left."

"Did he tell you why?"

She took a deep breath and slid off his lap. "Does any of this really matter?"

"Yes. Humor me. I want to know what he said."

"And then we'll never discuss this again?"

"Tell me what he told you."

"He insinuated that you were improper with some business dealings, and that what you were doing could jeopardize Simmons and his reputation in business. When he confronted you, you left."

"He told you that!" Michael laughed. "He told you that!" Michael was dumbfounded. "That self-righteous, lying mother—"

"Hey, he's my father. I know that you don't like him, and I know that he doesn't like you, and I am pretty sure that there is more to it than what he said to me, and that some of it probably had to do with me. I will not be a party to this shit between the two of you. I know that sounds naïve and childlike. I know that it will be hard to have both of you in my life. Try to understand this, Michael, I love him. I don't like him, but I love him. He is my father. You, on the other hand, what I feel for you I cannot even begin to put into words. It will break my heart to lose my father, but I am prepared to lose him if he issues me an ultimatum. I will not give you up. I have loved you and dreamed of you, and I have wanted you for so long that I will not give you up. It makes no sense, I know. It's just there! My feelings are just there."

"Just as mine are for you. You're mine. There's no going back."

"You make me happy, Michael! I have prayed for this. I have what I want." She showered him with kisses. "I am so lucky. Most people never find their other half. They sometimes think they do, but something is always still missing for them. They need something else, something more. For me, all I need is you, nothing else. I will give up everything for you, and everyone."

"I love you, Seine." He said stilling her with a kiss. He ran his fingers gently along her jaw line and inhaled her scent. This woman would save him; the repercussions and consequences with Stephen be damn. At that moment, holding her and having her arms around him was what mattered most.

"If you love me like you say you do, then you won't be the one to ask me to choose between you and my father. I know that he will. He will never accept my being with you. I know that. Don't be the one to put me in the middle of this business between you two. I do not want to lose you because of this. I don't want to give either of you up unless I have to."

"And if you do have to choose, no matter what is said or what your father or I do, you would choose me?"

"It's like I said, if I had to give up one of you, without a doubt it would be him."

"Are you sure?"

"I swear on my love for you. I do not ever want to be without you ever again!"

"No matter what I do, you will be with me? I want you to swear it. I want you to swear it right now that you won't leave me no matter what. Swear it!"

"Are you planning on killing someone, namely, my father?" She leaned into and kissed him.

"I am serious. Swear it." He demanded. She heard the importance of his question and her answer.

"I don't think there is anything you could ever do that would make me stop loving you," she responded truthfully.

## Chapter Six

On board his yacht, he led her to the luxurious, airy salon. Following close behind them was a peculiar-looking, older white man in black pants and a white jacket. He seemed nervous and spoke rapidly. Seine released Michael's hand and walked over to the large circular bar. The man informed Michael that the course was set and the weather was perfect, the ocean calm. They would be docking in St. Verona by six a.m. The man asked if Michael wanted him to prepare a late snack, and informed Michael that he had received several phone calls, among them one from Stephen Lays. Michael stood at his desk and shuffled through several pieces of mail that he had arranged to be delivered to the boat earlier that day.

"Jefferson, did he leave a message or indicate that I should call him immediately?"

"Yes, sir," the man replied. "He said to ask you if you were sure that this is the course of action that you want to take. He said to say that it wasn't too late and if he didn't hear from you by nine a.m. tomorrow, that he'd assume all systems were a go. He said that you would understand the message." Michael looked at Seine who stood at the oversized windows looking out at the night ocean.

He hesitated a moment. She turned and smiled at him. It is not too late, he thought, but quickly dismissed the idea. She loved him. He returned her smile. She would stay with him no matter what. He had to trust that statement. He absently tossed the mail down on the desk and walked to the sofa. He sat and using either foot removed his shoes.

"Are there any other messages?" He asked kicking his shoes aside. He loosened his tie.

"Yes, sir, but nothing urgent. I put them on your desk. Will that be all Sir?"

"That'll be all for tonight, Jefferson. We'll see you in the morning." He stood up and removed his jacket.

"Would you like a wake-up call, sir?"

"No, I'll set my alarm. It won't be necessary to disturb us. Good night, Jefferson."

"Yes, sir. Good evening, Ms. Simmons." The man nodded and turned to walk away.

Michael walked over to Seine and enveloped her in his arms. He bent to kiss her. "Tired?"

"I'm too excited to think about sleeping. I feel like Cinderella, and you are my Prince Charming. So with that thought in mind," she said as she turned in his arms, "I would like very much for you to take me to the master's stateroom quickly before I explode! I want you to make love to me slowly. I want you to make me scream," she whispered, returning his embrace.

\* \* \* \*

When they entered the stateroom, he watched her look immediately to the bed. It was a large king-size bed with white satin sheets. The bed was also adorned with rose petals, and candles were lit on both bedside tables. A bottle of champagne with two glasses completed the setting. He stood behind her with his arms holding her and his neck bent. "Do you like it?"

"It's very romantic, Michael, it's beautiful, so romantic. When did you have time to do this? It was done for me, right?" A note of jealousy rang in her words.

He smiled coyly at her.

“Are you jealous?” He pressed against her, cupping her buttocks. Then he slowly, seductively, ran his hands along the length of her body. They seemed to linger in all the right places.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She moaned into his mouth.

“This is all for you. I went to the party with Pillar, but I knew I’d be coming home with you. I find that I cannot breathe completely with you. All body functions want to shut down.”

“Not all body functions,” she said as she ran her hands along his erection. He relaxed and then exploded from her lingering touch.

“You are in my soul, Seine, my salvation.”

“Yes, I am.” She moaned into his mouth. She arched her back as his lips descended on hers; they fought unconsciously to dominate the kiss, their tongues dueled. He ran his fingers along her mound, caressing and igniting her fire. He bit back a moan as his fingers encountered the wetness of her center. She was so incredibly wet. His mouth watered at the thought of tasting her, running his tongue along her folds, eating her, and lapping at the honey that would drip from her need.

It was her next motion that stopped him from sliding to his knees and feasting on her core. He stood immobile as she stepped back away from him and slowly lifted her hands to undo the straps that held her dress up. He watched as the thin fabric slid down the curves of her luscious body. She slipped out of the dress and stood before him naked.

His eyes took her in, examining every inch of her body - her breasts were perfectly rounded and perky, her abdomen was toned but soft and those endless legs! His breath caught in his throat as he remembered the feel of those gorgeous legs wrapped around his waist, squeezing him, pulling him in deeper.

With the back of his hand, he caressed her cheek. He reached out and tugged her close until finally he held her in his arms. He felt her shudder and ripple from the heat of his breath so close to her lips, the feel of his hand squeezing her breast. She purred like a cat and reached for him, pulling him into her as he kissed her, gently at first and then demanding.

It was an assault.

\* \* \* \*

Although she had absolutely no experience with men prior to tonight, she knew that they would not be making sweet and tender love this time. That was more than okay with her. The most thrilling part of the previous encounter was when he lost control totally. She loved him like that – totally without control just total abandonment.

“Fuck me, Michael,” she said to him in a guttural voice. His kisses turned fierce and brutal, his tongue exploring her mouth. He pulled away from her and gazed down at her face. Quickly and expertly, he ran his teeth over the most sensitive areas of her neck, slowly along her arm, navigating quickly to her exposed breast. All the while, she was saying the most dirty words known to man. She was hot, and he was on fire. He was rough yet gentle and sweet as his mouth teased and bit at those dime size nipples that were hard as a pebble stone.

She melted as his fingers expertly massaged her, explored her, and prepared her for another claiming. He circled, teased, and pulled at her breasts with his teeth, fed on her nipples. She came hard and fast from the foreplay, but still she parted her legs and pulled hungrily at him.

He fell to his knees and lapped at her. He attacked her with his mouth, his tongue, and his fingers. Oh God, his teeth! She exploded too quickly. It was too fast. She wanted more, and she got more. She had read about the joy of oral sex, but it did not compare to the shit he was doing to her. She cried out as another orgasm rocked her. She spread her legs farther and rotated wildly in rhythm to the movement of his fingers and tongue danced across and over her most sensitive area. She struggled to breathe.

“More, Michael. Please, I need more.” He placed one hand at the small of her back, and she leaned hungrily into the other. He supported her weight when he felt her begin to tremble again uncontrollably. He prodded at her, his free hand moved rapidly in rhythm, squeezing her shaking inner thigh, inflicting a sweet pain. Then, those gold-plated fingers found her anus. She did not think she would survive.

Her breathing was hurried and off-key. Her back arched once more when he inserted two fingers, then three into her asshole and his mouth sucked at, lapped at her swollen protruding bud. She thrashed her head to one side and then the other, her hands gripping his hair, pulling him into her farther. All the while she uttered lewd phrases, sweet phrases that she had memorized from every erotic book she’d ever read. She knew that her man would get off on that, that dirty words from her pretty lips would drive him insane.

The mixture of pleasure and pain was too much. He never said a word, but then he did not have to. She picked up quickly on the little nuances that he had, the way he responded to her total abandonment, the excitement he expressed by action when her words digress to locker room speech, and the enthusiasm in his eyes that shone with lust the more responsive she was. His pleasure came from exacting total surrender from her.

She trembled, and he held her closely. She was not sure if it was her body’s response to his actions or the loss of oxygen that made it hard for her to breathe. She threw her head back and screamed as another orgasm flooded her body. It was all too much, and despite the pleasure, she felt instant remorse that it was finished. Her legs gave out, and she seemed to float in slow motion to the floor. Michael quickly collected and ushered her to the bed where he laid her out. He perused her body and then grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled, gently at first, and then he added pressure.

“I suspected that you would like a little pain with your pleasure. Needless to say, I do too. I’ll give you all the pain and pleasure you can take,” he told her.

She bit her lower lip and ran her nails down along his back, digging into his flesh. He groaned deeply. “I’m your perfect match, baby. I’m your soul mate,” she teased.

“Mine. All . . . mine,” he told her and then he ran his fingers along her creases, coating them with her juices. “Look at me,” he ordered. He placed his fingers on her lips slowly closed his eyes and brought his lips to her. With his fingers between them, he pressed gently against her mouth.

“Do you love me, Seine?” he whispered to her.

“Yes!” she responded breathlessly, “Yes!”

“Do you belong to me, Seine?”

“Yes!” She moved her face against the rough and hard stubble on his face. He somersaulted off the bed and quickly discarded his clothes in record time. Just as quickly, he was back, and he flipped her so that she lay on her stomach. He stretched her arms above her head and held on tightly to them, his fingers intertwined with hers.

He mounted her and pressed his erection between the folds of her buttocks.

She tensed.

“What are you doing?” she asked, suddenly skittish because of where he lay. The thought that maybe he had something in mind that, while a good idea someday, was not quite something for which she was ready. He laughed against her neck.

“Don’t worry, baby. We aren’t quite ready for that, but someday, right?”

All she could do was nod and wiggle beneath him in affirmation. He bit at her ear savoring the feel of her beneath him.

“Say it again, Seine. Tell me you belong to me, that you love me. Tell me to fuck you as you did before. Say it!”

“I belong to you. I love you. Fuck me, Michael. Fuck me,” she responded, enjoying his weigh on her, anticipating his next move. Her wait was over before it really began because he slammed into her, straining and relentless. He fucked her like there was no tomorrow. Her body arched, and she met him. Still he fucked her for all it was worth. Grinding her ass, meeting his thrust, she gave as well as she got, her body humming. Her words to him once more digressed, and he exploded from her matched intensity and shameless need. She loved the feel of him inside her.

“Do it, Michael, do it, baby . . . oh yes, baby, yes!” she begged, whimpered.

“Fuck!” he screamed out his release. “This is...you are so un-fucking-believable!” he crooned. “And all mine.” She turned in his arms and rested her head on his chest.

“You make it so hard for me to wait,” he moaned to her. Seine clung to him. The last thing she heard before sleep took her was, “I will never let you go. I will never let you leave me.”



## Chapter Seven

They docked as scheduled at six a.m., were driven to the airport, and by seven o'clock, they were landing on the private heliport of his small island estate. When she walked into the huge living room of his ocean view home, she gasped. It was spacious, all the furniture white, with a huge marble fireplace wedged between the floor-to-ceiling windows that allowed for an excellent view of the ocean.

"It's beautiful!" she said, hugging him.

"And quiet and secluded. You can let your hair down here, and no one will ever know." They stood, holding one another looking out at the beach and ocean.

"And it's all yours!" She cooed.

"It's all ours," he corrected, kissing her gently on the forehead.

Jefferson interrupted them, announcing that Ms. Collier, the cook, had prepared a light breakfast on the deck. Seine said she was famished and followed Jefferson to the deck. Michael went into his study and checked his watch. It was eight forty-five a.m. He felt better. He had time. He calculated that it was six forty-five in Los Angeles, but he needed to make sure. He reached for the phone and rang for Jefferson. He asked him about the time. Jefferson confirmed the current time, and the time in Los Angeles. He had about two hours, plenty of time to call Stephen before nine. That was one call he could not afford to miss making.

As he had done five years ago, he would simply adjust his plan. He could not go through with it now, not the part that involved Seine. Although vengeance and retribution on Lawrence paled in comparison to the love he had for her, that part of the plan was still necessary. He just had to trust what she had said to him last night, that she would love him and stay with him no matter what. He could not hurt her. Hell, he no longer had the desire to. Stephen would still get his revenge against Rafael. They had proof of Rafael's malevolence so Stephen would be okay with the change in plans. Hell, Stephen had always been opposed to involving Seine anyway. Convincing Stephen would not be a problem.

He decided to take a long, hot shower. Once showered and in fresh clothing he went to the deck to join her. He saw her down on the beach. At some point, he noted she had changed clothes. She wore a bikini with a matching sarong wrapped around her waist. He pulled off his t-shirt, reached for his cell phone, and went down to the beach to join her.

"Hey you," he said, grabbing her from behind. "Did I tell you today that you are breathtaking?" She returned his embrace but said nothing.

"Is something wrong?" She seemed remote.

"I guess it is all just hitting me now. It's kind of hard to believe that I am really here."

"I know. I know. I feel the same way. Sit with me." He pulled her down close to him and she rested her head in his shoulder. He felt her body relax in the feel of his arms around her. She nuzzled close, put her arms around him, and they sat quietly for a while, content in one another's arms.

"It is so beautiful here, Michael. I think of all the places we'll go together, this will always be my favorite. This will always be our home."

"It's hard to imagine you wanting to be somewhere other than Paris."

"I love Paris. It will always be my home, but this is different, special. This place will be our home, and this is you," she said, gesturing out at the ocean.

"What do you mean?"

"The ocean. If you were an element, you would be water. You would be the ocean."

"What about the tidal waves?"

"Like I said, you'd be the ocean, calm one moment, an unexpected storm the next. Mostly when I think of the ocean, I see blue water for miles and miles and it connects with the sky. It's quiet and strong and massive and calming. You just float and you are calm. You calm me. I feel so safe with you."

"You are safe with me," he said kissing her forehead. She raised her head and kissed his lips. "I'm going to make everything right. I'm going to make you so happy that you will never want to leave my side."

"You already have."

"You know," he began, "when I was a boy, I dreamed of having a place like this, for my life to be like this. I dreamed of, this moment. I've fought dirty for so long that it became second nature to me. Today is the first time in years that I feel free. Free of plans to be more than I was born to. My father thought that I was crazy. He could never quite get himself to see that there was more to this world than CrownMar, Tennessee. But I knew that someday I would be here."

"Do you ever go home?"

"No. I left all that behind when I went to college." He thought about his mother, shook his head in regret. "I haven't been back there in years."

"I'd like to go there with you someday."

"Why?" he asked with astonishment.

"Because it is a part of you. It's where you come from."

"I think you would be disappointed. There's nothing to CrownMar. It's a little hillbilly town, stuck in some kind of time warp. The people there will never change. You would never fit in there, Seine." He could imagine the dirty looks and stares the two of them would generate.

"Why? Do you think I'm that shallow and materialistic? Where you come from is real. This may sound cliché but growing up with *things* cannot begin to compare with growing up with love, to be rooted and surrounded by hard-working people."

He smiled at the irony of her statement and did not comment. He'd let her keep her illusion of an idyllic life in places like CrownMar, that all small towns were like Mayberry and that love and nurturing were synonymous with small town life. He knew better. CrownMar was the Peyton Place of Tennessee and he had no desire to ever step foot in that hellhole again.

"Small towns like the one you grew up in, they are the heart of America. My father. . ." Her voice trailed off. She took a deep breath and continued, "My father profits from that. Rich people profit from it. We always say that money doesn't buy happiness. It's true. It doesn't. My father lost that connection to what makes you who you are a long time ago. Family became less important to him and giving Rafael and me things became his focal point. Sticking it to the man and being the man is so important to him. Rafael and I were secondary."

She was quiet for a moment. "I guess the more money he made, the less I felt like he loved me. Then one morning I woke up at an all-girl's school in Paris. I didn't even rate in New York! I mean there are really good schools in New York but...I was shipped very far away. Thank God, I had Lynda. It was probably harder on her than it was on me. She had lost her mother, then her father." She looked at him and squeezed his arm. He brushed a lone tear from her cheek.

"I want to do it all," she continued, "I want to do all the normal things that normal people do. I know your parents are dead, but I would really love to meet any family that you

have left. I want to see the grade school you went to, the Dairy Queen you went to after school. I want to know everything about you.” She smiled at him lovingly.

For a moment, he was afraid to breathe. He felt so relaxed and safe just sitting there with her. He felt that he could tell her about all of the hopes and fears that he had as a child, even the ones he still carried with him. He thought, in that moment, that she would understand them all and somehow would know how to make all the dark demons he carried disappear. While his mother had said she loved him, had praised, and had encouraged him, he always felt something was missing. His father had repeatedly drilled into him that touching and displays of affection were strictly forbidden. Men do not show affection because it was a sign of weakness.

How many times, Michael thought, had he been accused of being a girly-boy because of his response to his mother’s hugs? Eventually his mother had stopped hugging him and bestowing light pecks on his cheek when his father was around. As an adult, he came to understand why she did it, but to a small boy, it signaled rejection. Because of his youthful interpretation of her lack affection to him, he learned to hide his feelings, whether his father was around or not. He still carried that fear with him despite his knowledge of the cause. Against his will, his wall went up. The fear of Seine rejecting him too was enough to warrant in his mind that he remain silent. He knew she saw the struggle within him, saw it in his eyes. She reached out to him.

“You can trust me. I love you.”

“Always? No matter what?” He stroked her cheek.

“No matter what, Michael, just trust me to love you best, like no one else. Trust me to love you,” she whispered against his chest. He rested his chin against her forehead and held her close. After much debate, he opted to change the subject.

“You know, contrary to popular opinion, there isn’t a Dairy Queen in every small town in the good old U. S. of A.” He laughed. “We did have a drugstore, however, that sold ice cream, probably one of the last dime stores around. It was Woolworth or G.C. Murphy’s, I think. Don’t quote me.” He laughed.

“So you hung out at the drug store. What was your favorite ice cream, chocolate or vanilla? And you had better say chocolate.” She laughed.

“Seine, we could barely afford milk. There were no trips to the drugstore after school.” He looked down, grabbed a handful of sand, and held it up, allowing the sand to fall from his hand.

“That’s okay, baby. I never went to the drug store after school either, but then I lived at school. I think that when we have children, we should build a Dairy Queen in our backyard, or better yet, right here on this beach. We will give them everything that we didn’t have.”

“I like that.”

“What, having our own ice cream parlor?”

“The thought of us married . . . with children.” He said this knowing that the possibility of their having a child was very real now. He definitely liked that thought.

“How many?” she asked playfully.

“A dozen,” he said, glad her somber mood had passed as well as his own.

“I don’t think so!” She laughed.

“Okay, half a dozen.”

“I think the number of children we have will be negotiated later. Tell me about your life back then. I want to know everything about you.”

“I don’t want to talk about CrownMar. My memories are probably like yours, not very happy all the same. I’ll tell you this. I always hoped that I would be able to share a place like

this with someone special. I thought about it a lot. I knew the kind of person I wanted her to be, someone who wouldn't judge me. I've done a lot of bad things, I mean really, really bad things, to get here. Most people would never understand. I wanted a woman who would understand, who would understand me, and still love me."

"I wanted someone who would accept me, good and bad. When I met you, well, talked to you, that night at your father's house, I wanted it to be you. You were the angel that I had created in my mind's eye. Ten minutes with you and I knew that in order for all I have wanted to be true and real, that I had to be with you. It wasn't anything that you said or did, but it was the way you looked at me. I not only wanted to make love to you, but I wanted to love you too. I wasn't sure for a long time what it was that you wanted from me that night, so I created a fantasy about you. On bad days, they were not so good, but occasionally, on a good day, I had you, and the world really was mine. I think that maybe I can have it all, whatever all is, if I have you, all of you baby, all of you."

"Michael . . ." She brought her face to his and kissed him gently.

"I love you, Seine."

"Michael," she moaned his name as his mouth captured hers.

Repeatedly she said his name as he made love to her gently and slowly on the sandy wet beach.

\* \* \* \*

The sound of his phone startled him. They had fallen asleep. She lay beside him, her head gently on his chest, the morning sun beating down on them. He reached for his phone.

"Stephen. What time is it?" Michael asked panic-stricken. He eased his arm from beneath her and looked at his watch.

"It's eight thirty here. I have to say Michael that—"

"I'll call you back." Another thirty minutes, and he would have been too late. "For now, do nothing. Do you understand? Do nothing!"

"But, Michael, I—"

"Do nothing, Stephen! Do you understand? Wait for my call. When I get to the house, I'll call you and explain." He disconnected the call. Nudging Seine, who still lay naked in the sand, he woke her. She asked what the urgency was when he instructed they had to get back to the house. As they dressed, he mumbled that an emergency had come up. He had to make a call.

## Chapter Eight

He took a deep breath and reached for the phone on his desk. He dialed Stephen Lays. He knew Stephen would understand what Michael had to do. They had come too far together, and always Stephen gave Michael an out option for this part of their plan. Always Michael rejected it. Even yesterday, Stephen offered a final “out.” Now, Michael wanted and desperately needed it.

“Stephen, call it off,” Michael said into the phone. There was a silence. “Did you hear me, Stephen?”

“Oh, I heard you. I just don’t understand.”

“It’s simple. It is best if we—how did you phrase it to Jefferson, it is best that we take a different course of action. I don’t want to do this now.”

“Didn’t Jefferson also tell you to reach me by nine a.m.?”

Then it hit Michael; Jefferson had meant nine a.m. here, not nine a.m. in L.A. He dropped his head into his hand. *Oh God*, he thought. *Oh God*.

“A fucking different time zone?” He almost laughed the words. “I fucked up, man. I fucked up, didn’t I?”

“Michael.”

“I fucked up. Shit!”

“I knew this wouldn’t work. The whole scenario with the girl was over the top, brilliant, but stupid because you think with your fucking dick instead of your head when it comes to that lady! Shit, man!”

“It’s not about sex!” Michael yelled into the phone.

“I know. It’s about having the ass and keeping it too. Man, I waited till seven fifteen, that’s nine fifteen your time—the project time. I even waited an extra fifteen minutes!”

“Damn it! I should have called. I even checked with Jefferson to verify the time difference. Fucking time zone! Shit. It’s all on me. I wasn’t thinking. I messed up.”

“You were thinking, just not with your fucking head. Judging by the photos of the two of you, I can understand why your mind was somewhere else.”

“Can we get them back?”

“No can do. The minute Silas transmitted the images to me, I had copies delivered to the major tabloids by messenger. They’re going to press now. By the end of the week, those photos will be on the cover of every rag magazine, in every store in the country and overseas. There is no way we can stop it without tipping our hand that we planted them. The most I can do is halt Heather O’Rourke at ON! TV from covering it for now. She received copies a little while ago. You know she does that ‘Up To the Minute’ spot every couple of hours. So far this morning her top story was the scene at the Jackie Gleason Theatre last night between you and Pillar. They’re all speculating about the cryptic comments that Pillar made. Get this. CNN has even picked that up. I don’t see how we can neutralize this. With the lead in from last night’s event, the two of you are a hot topic. Just as you said it would be, it is. The magazine has them. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Shit!”

“I know this isn’t much consolation, but I did message over the most flattering shots of the two of you on the beach, the ones not so triple-x-rated.”

“From the beach this morning? I didn’t hear or see anything.”

“I wonder why. Anyway, they were aerial shots from the helicopter. We wouldn’t have done our job right if you had seen or heard anything. The more graphic ones are in the safe. I spoke to that son-of-a-bitch Silas about the memory card and film he has, and he

understands he is to turn over all originals to me the minute he steps off that plane. He'd never double-cross us because he knows what's good for him. I'm meeting his plane when it lands, and I will reiterate that if any images were transmitted to anyone besides me, because he thinks he can make an extra buck, then his ass will be ours."

"Thanks, Stephen, but I'm fucked anyway. Do me a favor?"

"You got it, man."

"Call that motherfucker Silas back and tell him that I will personally kill him if he tries a fast one."

"No problem, but trust me, the Silas issue is a done deal. He's not suicidal, and he knows that if he crosses us then he has pulled the plug on his career." Stephen paused and then abandoning his business manner said, "Michael, I am really sorry about this. Are you okay?"

"No," Michael replied honestly. "I just have to think. I can't lose her now. All along, you were right. I wish I had listened. I didn't, and now I'm fucked."

"Do you want me to call you back? That will give you a chance to evaluate the damage?"

"No, I'll call you back. Better yet, hold on." Michael tapped the phone to his head as if the movement would expedite a thought or an idea that would make the situation better. He knew there was not one.

Then he heard her voice. He remembered what she said in the car. *"There is nothing you could ever do that would make me stop loving you."*

"Proceed," he said into the phone.

"I beg your pardon?" Stephen asked in disbelief.

"You heard me. Proceed. Continue with everything as planned. We have no choice. I can't go back on our deal now, and what is done is done. We won't lose, that just isn't an option. By Monday evening, the control of Simmons Publishing will be turned over to me."

"Us." Stephen interjected quickly.

"Right, us," Michael responded irritably. "Of course, us. Just as we had planned. I get to my revenge against Lawrence, and you get the thrill of putting the screws to that sick son of his. That's it."

"You're sure?"

"Oh yeah, we've come this far. We'll finish it. We're partners. We started with a goal and we both have a reason to see it to the end. I'll just present the alternatives to signing the contract differently to Lawrence. That way we can clean up and detour all ramifications for those damn photos. If you think about it, Stephen, the right statement to the press about the photos will work in our favor."

"Break it down for me."

"What do married people do Stephen?"

"They fight like hell."

"Confirmed bachelor. No."

"Please, it's early in the morning. Just spit it out, man."

"They make love."

"Oh hell, you married her?"

"Not yet, but the press doesn't need to know that. I'll say that we are. There is nothing wrong with a man and his wife being intimate, now, is there? The original plan is intact, only I'll clean up the photos. Shit, with all the crap we have on Rafael and Lawrence, discrediting her is useless and detrimental to my future well-being. I need her. More importantly, I am not going to see her hurt and if it takes me until the end of my life, I will make this up to her. Those photos and that aspect of the plan are officially canceled. Do I have your agreement and blessing to that?"

“You’re preaching to the choir. I told you it was stupid in the first damn place. Your goal at the time was to pacify that massive ego of yours and stroke your deflated pride. You have my agreement and my blessing. I will even throw in a couple prayers and a Hail Mary, my friend, because you are going to need them to get out of this mess. Now, back to the matter at hand, what if they ask for proof of your bogus wedding?”

“Why would they? They’d only speculate the validity of my statement if Seine says it’s a lie, and Jesse will make sure she doesn’t. They’ll run with the story, marriage license be damned.”

“Shit, man, my juices are flowing we’re so in tune. It’s hard to believe that my identical fucking thinking twin is a white boy from the Ozarks!”

“That’s right man. Two small changes. The interview for ON! TV and the way I present the options to Lawrence. Seine has nothing to do with it.”

“This is why you’re my boy! I’ll call Jesse so he can clean this shit up . . . slowly of course. We’ll have you smelling like fucking roses. Instead of being the bastard that fucks up her career, you’ll be the saint that saved it. She’ll love you for this.”

“She already loves me.”

“Yeah, right, whatever. I’ll take care of everything on my end.”

“I know I can count on you. I’ll see you in New York in a couple hours.”

“The transportation has been arranged. Your Cessna was cleared for take off several hours ago, so as soon as you get to the airport, you can take off. In addition, arrangements have been made for your girl to go directly to Atlanta later today. So, I guess this is it.”

“Yeah, Stephen, this is it. Just think, Tuesday morning you can trade in your boat for one just like mine!” He laughed and hung up.

\* \* \* \*

Stephen held the phone in his hand. He shook his head smiling. He and Michael worked so well together. *A fucking boat my ass*, he thought. Tuesday morning, Rafael’s ass would be his, a long overdue payment. Everything he had done for the past five years was for Eliot. In less than forty-eight hours, the payback he had coveted for Eliot would be complete. He inhaled quickly and relished the rush that he experienced whenever he and Michael were about to drop a bomb.

He opened his bottom drawer and removed the antique silver frame that held the image of his sister. “Eliot,” he began, his voice full of an emotion that he kept hidden deep within, “I wasn’t there for you. I let you down, little sister, but I am making it right. He’s going to pay, baby girl. He’s finally going to pay. It might not bring you back to me, but I’ll be able to sleep at night knowing that I exacted your revenge. It’s all coming together, baby girl, just as I promised you it would.”

## Chapter Nine

Michael exited the Cessna and slipped into the limousine waiting for him on the private airfield. Everything was progressing as planned. Stephen called to say that Jesse was in position and that Jesse was relieved by the change in plans. When his driver stopped in front of Trump Towers, where O'Neal Enterprises maintained four floors, he stepped out to a barrage of cameras. He glanced at his watch as he walked toward the entrance. He had exactly forty-five minutes to make it back to the airport. The reporters all wanted to know the same two things—how long he had been involved with Seine, and how did their relationship fit into his take over bid for Simmons Publications.

As he neared the building's entrance, he spotted the ON! TV crew and smiled. He had a story for them. Without missing a step, he checked his watch once more. What he had to say would be the lead story on Heather O'Rourke Live.

\* \* \* \*

Seine entered her Atlanta apartment a little shaky. On the flight to Atlanta, she had played the events of the morning through her mind repeatedly. Something was off. Until the call on the beach, Michael had been everything she expected and anticipated. After that call, he had ushered her back to the house in record time. He had disappeared into his study only to emerge with unexpected travel plans for them both. She had questioned him, but he had insisted that it was business related. She did not believe him.

"Does it have to do with my father and Simmons Publishing?"

"Seine, please, I've got to go."

"I understand," she had said hesitantly and then thought better of it. She crossed her arms and questioned him. "Actually, I don't. Why can't we go back together?"

"It just wouldn't be a very good idea. I love you." He bent to kiss her.

"You'll call me?" She asked, refusing to let his arm go. "I'm scared, Michael. You're keeping something from me. I can feel it. What's going on? What are you up to?"

"You have to trust me."

"I do trust you. I just have this feeling that if you walk out that door that everything is going to change. Just be honest with me please. There's nothing you can say to me that is worse than what I am imagining right now."

He had taken her in his arms and held her close. "Trust me, baby," he repeated. "There are some things that I have to take care of, and then I promise it will just be me and you. Trust me, Seine." He had kissed her quickly and released himself from her firm grip. At the door, he had stopped and turned to look at her.

"Come here," he commanded. She walked into his open arms.

"Remember what I told you. I am not ever going to let you go. And I am counting on what you promised me to be absolutely true, that you'll love me . . . no matter what." He had bent his head and kissed her. Then he was gone, leaving her with an overwhelming sense of dread.

She tossed her bag on the sofa and walked to the phone. She just had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Nothing seemed right. She had to talk to Michael. She needed to hear his voice. She wanted to hear him say again that he loved her and that everything was okay. As she reached for the phone, a hand reached out and tapped her shoulder.

"Jesus Christ!" she stammered. "You scared the shit out of me." She turned and hugged Lynda. "What's going on?"



"Baby girl, nothing compared to what you have been up to. Couldn't you've been a little more discreet?" Lynda asked with a wicked smile.

Seine looked at her, puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"Your little escapade even made the midday news. Seine, you should have been more discreet," Lynda said lightly but with a trace of reproach.

"What are you taking about?"

"She's talking about this!" Jesse shrieked as he entered the room. He handed Seine a copy of the daily celebrity rag *ON! Now Magazine*. She let out a gasp and then looked at Jesse. The headline read "Virgin Princess . . . NOT!" On the cover was a picture of her on the beach sitting on Michael's lap, her breast pressed against his chest. Her head thrown back, with her legs wrapped around his waist. They were both completely nude. There was no room for doubting what they were doing. Beneath the photo was a caption, "More sizzling photos inside."

"How did this happen?" Jesse shouted.

"How do you think?" Lynda yelled at him. "Get real, Jesse."

Seine paced the room, her hands covering her face. "Oh God, how did they know? How did the paparazzi know where we were? Oh, Jesus Christ! I was afraid of this, I told Michael. Can this be fixed?" She looked at Jesse.

Jesse looked her up and down and responded indignantly, "Sweetheart, I can fix anything! It'll be tough, but I can put a positive spin on anything."

"I need to call Michael," Seine said decisively. She walked toward the phone.

"Girlfriend," Lynda put her hand on Seine's shoulder. "I'm so sorry that something you've waited for, for so long has been turned into a freak show. I'm so sorry."

"I told Michael this would happen. I bet it was the damn driver!"

"What driver?" Jesse chimed in.

"If the driver snitched, it would have been easy for the paparazzi to know where we went once the boat took off."

"Oh my God!" Jesse said. "I have told you girls over and over again, see no evil, speak no evil, and for God's sake, do no evil around the hired help! Where do you think these people get their information from?" He waved at the copy of *ON! Now Magazine*. They all turned when the door opened. Lynn, Jesse's personal assistant rushed in.

"This was just sent over by messenger. It's from Heather O'Rourke." She handed Jesse the DVD. "It's labeled urgent, and she addressed it personally. See, there's a smiley face and devil robe. That's her personal bitmap signature stamp. It's so cool."

"Oh Lord! This can't be good," Jesse said as he dismissed Lynn's rambling and headed to the DVD player.

They watched it once, awestruck and dumbfounded. Seine sat staring as Jesse skipped back to the spot that caused them to drop their mouths. Was she hearing things? Had she imagined what she had just heard Michael say? Was this really happening? Lynda walked up to her and placed her hands on Seine's shoulder.

Jesse pressed the play button.

"Would you repeat that please?" the reporter asked him. Michael stood just outside Trump Plaza with cameras flashings and microphones at his face.

"Seine Simmons and I were married three weeks ago on a private Island in the Caribbean. What the paparazzi intruded on was a delayed honeymoon. Our intentions were to make our relationship known after the AIDS Benefit in Miami and after she had an opportunity to talk to her parents."

"And your relationship with Pillar Humphreys?"

"Pillar is a very good friend of ours. We enjoyed one another company, but after Seine and I got together, Pillar and I simply became friends. Actually, Pillar was primarily responsible for Seine and I reconnecting."

"How noble of her."

"Look, I'll cut to the chase. The last thing Seine and I wanted was a negative twist to our relationship, particular in light of my relationship with Simmons Publishing. Pillar agreed to accompany me in public. We have no relationship beyond very good friends."

"And last night at the party in Miami . . ."

"That's it. I've nothing more to say about this. Please respect our privacy, and for God's sake, do not make more of this situation than it is. Now, if you'll excuse me." Michael walked away from the interviewer and Jesse pressed the pause key. Seine noted the rigid "we're fucked" pose that Jesse had. The room was silent. Lynda and Seine waited for Jesse's inevitable explosion.

"You're married?" Jesse yelled.

"Don't be ridiculous! I was in San Juan with you three weeks ago!" Seine yelled back to him.

"Not twenty-four hours a day you weren't, girlfriend. And don't take that tone with me, Miss Thang."

"I have no idea what's going on here. I don't know why he said that. It isn't true. This is bad, isn't it?" She asked Jesse. He stood with his hands on his hips.

"Actually, it was . . . but it's not anymore!"

"Break it down, Jesse!" Lynda yelled.

"All right," Jesse said his fingers flying around. "Once this airs on Heather's show and you release your statement—that I intend to write personally and you will stick to the script—you two will be this generation's Bogart and Bacall, Taylor and Burton, Hepburn and Tracy. You'll be the real life Heathclift and Cathy. We'll rename your CD—get this—*No Longer A Child*. We'll move up the release date and redo the video. Do you have any photos of that husband of yours? Preferably photos with his clothes on?"

"I'm not married!"

"Who cares?" Jesse yelled as he walked quickly from the room. "I've got a lot of work to do. Let's go, Lynn. We are going to make so much bank off this. Bling, bling, baby! Bling, Bling. God bless Michael O'Neal and your insatiable libido!"

Alone with Seine, Lynda walked to the sofa and sat next to her.

"Well, I'm at a loss for words."

"That's a first. Lynda, I swear I don't know what's going on. I'm—I don't even know what to say. Everything is happening so fast! This is crazy!"

"I think I do."

"Really? You want to clue me in?" She leaned back on the sofa and covered her eyes.

"Well, I think the Beast has done Beauty one big favor."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. I mean, Seine, your popularity is so based on the image that Jesse has created of you. The Virgin Princess, Miss Congeniality, Miss Morality. Girl, everything would be over if you became the lying white man's whore on the beach. I know times have changed and most people could care less if you're with a white man. But baby girl, we're talking Middle America—rural America. We're talking a shitload of fans, and more important than that, a shitload of the fans' mommas and papas who hold the pocket change for those CDs of ours. They love you because of that image that Jesse created."

"Image? You think after all these years that I am a fake?"

“Image, yes. Fake, No! I’m your girl, Seine, and I know that you’ve wanted to bone that man since as long as I can remember.”

“It’s not just about sex. After all this time you should know that too.”

“I know. I know that there’s more to it than that.”

“I love him.”

“I know you do. And,” she said waving at the television, “I know he loves you too. I mean, he could have just kept going when the reporters were at him, but he didn’t, Seine. He protected you. Okay, so the lie was way out there, but it is hard to disprove. I mean, there are so many little islands in the Caribbean, anybody who tried to locate a married certificate would have one hell of a task. And why would they even bother? There would be no point. You’re hot right now in the media. They’d rather make a shitload of money on a story at their doorstep than to invest time and resources to try and find one that they don’t know exist.”

“You think he loves me?”

“Yeah, I think he loves you. And now, girlfriend, I want, no I need the 411! Was it...you know.”

“Oh my god, Lynda, if I had known it was that good, I would have done it a long time ago!”

“No, baby, it wouldn’t have been the same. It’s only that good when the man doing it has your heart and your soul. I am so jealous.”

## Chapter Ten

Michael looked up from his desk when Stephen walked in. "Stephen, how was your flight?" Michael looked back down at the papers he was reading.

"It was okay. I have the papers." Stephen opened his briefcase and handed Michael several folders.

"Thank you. Did you get everything from Silas? Is that situation all sewn up?" He took the folders and glanced over them, slowly smiling.

Stephen spoke as he sat his briefcase down and slid into a chair. "You don't have to worry about Silas. I put the memory card in the safe deposit box myself personally before I left L.A. Silas is smart. We don't have to worry about him."

"Well, as always, good job. Did you see me on TV?"

"Yes, I was impressed."

Michael looked at him, aware of the sarcasm in the comment, and sat back in his chair. "You disapprove?"

"I think you misunderstand, Michael. I'm just . . . you're not going to have any problems finishing this, are you? It's not just your moment any more, but mine."

"I have everything under control."

"Are you trying to convince me or yourself? You can still lose her. You know that, right? The shit will still hit the fan about that brother of hers."

Stephen's statement sent a chill through Michael. He would not lose her.

"I have to believe that it's going to be okay. I don't have anything else to hold onto. I started this, dragged you into it—"

"I wasn't exactly kicking and screaming all the way."

"No, but you gave up a lot too. You've invested in this just as I have. I wish that . . ." Michael trailed off.

"What?"

"That I had listened to you when we first started this. I wish I had not involved her in it, but, as usual . . . oh hell! What's done is done, that's it."

"Yes but still, Michael—"

"Okay enough of this. You have always been here for me, through all of it, the take over of Sebastian Industries, everything. I could not have done that without you. Correction, I could not have done it as quickly without you, but now it's a done deal. Lawrence is about to be fucked, and so is Rafael."

"Let's do it then," Stephen said as he stood and headed for the door. "We can go over the papers on the plane."

\* \* \* \*

"Your father called, right before you got in. You'd better call him."

She and Lynda had spent the last twenty minutes talking about the last twenty-four hours. Lynda was truly happy for her. Nevertheless, when the opportunity arose during a lull in their talk, Lynda brought up what she knew Seine was avoiding.

"Did he sound angry? Disappointed? Is it possible that he hates me more now than before?"

"Your father doesn't hate you. Your father loves you."

Seine looked at her strangely. She thought that Lynda's tone was overly familiar and defensive, not of Seine, but of her father.

"Then how do you explain shipping a kid off to a foreign place? He didn't want me then, and he only wants me now because of what I could do for him. That is supposed to tell me that my father doesn't hate me? If he loved me, he would have kept me here with him, but he didn't." *There*, Seine thought. She had finally said aloud what she had felt for so many years. She waited for Lynda's reaction.

"Seine, you went to Paris because he wanted the best for you. I'm sure it broke his heart and your mother's heart to not have you here. He just wanted to give you the best of everything. Going to school and living in Paris wasn't the worst thing that could have happened to you."

"Am I missing something here? Because up until this moment, I thought you were on my side."

"I am on your side. I'm just trying to be realistic."

"I'm sorry. I'm on edge. I really am sorry. What did he say?"

"Not much, just that he wanted you to call."

"No, I think under the circumstances that I should see him. I'll drive over to the offices in a little bit. I want to call Michael first."

"Michael can wait. Go see your father, now, Seine. Don't put it off. It's not going to make the situation better if you do."

"I know you're right. You're always right. Thanks, Lynda. I just wish I had more time, you know? I'd really like to get things straight in my mind first."

"All you can do is take care of what you know, period. Please don't start imagining things. Just concentrate on what you know and figure out how to handle it. Don't go to that place in your brain that feeds on paranoia and 'what ifs.'"

"That's easier said than done. But you're right, first things first, and that would be Daddy."

"Good, you need to go see him. He sounded really worried, and I'm sure after he hears the latest, you know that you're Mrs. O'Neal, he is really going to freak out." Lynda threw her hands up and added, "I know, I know, you're not married."

"You'll come with me?"

"To your father's? Are you sure you want me to?"

"Yeah, I'll need all the support I can get."

"You're a grown woman, and I think it's time you acted like it in all ways. Do you remember years ago you told me that someday that man would be yours?"

"Yes."

"Well, he is. You did it. You don't need me there with you. You can do this too. Give Big Daddy a hug for me, okay?"

\* \* \* \*

Seine entered the offices of Simmons Publishing a little after six p.m. Most of the employees had gone. She had spoken to her father on the ride over so she knew he would be there. She leaned stiffly against the elevator wall with her eyes closed and her hands squeezed tightly into fists mentally prepared herself for the fight she knew she had ahead of her.

She opened the conference room door. Her father stood at the end of the table and looked up at her. She saw the hurt and look of betrayal in his eyes. She closed the door and walked to him.

“Daddy . . . Pops. I am so sorry.” She put her arm around him. Her intentions were not to cry, but the tears came anyway. “I am sorry that I hurt you.” She said to him. He slowly brought his arm around her.

“Seine, you have no idea what you have done.”

“Pops, please, I need you to understand.” He pushed her away, maintaining a tight grip on her shoulder.

“You need! You need!” he repeated. “For as long as I can remember, it has always been about what you need. Do you ever for a moment stop and think about what others need? You have no idea what you have done to me, to your mother, your brother, to this company. My life’s work, Seine! You have allowed that man in here to hurt all of us because of your needs!”

She looked in his eyes. No more hurt and disappointment, instead there was anger in his eyes, anger and resentment. Then there was pity when he said, “You don’t know what you have done, do you?” She took a couple steps backward.

“I love him,” she stated simply.

“And that makes it okay?” he asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Pops, I’ll talk to him. I’ll talk to Michael. I will . . .” She stopped when she heard the rustle of paper behind her, followed by a voice.

“You will what?” a man asked.

She turned quickly. Michael was sitting at the opposite end of the table, in the large oversized chair. “Michael!” She took a step toward him. The look in his eyes told her not to move.

“Seine, I asked you a question. Please answer me,” Michael spoke softly, but his eyes told her that he was thinking the worst. That what she had said was an affirmation to his fanatical insecurity that she did not love him. She dreaded the uneasiness that she felt. The last thing she wanted was for him to doubt her but there it was, in his eyes: doubt. She took a deep breath and held it a moment. Surely, he could not believe that she was using him to help her father keep control of Simmons Publishing.

He was leaning slightly in the chair, his elbow on the arm of the chair, his thumb under his chin while his middle finger moved slowly across his upper lip, his forefinger rested on his cheek.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“What are *you* doing here?” Michael countered. Earlier in the day, she had left a message on his cell phone about her interview with Heather O’Rourke later in the evening. Her message said that she would like to meet him afterward. The look he gave her and the sound of his voice told her that he was questioning her honesty in that message. She grimaced at his look of disbelief followed by anger. She imagined that he was wondering what the hell she was doing here because she had not mentioned any plan to stop by her father’s office.

“I came to see my father about the photos and—what are you doing here?”

“Were you with me to help your father?” he asked directly, putting her on the defense. Doubt was evident on every inch of his face. His cobalt eyes bore into her soul, and the smirk on his face intimidated her. She wondered if he thought she was just playing him. She hoped that he would believe that she loved him and realize that his fears were unfounded.

She steeled herself for yet another battle she knew she would have to wage in order to convince Michael that she was safe, that she would blindly follow him anywhere, and that she would not betray him. This, she thought, was getting old. But she would not give up. She would not give up on him seeing the truth and having a future with her.

"Michael, how can you ask me that? No, of course not," she said firmly, hoping that the conviction of her words would be proof enough for him. However, he persisted.

"Are you here to report your success to Daddy?"

"I told you why I am here," she yelled at him.

"I thought I could trust you. I ask you once more, what are your motives for being here?" His thoughts, emotions, and actions were totally out of control, so she took a mental step back. She had seen him out of control before, but this was different. The crispness of his voice was overshadowed by fear. Could he be afraid that he had misjudged her and her feelings for him?

"When I got home, Lynda said my father had called. She said he was upset. I...I needed to explain what had happened between us. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I think you know," he said. Then he looked at her father who had intently followed the interaction between the two.

Seine wished she could read her father's thoughts on his face, but unfortunately, his countenance was passive. Lawrence seemed less concerned with what was said and more enthralled by the unspoken communication. Neither man spoke, their gazes intent on one another.

For a moment, it was as if she did not exist in the room.

"What am I missing? Michael, what is going on here? One of you had better answer me now!" she demanded, looking from one man to the other.

"This man that you foolishly have thrown yourself at has come to settle a long overdue score. Shall I tell her, or would you prefer the honor? After all, this is your big moment." Her father directed his latter comments to Michael. Lawrence reached for the folders that lay before him and slid them across the table to where Seine stood. She reached for them.

"Lawrence, is that necessary?" Michael asked stoically, easing back into his seat.

"Hell yeah, it's necessary! I want her to know what kind of sorry son of a bitch she thinks she is in love with. I want her to know just how fucking spineless, calculating, and unscrupulous you are." Her father spat the words.

Michael slowly smiled and said to Seine, "Put them down." He noted her hesitation and repeated, "I said put them down." She looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

"I beg your pardon?" Her voice was even and relaxed. He smirked, shifted in his seat, and nodded toward the chair.

"Please pass the folders to me and take a seat." Ignoring the patronizing tone of his voice, she smirked as the folders slid from her hand and she sat down.

"Happy?" she asked sarcastically.

"Ecstatic," he replied dryly.

Lawrence shook his head and laughed. Michael looked at him and smiled. "I hate to interrupt your little bonding session, but there is a matter on the table that most definitely needs your attention, princess." Lawrence addressed his daughter.

"Daddy," Seine began, her voice quivered slightly but, she quickly recovered, "I know you probably think that the article, the photos, that they're . . . very damaging to you and to me, but Michael has fixed it. He told the press that we're married. The publicity will be over as quickly as it started. A positive spin can be put to anything and that is already happening thanks to Michael." She turned and looked at Michael. "I understand why you said what you said. You did it to protect me and my career and all the people that are involved with me and depend on me."

"As usual, Seine, you are seeing things only as you want to see them. There is more going on than those damn photos of you and him! He's here to destroy me and everything

that I have built. The son of a bitch has me over a barrel!" Her father yelled. "And you helped him put me there with your needs and your wants and your stupidity!"

"What are you talking about? Daddy, please, English, speak English!" She yelled at her father. Every nerve in her body was ignited now. She came by her drama queen title honestly. Her father was the king of drama, and he knew how to drag a situation out to extremes, complete with the right amount of hyperbole.

"He used you. Pure and simple. He used you and took advantage of you just to hurt me," Lawrence said.

Seine looked at Michael and shook her head. "He loves me. He would never do that. Tell him, Michael." Her gaze fixed on the man she had given herself to so completely, but he just sat there and never said a word. There was no other expression on his face, just that cold, pretentious smirk that he wore so well. *That's the last time I'll take Lynda's advice. He is thinking the absolute worst, and I don't know how to stop it.*

"There are two folders before you, Seine." Her father began, his voice laden with just enough pity to irk her. "Folder number one contains a bill of sale for Simmons Publishing and all its subsidiaries. I'm supposed to just sign it! Just like that, he wants me to sign away everything that I have worked for. And because of you and your brother, I have little choice. This bastard has made sure of that. He has tied up all the loose ends, and he knows it!" He ended his speech on a high note.

"What does Rafael have to do with any of this? What is he talking about?" she yelled, her patience expired. "Why would my father just sign over his company to you? What have you done?"

"You believe him, and you condemn me without knowing the full story!" He yelled back at her. "You turn on me like this and side with him based on his word! What am I to you? Nothing? Do you have any idea the things that I have given up for you? The things that I have done for you? You take his word and condemn me?"

The words stung her like a slap on the face. She sat paralyzed by his accusation, wondering where it was all coming from and why she had not seen any of this coming. "I'm not condemning you! I just . . . Michael, please tell me that what the hell is going on here."

"Seine, you know the answer to that without my answering. You know how I feel, but I'm not so sure at this moment how you feel. I think that maybe it was a game to you, that it was always a game for you. In the beginning, your motives were to hurt him. Now you think you can help him."

"No," she said. "You know that isn't true. Don't say that, and don't think that!"

"This is all so fucking touching," her father interjected, finally losing his pseudo-persona of cool. "My heart is melting. The love you two confess for one another has made me see the light. Excuse me while I go throw up my lunch. Cut the fucking crap, O'Neal. Your point isn't lost on me. So you have my daughter's mind, heart, and libido all sown up in a nice fucking little package! Well, I'm going to unwrap it!" he said looking squarely at his enemy.

"Despite your father's insistence to the contrary, this is business. It has nothing to do with you," Michael said to Seine, ignoring Lawrence's comment.

"Bullshit, O'Neal. It has everything to do with her, and you damn well know it! It has always been about her! From the day I kicked your sorry white ass out of here, it was about her. You want to know what is sad? Short of putting a bullet through her skull, there was nothing I could do or say that would have kept her from you. Your ego, your pride, and your determination to get even with me kept you from her for years. You are still making the same mistake. You're not thinking with that brilliant brain of yours. You are allowing her to



cripple you, just as I always knew she would. I didn't want her to sink into the dirt right along with you. That's why I got rid of you. You've been on a personal vendetta against me from the day I told you that you were trash and not good enough for her! I was right," Lawrence yelled at him.

"Is that true?" she asked. "Was that the reason you left Simmons Publishing? Did what my father say keep you from coming to me in Paris? Is that true?"

"Yes."

Seine turned to her father. "How dare you? How dare you manipulate my life like that? How could you be so cruel to me, to him? I knew that you would oppose this relationship, and I felt terrible knowing that it would be months, maybe years before you would accept my decision to be with him. I love him. I do not care how you feel, not anymore. Not ever again!" She stood up. As the magnitude of her words to her father sank in, she experienced an overwhelming urge to place her arms around her father and kiss him goodbye but was frozen where she stood. This man whom she called Pops, in his own way, had protected her even when they were thousands of miles apart. She looked in his eyes. She hoped he knew that she loved him, despite his faults, but she had made her choice. Michael was and always had been her only choice.

"Let's go, Michael," she said.

He smiled at her.

\* \* \* \*

He felt an immense relief. Her three words, "Let's go, Michael," gave him a measurable amount of hope and time. All he had to do was to get her out that door and as far away from her father as possible. He had to control himself and his emotions. No more outbursts! He had to get her out that door.

He stood slowly, as if he had all the time in the world and held out his hand to her. She took his hand while Lawrence stared at them as if he were watching a bad movie. Michael saw the look of utter disgust on his mentor's face replaced with hatred and knew that Lawrence intended to play the last card that he held. Michael scolded himself mentally for not taking the folders back from Lawrence earlier. That was an error he knew would cost him dearly.

"Not so fast, Seine," her father said. She turned and looked at him.

"What?" she asked defiantly "Are you going to disown me? Or maybe you plan to banish me again, just as you did when I was a little girl?"

"Is that what think? I never banished you! I was trying to protect you!"

"Oh, Daddy, I know you were, but it doesn't matter anymore. I've made my decision," she said softly.

Michael looked at Lawrence and saw the muscles in his face tense. "Come on." Michael said to Seine. She turned again to leave, and once more, her father called out and halted their departure.

"Don't you want to know what is in the other folder?" Lawrence asked quietly.

"Now, Seine, let's go." Michael tugged at her. The urgency in his voice sent a shiver through her spine.

"You're hiding something! I can feel it!" she said to Michael.

"Of course he is, princess." The zest in her father's voice confirmed to Michael that Lawrence had noticed the panic that Michael was feeling. Seine was definitely Michael's Achilles heel, and Michael saw a look of anticipated victory on Lawrence's face. Michael

knew at that moment that Lawrence was going to use the one weapon at his disposal to ensure that he would keep his daughter from Michael and the company out of his and Stephen's hand. Michael smiled at Seine, and he knew that this scene had to be played out.

He looked at her like the little boy who told the lie and was sorry, not because he had lied but because he had been caught. He felt her stiffen against his touch and surmised she was bracing herself for the *terrible truth* her father was so hell-bent on telling. Michael reached for a chair, pulled it out, and motioned for her to sit down. He reached for the remaining folder, set it before her, and took his seat.

He waved to Lawrence and said, "The ball and her happiness are in your court. She can be happy with me, or unhappy with me. This is a decision that you make. Regardless, when I walk out of these doors, she will be walking out with me." He looked at Seine and added, "What is the phrase you used, 'It is ordained.'"

"I'm not going to sit here and let you have your cake and eat it too." If she doesn't find out now, she will eventually because I'm not signing the fucking papers. You can do whatever the hell you want to do, to me, her mother, or her brother. You can do whatever the fuck you want to do with her. She's made her choice."

"Daddy?" She whispered.

"Cut the theatrics, Lawrence. We have a plane to catch."

"We do?"

"Trouble in paradise?" Lawrence said with a laugh. They both looked at him.

"Just say what you have to say and get it over with," she said to her father.

"Envelope number two, the family's nasty little secret over the years—business, personal, dossiers, affidavits, and photos. Separately they mean nothing, but together, Seine, all of it together at once would destroy us," he said without pause.

She snatched up the folder. Inside the folder were several envelopes and papers. She tore open the one that had Rafael's name on the label and her eyes flew to Michael. He did not look away from her, and there was no sign of remorse in his eyes. He sat motionless and studied her as she examined the images. Tears welled in her eyes as she flipped from picture to picture.

"Where did you get these?" she finally asked, far too calmly.

"It's only a sampling of what he has," Lawrence responded.

"Oh God!" She moaned. "Oh God!" She shifted through the pictures a second time.

"I suppose this was my lucky day, first those photos of you for the world to see and now these!" Lawrence's voice broke, and he buried his head in his hands. She sprang from her seat and knelt next to him, placing her arm on his shoulder.

"Pops, I am so sorry! These pictures, they will never see the light of day. It would kill Mom. I promise you. I promise you. Michael will not use these pictures. I promise you." She looked over at Michael.

"I . . . I don't want you to hurt my father," she cried out to him. "You'll destroy the negatives. You won't hurt my mother."

"Of course, my love. Anything you say," he said dryly.

"Stop it, Michael! Don't patronize me. Don't worry, Pops. Please, I'll take care of it. You know you can count on me. I will take care of it."

"Lawrence, it appears your daughter has negotiated to save your ass on this one." Michael said.

Seine jerked her head up and looked at him. "Why are you making matters worse?" She blasted at him.

"I am so sorry, my love. Forgive me," he said contemptuously.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because you are betraying me.”

“How am I betraying you?”

“Because you are taking his side!” Michael fired back at her. She stared at him with a look of shock and anger on her face.

“Do you want me to hate you? Is that your motive? Why are you being this way? Betraying you? You are betraying me. You are threatening my family in the worst possible way. Those pictures would destroy not only my father but also my mother! My Mother, Michael! My Mother! But I am betraying you?” she screamed.

“Yes,” he retorted. “You care more for him than—”

“You?” She finished his statement. “You compare my love for you to the love I have for my family? Does my loving you require that I give up everything and everyone else? That is to you what love is?”

“Yes,” he said flatly.

“Oh my God!” She stood to circle the room, her hand pressed to her forehead.

“Seine, you’re involved with a madman.” Lawrence’s voice was barely audible, speaking more to himself than his daughter. He shook his head, leaned forward, and rested his elbows on the table.

“From day one you have fucked with my mind!” Michael yelled at her. He hated and despised her at that moment. He hated and despised himself for wanting her as badly as he did.

“Michael.”

“Shut up!” He struck out at Lawrence next. “I wasn’t good enough for her! I wasn’t good enough for your daughter. I loved her, and I was loyal to you, but I just wasn’t good enough!”

“My father was right. You do not love me. I am just a tool for your sick vendetta against him!” There were no tears in her eyes or hesitation in her voice, she just seemed recklessly determined to lash out at him.

His chest constricted. He realized the full implications of his actions and the words that she said to him. He stood slowly and placed his hands on the conference table. With great resolve, he looked at her, determined to give her one last chance. He did not want to lose her, not now. He refused to entertain the thought that he might.

He could feel the adrenalin rush through his body like a great tidal wave. It overtook him suddenly. He was drowning. The hole he had fallen into was getting deeper and deeper. There was nothing to hold onto to keep him from going farther and farther down, except Plan A.

“With all of this, you still take his side?” he asked Seine, trying to steady himself. The power she had over him blinded his senses. He wanted to grab her by the hair and drag her out of the room like a caveman, but he could not move. Fear locked of not having her locked him in place. He had to make her understand he could not and would not leave without her.

“I loved you! Why couldn’t that be enough?”

“If you love me then come with me now, right now! I will not use those pictures. He doesn’t have to sign any papers. He can keep his fucking company! I don’t care about any of that any more. I care about you. I love you, and I need you, and I want you to come with me right now, Seine.” He held his hand out.

“Why did you do this? Why? I loved you so much! Why would you do this to us?”

“Leave with me now.” He pleaded with all his heart.

"Michael what have you done?" She shouted back at him.

"Seine, come with me now!" Everything was slipping away from him. His mind was racing. *Why did I do this?* he thought. *What have I done?*

"I'm not going anywhere with you, ever. This ends now." She spoke perfectly poised and relaxed. It was the ultimate betrayal. She had lied to him.

"You lied to me."

"I lied to you?"

"You said that you would be with me no matter what. You lied to me. You betrayed me. You lied to me."

"You still don't see what you have done, do you?"

"Seine, I offered to make all of this right," he said dryly.

"Until the next time," she said harshly. She looked at him and then at her father. "The both of you disgust me." She walked toward the door. In one swift movement, Michael grabbed her and flung her into the nearest chair.

"You think that you can dismiss me? You fuck with my head and then you think you can just walk away and I'd let you?"

"Leave her alone. You've lost, give it up!" Lawrence yelled to him.

"You shut the fuck up!" He yelled at Lawrence. From the corner of his eye, he saw her rise. He pushed her back down into the chair and said, "And you don't fucking move." He walked back to his seat and sat down. It took a fraction of a second for his mind to register the words "Plan A."

"I tried to be reasonable," he began, "but you two, you two are a piece of work! I realize that I can't be reasonable. I told you that I would have your company and your daughter. I am not a liar. I will have the company, and I will have you," he said to her.

"You'll never have me."

"Not the way I'd like, but I'll have you nonetheless."

"Michael . . ." Lawrence began.

"Both of you just shut the fuck up and listen. I tried to be reasonable but you both wouldn't listen. So, here is the final folder, metaphorically speaking of course. You," he said pointing to Lawrence, "will sign the papers and have them delivered to my office in L.A. by 10 a.m. tomorrow. So that there is no misunderstanding, that is 10 a.m. L.A. time. If they are not delivered, then at exactly 10:01 a.m. L.A. time, my assistant will send by courier the most damaging of the photos—perhaps the one of your son in his carnal pursuit to every newspaper and television station in the major cities. The district attorney and state attorney will have no choice but to investigate. I have people in high places now. They will see to it. There is no way in hell your threats and bribery will keep him out of jail this time, Lawrence. With his arrest, hell even before, the stock in your company will begin to plunge. You won't be able to give the stock away, and I'll pick it up for pennies on the dollar. To add to the media circus that I am sure this will create, I will announce my plans to divorce your daughter," he said, reverting to a slight deviation of his and Stephen's original plan.

"We aren't even married, you fucking asshole!" she countered.

"Prove it, you conniving little bitch! Prove it! Who would believe you? Your credibility and your reputation and your illustrious career might survive your brother's extracurricular activities, but not your own personal deviousness! There will be questions for you to answer. Believe me, they will ask all the right questions necessary to embarrass you and your family because I will supply the questions to them."

"Oh my God, you sick, twisted bastard," Lawrence chimed in. "You did it. You arranged for those photographs of the two of you! Of course, ON! TV was the first to broadcast

them; ON! Now Magazine was the first to print them. You sick bastard! You hate me so much that you did this to her? And this is the sick little fuck that you love?" Lawrence yelled at Michael, then Seine.

"Tell me that isn't true!" She screamed.

"Does it matter what I say? You would never believe me. You've made your feelings perfectly clear to me! You have already condemned me!"

"I won't do it." She said. "I won't submit to this blackmail under any circumstances."

"Oh, yes you will."

"No, Michael, I won't."

"You will, or you destroy your family, your future, and our children's future."

"You're pregnant? Is that why you married this son of a bitch?" Her father was incredulous.

"For the last time, I am not married, and I am not pregnant. I will never marry you! You are evil and cold and—"

"I am everything you want! Or at least that was the case an hour ago."

"You are crazy!" She yelled at him.

"I know. I am. You make me like this. You are the worst thing that has ever happened to me," he added bitterly.

"God, we are sick and twisted, Michael. I mean truly, truly sick and dangerous. This is wrong," she said.

He knew what she was referring to. He felt it too. There was a pull between them, even now, that was incredibly strong and compelling, an underlying current of electricity that he also felt. As was the case years ago, he watched her watch him and knew that they both wanted one another.

"And this is out of our control. No one can turn feelings on and off at will. If you had been reasonable, if you had left with me, then all of this would have been avoided. You leave me absolutely no choice," he ended on a quiet note. He loved her, but he felt backed into a corner.

"What are you planning now? You are dying to tell us, so let's hear this big plan of yours. Just how do you think you will ever get me to do as you want? Don't leave us in suspense, Michael, spit it out." She challenged him.

"I will release a statement indicating that I am having our marriage annulled because one party entered into it unlawfully. That party, by the way, would be you. The statement will be simple. You married me in hopes of saving your father's company. That makes you the worst type of whore there is. That is the only comment that I will make. My friends, of course, will take it upon themselves to discuss with the press, in great detail, how my heart is broken by your deception, which is true. When I'm through with you, you will go from America's little sweetheart to the Mata Hari of Wall Street. You'll be more hated than Yoko fucking Ono!"

"You would do that to me?"

"You did it to yourself with your betrayal, Seine. I have nothing to lose anymore. Why should I give a fuck about you when you do this to me? You won't come with me so why should I care what happens to you? You said that you would love me no matter what. You said that you would never leave me, but in the end, you don't love me. In the end, you leave me. Why should I care?"

She stared at him

"You'll never get away with this. If there is a betrayal, then it is you. And I will make you pay—love be damn, I vow to you that you will pay."

"How?" he demanded menacingly. "Just how are you going to make me without destroying everyone around you? Me, I have no conscious. That's why I've gotten as far as I have. I'm used to being spat on and treated like dirt, everyone's worst nightmare. You can't say that, baby. You've always been adored, and you've spent your entire life on a pedestal. Many people depend on you. That little group of yours is a company in itself. There are hundreds of people on your payroll. To stick it to me, you are going to put them in the unemployment line. Plenty of people will be hurt besides me, but like me, they are all innocent in the game that you have created."

"The game that I created? You are the mastermind, Michael, not me," she spat.

"That is a matter of perspective, one that I, for one, am not in the mood to dissect like a laboratory experiment. Besides, I'm famished," he said, looking down at his watch. "Will you join me for dinner, my love? It would be our first time out as man and wife." They looked at him, once more, as if he were mad.

"You're kidding, right?" she said, adopting his nonchalant tone.

"I'm very serious, Seine."

"Well, no thank you," she said shaking her head. "I'd rather die a slow and painful death than spend one more minute with you. You make my skin crawl."

"You have your claws out, my little cat. You know what that does to me," he said lightly, adding, "You know, all you have to do is be with me, and I'll make this entire situation go away."

"Michael, I was with you."

"You chose him over me," he said gesturing at Lawrence.

"Oh, Jesus Christ! Here we go again," Lawrence interrupted. "You two are saying the same thing over and over again! You are a sick fucker, you know that?" Lawrence yelled at him. Michael ignored the statement and crossed over to Seine. He knelt in front of her.

"Seine, if you come with me now, I will . . . I promise he can keep his company, and no one will ever know about your brother. I will take care of it. I will do what your father didn't do. I will get your brother help. Your mother will be safe. I will not hurt you again, baby, please. I know that I was wrong. I tried to stop it. I was too late. I will never let anyone hurt you ever."

Her eyes were closed. He continued to kneel for several moments before her, waiting for a response. She held firmly to the arm of the chair in which she sat with his face right hers. More than anything, he wanted her to put her arms around him, hold him tight, and kiss him without feeling disgust by her desire to do so. He wanted her to want him as badly and desperately as he wanted her, and he suspected that she did, but hated herself for it. He knew that no matter what, her pride and anger were holding her firmly in her seat.

"You're like a child, Michael," she spoke quietly. "You have no concept of what you have done and the ramifications of your actions. You want trust, complete trust but you are not capable of giving it yourself. You are sorry, I know that much, although the words have never parted from your lips. You say you want to make this all go away." She paused and wiped away the lone tear that had escaped her shuttered eyes.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. "I sit here, and I am so confused because I love you, I do, but I hate what you have done because it was not necessary. You had me before you knew you wanted me. None of this was necessary. You were hurt so bad as a boy, that now all you see is betrayal. I ache for you still, and I am as crazy as you are because I feel so strongly for you."

"Come with me. Help me. Please," he implored.

"I can't. I won't." She looked into his eyes, and he saw the longing in them and the total determination and pride that would keep her from falling into his arms. He knew she was building a barrier and protecting herself just as he had done for years.

"I have to think, Michael. I have to think. I need time. Give me time. This is so much to take in."

He knew she was now simply placating him. Still, he continued to kneel before her, afraid to move. He also conceded that she was stronger than he was, that she could need him and want him and still walk away from him. She had said that she was very patient, that she could wait forever for him to come to her. She was able to wait because she knew that he would come, that he could not help but come. Now he knew that she would make him suffer, pay, and bend at her will until she was ready to forgive him. He knew that she would do this because of the love that he had expressed too openly to her. Pointless as it was, he continued. He heard himself speak and hated what he was hearing.

"Seine, I need to know," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "I can't breathe without you. I can't breathe." His voice cracked. "I told you that I loved you too much, that your love could destroy me. Please." He felt like an idiot but he did not care. It was too much *to not have her*. The pain of not having her was more than he had imagined. It ran through him, in his veins like ice-cold water. The pain was more real than he thought was possible.

"I need time."

"It has to be tonight. I need to know tonight," he whispered.

"Go away, Michael."

"Seine."

"I want you to leave now." She demanded. "I will see you tonight. I promise, but please leave now, Michael." He pressed his lips against her forehead and slowly touched her cheek. She cringed from his touch.

"I hate that I ever met you. I hate that I love you," he said, and he walked out the door.

\* \* \* \*

"Tell me you have a plan. Tell me you can take care of this. Tell me you can get me out of this," she said to her father. He shook his head in a noncommittal manner and started rambling. She sat and listened to her father make excuse after excuse about what he had done and what her brother was. She listened as Lawrence had the audacity to say that it was her and Michael's fault. It was everyone's fault except his own. He said there was nothing he could do, that he needed time. She had to give him time, a strange mimicry of her reply to Michael.

"How?" she demanded.

"Give him what he wants."

"You're asking me to be that psycho's whore? I am your daughter! You're asking me to give myself to him after what he has done to me, to us?"

"It's nothing you haven't already done. Listen to me, think about your mother. Think about her! We have all messed up. All of us."

"Speak for yourself. I didn't do anything wrong!"

"Okay, so that's wasn't you on the beach with your ass in the air! Don't sit here like you're innocent with that holier-than-thou, sanctimonious look on your face. You gave him ammunition. I gave him ammunition. God knows, Rafael did as well, but think about your mother and how this will destroy her world, Seine. First, there are the pictures of you and

him on that beach, and now the bust on Rafael. It would kill her and break her heart. I can stop it. I can beat him! I just need a little time.”

“You’re asking the same thing of me that he is. Only his reasons aren’t so self serving as yours! Don’t use my mother as a tool to meet your needs. If you cared about my mother, we wouldn’t be having this conversation! If you had been a better father to me and to Rafael, we wouldn’t have been such disappointments to you.”

“Seine, you have to be reasonable. You have no choice. I need time to take him out! Can’t you get that through that thick skull of yours? You’re the weak link in his chain. Stay with him just long enough for me to deal with this. I will take care of it. That’s all I am asking of you, princess, just a little time!”

“You’re my father! Daddy, please do not ask me to do this. Please take care of it.”

“I need time, Seine. You give me what I need, and Daddy will take care of the rest. Just give me some time!”



## Chapter Eleven

He sat on his sofa in the dimly lit spacious living room of his Atlanta apartment. He sipped his whiskey sour and tried to pinpoint the exact moment he had lost control. He imagined all the people he had screwed over, standing in a line laughing and pointing at him. All the people he had used and manipulated to get to where he was now were laughing at him in his head.

They were laughing at him because he had broken his own rules. He had let her do this again. He sat back and cursed her once more, then himself, and finally her again. His emotions were twisted. He realized as he drove himself home that he loved someone that he did not really know. He realized that he hated her and loved her all in one mixed-up jumble of emotion.

He tightened as he thought of her, of the hold she had on him, and of the power that he had given her to dangle over him. He was well known for his reckless, uncaring, laconic business approach, but not with her. He grimaced when he thought about how he begged her. In front of the man he hated most in the world, he had begged and groveled for her to leave with him!

He stood, crossed to the bar, and poured himself another drink, his hand shaking from the knowledge that she might not come.

*What if I have lost her?*

“Oh fuck,” he said aloud to the empty room. “What have I done?” He knew that his emotions were flip-flopping. He knew that he loved a woman that he also despised, but in the end, his mind came back to the same conclusion. He had to get her back. He had to have her. His chest tightened. He could feel the blood running through his veins. He could feel every nerve ending tingling.

He lay back on the couch and closed his eyes. He saw himself once more, kneeling before her like a lovesick puppy, wanting her to love him, to want him, to need him. He moaned at the images his mind vividly recalled. Lawrence surely got a kick out of that. Had their roles been reversed, he would have relished the sight.

Lawrence was probably celebrating his victory, no matter how short-lived that victory was destined to be. Michael resolved that at ten o'clock tomorrow morning he would make them all pay. Michael found temporary solace in the knowledge that in the end he would be the victor. That company would be his, and the smirk on Lawrence's face would be wiped away into oblivion.

“But at what cost?” he murmured. He told himself that he should not mourn something that had never been real. Her confession of everlasting love had not been real. Her declaration of devotion to him had not been real. What he felt for her was real, but she had lied to him. She had deceived him. She had betrayed him and had made a fool of him and a mockery of his love for her. He resolved that if she did not come to him, he would make her pay with everything he had. He would make her feel the same pain she was causing him.

He hoped to relax. He had not intended to sleep, but he did. He was dreaming. It was the same dream he had experienced since that day in her father's study all those years ago.

He was eight years old. The place was CrownMar, Tennessee. The sun beamed down on his face as he swatted away mosquitoes. He was standing by a muddy, dirty pond. He looked up at the man that stood beside him. It was his Uncle Ray. Michael wanted to put his hand in his Uncle's, but he was afraid to.

“It's okay, son,” his uncle said to him. “Sometimes a man needs to reach out. Don't be afraid, son.”

Michael hesitated and then he took his hand. "Uncle Ray, am I dead now?"

"What do you think?" His uncle laughed.

"I don't want to be dead, Uncle Ray," Michael said to him.

"Well, son," his uncle began. "There are two things that will surely kill a man—old age and the right woman. You know, son, the kind of woman that you disappear into. You found the right woman, son, and you are now surely dead!" His uncle's laugh got louder and louder.

Michael bolted up. Breathing heavily, he looked around the room. He always woke up when his Uncle began to laugh. He rubbed his head and then checked his watch. It was a little after ten. She should have been here by now.

A little before midnight his wait was over. The sound of the buzzer woke him. He jumped out of his bed and went to the front door, snatching it open.

"Where have you been?" he demanded, pulling her inside. She pulled away from him, walked to the sofa, and flopped down, the smell of alcohol trailing behind her.

"You're drunk!" he said.

"So are you." She reached for the empty glass he had left on the table. "Shall I fix us another one? We can share a drink while we discuss our arrangement, our little deal. You know, my stay in purgatory." She walked over to his bar and inspected what he had. He stared at her.

"Seine."

"Let's see. That is my cue to whimper and say, *Oh Michael! Oh Michael! I love you, I need you. Take me, Michael, please.* Is that my line? Did I get it right?"

"You are drunk. aren't you?"

"I am very drunk. I am very, very drunk. I needed to be drunk to be here with you. I hate you. I hate that you took what I gave you and then you threw it back in my face as if it were nothing! I had to get drunk to stomach being here with you!"

"Sit down. We need to talk," he said to her as he motioned for her to sit down. She poured herself a whiskey and looked at him. Seductively she brought the glass to her lips and said,

"Do you want some?" She smiled slowly and added, "I mean the whiskey. Not me."

"So it is going to be like this?" he asked, unable to take his eyes off her.

She sat her glass down and then removed her jacket. "Like what?" She feigned ignorance.

"Combat, you and I at war?"

"Did you expect it to be any other way?" She asked moving her hands to the belt that she wore. She slowly removed the belt and tossed it to him. Then she ran her hands up her stomach, pausing momentarily at her breasts. "I asked if you wanted some. Do you?" She teased.

"No," he said simply, growing weary of her charade.

"Well, I do." She said as she unbuttoned her blouse. First one button, then two. "I guess you're not the only insane person in this room tonight. When you yell at me, my body trembles. When you attacked me and called me a whore, I trembled. I wanted you to touch me so badly. I felt so dirty because you make me so crazy and all I want is for you to touch me and..." She threw her shirt at him. "...and then I remember that I hate you, and that I want you to die!"

"Stop it, Seine. It's not going to work."

"What's not going to work?" she prodded him.

“This display has no effect whatsoever on me. That is not, and never was, what I wanted from you.”

She froze in her movements and let out a sigh. She reached for her glass. “Maybe you should have a drink. It’s easier to fuck your enemy when you’re drunk. You’re not quite drunk enough if you don’t want to fuck me.”

“You’re not my enemy. I . . .”

“Love me?” she finished for him. “You don’t love me. You want to own me, to possess me, to hide me away from everything and everyone, to have me all to yourself. My father was right. You really are a weak, spineless man. How did I ever think I loved you? Why did I wait to give myself to you? You are everything my father said you were! I hate you!” In one quick motion, he jumped from the arm of the couch and grabbed her.

“You stupid, spoiled, little bitch! I will break you. I told you once that little girls shouldn’t play with fire.”

“Are you going to hit me? Go on, do it. I dare you.” She did not scream or attempt to free herself. She merely looked at him with disgust. “You don’t have the guts to hit me.” “You don’t have what it takes to own me. You never will. I hate you.”

He pushed her aside and turn to walk away.

“Michael! Do not walk away from me, Michael,” she shouted after him.

He flung his hand up for her to stop. She retreated instantly. He took several steps backward, bringing his hand down to its normal position.

“I’m going to bed. You can sleep on the couch.” Then he stopped and slowly turned his head to face her and said, “But if you’re not here when I get up in the morning, I will fuck you, your daddy, your momma, and that deviant brother of yours. That’s not a threat, love, it’s a promise.” Then he disappeared down the hall to his room to the sound of her quietly crying.

## Chapter Twelve

The next morning, Michael entered his kitchen and found Seine and Lynda huddled together at the breakfast table. They simultaneously looked up at him.

“Good morning, ladies,” he said casually as he crossed to the counter and reached for the coffee pot. He reached for a mug and poured coffee into it. He turned to face them, slowly smiled, and brought the cup to his lips. He parted his lips to sip but stopped. He noted the slow grin she gave him.

“Did you put something in the coffee, my love? Are you trying to dispose of me so early in our bliss together?” He asked sarcastically.

“Now do you see what I am talking about?” she yelled to Lynda. “Do you see what I have to put up with? He’s crazy.”

“Seine, is it necessary to air our dirty laundry?” he said, enjoying the rise that he was getting out of her.

“I think I should go.” Lynda stood.

“Don’t leave on my account or hers. She’s doing what she does best, overreacting like a spoiled little girl who can’t have her way. I’m sure you are used to her prima-donna tantrums after all these years.”

“I wish I had put something in that coffee. I wish you would just die.”

“Right,” he said softly and then he took a sip.

“Seine, for future reference, when you make coffee, I like mine strong. Just like my women.” He poured the remainder of the coffee into the sink. “I’m going to go now, love. I have things to do.”

“More instructions for your henchmen?”

“Yes. How perceptive of you, angel. But I need to make arrangements for us too.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Our trip, travel plans, and wedding plans. I assume your friend knows that we are currently living in sin. I’ll take care of that.”

“You think I’m going to marry you?”

“I know you’re going to marry me.”

“I said I would stay here with you. I didn’t say I’d marry you.”

“I didn’t ask you. I am telling you.”

“You’re going to regret this. All of it.”

“I already regret it. I know you can barely stand to be in the same room with me. News flash. I find your company just as repulsive. What I want right now is to put my hands around your lovely little neck and squeeze the fucking life out of you.”

“I’m definitely leaving now.” Lynda said. She reached for Seine and hugged her.

“He says he’s going to kill me, and you’re going to leave?”

“If he was going to kill you, which he isn’t, he would have done it last night! The acting lessons you took are really paying off, but I’m your girl, and I know you. I’m leaving because I think all of this is stupid, ridiculous, and boring. It’s like a bad cartoon! You,” she said turning to Michael, “need to get a grip.” To Seine, she said, “And so do you. Now give me a hug. I’ve got to get to the studio. I should have been there hours ago. Come on, give me a hug.”

“Good luck, baby girl.” She whispered in Seine’s ear, “I’ll call you later.” Seine held onto her tightly.

“Please, don’t go. Just wait in the other room. Please, Lynda.”

“Seine . . .”

"Please," Seine pleaded.

Lynda smiled at her and shook her head in affirmation as she reluctantly gave in. She turned and smiled at Michael.

"You know, I always knew you'd be trouble. Good luck, Beast." She smiled at him and patted him on the shoulder, adding, "I feel for you!" She turned to Seine, winked, and said, "Beauty, I'll be in the next room." Then she walked out the door. He looked after her in disbelief.

"What the fuck was that?" he said to Seine.

"It's an old joke. Michael, be reasonable. This isn't going to work. We're too angry with one another for it to ever work." He pulled a chair out and sat down. She stood a couple feet away, her arms crossed.

"Seine," he began, "You are not listening to your heart. If you would just listen to your heart, it would be different for us. Sit down please, Seine." He pulled a chair out for her. She hesitated a moment and then sat down.

They looked at one another in silence. He reached across the table and placed his hand on top of her. When she did not withdraw, he squeezed it gently. Again, there was no response from her, which he took as a good sign. She stared at his hand on hers and slowly pulled her hand from his.

"Right, well..." He stood and said, "I really have to go now. We will leave later this afternoon." When she did not respond, he continued, "Are you going to walk me to the door? Are you going to give me one of those hot burning kisses that are planted in my mind and make me melt and turn into a whimpering little boy?" He asked sarcastically as he approached her. He leaned into her and she turned her head from him.

"Of course not," he said with little resolve. He kissed her cheek.

"You know, Seine, I am as patient as you are." With that, he walked out of the kitchen.

Seine stood up, listening for the front entrance door to close. She looked up when she heard footsteps. Lynda stood in the doorway.

"He's gone?" Lynda said.

"Good riddance," Seine said meekly.

"Yeah, okay." Lynda replied jokingly. "He's very passionate. Now don't be angry. He's your man and all, but when he said that he wanted to put his hands around your neck and squeeze the life out of you, did it make you all tingling inside?"

"Shut up, Lynda. That shit is not funny."

"Yeah, but you're a freak, Seine. It's your nature. That's why you were so attracted to him in the first place, and you know that I'm not taking about the threat itself but the passion in his voice, the desire in his eyes. You have that man so whooped."

"Did you hear anything I told you? I guess that you think what he did was okay."

"Of course not, he's a piece of shit. There, is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Yeah!"

"And he is your piece of shit. That is what you said you wanted. Oh, Seine! Girl, open your eyes. You don't know what you are doing do you? You don't see it do you?"

"No, Lynda, but I have five bucks in my pocket that says you are going to tell me."

"Do you see how much he loves you?"

"That does not make any of this okay."

"I used to think that you walked around with your head in the clouds when it came to that man. Now I am sure you do. I used to think that everything you touched turned to gold, never stone. I'm not so sure about that anymore. You chased after him. You got him. I told you I had a bad feeling about him, that he wasn't at all like normal men, but did you listen?"

No! Now you're going to throw him out the window like yesterday's wash water? If so, then just do it."

"I'm supposed to just forget all the things he did?"

"Yes. Tell me again what he did to your father, and then remind me of what your father did to him. Then tell me what you did and have always done to the both of them."

"What I've done to them?"

"Yeah. My God, he is a very bad man, not a bad boy, but a conniving, sneaky, ruthless, bad man who melts in your presence. And you, sweetheart, knew this going in. You knew this. He's capable of some crappy shit, and you knew this."

"I didn't think he would ever hurt me."

"And you had better make him pay for it, but remember honey, make him pay in the right way. The method that you are using now is wrong."

"Okay, Lynda. This is the way you're going to play this. Let's tell Seine how stupid she is."

"No, listen carefully to me. Stop what you are doing or you will be one of those women sitting alone at home eating chocolate donuts with nothing left but pride. Right now, there are women out there laughing with their man, girlfriend. They are having a good time with their man because they did not let their pride keep them from him. There are women who have forgiven their man for something far worse than what Michael has done. And all of those women who haven't, you know the ones that can't find it in their hearts to forgive their man, well, baby girl, they have their pride and their chocolate donuts but no man."

"By your way of thinking, a woman should just be a doormat?"

"Did I say that? At crunch time, and this is crunch time, you have to be woman enough to love him even when he has done wrong. You can't just love him when he is a good little boy. You love him when he is wrong too. Because a real man, a good man, will love you when you're wrong. Think about it, Seine. Are you woman enough to love your man when he's wrong?"

"Just forgive him, just like that?"

"Yeah, if he's what you want. Than do it and to hell with everyone else."

"Always forgive him and do as he says and—"

"You're being stupid. If you want to paint the bedroom walls purple and he doesn't, paint the walls purple anyway. I'm talking about the things that tear men and women out of each others arms. You can find another man, but would any other man touch your soul the way you say he does? Seine, please do not throw it away."

"I know you're right, sort of. I know you are. But . . ."

"But?"

"Pops has manipulated me for as long as I can remember. He has tried to control me since I was a little girl. You know that that is true."

"I think I know where you're going with this."

"Do I go from one manipulating controlling man to another?"

"Think about why they did it. Then you decide. Why did your father do the things he did? Why did Michael? There is a way to say 'stop' to someone and still be with them, especially if he love you. You are right. You have to make it clear to Michael that you will not be his puppet or his personal property. He cannot own you. He has to trust you. Grownups work through stuff like that. Their love gets them through it."

"This is very hard. I love him. I love him, but I am so angry right now that I wish I could just get away from it all, to press rewind and not have to deal with it. Go back to the other night, everything was great then, but now . . . I love him but . . ."

"I know. Everything is easier said than done. I can't imagine what it's like to be in your shoes right now."

"It feels like someone has taken your heart and you're not sure how to get it back."

"What are you going to do Seine?" Lynda asked after a long silence.

"Part of me wants to do like you said. Even yesterday, I was listening to my father say the things he said, and Michael was yelling at me as if I had done something wrong. I looked at him, and all I wanted was for him to put his arms around me and to love me. That's how I feel right now. I can't stand the thought of him not being with me, but there's a part of me that wants to make him wish he had never met me."

"I think he already does."

"What am I going to do?" Seine asked breathlessly.

"Forgive him."

"Why do you always do that? Forgive him? That is your answer for everything! Forgive him? It isn't that simple! Your problem is that you find it hard to see anything from my point of view or from any woman's point of view. Now it is my turn to be direct. You think so little of men that you excuse all the bad shit they do because you do not expect them to do any better! That's the difference between me and you. I expect a man—especially my man—to be better because I have faith in him that he can be. You, on the other hand, expect him to fail because you think failure is all they are capable of because all the men you have ever known have failed you! Your father, my father, Rafael! Especially Rafael!" The minute Seine said it she regretted it.

She took a step towards Lynda but stopped. Lynda quickly turned her back to Seine. Seine walked around her to face her. She saw the tears welling up in Lynda's eyes. Seine wiped a tear from Lynda's cheek and put her arm around her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to her.

"Seine, I loved him so much." Lynda whispered back to her. The two women held one another.

"I know. I am so sorry." Seine cupped her friend's face the way Michael had cupped Seine's when he had comforted her, when he made her feel safe. She looked at Lynda with all the love a sister could have. Her heart broke because of the pain she had caused.

"I am so sorry I said that Lynda."

"I know."

"We won't talk about him now, or ever again. I swear to you, I'll never say anything like that to you again."

"Forget about it." Lynda said, forcing a smile.

"Now I'm crying." Seine laughed through her tears.

"That's okay; you always cry." Lynda said, dabbing at Seine's tears.

"But that's my job in this friendship. I cry, you listen and scream at me." They both laughed.

"Let's go," Seine said taking Lynda's hand. Seine sensed that they should do something. Anything so that her friend would not succumb to the melancholy her brother had left for Lynda. *Men!* Seine thought again. *They can do such damage and somehow manage to leave women to clean it up.*

Seine knew that Lynda was a survivor and had not allowed Rafael to steal her soul. Seine longed to be strong like Lynda, but Michael made her melt. He had her soul. Just thinking about him made her weak. She wanted to spend the rest of her life in his arms. It angered her that the thought of him broke her defenses.

"Where are we going, Seine?" Lynda asked as Seine led her down the hallway.

“To meddle,” Seine answered with a devilish grin on her face. “Let’s take a look at his stuff, like when we were little. Do you remember rummaging through Lawrence’s private papers in his study? Let’s see what my future husband has hidden away in his desk.”

“And if he catches us?” Lynda asked, feeling better.

“What is he going to do? Kick me out? That’s not going to happen. He is giving up too much just to have me here.”

“You like that, don’t you, having him grovel your feet?”

“Of course not, but do you want to know truthfully?” Seine asked coyly.

“Oh God, don’t say it!” Lynda said imagining what Seine was going to say.

“I’d rather grovel at his.” Seine slid open his top drawer and examined the contents. “Do you want to know what else I would do at his feet?” She said hoping to shock her.

“No. Yes. Okay sure, but nothing too graphic.” They both laughed and enjoyed the playfulness, eliminating both their worries, future and past.

“I’ll say this. My man should have his technique patented.”

“Okay, that’s it! Shut up. Do not share anymore.”

“Oh my God, Lynda. He has his socks arranged by color!” Seine gasped as she rummaged through his drawer.

“Anal!”

“No, not yet, but maybe—”

“Seine! I mean he is anal-retentive, you know, a freak for order and neatness and . . .”

“We attended the same school, Lynda. I know what it means.” Seine said as she reached for the large leather-bound book partially hidden by his socks. “What’s this?” She lit up with curiosity.

“Let’s see,” Lynda said taking the book. They sat down on the huge bed and opened the album.

“Girl,” Lynda said in awe. “It’s you.” She flipped quickly and saw that they were all pictures of Seine and newspaper articles highlighting her career.

“Oh my God, they’re all of you. The last five years of your life is in this book.” Lynda squealed.

“Lynda,” Seine said as she looked at the images of her. “Oh, Lynda.” She repeated.

“He didn’t come to Paris five years ago, but he never stopped thinking of you. He wasn’t using you to get to Lawrence. He loves you!”



## Chapter Thirteen

Stephen listened patiently as Michael went over the events of the previous evening. He sat in Michael's office, leaning back on the sofa with his head resting on his folded arms. Michael stood at the window staring out at the street below as he told his story. Stephen looked at him occasionally but he never interrupted.

Stephen knew what Michael was leading up to. That girl had Michael so wrapped up emotionally that Michael wanted to give up everything. He did not understand the appeal. Then again, Seine was not his type. Physically, she was too skinny, too light, and her hair was too damn short. As a person, she was too self-centered and spoiled. Besides that, she had that way about her that intrigued men far too much for his taste. He preferred the down-to-earth, girl-next-door type.

He could never trust a woman like Seine, but he knew Michael loved her. She was the proverbial American Princess that men like Michael had to possess, a class act in public with the morals of an alley cat or ten-dollar hooker in the bedroom. She was his crown. As Michael continued, Stephen knew it was difficult for him to say the things he was saying. Nevertheless, the bond between the two men had grown deeply throughout the years, and Stephen did not judge Michael or think him weak.

"So," Michael concluded, "what do you think?"

"Honestly?"

"Yes."

"Fuck you if you think Rafael Simmons walks. Fuck you. I don't give a shit about the company. You can kiss ass with the girl to get her back, but fuck you if you think Rafael Simmons does anything but ten to twelve for rape and embezzlement. He's a cokehead! I'm sorry. I will go along with everything else, but that motherfucker goes to jail."

"What if he just...goes away?"

"We're not the fucking Mafia, Michael, and your last name isn't Corleone."

"I don't mean kill him, just send him away."

"To jail? Then I'm happy."

"Stevie," Michael said, smiling. "There has to be a common ground."

"Don't give me that 'Stevie' shit. Jail"

"Jail."

"That's it. Jail. For five years, five long years we put this profile together and that sick son of a bitch is going to pay. Not just because of my sister, Eliot, but for all those girls. He has to pay for all of the stupid shit he did! The guy is a psycho. Some people are so ignorant. That fucker was born with everything, and he has the mentality of a damn hood rat. At least when they do fucked-up shit it's because it is all they know and it's the only way to survive when you have nothing. I know. I came from that shit. Like you, I have worked my ass off to raise myself above the circumstances of my birth, and despite what people say and think about us, we give back to our respective communities. Hell, Michael, we have both given a lot of money to inner-city groups and organizations. God knows you support hundreds of disadvantaged youths of all races. Our charitable contributions are endless. We are not the bad guys. Rafael is, along with his father. Hell, every member of his family is at fault because I refuse to believe that they were ignorant to the things that he was doing. And yeah, I'm including your girl in that statement. That son-of-a-bitch Rafael is a want-to-be gangster fucking over his own people. You know it, and I know it. Lawrence thought that making payoffs and turning a blind eye to his son's destructive behavior was protection. He was wrong. He failed because we now have the concrete proof necessary to end that bastard's

rein of terror. His father should have been getting him psychiatric help instead of making payoffs. I can't let it go just like you can't let her go, so do not ask me to."

Michael reached for his cigarettes, lit one, and sat on the sofa. "All right." Michael said, leaning back on the sofa.

"All right?"

"Yeah, you're right. Fair is fair. Send the papers, on Rafael only. I hate that bastard anyway. Before all this started, I tried to drop dime on him to the authorities, but, as you know, Lawrence shelled out the big bucks to keep his ass out of jail so fuck him. But with your permission," he said sarcastically. "The shit we have on Lawrence and the rest of the family stays in the safe. That's our new deal."

Michael extended his hand to Stephen, and he took it and smiled. "There's one other thing we have to work out," Stephen said

"And that one other thing is?"

"Getting you out of the shit you're in with that girl."

"She's staying with me. I'll make it right with her. It will just take time."

"You misunderstand what I mean. You need to forget about her. Get her out of your system. You should just walk away from her, man. I mean ASAP. What you are doing is crazy and bad for you. She has got you twisted. I mean honestly, if you counted the total number of hours that the two of you have spent together you wouldn't get past a hundred. The entire time we have hung out together, you have not allowed yourself to get to know other women. Man, when you two are not together your brain is lethal. Five minutes with her and you are back in Idiotville. You need to walk away, just as you did years ago. That's the only reason we got as far as we did and that is the only way you can stop being nuts."

"What part of *I love her* do you not understand?"

"I guess God loves me because I've never been afflicted with that disease. With that said, partner, you need to get her out of here because in twenty-four hours her brother is going to be front-page news. She's going to be pissed."

"She's already pissed."

## Chapter Fourteen

"Maybe I should come home," Seine said into the phone. She heard the sigh in Lynda voice.

"Maybe you shouldn't."

"But Rafael . . ."

"He's a big boy, Seine. He made his bed. Speaking of which, how are things going?"

"The same," Seine said solemnly. She and Michael were entering their third week as man and wife. It was not close to what Seine had imagined it would be. When they did speak, it was forced and strained, and they eventually would end up attacking one another verbally. The previous week he had avoided her completely, spending most of his time in his study. She walked along the beach or tried to read.

"What's really going on?" Lynda asked.

"We can't seem to click anymore."

"Seine, swallow your pride."

"Only if he swallows his," Seine snapped back, wincing at the lie. He had swallowed his pride and then some. He had tried, but she was the one that held back, wanting to make him pay for the pain she felt he had caused her family, but mostly for the pain he had caused her. If only he had just taken her as she was and had left everything else behind.

"I'm not going to have this conversation with you again. It's useless. You'll regret it."

"Thank you so much, Lynda, as usual for being so understanding," Seine said sarcastically.

"Do you want me to come there? I can, you know. Just say the word."

The last thing Seine wanted was for Lynda to show up on their doorstep. Lynda was not capable of understanding what Seine was feeling or why she did what she did. She did not want a second body around with which to fight.

"No, stay with Mom. She needs you more than I do."

"You'd be surprised. She really is holding up well under the circumstances. She's doing okay, really"

"I'd just feel better if I was with her too, for support."

"Seine, your brother has generated enough publicity. If you show up here in Atlanta, it would only stir things more. This has been one hell of a three-week publicity ride. Jesse is orgasmic from it. He's milking the publicity hounds for all it's worth. He doesn't want you here either. He wants you to keep your distance. Trust him, and he'll save both our careers."

"What about you?"

"Come on, girl, I'm popular but forever in your diva shadow. I'm the sweet little girl next door, second fiddle. You just stay put. Don't even think about coming here. The press will eat you alive. I don't think you can handle any more bad press, and you know they will make mountains out of mole hills if you show up here without your husband. The worst thing Michael could do is show up with you at Lawrence's doorstep."

"Because he created this you mean?"

"Yes and no. Rafael ultimately created this, and Lawrence helped, and you and your mother and me. We knew what was going on."

"Speak for yourself."

"You knew what was going on with me."

"I thought—I didn't know there were others. I swear."

"I'm on my cell phone. Let's not talk about that anymore. You know this stuff with Rafael is growing and developing a life of its own. Because of you and Michael, it's very profitable. They're eating it up. You just need to continue to lay low."

"You know I never leave the house. The press is everywhere down here. A helicopter flew over the house yesterday while I was sunbathing. Can you believe that?"

"That sounds familiar. Naked on the beach. Was he with you?"

"No, Lynda, he was not."

"You say that like you're sorry. I bet you are horny as hell."

"You always bring the conversation back to me and him, don't you?"

"My life is so boring, of course I do! I'm living vicariously through you, and now you're making your life dull."

"You need to get out there and have fun, if that's possible under the circumstances."

"You know me, Seine, I'm a survivor. I have to go now. I'm meeting Mom for lunch and then we're going to get our nails done."

"You're kidding, right?" Seine said feeling a little jealous that she could not be there and surprised that her mother was actually leaving the house. "She's getting her nails done, with all that's going on?"

"Yeah, everything is the same. That's what I've been trying to tell you. She eats and shops and gets her hair done. Lawrence is golfing and spending Saturday afternoons at the club. So, get on with your life. They are. I have to go now or I'll be late."

"Tell Mom I love her. I'll call her tonight."

"Love you, girl."

"You too." Seine answered, and then hung up. *So*, Seine thought, *it's as if nothing happened*. She looked around her room and realized how lonely she really was, how empty she felt, and how ridiculous she had been, punishing him and herself for people that were still living their lives as if nothing had happened. That, she decided, would change starting now.

Later, she lay on the sofa flipping through a magazine, waiting for him. She had formulated a plan that she was confident would work. After all, she was very good at that. She knew how to get to Michael better than he knew himself.

She immediately tensed when he walked into the room, suddenly afraid to follow through with her decision. She swallowed deeply. He looked extremely pleasing to her, his skin tanned perfectly from the sun.

\* \* \* \*

When she looked at him, Michael immediately felt drained. His body reacted to seeing her as always with a burning need for her, but his mind overruled. Still, she seemed different today. Instead of her normal scorn-laden gaze, there was a faint smile on her face. He was weary of her, and he wondered what she was up to, what she had in store for him. Today he did not want to deal with her threats, temper tantrums, and insults to which he had listened for the last several weeks. He walked to his desk and wondered why, of all the rooms in the house, she chose his study. She had avoided coming in here in the past.

After a couple weeks, this room had become his refuge from her. As much as he loved her and would always love her, he felt less tired when she was not around. He had done everything to get her to forgive him, but nothing had worked. The one thing that she wanted, he just could not bring himself to give to her. He could not mentally let her go. He knew it was sick and twisted, but he had to try. He had to because he did not think he could manage his life or live his life without her.

He sat down and turned on his computer. He leaned back in his chair and turned slightly while he waited for the system to come to life. He intentionally avoided her gaze, but could feel it nonetheless. Her stare bore into his back like daggers. He typed in his password and navigated to the financial statements on which he had planned to work. Her being there was a distraction. He heard her stir, and against his better judgment, he turned to look at her. She was sitting up now, staring at him. She looked so beautiful. He hated himself for wanting her so badly and so desperately. *What is wrong with me?* he thought.

"What is the problem now, Seine?"

"Did I say anything?" she asked lightly.

He looked at her and wondered once more, what she was up to. He braced himself for her attack. "You have no complaints today. That is so unlike you," he said bitterly.

She stood up and walked over to his desk. She moved slowly. The closer she got, the harder it was for him to remember why he was angry with her. It was harder for him to remember why he distrusted her. She ran her hands across his desk, her fingers tracing the papers he had scattered about it. She stopped in front of him. She reached out as if she were going to touch him. His hands squeezed the arm of his chair to keep from grabbing her.

That same voice that had tried to keep him away from her was now yelling at him, "*No*" It was saying. He felt hot, as if he were on fire. His loins ached, and he felt his growing need for her pressed against his jeans. She placed her hand on his cheek. Against his will, he closed his eyes and moved his face in her hand. His head moved until his lips were buried in the palm of her hand.

For weeks, they skirted around each other, attacked each other verbally. Their minds were at war, but not their bodies. Their bodies betrayed their need and longing for one another. Now she stood above him in her position of power, looking down at him, granting him permission to touch her, demanding that he take her.

"Truce?" she asked, standing before him. There was no smile on her face. She stared down at him, her lips slightly parted. He could feel the craving in her, he could smell her need for him, and he could feel the yearning of her body for him.

"Seine," he whispered. He looked up at her as she ran her tongue against her lips. *What is she up to?* he thought. His breath was labored. He wanted to feel her legs wrapped around him so tightly that he could hardly move. He wanted to hear her say his name, and he wanted to tell her that he loved her, needed her, and wanted her.

He wanted to taste every inch of her skin because it was so exotic, sexual, raw, and forbidden to him. He wanted to claim her as he had before and to see her eyes when he did. All of him except that little voice! That voice that was always telling him *No* and *Run!* It was hammering at him.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked her, barely audible. As if he were having an out-of-body experience, he slid his hands along her waist and down to her thighs. He moved his hand farther in and expertly massaged her through the rough denim jeans that she wore. He heard her gasp, and her hand quickly moved to the back of his head. She pulled his face to hers. His initial instinct was to please himself by pleasing her, but instead he jerked away.

"Why are you doing this?" he repeated. His tone demanded a response.

"I don't want to fight with you anymore."

Once more, her voice was still and seductive. She ran her fingers through his hair. He wanted to reach out and take her in his arms. He examined the body into which he craved to fall. He reached out and cupped her buttocks. She pressed forward slightly, hesitantly.

"Bullshit. I know you. You're up to something," he half whispered. He stared at her, waiting for a response to the action his hands were taking. He bobbed his head but

intentionally did not come in direct contact with her. He saw the beads of sweat adorn her forehead and felt her body wiggle in his grip from anticipation of him pleasuring her the way he had so many times before when they were first together. She ran her fingers to his collarbone and watched his breath escape, strained and heavy. Her lips parted as he swallowed, and his Adam's apple slightly bulged. She knelt and ran her tongue over it. He whispered her name so lovingly and with such need and desire. She stood upright quickly.

"I have always wanted you, Michael," she said breathlessly.

He watched as her chest moved quickly from her rapid breathing. He knew what was happening to her senses, to her body. The same thing was happening to his. He reached out and cupped her breast through her T-shirt, and he pulled her closer to him. Half sitting, half standing, he brought one breast, kissing gently, then roughly, allowing his teeth to graze the nipple quickly yet teasingly, then moved to the other. She let out a piercing groan and raked her fingers along his back pulling him closer to her.

"I will never get my fill of you. I'll always be hungry for you." He moaned. He touched and pulled at her the way he knew she liked, roughly and quickly. He knew she enjoyed being overpowered and overwhelmed, and he enjoyed overwhelming her. He enjoyed that his total dominance and her submissive abandonment when they made love excited her. It was the only time that he really felt in control of her, and that is drove him nuts. It was the only time he was able to possess what he wanted to have forever—her! He would not be polite or courteous, not that it was in his nature. He loved being her pirate, her barbarian. He sucked at her breast roughly, the way she liked. Her head involuntarily moved back, and she arched forward with his touch.

"I can't stand not being with you any longer. I want you so much Michael." She moaned.

He drew her to him, and he rested his head on her stomach. "Seine, Seine, I just want to love you." His body burned for her and he felt his throat go dry. She placed her hands around his neck and said his name again, slowly. She held him firmly against her trembling body and kissed the top of his head. She wrapped her fingers in his hair and pulled his head back. She bent and kissed him deeply longingly.

"Do you still want me?"

He hesitated and a part of him wondered if this was a trick. If it was all a trick, a part of him did not care. *Fuck it!* He wanted to taste every part of her.

"I want you always, Seine," he finally responded, unable to restrain himself any longer. At that moment, he belonged to her and could not resist her. She pressed his head to her stomach and held him, with her arms holding him close, and his arms around her waist.

"Michael."

She moaned. He could not think. No one said his name the way she did. She was a narcotic to him, a drug, a habit he did not want to kick. He had to have her now. It had been so long. He stood quickly, and his mouth sought out her neck. He fed off her greedily, and she moaned and squirmed as he sucked savagely at her neck, scraping his teeth against the bone in her neck he had discovered to be one of her most sensitive areas.

"I can't breathe when you do that," she said as he pawed and nipped at her neck. She thrust her body into his and raked her nails along his back, encouraging him to continue, to take her, to make them one again. He quickly tugged at the T-shirt that she wore, and soon it was gone. He threw it to the floor. Once more, he sought out her breast with his hands while his mouth explored hers. At the same time, they reached for each other, taking hold of what the other had but they wanted. He pushed his hands inside her jeans and expertly rotated in quick, solid, circular motions that she reacted to wildly, crushing her body against

him, bouncing up and down in rhythm to his movement. He pushed his fingers further into her, leaving his thumb to pleasure her outside.

He watched her face, inhaled deeply, and found a satisfaction in knowing he was giving the woman he loved the pleasure that was freely displayed on her face. Her pleasure heightened his, and he pressed himself against her thigh. She slipped her hands into his pants and cupped him. Gyrating against him faster and faster, her hands ripped at his shirt, and once it was removed, she ran her tongue along his bare chest.

"Shit," he moaned when she wrapped her hand around his fully erect member. With her free hand, she frantically pushed his jeans down. He stuck his thumbs along the edge of her jeans and pulled them down, caressing and kissing her as he fell to his knees. She parted her legs to allow him better access, and he slowly brought her to the brink of total abandonment.

"Michael," she said as his tongue raced across her most sensitive areas. He felt her tremble and shake uncontrollably. She pulled him up to her and sought out, once more, what she wanted. He stood up quickly, wrapped his arms around her, and whispered how much he loved her. She cupped him with both hands, but he pulled away from her quickly. He held her firmly in place when she fell forward slightly, unable to hold herself upright. He lifted her quickly, and she wrapped both legs around his waist and held tightly to his neck. He moved backward, carefully until her back was against the wall. With a force, he entered her. With his help, she moved up and down, using the wall to support her back. She moved in perfect synchronization to his quick, pointed, forceful thrusts. She relished the explosive blinding passion that only he could release in her.

"Now Michael...now...yes...oh God, yes!" she screamed to him. He pinned her against the wall. She tightened her legs, and he drove deeper and deeper into her.

"Look at me, Seine, tell me you love me." She wrapped her legs around him tighter and held onto to his neck.

"Oh God. Yes, Michael. Yes," she cried out.

"It has been so long." He moaned, knowing that he needed to release himself quickly. With one final thrust, he came. "I love you too much." He moaned as he felt her violent tremble from her orgasm.

They held each other tightly. He kissed her face, her neck. "Seine, I love you." He whispered. He kissed her deeply, and then moved slightly so she could bring her legs down.

"You do this to me," he whispered, a slow grin crossing his face. "I'm like a schoolboy with no control." She kissed his chest, his face, and his lips.

"I love you. I will always love you." He hugged her tightly.

"I need you too."

He pushed her from him quickly, and she closed her eyes.

"You need me?" He said stepping away from her. "You needed me? Or you need this? I love you, and you need this. What did you need? For me to love you or for me to fuck you?"

"No, please don't do this," she whispered.

"Don't do what?"

"Turn my words against me again!" she yelled at him.

He adjusted his pants.

"Put your shirt on." He tossed it to her as she stood motionless against the wall. She held the T-shirt against her chest.

"Get dressed now." He brushed past her, careful not to make eye contact. He sat down and looked at the computer screen. Running his hand along his bare chest, he scoured the room quickly to see where his shirt had landed. He sat back in his chair and then watched as she put on her T-shirt. *The bane of my existence*, he thought.

“Michael, I did not mean anything . . . I did not mean that I just wanted to make love to you.”

“Seine, we did not make love. We fucked,” he said evenly.

“Michael.” She wiped a tear away.

“I have a great deal of work to do. I don’t have time to play cat-and-mouse with you, so spit out whatever you have to say. Don’t leave me in suspense. Say it and get it over with,” he said and waited for her reply.

“I don’t want to fight anymore. I love you.”

“You’re a liar. Everything that comes out of your mouth is a lie,” he growled, anger overflowing in his words. “You have told me that you’re a prisoner, my prisoner. That is because for weeks you viewed yourself as a prisoner. I never said you couldn’t leave this house, did I? You chose to stay, your choice. Why? To punish me? So you can punish me. You tell me everyday that you hate me, that you despise me. Now you say you love me. I guess I am supposed to believe you suddenly. What more do you want from me? What can I give you that I haven’t already given! What?” He yelled back at her.

“I just want to—”

“Get away from me. I know. You stand there after what just happen and you say you love me. No. You don’t love me. You want to fuck me. My mind and my body. You have made me crazy here and I want you to go!”

“What?” she asked in disbelief.

He bolted from his seat and grabbed her.

“Leave! For God’s sake, just go! You are more trouble than you are worth.”

“Michael.”

“You have told me every day for the last few weeks that you hate me. You tell me every day that you despise me, that I am insufferable. Why are you here? Just leave!”

“You would like that wouldn’t you. I’d just be giving you an excuse to destroy my father,” she responded, fighting back.

“Your father did that, Seine, not me. Besides, I told you what I have on your father will never see the light of day. I’m not the big bad wolf you say I am. They’re safe.”

“What about Rafael? He will probably go to jail because of you.”

“He’s a rapist and a crook! Rapists go to jail! Thieves go jail!”

“Which leaves me. When my father is dead, Simmons Publishing will be mine, which means you’ll have Simmons because of this farce of a marriage that you blackmailed me into.”

“I suppose it is true that every cloud has a silver lining. When you put it like that, I suppose I will have Simmons Publishing after all.”

“This is how you love me.”

“No. This is how you let me love you. I’m beginning to think you wouldn’t want it any other way, and I don’t like it anymore. Now get out,”

She stood staring at him, not moving.

“I said get out. It’s time for you to pack your bags and get the fuck out!” he yelled as he pushed her aside. She reached for the door and he slowly walked backward from her, his gaze intent on her movement. Halfway through the door, Michael started toward her, causing her to run to the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. Once she reached the top of the stairs, Michael slammed the huge study door with a loud bang, disturbing the silence that had taken over the once-loving home.

He fell back on the sofa and took a deep breath. His heart was racing, and his breathing forced. He stood and walked to the bar and poured a drink. He had had enough. He was



tired of it all. How much more was he to take? He was every bad joke ever told about a man obsessed with and made a fool of by a woman. No more.

He was not going to be her whipping boy ever again. It was time to get back to his life. He wished he had taken Stephen's advice and had just walked away from her. Twice he had ignored that good advice. He could not take it anymore. He loved her but he realized, staring into his drink, that he would not subject himself to the pain that she caused him. Because he loved her, he would not do this to her anymore. It was over. He sat his drink down. He wanted her out of his house and out of his life.

## Chapter Fifteen

She paced back and forth in the room. She would not leave. She would not go. She had to think. She had to change his mind and make him see that she had been wrong. They were together again, and then she blew it. *Why did I say that? Why didn't I say I love you too? He was right.* She knew he was right. She just would not swallow her pride and be happy with him. Now she might be unhappy forever without him.

No other man could even come close to him. She would not settle for less than him. She sat on the edge of the bed and cried. She damned herself and her pride! *I have to think, and quickly. What do I do?* She would not be one of those women that Lynda warned she would become if she allowed her pride to keep her from him. She would not settle for any man. She wanted him, period. She had to make him see that, somehow. *Why did I do this? Why was I so foolish?*

She looked up when he entered the room.

\* \* \* \*

He watched as she wiped the tears from her eyes. He thought about how perfect she looked to him even now. He smiled crookedly and pushed the thought away. *Not this time.* He would not be sucked in by those big brown eyes and the lost-little-girl expression on her face. Not again.

"I want you to pack your things and go," he said dryly, without emotion.

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll get together what I need, and I will leave. Either way, tonight, one of us will be gone from this house. That is what you want isn't it?"

"What I want is for it to be the way it is supposed to be. The way we said it would be. The way it was for us the first time we were here. I want everything else to not matter anymore," she said softly. "I want it to be the way it was when we loved one another."

"What kind of game are you up to now?"

"I'm not. I'm being honest." Her voice was barely audible. He walked over to the bed and sat next to her.

"Seine," he said softly. He reached over and took her hand. She placed hers on top of his. "Seine, we want the same thing."

"Then we can fix this," she said hopefully.

"No, we cannot fix this. I don't think it is fixable."

"Don't say that," she said inching closer to him. "I will do and be whatever you want. Just don't say that it can't be fixed."

"I don't want to do this anymore," he finally said.

"I've screwed up?" She looked at him.

"No," he said looking at her. He loved her so much, but he would not let that love sway him again. He would never feel that little again. "We screwed up. Mostly I screwed up. I put your father between us. Time and time again, I put that man between us. I am at fault here. I did this to us. I was wrong, and it cost me you, but I tried to fix it. And of course, being the unlucky bastard that I am, I tried again to make it better, but I made it worse. If you had only met me halfway, that was all I asked of you. If you had forgiven me just enough to get back on track . . . but you couldn't."

"We screwed up pretty badly, haven't we?" She said, childlike.

"Yeah."

"This is it?" She asked, looking into his eyes. She slowly eased her hand from his. He made no move to stop her. She reached out to touch his face, and he moved slightly to divert her touch. He stood up quickly to put distance between them, knowing if he did not stop this now, he never would be able to.

"If you should ever need anything, get word to me. I'll always look out for you," he said softly. He smiled at her and then walked to the door. She bolted off the bed and flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"Don't make me go." She buried her head deep against his back.

He turned and held her. "I can't do this anymore. I just can't," he whispered to her.

"Michael, please."

"I can't be with you like this anymore. I can't," he whispered.

"Michael, I'm sorry. Please do not send me away," she cried.

He tightened his embrace. They stood there for a moment holding one another.

"I can't, Seine," he said finally. "I can't."

"I said I was sorry. Please don't send me away."

"I'm sorry too." He disengaged himself from her hold and lifted her chin up. He lowered his lips and quickly brushed his lips against hers. "But you cannot stay. I will end up hurting you again. I don't trust myself to not do that."

"I need you. I need you, Michael" She whispered to him. "You still love me, Michael. I know you do. Tell me you love me."

"I will always love you, Seine, always."

Looking helpless, she watched him back away from her and turn toward the door. "Then why are you doing this to me! Why are you hurting me again?"

"I'm hurting you? This is the shit I'm talking about, Seine. I am still hurting you. I am always hurting you. What about me? What about the pain that you give me? The hurt you give me? Your lies, and your betrayal of me? I gave up everything for you, to have you, to love you. What about me?" He yelled back at her.

"I said I was sorry."

"Sorry! You're sorry, so now everything is okay? Because you are sorry?"

"Just forgive me, please," she begged him.

"Like you forgave me?" he emphasized bitterly.

"Michael, I want . . ."

"You want," he interrupted, not thinking, and certainly not caring. For weeks, he had carried inside him, things he had wanted to say but had been afraid to say. That was over! Now she stood there thinking words could make all of those weeks of pain and ridicule go away.

He took a step toward her. "I debased myself to my friend. I cried to him like a little boy. I swallowed my pride and begged him for what I had no right to beg for. I did that for you. I reneged on deals and promises thinking that I could have you. I made a fool of myself in front of your father. For what? For you. Thinking I could have you . . . I did those things. And what did I get in return? This shit." He kicked at the closed door several times.

"Michael, please forgive me." She said, closing her hand over her mouth.

"I guess I'm supposed to bow my head like a good little boy. I guess I am expected to forget all the fucking bullshit that you threw at me the last few weeks. I'm supposed to just forget about it, like you did, right? If you wanted to get even for what I did, then you succeeded. This is probably a game to you still. I don't believe the apologies that are coming

out of that pretty little mouth of yours. I don't believe anything you say anymore, just as you didn't believe me. I cannot live with you. I don't want to live like this. I am not going to live with a woman who runs hot and cold like you do! I am not going to continue to be emotionally blackmailed the way I have been by you for the last few weeks. I am not taking your tantrums and your insults anymore, so I want you out of here now!"

"Michael, I promise it will be different. I promise."

"Until the next time, isn't that what you said to me?" He yelled at her. "I could not understand why you didn't forgive me. I tried to make it right, but you held on to your anger with a vengeance, like the vengeance that I held onto for your father." He paused for a moment and then said evenly, "No more vengeance. Mine has been replaced with anger. Anger makes it easier to walk away. The anger makes it easier just to forget what we have. The anger fools you into thinking that it wasn't real."

"I can't forget it, Michael," she cried.

"Then find that anger, Seine. You have no choice. It should be easy for you to do. You held onto it with a firm grip for so long. We are so alike in that. My vengeance and my anger drove you right here. If I had been a decent person, we never would have ended up in this mess. So take a bow, baby, I'm broke. It took me five long years to get mine. Oh hell, what am I saying? I didn't actually get mine, but I am paying for the trying. I had you, the sweetest gift from God. For vengeance, I lost you. So get angry, baby, summon it up, but make no mistake when I say I want you out of here, tonight. I do not want you in my life in any way, period. Get your things, Seine."

He grabbed her arm and pulled her over to the closet. He flung open the door and grabbed a handful of her clothes. "Take all of it," he said, throwing them at her. "I don't want you to leave anything." He threw her clothes from the closet. He crossed to the dresser and flung it open. He took her garments and threw them at her. "Take all of it. I don't want anything left here that will remind me of you. Anything you leave will be fucking burned!"

"Stop it," she screamed. She ran up behind and started pounding him on his back.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" He turned, lifting his arms to protect himself from her blows. The movement was so quick and unexpected that she missed a step and landed on her side on the floor with a thud.

"Seine," he said. She moved slightly and let out a gasp. "Are you all right? I'm sorry. Are you okay?" He reached out to her as she leaned over unable to catch her breath. He panicked when she moaned and clutched her abdomen.

"Seine, baby, what is it?"

"I'm . . . I'm fine. It hurts," she said barely audible. She twisted forward.

"I'll call for help."

"No," she practically screamed. "No. I'm all right. I'm fine," she said regaining her composure. She sat up and held onto his arm to steady herself.

"Oh God," she cried out as the pain ripped through her again. He gathered her up from the floor and carefully, but quickly, laid her on the bed.

"Seine, it's going to be okay," he said reacting to her discomfort. She held onto his arm tightly.

"I'm scared." She moaned as she twisted her body into a fetal position.

"I'll call for help."

She grabbed him with her other hand. "Don't leave me. Please," she whispered.

He bent his head and kissed her forehead. "I'm not going anywhere," he assured her. He reached for the phone and pressed Jefferson's extension. He cradled the phone and held her. She eased up slightly and nestled her head in the crook of his neck.

"Jefferson, bring the car around immediately. Mrs. O'Neal is hurt. Contact the hospital. Let them know we're on our way. Do it now, Jefferson!"

"Yes sir, right away," Jefferson responded and hung up the phone. Michael let the phone drop, and he reached for the comforter.

"I'm going to wrap you up and carry you to the car. Do you understand me, Seine?"

"Don't leave me," she said again as he threw the bed covering around her. Once more, he held her in his arms and she wrapped her arms around his neck. He quickly left the room.

\* \* \* \*

Jefferson came to an abrupt stop in front of the emergency room of the tiny hospital and took in the area. *Shit*, He thought as he turned off the ignition. No reporters. *Where the hell are they?* He had made a call to the local station and told the woman he spoke to that he had the latest scoop in the Michael-and-Seine-O'Neal saga. After agreeing on a not-so-modest fee, Jefferson had told the young lady what was going on and to meet him at the hospital.

For the past few weeks, the press had descended on the small island, and now none were in sight. Maybe, Jefferson thought, he had beaten the media to the hospital because it was still and quiet. That or the young woman he spoke to did not believe him. Either way, she owed him, and he would collect.

He decided, as he got out of the car, that he would call his contact at ON! TV once he was inside and could get to a pay phone without bringing attention to himself. The problem would be to beat the nursing staff or some janitor to the phone. If someone in the hospital beat him to the punch, he could kiss his "snitch fee" goodbye. His heart raced at the thought that some crabby nurse would end up with his money.

Michael was out of the car now with the girl. Damn, that would have made a great shot; Seine wrapped in a blanket and Michael shirtless carrying her into the emergency entrance. As an afterthought, he hoped the girl would be okay, even if she was a domineering, self-centered bitch.

He hurried behind them and watched as they disappeared into the emergency room area. A nurse pounced on him, asking questions. He answered them all as best he could, then insisted that he could do no more, that he was just the driver and butler at the residence and that she would have to direct the rest of her questions to Mr. O'Neal.

Exasperated, the nurse said that Mr. O'Neal was in no shape to answer questions and was useless. He waited around for about thirty minutes. He saw an opportunity to disappear, to make a call, but another nurse requiring information sidetracked him. Jefferson feigned ignorance but took the time to ask if she had any idea what was wrong with Mrs. O'Neal. She hesitated before responding.

Jefferson figured that since he appeared to be a kindly old man, that the nurse thought it okay to say, "Possible miscarriage." He thanked the woman in his best grandfatherly tone and turned to exit, mumbling an excuse about getting back to the house to get Mr. O'Neal a change of clothes. He walked quickly to the door. At his car, someone reached out and tapped his arm.

"Jesus Christ," he said with a fright.

"No, Lacy Matthews Channel 12 News. So what's going on, Pops?" The lady asked casually. "I have the pictures, but I need a story with it. What's up with the Virgin Bride and Mr. Hot Stuff?"

He looked around and saw a tall lanky man not too far away with a host of cameras around his neck. "I don't want my picture taken." Jefferson said nervously. He continued to inspect the area to make sure no one else was around.

"Of course not, old man. We would never drop dime on our sources. What's the scoop? Did she have an accident? Why wasn't he dressed? Was she naked under that blanket? Let's have it, Pops."

"You got something for me?"

"Of course," the reporter said handing Jefferson an envelope. "Now spill, old man before I kick the shit out of you."

"Miscarriage, maybe, that's what the nurse said. And yeah, she was as naked as a jay bird under that blanket." The old man lied. "They're always, you know, at each other like rabbits." He leered. "I guess he pushed too hard." The old man laughed at his joke.

"Okay, Pops, beat it. I'm going to do a taping in front of the emergency room entrance. Unless you want to be a star, get lost. And thanks for the tip."

Jefferson waved the envelope and said, "Thank you!"

\* \* \* \*

Michael closed the door to Seine's hospital room gently behind him and walked down the long corridor to the waiting area. As he approached, he saw Stephen stand and walk to him. They stood for a moment looking at one another. Then Stephen reached out and patted his shoulder. They smiled at one another, and Stephen suggested they go to the cafeteria for coffee.

"I'd rather stay here. The doctor's in with her now."

"She's still doing okay?"

"Yeah, the doctor said I can take her home later. She needs to stay off her feet for a while, but they have everything under control. I'm going to be a father. Can you believe that?"

"That's great news, man, *for you*."

"I just wish . . . Oh well, I'll worry about that later," Michael said, pausing when he saw Lawrence sitting in the waiting area with Seine's mother. Lawrence rose slowly, and his wife reached out and took his arm, motioning for him to sit back down. Michael looked at him and then at Stephen.

"How long has he been here?" Michael asked, turning and heading for the elevators.

"They just arrived a little while ago."

"That couldn't have been very pleasant for you." Michael said.

"Fuck Lawrence," Stephen said. "I'm surprised he was able to tear himself away from the golf course long enough to be here."

"I'm not up to dealing with him. Can you take care of it?" Michael asked as they stood at the elevator waiting for its arrival.

"My pleasure," Stephen said with a grin.

"The mother stays, but I want that bastard out of here. Under no circumstances does he see my wife."

"I'll take care of it," Stephen said. The elevator doors swung open. Stephen's mouth dropped when the young woman stepped out of the elevator.

"Did I die and go to heaven?" Stephen wondered aloud.

"You must be the other half of this asshole," Lynda stated nodding toward Michael. Then, smiling warmly at Michael, she said, "I should be mad at you. Why didn't you call me

immediately? Why did I have to find out on the TV? What's wrong with you?" She put her arms around him and hugged him.

"Michael," Stephen, who couldn't have been more obvious about his attraction to Lynda asked, "aren't you going to introduce us?"

"Introductions aren't necessary," Lynda answered quickly. "I know who you are, and although I'm not the star of the group, my picture has been in the paper too. You know who I am. Now put your dick back on hold, this isn't the time for exchanging numbers or scoring a piece of ass, Romeo. No matter how good my ass looks to you, and by the way, yours looks good to me. We have to keep it together, for our friends." She looked back at Michael and said, "How is she?"

Stephen stepped back looking confused. Michael gave Stephen his best "Watch yourself" look.

"The doctor's in with her now. She's going to be fine. The baby is going to be fine," Michael said, still unable to believe that it was real. The woman he loved was going to have a baby he would love. Reality sat in quickly. It was so like Seine, he thought, not to tell him that she was pregnant.

"And is Daddy going to be fine?" She asked sincerely, squeezing his arm. She saw the discomfort on his face and added quickly so that he would not have to respond, "I want to see her. Where is she?" She asked without looking at Stephen. She also seemed unnerved by the sight of Stephen.

"She's in room 3550, but you'll need to wait. It will be maybe another twenty minutes or so before you will be able to go in, according to her doctors. They threw me out."

"We were on our way downstairs to the cafeteria," Stephen said, pressing the button to the elevator with one hand and slipping his other around her waist. "Would you like to join us?"

"I never really liked the overly familiar touchy-feely type," She said easing out of his grip.

She protectively slipped her arm around Michael. Michael recognized the game about to unfold and found it a welcome diversion from his own problems. He knew the routine. Stephen would chase and she would run—but not so fast that Stephen couldn't catch her. He also knew that was Stephen's favorite game to play.

"The alternative to having coffee with us," Michael said, "is to join your surrogate papa in the waiting room."

"Lawrence is here?"

"Yes, and Seine's mother. They are in the waiting room. It's your choice, suit yourself." Michael stepped onto the elevator followed by Stephen. Stephen reached out to keep the doors from closing.

"Join us." Stephen flashed a drop-dead gorgeous, sexy smile that highlighted perfect white teeth against deep mahogany skin.

"Lawrence, huh?" she said stepping back onto the elevator and sliding next to Michael. "I don't feel like dealing with him this early in the day. I'll bow to Big Daddy after my caffeine fix. I should have known he'd be here. Seine is in his heart."

"Right," Michael said sarcastically

"Please don't tell me you're jealous of a father-daughter relationship."

"Someday," Michael said, "I'm going to figure you out. What's your angle?"

"I love what Seine loves."

"Oh shit, man! You have yourself a potential harem," Stephen said.

"Platonically. He's not my type." She looked at Michael and said, "He's too pale." Then she laughed. "Besides, it's just a figure of speech. I love what Seine loves. You love what he

loves...” She allowed her voice to trail off. She smiled as the elevator doors closed. She looked at Stephen once more, slowly smiling. “I know about you. You two guys are the Batman and Robin of the Financial Drama network.”

“The Financial Drama Network? What the fuck are you talking about?” Stephen asked.

It was obvious to Michael, and he guessed to Lynda, that Stephen was taken aback by her remarks and smiled to mask his confusion.

“Sorry, I talk in terms of reading and television. Besides music, that’s my life. It’s just that little glimmer in your eye. I don’t think I put it there, so whose ass are you about to kick now? That’s what you guys do, create havoc in Gotham City. Who is on your hit list, as if I didn’t know?”

“First of all, Batman and Robin were good guys. So why would we be wrecking havoc on Gotham City?” Stephen asked exasperated.

“Oh my God, you watch Batman and Robin.”

“Everyone,” Stephen began, but Michael cut him off.

“Maybe I should leave you two alone.”

“Are you pissed off that you’re not the topic of conversation?” she replied, stepping off the elevator.

\* \* \* \*

“So I take it you didn’t know?” she asked Michael. The three sat at a tiny table in the back of the hospital’s cafeteria.

“No.”

“Did she know?” Lynda asked.

He smiled slowly. *Did she know?* He wondered. *Was this yet another weapon she was planning on using to punish him in their long running battle?* He did not want to believe that it was possible, but how could she not know? *Was that the reason she did not want to leave?* For an instant, he relaxed, but it was short-lived. *Why hadn’t she told me? Why didn’t she just say something?*

“I don’t know,” he answered simply. Lynda inhaled deeply but said nothing. “Spit it out. What is it?”

Stephen squirmed in his chair, uncomfortable with the course the conversation was taking. “I think I’ll excuse myself and let you two talk.” Stephen stood up. “I’ll take care of that matter we discussed earlier.” Stephen patted Michael’s shoulder and then walked away.

Lynda turned to Michael and asked, “Would that little matter have anything to do with Lawrence?”

“Why do you say that?”

“You know,” Lynda said, shaking her head, “you are as bad as she is.”

“What are you talking about now?”

“Did you send him up there to get rid of Lawrence?”

“Stephen isn’t my lackey or my pit bull. He’s my friend.”

“Oh, I know he’s not your lackey and certainly not your pit bull. The brother is too smart for that, and he’s dangerous because he knows just how smart he is, just like you. You two are so far up each other’s asses that if you cough, his chest would hurt. If you wanted someone gone, he would make them gone.”

“Really?”

“Really, just look at the bodies in your path.”



Michael thought for a moment about the implications of her statement. He decided not to pursue it. To compensate for the awkward silence in the conversation, he drank from his cup.

"That was funny."

"What, the way I lift my cup?"

"No, that you knew she did something to your coffee that morning."

"She did?"

"Yes, she did."

"What?" he asked, his mind beginning to imagine the worse.

"She blessed it."

"What do you mean she blessed it?"

"Nothing, it doesn't matter, don't worry about it. She didn't spit or piss in it. You two are very close."

"Me and Seine?"

"No. I mean yes. But I was speaking of you and Boy Wonder."

"Stephen and I."

"Yes. Seine and I are like that too. Maybe we're the female version of you two. I can tell that he looks out for you and you look out for him. Really, what's the purpose of pissing off Lawrence? He has every right to be here, she is his daughter."

"He doesn't deserve her."

"She's his daughter," Lynda said adamantly. "You don't get it, do you? It's totally lost on you?"

Michael sipped his coffee and said nothing.

"So Stephen goes up there and quietly informs Lawrence to leave per your request. What do you think he will do? Just go because that's what you want?"

Still Michael said nothing.

"This is ridiculous. Just leave him alone. You should call your friend off."

"Stephen?" he asked, not surprised that she had managed to maneuver the conversation back to Stephen.

"Yes. The tall, very dark, and very handsome guy you sent up there to do your dirty work. He would probably do anything for you and you for him too. Just look at Rafael."

"You're bringing him up," Michael said annoyed. He realized that Lynda and Seine were alike; both were extremely good at pissing off men and irritating them beyond reason. Albeit the methods they used were completely different, the reactions they hoped to illicit were not. *Is this what becomes of spoiled little girls left to their own devices?* Michael thought.

"Yes. Rafael was taken out by you . . . for Stephen."

"And you know this because . . ."

"Like you and Mr. Stephen Lays, I make it a point to know things. I know all about Rafael and Stephen's sister. Her name is Eliot, isn't it? Strange name for a girl."

"So you're pissed off about Rafael too." Michael ignored Lynda's prodding about Eliot. Stephen did not talk much about his little sister. Under the circumstances, Michael understood why. If anyone's life read "Poor Me," it was Eliot Marie Lays.

"Yes and no. I mean I feel bad." She paused for a moment.

Michael figured she was thinking about Rafael and about what he had truly meant to her. She glanced down at her left hand and ran a finger over the scar there. Michael sat motionless. He didn't want her to know that he was aware of her disastrous and abusive relationship with her pseudo-brother and demented ex-lover.

The tension finally eased when Lynda smiled at him, a whisper of a thank you in her brown eyes for not calling her on that part of her life. The familiar feeling of hate boiled in him. Lawrence, who claimed to love Seine and Lynda, had much to answer for. However, Michael realized, he would not be the one to deliver justice to Lawrence. For now, he would have to be satisfied that he and Stephen had taken care of the real menace and threat. For now, Michael's only concern was Seine and their child.

"Seine and I are like sisters, so of course I love Rafael like a brother. Like many families, there is one apple that we wish had not fallen from our tree. Rafael as a person is scum, but as a brother, I love him. I do feel bad for him too. He has been a part of my life for years." Lynda looked down at her cup, then at Michael. "You will get used to my strange analogies and erratic thought process someday. Try to keep up with me in the meantime."

"You really are out there," he commented.

"I'm going to take that as a good thing."

"Oh, it is. You sound like Seine." He smiled.

"Now that, you will need to explain. I'm not the prima-donna type."

"She certainly is." Michael said laughing. He felt very relaxed talking to her. "What I mean is, you just come right out and say what you think. You don't skate around it. Seine is like that. From day one she was like that," he said reflectively.

"You mean the things she said to you to reel you in?"

"Reel me in?"

"You know, in Lawrence's study all those years ago. She told me about that, and I thought she was nuts, but, she knew what she was doing and what she was saying. It got her what she wanted."

"What she thought she wanted."

"No, honey, it got her what she wanted. You, hook, line, and sinker. She always wanted you, and she always will. She allowed a sense of family loyalty to get in her way momentarily. You won't hold that against her, will you, Michael?"

"Oh that's what it was, family loyalty? This bullshit the last few weeks was all about family loyalty. I was supposed to be her family," he said sarcastically.

"You are so like Seine it is ridiculous! It is about what you want. Your universe centers on you. Her universe centers on her. You two have room for only one other person on your planet and that's each other," Lynda said with a laugh.

"I am not a part of Seine's universe. She hates me." He looked at her and smirked.

"Oh my God, you believe that? She is not capable of hating you. Are we talking about the same person here?"

"The sexy little girl with brown eyes, spoiled little brat, drama queen? I think we're talking about the same girl."

"Yeah, I guess we are. But she has loved you forever."

"Why are you telling me all of this?" Michael asked wearily.

"Because you're going to leave her, and I don't want you to," Lynda said earnestly.

"I think it's time we headed up," Michael said as he slid his chair back.

Lynda reached out and took his hand. "She loves you very much, and I can see that you love her. You think I'm being a busy body? I am, but it's what I have done all my life. I look out for Seine, and she looks out for me. Don't walk away from her now, she needs you too much."

"You mean because of the baby."

“No, because she loves you, and she needs you. It has nothing to do with the baby. The poorest, weakest woman in the world can manage raising a child without a man, and Seine is neither poor nor weak. She does not need you to help her raise her child.”

“Our child,” he said adamantly.

“Semantics! You get what I am saying. You two love each other. If you could swallow your pride,”

“I tried,” he said defensively. “I don’t know what she has been telling you but I have busted my ass trying.”

“Congratulations. I give you the award for the Man Who Suffered the Most.” She stood up. “You and your trophy sleep well tonight. I’m going up.”

“Sit down and just wait a minute. Who do you think you are anyway?”

“Your fairy fucking god mother! So talk to me.” She slid back into her chair.

He cocked his head to the side and stiffened. His initial instinct was to walk away, but he ignored it. He leaned forward, looked at her, and quietly said, “I caused this.”

“You caused what? Are you referring to the whole ‘I’m going to screw Lawrence production’? That was business, right? Lawrence said he didn’t want some dirt-poor, come-from-nothing, white boy sniffing around his pure-as-gold, socially-elite black daughter. That pissed you off, and you acted out. You came up with this great diabolical scheme to recruit the Devil’s advocate, Stephen, and you two demons set out to destroy Lawrence and Rafael and Seine, aka Jesse, her ‘perfect manager.’”

“How did you find out about Jesse?” he asked, regretting the question immediately.

“I didn’t, until just now. What’s wrong with you? Rule number one in the book of good soap-opera drama is if you’re the bad guy, never fess up. Never assume the other person knows anything. What’s wrong with you affirming my suspicion about Jesse? She has your brain fried.”

“Jesus Christ, please speak English.”

“What I am saying is that none of that matters! So what! Thanks to your manipulations, you have made her dreams come true. Dream number one, to bed you. Number two, marry you, and number three, to be the mother of your children. Oh my god! She bedded you, she married you, and she is now about to have your baby. What have you done? You made her dreams come true, and as far as the black-white issue, most people in our circles could care less. Besides, you two have enough fuck-you money that no one would refuse you service or turn their nose up because you’re together. Unless you’re planning on moving back home to backwoods CrownMar, Tennessee, no one cares. I don’t think the people you come in contact with on a daily basis are even going to blink at the two of you together.”

“It never was a color issue. It was a class issue, which is ironic in and of itself. A white man in America being told he wasn’t good enough for a black woman.”

“So being a white man, you resent that Lawrence, a black man, had the balls to say no Master O’Neal.”

“Oh don’t give me that racist shit. You sit here talking in riddles. Yet I make one innocent remark and you’re offended! You throw out racist statements about me! How did you phrase it—oh yeah, ‘dirt-poor, come-from-nothing white boy.’ I’m too pale, and you refer to me as Master O’Neal like I’m a slave owner or something. You say that to me, but I make one innocent comment, and I’m the leader of the fucking KKK!”

“Don’t be so sensitive. If you’re going to go ballistic every time I say something off color, no pun intended, then we won’t be friends. Your sensitivity got you into this mess in the first place. Seine is not interested in Mr. Sensitive. She never liked the Cinderella story.”

“Oh my God,” he said aspirated. “It doesn’t matter much anymore.”

"She does not care about the Social Register. If she did, instead of doing hip-hop, she would have performed opera. That was always Lawrence's hang up, and he counted on her because he knew that Rafael was a major screw up and would be caught with his pants down and his hand in the cookie jar someday. Wake up. So you tried to take his company, big deal! You're not the first to try it and you certainly won't be the last. It was yours. Simmons Publishing was signed, sealed, and deliverable to you, but you gave it up, right? For what? For her! And as far as Rafael goes, you and your partner put the screws to Rafael and now he's singing in Sing Sing! Who cares? Rafael was a creep. I love him, but he was wrong! He was the worst type of rapist! Little girls can sleep well at night now. Lawrence knew his son was a degenerate. Did he do anything to help him? No. For whatever reasons, Lawrence just swept it under the proverbial rug like so many families do. I think the bigger picture here is, do you and Seine let all of that keep you apart, or do you stay together?"

"Are you finished?"

"If I've convinced you, then yes."

"You don't have to convince me. Once I tell you what I did, I think you'll be singing a different tune."

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean I caused this. She's here right now because of what I did."

"What did you do?"

"I caused this. I was so angry. I wanted to just...I wanted to..."

"Kill her?" Lynda asked.

Michael looked at her bewildered. She had said it so casually. "Yes."

"I see." Lynda sat back in her chair. "Why don't you tell me what happened."

\* \* \* \*

"Well?" Michael said after finishing the story. There was something about this girl. He felt drawn to her and he trusted her. He wanted her to understand him and to maybe even help him. "Are you going to say anything?" He prodded her.

"Wait a minute. You actually threw all her clothes out of the closet and her panties and bras from the drawer? You threw all her shit at her?"

"Everything I have said and that is your question?" he said angrily.

"Well, it's comical."

"Do you think this is a joke?"

"No. I think you're crazy, and so is she!"

"That's it, I'm leaving," he said flustered.

"Now wait a minute. Calm down, Beast."

"And what is it with this 'Beast' shit?" Michael snapped at her.

"It's an old joke, and don't get your feathers all ruffled. I would joke with Seine that she was Beauty and you were the Beast. You know, the fairy tale? Of course you don't. You were too busy learning how to fuck over people to bother with simple shit like fairy tales."

"Will you cut the crap?" he demanded. She looked around quickly.

"Don't ever," she said shaking her finger at him, "do that again. I'm not your woman. *Capisce?* Don't raise your voice to me like that again. Ever!"

"Okay, this is pointless," he said shaking his head in aggravation.

"Calm down. Michael, I cannot think of a single woman that I know who would not attempt to beat the shit out of anyone that would do what you did."

"Are we still talking about clothes?" He said. He was really pissed off now.

“Yes and no. Let me see if I have this right. She’s begging you, right? ‘Don’t make me go. I don’t want to leave.’ She’s saying all this to you and then she says ‘I’m sorry,’ and deep down inside she had done nothing to apologize for, and you don’t care! I can’t blame you for not caring about her saying she was sorry, especially after all her bullshit for the last few weeks. Besides, on a scale of one to ten, your bullshit is off the chart, while hers rates a five, six tops, but that’s me, not her. You tell her she’s got to go. You insist she goes, so she’s really pissed now. ‘How dare you’ is what she is thinking. What does she have to lose? So she attacks you! Most women will pound on a guy because she knows unconsciously that he is not going to smack her on her ass. I mean, what woman in their right mind attacks an angry man unless she knows deep down that he is not going to beat the shit out of her. She knows the worst that can happen is he pushes her away. That is why I think that some women respond to ‘Get the hell out’ with punching, screaming, and kicking. Personally, I would have kicked you in your groin, not your back.”

“What?” he asked, astonished by her total frankness and nonchalant attitude.

“Hit a guy in his back, or in her case, pound a guy in his back, gives him time to turn on you, as you obviously did, but kick him in his groin and he’ll go down, quickly! Then you can make your getaway, which is important because when he catches his breath, even the sweetest guy is going to really kick your ass. I’ve always been smarter than Seine when it comes to working a man.”

“You have time to think about things like this?”

“I’m in show business. There are more lecherous old farts in my business than—what did Seine’s mother use to say—than frogs jumping in Florida or something like that. Anyway, I also think that it is basic human nature to protect oneself. A lot of people would disagree, but I think it was only natural that you turned so abruptly, which caused her to lose her footing and fall.”

“That is not what I expected you to say.”

“You didn’t know that she was pregnant, and I would bet my last penny that she didn’t know either. She never once said anything to me or even hinted at it. We tell each other everything. God smiled down on the both of you. Your baby is fine, she is fine, you’re okay. Your back isn’t damaged. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t advocate abuse to women. I don’t consider what happened between the two of you physical abuse, at least not on your end. Believe me, I know abuse from a man. She did physically attack you, however, I’m digressing. The point I am trying to make is if I thought for one moment that you were a woman-beater, we would not be sitting here together right now. I would have gotten off the elevator and really kicked you in the groin. I would not have left you alone with her in Atlanta, and I would have fought tooth and nail to keep her from coming here with you. She had a choice despite her noise and your threats to the contrary.”

“What do you mean?”

“She didn’t have to marry you. You wouldn’t have hurt her by destroying her father or her career despite your threats. All you ever wanted was her.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Look at you. Only a man so blinded by this thing that you have with her would do the things that you have done. Her life is not in danger with you. If she mouths off again, or, more accurately, when she mouths off again, you’re not going to beat her. Seine is smart. I don’t think she will try to kick your ass again. I think after these last few weeks that she knows how far she can go with you and what she can get away with. She’ll know when to shut up, and so will you. I think you have your priorities together now. You are a lot of things, Michael, vain, selfish, arrogant, and macho. You think you are God’s gift to the

business world, but you are not a woman-beater. You did not viciously attack her, and you did not try to do harm to your baby.”

“I don’t know if you complimented me or if you just called me a piece of shit.”

“Both, baby, both.” She smiled at him. “Nothing you have told me or what has happened between the two of you has changed my mind. I don’t want you to leave her, and I know she does not want to leave you. I do, however, wish you would both grow up.”

\* \* \* \*

Michael entered the waiting room and froze. The only person in the room was Lawrence. He wished he had not insisted Lynda go in alone to see Seine. He wondered next what had become of Stephen. He looked away from Lawrence, walked over to the huge urn of coffee, and poured a cup, wishing that it were whiskey.

“Mr. Lays had to make a call,” Lawrence said to him, as if reading his mind. He heard Lawrence stand and move toward him. This was the moment he had been dreading.

“And your wife?” Michael asked solemnly.

“With her daughter.”

“So we’re alone.”

“Yes, does that bother you?” Lawrence asked. Michael ignored him and took a seat. Lawrence walked over to him and tossed onto the table the paper that Lawrence had tucked under his arm. Michael glanced at it. It was a copy of *ON! Now Magazine*. The headline read, “Virgin Bride’s Pregnancy Scare!” and the picture was of Seine and Michael entering the hospital. The caption below read, “More Photos and Details Inside.” He made a mental note to fire the editor. Michael smirked and slid the magazine back to Lawrence.

“Do you two ever keep your clothes on?” his father-in-law asked.

Once more, Michael ignored him, choosing instead to lean back in his seat and stare at Lawrence, dumbfounded.

“The article implies she was naked. They quote an unnamed source that you two go at it like rabbits.”

“We’re married, Lawrence,” Michael said, and then with a slow grin, hoping to inflict a mental image that would disturb Lawrence, he added, “Unlike you, I fuck my wife, not my secretary or the lady up the street. I fuck my wife . . . a lot.”

“You are really a sick bastard you know that. That’s my little girl you’re talking about! You must have her confused with a sleazy whore.”

“I don’t do sleazy whores, but I have photos that say you do. “It’s funny that you say that, considering you encouraged your daughter to be with me. Why, Lawrence? To appease me long enough for you to figure out how to stop me from destroying you and your company? You sit here and talk to me about your daughter as if you love her and are more concerned for her than me. You throw her to the man you consider to be the worst person in the world for her so you can hold onto your good name and your fucking company. But I am the bad guy, and you say I am heartless and soulless. I would never prostitute my daughter as you prostituted yours.”

“But I didn’t publish it.”

“Are you suggesting that I planted this story?” Michael leaned forward and set his cup down.

“It wouldn’t be the first time you planted a story to humiliate my child.”

“Lawrence, she has not been your child in ten years. She stopped being your child when you exiled her to Paris at the age of fifteen.”

“Those are Seine’s words, not yours. Suppose you tell me how a healthy twenty-five-year-old woman ends up here.”

“Are you suggesting that I did something to her? Are you suggesting that I am so evil that I would do harm to my wife which would result in the death of our unborn child?”

“I wouldn’t put anything past you,” Lawrence said.

Michael looked away from him, knowing that the accusation was partly true.

“Let her go, Michael,” Lawrence said softly. Michael looked at him. “Just let her go. End it. The two of you . . . this isn’t right. Nothing good will ever come of the two of you being together, nothing.”

“Send her back to you?” Michael asked quietly. Lawrence’s words had struck an uneven sick chord in Michael.

“Yes, send her home. I’ll make up to her for what I’ve done. I have to make things right with her.”

Michael stood up and walked to the window. He pushed his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He looked out at the empty streets. He knew at that moment what he would do. While Lynda had tried to persuade him, Lawrence words had truly convinced him. He turned and smiled at Lawrence.

“My wife, *my* wife, is going to give me yet another gift: your grandchild. That is the good that will come from our being together. For better or worse, I’ll never walk away from her or my child. Unlike you, I will keep what I love with me, until they want to leave. If Seine wants to go with you, I will not stop her. That will be her choice. Seine leaves me only if she wants to. I’ve learned that much. I know that she will not go with you, because she knows that she belongs with me.” He pushed himself from the window and walked to the door. Then, in typical Michael O’Neal-fashion, he paused and turned to make his final statement.

“We’ll never be friends again, Lawrence. That’s asking too much. But for Seine, and for my child, your grandchild, we need to find a common ground to meet on.”

“Oh, you’re feeling really charitable and generous today, aren’t you, motherfucker?” Lawrence snapped at him.

“Yes, I am, Lawrence, yes, I am.” With that, he walked out.

## Epilogue

“Why do you let her walk all over you?” Stephen asked.

Michael looked at him blankly. Seine had been gone for three peaceful, yet, unsettling days. They sat on Michael’s deck enjoying the evening breeze from the ocean. Michael sipped on this beer.

“You’re the fucking Scarecrow. You got brains, but you just don’t know it!” Stephen said to him.

Michael laughed and continued to stare out at the evening tide.

“Are you listening to me?” Stephen said, leaning forward in his chair.

“I’m trying not to,” Michael said softly.

“Oh fuck, man, you’re not going to cry, are you?” Stephen said joking.

“He better not!”

They turned to find Lynda standing at the sliding patio door. Stephen looked her up and down, and she in turn gave him an eyeful.

“Careful,” Michael said. “You know what they say, birds of a feather flock together. You want to be next?” Michael asked Stephen, who immediately blanched and refocused on the seagulls that flew nearby.

“Shut up, Michael,” Lynda said walking over to them. She reached for Michael’s beer and took a swig.

“Please make yourself at home with my beer.” He said mockingly.

“Now that is the type of remark that I would expect from you. I couldn’t very well sip his beer. He’s holding onto it so carefully you’d think it was a symbol of his heart . . . or something.” She nodded at Stephen. “Are you guys going to ask me to sit down?”

She was very sparkly. “You’re waiting for an invitation? A take-charge girl like you?” Michael asked. He looked at Stephen who was once more eyeing Lynda like a homeless puppy would a potential owner.

“I’m going to enjoy hanging out with you guys. You owe me,” she said to Michael.

“I do?”

“Yes, I brought your wife home. She’s upstairs, nasty pregnancy hormones and all.” Lynda faked a shiver for emphasis. “I brought her back kicking and screaming. Why don’t you bribe her doctors to tell her she can’t travel? I thought the first three months were bad, but this is worse. When she wasn’t throwing up all over everything—you owe me a new sofa by the way—she was crying and complaining nonstop! ‘It’s hot. It’s cold. I’m hungry. I can’t eat. Do you think Michael will be mad if I stay an extra day? I miss Michael. Michael gets on my last nerve.’ I wanted to throw her out the window!”

“Try being in my shoes! And I’m not replacing your sofa.” Michael laughed.

“Fine! I was kidding anyway. I guess having it cleaned will suffice. She told me about your latest disagreement.”

“The I-want-to-have-the-baby-in-Paris argument,” Michael said.

“Paris? That’s ridiculous, you’re Americans.” Stephen said

“When are you going to put your foot down? When are you going to smack her ass and show her who’s the boss? Put your foot down,” Lynda told him.

“That’s what I’ve been telling him to do,” Stephen said

“Yeah right, put my foot down. Seine is the boss. That should be obvious to you and Stephen by now. You know, Lynda, I’m beginning to think secretly you are an advocate for violence.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I speak metaphorically. It’s a nervous thing I do.”



"I know. I've figured that out about you," Michael said.

"I told you last time I saw you to get a grip. You didn't. Now you've made matters worse."

"Why do you care?" he asked, regretting the question immediately. He braced himself for another off-the-wall, try-to-follow-me comment that Lynda was so good at giving.

"Because I can't deal with this shit anymore. It's not good for business, and I think I might get an ulcer. What about you?" She asked Stephen.

"What about me?" he asked hesitantly. He too was aware of Lynda's cryptic method of communication.

"Does he moan and groan to you about her?" Lynda asked. "Actually, I've learned to let most of what she says go in one ear and out the other. You would be very proud of me, Lynda," Michael said.

"Seriously, Stephen, tell me how have you been," Lynda asked, totally ignoring Michael who simply hunched his shoulders in recognition of the two future love birds. "I had expected you to call me by now," Lynda added shyly. She had a coy, innocent expression on her dangerous, albeit beautiful, face. *Yeah, right* Michael thought, remembering how Seine had gone from sweet little school girl to femme fatale in a blink of an eye. Stephen did not stand a chance.

"He has no feelings," Seine said as lightly as she stepped out onto the deck.

"Hello, baby." Michael beamed at her as Seine walked over to him and sat beside him.

"Did you miss me?"

She kissed him gently. He smiled at her and extended his arm to set his drink down. She was glowing, and he loved every inch of her warmth. That he had succeeded in obtaining everything he wanted, despite the stupid mistakes he made attempting to get it, amazed him. All the maneuvering and plans were for nothing. She had always been his. He just had not trusted that fact as he should have. As he gazed into the eyes of the one person he would cherish *freely* and forever, he knew he would never make that mistake again. At last, he understood and firmly believed it was his all along. It was nothing he had to fight for or conquer to possess.

"I guess you didn't miss me," Seine said when he didn't respond.

"For God's sake, Michael, tell her you missed her. Tell her that you were dying in her absence and you even considered suicide. Just don't let her start," Stephen said mockingly.

"Stephen, that comment just flew over my head. Whoosh! Just like a pretty bird flying way high. I am going to ignore it because I am happy. I am home with my man and my friends—correction, friend. I'm not going to ruin this evening by arguing with you." She laughed.

"You mean there is an unselfish bone in your body?" He poked fun at her.

"She has several unselfish bones in her body." Michael said. "And yes, I did miss you, very, very much," he said, pulling her from the chair onto his lap. He kissed her quickly and gently.

"Oh my God! He's kicking." Seine grabbed Michael's hand and placed it on her tiny, round stomach. "Did you feel that?" she said beaming at him.

"Yes," he said barely audible.

"Lynda, feel." Seine said. Lynda walked over to her.

"Oh, wow," Lynda said. "Oh, wow."

"Don't sit there like Scrooge. Come on over here Uncle Stephen. Your nephew is kicking!" Stephen was out of his seat, and Lynda stepped back so he could place his hand on Seine's stomach.

“I don’t feel anything,” Stephen said, somewhat disappointed.

“Maybe you scared him away.” Seine said jokingly, running her arm along his shoulder in a consolatory manner.

“Very funny,” Stephen replied. “Hey, boy! Come on and kick for Uncle Stephen.” They all laughed. Stephen looked up at Lynda and smiled.

He decided he would make a point of calling her.

## *About the Author*

Pat Cromwell's number one addiction is daytime soaps. She draws her inspiration for "over the top and sometimes outrageous" dialogue not only from her favorite daytime soaps—which she records religiously—but also from her family and friends. She's the first to admit that sometimes her characters are "way out there," but millions of fans of the genre can't be wrong! She's proudest of her two children Adrians and Andrue, spoils her dog Tiki rotten, enjoys her job as an MIS Supervisor in Indianapolis, Indiana, and spends her spare time penning stories. She loves to hear from her readers, so feel free to contact her at [pacd97867@cs.com](mailto:pacd97867@cs.com).