



Red Room Publishing

When Dreams Come True

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Chapter 1

“Maybe I’m dreaming,” she murmured as she checked out the man walking towards her. He was tall, about six feet in height, and his olive colored skin looked very soft to the touch. She straightened her posture and held her head high as the distance between them grew smaller. It was a windy day in New Orleans and his jet-black wavy hair danced wildly about his face. The closer he got to her, the more nervous she became.

His eyes were deep blue, almost black, and his face was covered with morning stubble. She was weak-kneed for guys with a goatee and sure enough he had one. He wore a black turtleneck, stonewash jeans, and black Stacy Adams shoes. She thought that was kind of weird—a white man in Stacy Adams wing tips. Stranger still was her body’s reaction to him. She flushed as she watched him make his way towards her. His walk was seductive and slow. Other than movie stars, she had never particularly found white men attractive, but this guy was a four-star viewer delight.

As he passed her, he reached out and touched her shoulder. He leaned in and whispered, “Hello.”

She froze instantly, and then after a moment's hesitation, turned and followed his movement as he went past her. Her body trembled from the aftershock of the electrical current that shot through her from his touch.

He slid his hand back into his pocket still looking at her as he continued his slow pace down the busy street. She smiled and nodded feebly and he did the same. Then he turned his head and continued up the path to the Atkins English Building.

"Shit," she whispered and then quickened her pace to the main library.

* * * * *

"I mean he was fine! Capital F-I-N-E, good looking, gorgeous, please take me home and fuck my brains out right now fine!" she said.

"Come on, you said he was white," her friend Nicky said.

Chris immediately picked up the annoyance and disapproval in her roommate's voice.

"Girl, you need to get your brain out of Midwest Indiana and appreciate that it's the new millennium. We are young, gifted, black and we can have or do whoever we want. It's written in black and white on page

eighty-seven of my all-time favorite issue of Cosmopolitan Magazine. I'll let you borrow my copy so you can expand your vision."

"But still, with all the fine brothers on this campus, you're sitting here lusting over some nasty ass redneck. This is Franklin College, number one black college smack dab in the middle of New Orleans. The brothers here are worth the cost of tuition alone. They're real black men, girl. You had better take advantage of the situation now."

"Nicky, what makes the brothers here different from the ones somewhere else? Are you saying they're better than the guy working at the liquor store or driving public transportation buses? I know you aren't making a distinction between an educated brother and a hard-at-work brother. I mean, that wouldn't be cool now would it, Ms. Malcolm X Mandela King?"

"I'm saying, when you leave here with your degree you're looking at getting paid. The brothers here are looking at getting paid. His payday and your payday add up to making a big difference for all our people."

"Oh God, here we go again."

"It's true and you know it. We have to make a difference. We have to stick together. Stay together. It's a negative trend in our community, sisters going with white men. It's bad enough the brothers started deserting their

people in the seventies. And now it seems the new millennium is all about the black woman going backwards.”

“Backwards?”

“Yes. You know, back to the master's bed.”

“All right, there's no talking to you about this.” Chris closed her book and folded her hands. “You've never been curious?”

“No.” Nicky's response was quick and adamant, but still Chris persisted, hoping to rattle her chain.

“You don't find Johnny Depp incredibly sexy?”

“Not even a little.” Nicky avoided eye contact with Chris and continued flipping the pages of the book she was reading, pretending to be engrossed with the words on the page.

“What about...”

“I am loyal. I am strictly a Denzel Washington kind of black woman. I'm not rehashing the whole slave thing. I don't need a master.”

“Are you serious?” Chris asked, hoping once more that Nicky was not that racist, but knowing full well that she was. This was an argument that they had had before. Chris contributed Nicky's position of race relations to her Midwestern conservative, separate but equal upbringing. Chris, while not ignorant to the difference between blacks and whites and the silent

racist attitude in America, had never experienced first-hand the things that Nicky had. Chris had never been called a “Negga” as a belligerent reference, and she certainly had never experienced real racism. She grew up in the racially mixed community of Schaumburg, a suburb of Chicago where people were just people.

“Very.” Nicky closed her book and added, “We'd better go. We'll be late to Black History. Dr. Baron's permanent replacement is taking over the class today. I wonder who this Professor Ingram is. Do you know if Ingram is male or female?”

Both girls started gathering together their books.

“Male. Whoever this Ingram person is, I heard that Dr. Baron has known him for years and that Ingram taught Black History at NYU. I still can't believe Dr. Baron's had a heart attack. He's only thirty-five years old. That's really scary.”

“Of course you do know that heart attacks are the number one killer of African American males,” Nicky said in her *I know everything there is to know about the Negro race* voice.

“You mean besides murder,” Chris responded sarcastically. “You know, Nicky, if you are going to quote statistics, you should get them right. Also, you should curb your overzealous enthusiasm at proclaiming to the

world how black you are. You can be black and proud and not wear it like a banner twenty-four hours a day.”

“Excuse me?” Nicky said with self-righteous indignation.

“You heard me. Do you even know how to converse without bringing politics into the conversation? You make people uncomfortable.”

“I am concerned about my race.”

“*You're majoring in fine arts!* How is that degree going to help your brothers and sisters? Are you going to rent a van to pick up little ghetto kids, take them to the museum so they can get a little culture? They don't need to know about the fucking Mona Lisa. They need stability and love and guidance. They need healthcare and better living conditions. They need to know that someone cares. They don't need rhetoric. Why not become a doctor or a lawyer or a fucking social worker? Study political science and run for mayor. How are you going to change anything by perpetuating the ideal that all white people are evil and cruel and devils?”

“You let a white man just reach out and disrespect you this morning and you're lecturing me on what the black race needs?”

“How did he disrespect me?” Chris asked, exasperated.

“He touched you. Somewhere in his mind he thought it was okay to just touch you. A black woman! Somewhere in his mind he thought that as a

white man he could just invade the space of a black woman and your reaction to that touch validated his unconscious superior attitude. And somewhere in your mind you thought it was okay, because unconsciously you obviously think him to be superior to you.”

“You know,” Chris said, shaking her head, “racism had nothing to do with it. In fact, racism was the last thing on his mind and my mind.”

“Right. Let's perpetrate that myth that all a black woman wants is to get fucked.”

“You're right. This black woman does want to get fucked. It's been a long time. There. Call me a whore if you like because if I ever got the chance, I'd fuck him. He looked just that fucking good!” She gathered her books and left.

* * * * *

“You didn't tell me about the fringe benefits of this job, Leo,” Kenneth spoke into his cell phone.

“What do you mean?” Leo Baron asked.

“The women are gorgeous.” Kenneth adjusted his cell phone against his ear as he leaned back in his chair. He swiveled around and gazed up at the ceiling of the small office that he now occupied as a temporary professor

in the Department of African-American Studies. He reflected on the events of that morning and pictured in his mind's eye the image of the woman that he knew had changed his life. There was only one problem—to find her...and keep her.

“Yeah, you would view the campus scenery as a smorgasbord.” Leo laughed. He was all too aware of Kenneth’s taste in women—smooth caramel color skin, short hair that did not distract from an oval-shaped face, big brown eyes, full rosy lips, a perfect little body with breasts that fit perfectly in the palm of his hands, and an ass that begged to be set free from the confines of tight clothing.

Leo had known Kenneth for years. Kenneth's mother abandoned her well-to-do living conditions in the suburbs—which included Kenneth’s father—and moved into the “poor black part” of town with her jazz singer boyfriend, Elias. Eventually Elias and Kenneth’s mom married and after a while Elias was able to open a jazz club in the district. But in the beginning, when Kenneth was seven years old, it was very hard for them.

The best they could afford was a run-down two bedroom apartment in the infamous DeQuincy Gardens Development of New Orleans. It was a rough place reminiscent and on the scale of Chicago’s Cabrini Green or Indianapolis’s Brick City or the Phoenix. He was the only white boy in the

projects and he would get his ass kicked on a daily basis. That is, until Leo took pity on him, stepped up to the plate, and decided to protect Kenneth.

“I saw this girl this morning.” Kenneth’s voice was wishful, practically a whisper, with an edge of anticipation.

“Did you just refer to her as a girl—you know, jail-*bait*?”

“Sorry. She was definitely a woman, a beautiful, gorgeous, long-legged beauty. This lady was perfection. I’m in love.”

“You’re in lust, man.”

“I’m in love. I’m going to marry her.”

“You don’t know her.”

“I’ll find her, make her scream, and then I’m going to marry her.”

Kenneth laughed, adding, “She’s so hot that even if she doesn’t make me scream, I’m still going to marry her.”

“You are still my crazy little white boy. Man, there are over ten thousand students on that campus. You’ll probably never see her again.”

“I believe in God. I’ll see her again,” Kenneth said adamantly.

“She probably didn’t even notice you.”

“Listen to this, Leo, I was walking towards her and I was checking her out. She was eyeballing me, from head to toe. I got hard as hell, man. When I went past her I leaned in, touched her shoulder, said hello.”

“No, you didn’t! Don’t tell me you sniffed her.”

“Hell yeah I did. Man, I can still smell her. She reminded me of a field of wildflowers. My lungs exploded.”

“What have I told you about using my shit? That’s my shit, copping a quick feel and whispering hello. Girls go for that shit if you do it right. But I’ve told you time and again that the move is a black man Casanova Thang. A white man can’t do that shit to a sister.”

“This one did. I’m telling you, she stopped dead in her tracks. I mean she stood perfectly still.”

“She was probably pissed and considering kicking your scrawny little ass.”

“No baby. She turned and looked at me and her lips slowly parted.”

“Shit man.”

“Now all I have to do is find her and tell her that she’s going to be my baby’s momma,” Kenneth joked. He added a smack to emphasize his statement.

“She would slap your ass silly. The sisters at the university are serious students. Trust me—they are not interested in being anybody’s baby’s momma. These ladies are going for the big score, man.”

“You’re speaking of the Big MPP—Money, Power, and Position.”

“Damn right. And they’re working hard for it too. So if you do see her again, put your white ghetto boy mentality in check. Try to remember you’re a professional and do yourself a favor and play the role. I seriously worry about you, boy. You’re too ghetto sometimes.”

“I know how to act, Leo. I didn’t know I’m supposed to play the role of a Brooks Brother suit with you.”

“Hell no, man...we’re cool. But my reputation is on the line here. Six weeks. You’re in my classroom for six weeks because I put you there. Don’t screw it up by chasing after skirts. Anyway, this chick probably isn’t a sister from the hood. Speaking of which, how’s Regina?”

“I don’t walk to talk about Regina.”

“I told you not to marry that girl.”

“I didn’t have a choice.” Kenneth knew Leo was about to go into his best friend and big brother speech.

“You know I love Regina like a sister and you also know that I gave her the same speech, that a marriage that is the result of a pregnancy does not make a good marriage. I said it then and I’m saying it now—people have babies everyday without going through that shit. And you’re still paying.”

“Regina was my girl. I had to marry her. I couldn’t let anyone else have her. She belonged to me, and I belonged to her back then. And she knew it.”

“You’re sick with that possessive *you belong to me* bullshit. Man, you want to marry every woman that you sleep with. So shut the fuck up.”

“Watch your mouth, man, or I’ll tell your momma on you. Regina was my girl, my first real—”

“Piece,” Leo interjected quickly, which immediately riled Kenneth up.

“No, she was my first real love. She is just being a bitch right now. She refuses to let me near my little girl without jumping through her hoops. I wish it was about money. It would be easier.”

“Regina is a lot of things but a money grubber she is not,” Leo said.

“I said *I wish* it was about money. We’re having issues about other things.”

“Let me guess. Ashley?”

“We’re immersed in a public school versus private school battle and right now we’re at a standstill and she’s sticking to her guns.”

“Want me to talk to her?”

“It wouldn’t do any good. You know how Gina can be. She’s one stubborn ass black woman when she puts her mind to it. But, she’s still my girl.” The underlying love and affection in his voice did not go unnoticed by his friend.

“Your sentiment for her is the problem. You never could put your foot down with her. Even now, six months following your divorce, you’re still letting that girl control you. I’ll tell you what I think, Kenny—she wants you back.”

“Wrong, she's got a man. You know that. He's cool. She's happy with him and Ashley adores him. So why can't she leave me alone?”

“Don’t you mean, why can’t she let you have your way? I’ll tell you why, Kenny. Because from day one you were her little white boy, you did whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. You spoiled her. And then you did the unthinkable. The worst thing a man can do—you walked away. You left her.”

“She left me, Leo. Get it right.”

“Semantics—you went to New York without her.”

“It was a job. I repeat—she left me.”

“But you left first. Let me finish before you interrupt me again.”

“Yes, father.”

“I’m not your daddy, but I’m sure Elias told you the same thing. It wasn't her idea. If it's not a woman's idea, they will fuck with you and fuck with you. I don't give a damn if it's a black woman, white woman, Puerto Rican, or Jew. They all have that shit in common.”

“Watch your mouth. I’m serious. I hate that word used flippantly like that. It’s disgusting.”

“Fuck you, Kenneth.”

“Fine, you can burn in hell. Seriously, I worry about Ashley and the tension that Regina and I have between us. I get along okay with her man and I wish him luck. Gina just comes out of a bag whenever she thinks that I’m not being responsible enough. I can’t really be mad at her too much for that. If the roles were reversed I’d be in her face too. We both love Ash but it’s got to end. It’s affecting my little girl. Ashley is confused and she’s at a very special and tender age right now. Regina and I talked about it a couple weeks ago. We’ll get back on track.”

“I know, man. Regina will simmer down eventually. Something else probably has her running scared. She still cares about you and she never let you get away with stupid shit. You’re a good father, and Regina knows that. She knows how much you love Ash. Have you talked to Moms about it? She’s always been good at reasoning with Regina.”

“Fat chance and no dice—you know my mother is sitting around sympathizing with Regina on this one. They’re joined at the hip. Talk about misplaced loyalty. Neither one of them will ever forgive me for taking that job at NYU.” He looked at the picture of his daughter resting on the desk.

“Kenneth,” Leo said.

“I’m still here. I was just thinking about Ash.”

“Shouldn’t you be in class now, Kenny?” Leo asked.

“Oh craps!” Kenneth said, glancing at his watch. “I’m late.”

“As usual.”

“No kidding. You take care, Leo, and no more scares. You took a couple years off my life when your ticker broke. Your life flashed before my eyes. It was frightening.”

“Fuck you, Kenny.”

“I don’t think so. Take care of yourself, Leo.”

“You too, and take care of my class.”

“I’ll talk to you later, man,” Kenneth said

“Later. Oh and Kenny?”

“Yeah?”

“Good luck finding your new baby’s mamma.” Leo laughed.

“I have God on my side, I don’t need luck. I have a feeling she’s right around the corner.”

* * * * *

She was late when she entered the lecture hall and took her customary seat in the back of the classroom. Chris was still fuming from the argument she had with Nicky earlier. Nicky soon entered and took her seat next to Chris.

“So where's the new professor?” Nicky whispered to Chris. Chris looked at her and then slowly smiled. Nicky was playing her *I'm not going to apologize and everything is cool* role.

“Who knows?” Chris said lightly. They both looked up when the door at the front of the classroom opened.

“Oh shit!” Chris gasped.

“What is it?” Nicky asked.

Chris looked at Nicky and then back at the professor. She decided against telling Nicky that their new professor was the very same man that she had ran into earlier. Chris surveyed the rest of the room.

“Chris, what is it?” Nicky asked again.

“I forgot something in my room—a book that I promised to give someone.” She looked back at the new professor. He had his back to the class while he wrote his name on the board. Even with his back to her, this man looked good. The jeans he wore hung below his waist and highlighted his ass to perfection.

His hair fell just above his shoulders and she could tell that his body was muscular and firm, but naturally so. When he turned to face the class, her throat knotted—he was so incredibly handsome! He was the perfect height, perfect build. He wore his casual attire flawlessly. He had the perfect body. What the hell was he doing teaching, she wondered? He should be on the cover of GQ magazine so that other women could experience the same spike of excitement within them that she was experiencing now.

“My name is Professor Ingram. I'm going to finish the semester up with you. I'm a very good and personal friend of Leo's...I'm sorry, Dr. Baron's. He personally requested that I take over his class and the university saw fit to go with his recommendation.” He paused and surveyed the classroom. When he spotted her in the back row, he slowly smiled. He took a couple steps backward and rested on the edge of the desk, his legs crossed at the ankles, and then reached into his briefcase and pulled out a pair of glasses. He tilted his head and looked at the notes he had prepared for the class. Smiling, he tossed aside the paper and began his speech.

“As I said, Dr. Baron and I are very good friends and with his recommendation I'm now your new professor. I tell you this because if you have not noticed I am a white man, teaching a predominantly black class,

the subject being Black History.” There were some chuckles at his statement.

“I previously worked at NYU, in the black history department. I resigned my position there and concentrated on writing. I'm a published author of several children's books. I wrote the series of books as a tribute to the beauty and uniqueness of mixed-race children. I dedicated my books to my daughter, Ashley.”

He paused and caught her eyes, then said, “If you have not surmised by now, my daughter is bi-racial. I am not telling you this as a way to endear myself to you, but because we will be discussing the history and impact of mixed relations, specifically in New Orleans. We will follow the direction that Dr. Baron had begun and delve into the richness of the Creole, Mulatto, and Quadroons and how they helped shape the rich history that is New Orleans. The two pieces of literature that we will look at are *The Quadroon* and *Slavery's Pleasant Homes*. Both stories were written by Lydia Maria Child.”

He paused once more. Crossing his arms he began to pace about the front of the classroom. His voice was full of enthusiasm and revealed his love for what he was doing and the subject that he taught.

“We will also take a trip towards the end of the semester to a community whose history will amaze you. It's a little town approximately

one hundred fifty miles from here called Lizabeth City. Some historians have called Lizabeth City the Garden of Eden in America.” He stood now at the podium that was in the center of the front of the classroom.

“Before I go any further I want to say that some of you may find my method of teaching somewhat unorthodox; my style is completely different from Dr. Baron's.”

Again he looked directly at her.

“I only ask that you give me an opportunity to prove my abilities and the depth of my feelings...in regards to the subject matter that we will explore. With that said, I'll call roll and then we will delve into our discussion. I promise to try my best to become familiar with all of you so that eventually we will be able to eliminate the...formalities and get right down to business,” he concluded with a devilish smile.

His eyes, a shimmering dark blue, bore into her with such intensity that he was sure that the shudder she gave was indeed affirmation from God that she was the woman that he would make his own. With that thought foremost in his mind, Kenneth vowed that by week's end he would have her ensconced completely in his life and that he would make all her dreams come true.

* * * * *

His voice ripped through her. Her breathing was labored and her heart raced. She knew she was sweating and as she ran her hand along her forehead she unconsciously moaned from the uncontrollable burning sensation that started in her throat and spread throughout her entire body. She knew she was turning forty shades of red. Squirming in her chair, she felt very self-conscious.

His speech had been full of hidden innuendo and he looked directly at her while he spoke. Chris wondered if anyone else knew that much of what he had said in his opening statement was aimed towards her. She wondered what she should do. She looked over at Nicky; she was busy taking notes and seemed oblivious to him and the double meaning of his words. Whenever he would speak about something that could be construed as intimate or sexual, he looked at her.

He held a notebook in one hand and as he lectured he wrote various words on the blackboard. She grabbed her pen and flipped open her notebook. She couldn't concentrate. She closed her eyes, and immediately an image of him grabbing and kissing her filled her mind. She tried to shake

it away. But she couldn't. Without thinking she said in frustration, quite loudly, "Shit!"

She heard the word leave her mouth, and like her classmates, she was stunned by the utterance. Now everyone really was staring at her, or so she thought. She sank down into her chair. She was mortified. She wanted to die of embarrassment. Chris glanced at Nicky who was giving her a questioning evil glare.

"What's wrong with you?" Nicky chastised. Chris shrugged her shoulders and smiled apologetically.

"I beg your pardon?" Kenneth said. He had a smirk on his face. He reached for the attendance chart, and added, "Is there a problem...Miss Larson?" He looked at her.

"Professor Ingram, I am so sorry. I...I apologize," she stammered.

He gave her an amused look that seemed to say *I know what your problem is*.

"Was it something I said or didn't say?" he asked her coyly. She returned his smirk as he continued, "Was I going too fast or perhaps too slow? You will find that I'm very adaptable." He spoke carefully, enunciating each word.

Her eyes widened. *He's doing it again!* Her cheeks reddened at the double meaning of his words and the intimate way that he said them, not to mention the piercing, unnerving, know-it-all look that he was giving her. She looked around to see if anyone besides her understood his double-speak—not that it mattered since half the class was way too busy snickering at her and the other half wore expressions of boredom and the infamous *Can we get on with it* look.

“You're fine, sir. I mean...your delivery of the issues is fine. I have no problem with your presentation, none at all. And, I assure you, if something is said that I don't care for...or understand, I promise to let you know.” She paused and then added, “Sir.”

Two can play at this game, she thought as she watched him decipher the load of crap that she'd thrown at him. Slowly he smiled.

“How refreshing it is to be in the presence of a young person who respects and admires her elders to the extent that they incorporate the term *Sir* in their vocabulary.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You didn't allow me to finish, Miss Larson. It is not necessary to address me as sir...in the classroom Professor Ingram will suffice.” He turned

abruptly to the blackboard, scribbled a couple lines, and then continued his lecture.

Chapter 2

At the end of class he gave out assignments and watched the group file out. She remained in her seat and pretended to organize her papers.

“Are you coming?” Nicky asked.

“I’ll catch up with you later. I want to talk to him and hopefully smooth over my ridiculous outburst.” She added quickly, “And of course I want to discuss my grades.”

“Why did you yell out like that? What was that about? Wait a minute, let me guess. You were thinking about the white guy from this morning.” Nicky’s voice was cold.

Chris leaned her upper body away from her, afraid the chill Nicky emitted would freeze her. *Oh yeah*, Chris thought, *this chick definitely needs a life*. If Nicky knew the real deal she’d really freak out.

“Yeah, you could say that,” Chris opted to say in lieu of what she really wanted to tell her roommate. She was smiling inside at the irony of the situation.

“I’m out of here,” Nicky said. She had a look of total disapproval on her face.

“Bye.” Chris waved Nicky off and watched as she left the room. Then Chris stood slowly and made her way to the front of the class. He sat leaning back in his chair. He watched her as she made her way to him, a cagey, all-knowing grin etched across his face.

“Chris Larson,” he said, smiling. “I like the way that sounds. Chris Larson. I like the way your name sort of rolls off my tongue, sexy like the way sir sounds coming from your lips. I like that too—it was sweet, sexy, and ...”

“I beg your pardon?” She came to an abrupt stop at his desk and put a hand on it for support.

“Already?” An astonished look crossed his perfect face.

“What?” she asked, truly lost as to what he was saying.

“Begging already?”

“Oh for God’s sake.”

“Yes it is.” His eyes never wavered from hers and his expression remained crafty.

“What are you talking about? So far, this conversation is as exciting and enlightening as my last sit-down with my three-year-old nephew. Do you think we can carry on a conversation with more than one word and is it possible you can refrain from misinterpreting everything I say?”

“That would be you,” he replied.

“You’re going to be difficult aren’t you?”

“Yes, but you will be amazed and...satisfied.”

“Okay, this isn’t working. Let’s start over and I’ll go first.”

“Absolutely, you go first. I’m a firm believer in women first.”

She couldn’t help but smile at that one. It was not very original, but it was a nice tidbit to store in her memory bank. She bit her lower lip and decided to wave the proverbial white flag of surrender.

“Professor Ingram, I’d like to apologize for my outburst.”

“That’s not necessary. You never have to apologize to me for any outburst you make,” he said slyly.

She squinted and then frowned. “Excuse me?” She hoped her voice carried enough indignation to make his toes would curl.

“Any statements you make in class. I welcome any and all discussion.”

“Still, I think it only appropriate that I apologize. My mind was somewhere else.”

“Was it on this morning?” He held a pen in his hand and slowly ran it slowly back and forth across his lower lip.

“Of course not; I thought you were rude this morning. I didn’t give it a second thought,” she lied.

“Little liar. Sure you did.” He tilted his head to the side to get a closer look at her form in the jeans she wore. “I like your pants.”

“I think I'd better go.”

“Do I make you nervous?”

“Yes you do. I'm sure there is a law or rule or something against what you're doing.”

“What am I doing?”

“You are harassing me,” she responded point-blank. Those drama classes she took as a freshman were finally paying off.

“No. I complimented your jeans.” He nodded his head towards her derriere.

“You were leering at me and you touched me in an inappropriate manner this morning.” *Oscar performance*, she thought.

“All I did was say hello,” he said innocently.

“It's the way you said hello.”

“I don't understand. Hello is...Hello.”

“You touched me.” To bring the point all the way home, she straightened her back and pointed her chin out—military training via ROTC in high school.

“I brushed against you.”

“No sir. You touched me. And you know you touched me.”

“Okay, Chris. I touched you. If you say so, I touched you.”

“You did.”

“Okay, let’s not belittle the point. Did you like it?” There was definitely a dare in his question despite the innocent manner in which he spoke.

“That's what I mean. You talk in circles and you're saying completely innocent things, but they really aren't innocent. It bothers me.”

“That's just the way I am, Chris. What do you suggest we do?”

“We don’t do anything. You, on the other hand, may consider not doing it.”

“You don’t want me to do it?”

“Again with the innuendo, just stop!” Her words rushed out breathlessly.

“Stop what? Stop talking to you and looking at you, stop thinking what I'm thinking? Stop what? Stop sitting here?” he asked, still smiling that wonderful smile that lit up his face. *God, he is so gorgeous*, she thought, but nevertheless, she maintained her performance.

“Yes.”

“Okay.” He stood up and moved closer to her, easing down on the edge of the desk. He sat extremely close and his thigh brushed against her hand. She made a motion to jerk it away, but he was quicker and held it firmly in his grasp.

His fingers slowly interlaced with hers—his eyes seemed to be fixated on the contrast of their skin tone, his pale skin keenly pronounced against her darker, caramel-honey hue. His eyelids dropped and the orbs of those stunning blue eyes turned gray. Right before her eyes, she watched as his eyes spoke volumes about his feelings

She stared at him, frozen, unable to move. She knew that she should take her hand away from him, but she couldn't. His touch felt so good and relaxing, hot and...promising. His touch was shy and gentle with an edge of sharpness and...pain. It was as if he was testing her responses to determine just how aggressive he could be. His simple touches excited her. She wondered what it would be like if they both lost all control. She exhaled sharply at the thought.

The sexual awareness that Chris felt was instantaneous. Chris wanted him to touch her, to hold her, to own her. Nicky's words ricocheted in her mind...*back to the master's bed*. She couldn't help but blush at the thought and the image. Of course, the master's bed that Chris envisioned

was hardly what Nicky meant. Damn, that girl needed a life outside of her militant hemisphere. It was the new millennium and women no longer had to hide their sexuality, but embrace it. Well, according to Cosmopolitan Magazine and her own life choice.

In that moment, she wanted this man to know every inch of her. The spark that he had ignited that morning was now a five-alarm fire that burned of its own accord between her legs. She wanted him to touch her, and she wanted to play slave to his master. She cast off the doubt and uncertainty that squirmed around in her mind of going *there* again and concentrated on the here and now, particularly the delicious feelings he sent through her.

She studied the expression on his face and could feel the heat that his body generated. He was so into her. *So, this is a good thing*, she thought. She was pretty sure she wasn't alone with the feeling, but it was always good to have proof. And the lust in his eyes as he fondled her fingers was as good as a contract signed in blood.

She looked down at their hands and moaned without thought as his fingers played perfectly with hers. It was so erotic. More important, it was safe. Physical coupling she could handle. It was mental bonding that scared

the shit out of here. It was all the mental crap that had reduced her to a gibbering idiot in the past.

This was—would be—just a physical excursion. It would be a diversion to pass time until school let out and she could return home—none of that boyfriend-girlfriend bullshit that had gotten her into trouble in the past. Just a physical thing and, judging by his touch, a delicious adventure at best.

“Do you want me to stop thinking that—well, frankly that you are without question the most beautiful, precious, and lovely woman I have ever seen?” he asked in a whisper, breaking her train of thought.

“What?” she asked in a husky voice, followed quickly by a frown at the absurdity of her question.

“I want to see all of you,” he stated without any preamble.

God, she thought, *how absolutely delicious, forthright, and honest*. His words rushed out like a child’s would at the thought of getting a toy that he yearned for.

“Professor Ingram—”

“Kenneth. Say Kenneth.”

“I—”

“Say it.” It was a quietly spoken command.

She hesitated. Alarms went off in her brain and then in her mind's eye the image of Rondall, the boyfriend from hell, flashed. Her last boyfriend had been seriously possessive, issuing orders and demands. If the psychopath's orders were not complied with, he demonstrated an overzealous punishment.

Thus she had adopted a new outlook on life that she would never be a victim like that again. She had propensity for respecting various aspects of her personality, so she called upon her good friend Self-Preservation who immediately took control of the situation.

Chris—with self-preservation foremost in mind—attempted to free her hand from his intoxicating ministrations, but Kenneth held firmly. He squeezed her fingers, and then slowly released them, caressing her hand as he did so. He took a couple steps back from her; his smile and the hold he had on her with his gaze never wavered.

“But if you’d rather not, then it’s okay. I’d never force you to do anything that you don’t want to. I can’t stand it when people try to force me into anything. I’m a firm believer in do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes. Yes I do.” Her response was slow and deliberate. Chris heard the hesitancy in her voice and knew he had too. He cupped her chin and forced her to look at him.

“I’m not here to hurt you.” His words resulted in a chill that started at the base of her neck and rapidly spread down her spine. Self-preservation fell away and in its place stood hope. Hope, full of fairy tales and a Polly Anna outlook, wanted her to believe. Plus, she was a very astral person. Every morning she diligently read her horoscope before leaving home. Her gut instinct told her he was one of the good guys.

His aura is good.

She so wanted to get rid of the past, she so wanted to trust the vibe she was getting from him. She so wanted at that moment to believe him. It was ludicrous, but true. Chris had made the mistake of not trusting her sixth sense once and it had cost her. She would never make that mistake again.

Kenneth Ingram, she decided at that moment, *is one of the good guys*. She took a hesitant step towards him, and he took two towards her. He reached out and took her hand again, beginning his ministrations all over. His hands moved slowly up her arm and the sensation was maddening. She moistened her lips and inched nearer to him, glancing at the closed classroom door. She wanted to touch him, but thought better of it.

“Kenneth.”

“Yes?”

“You have to stop,” she whispered.

“You don't like that?” He jerked his hand away.

“I don't think it's appropriate...*here*.” She placed a strong emphasis on the word *here*. Chris nodded towards the lecture hall's double doors.

He looked in the direction she indicated. “It's okay. There are no classes scheduled in here until tomorrow morning.”

He tilted her head and ran his thumb along her lower lip. She inhaled quickly and closed her eyes. She moaned and covered his hand with hers, and moved his fingers over her cheek to the side of her neck. His eyes brightened as the tips of his fingers did crazy things to that very sensitive area of her neck. It was her erogenous zone and he was stroking it into a frenzy while his other hand continued to caress her upper arm.

“You like that?” he asked.

She parted her lips to speak but no words came out.

“Do you like it?”

She bit her lower lip. “Yes. Yes I like it,” she moaned. She could feel his breath so close to her face. She opened her eyes and looked at him. His eyes were closed as he moved nearer. Thinking he was about to kiss her, she

tilted her head to meet his lips. He veered slightly to the side and pressed his face against her hair, inhaling.

“You’re smelling me?” Chris backed away from him.

“Your hair smells wonderful,” He ran his fingers through her short locks. “It smelled good this morning. You smelled so good this morning that you hurt my lungs. You still smell so good, so natural, and so real. You smell like heaven would smell.” He groaned.

“What?” she said incredulously. *This is a new tactic*, she thought.

“Do you believe in heaven? You smell like heaven. You smell...safe.”

“You have the best lines!” she said, laughing. “You’re very smooth for an older guy.”

“Old!” He moved away and relaxed against the edge of his desk. “I’m only thirty-one. And you look about twenty-one or twenty-two. At any rate, you are over eighteen, right?”

“Yes I am.”

“Thank God. I know there are a lot of little child prodigies running around this campus. Leo told me all about the little fourteen-and-fifteen-year-old brainpans. Thank God you’re not one of them. Or I’d have to wait another four or five years before I could have you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“To be with you the way we want to be. That is what you want right?”

She stepped back again. “You think I'm easy? Of course you do. What else would you think? I'm standing here practically begging you to touch me. What else would you think? But I'll have you know that times have changed. Women no longer—” She stopped speaking when his hand shot out in the universal symbol to cease and desist.

“That is not what I meant,” he said.

“Sure it wasn't. Shit. Why is it if a woman responds to a man's sexual advances readily that she's branded a whore? I don't think you're a whore and you're behaving like a rabid dog in heat. I respond because I find you...interesting, and you label me a fucking whore. This is so typical of the male mentality of the new millennium.”

“Calm down, Xena Warrior Princess, and watch your mouth. For the record that is not at all what I meant. And I will not tolerate you saying hateful things like that about yourself. So don't. Unless we're in the throes of a passionate embrace, then,” he pulled her to him, his hands fastened at her waist, and whispered into her ear, “Yes, by all means tell me you belong to me. Tell me you are my little whore and I can do with you whatever I want because you belong to me. I like dirty talk and I think you do too. I am

so glad you're not one of those prudish little girls who wears a mask and pretends she doesn't have a passionate bone in her body. I knew you were passionate by your response to my touch this morning. I am very glad that you are passionate, as long as the passion is for me."

Chris knew she should be offended and disturbed and angry by his words but she didn't feel any of those emotions. It excited her. She wanted to be those things and more.

"I am passionate for you." Chris brushed her face against his cheek.

"Then marry me." He brought his lips to hers.

She pulled away quickly. "What the fuck did you say?"

"Seriously, you need to watch your mouth. I told you that before. That's a filthy, filthy word. Your language is...how can you just use that word like that? It's incredible that you allow such filth to come from those lips. I mean, you just say it. What's wrong with you?" He had a genuine look of confusion on his face, which quickly transgressed to a scowl. Chris realized that he was serious, dead serious, livid, and very...oh for goodness sake—angry. The guy was actually angry.

"You're fucking serious aren't you?" she said, intentionally swearing.

"Yes!"

“Fuck you. I'm leaving,” She turned her back to him and had taken several steps towards the door before he reached out and snaked his fingers around her arm.

“All right, all right, I'm sorry. You can talk anyway you want. I will try very, very hard to get used to your language. I'm not a moron. I knew deep down inside that there would be some things that I would have to get used to—that there would be some things that I'd just have to tolerate. But I will insist that you watch your filthy, beautifully formed mouth around my daughter. She is very precious to me, as are you. Just in a different way. There, our first disagreement solved.”

“Let go of me. I don't need anyone to tolerate me, especially you.” Hope took a quick backseat to anger and quickly evaporated.

“I said I was sorry, don't go. I should not have said tolerate. How about overlook or accept?” His eyes brimmed with a childlike gleam and a healthy dose of humor and sincerity.

She smiled slowly at his performance and thought how different he was from any man she'd ever known—not that there had been very many.

She relaxed, giving in to her need to have her curiosity satisfied. For a million dollars she would not have found the strength or willpower to walk away from him. Everything about him pulled at a heartstring she thought

she'd buried with her nutty ex-boyfriend. Fleetingly she felt hope return and slowly the outside layer of the stone she had erected around her heart began to crumble. But only the outside layer; the voice of Self-Preservation reared its ugly head again and the unmistakable image of Rondall, the president of The Psycho Boyfriend Club, flashed through her mind

“Don't ever say anything like that to me again.” She spoke with no hesitation but with enough conviction that she hoped there would be no room for him to doubt that she was serious.

“So you forgive me?”

She stared at him with disbelief. “You are so out there.” She laughed at him, secretly unwilling to share too much of her feelings. The physical element she could deal with, but the emotional upheaval that he was causing her at that moment was something that she'd have to sort through without his interference or input. She'd known him less than a day, but her instinct told her that he would probably be more than she could afford mentally.

“That's a good thing right? You can live with that right?” He grinned.

“Kenneth.”

“You feel like you have known me forever don't you?” he teased.

“Yes I do,” she answered truthfully.

“That's because you have. You just didn't see my face when you dreamed at night of the man that would capture your soul.” He held her hand and smiled his ridiculously cheerful smile.

“Kenneth, let's get out of here. Someone might see us.” She leaned her body into his and closed her eyes.

“You want me to make love to you don't you?” Again his hand began a slow, tortuous exploration of her body, concentrating this time on her lower and upper back, finally moving again to her neck. He whispered into her ear, “I want to make love to you too. I want to feel you naked in my arms. I want to taste every part of you. I want to...I *need* to ravish you and never let you go. I want to sleep inside you and cup your breasts tightly so you won't ever get away.”

“Let's go,” she moaned.

“Tell me what I want to hear and then we'll go.” He ran his hand along her thigh.

“You make me crazy,”

“Yes. I like hearing that, but there is something else I need to hear.”

“God, Kenneth! I want you, all right? Now, let's get out of here please.” She kissed his neck. Who would have guessed she had latent voyeuristic desires? She certainly wouldn't have, but the knowledge that at

any moment someone might walk in and see the two of them only added to the sexual whirl she was caught up in. She placed her hands on the side of his jeans and slid them inside. She cupped his buttocks and pressed her pelvis against his hard shaft. Her mouth covered his.

He cupped her breasts and his fingers squeezed her rock hard nipples. Then without warning he pushed her away.

“What? What is it? What happened?” she stammered.

“Tell me what I want to hear.”

“What are you talking about? I told you I want you.”

“Are you going to marry me?” he asked point-blank.

“Oh Jesus Christ, give me a break!” she said, upset that he was back on that subject.

“Don't use the Lord's name in vain.”

“I don't even know you. But I'm supposed to say I'll marry you. What kind of shit is that?” There was no mistaking the frustration in her voice.

“You'll sleep with me but you won't marry me?”

“I don't fucking know you.”

“That's it! I can't do it. I guess I am a liar. I can't take your language. It is totally, absolutely wrong.” He stalked to the opposite side of the desk and started gathering his papers.

“You fucking low-life piece of shit! I’ll report you to the school. You’re insane.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. You use it so randomly! I grew up in the projects and I can’t think of one girl there that spoke like you do. You should be ashamed of yourself! Your mouth is disgusting! Forget everything I said and everything I did.” He slammed his briefcase shut and grabbed it up by the handle. He looked at her, shaking his head with a formality that made her wonder if he was serious about the entire talk of marriage.

“The engagement is off.” He walked quickly to the door and never looked back.

For several minutes following his somewhat dramatic exit, she stood shell-shocked, frozen in the same spot, willing time to be on her side. She wanted a do-over. Alone in the lecture hall, she felt totally lost, and oddly, not at all as whole as she did when she’d first entered the room. Yeah, she wanted a do-over.

* * * * *

“And then this white motherfucker had the nerve to say the engagement is off. Can you believe that shit?” Chris said into the phone.

“You should report him,” Alicia, Chris's sister, responded. “He is obviously so incredibly fucked up in the brain. He should be in a loony farm, not a classroom. Tell me again how good he looked, and when you had your hands in your professor’s pants, did you get a good feel of his equipment or did you just play with his ass?”

“I just played with his ass but trust me, his equipment is in good condition. My little lady was smashed up against it. And if he operates it the way he uses that gorgeous mouth then he will most definitely pass the old driving test.”

“Oh my God, Chris, did you let him...I mean did he...you know?” Alicia asked.

Chris grinned knowing that her sister was probably sitting straight as an arrow in a chair with her hands clutching the phone in anticipation of a lurid detail or two. For as long as Chris could remember, she and Alicia had always told each other everything. Not only were they sisters, but truly best friends sharing all aspects of their life. They had no secrets between them and they knew each other very well.

“Of course not—I was talking about the things he said. I mean, I can't think of any guy I've ever known that has said things like that to me, and if

they had, well you know I would have cussed them out and then slapped them silly.”

Alicia cleared her throat rather loudly in response.

“Okay there was that asshole Rondall. But the professor is not like Rondall. Alicia, I’m telling you, girl, there is something about him...it was something in his tone of voice that made it okay and exciting and all I wanted to do was feel him. Besides, he has a fantastic aura and my gut instincts tell me to go for it.”

“Oh God, you and your metaphysical deductions of human mentality leave me pondering the existence of yin and yang and the great debate of whether the chicken or the egg came first,” her sister said mockingly.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Garbage, pure garbage—I just spewed a shitload of garbage which is what you do when you start that voodoo talk.”

“It’s not voodoo, but indeed a gift. Had I embraced it when I was with Rondall, I would not have been with Rondall. If I had listened to the voices in my brain, if I had embraced them rather than silenced them, I never would have been Rondall’s victim”

“If you mention that psycho boy loser again, I swear I will hang up this phone.”

“Did you call Rondall a loser? Girl please, all losers in the world will probably rise up and whip your black ass for lumping him in their category. He is more kin to your average psycho, nutcase, egotistical maniac.”

“Obsessive, possessive pissant.”

“Now you’re talking.”

“No I’m not. You are. So come on and spill, dear sister of mine. You just want to jump your professor’s bones right. Am I right?”

“God yes!” She expelled dramatically. “Alicia, it’s weird but a part of me wanted to connect with him—a very small part.”

“Well it’s too late now and what you’re working with now is a pipe dream. After all, he said it was over.” She laughed, adding, “Wait till I tell Mommy that you were engaged to a white man and dumped by that same white man in less than an hour!”

“Fuck you, Alicia, and don’t say anything to Mommy or Daddy. I don’t want either of them to blow a gasket! After the meltdown I went through and the pain I caused them and especially you after all that crazy shit with Rondall, Mommy and Daddy would hire a detective so fast to get the four-one-one on him. And heaven help him if they found a nasty skeleton in his closet. They’d hire a hit man to protect me. So keep your mouth shut.”

“I won’t say anything and you know it. I was just yanking your chain. But seriously, be careful. And Chris, sincerely it is good to hear you talk like this. After Rondall the freak, well, you withdrew. Sure there were guys, but there’s a fire in your voice when you talk about your professor. Although nothing will come of it, it’s good to hear you say something special about a guy, something nice. I guess the therapy is finally working?”

“Yes. Three years later and I really am feeling good again and the nightmares are gone. So we’ll move off the subject of Rondall. By the way...damn hold on,” Chris said when she heard the knock at her bedroom door.

“What is it?” she yelled to Nicky.

“You have a phone call.” Nicky entered the room, her hand outstretched with the phone.

“Someone's calling me on your phone? Who is it?” Chris accepted the handset.

“Professor Ingram. He said your line was busy.” Nicky frowned as per usual at the phone that Chris was clutching. “He said it was about an assignment for extra credit that the two of you discussed earlier. I *told* you to study harder.”

Chris shook her head at Nicky's retreating back. Nicky's not so subtle chastisement was so typical. When the door finally closed behind her roommate, Chris spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Professor Ingram—" Chris said as rigidly as possible.

"Chris, I'm sorry I—"

"Please hold on. I'm on another call. It'll only take a minute." She laid the phone down and spoke back into her own phone.

"Alicia, he's on Nicky's phone. I'll call you back," Chris said hurriedly.

"Do you promise?"

"You know I will."

"Good luck, girl. I guess. Love you."

"I love you too, Alicia. Bye." She pressed the *end* button and tossed the phone aside. Taking a deep breath she picked up Nicky's phone.

"Sorry about that. I was talking to my sister long distance."

"Is your sister in Chicago or is she away at school too?"

"She's a junior at Northwestern—the Chicago campus, not Evanston. Alicia opted to stay close to home. Obviously, you were a busy little beaver after you stormed out on me. So, did you find out all you wanted to know about me when you went through my school records?"

“Not nearly enough. Why did you decide to attend a college so far from home?”

“I guess I’m an adventurer at heart, but I do miss my family a lot.”

“You’re singing to the choir. When I was in New York my family lived here in New Orleans. Family is very important. I hate that yours is so far away. That’s the main reason I hated New York—being away from my family. Especially my daughter—it was very hard.”

“How old is she?”

“Ashley is seven years old and beautiful. I want you to meet her.”

“Look Professor—”

“Kenneth. Call me Kenneth. I feel like an old, outdated fart when you call me Professor Ingram. So call me Kenneth or Kenny. Leo calls me Kenny sometimes.”

“Kenneth. Is that better?”

“Yes,” he said. “I have a pet name for you.”

“What?” she asked expectantly.

“Chrissie.”

“Fuck no! I’m sorry I mean no, absolutely not. Chrissie is a blue-eyed, blonde-haired, white girl’s name. Chrissie is Barbie’s little sister. I am not related to Barbie.”

“Well you definitely would never catch me with her. So now that you have forgiven me, will you come see me?”

“When?” she asked, regretting the anxiousness in her voice.

“Right now—I want to ravish you and we need to make plans.”

“What kind of plans?” she asked, edgy, “Think carefully about your response. The wrong answer will have me in my bed tonight instead of yours.”

“Chris,” he simply said.

“Well, I’m waiting. Answer me.”

“Chris, you know how I feel. I can’t lie to you. I told you that.”

“Can you at lease give me an opportunity to catch up with how you feel without the added pressure, temper tantrums, and ridiculous threats?”

“Fair enough, I’m just anxious.”

“Okay, that I can live with. Relieving your anxiety and mine I can live with.”

“You’ll come see me then? Besides making love to you, I want you to see my daughter.”

“Your daughter lives with you?” She bolted up in the chair. “I assumed she lived with her mother. Speaking of which, the mother of your child is referred to as your...”

“Ex-wife. Regina and I have been divorced for nearly six months now, separated for two years. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“Yes, ex-wife sounds very good to my ears. Not wife or girlfriend. But definitely without a doubt an ex. Not separated or on break, but finished, over, and no going back.”

“All of that and then some. Although, Regina probably wouldn't mind a row in the old haystack with her ex-husband. After all, besides Ashley, sex was the only thing that kept us together. The sex was great.”

“And that comment is supposed to make me want you?”

“I was just being honest.”

“I think you are being a pig,” she said.

“Chris, are we about to have our second argument?”

“Fuck you.” She pressed the *end* button and tossed the phone aside.

When it rang about ten seconds later she jumped for it.

“Hello?”

“Do not ever do that again,” he said.

“What?”

“Hang up on me. Run away from me. Give up a fight. Not say what you feel. If I'm being a bastard tell me. If I agree, I'll apologize. If not, we'll agree to disagree. But don't run away.”

“Is that what you think I was doing?”

“Yes, because you're scared.”

“Of what, you?” she asked.

“Yes. But mostly you're scared of the way you feel.”

“You want to run that one by me again. You don't know a damn thing about how I feel. We've known each other for less than twenty-four hours.”

“The amount of time we've known one another is immaterial. What is important is how we feel. I know that you think that it is impossible for everything I am saying to be real. You think that there is some sort of time frame that dictates how quickly a person can fall in love with another person. You think this is just about two people who have the *'hots'* for one another. You're a mature woman of the new century and you can live with that—having the *'hots'* for me, and me having the *'hots'* for you.

“But when I tell you that I love you, while you know it's true, you still don't want to believe it's true. It's an antiquated thought process, Chris, that you've carried over from the twentieth century. That two people can't fall in love instantly. That two people can't share unbridled carnal passion and be in love completely and simultaneously at the same time; that and the fact that some bastard obviously hurt you pretty badly. We'll delve into that later. But for now Chris, you need to know that I would stake my life on

what I am feeling here. I am earnest when I tell you that I love you and I crave you, which makes my desire for you stronger than anything I have ever felt before.”

“You didn’t feel this way with your wife?”

“Yes and no. Don’t get angry but I really, really liked loving Regina. Regina was my heart. And when I lost Regina I spent a lot of time crying—I mean really shedding tears, like a girl. I couldn’t sleep or eat and it was twice as bad because I knew when I woke up in the mornings, my little girl wouldn’t be there. I felt constricted. My heart was broken. It’s different with you, Chris.”

“How is it different, because frankly that sounds like love to me.”

“It was. But it’s different with you. You have a part of my heart now, Chris, that I didn’t even know was there. I don’t think of ways to make you happy like I did with Regina. I just want to make you happy. Regina didn’t have my soul. You do. I’m sincere, Chris. Let me show you. I need you. I want you, Chris, in a way that I never wanted Gina. That’s not taking anything from her. I loved her...I love her. But I want you, I mean...I really, really want you. Give me a chance to show you. Come over to my place.”

“I think...this is about sex,” she said nonchalantly. However, as she gripped the phone she indulged herself with a fantasy that maybe it wasn’t just lust. Could it be love?

“Perhaps it’s all about sex for you, but definitely not for me.” The conviction in his voice was unmistakable. “I’ll work overtime to make sure you understand what it really is. You’ll see, honey, and when you least expect it, the realization will bite you in the ass the way it did me. But don’t worry, Chris, I’ll kiss it and make it better.”

“You just said that you want me to come to your place so that you can ravish me. That’s lust, sex, you know what I mean. *Sex*. It’s hot and—”

“Obsessive and satisfying. Answer me this, have you ever had sex with someone that you felt absolutely nothing for, but you simply had an itch that you wanted that person to take care of?”

She thought for a moment, unsure of how to respond—truthfully or with indignation.

“Answer truthfully.”

“You’re trying to make me think you’re inside my mind.”

“I am.”

“Bullshit! You cannot read my thoughts. Anyway, what woman in her right mind would answer that question? If I say yes than I’m a tart. If I say no than I’m afraid of expressing myself sexually. It’s a lose-lose situation.”

“All right, for argument’s sake and to move on, let’s assume that the answer is yes. Have you ever been in love or thought you were in love?”

“Yes.” Rondall’s image flashed in her mind. She shuddered.

“And this guy made love to you.”

“Yes.” Again she shuddered at the memory.

“Was it satisfying?”

“God no!” She responded quickly. Too quickly—she mentally hit herself upside the head.

“But you continued having sex with him anyway right?”

“Yes,” she answered begrudgingly. *Only because, she thought, he’d convinced me that it was my problem instead of his—that I was frigid and incapable of passion. That what I was asking for was too freaky and that nice girls would never consider such things.*

“Okay, now imagine making love to a man that turned you on physically and turned you on mentally. Just imagine all the things that you could do with him because he loves you and you love him and you trust him and he trusts you. Just think of the possibilities.”

“Shit Kenneth, you have a way with words.”

“I don't want to just get you in my bed, Chris. I'm trying very, very hard to get you in my life, all of you. I want all of you.”

“This is too much, Kenneth. I just met you. You're asking for too much. You don't have to keep saying those things. You can have me in your bed. Stop confusing me with this love shit.”

“The thought of being loved hurts?”

“I've been there, done that.”

“You have a trust issue, Chris. I'll take care of that.”

“Why are you doing this? You want me physically—I want you in the same way, so why are you trying to make more of it than it is?”

“You are too young to be so jaded, honey. For the record, you're wrong and I will prove it. You will see and then you'll know that you were wrong about me.”

“What do you mean?” Chris mumbled, rubbing her forehead fiercely.

“You think I'm—to use your colorful term—full of shit. You'll think I'm full of it no matter what I say or do right now. That's natural and it is also something that we can deal with together. One day at a time, honey, one day at a time. I am being sincere, Chris.”

“There are other things besides that.”

“What other things?”

“You're my teacher. I'm a student. And then there is the whole black-white thing.”

“Don't try it, Chris. You can't use my position at the university as an excuse. I have a temporary contract and nowhere in that contract does it state I can't see you. Besides, there are only six weeks left in the semester. The only person I have an obligation to is me. That's it. So you'll need to find something better than the teacher-student issue, because there isn't one.”

“It's frowned upon. Everyone knows that. You can jeopardize your position.”

“I'm only there as a personal favor to my boy Leo. I owe him. Understand this, Chris; my becoming involved with you will not affect Leo's return to his classroom next fall. I don't need that job. I told you earlier, I write books. I am not going back into teaching. I just did this as a favor to Leo. The teacher-student issue is closed,” he said with a finality that would not be breached.

Although miles apart, Chris would have sworn she heard the door slam on the issue. Odd, she thought, that his declaration coupled with the impenetrable inflection of its delivery would excite her. Even more perplexing was the fact that she accepted his decree as the final answer.

Choose your battles wisely had always been the mantra for the women in her family, so, to hell with it. Let him have this one. She cleared her throat before tackling the next issue.

“There is still the other—I'm not so sure I know how to deal with it.”

“You are no doubt referring to the black-white thing.”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean exactly? Deal with loving me, a white man, or the people that would have a problem with it?”

“I have no issues with the color of your skin. I was just thinking about some of the people in my life that would have a problem with it.” Chris could imagine the look on Nicky's face and the inevitable verbal lashing and assault. She mentally shrugged that thought away. Nicky was high-strung and Chris had grown accustomed to overlooking Nicky's militant rhetoric.

But what about my parents? As Kenneth would say, that's a dead issue. While her parents would have reservations, they certainly wouldn't object based on his color. After Rondall, all they wanted was to see her happy and safe. If they felt secure that Kenneth, or any man for that matter, protected and loved her, then they would embrace him.

Chris's concern was for the stares and snide remarks from total strangers. Inwardly she felt stupid for being more uptight about a stranger's

opinion than the thoughts and reactions of people she actually knew. Was she really so thirsty for approval that she would let strangers dictate, or more to the point, actually choose who she would invite into her life?

Kenneth's voice broke into her thoughts. "People will think and say really nasty things. It can be very hard at times, but two people who care about one another can deal with anything. You would think I'd be used to it but I'm not."

"So if you couldn't stand it and it was hard for you, why go through it again?"

"I didn't say I couldn't stand it. I said I still wasn't used to it. I don't let strangers control my feelings and tell me who it is right to be with. I learned that from my mother and father—well technically he's my stepfather."

"Your stepfather is black?"

"Yes. But I think of him as my father. He is my father in all the ways that count. I owe him so much. And despite the pain my parents endured, I am so grateful that they had the willpower to stick it out."

"It must have been hard."

"I'm sure it was for them. When Gina and I separated, I was devastated by the hurt in my father's eyes. I felt that I had failed him

somehow because he had taken my failure as his failure. You see, he taught me the value of family, to be not only a strong man, but a good man too. So when my marriage fell apart and my family went in different directions, he took it personally because he thought that he hadn't given me all I needed to keep my family together. A man makes sacrifices for his family. I just didn't know what more to do to save it. Needless to say, it was one of the worst experiences of my life."

"I don't ever want to go through that type of pain."

"I don't want to see you go through anything like that either. There are different types of pain, different levels. I tell you some of the things that I've gone through are unbelievable. Here's an example. I was the biggest freak growing up. I was the only white boy in the projects. I literally got my ass kicked every single day. But I didn't care. I loved my mom, my father, and I loved my home. After a while they got used to me, the other kids in the neighborhood, and I really felt good and like I finally belonged. So the pain I went through in the beginning was worth it. I had Leo looking out for me, and I had Regina. In the neighborhood, we were okay, me and Regina. We were normal, just plain old Gina and Kenny. But when we left the neighborhood, some people, not a lot of people, but some people, looked at us like we were freaks."

“They did this because you were a mixed couple?”

“Yes. But I chose to live with it. And Regina did too. And together Regina and I were strong in our commitment and if we were not going to be together it would not be because of the few bigoted people who felt we shouldn't be together.”

“So what happened to you and Regina?”

“Honestly, we grew apart and our values changed. I was offered the job at NYU. She didn't want to leave home. She wanted Ash to grow up with family around. I respected that. But it was a job that I thought would open doors for me and then I could give her more and give my little girl more. But, it didn't work out that way.”

“You got involved with someone else?” she asked.

“No. Now why do women assume that the man cheated?”

“Because they normally do. So Regina cheated on you.”

“No. No one cheated. I am a very loyal, monotonous, one woman guy and she would never do anything like that to me and neither would I, especially to her.”

“Why especially to her?” Chris's curiosity was piqued.

“I loved her. I still do. Only I love her in a different way. I'm pretty pissed at her right now. She's going through her *I'm going to screw this white*

motherfucker phase and she's making my life pretty damn difficult over some very serious issues about my daughter. We can't agree on big things like her education—public or private schools. There are other things, but it all centers around our individual ideals of what is best for Ashley. Gina will eventually come around and realize that I'm right on the Ashley issues. She'll remember one of these days that I was usually always right. I try to be mad at her but I can't. I love her.”

“That is so sweet and touching, but here you are talking to me.”

“Okay again I'll say it, I love her platonically. Only an asshole makes an enemy of his children's mother instead of bonding with her, especially if she is your child's primary caregiver. She's my daughter's mother. I'll always love her. It's just not the kind of love where you want to take a stroll in the park with that person, or go on vacation with that person, or just be quiet and do crossword puzzles with that person.”

“But she still feels that way about you.”

“No. She's getting married to a guy that plays piano at my father's club.”

“Is she marrying a white guy?”

“No, he’s a black guy, really cool and he treats my girls well. My daughter is absolutely nuts about him. He’s perfect for Gina. My mother likes him.”

“Your mother?”

“Yes. Regina and my mom are pretty tight. My mom even sides with Regina on all the crap she pulls. She’s Gina’s collaborator in the *Let’s Make Kenneth Pay Through the Ass and Wish He Were Dead Society!*”

“I’m lost. Your mother is helping your ex-wife screw you.”

“Yes, and after one afternoon with my mom and Regina you’ll probably be a member too.”

“You must have done something terrible.”

“No I didn’t. Women are just like that.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t get your feathers in an uproar, Gloria Steinem. You all just tend to stick together. I suppose it’s a sister thing.”

“Your mom is white.”

“Sister as in women—you all just stick together. Unless you’re fighting over the same man, then you will tear each other apart.”

“Men are like that too.”

“But we’re not as devious and unforgiving as you ladies are. You all can carry a grudge with you until the day you die. Men are much more forgiving.”

“That’s debatable.”

“We’ll debate it later. But for now, Chris, I’m going to give you my address. I want to make love to you right now. Afterwards, we’ll discuss family history, my life and your life. But right now I am dying to be inside you. Can you understand what I’m saying, Chris? I need to be inside you and to taste you and to smell that beautiful short head of hair. I want you to stand naked before me so I can see every inch of your body. I want to learn where to touch you and how you like to be touched. I want you to learn how to touch me. I want to make love to you so much right now. Do you have a pen so you can take down the directions to my apartment?”

Chapter 3

“Very nice, this is very nice,” she said.

His apartment was huge. The decor was very modern and the colors were shades of gray and white. She admired the huge fireplace flanked on either side with bookshelves. There were two large black leather sofas positioned across from one another. He took her jacket and led her to the sofa.

“Did you decorate it or did you hire someone?”

“I did it myself with a little help from Leo.”

“I see,” she said with a mischievous grin.

“Now wait a minute. Leo and I are friends.”

“Two very close friends who just happen to dabble in interior decorating?”

“Yes. There’s more at the Home Depot than power tools.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to attack your manhood. You guys did an excellent job—masculine, yet comfortably feminine. It reminds me of Metropolitan Homes Magazine. It is very crisp and chic and manly.”

“Thank you, I think. Would you like something to drink?” he asked.

“Soda is fine.”

“What kind would you like? I have cola, orange, and grape.”

“It doesn't matter as long as it's not a diet.”

“I'm going to have a beer. Do you mind?” he asked.

“Not at all.” Chris watched him as he headed for the kitchen. He had on jeans and a white cotton button-down shirt. She walked over to the huge fireplace and reached for the silver frame that held a picture, she assumed, of his daughter. Chris smiled. The girl was beautiful. Her features were like most biracial children, light complexion, long sandy hair, petite nose and lips. Her eyes were dark icy blue. She looked like her father.

“That's my beautiful little girl. She is beautiful, isn't she?” Kenneth asked as he handed Chris her drink. His voice and the glint in his eyes betrayed his emotions. He loved his daughter very much.

“She's gorgeous, Kenneth. She has your eyes.” Chris took the soda he held out to her.

“Yeah. Gina has gray eyes. Sometimes Ash's eyes look smoky gray. Usually when she's being a brat or after her mother has punished her. They get really dark and very smoky. But mostly they are blue. They're always blue with me.” He drank from his beer and then sat the bottle on the mantle.

“I bet you spoil her.” Chris laughed.

“Oh yeah and it pisses Gina off sometimes. But I only have one daughter and besides, Ashley is my princess.” Kenneth took the photo and her drink from her hands and placed them on the mantle and then pulled her close to him.

“I want more children. I want a son but no more girls,” he whispered into her ear.

“I’d like a daughter someday.” She relaxed her head in the curve of his neck.

“Well, maybe another daughter but I definitely want a son,” he said, leading her in a slow seductive dance, tapping his fingers gently against the small of her back. She closed her eyes and relaxed in the safety of his arms.

“Just one son?” She enjoyed the slow seductive pace he set.

“Sure or maybe two, maybe three,” he said, brushing his lips against the curve of her neck as he ran his fingers along her upper arm.

“I suppose you have names already chosen.”

“Oh yeah; Elias Leonardo Ingram after my father and of course Kenneth Christopher Ingram, Jr.”

“Sounds like you have given that a lot of thought.”

“I have. I knew that I’d find the perfect woman to help me along with it and now I have.”

“Me.”

“Yes you.”

“Do I have any say in it? What if I have other plans?” she teased.

“I’m going to romance you and sweep you off your feet.”

“Are you really going to romance me?” She was floating on cloud nine in his arms. Plus, her sex pulsed like crazy and the little voices in her brain were asleep. It was just the two of them, and just as she had resolved on the drive to his apartment, she had every intention of just going with the flow.

She’d made up her mind to take a plunge and have a good time. She’d let tomorrow happen as it saw fit. But tonight...yeah tonight she’d be free of worry, doubt, and what ifs. Tonight she’d have a damn good time, forget about doubts, and more importantly, to hell with tomorrow.

“I am going to take you to the best restaurants in town, I will send you flowers. I am going to take you to the beach, the movies, and the park. We will spend afternoons shopping for antiques and rare books. We’ll do crosswords together and we will attend church hand in hand on Sundays.”

“I don’t know about church.”

“I go to church every Sunday.” Abruptly all movement stopped. For the first time, real doubt appeared in his eyes and there was no mistaking the concern in his voice.

“Oh I go to church too,” she said quickly.

“Good. That might have been a really big problem.” His voice was earnest. She shook her head in disbelief. He was such a contradiction.

“Have you ever known a Baptist that wasn't a sinner?” His response was to the non-verbal question written across her face.

“You're Baptist?”

“Oh yeah, born again, fire and brimstone. My religious beliefs are just one of many things that my father instilled in me. Now, that's a funny story. You see, my father is a jazzman. He plays trumpet and saxophone, but every Sunday, come rain or shine, he took me and my mother to church. We were the only white faces there. You'd think I would have learned to ignore stares and silent admonishing from that experience, but I didn't...I haven't. It still gets to me sometimes. But, anyway, after a time everyone at the parish became used to us. I love the church.” Again, there was a sincerity and deep love in Kenneth's voice when he spoke of Elias; his feelings were laid out and so obvious, just as they were when he spoke of his daughter. The same sparkle was evident in his eyes.

It was the same sparkle that had slowly formed in his eyes that very morning. She inhaled deeply at the memory of seeing him for the first time

and the look that slowly took over his expression that morning. She stood stark still, frozen as she recalled the look he had then, and now.

“What’s wrong?”

Oh Dear Lord she thought

“Nothing.” *God, I must sound like an idiot*, she thought. “Nothing...I was just thinking...You love him a lot don’t you?”

“With all my heart. He is the best man I will ever know.” He continued to dance her around the room, keeping in tune to the melodic beat and rhythm of Charley Bird Parker. It must to have been a mix that he put together, because the sultry voice of Dinah Washington now filled the room.

Perfect, she thought as she lost herself in Dinah’s voice, Kenneth’s arms, and the pleasant—albeit scary—thought that he really, really liked her. Loved her maybe? There was something happening here and she was relaxed with it. *I’m not going to run.*

“You like jazz?” he murmured against her ear.

Not trusting her voice at the moment, she nodded in response.

“My father taught me to play the saxophone. Sometimes we jam together at his club in the quarter. He owns Jazz One. Have you heard of it?”

“Are you kidding? Jazz One is legendary.” She noticed the not so subtle shift in the direction they were moving in and she realized that she was being led from his living room. Her nerves went on a delicious high alert.

“Would you like to visit?”

“Yes.” She couldn’t help her excitement about the prospect of going. Jazz One was smack dab in the quarter and was one of the first clubs to reopen after Katrina. It was popular among the college crowd and the tourists. It was also extremely hard to get into.

“Good. Then we're on our way.”

“Now? You’re taking me to the club now?”

“No. But I have a feeling that we are on our way to great things, honey.” He laughed. He lightly tapped her back, and then ran his hands up her arms, resting momentarily on her shoulders. He cupped her face and kissed her quickly.

She moaned and was taken aback when he broke the contact.

“Are you always that fast with your kisses?”

“Chris, you make me hard just looking at you. If I kissed you the way I want to kiss you I'd ruin a perfectly good pair of pants.” He trailed his

fingers down between her legs and squeezed gently, and continued moving them towards the dark hallway. “And so would you.”

His maneuvering ended and she knew he’d brought her to his chosen destination. She didn't protest. After all, he had made his intentions clear on the phone. It was what she wanted too, and had anticipated from the moment she’d agreed to come see him. Damn, it was wonderful to be a modern woman.

They came to a stop at the edge of his huge bed. He pressed his thumbs against her neck and kissed her again, this time lingering. She pulled away and looked into his eyes, smiled, and then stepped away and looked around the room, taking in her surroundings. It too was large and decorated in grays and whites. He slowly began unbuttoning his shirt. Once it was undone, he reached into his back pocket, pulled out a tiny silver packet, and flashed it at her.

“Do you approve?” he asked.

She looked at him and nodded.

He pitched the condom onto the bed and then slipped out of his shirt. There were faint patches of hair on his chest that led from between his breastbone to just above his jeans. She smiled slowly and placed her fingers on his naval. He exhaled slowly as she unsnapped his jeans.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Yes,” she agreed, and kissed him slowly, exploring his month with her tongue. “Make love to me, Kenneth,” she whispered in his ear. She ran her hands through his hair and they both whispered encouraging and playful words to one another.

He made a motion to remove her shirt but she pushed his hands away.

“Not yet.” She wanted to explore his body first. She placed her hands on the sides of his jeans and pushed them down. He stepped out of his pants and boxers and kicked them aside. Admiring his lean muscular physique, she wanted to bottle the moment and tuck it away on a shelf. He had looked marvelous in his clothes, but standing naked before her now...damn his momma should be proud.

He was her wet dream come true, so damn sexy.

She stepped back, and toeing the back of her sandals, kicked them off. Then slowly, and she hoped seductively, she began removing her own clothes. She pulled her jeans off, revealing her red silk lacy panties. Then she raised her t-shirt over her head and threw it in the same general direction as her pants. She made a show of stripping before him and could see the lust building in his eyes.

He moved quickly towards her, and placed his hands just above her waist. He lifted her until her breasts were against his face and took one nipple into his mouth. She quivered and moaned, throwing her head back.

He turned and carried her to the bed, tossing her haphazardly onto the massive king-sized mattress. He followed her down, landing on top of her. His fingers pressed into the curves of her waist. Despite her squirming, he held her steady in the spot where he had placed her while he pressed against her moist center with all the enthusiasm of a naïve schoolboy.

It was as if his brain had gone on vacation; he was not a grown man, experienced in the art of making wild animalistic feral love, but an adolescent on the verge of his first real piece of ass. The head of his penis, thick from the overdose of blood that had rushed to it, ached and throbbed as it lashed out at her center.

Was he attempting to use his little head to breach the barrier of her panties? Damn, she wished she had had the foresight to wear a thong. His hips lead the charge against the now drenched panties, probing her wetness with his hard erection.

He moaned with pleasure as his fingers dug further into her skin. Her mind was racing a mile a minute. How to get rid of those damn panties and

do it quickly? He'd better not cum like this! She was on the verge of one hell of a masturbatory orgasm when she felt his body go absolutely still.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!" She moaned in disappointment. She'd been so close. Even if it was a dry hump induced orgasm, it was still an orgasm and she'd wanted it. She could taste it on the inside. To punctuate her disappointment she slapped his back, and then quickly, soothingly, caressed the spot that she'd slugged.

"It's not what you think. I...need a minute. I feel like a kid. Damn, I want to fuck you so bad. Damn. Okay, don't freak out. I swear, I'm not like this, but sweetheart, I'm a kid with you. Okay. Give me a minute." Then he kissed her, a long, searing, passionate kiss that curled her toes. Reflexively, her hips jerked and the party commenced again. He growled. He actually growled.

"These fucking panties have got to go." He jackknifed off her and with the speed of an alien from another planet divested her of the offending garment. Two things registered in her lust-induced foggy brain: Kenneth had used the word fuck and oh my God, he was totally without control.

He grabbed the back of her neck and kissed her more passionately than any man had ever kissed her. Her lips felt swollen and still he pulled. The pain of his tightened embrace was ecstasy to her. He used brute force

that awakened her body to a pleasure she had longed for—animalistic lust. A devouring of her flesh that was raw and steamy. He said he wanted to ravish her, to taste every inch of her, to know her body intimately, and he was. This man was not a liar. Her mind was in a frenzy, his actions bringing ecstasy and pain and joy. Oh yeah, what he was doing to her and making her feel was no doubt what she had been missing before. He was a master in the bedroom and she was his willing slave.

“God yes, Kenneth...that feels...so good!”

She had never been made love to like this before. Her body had never reacted like this before. He ran his fingers along her cleavage, exerting a delicious pleasure. She tossed her head, to the left, then back to the right. He had not entered her nor had he touched her mound with his hands, but still, here she was at the precipice of a second orgasm and he’d better not fuck it up this time.

“Yes Kenneth, yes Kenneth!” she chanted as he ignited every part of her body and it hit her like a ton of bricks. Not just any old bricks or stone.

But...granite! Yes granite—that ridiculously over-priced crap that her parents fought over when they remodeled the kitchen. Her father had been livid about the price of it, but her mother had for once insisted. Chris understood now. Granite was superior.

“Fuck me now...Kenneth...” She knew that he didn’t need any encouragement. Hell, that wasn’t her reason for screaming like a banshee. He had yet to penetrate her, and she was experiencing the most overpowering orgasm in her life. She screamed because she knew that what was coming would be even better.

He paused a fraction of a second and watched her reaction, then he racked his fingers down her abdomen so roughly that for a moment, she thought he might actually have broken her skin. The pain was an excruciating pleasure. His thorough exploration of the dark, damp cavern under her flat belly, luxuriating in the soft, silky feel of the trimmed patch of hair that covered it was the icing on the cake. The man’s tongue was lethal, his teeth were a gift, and she wanted more.

“I really do love you,” he whispered between bites, tugging and pulling.

“I can’t take any more...stop Kenneth...please! I can’t breathe.” Her words must have excited him more, because he became even more relentless.

He brought his free hand to her face, fisted her hair, and pulled her awkwardly to him, devouring her mouth, silencing the echo of her orgasm. He whispered all those sweet nothings that she wanted to hear. He was wearing her down because she was beginning to believe the words that he

lavished upon her. She wanted to touch him, pleasure him and to be an equal participant in their lovemaking, but she was so lost in her own pleasure that she could barely move.

He continued kissing her, and then using his teeth, he gnawed at her lips. He kissed her neck, her swollen breasts, and moved again towards her engorged clit. Slowly he slithered, yes slithered, toward her pulsating, greedy little lady, stopping momentarily at her naval and lavishly exploring it. She had no idea that she could find pleasure in having that part of her body attacked.

As he moved lower, she held her breath in anticipation of his second visit to that area and she remembered this time to send a silent prayer of thanks because on a whim she had shaved her legs, arms, and trimmed the little lady that morning.

Oh yeah, she thought, this is definitely meant to be.

When his tongue lashed out she grabbed a handful of his hair and jerked upward. He was deadly with his tongue and she felt as if she had died and was being transported to heaven at breakneck speed. She held onto him tightly as his tongue dove in and out of her wet depths, savoring her nectar. Chris's hips moved rhythmically under him, her belly bucking upward

toward his mouth. Soon his fingers joined in and she nearly lost all perspective of anything and everything that was not him.

Her newfound lover was good and knew what to do because as she approached another orgasm he increased his speed, became swifter with his mugging and used his teeth gently, but firmly, on her button of ultra sensitive flesh. She gasped and moaned and finally screamed...again.

Chris could not believe that she was screaming. She had never screamed out an orgasm before tonight. She had never had multiple orgasms before. Her body became rigid and she heard him say, "It's okay, honey."

Her body arched frantically and she allowed herself to enjoy the aftereffect of the sensation that he had given her.

She stood outside her body, and looked down at her limp little ass. She smiled at the cooing noises she made, the rapturous look of satisfaction that marked her features. She didn't give two shits that her hair was all over the place, kind of matted and drawn up from the sweating. Hell, it didn't matter. *This is why God gave us perms and beauticians*, she mused, because lying there, well she resembled a bald version of a drug-induced Mona Lisa having a bad hair day. She shimmered, and cooed, and slowly drifted to earth.

He turned her quickly onto her stomach and moved her to the center of the bed. He nestled his head in her neck and relaxed his body on hers. The

weight of him sent a shiver through her and she relaxed completely as he rubbed his body against her.

“Do you believe me when I say I love you, Chris? I want to be with you forever.”

“Yes, I believe.” At this point, she would have agreed to anything.

“Do you want to be with me forever, honey?” He kissed the back of her neck, her cheek, her earlobe. He pressed his swollen cock into the crevice of her ass and she shuddered in anticipation.

“Yes, Kenneth. Don't leave me. Don't let me go,” she whispered. Her mind was in absolute delirium by the way he was touching her and the promise of things to come. She reached for the headboard to brace herself. She willed herself to relax.

“Go slow because it's been a while.”

He shuddered from the implication, and this time, he tossed up a prayer of thanks. He made an inaudible statement or maybe he'd spoken plainly, but the anticipation of him penetrating her ass was all she could hold onto—that and the brass handle of his headboard. He pried her fingers loose and turned her over onto her back.

She moaned in disappointment.

“Not this time, honey.” He laughed out the words, sort of giddy-like, and then he smiled that coy, boyish smile and added, “If you’re a very, very good girl I will give you the ass fucking that you want. I’ll go so far as to tie your limbs to this four-poster bed and fuck you until you pass out. But you have to be a good girl, Chris, and give into me. You have to love me, like I love you.”

“Oh God, Kenneth.”

“You have the prettiest little ass, honey, and it will be my pleasure to fuck it.”

“Yes, Kenneth.”

“Now look at me. Always look at me when we become one.” He dug his fingers into her hips.

Before she could respond, he brought her legs forward and thrust into her. He pounded his body against hers, fast, wicked, and hard. His balls slammed against her ass, and still he hammered and she loved every aching moment of it. He was like a mechanical piston delivering his glorious assault with precision timing. She thought she would die! One-one thousand—bang! Two-one thousand—bang!

It was nirvana!

It was bliss!

It was the beginning of her third orgasm and as her release neared she thought about China patterns, a Vera Wang wedding gown, and a honeymoon in Fiji.

“Wrap your legs around me. Tight...tighter, honey, squeeze me so hard that I will fucking break in two.” His voice was hoarse and riddled with desire.

She cupped his buttocks, squeezed tightly, and pulled him farther into her. He gripped her waist in a firm hold, never taking his eyes off hers. She moaned, gasped for air, and cried out, closing her eyes and giving into the wicked tremors that flooded her.

“Don’t...move...Chris...please, honey, do not move.” He groaned.

His words did not fully register—all she heard was move. She arched her body up to his and sought his lips, intent on claiming his mouth and delivering the perfect kiss.

“Ah...shit!” He let out a groan that announced his long overdue release and with one final and furious thrust, he buried himself balls deep in her wet, tight channel, giving in to his own explosion of completion. He fell limply on her, an overwhelming desire to close his eyes and sleep. She made a mewling noise and he smiled.

Just as his eyelids were descending, he spotted it.

The tiny silver package laid unopened about six inches to the right of her beautifully sated face.

Chapter 4

They lay quietly in the afterglow. She moved her head slightly and he knew any second she'd see the unopened condom. He had tried to control himself mentally and had every intention to withdraw long enough to place the condom on. But the minute he felt her coming all around his naked flesh he was lost. He couldn't stop, not for all the tea in China would he have been able to hold back his release.

For him, the knowledge that he may have planted his seed in her was far from scary. His dick was hard in seconds knowing that in fact his son just may have been firmly inoculated in her.

He didn't believe in over-analyzing the rights and wrongs of a situation and certainly not his emotions. He just simply went with his feelings and savored the here and now. However, he did wonder if subconsciously he had deliberately waited until it was too late to use the condom.

An even darker thought entered his mind: *what if she's on the pill?*

Stupid medical science.

Why'd they have to invent those things anyway?

He held his breath knowing that any second the explosion would come. Any minute the realization that they did not use a condom would penetrate through the fog in her brain and she would go ballistic. Although it had been less than twenty-four hours since they met, Kenneth was confident he had her figured out.

When her eyes shot open and the look of serious anger masked every beautiful feature on her face, he braced himself. The emotions that danced across her face in such a short period of time were astounding. He closed his eyes when the look of fear replaced anger. It pierced his heart.

“Get the fuck off me!” she screamed as she slapped at his shoulder.

He eased away from her, hiding the humor he found in the girly tap she’d delivered.

“Calm down, Chris,” he said, hoping to reason with her. “Everything’s going to be okay. I know what you’re thinking.”

“That I’m a complete and utter dumbass and a completely stupid fool. That I just did the most irresponsible thing a woman of the new millennium can do? That’s what I’m thinking!”

“We, baby. We did it. I am so sorry. I...I didn’t do that on purpose. I couldn’t stop it. I told you not to move honey,” he stammered.

She slid to the opposite side of the bed.

“I’m going to be sick,” she moaned. “Oh God, what have I done? Where’s the bathroom?” She was visibly panic stricken.

“Through there.” He pointed to a door and she bolted off the bed, ran into the bathroom, and closed the door.

“Oh craps!” He grabbed his pants, slipped into them, and then walked to the door. He knocked but there was no reply. He tried the doorknob and was grateful that she had not locked herself in. She stood at the sink, her hands covering her face. She was crying.

He walked to her and put his arms around her shoulders. She turned and buried her face in his chest. He held her tightly. He sighed, relieved that she didn’t push him away.

“You don’t use any form of birth control?” he asked once her tears had subsided. She pulled away from him. He held his breath, waiting for her response.

“No, you son of a bitch, and I don’t give two fucking shits about being pregnant, you asshole.”

Thus was the response he had hoped for. The colorful adjectives she spewed he could have done without. Before he had an opportunity to chastise her, which he surmised would be a lifetime job from here on out,

Chris continued her dramatic speech, complete with the right amount of self-indignation and a healthy dose of tears.

“Have you ever heard of sexually transmitted diseases?” She paused and he grimaced. Great, this was going to be the educational lecture. Her hand firmly planted on her side, he prepared to tune out the rest of her speech, and opted instead to read her body language. By observing her body language, he could spare himself the inevitable lecture, but would know when to chime in.

“Have you ever heard of AIDS? What's wrong with you? If you don't use a fucking condom then you fucking pull out, you motherfucker!” For added effect, she pulled her hand back and slapped his shoulder again. He gave her two slaps, but when she became greedy and tried for a third, he caught her by the wrist, twisting it slightly. With a flick of his own wrist, he rested her hands behind his back so that once more they were embracing.

“Watch your filthy mouth,” he said, unable, or better yet, unwilling, to let her get too carried away.

“Fuck you!” she replied—loudly.

“Oh God, if I'm ninety years old on my death bed, I will still be wishing that you didn't have a nasty, filthy, disgusting way with words.”

“You motherfucker. You white fucking lunatic.” She enunciated each word for added effect.

Well damn, he thought. Time to take control of this situation, or tonight would set a precedence he had no intention of allowing and she’d grow to hate him for. Chris, he understood from the moment they first met, did not want a little Millhouse in her life, but a larger than life Nelson with a bit of Bart Simpson thrown in for good measure.

“Why is it okay for you to call me a fucking white lunatic? Why are you bringing race into it? What if I called you a self-absorbed spoiled little black bitch? I’d be a racist, prejudiced son of a bitch. Why is that?”

“I’m not self-absorbed and you are a white fucking lunatic.”

“Honey, you most definitely are a self-absorbed spoiled little black bitch. So we are in agreement. That is our fourth disagreement and it is solved. Now, let’s concentrate on our third.” Again his directive was final. The conversation was closed for discussion on her bitchy nature and the gloss of her skin.

“You asshole.”

“Jesus, help me, I’ve fallen in love with a drama queen—*again*.”

“Don’t you dare compare me to Regina! Are you crazy? You don’t know what we just did do you?”

“Yes. I just made love to my girl.”

“We had unprotected sex!”

“We made love and we did not use protection,” he corrected her. “And I am guessing by your strong reaction you've never had unprotected sex before. Has this ever happened to you?”

“No. I swear to you on my life that I never have. Please tell me you haven't either. Oh Lord, I'm only twenty-one years old. I have my whole life ahead of me. I don't want to die. I don't have insurance.” Yes, he thought, she was indeed a drama queen.

“I've only had unprotected sex with my wife.”

“But never since.”

“No, except tonight, just now with you. I've always used a condom.”

“Then what the fuck happened tonight?” She leaned against him.

“I didn't do it intentionally.” He let her arm go.

“I know and I believe you. I mean, why would you?”

He said nothing, just looked at her innocently, all the while trying to squash the guilt that was eating at his insides. Inwardly he smiled and wondered if he should rethink his plan to name his first son Elias. By all rights his first son should be named after him, but he desperately wanted to

honor his stepfather. Oh well—if he was lucky—he had nine months to decide.

“Oh God, what are we going to do?” she moaned. She sat down on the commode.

“Timing is everything. Is the time right?” he asked, wondering as he did so if the internal debate over which name to choose was even worth consideration.

“I’m thinking,” she began, “but I can’t remember the exact calculation. Is it two weeks before or after? Shit I can’t think. I’m confusing myself.”

“Listen Chris, I am almost one hundred percent sure that everything is okay. But we will just go get tested. That's the only thing we can do to alleviate your fear that you may have contracted some dreaded virus, which by the way I know you didn't because I am one hundred percent clean. It's something that we would do anyway, but more importantly, we'll go so we can satisfy our curiosity on the pregnancy issue.” *Damn I am good!* He mentally patted himself on the back as he literally patted hers.

“But—”

“Chris. We can't change anything. It's done. It's as simple as that. The main thing is that you believe me when I say that I am not here in your life to hurt you. I've told you the truth. That has never happened before. You

told me that it has never happened. I believe you. I have—” He paused when she looked away from him. He saw the tears swelling in her eyes again. He lifted her head and held it. “Look at me, Chris. I love you. I respect you. I need you. I want you. I also see that you are scared, honey. We will go and get a test. I will do anything you want. Just please don't write me off.” He spoke as gently as he could.

“Why me? Why did you choose me?” She looked at him helplessly.

“I didn't choose you, Chris. I had no choice. And neither did you. God is in charge of this.”

“You really are the definition of a Baptist hypocrite aren't you?” She couldn't help the grin that she gave him.

His words made her feel a little better. His ability to change her mood instantaneously was yet another plus in his corner.

Yes, I can become addicted to this guy, heaven help me, she thought. She reached out to him, needing to feel his touch.

He put his arm around her and lifted her up, turning around and setting her on the base of the sink. He gripped her ass and pulled her to the edge. He kissed her slowly, exploring her mouth with his tongue. She relaxed her hand on his neck.

“I want this to be real, Kenneth.” She cupped his face in her hands. “I want this to be real. Please don't be running a game on me. I want you to love me.”

“I love you.” He hugged her. “I think I will always love you. I want to always love you.”

“But you don't even know me. You just met me.”

“What I do know I like. I love. Except your potty mouth.”

“Fuck you, Kenneth.” She laughed.

“Yes,” he said. “Fuck me, Chris. Fuck me real hard and real long and real good.”

* * * * *

He pulled the cover over both of them and snuggled his nose into her hair. She ran her fingers along his back and let out a long sign. She tried to think of another time in her life when she had felt so happy, so safe. But she could not. In his arms, she felt safe. It was like a dream. If only it was real, if only it would come true.

Kenneth had repeatedly told her *while they made love* that he loved her and wanted her, but the voices were back. Skepticism reared its ugly little

head, resting much too comfortably in her mind. How could it be real? Her jaded outlook of happily ever after forced her to examine everything up to that moment realistically.

She lay beside this incredible man who had laid everything out in the open. She tossed and turned, warring with herself and those damn voices!

She wanted to daydream like she had before Rondall. She did not want to be one of those women so immersed in yesterday's betrayals and heartache that she would stupidly let the good ship Lollipop pass her by. She wanted to stop being afraid and...yeah believe. It was frightening, letting go of yourself and taking a chance.

But still...*what if* resounded like church bells in her brain. She longed for the white Vera Wang to-die for gown, the white sandy beach in Maui, a diamond ring that would be the envy of all her friends, baby booties and...him.

But that damn skepticism and doubt would not shut the fuck up.

He was so tender with his words and so good with his hands. She liked the way he made love to her body, but more, she sizzled at the way he made love to her mind, to her soul. He said everything that she had always wanted to hear. He touched her with an urgency and need that she'd never felt before. He consumed her body, mind, and soul.

She didn't ever want to leave his side.

"Good night." He pulled her face to his and kissed her. Then he rolled over onto his side with his back to her.

She sat up and looked down at him, her upper body supported by her elbows.

"I have never known anyone like you, Kenneth," she said.

"And you never will again," he replied drowsily.

"Kenneth?" She shook his shoulder.

"Yes?" He turned on his stomach, his face hidden from her.

Alarms went off in her brain like fireworks on the fourth of July.

"Kenneth!" she repeated.

"Chris please, let's go to sleep, honey. No more talking."

"Maybe I should leave." She threw her legs over the edge of the bed.

He grabbed her and pulled her back down. "Maybe you should not leave. Maybe you should lay here, real quiet, right here next to me and sleep." He kissed her forehead. She turned onto her side. He slid his arms around her and held her waist tightly. Then he relaxed his head in the small of her back.

"This is nice," he said.

“Are you sure you want me to stay? If you want me to leave I will understand. No strings attached. I knew what I was getting into,” she said unsteadily, her body still tense.

In response, he traced the curves of her body—from her sexy thigh to one of her firm brown breasts. He cupped it, and with his thumb, circled and kneaded the nipple until it was hard like a precious diamond stone.

“I’m going to sleep like this tonight, Chris, because I think you need to feel me real close. And you want to be intimate with me. Not sexual, but just intimate like two people in love. I think your brain is working overtime telling you to leave while the getting out is good. So, I’m going to hold you like this all night until morning. I am not going to let your breast go. If I do, you might try to creep out while I’m sleeping. I won’t let you leave me. I can’t let you leave me, Chris. You’re my girl now and I really do love you.”

He kissed her neck.

“But in the future,” he added, “take note that I sleep untouched on the other side of the bed. I’m not a very touchy-feely sleeper. I have a thing about someone else’s breath invading my space, especially when I sleep. It’s an idiosyncrasy of mine that I developed as a child when I first moved into the projects. Whenever I was about to get my ass kicked, I mean literally without a doubt kicked, the boys would get real close in my face. I still get

the shivers when people get up in my face or too close to me, unless I'm making love, or fucking, or just having sex or playing football or basketball or something like that. It's just a weird thing from my childhood. Is that okay with you, Chris?" he asked politely.

"Yes, Kenneth." She smiled to herself.

She covered his hand with hers, and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 5

She brought her cup of coffee to the table and eased into the chair next to him. He kissed her cheek and took a sip of his own coffee. He was reading the morning paper. Occasionally he made comments about an article and she'd give her opinion. Mostly she observed him curiously. It had been a week now and she had spent every free moment with him and absolutely loved being attached to him.

The thought of not being close to him, talking to him, looking at him, made her ache. The thought of him being with anyone else was painful. Chris figured that it would probably end soon but she reasoned that there was nothing wrong with enjoying it while it lasted. Despite his protest to the contrary and the effort he put forth she tried very hard to remain firm in protecting her heart from the inevitable ending. One way or another she'd be hurt.

He was no Rondall, but her history dictated caution. Rondall had attacked her both physically and mentality. Kenneth's attack was different. Slowly, he chipped away at her protective barriers and every day with him she found more and more of her guard being withdrawn, replaced by a hurt

that she figured was coming. But still, she enjoyed every minute of the ride he was giving her.

He folded his paper and leaned back in the chair. He removed his thin wire-rimmed glasses and rubbed his eyes, and then he looked at his watch and frowned.

“Maybe I should go.” She stood up quickly.

“If we had a dollar for every time you have said ‘Maybe I should go’ we would be rich, honey. Are you going to be suspicious of every gesture I make?” he asked, pulling her onto his lap. He kissed her and held her tight.

“Chris, do I have to walk around all day like a dog on a leash and hold your breast to keep you from disappearing because that pretty little head of yours keeps telling you that I only wanted to have sex with you, which we didn’t—have sex I mean. We made love. And we’ll make love again tonight, and tomorrow night, and every night. I love you, Chris, and eventually you will believe me.”

She relaxed her head against his shoulder. She knew she was being ridiculous, but she was afraid that she’d wake up and discover that it had all been a dream.

“When’s your first class?” he asked.

“An hour ago, but don’t worry. I called Nicky and asked her to take notes.”

“Your roommate is a looker.”

“Excuse me?” she asked, because his statement was so far out of left field.

“Don't get your feathers in a ruffle, honey.” He leaned in and lightly grazed her bottom lip with his teeth. “You are officially now my girl. Didn't I make that clear?”

“Then why did you say that?”

“Unless God takes my eyesight, I will always window shop. But I promise you, my body would never let me purchase. It belongs to you. Chris, I don’t like you missing classes.” Kenneth was an expert at changing touchy subjects and quite adept at leading Chris to more neutral topics of conversation. Generally, he applied this skill following an off the wall statement like his ridiculous comment about Nicky.

“Yesterday was our one-week anniversary and I wanted to fix you breakfast this morning. It’s okay. I’m passing that class with an A. Really, Kenneth, I know what I’m doing.” Her goal was to put his mind at ease.

During the week they'd been together he had shown an affinity for her well-being. He was really beating her down to his way of thinking and leading her to, as he called it, the light at the end of the tunnel.

She kissed him on the cheek, running her fingers through his hair, down his face, across his shoulder, ending at his chest. She pinched a nipple. For a man, his nipples were extremely sensitive and she enjoyed the look of pleasure on his face when she aroused them.

"Honey, that feels nice. I love everything you do." He groaned. "I love you."

"And I want to believe you and I know that we've had this conversation a million times before, but it's just that I was in a relationship before and I thought that it was perfect when it was really a nightmare."

"Chris, don't make me pay for someone else's dirt."

"I'm trying not to. I'm sorry but...I don't mean to make you pay for someone else's shit but it's weird, and I am so trying to get past it but I'm afraid of another broken heart."

"You don't get it do you? You are the one with all the power. Not me, Chris. You can break my heart and walk away with it *and* my soul. I belong to you. You can crush me, Chris. That's why I want to marry you. I want to be with you." He kissed her and nuzzled the hollow of her neck.

“Kenneth.”

“Yes,” he moaned.

“I think I do want to love you. Are you sure it’s okay?” she whispered.

He cupped her face and smiled. “It’s more than okay, Chris. It’s better than okay.”

“Kenneth?”

“What is it, honey?” His mouth grazed her neck down to her shoulders.

“What you said earlier, do you mean it?”

“When I said I want to marry you?” He smiled slowly.

“Yes.”

“I do want to marry you. I’m an idealist, Chris. Not a realist. I’m also an oversexed, spontaneous, very jealous and territorial male. I see what I want, and I try very hard to have it and keep it.”

“And you want me?” she asked, knowing the answer.

“In the worst possible way. I want you all to myself. I want you to belong to me period, no room for anyone else.”

“That idea is growing on me. I’m fantasizing about weddings and babies and always about you.”

“Then we should do it. I'm an old fashioned guy when it comes to that. I will be married to you. Don't you want me?” he asked. “I mean really want me or is it okay with you to know that I'm free to be with someone else? Do you feel okay knowing that I am free to be with another woman? To smile at another woman the way I smile at you. Is that okay with you? Or do you want me to make love to only you? Do you want me to belong only to you?”

The thought of him with anyone else pissed her off and her red blood turned green.

“Kenneth...you scare me,” she said. What she wanted to say was that he was changing her. Her orderly and uncomplicated life was changing. Her heart said go for it, and to trust him, believe him.

Her heart said fairy tales can come true. She was trying, but her mind still had other thoughts and misgivings. The probability of anything he was saying as being true was one in a million. Chris wanted what he told her to be true, but her brain kept throwing logic into the mix.

“Chris, listen to me, if you ask me a question I will always answer you honestly. I will never lie to you. I want you to trust me and all I require and need and want from you is the same.”

His voice was so kind and sexy and his words made her feel safe and warm. Her mind told her to run, to get away from him, but her heart and her body were telling her head to fuck off. She had never craved anyone as badly as she yearned for him.

“Okay,” he said when still she did not respond. “It will come with time. I can wait. I *will* wait.” He scooted her off his lap into the vacant chair beside him. He held her hands firmly.

“You promise to be patient with me?” she asked, watching him, trying to read the expression on his face.

“I’m not the most patient man but for you I will be. I can wait for you. I’m going to wait for you. I will wait for you because I love you.”

“Shit!” she said, more frustrated with herself than him.

“For a tough little bird you sure are insecure. Have you not looked in a mirror lately? In your own way you are gorgeous, sweetly gorgeous and classic. But my God you are insecure. Think about it. When you leave here today, do you realize what I am going to be faced with? There are literally thousands of Denzels on that campus who would give their left nut to fuck you. I’m just a skinny little white boy. Now that is intimidating. At least you don’t have to contend with the fact that there are thousands of Barbies in my path. Not that Barbie was ever my type.”

“I would kill you if you cheated on me, Kenneth. I’d...I’d...”

“Ah come on. Spit it out, let’s here the dick threat. It’s on the tip of your tongue. Say it. *I’d cut off your dick, Kenneth. I’d kick you in your nuts, Kenneth.* Women and their dick threats—and you can’t understand why we walk around with our hands pressed to our crotches. It’s because of dick threats. That is why, honey—dick threats.”

“How do you do it, Kenneth?” She leaned back in her chair.

“Do what?” Again he nuzzled her neck and planted a kiss quickly and precisely over that very tender spot that made her absolutely crazy.

“Put me so at ease—turn me on quicker than shit. Oh Kenneth...”

With great expertise, he had her jeans unsnapped, two fingers firmly inside her, with his thumb pressing against her clit, taking in the lust on her face.

“Oh God,” she moaned.

“Do you like that?”

“Shit yes,” she responded...barely.

He loved the way she moved when he touched her. It was so unrestrained, unrefined, and natural. He could feel the blood coursing to his shaft as he watched her body twist on his fingers. She came abruptly and fell against his chest. He kissed her roughly, his hand twisting in her hair. He

had discovered that she liked that, him pulling her hair. He could make her cum by spanking her ass, or pinning her to the bedpost and tormenting her with his flogger. It was just another thing added to the list of why he had to have her. Vanilla sex had its moments but he was not the missionary kind of guy. He liked it rough and so did she.

“I cannot believe,” he said as he unzipped his pants, “that you are mine. How did I go so long without you?”

“Kenneth,” she whispered, “you are so beautiful to me.”

“You are beautiful. I believe in God and love. I think you're a gift from God to me.” He pulled her to a standing position and pushed her pants down in one motion, taking the panties with them.

“Step out,” he ordered.

She complied with a look of anticipation and lust in her eyes that matched his.

She straddled him, impaling herself on his hard shaft.

“Oh damn, ride me, Chris...that feels so good. You are so tight, honey, you don't know what you do to me...faster, fuck me faster...I want to fuck you forever, Chris. I want to marry you, and fuck some more. You're so good, sweetheart. I will never get enough of you ever. You're mine. Mine.”

Chapter 6

“Okay,” he said, bringing the car to a stop in front of the ranch style brick house. “Do not let Gina intimidate you. If she’s in a prissy mood, then my mom will be in a prissy mood. Don’t let them scare you. They might try, but don’t let them.” He squeezed her hand for added emphasis and support.

“I thought you said that they would like me?” she said apprehensively.

“I only said that so you’d come.”

“So you lied?”

“Only so you’d come.” He leaned across the seat and kissed her. With a huge smile and a twinkle in his eye he asked, “Are you ready?”

“Fuck no!”

“You’re going to fit right in.” He squinted.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“My mother has a mouth like a sailor too.” He bolted out of the Lexus sport car, walked over to the passenger door, and opened it. They both turned in unison at the sound of the front door whipping open, followed by a resounding slam.

“Daddy!” The little girl sprinted across the yard and jumped into Kenneth’s outstretched arms. He lifted her high in the air and twirled her around.

“Hello, baby.” He planted a kiss firmly on her forehead. “I missed you.”

“I love you, Daddy.” Ashley laid her head on Kenneth’s shoulder.

“I want you to meet someone, Ash.” He walked her to the car to make introductions. “Ash, this is Chris, my very special friend that I have been telling you about.”

“Hello. I’m Ashley.” She reached her hand out to Chris, never letting go of her father’s neck.

“It’s nice to meet you, Ashley.” Chris took Ashley’s hand and shook it. “Your daddy has told me a lot about you.” They smiled at one another and then at Kenneth.

“Is your mommy here?” Kenneth asked. Chris heard the apprehension in Kenneth’s voice and wondered what other surprises he may have in store for her.

“Yes. And play nice, Daddy,” Ashley said.

“Kenneth,” Regina yelled from the porch before he had a chance to respond to Ashley’s statement. He turned and waved.

“Please Daddy, please play nice.”

“I will, baby,” he whispered in her ear.

Chris felt every nerve in her body rear its ugly little head as she watched Regina walk towards them. Actually, it was more of a glide. She took in Regina. She had delicate features like Chris, small bone structure, short hair, same color eyes. But Regina had a special sparkle about her, that extra something that intimidated most women.

Chris felt a pang of insecurity. Kenneth always referred to Regina as the sweet little girl next door type. What a crock of bullshit. She waltzed across the lawn like she was fucking Princess Diana raised from the dead. Regina placed her hand on the small of Kenneth’s back and kissed his cheek. Chris took a step back and wished she could disappear.

“Have you been given your orders?” Regina asked smoothly, never taking her eyes off him. Great, even her voice was unique—neither husky nor demure, but sultry and sweet.

Just fucking great, Chris thought.

“Yes,” he said, kissing Ashley’s forehead again. “I have been told to play nice.”

“Mommy please, no yelling,” Ashley instructed.

“I promised you I wouldn’t.” Regina smiled at her daughter.

Chris realized that Regina's hand never left Kenneth. The fact that Kenneth did not extricate himself from her hold only compounded her uncertainty.

"So how are you?" Regina asked.

"Okay."

"You're just okay?"

Chris saw his jaw tighten. Kenneth shook his head slightly and elaborated. "I'm trying to get used to university hours again and all that goes along with it without taking away from Ashley and Chris. Things will calm down soon enough. I have roughly three weeks left in the semester so it's downhill from here. Chris and I will be able to chill out soon. But all in all we're doing pretty well. Why? What's with the look?"

The voices around Chris faded into the background as she took in the meaning of Kenneth's response. He had spoken of her as if they were one. She glowed on the inside at the thought. Then she realized all conversation had stopped and Gina, Kenneth, and Ashley were staring at her. Her hand raced to her hair and her fingers busied themselves smoothing down any edges that the wind may have disturbed—surely they stared at a stray hair.

"Are you okay, honey?" Kenneth touched her shoulder absently.

"I'm fine."

“You’re sure?” Regina asked.

“Absolutely.” Chris smiled to emphasis the point.

“If you’re sure...” Regina turned her attention back to Kenneth, and in essence dismissed Chris totally. “You seem different.”

“I am,” he said, smiling broadly at Regina, and then he winked at Chris.

“I like it, this new and improved relaxed Kenneth.”

“I’m glad you approve.” The sarcasm in his laughter did not go unnoticed by Regina.

She smirked at him before speaking. “You’re being rude, Kenneth.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“Mommy and Daddy, you promised.”

“It’s okay Ash; Mommy knows that Daddy is just teasing her.”

“I wasn’t talking about your cryptic little response to me. You’re ignoring Chris and she looks uncomfortable.” Regina glanced at Chris.

Upon hearing her name, Chris shot to attention. She caught a glint of a smile in Regina’s eye and went on high alert. Kenneth looked at her quickly than back at Regina.

“I have a present for you, Daddy. It’s in Grandma Birdy’s room. Do you want to see it?” Ashley asked. She placed her hand on Kenneth’s cheek and

turned his face to hers, wanting his full attention as all doting daughters do.

“Please. I want you to see it now, Daddy, please?”

He looked at Chris and hesitated.

“She’ll be okay. I won’t bite her,” Regina said, crossing her arms and looking at Chris.

“Go. I’ll be fine,” Chris said.

“Come with us,” Kenneth said to Chris. Chris smiled at Kenneth and then looked at Regina.

“You go. Please,” she said, never taking her eyes off Regina.

“You’re sure?” Kenneth asked.

“Oh for God’s sake, Kenny, and don’t give me that Lord’s name in vain crap,” Gina said irritably. The way Gina dragged out *Kenny* made Chris want to slug her.

“Some things never change do they?”

“Play nice!” Ashley said.

“Just go, Kenneth,” Chris said firmly.

“What do you think I’m going to do or say to her, Kenny?” Regina asked.

“Yeah *Kenny*, what do you think I’d *let* her *just* do or say to me?” Chris added.

“You’re being ridiculous, Kenny,” Gina stated and looked sharply at Chris.

“I’m not a little girl, Kenneth.” Chris looked him squarely in the eyes and dared him to make a heroic gesture or say anything that implied Chris needed his help with Gina.

“Right, I’m the little girl,” Ashley said, eyeing Chris. “Your only girl and I want to show you my present now!”

All three of them turned their attention to him, frowns on all faces.

“Kenny!”

Kenneth turned, visibly relieved to hear the voice that called out to him. Elias would know what to do. “Thank God, Pops!”

“Let’s go, boy, while the going is good. Let them hash it out on their own and just be glad that your mother is too busy in the kitchen to be out here too.” Elias revealed a row of perfectly white, even teeth. He took Ashley from Kenneth and, holding her hand, took a step towards the front door. Ashley stopped abruptly. She placed both hands on her hips and glared at her father.

“Come on, Daddy!”

Kenneth smiled questioningly at Chris.

“Go,” she said, leaning against the car door.

He looked at Elias for guidance.

“Trust me on this, Kenny. Let’s go inside,” Elias said.

Kenneth smiled and took Ashley’s hand.

“So what kind of present is it?” he asked his daughter. “Did you make it yourself?”

Both Gina and Chris watched them disappear into the house.

* * * * *

“So you’re Chris,” Gina said when the front door closed.

“Yeah, I’m Chris.”

“Kenny’s told me a lot about you.”

“I’ve only known him for a couple weeks. So he couldn’t have told you too much.” Chris made a mental note to never call Kenneth *Kenny* again. She knew she could never pull off that purr on his name as sweet as Gina was doing.

“Put your claws away, Chris. I don’t want Kenny. Been there and done that. What I meant to say was during the limited amount of time that you’ve known each other, he’s told me quite a bit about you.”

“Is this where we draw lines in the grass and dare each other to jump over them, or do we dispense with the formalities and just get down to business?” Chris took a step towards Gina.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know, I knock the shit out of you.”

“Over Kenneth? Girl, please...be for real.” Gina laughed.

“What's so fucking funny?”

“Calm yourself down there, Little Tyra-Wannabe-Banks. We can do this without Dr. Phil; it's not that deep. All I am saying is that I could give a rat's ass about Kenny. In that way, I mean. Didn't he tell you that I'm engaged?”

“Where I come from, that doesn't mean shit.”

“Yeah, that's right. He said you were from Chicago.”

“So?”

“So, this is the south and we're mellower here in the south—kissing cousins.”

“You can kiss any cousin you'd like, but not Kenneth.”

“Shit girl! I like you.” Then, without warning, Gina grabbed Chris and hugged her. “You remind me of me when I realized I liked Kenneth more

than just a friend! Now all we have to do is convince Ash that you're not going to take her Daddy away," Gina said with a smile.

Chris slowly smiled but only fractionally relaxed.

"From the minute Kenneth told Ashley about you, I'm afraid my daughter formed an instant dislike for you. She is very territorial, a real daddy's girl. Of course, the fact that Kenny spoils her rotten and has her thinking she's the most important person ever does not make it easier. Of course I tried to convince her to give you a chance."

"I'm sure you did," Chris said skeptically.

"I did," Gina replied. "You see, now I'll just tell Ash that she was right—you're a terrible person—and the minute I do, Ashley will jump to your defense and become overnight your very best friend and biggest fan. Unfortunately for me, if I say something is red, immediately my daughter will say its light red or worse, pink. But that's a good thing for you because now she'll spend her energy trying to convince me to play nice. Do you see?"

"And you're doing this because..." Chris trailed off.

"I want Kenny to be happy. Sure, we have some major Ashley issues yet to sort through, but those issues do not diminish my love for him. Besides, eventually he'll come to his senses and remember that I was generally always right about everything and then our Ashley issues will be a

moot point. What's so funny?" Gina asked because Chris couldn't help but let a bemused little laugh escape her otherwise rigid demeanor.

Chris remembered that Kenneth had said the same thing when he explained the problem between him and Gina.

"It's nothing. Kenneth explained about the Ashley issues."

"He's crazy about her. We both are. Kenny is for the most part great. He gave me something no one else ever could."

"You mean Ashley."

"Not just Ashley. He gave me a whole lot more than her. I never really had a family. My mom, well, she would never win an award for Mom of the Year, not even Mom of the Minute. I was six years old when I first met Kenny. That's when Kenny's mom Birdy and Elias moved into the old neighborhood. We became friends. It was me, Kenny, and our buddy Leo. You know Leo right?"

"Professor Barons. Sure."

"Well anyway, I loved hanging out at Kenny's and well, with no father and no mother to speak of, I used to have fantasies that I belonged to Birdy and Elias. So when Kenny and I hooked up, his family became officially and legally my family. I've loved Kenny all my life. But to be honest, eliminating hormonal urges, we really should not have been together."

“Hormonal urges. Kenneth mentioned that little tidbit too. And your rubbing it in my face isn’t doing much for this bonding that you’re interested in our having.”

“Sorry. I guess I shouldn’t have said that. What else did he say?”

“You’re kidding right? What kind of question is that?”

“Well damn, I am nosy aren’t I? Sorry. But listen, Chris, really, I am no threat. I just...you know, love him.”

“You still love him? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Yeah, I’m telling you I still love Kenneth and I’ll always love Kenneth. But I don’t want Kenneth. Not like that. I’m going to marry a man that loves me the way Kenneth never could have loved me. There are different levels of love, Chris. I’m not a threat to you in any way but one. Well two. Don’t break Kenneth’s heart or my daughter’s heart. Both are yours if you want them. If you do, then you have no idea how lucky you are going to be.”

“I’ve only known him two weeks. I don’t even know where this is going.”

“To Kenny, a day is a lifetime. But you should know that by now.”

“Yeah, I’m figuring that out,” Chris said, smiling at Gina. It was crazy, but she was amazed at how relaxed she was beginning to feel. She was

talking to her man's ex-wife and subconsciously she had put away her daggers and was enjoying the bonding.

"Do you smoke?" Regina asked, completely out of left field.

"No."

"Good. Ashley has asthma. I avoid taking Ashley places where people are smoking you know. I try to be as careful as possible. She hasn't had an attack for months now."

"Kenneth didn't tell me that. When she's with us, I'll make sure that it's always a healthy environment," Chris said, nodding in agreement.

Regina leaned against Kenneth's car and looked at Chris. "Every once in a while give me an angry growl. He's watching from the bedroom window there." Gina nodded slightly to the left and Chris caught a movement of the curtains. "He thinks I'm going to tell you all his dirty little secrets but I'm not. That wouldn't be right and besides, the last thing I want is for you to think that I want him, which I don't."

"Yeah right, I hear you." Chris regretted the sharpness of her response and mentally kicked herself.

"Still, you don't believe me." Regina made a reprimanding "tsking" sound before continuing. "Look, one last time all I want is for him to be as happy as I am with someone as good as Alex. Alex is my fiancé. I want

Kenny to be as happy as me. I just wanted you to know that and to say that to you while we were alone. I know you think this is strange and crazy. I know I would. But that's all I wanted to say to you."

"I hear you."

"I want us to be fast friends for Ashley and for Kenneth and for me too."

"Now we're getting somewhere. I understand Kenneth and Ashley, but why is it so important to you? And do not try to snow me or bullshit me."

"I don't want to lose Birdy and Elias."

"You're Ashley's mom. How could you lose them?"

"You will be Kenneth's wife. He'll bring you for Thanksgiving and Christmas and Sunday dinners after church. I would never put Elias and Birdy into a position of choosing my presence or yours. Kenny and Alex get along fine so that's not an issue. Alex and Elias are really close and Alex calls Birdy Mom. I want us—you and me—to be like Alex and Kenny, friends. Besides Ashley and Alex, the only family I have is Kenny, Birdy, and Elias. I don't want to give them up. Hell, I gave up my marriage with Kenny so I wouldn't have to leave them."

"Kenneth told me about that."

“He told you about my staying here and not going to New York with him? In retrospect, I still would have made the same choice. It was the right one. Had I followed him as he felt I should have, then Kenny and I would be miserable together and where would you and Alex be? You’re what he wants Chris. I can tell by the way he looks at you. I can’t remember seeing that look when we were together. Kenneth said you’re getting married. I think you’re very lucky and so is he.”

“So he says. Who am I fooling? I want to be with him so bad sometimes I think I’ll die if it doesn’t happen sooner rather than later.”

“Listen girlfriend, I give the two of you a month, maybe two months max, and then you’ll be the new Mrs. Ingram. I think I’ll like that.” She slowly moved off the car and added, “Let’s go inside. I know Birdy’s dying to meet you.”

Chapter 7

“I love holding you, Chris. I love the way your body fits mine.” Kenneth held Chris in his arms and she snuggled closer to him, intertwining her leg with his. He tightened his grip and ran his lips along her forehead.

“You're so lucky, Kenneth,” she said.

“Why, because I have you?” he asked mockingly.

“No. I mean yes, but also because you have your family. They all love you so much,” she said.

He propped himself up and rested his head in his hand, looking down at her.

“I thought you were close to your family?”

“Sure I am. Alicia, my sister, and I are very close. But, my parents...” she barely whispered.

“You're not close to your parents.”

“I love my parents. They're very supportive of me, but our relationship is nothing like yours with Birdy and Elias. My parents spend so much time in their role as protector of Alicia and me, that along the way we never developed a friendship. I'm not their friend, I'm their daughter. I wish...my

Mom and I were friends the way you are with Birdy. I could never express myself to my parents the way you do. I've never met people like them before." She reflected on the day's events at his parents' home.

"You like them then?" he asked, wanting to steer her away from overanalyzing her feelings about her parents, and her relationship to them. She responded with jubilation to his question.

"God yes, Kenneth. Your mother is crazy! I can't remember the last time I laughed so hard. Your mom and Regina together are insane. I felt for poor Alex and Elias. I bet they never have a dull moment. And Ashley is such a little lady and very protective of you. I mean she is a real Daddy's girl which I understand completely, because I am too. I can't believe that I was ready to hate Regina because I thought that she probably still wanted you."

"Gina loves Alex," Kenneth said adamantly.

"Oh I saw that. At first I misinterpreted what she was saying as the ex-wife wanting her man back." Chris sat up and looked at him. "But she was the ex-wife wanting to be my friend because she wants to be your friend, and she really loves Birdy and Elias. She was going out of her way to make me comfortable and to like her and...it was just so weird. We're meeting next Saturday for lunch and I'm going to hook her up with my hairdresser. She really likes the way my beautician lays my hair out. Oh my

God, she is drop dead gorgeous and she sincerely likes my hair! This is so crazy, Kenneth.”

“You’re drop dead gorgeous, and is it crazy good or crazy bad?”

“Good. It’s all good.” She took a deep breath. “But it’s so fucking scary too.” She added quickly, “Sorry, but so friggin’ scary.”

“Why?” He kissed her shoulder.

“It’s like I’m in a dream. It’s been like this since I met you. When I’m with you it feels so good and so right. I don’t want to ever leave. I want to hide away inside you and go everywhere you go. I want to be everything that you want me to be and more because you have so much faith in me and you honestly believe that I can do anything. When I’m not with you, I get really scared and the ‘*what if’s*’ are in my brain, making me crazy. I want so badly to let every doubt and precaution I have go. I get so angry with myself, Kenneth, because even now I am still scared. Yesterday I stood outside your door for a long time. I was afraid to knock.”

“What? Why, honey?”

“Because I’ve been here every day since I met you. I was thinking as I stood there, what if he wishes that I give him a break and what if he has other plans? The worst was what if he’s with someone else?”

“That will never happen.”

“Kenneth, let me finish. The 'what ifs' are driving me crazy and the way I feel about you is driving me crazy. I know, I know, I know I am over-analyzing this. You tell me all the time, I am over-thinking it. Kenneth, you make me crazy. I can't think straight! Everything is about you now...everything.” She slid down into his arms and he held her close, a grin on his face.

“I'm that good?” he asked jokingly.

She playfully slapped his back.

“You know you are. You're that good. I don't understand how she could just let you go off to New York without her. How can she love someone else when she had you? How can I love you and have you and keep you all to myself? Everything about the way I feel scares me.”

“Chris.”

“Let me finish, Kenneth, please. In three weeks you have taken me through so many changes. I started out this self-assured woman, hell bent on succeeding and never being that girl who gets lost in a man's ideal of love. I had decided that I would be this independent woman. Hell, I was finished with the idea of love and happily ever after. And now, three weeks later, here I am lost in you, lost in loving you so much, wanting to give all of me to you. I am so close to the dream that you speak about; it's within my grasp,

but I am still afraid to take that plunge. I know, I know I'm contradicting myself. I'm just so scared."

"This isn't your way of saying that it hurts too much to be with me? You're not thinking that maybe it's easier not being with me?"

"Oh God no, never. I'm saying that...I can't imagine living my life without you in it. I crave you. I've wanted someone like you...I feel like I've wanted you forever. The bad part is that I'm afraid I'll lose you, smother you, and want you too much. So I am now here with the same problem I had three weeks ago, only I have allowed my heart to open to you and I am still here frightened as hell of losing, of being hurt again. I feel like I'm walking on eggshells. I'm tired of feeling this way and I know you're tired of hearing it."

"Just keep talking to me and we'll get through it together. Tell me your fears always, Chris, and I'll always try to help you with them."

"I know, and I am grateful. I just need to relax and stop thinking. I need to be myself. I need to loosen up."

"You make it sound like you're some kind of robot or something wandering around here. If you weren't yourself these last several weeks, then God help me when you do unleash your true nature."

"Beg your pardon?"

“Your feathers ruffle quicker than anyone I have ever known,” he teased her.

She buried her head in his chest and squeezed his arm. She could feel how tense he was and knew that if he could he’d erase all the hurt that she’d experienced at Rondall’s hand from her memory. Not so that it would be easier for him, but so that it would be a pain that didn’t exist for her, a pain that made her nuts, a pain that kept her from moving forward.

“You just piss me off sometimes. I can’t help it. But I need you. I can’t say...I won’t say I’ll do anything to have you. I can’t stop being me. I will not stop being me. Not even for you. Please don’t ask me to turn into Barbie or Harriet Nelson. Please don’t ask me to be different than I am now.”

“Honey,” he said, wrapping his arms around her. “I want you the way you are. That’s why I love you. For who you are, not who I want you to be. Who I want you to be is who you are. I like a woman with spunk. I want you for who you are, filthy potty mouth and all.”

“Are you sure, Kenneth? I know I call you names but not like I used to. And only when I’m really shitty and I hardly ever use the f-word anymore. I try not to. Sometimes I slip, but I try not to. And that’s okay to change that. It is a bad habit. I started it just to piss my father off and now I do it sometimes just to piss you off; especially when you pull that macho me

Tarzan you Jane crap, which I do like sometimes. But I...I do and say things that can be trying I know. I like who I am. I can't change. I won't change. Not in the big ways! And to not say the f-word is a little thing, not a big thing, and you have to concede that I have put forth an effort to clean it up."

"Yes. I give you an A for effort."

"Seriously Kenneth, do you understand what I am saying? My mother did that. She became what my father wanted her to be in the name of love. Because she did that, I never got to know who she was but just the woman my father wanted her to be."

"I'm not going to do that. I promise."

"And you'll take really good care of me?"

"I intend to take extremely good care of you."

"Good. I want someone to take care of me. I have to be tough out there but in here I just want to crawl up into your arms and let you take care of me. I want you to make all the bad things go away."

"Look at me, Chris. I'm not going to let anything or anyone hurt you ever. Do you believe me when I say that I will not let you down or let anyone take you from me?"

"I want to believe you, Kenneth. I have faith in you."

“That’s a very promising start. We will make it to the end of that tunnel, honey, and I will be with you every step of the way. Just believe in me, in us, Chris.”

“I will. I promise I am going to work hard at catching up with you.” She kissed him, and then added quickly, “But if you're lying, then when I get through with you, you'll think the way Gina is fucking with you over the Ashley issues is child's play compared to the bullshit that I'll put you through. I will not tolerate you hurting me or playing with my mind. Do you understand, Kenneth? Remember who started this. I wanted to screw you. You wanted to get married. Do you remember, Kenneth?” She grabbed his arm, unwittingly applying more pressure than she had thought.

He flinched. “I remember. Calm down.”

“If you hurt me, I won’t let you get away with it.” Her nails bit into his arm and this time, along with flinching, he tried to pull away from her, but her grip was firm.

“Then I guess I had better not hurt you.” He snatched his arm away from her and inspected it. “That hurt!” He threw his legs over the side of the bed. “Chris, you broke the skin,” he yelled at her.

“Sorry.”

“I can't believe you did that. Look at this.” He shoved his arm in her face so that she could see the little prick on his skin. “What's the matter with you?”

“I said I was sorry. Why are you acting like a baby? It's just a little prick!”

“I'm bleeding, Chris.”

“It's a scratch. You're behaving like a baby and you're overreacting at that,” she said, exasperated and annoyed that he was carrying on about his arm. She grabbed his arm and then flung it away. “You're not bleeding. It's just red. You are acting as if I beat you or something. I said I was sorry. It's not like I meant to hurt you.” She kissed his shoulder and added, “I can think of a couple things that I can do to make it all better. Would you like that, Kenneth? Would you like for me to try to make it better?”

She lay back on the bed and held her arms out to him. He looked down at her and she could imagine the deviant thoughts that raced through his mind because he had the look of the little boy locked in a candy store—so many choices...so little time.

“You say you're sorry, Chris, but I don't know if you understand exactly what you've done.” In a flash, he pounced on top of her.

She held her breath, trying not to laugh at the menacing look he gave her. She'd been here before with him; role-playing was Kenneth's favorite game and one that she looked forward to. It was a game they played well together.

"What if I did that to you?" he asked.

"Get off me, Kenneth."

"Men go to jail for doing crap like that. How many poor saps said I'm sorry but woke up in a jail anyway? How many poor innocent assholes said they were sorry?"

"Let go of me, Kenneth...please...I'll do anything you say."

He held her firmly on the bed, his hands clasped around her wrists, her arms stretched out above her head. He lay on top of her and kissed her. He moved his body seductively against her, each movement quicker and sharper than the previous. She arched to meet his lips, conscious to keep up the pretense of fighting him off.

"Are you scared, Chris?"

"No." She tried to bite back her laugh but couldn't.

He responded by pulling her up from the bed, slapping her ass several times, and then falling back to the firm mattress with her, once more, trapped asymmetrically beneath his body.

“You're scaring me, Kenneth.”

“You're scaring me, Kenneth,” he mimicked her. “You always say you're scaring me, Kenneth.” He brushed his lips against hers. “Why is that, Chris? Do you want me to scare you?” His mouth captured her earlobe and he ran his tongue along the inside curve.

She jerked her hips.

Bingo!

He grabbed her nightshirt and pulled it up to her waist. Then he grabbed at her panties and tugged at them. He made a mental note to visit Victoria's Secret and replace her bikini and boy cut panties for sexy black and red thongs. She eased herself up so that he could work them off quicker and easier. All the while they stared at one another. Again his hands snatched out and captured her wrists in his grip, holding them firmly.

“Do you want me to scare you, Chris?” His voice was deep and harsh.

She struggled once more and then gave into the moan that she'd trapped inside her throat.

“Let...me...go,” she moaned.

“Why?” he asked as his head moved towards her breasts.

“I want to touch you.” She tilted her neck to the side so that she could graze her teeth along his face. She had learned that maneuver drove him over the edge. “I can’t touch you when you’re holding me down.”

“Do you want me to scare you?” He released her hands and sat up. His blue eyes were laden with lust. She quivered.

“No.” She placed her hands on the elastic waistband of his sleeping pants. She yanked them down and then brought her hands to his head and pulled him down.

“Say yes, Chris. Tell me to scare you.” His demand was followed by a piercing kiss.

“No.”

“Say yes. Say yes now, Chris,” he demanded. “Tell me to do all those bad little things that you like me to do to this sexy body of yours. Tell me to take you, Chris. Say yes, honey...say yes.”

“Yes,” she said, bringing her lips up to meet his and wrapping her legs around his back. They captured one another with a hunger. Like animals. He moved quickly. She responded with a desire that he had unleashed the first time she saw him. She closed her eyes and saw it so clearly. He said hello. She heard the words again and again. Her body moved to the rhythm of his simple hello.

“Tell me you love me, Chris.” He penetrated her body, her mind, her soul.

She held him and said, “Ah God, Kenneth...what you do to me.”

He kissed her slowly, deeply. Then with a fierceness that made her tremble and stop her heart. Her body vaulted to meet his. She loved him. She needed him. She ran her teeth along the rough stubble of his throat. She moaned with pleasure as his teeth and hands raked across her chest.

“Kenneth,” she yelled.

He grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her head back as he exploded inside her.

“Don't ever leave me, Chris.”

“I can't leave you.”

“I swear I'll keep you safe. No one will hurt you if you stay with me...just me and nobody else, honey. You can't have anybody else.”

“I don't want anybody else, Kenneth.” *Mine*, she thought as he claimed her.

All mine.

“God honey, you don't know what you do to me,” he whispered to her. Over and over again he told her in a quiet self-assured voice all the things she wanted to hear, all the things she desperately wanted to believe.

He whispered to her about her dreams and how he could make them come true if she only believed.

She held him closely.

She couldn't imagine anything or anyone that could make her leave him. Her last thought before joining him in sleep was how badly she wanted those dreams to be true and how she ached to just believe.

* * * * *

Kenneth muttered and reached for the ringing phone, taking note of the time and wondering who was calling at 12:45 in the morning. He grabbed the phone, realizing suddenly that it might be Gina. What if something had happen to Ashley or Elias?

"Hello," he said, anxiously praying that it wasn't Gina or his mother.

"Professor Ingram?" It was a female's voice.

"Yes," he said. "This is Professor Ingram."

"This is Nicky, Chris's roommate. May I speak to her please, if you don't mind?" Nicky asked. Her voice gave Kenneth the shivers. For a pretty girl, she was a borderline bitch and Kenneth hated being in her presence or

even in her close proximity. She was without a doubt the most viperous bitch he'd ever known. They had agreed to avoid one another at all cost.

"Why?" he asked as dryly as possible. "She's sleeping." He looked over at Chris who was beginning to stir.

"Put her on the phone."

"I told you. She's sleeping. Can this wait until morning?" he asked. There was a pause and Kenneth instinctively knew that Nicky's reply would be rabid and well-thought out. The girl was quick with her sarcastic comebacks.

"Wake her and tell her she has company at home, assuming of course that this *is* still her home." Nicky's reply was as cold as Kenneth knew it would be. He shrugged and decided to take her bait.

"You expect me to believe that she has company at this hour of the morning?"

"Yes I most certainly do. Are you calling me a liar? And here's an added FYI for you, Professor, just in case I neglected to mention this, it's her boyfriend. Yeah, boyfriend, and he drove all the way to New Orleans just to see his sweetie. You will tell her won't you? I know she would be upset if you didn't. Well, as the fine folks in France would say, *au revoir*, Professor Ingram."

“Nicole!” Kenneth yelled into the phone.

“I’m sorry, do you prefer German? *Auf Wiedersehen*, Professor Ingram.”

She slammed the phone down and Kenneth sat stunned, listening to the droning of the dial tone. He dropped the phone and shook Chris.

“Wake up!” he ordered.

“Leave me alone,” she replied, shrugging her arm away from his prodding.

He sat up on his knees and grabbed her arm, startling her and bringing her to a sitting position.

“I said get up.”

“What is wrong with you?” she retorted as she attempted unsuccessfully to free herself from his grip.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!” That got her attention. Kenneth cursed. Not just any old curse word, but Kenneth said *fuck*. The few times Kenneth yelled he was always pissed beyond reason and that word came from his mouth only when he was on the verge of a major orgasm. Whatever was going on was serious.

“Let go of me now,” she said evenly. He did. Pushing her back onto the pillow, he jumped out of the bed, yelling like a madman as he put on the

jeans he had discarded earlier when they got in from his parents. “Slow down,” she said calmly. “And explain to me what you are talking about?”

“Get out of the bed and let’s go.” He took her arm and pulled her up again. She jerked away and fell back on the bed.

“What is going on? You are seriously beginning to piss me off.” *Patience be damned*, she thought.

“Your little buddy Nicole, the campus shrew and head witch, just called. It seems you neglected to mention a boyfriend.”

“Nicky called here and told you I have a boyfriend. What the hell are you talking about?” she asked.

“You have company at home, Chris—your boyfriend. It seems the poor bastard drove all night to see his...let’s see, how did she phrase it? Oh yeah, his sweetie. You didn’t tell me about a boyfriend. I’ve heard plenty about an ex. When were you going to tell me about your boyfriend—after our wedding? Perhaps you were going to enlighten me on our fucking honeymoon?”

“Ex-boyfriend and slow down, Kenneth, please. You know all about him.”

“I am so pissed off with you right now I can’t think straight.” He stopped pacing and stood in the middle of the bedroom with his back to her

and his hands resting on his hips. She walked over to him and put her head into the bend of his back and her arms around his waist.

“Ex-boyfriend, Kenneth, and we have discussed him on numerous occasions.”

“If he's such an ex what the fuck is he doing at your apartment?”

“I have no idea,” she said.

He removed her hands and walked out of the room.

She crossed to the door and yelled after him, “Let me explain.”

He made no reply.

So she stood there, unwilling to move and refusing to follow after him.

* * * * *

This, she thought, is a life altering moment. This is a turning point in our relationship. A real test, and, depending on how she handled it, she'd either pass it with flying colors and live happily ever after, or fail it, resulting in her returning to the life she had before she met Kenneth Ingram.

She would not stoop to running after him, chasing him, whimpering and crying, begging for his understanding and forgiveness for something

that she hadn't done. That was not an option, despite the raging debate that was going on inside her amongst her alter egos. They were all yelling in her brain at once.

Of course Fear, prissy, silly Fear without a backbone in her body was all for her throwing herself at his feet, groveling, whimpering, and crying, begging for forgiveness when she hadn't really done anything wrong. Hell no, good old Anger chimed in. Make him live to regret his actions and then kick his ass. Yeah, that was a thought. Chris yelled an obscenity at the space where he had stood before he slammed out of the bedroom.

Okay. So she was way littler than him and the chances of her kicking his ass were non-existent. Besides, this was an adult relationship and she was an adult so she'd handle it as such and not resort to a tactic so asinine and stupid.

Fear and Anger blanched when Lust spoke. Stroke his ego, tell him he's the shit, and then when he's at his weakest, give him the best damn blowjob this side of the Mason-Dixon line. That will calm his mind and he'll forget what he was even angry about. There's not a man alive who can stay angry following a good blowjob—especially if the lady giving it does so of her own free will instead of being asked.

Chris smiled. Not a bad idea—after all she'd get something out of that. But no dice, she thought as she slowly crossed back to the bed and reached for her gown. Once dressed in it, she sat down slowly. *He didn't even give me a chance to explain!* Anger perked up. *He'll regret this!* Anger was jubilant.

She touched her forehead. And then she smiled. Slowly she realized what had happened. That bright, beautiful shining light—also known as Wisdom—glowed and lit up every corner of her brain. She looked around his room. At his things and her smile broadened. She ran her hand along the bed and then she laughed.

Quietly and happily she laughed.

She felt good.

Very good, because she was still here! She had not grabbed her clothes and ran from his apartment. Self-preservation never entered her mind. She had not used this episode as a catalyst that would lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, thus dooming the relationship to the oblivion of Hell. She did not think about past hurts and run out just to avoid a current hurt. She remained here.

She didn't give in to Fear, or Anger, or that slut Lust. No.

She was choosing...Wisdom.

Despite what he had said and how he had reacted, he had not told her to leave and she had not left. It all made sense to her and she felt free. Free to love him and to accept his love. No more comparing him to Rondall because he was not Rondall. She lay down on the bed, pulling the covers snugly over her, and she felt so happy. He loved her! Not because he flew into a jealous rage, but because at no time during his anger did he tell her to get out. If he didn't love her, he would have told her to leave. But he didn't. The revelation and security all came together at once.

Thank you, Wisdom!

For weeks she had been afraid to take that plunge. To dive off that pier and trust that Kenneth would catch her. She'd been afraid because of Rondall and her terrible past with him. Not anymore. She couldn't even muster the energy to be mad at Rondall. It was her fault. She was allowing Rondall to maintain that invisible hold on her. Not anymore. She felt so free and peaceful. She believed. Kenneth loved her; it wasn't a pipe dream, and she would have it all. She would have it all with Kenneth.

"I'm so pissed at you right now," he had said. *Right now! He really loves me*, she thought. Men who just slept with women, and really enjoyed sleeping with that woman, would not hesitate to throw them out because they knew that there was always another willing woman in the shadows

just waiting. But he loved her. She hugged her legs to her chest and smiled in the warmth of knowing that he really loved her and that she really, really, believed it and trusted it. And that she really, really loved him too.

Without any fear or lingering doubt!

She hadn't walked away. She stayed because she loved him and trusted him.

And she wanted him.

"I love him," she whispered. I stayed. I'm sticking! I'm not running, but staying and sticking! I'm not afraid to face the unknown. I believe! He is not going to hurt me!

With that realization, she knew she had to call Nicky. What if Rondall was at the apartment? What was he doing here instead of Chicago? What was he doing here? And why would Nicky mislead Kenneth? Chris snorted.

Nicky disliked Kenneth so much that she would deliberately attempt to get some shit started between Kenneth and Chris. Of course Nicky would invite Rondall here just to try to break them up. Nicky was such a backward militant for the black folks that she couldn't see that love was blind.

"That bitch!" she muttered as she reached for the phone, but stopped. Tomorrow she'd deal with Nicky and anyone else out there that would pose

a threat to her and Kenneth. *Her Kenneth*. She basked in the glow that surrounded her. Yes, he was hers and she was his. She closed her eyes and thought about where they would live once they were married. A big white house with a red door and white picket fence consumed her thoughts as she closed her eyes and indulged in all the possibilities of their future.

Chapter 8

She could feel him there, staring down at her. She turned her head to face the door and saw him standing there, his hands on his hips. She wanted to smile, but refused to. They stared at one another. Her heart beat rapidly.

“Well?” He finally spoke.

“Well what?” she asked.

“Who the fuck is he?” Kenneth asked.

“Did you hear what you just said? You said fuck, Kenneth, and we aren't even screwing. As a matter of fact, you've used that disgusting word several times in the last hour. And you have the nerve to condemn my blatant use of it.”

“Don't try to sidetrack me Chris. I asked you a question and I expect an answer right this second or so help me God.”

“Or so help you God what?”

“I'll go over there and beat the shit out of him, bring his mangled body back here, and then you can tell the both of us what you've been up to.”

“If it's who I think it is, then you'll be the one getting the ass kicking. He weighs over two hundred fifty pounds, is six-foot-four, and a real bad ass. So go. Take your little ass on over there David and watch Goliath eat your ass alive.” The minute the words exited her month she winced.

He pounced on her.

“You're hurting me.” It was purely a standard reply whenever he pounced on her.

“Forget it, Chris. I'm not going to fuck you. You reel in the hormones and tell me who that guy is. Why is he making himself comfortable in your apartment?”

“Let go of me and then I'll talk.” She spoke very calmly. He looked at the smile on her face and she knew he was stupefied by her reaction.

“What are you up to? But first, who is he and what does he mean to you?” he asked bitinglly as he slid to the side and rested against the headboard, his legs pulled up slightly, glaring all the while at her. She sat up slowly. He grunted and then he looked away, then back at her quickly in time to see the amusement on her face.

“It's not funny.”

“Bullshit. It's funny and ridiculous and totally uncalled for. How dare you treat me with such disrespect like that?” She took his hands in hers and

held tight. Wisdom applauded. “How dare you? I'm here with you. I'm here with you because I want to be. Not because you make me. I'm not a prisoner you have locked up. I'm a willing and happy part of this relationship and you act as if I'm not.”

“Who is he?” He controlled the anger in his voice and look to her for a reply.

“First, do not ever treat me like your child or just any woman on the street. I deserve better and you know it. As you very well know, Rondall is the nutcase I was involved with. I have no control over where he goes. I'm pretty sure our dear friend Nicky has something to do with him being here. That will be dealt with. He's nothing to me...he is nothing to us.” She took a deep breath before continuing.

“Now, I understand that you were not thinking clearly. This is a new side to you. I would never have pegged you for the jealous type. So, you are learning to live with my...at times...very colorful language and I'll learn to live with the He-Man theatrics that accompany your jealousy. It's a tradeoff. And, finally it appears we've had and settled our forty-third disagreement. This is so awesome because this is the first time I got to say that! Kenneth, it is time to apologize.”

“You expect me to apologize.” He grimaced and Chris figured that even he realized what he was saying was stupid and unfounded. But that was okay. They were two mature adults—albeit one of them was being childish at the moment. She would deal with it. Like a woman in love and who was loved.

Wisdom. It did not mean she had to succumb to the same behavior. She was really embracing this grown-up, mature relationship thing. She took a deep breath and decided to take the leap.

“Then it will be a cold day in hell before you crawl your scrawny ass back in this bed with me.” To emphasize the point, she stretched out and pulled the covers to just below her chin. “You sleep on the couch. Without an apology, do not lay your ass in this bed. Go on! Get out of here. Kenneth, leave the room, but not our home. We’re adults—we’ll take a little break within a couple feet of each other.”

“What?” A look of total confusion marred his face.

“You have an eight o'clock class in the morning; I set the alarm so you don't have to worry about oversleeping. I'll make sure you are up and I'll fix pancakes like I have every Monday morning for the past five weeks. Go on, Kenneth.”

“This is my bed,” he announced, astounded by the sudden change in their roles.

“It's *our* bed, Kenneth. You made it mine nearly a month ago and I intend to keep it, but I'm not sharing it with you tonight or tomorrow night or the next night until you apologize to me.” She sat up in the bed. “Damn, do we have any maple syrup? When we went to the grocery store Saturday, I don't think we picked up syrup.”

“Forget about the pancakes and the syrup and the stupid alarm. This is *my* house.”

“*Our* house,” she said softly.

He sat down on the bed.

“My car.” He edged closer to her.

“*Our* car,” she whispered.

He reached out to run his hand slowly down her shoulder, stopping at the curve of her elbow.

“My body.” His hand glided over her abdomen, leaving a feather-light tingling in the depths of her soul as he made small circular motions just below her belly button.

“Your body.” She agreed without hesitation. With a smile on her face as bright as the sun on a cloudless summer day, Chris placed her hand on his and flung it away. “After you apologize.”

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly. He bushed his lips against hers.

She jerked her head away and frowned. “I don’t think you mean it.”

“Don’t push it,” he said with a cocky look on his face.

“Like you did. You just fucking—”

“Chris!” He flopped back on the bed.

“You just fucking assumed the worst of me,” she continued. “And don’t tell me to watch my fucking potty mouth.”

“Jesus Christ!” He groaned.

“Did you know that is the same as my saying fuck? Why don’t you watch your fucking potty mouth?” She laughed.

“Oh God!” He moaned, reached for a pillow, and rolled over to his back and covered his face.

“Kenneth!” She took the pillow from him. “Apologize now. Or so help me...”

“Or so help you what? You’ll leave? Are you threatening to leave me now?”

“I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me.” She reached out, touched his face, and said, “You are mine. I know that now. I believe that with every fiber of my being. I love you, Kenneth. And I am yours. I could never leave, but I will be very sad and I will not be as happy here as I know you want to be. I love you, Kenneth, and I trust you.” She put her arms around him and held him close.

“Chris, for the first time I believe you. For the first time I believe you really mean it.” He nuzzled her neck.

“I do. I know now how much I do. I know that now. When you yelled at me and you were so angry and hurt, but you didn’t tell me to leave, I knew that this is real. And I was mad, really mad but I didn’t leave. Before, I would have left. But it never entered my mind to put my clothes on and leave. I stayed. I wanted to stay. I was mad but it didn’t matter because I didn’t even think to leave. It just didn’t enter my mind.”

“Why?” He asked.

“Because it would hurt me as much as it would hurt you, maybe more.”

“Not more.”

“Just as much.” She lowered her mouth to his and kissed him. “Before I thought I loved you, but now I know that I do love you. I didn’t think that

love at first sight was possible, Kenneth. But I know it is and I found it here with you. I stayed to make it right. And you didn't tell me to leave because you want to make it right." She paused and carefully said, "Kenneth, Rondall means nothing to me...anymore."

"Okay, what the hell does that mean...anymore?"

"He hurt me so badly, Kenneth, and for weeks now I have been holding back an important part of me from you, because I was afraid of feeling that same hurt again. I was still letting him control me. I was giving him this power over me, but tonight, I got it back, Kenneth. I truly had an epiphany."

"I believe you." He believed her because he felt it in her touch and saw it in the look in her eyes.

"I don't care about him; I have no feelings good or bad for him. Kenneth, it is important to me that know that." She laid her head on his shoulder.

"I understand, Chris." He kissed her forehead.

"I love you. How did I get so lucky? Kenneth, know that the woman in your arms tonight has no doubts and she truly loves you completely. Because of you I know what it is like when dreams come true."

She lost herself in his passion and his embrace and the surge and finalization of uniting and becoming one person. It wasn't until morning and he had left for the university that she realized he had not apologized. She shrugged—obtaining that apology would just have to wait until later. Dealing with Nicky and Rondall, and anyone else who tried to destroy her dream with Kenneth was top priority on her list.

The End

A little bit about the author:

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Pat Cromwell's number one addiction is daytime soaps. She draws her inspiration for "over the top and occasionally outrageous" dialogue not only from her favorite daytime soaps – which she records religiously – but also credits her family and friends.

She's the first to admit that her characters are sometimes "way out there" but millions of fans of the genre can't be wrong! She's proudest most of her two children Adrians and Andrue, spoils her dog Tiki rotten, enjoys her job as a MIS Supervisor in Indianapolis, Indiana, and spends her spare time penning stories and watching Lifetime. She loves to hear from her readers so feel free to contact her at pacd97867@cs.com.