

Patricia A.  
Rasey

One simple kiss...  
One mistaken identity...

# Dark Savior



## DARK SAVIOR

...Foster leaned into her, his arousal pinned between them. He wanted nothing more than to grasp her legs and wrap them around his waist and drive into her like there was no tomorrow. Had he ever felt so out of control with Ashley? What the hell was she doing to him, this Ashley...Brooke, or whoever the hell she was? Whatever the scheme, he liked it...hell, he reveled in the new person she had become. He had a feeling making love to her once would never be enough. He lowered his hand to her derrière, the soft flesh easily filling his palm. Her answering gasp was nearly as loud as the bell, announcing the fact they were no longer alone.

Damn, he had forgotten to lock the door.

Still wrapped in each other's arms, they both gaped at the door...

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*Eternally Yours*

*Eyes Of Betrayal*

*Facade*

*Fear The Dark*

*The Hour Before Dawn*

*Kiss Of Deceit*

*Lawfully Yours*

# DARK SAVIOR

BY

PATRICIA A. RASEY

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DARK SAVIOR  
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*To Brooke Nicole Abel,  
who was born about the time I originally wrote  
this story and fancied it getting published one day.  
What a beautiful young lady  
you have become.*

*In loving memory of Ashley Victoria Heath.  
Some people come into our lives and touch it, no matter how  
short our time with them is, and forever live in our memories. Ashley  
was one of those people. I will dearly miss her as she now sleeps  
with angels but she will forever remain tied to my heart.*

*And to Amanda Marie Auzins,  
whom I watched grow into the beautiful young woman  
and softball player I see today.*

*These three young ladies  
I had the pleasure of watching grow up,  
and to them I dedicate this book.*

## PROLOGUE

*New York 1922*

Awakening to brilliant sunlight streaming through the lace-curtained window of his penthouse, Foster rolled over, looking at the vision lying naked beside him. Rays of light cast across her milky-white, flawless skin. They were a near perfect fit. Making love to her had always been fun and passion filled. But sex had never been the problem. After dating just shy of a year, he wanted more and the word love had yet to cross either's lips.

Her chin length, golden blonde hair, lay in perfect finger waves even after their ardent night. She had been a wildcat and certainly knew how to please a man. Smiling, his gaze dropped to the cherry-red of her lips that had been thoroughly kissed hours before. Parts of him stirred just thinking of her skilled mouth and what it could do.

Stretching on his back and crossing his arms behind his head, he stared at the white cotton canopy and pondered his decision to move

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west. She'd likely be pissed. But then again, he had never promised her a lifetime. They both needed to move on.

As he lay there contemplating the right words, Ashley rolled over, coming to rest on his chest, snuggling against his warmth. He pulled her into his embrace, leisurely stroking the smooth skin of her back. She sighed and smiled lazily. Leaning forward, he placed a tender kiss upon her forehead. This was going to be much harder than he had anticipated. How the hell would he tell her he was leaving in only a few hours?

"Going to the office today?" She stifled a yawn with the back of her hand.

"No." He shifted beneath her. "I've made other plans."

"Something we can do together?" She placed small kisses on his chest, tickling the sparse black hairs. "I get so lonely hanging around here all day."

"No." He answered her question. "Ashley, we need to talk."

"What is it?" The warmth of her blue eyes was nearly his undoing and had him second-guessing his well-laid plans.

"You know we don't love each other...at least not in the way husbands and wives should."

She shrugged. "That doesn't mean I don't care about you. What is it, Foster? What has you speaking such silliness?"

"Don't overly worry yourself, my sweet." He leaned down and briefly kissed her.

"What's bothering you, Foster?"

"There is no easy way to say this. I'm leaving later today."

"Leaving? To where?" She sat up, taking the sheets with her. "How long will you be gone?"

Foster made no effort to cover himself as she left the bed, wrapping the sheets around her. He sat against the headboard, crossing his arms behind his head. "I'm moving to Denver."

"You're what?" The last word came out more of a screech, causing



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Foster to grin. She was even more beautiful, if that were possible, when her azure blue eyes flashed in fury. "What the hell are you grinning at?"

"Do you know you're more radiant when you're angry?"

Ashley picked up a pillow from the settee and threw it at him. A chuckle erupted from his chest. Her anger quickly deflated as she sat on the edge of the bed. "Will you be coming back?"

"I don't know." And the truth of it, he didn't.

"I'll miss you." She looked to her hands clasping the sheet loosely around her.

"And I'll miss you." Foster used his forefinger to tip her chin so that their eyes met. "But, it's time for me to move on."

"We could still get married, you know." Her grin grew wicked. "We're great together in bed."

"You don't want to be my wife, Ashley. You don't love me, nor I you. We would make each other miserable once the passion died. Besides, I've never concealed the fact I don't wish to be trapped in that institution."

"Trapped?" She laughed. "You may not love me. But someday, Foster, you'll find that someone and you will get married. Mark my words."

"I have no desire to tie myself to any one woman." He crooked his finger toward her. She crawled to him, easily falling into his embrace. "Besides, then I wouldn't be free to come visit you whenever it pleases me."

Ashley slapped his chest. "Who says I will wait for you, Foster Taylor? Unlike you, if the right man comes along, I do wish to marry. Lynette's been gone for three years and you can't die because she did."

Anger coursed through him, his body tensing beneath hers. The last thing he wanted to discuss while in bed with Ashley was his dead fiancée. Foster got up and put on his boxer shorts left discarded by the bed. "I have to go."

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"I'm sorry, Foster. I didn't mean to anger you, but it's not healthy to carry around your grief for so long. Lynette wouldn't have wanted you to die with her. I know you loved her and she loved you, but she wouldn't have wanted you to stop living because of her."

Foster whirled on his heel. "Not only did I lose her that night," he stated in a unwavering voice, "but I also lost my child she carried. I will never stop looking for who did this to me the day before we were to wed. She is the only woman I will ever love."

"I'm sorry, Foster." Ashley placed a hand on his cheek. "I only wish I could ease your pain."

"You know," Foster leaned down to briefly taste her cherry-colored lips, "I wish you could, too. But it's time for me to move on."

He pulled on his woolen, blue pinstriped trousers. After donning his pants and a shirt, he slipped his arms into a matching vest and jacket, leaving all unbuttoned. His hair, he finger combed back and tied into a queue at his nape. He turned to face her again. "My train leaves in two hours. I've sent most of my belongings ahead. I couldn't leave without saying goodbye. You're my best friend."

"I know." Ashley encircled his waist and laid her head on his chest. "I'm going to miss you."

"If you ever get to Colorado, you'll know where to find me." He kissed the top of her head.

"Is your new hotel completed then?"

"Soon," he replied. "Enough so, I'll have a place to live. They've assured me my penthouse will be livable by the time I arrive in Denver. You're welcome to live here as long as you wish. I've instructed my manager that the penthouse is yours until you no longer feel the need for it."

"I've lived off you long enough, Foster. It's time I made it on my own. Besides, the penthouse won't be the same without you. Once I get on my feet, I'll find a place of my own."

"You take care of yourself." He patted her derrière. "And write to

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me often.”

“I will,” she assured him. But something told him she wouldn’t. Knowing Ashley, she’d not want to interfere with his moving forward.

He buttoned his shirt, vest, and jacket. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he stepped into his shiny black oxfords. The closest he’d ever get to looking like a business man. He smiled. What did he care? He’d made millions building hotels across the continent. He now owned five including the one they stood in.

Without saying another word, Foster leaned down, picked up his briefcase, perched his wire-framed glasses on his nose and walked out the door.

“Goodbye, Foster Taylor,” he heard Ashley say to the closing door. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

# CHAPTER 1

*Denver, Colorado 1925*

Standing in her small shop, Brooke wondered for the hundredth time where she was going to scrape up enough money to pay for her paltry apartment's rent. Business had been slow for the month, and the rent on her store ate most of the profits. She could move her shop to a less reputable place, but then her sales would drop considerably, if not altogether, as she catered to the upper crust of society. So, the lobby of the highly respected Ashford Hotel had been the perfect place for her business.

Her store stocked items for those who traveled—expensive soaps and toiletries, cosmetics, music boxes, lacy undergarments, and many other items designed for vanity or gift giving. Women mostly frequented her shop, though men on occasion would stop by looking for an item to present their spouses or mistresses. Although the latter left a bad taste in her mouth, working in the lobby of a hotel had proven

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to the unfaithfulness of men. Not catering to them would be a loss of business, one she couldn't afford.

The tiny golden bell jingled above the shop's door, announcing a customer, bringing her focus to the person entering. Glancing toward the front of the store, her gaze collided with the most sensual pair of chocolate-brown eyes she had ever encountered. The man stopped just inside the doorway, gawking at her with familiarity, almost as if he thought he knew her. No way would she forget a face as comely as his.

He wore tattered Levi's, a white pullover cotton shirt, and work boots...not her usual clientele. His overlong black hair was tied back in a queue at his nape. Assuredly, this man would not be able to afford the luxuries of her shop.

"May I help you?" Brooke asked.

Ignoring her asked question, he approached the counter with a slow, sure gait. He reached across the counter and gripped her wrist within his large, work-worn hand. Electricity shot up her arm, heating her flesh from the mere contact. Brooke tried to pull free when their gazes collided. His lips curved into a lazy smile.

Without a word, he leaned across the counter and grasped the back of her head, pulling her forward until their lips met. Stunned and breathless, she gasped, pulling herself free of his hold. Brooke backed into the shelving behind the counter. A menagerie of toiletries and soaps crashed to the floor, as scents of rose and lavender floated between them. Placing the back of her hand against her tingling lips, she glanced to the bottles now leaking on the floor.

"Oh, my," Brooke spoke, bewildered.

"I'm sorry." The stranger's deep reply sent shivers dancing along her spine. "I didn't mean to startle you, Ashley. I was just so shocked and pleased to see you. I'll gladly pay for those."

Astounded, Brooke's gaze flew to his. "What?"

The stranger smiled. "Surely, you haven't forgotten me so soon. I know it's been three years, but I would never forget the taste of those

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cherry lips.”

Obviously, Brooke was thoroughly shaken by the brief kiss, so much so she couldn’t think of a comeback. This man seemed to think they had shared a kiss before, not to mention he had her name wrong. Disoriented, her gaze flitted to the broken bottles before settling back on his full lips.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming to Denver?” he continued. “Hell, I would have given you a place to stay.”

“Excuse me?” Brooke finally found her voice as the impact of his words settled in her muddled thoughts. He thought she was someone else.

“I get it.” He smiled, his gaze taking in her shop. “You want to be independent. Fine by me. What time should I pick you up?”

“I beg your pardon.” Brooke glared at him, her brows knitting together. “I don’t know who you are, waltzing in here and taking liberties with my person. But I would appreciate it if you would walk right back out that door and never come back.”

The nerve of the man, assuming because of one silly kiss she would be willing to go anywhere with him. Brooke knew turning away a potential customer wasn’t the smartest of choices, not when she needed the cash. But by the looks of him, he wouldn’t be able to afford much of what she sold anyway. Touching her short, finger waves, she glared at the ruggedly handsome man. Mere looks wouldn’t get him far...at least not with her.

“Ashley,” he reached for her hand before she jerked it away, “what kind of game are you playing?”

“A—Ashley?” Brooke flustered at his mistaken identity. “I don’t know who you think I am. But, sir, I assure you my name is not Ashley. My name is Brooke, but you may call me Miss Abel.”

Taking a step back, the man’s smile shed his face. He appeared to assess her as his gaze traveled over her form, pausing on her legs. For the first time, Brooke wished for a longer dress, though it was more

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fashionable shorter. As his eyes traveled back to her face, her cheeks heated to a most assured red. She didn't need a mirror to tell her as much. Their eyes met as his lopsided grin returned.

"No," he began in a slow, deep northern drawl, "those legs, I would remember. What kind of a game is this, Ashley? Still think you can get me to marry you?"

"I assure you, sir, this is no game. My name is Brooke Abel and I certainly don't wish to marry you." Anger laced her words. "My fiancé, Professor Brian Thompson, would not appreciate your advances."

"Ah, the jealousy angle," he chuckled. The pleasing sound rumbled from deep within his chest. Brooke shivered. "I'm not a jealous man, Ashley, and I don't enjoy playing games. You know that. If you wish to see me, you know where I am."

Infuriated by his arrogance, Brooke picked up a bottle from the floor and threw it at his retreating form. Missing him by mere inches, the bottle shattered against the wall.

"It's Brooke, dammit!" she shouted. Her face flushed anew from her surprising usage of profanity.

One brow rose as he gave her his attention. "Well, *Brooke*, you know where to find me if you should change your mind," he said, opening the door to exit, "but I'll be damned if I know why I'm still extending the invitation."

Brooke stared at the closed door for long moments after the outlandish man exited. She had no clue as to his identity. Whoever he was, he had shaken her to the core. Touching her lips again, she realized they still tingled, making her wonder what it would feel like to be thoroughly kissed by him and not just a mere touching of lips. Shaking off the silly notion, she glanced to her feet and sighed. No matter who he was, he forgot to pay for the damages. She frowned. Now, not only would she have to scrape up the money for her rent, but enough to pay for the broken inventory as well. Brooke knew she could always go to Brian for help. He'd gladly help pay her bills and most

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likely take over the business while he was at it, then insist upon getting married forthwith to avoid such occurrences in the future. Brooke sighed; she liked her independence. It wasn't that she didn't want to marry Brian, but she wasn't quite ready to take the next step. Brooke had been on her own since her parents' death four years ago, and wasn't ready to depend on anyone other than herself.

As she bent down to pick up the broken bottles, the bell to her shop rang again. Thinking the conceited jerk had returned to pay for the damages, she stood to battle him.

"Look, I'll pay for these myself if you'll just...oh," Brooke's face heated as she caught sight of her fiancé. "Brian, how good to see you."

Brian Thompson, impeccably dressed as always, approached the counter, his mannerism stiff and haughty. "Yes, my dear. It is a delight for you to see me in the early afternoon. Now, what was it you were saying? Something about paying for it yourself?"

"Oh, it's nothing." Brooke glanced at the pile of broken glass at her feet. "A strange man came into my shop and startled me, causing me to bump into the shelf and knock over some of these bottles."

"I do say you must learn not to be so incompetent if you are to be my wife. I can't have you breaking my priceless antiques now, can I."

"Yes, I know," Brooke conceded, glancing at Brian. Although she had never found him lacking before this afternoon's incident, she now found herself comparing Brian to the stranger. "I'll try to do better. Now, was there something you wanted?"

"We are invited to a small gathering this weekend. A few intimate friends. Shall I tell them we will attend?"

"Don't you mean your friends?"

"Of course, my dear, but you know my friends are your friends."

Brooke sighed, wondering if Brian ever considered anyone other than himself. He'd be a good provider and husband, she had no doubt, but his arrogance at times had her second-guessing her agreement to become his wife. "You may tell them we will attend."



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“Good. Now then, will you be coming by tonight?”

“I don’t think so.” Brooke picked off an imaginary piece of lint from her sleeve. “I’m exhausted and it’s been a long day. I think I’m going to go home, take a hot bath, and retire early. You don’t mind do you?”

“Of course not. You look as though you could use a little beauty rest. Besides, we will have plenty of time to spend together once we are married. Well then, I’m off. I’ll see you on Saturday around sevenish.”

“Saturday.” Brooke smiled, though it took too much effort.

Brian exited her shop giving a final toss of his hand in farewell. Before today, she never questioned her decision to accept Brian’s proposal. He was comely, pretty even, impeccably dressed and always held in high regard by his peers. Today, however, his perfect and faultless manners weaved their way beneath her skin. The earlier stranger came to mind. She supposed he had something to do with her sour mood...and that certainly wasn’t Brian’s fault.

\* \* \*

Foster sat in his office behind a mahogany desk, papers littering the surface. He rarely concerned himself with neatness, always having something more pressing to do. He propped his work boots on the desk and leaned back in the chair, arms crossed behind his head. He hadn’t planned on working today, the reason behind his state of dress. He hated wearing suits and only donned them when coming to the office, keeping up appearances.

Today, he’d planned on visiting Celeste, his reasoning behind entering the little shop in the lobby. He hadn’t paid much attention to her as of late, so he thought to buy her a small trinket and spend the entire day making up for his recent absence. Now?

The hell with Celeste. She could wait. After all, what was one more day? At the moment, the only thing on his mind was marching back down to the lobby, pulling Ashley into his arms and kissing her

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senseless. He wasn't sure what game she played, but he definitely wanted an explanation.

She had him rattled. He couldn't stop thinking of her and the things he'd like to do with her, like licking off every strip of fabric that covered her from his view. How the hell had she bewitched him? Even in New York, she hadn't totally captivated him. So what was it about the woman in the lobby that caused him to forget his plans of a day beneath the sheets with Celeste? Maybe her game had intrigued him with her insistence that she wasn't Ashley but someone named Brooke Abel. But no two women looked exactly alike unless they were born twins and Ashley had been an only child.

Amnesia came to mind, but wasn't a permanent condition. Certainly, she wouldn't have been so adamant at convincing him she wasn't Ashley if there was a part of her past she couldn't remember. He would have thought she would have been questioning him, rather than insisting this Brooke Abel existed. Then again, he thought with a grimace, this might just be another scheme to get him to marry her.

So why the hell had he wasted the last hour sitting here thinking about her? He should be furious, not bewitched. A knock sounded on the door bringing him out of his musings.

Foster flopped his feet to the wood flooring. "Yes?"

Mrs. Dunlap, his secretary, opened the door a crack and peered in. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. Taylor, when you specifically asked not to be. There is a woman here who insists on seeing you, even though I told her you were not to be disturbed."

*Ashley.* He had completely forgotten to pay for the damages to her shop items. How careless of him. She was no doubt here to insist he fork over the cash for the damaged goods. He grinned. The thought of seeing her anger again sent his blood to boiling.

"It's okay, Mrs. Dunlap. Show her in."

Standing, Foster walked over to the large window overlooking the bustling street. So she had decided to give up her little ruse for the price

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of replacing her items. How else would she know who he was and where to find him? Of course he owned the hotel, but he allowed Alex to handle the minor day-to-day details as manager. So even if she was telling the truth about being Brooke Abel, then she would have no idea the man in her shop this afternoon owned the building she resided in. And she had found him easily enough.

“Foster.” The woman purred as she entered the room, setting his nerves on end.

*Celeste.* Damn, he had forgotten to call her, informing her he wasn’t coming by.

“Celeste.” Foster turned and pasted a false smile upon his lips. “I’m sorry for inconveniencing you. I meant to call and let you know I would be too busy tonight. Forgive me?”

“You know I would forgive you anything.” She smiled sweetly, walking around the desk and wrapping her arms about his waist. “New secretary?”

He nodded. “Mrs. Dunlap started yesterday. Victoria quit to pursue other avenues.”

“She seems nice enough...and old enough not to be competition. Tomorrow evening then?”

“Possibly.” Foster stalled, not wanting to give her a direct answer, though he couldn’t fathom the reason why. “I’ll call and let you know.”

“Don’t wait too long, darling.” She winked at him, then lowered her voice and said, “Without you in my bed, it gets terribly lonely.”

“I know, Celeste, but right now I need to focus on work.” Foster backed from her embrace. “Now if you’ll excuse me... If I am ever to get out of here tonight, I’d best get busy.”

“Apparently you hadn’t planned on working.” Her gaze took in his attire with disapproval. “You never come to the office without wearing a suit.”

“No, I hadn’t planned on working,” he stated, escorting her to the door. “Goodbye, Celeste.”

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Without giving her time to argue, Foster shut the door behind her and returned to the window. The gas streetlights glowed as dusk fell upon Denver. Standing five stories above the paved street, he watched automobiles and horse drawn carriages drive down the streets as many men no doubt made their way home to their wives.

He sighed. For some reason, for the first time since meeting her, he could easily envision Ashley waiting for him with supper on the table and his babe in her stomach. The thought brought a smile to his whisker-roughened face. He rubbed the stubble. He had never entertained the idea of marrying Ashley and had no intentions of ever getting married. So why now? He knew Celeste would be eager enough to become his wife, had even hinted at it a time or two, but he held no desire to make her a life long companion. Celeste would make a good wife, just not his.

Damn, he was determined to find out exactly what kind of a game Ashley played. He wouldn't allow her to make a fool of him. No better time like the present to pay her another visit, after all...he owed her for the broken merchandise.

Smiling, he headed for the door.

## CHAPTER 2

Brooke glanced at her golden watch, eight o'clock—closing time. Walking over to the shop's wooden door, she bolted it, pulling the cream colored shade over the window. She returned to the counter and the cast iron register. Pushing the large red button, the cash drawer slid open, the ring echoing in the small shop. She extracted the money, counting the day's sales. It had been a good day. She smiled, hoping this weekend would follow in fashion so the price of the shattered bottles would make only a small dent in her inventory. She wrote herself a note as to the amount the bottles and deposited it with the money in the small safe behind the counter.

As she slid the heavy door of the safe closed, she heard a light knock on the shop's door. *Now what?* Brooke wanted nothing more than to retire for the evening. Sighing, she stood, went to unbolt the door and opened it. Before her, stood the handsome caller from earlier in the day. The same man who had caused her to break the bottles. He leaned arrogantly against the opened doorframe, crossing his arms

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over his chest.

Her breath caught in her throat as her pulse raced through her veins. His smug smile and dark sensuality caught her off guard. Her best bet was to quickly rid herself of his company and fast. She didn't need an explanation for her actions, even if closing the door on him would be considered rude. He placed a booted foot in the way.

Brooke patted the side of her hair. "I'm...I'm sorry. I'm closed."

Not acknowledging her, other than a sardonic smile, he eyed her with open curiosity. He seemed to take pleasure in her nervousness.

"I'm sorry, sir. But as you can see, I'm closed." She put more pressure on the door, hoping to dislodge his foot. "If you could come back tomorrow, I would be glad to help you."

He shouldered his way into the tiny shop, ignoring her attempts to get rid of him. Her mouth dropped and her anger flared once again. *The audacity!*

The man stopped and pivoted on his work boot heel. "You really should be more careful of the types of people you allow in here at this time of night."

Giving her his back, he glanced at the many different shaped bottles, the music boxes, and several other trinkets lining the shelves, before his attention traveled to a rack of silky undergarments gracing the center of the room. Her face heated as he approached them. He fingered the fine silk with great care, making her wonder how his fingers might feel gliding over the smoothness of her skin. As his fingers gently kneaded the cloth, the room grew quite warm.

"People like you?" Brooke drew his attention. His dark gaze now centered on her. "If you'll excuse yourself, I must be on my way."

"A date?" One of his black eyebrows rose. "Professor Byron perhaps?"

"Brian," she corrected, stifling the urge to chuckle at his mistake. Wouldn't her fiancé bustle at the slight. "As if it is any of your business."

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“Whatever,” he grumbled, as she retreated behind the counter.

“If you do not leave the premises immediately, I’ll be forced to call the owner of this establishment.” The threat might have sounded more convincing had she managed to keep the tremble from her voice. What would she do if he called her bluff? She had never actually met the owner, having dealt with his manager, Alex, in the past. The owner had always been somewhat of a mystery to her.

“Oh?” The man’s cheeks rose in his humor. He had the impudence to mock her. “And do you know who he is?”

“Of course. He’s a close personal friend of mine.” Brooke squared her shoulders, hoping he didn’t see through her lie. “Mr. Taylor. Have you heard of him?”

“You might say we’re acquainted.”

“Then you certainly know,” she toyed with the worn heart necklace adorning her neck, “he wouldn’t think kindly of someone trying to harass me in his hotel.”

“No, he definitely wouldn’t.” He nodded slowly, his gaze not wavering. “That I’m sure of.”

The man watched her closely, making her jumpy. She had never been good at untruths. But certainly he couldn’t have seen through her bold faced lie.

Brooke raised her chin. “Please, I must insist you leave my shop.”

“Look, I’m only here to pay for the broken bottles. After I went upstairs, I remembered my slight. Forgive me.”

“You’re staying at this hotel?” The man truly confounded her. How could a man such as he manage to pay for his stay at the Ashford? “Then surely, you can’t afford to pay for the bottles. I’ll take care of them.”

The man’s smile grew. She had amused him, causing her ire to rise.

“Don’t mock me, sir.”

“Mock you, my dear? I assure you, that’s the last thing I wish to do with you.” His eyes darkened, causing her to question the meaning

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behind his words. He reached into the worn pocket of his jeans and extracted a one hundred dollar bill, laying it on the counter. "I trust this will cover the damages?"

One hundred dollars would not only cover the damages, but pay for the rent of her apartment. Her troubles would be solved. But where had he come up with such a sum? Certainly if he had the money to hand out bills such as this, he'd dress himself more in the fashion. Organized crime had risen due to Prohibition. Could this man be involved with gangsters? Next, he'd be entering her shop wanting protection money. No, her best bet would be not to take his dirty money.

"I'm sorry, it's too much. I can't accept this," she told him and slid the crisp green bill back across the counter.

"I won't take no for an answer." He shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans, and turned to exit the shop.

She called out to him. His warm brown eyes captured hers as he turned, making her almost regret her actions, wanting instantly to take back her words.

"Change your mind about tonight? The offer still stands."

Thinking back to their earlier conversation and his offer to *pick her up*, she quickly said, "No." Heat flooded her cheeks. "I'm sorry, but I don't even know your name."

He chuckled, the sound rumbling from deep within his chest, drawing her gaze to the molded plains of his chest, outlined quite well in his white shirt. His grin widened, obviously catching her blatant ogle. She was no doubt red from neck to forehead.

"The name is Foster Tay...", he paused, maybe indecisive at revealing too much of his identity, putting her further on alert. "Foster Tyson."

"Well, Foster," she met his gaze, "it was certainly an experience meeting you."

He winked at her, then said, "The pleasure is all mine, I assure you," and exited the small shop.



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Brooke ran to the door and slid the bolt into place. She stood breathless with her back against the cool wood. Several minutes passed before she trusted her trembling knees and made her way back to the counter to retrieve her pocketbook. The crisp bill caught her eye. Who was Foster Tyson and more importantly, what was he doing in her shop?

Picking up the hundred, she placed it in her pocketbook. Though the money answered her current problems, she wasn't about to be indebted to him. She thought it best to return the money or at least insist he take the change. After locking her shop, she approached the registration counter.

"Excuse me, Shelly," Brooke caught the clerk's attention. "Can you tell me what room Foster Tyson is in? He forgot his change in my shop and I'd like to return it."

"Let me check," she answered, leafing through the pages of the registration book. "Tyson? Are you sure you have the name correct? There is no one listed in this hotel by that surname."

"I'm sure he said he was staying here." Brooke knit her brows together. "He left my shop only moments ago. Did you see a man come through the lobby?"

"No, but I've been busy. The only man I saw enter the lobby was Mr. Taylor."

"Oh. Well, thank you anyway."

Shelly smiled sweetly, and Brooke turned to walk away. Now how was she ever to find him? But something told her she hadn't seen the last of Foster Tyson. Stopping suddenly, Brooke returned to the clerk.

"Shelly, you said Mr. Taylor was here a moment ago?" she asked, wondering what the elusive man looked like. Maybe she could ask him about Foster Tyson. Surely he might know the man. After all, he owned the establishment. "Is he still here?"

"No, he left. He said he wouldn't be back until late tonight. Should I leave him a message?"

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Brooke shook her head. "It wasn't important."

Could Foster Tyson be Mr. Taylor? Somehow she doubted the owner of a hotel would wear the attire Foster had. Mr. Taylor would surely be an impeccable dresser. Brooke had never bothered herself with meeting the owner to the hotel as the rumor had it Mr. Taylor murdered his last two girlfriends. Supposedly, the law ruled the first a suicide. But the second, carrying his child, was stabbed...a right hand entry wound. Mr. Taylor was left-handed and the murderer went uncaught. With enough money, Brooke bet anyone could buy his or her way out of a conviction.

Brooke had always thought Mr. Taylor was somehow linked with organized crime, explaining why his hotel profited during Prohibition. And, of course, how he had gotten away with murder. Many hotels and inns foreclosed when the sale of alcohol was banned and people flocked to the speakeasies run by gangsters. This was why she preferred to do her business with Mr. Taylor's business associate, Alex, instead of the man himself. Besides, Alex seemed harmless enough.

Putting the nasty day's business behind her, she left the lobby of the Ashford and walked the short distance to her apartment.

\* \* \*

Standing across the street, Foster watched Ashley exit through the lobby doors. He quickly excused himself from the woman who had stopped him earlier, bending his ear about the dangers of the modern day automobile, and began following her. If for no other reason than to see where she lived.

Ashley walked briskly down the sidewalk, obviously unaware of being followed. Foster smiled as he kept his distance. The gas streetlights illuminated the night to a distinctive gray, casting a good deal of their surroundings in shadows. Definitely not a good atmosphere for her to be walking home alone in. He'd have to have a talk with her about that...once he got in her good graces, of course.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Rounding the corner, Ashley walked toward a less prominent section of Denver. Foster picked up his pace to assure he didn't lose her. The buildings here were much smaller and more rundown than those near the Ashford. Obviously she made her home on a meager salary. The hundred ought to help. Stopping in front of a narrow apartment building, Ashley fumbled in the dark for her keys before entering the three-story brick building.

Foster stood on the steps and narrowed his gaze. The Ashley he knew wouldn't live in such a rundown neighborhood, not when she was used to living richly off his income. What the hell was she up to? He intended to find out.

\* \* \*

Brooke threw her small pocketbook onto the chair beside the door and walked into the bathroom to draw her water. A hot bath was exactly what she needed. As the water flowed into the white porcelain tub, she entered her bedroom, and picked up her yellow bathrobe from where she left it atop the worn pink comforter.

Sighing, she slumped to the bed and hugged the bathrobe to her chest. Her free hand toyed with the worn heart necklace her father gave her. Thoughts of happier times bounced around her head as she remembered giggling when her father wrestled her to the bed, tickling her. Her mother had joined in, rustling the blonde curls of her long hair. Being an only child, she had no other family and she missed them dearly.

Five years ago, the three of them headed for New York to visit her mother's only sister. The train, carrying them on their journey east, had been robbed. Four men carrying shotguns entered the railroad car, bandanas covering the lower half of their faces as they shouted and demanded the release of their valuables. Brooke had thought of cowboys and Indians, days of old, when railroad robberies were an everyday occurrence. The entire scene seemed surreal. When they

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

approached her mother, one of the armed men grabbed her, claiming he wanted to take her. Her father launched himself at the man. A shot rang out and Brooke watched as her father crumbled to the floor in a pool of blood. Her mother screamed, clawing for the man's eyes as the second shot hit her in the heart, killing her as well. Brooke cowered in her seat as the men took the valuables they came for and left. Eighteen years old at the time, Brooke was left without a family.

Tears streaked her cheeks unheeded. At least in Denver, she had made a home. Though lonely, she depended on no one. Brian came to mind. With him she would have the family and security she so longed for.

Returning to the bathroom, she rid herself of her wool dress and silky undergarments, the one luxury she allowed herself, and stepped into the steaming tub. Shutting off the water, she leaned against the back of the tub, closing her eyes, allowing the steaming water to work miracles on her overtired muscles.

A knock on the door startled her awake. She must have fallen asleep. Quickly unstopping the drain and stepping from the tub, water splashing over the rim, the knock sounded again. Whoever it was seemed impatient.

"Just a moment," she called out, wondering who in the world would be calling at this hour.

Quickly toweling herself and adorning her clean silky undergarments, she wrapped her bathrobe securely around her and headed for the door when the knock came a third time.

"All right, I'm coming."

Brooke slid the bolt free and opened the door a crack. What on earth was *he* doing here?

## CHAPTER 3

“Alex?”

“I brought you supper.” He held up two paper sacks, a huge smile raising his cheeks, obviously proud of himself. “I saw you leave late tonight and thought you might not have taken the time to eat.”

“Well, you’re correct and how thoughtful you are, but—”

Alex shouldered his way past her, stopping her from making a polite refusal.

“Why don’t you get dressed? I’ll get some plates.”

Brooke closed the door, gawking after the hotel manager. Finding her tongue, she said, “Yes, I suppose I should.” Heading for her bedroom, she called back, “There’s some fresh tea made in the ice box if you’d like.”

So much for a quiet relaxing evening. Closing the door of her bedroom, she leaned against it. Alex had pursued her for three years, ever since she opened her shop in the hotel. Although subtle about his pursuit, he was persistent, even after she became engaged to Brian. He

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

had used the guise of their friendship to continue seeing her on occasion.

Brian, not being the jealous type, wasn't offended by her relationship with Alex, even at the mention of the few times he came by her apartment. But this was the latest he dared to visit, never before showing up after dusk, causing Brooke discomfort. Why hadn't she accepted Brian's invitation to stop by? Sighing, she pushed off the door and walked to her wardrobe. The sooner she shared the meal with Alex, the quicker she'd rid herself of his company.

Foster's image came to mind. She certainly had no problem being rude to him. But then again, the man had a way with making her behave her worst. Somehow, the idea of having him in her living room appealed to her. Scandalized by her indecent thoughts, she grasped a simple drop-waisted dress from the hanger and quickly dressed. The only man she should be wishing to spend her evenings with was Brian.

Entering the living room, the smells of roast beef wafted to her nose and set her stomach to growling. Two plates filled with open-faced roast beef sandwiches, new potatoes, and roasted corn sat on the coffee table in front of her sofa. She was suddenly famished and glad Alex had been so thoughtful.

"Smells delicious." Brooke took a seat beside Alex on the sofa. "I didn't realize how hungry I was until I smelled the food. It was certainly kind of you."

"Someone has to watch out for you. You're thin enough now; a strong wind would blow you away."

"You flatter me." She smiled. "I meant to come by the office today to pay the rent for my shop, but I got busy."

Alex took a large bite from his sandwich, then used the fresh tea to wash it down. "You needn't worry yourself over it, Brooke. Mr. Taylor knows you've always paid your rent. Two weeks late is nothing to be concerned with. I told you before not to worry yourself about Mr. Taylor. Besides, I know how to handle him."

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Brooke caught his gaze. His pale blue eyes complimented his silvery blond hair. "I don't know what I'd do if Mr. Taylor threw me out. It's my only source of income, no matter how small."

"I assure you, I wouldn't allow Mr. Taylor to throw you out of the hotel. I wouldn't stand for it." Alex patted Brooke's hand. "After all, I've been working for Mr. Taylor a little over three years now. Surely, he wouldn't keep me in my position if he didn't trust my judgment completely."

"Of course." Brooke pulled her hand free, trying to hide her repulsion. She needed Alex on her side. Finished with their meal, she reached for their plate. "Let me take this for you."

"Allow me to help." Alex followed her to the sink, and deposited the dishes.

"I'll get to them tomorrow." Brooke stifled a yawn behind her hand. "If you'll excuse me, Alex, I'm quite exhausted. I really must get some sleep if I'm to be worth a nickel come morning. I'll be by your office, first thing."

"Sounds like a plan," Alex said, though the disappointment shown in his eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

Brooke led him to the door, opening it. "Thank you for the supper, Alex. I'm sure I don't appreciate you enough. You've been a good friend to me."

"You're welcome." His hand grazed her cheek. "I'll see you in the morning."

Turning from the locked door, fatigue set in, so she hadn't actually lied to Alex. The day had been a long one. Turning out the lights, she entered her bedroom, disrobed and adorned her silk lounging pajamas and climbed into bed.

Chocolate-brown eyes and hair the color of coal loomed before her in the darkness of her room. His sensuous lips curved up in a lopsided smile, sending her stomach fluttering like a swarm of butterflies. His dark complexion and five o'clock shadow made his appearance dark

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

and foreboding...yet intriguing. Warmth spread throughout her, causing parts of her to tingle. Maybe, she would see him again tomorrow.

Tossing to her side, she fluffed the pillow and snuggled into the comfort of her blankets. She looked forward to the new day. Since the death of her parents, she rarely anticipated anything, merely existing one day at a time. Foster had done that for her, made her feel more alive than she had in the past five years. Tomorrow she would not only catch up on her shop's rent, but her apartment's as well and still have a little to put back for an emergency. All thanks to her dark savior, the one who had abruptly entered her life, shattering not only the bottles behind the counter but the walls around her heart. Sighing, she closed her eyes and slipped into a deep dream-filled slumber.

\* \* \*

"Mrs. Dunlap," Foster called to his secretary. Seconds later, she appeared at the door.

"Yes, Mr. Taylor." She wore a sharply tailored wool jacket and matching skirt. "What can I do for you?"

Foster took the wire-framed glasses from his nose and stood, walking to the large window overlooking the street. His expensive silk-stripped, blue, virgin wool worsted suit gave him the professional look he strove for, but he'd do about anything to jump back into his Levi's. Turning back to his secretary, he clasped his hands behind his back, glasses dangling from his fingers.

"Tell Mr. Thurston I'd like a word with him." As she turned to do his bidding, he stopped her. "One more thing, Mrs. Dunlap. Contact the manager at my New York hotel and ask him to find out what happened to Ashley Heath after she moved from my penthouse. I not only want the date when she moved, but where she moved to, and where she is now. Hire a detective if you have to."

"I'll get right on it, Mr. Taylor." She spun on her high heel and



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returned to the outer office.

Finding out what happened to Ashley might take days or even months, but he would eventually have his answers. He had to know what happened to her. Could it be possible she wound up here in Denver? If so, why the hell pretend to be someone else? Alex appeared at his office door, disrupting his musings.

Dressed in a costly olive green, cashmere wool suit, he appeared more pale than usual. Olive green didn't suit his complexion well. Foster gestured to the leather chair across from his desk, then took his own seat. Returning his glasses to his face, he clasped his fingers and gave Alex his full attention.

"What can I do for you, Foster?" Alex had been more than just a business associate the past few years; he was also a friend.

"There's a woman who runs a shop here at the hotel I want to know more about." Foster leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking. "Since you've always handled that end of my affairs, I was wondering what you could tell me about her."

"Who is she?"

"Her name is Brooke Abel. She owns Body Apparel. Do you know her?"

"I know of her." Alex pulled at his ear lobe. "If this is about her rent being late, she assured me she would be in this morning to pay for it."

*So, she was back on her rent.* Foster stored the small bit of information away for future references. If he had gone over his books lately, and not left that up to Alex, he might have already known that little fact. But that's what he hired associates for. He hated dealing with the day-to-day end of the business.

"No." Foster stood and began pacing the office. "That's not why I called you in here. I trust you to handle those details and so far you've been doing a fine job. What I want to know is *who* is she?"

Coming to a halt, he faced Alex again who fidgeted nervously in his seat. Alex obviously knew her. The question was, why would the

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mentioning of her make him nervous?

"What do you mean? You already know her name. What could you possibly want from her?"

Foster's one brow shot upward. "Are you questioning my intentions?"

"No, not at all." Alex's voice quavered. "I was only inquiring on what you wanted to know."

"For starters, how long has she rented that space from me?"

"Since you opened the hotel. Two weeks after you arrived here from New York."

"Do you know anything else about her...like where she's from?"

"Sorry, Foster, I'm afraid not."

"I want you to do a background check on her then. Find out her parents' names, and where they came from. I want to know everything there is to know about her, right down to the size of silk hosiery she wears. I want to know all there is to know about Brooke Abel."

"I'll get right on it." Alex stumbled out of his chair. "I'll have the information ready for you in a couple of days."

As Alex turned to exit the office, Foster stopped him. "By the way, Alex, check on a man named Professor Brian Thompson also. See what you can dig up on him."

Alex nodded, exiting the room. Foster turned again to the large window. The street below bustled with early morning traffic. Ashley, or Brooke...who ever the hell she was, would be soon arriving to open her little shop.

So, she was back on her rent. He suddenly wondered if business had been slow for her that she might be having trouble making ends meet.

Maybe he'd just have to pay her shop a little visit, do a little shopping. He smiled. Later in the day would have to be soon enough. Foster wasn't quite ready for her to see him dressed as he did for the office. Better to conceal his identity from her...for now.

\* \* \*

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Come in Brooke.” Alex opened the door for her. “You look stunning.”

“Thank you.” Brooke’s face heated. She walked over to his desk, smoothing the front of her dress. Reaching into her bag, she handed him a white envelope. “Here’s this month’s rent.”

“Thank you.” Alex smiled and gestured to one of the floral chairs. “Have a seat, Brooke.”

“No, I really mustn’t.” Brooke had a lot to do, and had little time for idle chitchat this morning. “I should hurry along. I have a shop to open and I don’t want to miss any early morning shoppers.”

“This will only take a minute. Please, sit.” His hand indicated the chair again and Brooke complied. “This shouldn’t take but a moment of your time. How long have you lived in Denver?”

“All of my life.” Brooke shifted in her seat. “Well, except for the year after my parents died. Why?”

“It just occurred to me that we know little about each other. How did your parents die?”

“In a train robbery about four years ago. But I really prefer not to talk about it, if you don’t mind.”

“You said you lived in Denver all your life, except the year after your parents died. Where did you live then?”

“New York. My aunt lives there.”

“Do you know Mr. Taylor?”

“The owner of this hotel? No, I can’t say that we’ve ever met. What’s this all about, Alex? I really must be going.”

“Just curious. I won’t detain you any longer.” Alex smiled and walked her to the door. “Can I give you a bit of advice? You might want to steer clear of Mr. Taylor.”

“Why? Is he terribly upset with me for being late on my rent?”

“No, not entirely. I just don’t think a lady, like yourself, should be caught in the presence of someone like him. He’s a womanizer. Might not do your reputation any good to be seen with him.”

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“I’ll take that into consideration if I ever happen to run into the man, Alex. Thank you for your concern. Now, I really must be going.”

Exiting the office, it occurred to her to ask Alex if he knew of a Foster Tyson, but thought better of it. Until she found out more about the man, she thought it best not to discuss him with anyone.

\* \* \*

Another long and busy day. Brooke looked forward to closing time. At lunch, Brian brought by a packed picnic, which they shared in her small shop along with a tiresome conversation. He’d always been a boring conversationalist, his topics usually centering around him and his teaching. How had she managed to overlook this shortcoming? Today she’d listened endlessly to his babbling about the laws and government of the country, while she spoke little. He also talked about his priceless collections of fine antiques, amazing her at his superfluous spending.

Growing up poor, her father was a factory worker and her mother took on seamstress jobs to make ends meet. Though there always seemed to be plenty of food on the table, her clothes were usually worn and tattered. In school, classmates teased her incessantly about being the little impoverished girl. Her father had taught her pride and no matter how they teased, she held her head high. Some days were harder than others and on those days, she ran home and cried into her pillow. Adjusting to Brian’s lifestyle once they were married, might be a bit of a challenge.

Straightening her shop as she prepared to close, she caught a glimpse of herself in the full standing mirror. She adjusted the violet sash of her pale pink dress, hanging low on her hips. She wished she could afford the more extravagant silk dresses of those she saw on some of the women patrons of the hotel. She’d always loved the feel of the luxurious fabric. Maybe once Brian and she were married, she could buy a few frilly dresses, spend a little money on herself.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Brooke chuckled. Somehow she doubted that. Brian's extravagant spending seemed limited to his antiques. Even her engagement ring seemed small in comparison to most.

She sighed. Of course, she was being silly; nothing more than pre-wedding jitters. Brian was a fine man and he would make her a commendable husband. She would no longer have to worry about food, rent, or a worthy home for her and her children.

\* \* \*

Foster watched from the opened doorway as Brooke examined herself in the mirror. *Perfection*. Her breasts weren't large, but nicely rounded. Foster imagined they'd be in exact proportion with his hands, envisioning a globe in each hand. His gaze traveled to the waistline she carefully hid beneath her drop-waisted dresses and thought his hands would easily span it. She had significantly lost weight since he'd seen her in New York, but her legs hadn't changed, long and slender. Thinking about them wrapped around his own waist, caused a tightening in his groin.

He couldn't deny, nor did he want to, the strong attraction. Hell, he wanted her more now than he ever had. The question was how long would she make him wait? Not being a patient man, he hoped it wouldn't be for long.

Foster stepped into her small shop. She turned, her eyes widening. Obviously, Brooke hadn't expected him. A smile grew on his lips.

"Can I help you?" Brooke asked, her expression quickly masking her surprise at seeing him in her store again.

"I don't know." Foster grinned. "Can you?"

"Is there something you wish to buy? Perhaps for a wife or fiancée?" She walked behind the counter, running her hands down the side of her dress as he approached.

"I'm not married." He held up his left hand, which sported a single silver band, but on his middle finger. "Nor am I engaged."

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Then a girlfriend perhaps? What did you come in here to buy, Mr. Tyson?”

“Maybe. How about one of these?” His fingers gently kneaded the silky fabric of a lacy chemise.

Brooke’s gaze followed his finger movement. He’d lay odds his presence affected her. “A size?”

Foster glanced at the peach colored fabric, thinking how sensuous it would look against the paleness of her flesh. “She would be about your size.”

“My size?” Brooke gasped.

He contained his humor and couldn’t risk pushing his scandalous behavior a step further. “Yes, but I’m not quite certain.”

Slipping the garment from its hanger, he walked behind the counter, stopping only when mere inches separated them. Brooke’s eyes held fast to his. He dropped the flimsy garment to the counter and grasped her about the waist.

“No, not quite as small as you.” He waited for her to withdraw, to put much needed space between them. This close he could feel each intake of her breath. “Not this small at all.”

She trembled beneath his touch as his eyes traveled to the cherry-red of her lips. Watching her tongue glide across the surface, his grip tightened. Her hands slipped up the front of his blue work shirt, causing his breath to catch. Attentively, he touched her lips with his, testing the silky surface. He liked how she felt against him, not only her lips but how her body melded against his. Not wanting to test his luck, he ended the brief kiss.

Her pulse beat rapidly in the base of her throat and her breathing quickened. Foster knew his simple kiss had stoked her desire and he wanted more. He descended on her like a ravenous lion. Her hands encircled his neck and her fingers entangled in the hair at his nape. He pulled her flush against him, her body fitting his like a glove. His tongue traced the taut line of her mouth, tempting her to open for him.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

With her slight gasp, he gained the entrance he sought.

His heart thudded in his chest like a randy schoolboy. Brooke evoked feelings in him he hadn't felt in years, not since he had first explored the opposite sex eons ago. He tempted her tongue into a sparring match. Tentatively, she responded, causing him to groan as she pulled the leather thong from his hair. It spilled from the queue like a black cape encasing them.

Foster leaned into her, his arousal pinned between them. He wanted nothing more than to grasp her legs and wrap them around his waist and drive into her like there was no tomorrow. Had he ever felt so out of control with Ashley? What the hell was she doing to him, this Ashley...Brooke, or whoever the hell she was? Whatever the scheme, he liked it...hell, he reveled in the new person she had become. He had a feeling making love to her once would never be enough. He lowered his hand to her derrière, the soft flesh easily filling his palm. Her answering gasp was nearly as loud as the bell, announcing the fact they were no longer alone.

Damn, he had forgotten to lock the door.

Still wrapped in each other's arms, they both gaped at the door.

## CHAPTER 4

*Shadowed in a corner of the lobby of the Ashford Hotel, the cloaked figure watched as a woman entered, wearing a silk, A-line afternoon gown, with lace sewn into intricate patterns. Several gold bracelets adorned her wrists as a single strand of pearls circled her neck and rested between the swell of her breasts. Her satiny brunette hair lay in perfect finger waves complementing her oval face. On her head, a cloche black hat perched regally with a white fluffed up feather trimming the side; a fur stole draped her shoulders.*

*Flawless, right down to her shapely legs.*

*The dark figure thought about what was to come; anticipation sluiced through cold veins. The poor woman didn't even know she was a pawn in a cruel act of revenge and retribution. But she had sullied herself by allowing him to touch her and now, she must die.*

*Rubbing manicured fingers together, the demon anticipated sliding the cold steel blade of the knife into the ribs of her delicate back, up, and beneath to vital organs, the clink of the metal as it scraped against*



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*the bone, the metallic smell of the blood as the life flowed from the body, and the warmth of the red fluid as it touched demonic skin. No more mistakes. Ashley had survived, and only now lived because he had left her behind in New York.*

*This woman, now strolling through the lobby, had set her fate when she allowed him into her life. The cloaked figure would not allow him to be happy, taking everything he held dear away...any chance at wife or family. The devil itself would bring him down and win this game.*

\* \* \*

Brooke quickly stepped from Foster's embrace, heat pooling in her cheeks. Foster, the cad, bore no guilt at all in his expression, only frustration from the interruption. He crossed his arms over his chest, his lean hip resting against the counter, and glared at the intrusion standing just inside the shop's door.

"Mrs. Thompson?" Her tone dripped with guilt. He almost laughed at her expression. "So nice to see you."

"Is it?" Brian's mother clipped. Foster could almost hear the cluck of her tongue. "I thought I would come by to see if you would accompany me to dinner, but I can see you are otherwise preoccupied."

"This...this isn't what it looks like," Brooke stammered, her face turning scarlet red. "Mr. Tyson was only telling me I was about the same size as his girlfriend. He wanted to buy her a chemise and needed to know if I had nearly the same size of waist. Isn't that right Mr. Tyson?"

Foster's lips curved, amused by Brooke's lame explanation. Like the older woman would believe that excuse. Grasping the chemise from the top of the counter, he walked to the other side and smiled down at her, towering over her by several inches.

"Yes, I do believe you are a perfect fit, Ms. Abel." He laid the silky garment on the counter, retying his hair at his nape. "Thank you for your assistance. I think this will do. I'm sure she will look stunning in

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

it. Although, if you would care to model—”

“Mr. Tyson, you go too far.” Brooke flushed, her gaze downcast. She couldn’t even face her fiancé’s mother. Foster almost felt for her...okay, so he didn’t. His smile grew.

“Would there be anything else?” she asked Foster. Her raised eyebrow challenged him to take his chemise and go away. Oh, but he couldn’t help baiting her.

“I think a bottle of the rose scent you’re wearing would do nicely.” He fought to keep his grin from going full-blown. “I especially love the way it made the crook of your neck smell.”

Brooke’s eyes widened, and had they not been in Mrs. Thompson’s company, he surely would have gotten a tongue lashing from his last comment. Instead her glare bore through him, intending to murder him where he stood.

“I do say.” The small woman cleared her throat, gaining both their attention. “Must you have had to taste her lips as well?”

Brooke gasped, her face blanching, as Foster’s grin grew, no longer containing his amusement. Although the bantering had been fun, he realized it was up to him to save Brooke’s reputation in the eyes of her future mother-in-law, knowing she would probably further embarrass herself if she opened her mouth.

“That would be my fault as well.” Foster winked at Brooke. “You see, her lips are the color of cherry wine. I had to see if she tasted as such. Oh, she tried to push me away, but I can be pretty persistent when I see something I want.”

“And?” Mrs. Thompson asked, causing Brooke to choke on her indrawn air.

He chuckled. “I have to admit, they are mighty sweet and as heady as wine...but I truly had no right. I believe I overstepped my bounds.”

“I must say then, I feel sorry for your girlfriend if you have no more restraint than that,” the older woman huffed. “Surely, Brooke, you must be more careful at the sorts you allow to patronize your shop.”

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

"I agree, Mrs. Thompson." Brooke smiled at Foster, satisfaction lighting her vivid blue gaze. "Although a customer is a customer. But one must realize what his boundaries are and not take liberties with another's person."

Not one to be bested, he added, "Then that person must be more forceful in her denial. I trust this will take care of my bill." Foster placed a fifty-dollar bill on the counter. "Please have them gift wrapped and delivered to the registration desk. Tell them they belong to Foster. They'll know what to do with the packages."

Foster turned and headed for the entrance when Brooke called out, stopping him. He turned at the entrance, his hand on the door.

"You gave me far too much money, Mr. Tyson, allow me to make change."

"Nonsense, the rest is your tip. The taste of your lips was worth the fifty alone," Foster said, winking again, then exited the small shop.

\* \* \*

Brooke watched his departure, touching her fingertips to her still tingling lips. My goodness, she needed to be more cautious in his presence. Something about the man made her totally lose her head.

"Brian would insist you give up this job immediately if he knew what sordid things went on here." Mrs. Thompson drew attention as she fanned herself. "Oh my, if the walls could talk. Is this how you conduct your everyday business?"

"Oh, heavens, no! This has never happened before, I assure you. That man, he..." Not knowing what to say without digging the hole deeper, Brooke quickly shifted topics. "If the offer still stands, I would love to accompany you to dinner. I need to close my shop."

"Of course, my dear." Mrs. Thompson smiled. "Hurry along and we can dine in the restaurant of this fine establishment. The food here is excellent. But I really must talk to Kyle about the riff-raff he allows into this hotel. A doorman should be more selective as to whom he

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

allows into a fine hotel such as this. Who is this Mr. Tyson, dear?"

"I'm not certain." Truthfully, Brooke wondered the same. Whomever he was, the way he threw around money he certainly must be loaded, though one wouldn't know it by his appearance. "I only met him yesterday myself."

"Yesterday?" Her tone bestowed her alarm.

"Yes, but I assure you there is nothing to worry yourself over. He apparently returned to purchase the articles he spotted yesterday. Why don't you go on ahead and get us a table while I finish closing. I'll join you in the dining room in a few minutes."

"Of course, my dear. Although, do be quick, will you? I would like to retire early this evening. One cannot get enough beauty sleep. You look as though you could use a little yourself. You're looking a bit peaked and I think I should talk to Brian about your eating habits as well. You're far too skinny. You need to get some meat on your bones before the wedding. Can't have my family thinking ill of you. Speaking of, have the two of you set a date yet? I could be in my grave before the two of you give me grandbabies."

Brooke grinned. "Not yet."

"I do wish the two of you would hurry. I'm certainly not getting any younger. Well, hurry along, dear. I'll see you in the dining room."

The older woman exited the shop with a certain air about her. The apple didn't fall far from the tree. How could she fault Brian for his arrogance when he had inherited it? Brooke groaned. Her lifestyle was far different from the Thompson's, one used to wealth. Somehow, she doubted she'd ever fit in. She'd likely be miserable before they ever reached their first wedding anniversary. Not for the first time, she second-guessed her decision to marry the man. And here she'd thought he was the answers to her prayers.

Foster Tyson flitted to mind, but she batted the thought away before it even had a chance to form.

Turning her attention to closing, she spotted the silky chemise lying

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on the counter. The garment was by far the most beautiful piece she carried, let alone the most expensive. Jealousy reared its ugly head. How could the lout kiss her in such an intimate manner, yet buy something of this nature for another woman...not to mention want Brooke's perfume for her as well. The man was a cad and she'd do well to remember that should he ever step foot in her shop again. She had half a notion to slice the piece to shreds before boxing it. Brooke grinned. That would certainly put a damper on any plans Foster Tyson might have for the evening.

Grasping a small box beneath the counter, lining it with rose colored tissue paper, she placed the silky chemise safely in the cardboard container. After wrapping the tissue around the garment, she picked a small bottle of the rose scented fragrance from the shelf and positioned it in the center. Placing the cover on the box, she wrapped it in pink floral paper and placed a foil *BA* tag, her shop's trademark, on the box fastened by a large rose-colored bow.

Package in hand, she locked her shop and headed for the dining room, dropping the package at the registration counter.

"Shelly," Brooke called to the reservations clerk, "can you see to it Foster gets this package? He said you would know what to do with it."

"Of course." She smiled and took the package. "I'll see that he gets it."

"But yesterday you said... Oh, never mind." Brooke waved off the question of Shelly's ignorance of the man the day before. Brian's mother waited in the dining room; she wasn't a patient person by nature. She had dallied long enough; by now the woman would be likely tapping her toes. "Thank you, Shelly."

"Anytime, Brooke," she replied, a large smile tipping her cheeks.

\* \* \*

"Celeste? What on earth are you doing here?"

"Well," she purred, like a well-stroked kitten, "if the cat doesn't

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

come after the mouse, then the mouse must go after the cat. Mrs. Dunlap told me you left for the day, so I thought I'd wait for you here. Your housekeeper let me in. You've been such a naughty boy, Foster. I thought surely you'd call tonight, seeing as how you worked late last night. All work and no play makes Foster a very dull boy."

Foster grinned as Celeste stepped closer; her finger circled his waist as she walked a path around him. Foster thought she looked more like a cat ready to devour her prey than a mouse come to play.

Stopping in front of him, she unbuttoned the front of his cotton shirt and slipped her hands inside. Her hands splayed over the thin mat of hair, then tweaked his nipples. As she placed small, teasing kisses on the tip of his chin, her hands worked their way down, pulling the shirt from the confines of his jeans. Celeste pushed the shirt from his shoulders to land in a pile at his feet, and all the while his mind kept drawing images up of the little minx in the Body Apparel shop.

She teased and tickled her way across his abdomen, down to his buttocks, where her hands splayed and gave a tight squeeze. "Does Foster want to come out and play?"

Foster descended upon her lips, his hands grasping her shoulders and pulling her flush against him. She opened for him, inviting him inside. Deepening the kiss, Foster found himself missing the sweet, satiny feel of another's cherry colored lips.

Damn, he couldn't get her off his mind. What the hell was wrong with him? Abandoning her mouth, not one to give up easily, he kissed a path down her shoulder. Celeste shivered and cooed beneath his touch. Her hands traveled to the front of his jeans, undoing the fastening. Foster placed his hand atop hers, stopping her. He turned his back on her and redid his jeans, before giving her his attention again.

"Foster?" Her brows arched gently. "Honey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." His clipped tone spoke of his irritation. But who was he angrier with? Celeste for being so readily available? Or himself for turning her away? Moments ago in Body Apparel, he had been

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

insatiable. Had the old bat not walked in when she had...now, he wasn't even mildly aroused. "You'll have to excuse me tonight, Celeste. My mind is elsewhere."

"It's me, isn't it?" Celeste's eyes rimmed with tears. "That's twice now you brushed me off. Since we've been together, you've never once denied me. What's wrong? Am I no longer pleasing to you?"

"Celeste." Foster wrapped his arms about her. "You're being ridiculous. I've been tired, nothing more. How about we go down to the dining room for dinner before I take you home. I'll change into something more appropriate. Then this weekend, I promise I'll make it up to you."

"Oh, that sounds wonderful." Celeste smiled and blinked away the unshed tears. "Why don't you wear your olive green suit? It compliments your complexion."

Foster chuckled and patted her derrière, before releasing her. It didn't take much to please Celeste and someday, she'd make a good wife, just not to him. A tinge of guilt crept to the surface. Maybe, he should tell her. It certainly wasn't fair to lead her to believe they had a promising future together. But what about his baser needs? He wasn't a man to go without for long. He ran a hand through his hair. Hell, he wasn't even able to get aroused moments ago, so what did he have to worry about? Surely, the little sprite in the Body Apparel shop had nothing to do with that.

"Allow me to change and I'll escort you to dinner." Foster winked at her, then headed for his bedroom.

Moments later, freshly shaved and showered and donning his olive green suit, they arrived in the dining area of his hotel. The matré d, dressed in a black tuxedo, met them at the door to the dining room.

"Mr. Taylor," he bowed.

"I trust my normal table is unoccupied," Foster stated.

"Of course, sir, if you'll follow me."

Foster weaved his way through the crowded dining room with

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Celeste on his arm. Stopping at a small, darkened alcove where a table sat away from the mainstream of guests, Foster pulled a seat out for Celeste, before taking his own. The *matré d* handed them each a menu before taking his leave. Picking up his menu, Foster pulled his glasses from the inner pocket of his suit jacket and placed them on his nose. He already knew the menu by heart, so he glanced over the top and took a gander at the surrounding tables. The dining room was filled to capacity, not a table left empty. Business was good. He'd hired the best French chef and no other dining room in Denver could match his establishment.

His gaze landed on the nearest table as a small petite woman glanced up from her menu, making eye contact. *Brooke*. She gasped and the smile quickly fled his face. The all too familiar tightening of his groin, pressing against the front of his trousers, returned tenfold. Damn.



## CHAPTER 5

Conversation flitted about the pleasant atmosphere of the crowded formal dining room. Glass chandeliers hung from the two-story ceilings like tear drops as potted palm plants scattered about, giving the room an earthy impression. The linen covered tables were adorned with white china and crystal water goblets all trimmed in gold. Silk oriental brocade papered the walls in rich gold and silver. A white and gold marbled dance floor spotlighted the center of the room as couples waltzed in front of live musicians.

Brooke had never been surrounded by such extravagance and felt as out of place as a bull in a china shop. Seeing Foster Tyson sitting beside them hadn't helped. She tried to act nonchalant, but the more she endeavored to act as though his presence didn't bother her, the clumsier she became. As she dropped her menu to the table, Brooke nearly tipped over the goblet filled with water. Her face blanched as Mrs. Thompson looked up from her menu and grasped the teetering crystal. Mrs. Thompson's brow shot heavenward.

### *DARK SAVIOR*

"My dear, you're as white as a sheet," Mrs. Thompson scolded. "You're drawing attention to us. Please conduct yourself in a more civilized manner."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Thompson, but I fear I have no appetite after all. I think I would like to retire early."

"Nonsense, dear." She placed a hand on Brooke's arm, staying her. "My dear, you're trembling. What has upset you so?"

"It's nothing." Brooke fidgeted with her napkin and stole a glance at the next table again.

"Oh dear," Mrs. Thompson gasped, her gaze following Brooke's. "Isn't that the dreadful man who accosted you? I should call the matrone and have him removed at once."

"No, Mrs. Thompson!" Brooke all but shouted. "Please, let it go and I promise to eat a fulfilling meal."

"If that is what you wish," she huffed, "but I do wish they would pay more attention to the sorts they allow in here. Although, I must say, he's cleaned up quite pleasantly. Wouldn't you agree, dear?"

"Yes," Brooke hissed. "Now, if you wouldn't mind, I would like to change the subject. How are Brian's classes coming at the university?"

As Mrs. Thompson chattered on about Brian and his choice of careers, not to mention how brilliant a son she raised, Brooke stole glances at Foster now and again. She had to admit, Mrs. Thompson had been correct in her assessment—he looked immaculate in a suit. The olive coloring brought out the deep shades of his skin. Though she thought him handsome before, she thought him even more so dressed as he was. The glasses resting on his nose came as a surprise. She wondered why he never wore them in her presence before.

The beautiful woman sitting beside him was undoubtedly wealthy by the looks of her dress and fur stole. She made it blatantly obvious that they were more than friends by her inability to keep her hands from Foster. She must be the woman he bought the chemise for. Jealousy once again reared its ugly head. Catching his eye, he nonchalantly

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grinned at her like one might a total stranger, causing Brooke to fume. How dare he kiss her as he had, then totally disregard her?

\* \* \*

Foster ate the thick rare steak filling his plate with mild interest, barely listening to Celeste babble. What was she saying? Something about her hair? Foster had a hard time keeping his attention on his dinner companion, continually stealing glances at the next table. The essence of her rose fragrance drifted across the small space, captivating him. He removed the glasses from his nose and replaced them in the pocket of his jacket. He hated wearing the scrap metal. He could see satisfactory enough without them. Well, as long as he wasn't standing too far from the object.

*Damn*, he thought again, his trousers becoming quite uncomfortable. If not for Celeste, he might just think to take Brooke, or whoever the hell she was, upstairs and satisfy the urge plaguing him.

"Honey." Celeste poked his arm, further irritating him. "Are you listening to me?"

"What?" Foster blinked. "I'm sorry. Were you saying something?"

"Have you been listening to a word I've said?"

"My mind has been preoccupied this evening. Forgive me?"

"Of course, I would forgive you anything." She batted her lashes. "I was saying we should go out Saturday. I want to go dancing and it's been far too long since you've taken me to a club. I heard Jelly Roll Morton is playing somewhere in town. You must find out where."

"Perhaps," he agreed, still only mildly interested in their conversation. The little minx beside them had bewitched him.

"Well if it isn't Foster himself." A deep male voice boom came from behind, rescuing him from making an immediate decision.

"Kip Cameron." Foster stood and hugged the man, patting his back. "When did you roll into town? Don't tell me you arrived weeks ago and you just now looked up your only friend."

## ***DARK SAVIOR***

\* \* \*

A handsome gentleman, his blond hair overlong and hanging loose about his face, stepped back from Foster's embrace, slapping him on the shoulder. Brooke could tell the two men cared deeply for each other, that much apparent in their gazes. Both men laughed as Foster gestured for Kip to take a seat next to his lady companion. She continued to eavesdrop, wondering if this man held any of the answers to the enigma of Foster Tyson.

"I arrived in town a few days ago. You know me, I had to check out the city for available females first." Kip laughed, slapping his thigh. "And speaking of lovely ladies, who's your beautiful companion? Don't tell me you've actually settled down."

"Not a chance." Foster grinned. "This is Celeste Asterly. You could say she's my girlfriend for the time being."

Celeste playfully slapped Foster's forearm.

"Truly a vision." Kip grasped Celeste's hand, placing a lingering kiss on her knuckles. "If you don't scoop this one up, I surely will."

"Celeste, this piece of work I call a friend is Kip Cameron," Foster introduced. "I met him in New York about seven years ago."

"The pleasure, madam, is all mine." Kip's words dripped with sugar. "You smell of summer, tempting lilacs."

*Lilacs?* Her brow rose, wondering what this woman would think of the rose scented fragrance Foster had purchased for her...especially if she knew that he procured it because he liked the way Brooke smelled. The woman would undoubtedly be displeased.

Brooke wondered about the relationship Foster had with Celeste. His attentions weren't what one might think a paramour would show his companion. Certainly this woman wouldn't pay him to accompany her. Or would she? The woman appeared to be of wealth and Foster did seem to have an unlimited supply of money. The more she thought about it, the more sense it made. After all, he had said he went upstairs, yet no Foster Tyson had been registered at the hotel. He told her to

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

leave his package at the desk, and they would know what to do with it. The only pliable answer she could come up with was he stayed with Celeste in her room. The thought lay heavily in her stomach.

“What’s the matter, dear?” Mrs. Thompson drew her from her reverie. “You haven’t looked your best this evening. Are you coming down with something? Maybe, we should call it an evening.”

“No—no, I’m fine.” Brooke placed her napkin on the table. “A good night’s sleep will be my cure. I think I’d like to freshen up in the ladies’ room, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Certainly, dear.” Mrs. Thompson smiled sweetly. “I’ll order dessert while you’re away.”

\* \* \*

Lost to the conversation at his own table, Foster watched Brooke excuse herself and head in the direction of the ladies’ room. Giving into his desire to follow, he excused himself from the table.

“I have an important call I forgot to make.” Foster stood. “I should only be a minute.”

“Of course,” Celeste barely acknowledged, waving him away with a sweep of her hand. “Now what was it you were telling me? What is it you do?”

Foster laughed as he walked from the table. Celeste would surely land on her feet when he decided to move on. His worries had been for nothing.

Making an arc around the dance floor through the dining area, Foster continued down a dimly lit hallway leading to the ladies’ room. Opening the door, he peered in, hoping to find it unoccupied aside from Brooke. Had it not been for his sudden obsession, he would have never considered entering a ladies’ room. A large woman with huge breasts exiting the room ran into him, nearly knocking him off his feet.

“Oh my!” She sputtered, shoving her way past Foster. “Hubert!”

He’d have to be careful of his antics in the future or chance losing

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

some of his prospering business. Chasing women into the ladies' room hadn't been one of the smarter decisions he's made. But then again, seeing Ashley again had turned his world upside down. Foster turned to lock the door, to keep any others from entering, just as a gray-haired elderly woman entered the powder room from the direction of the stalls. The woman screeched. Foster raised his hands in front of him in attempts to calm her. After all, it would prove to be quite embarrassing should the older woman have a heart attack because the owner of the establishment had a fetish for entering ladies' rooms, making amusing headlines for the morning paper.

"It's okay." He winked at her. "I'll only be a minute. The men's room was full."

"Well, I never!" She slapped him aside with her pocketbook and headed for the door. "I'll have to speak to the owner of this establishment first thing in the morning."

"Good idea." Foster followed her to the door, rushing her on her way. "Now hurry along."

With one final scathing look, she straightened her shoulders and marched from the room. Foster quickly locked the door behind her.

Coming around the corner from the stalls, Brooke ran into his solid chest. Quickly placing his hand over her mouth, he stopped her barely audible shriek. Brooke glanced at him, no doubt seeing his humor at the situation, then promptly bit the inside of his hand, forcing him to release her.

"Damn!" Foster shook his hand. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"You, sir, are truly scandalous." Brooke stiffened her spine. "What on earth are you doing, following me into the ladies' room?"

"The men's room was full?"

"I don't think so. Try again."

"The ladies' room is much cleaner?" He smiled, only gaining a lopsided grin in return.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“That I don’t doubt. But I would bet it’s not the reason bringing you in here, or do you make a habit of scaring poor old women half to death?”

“You heard that, huh?”

“How could I not?” She laughed. “I’m surprised you didn’t bring down the management and have them hauling your backside out of the hotel.”

“I’m not. Takes a lot to rile management here.”

“So, what did you want?”

Foster’s gaze dropped to her full red lips. “A moment of your time.”

“Oh no you don’t.” Brooke held out her hand. “I think you’ve sampled quite enough for one evening.”

Foster couldn’t resist rising to the challenge. “What’s the matter? Don’t think you could trust yourself to kiss me again?”

“Trust myself?” she fairly squealed. “What makes you think I enjoyed it?”

“Oh, I think you did. Shall I test my theory?”

Brooke’s gaze centered on his lips. For a moment he thought she might just agree and take up where they left off before the interruption earlier in her shop. Then with a shake of her head, she dismissed him. “What did you want from me, Foster, that couldn’t wait until I left the ladies’ room?”

For the first time in a long while, Foster felt at a loss of words, not sure why he had done something as foolhardy as following her. Now because of his spontaneous actions, he had an irate customer to deal with come morning.

He blurted out the words, “A date,” before he had a chance to think about what he asked. Although now that they were out, he wasn’t so sure he’d take them back if he could. A date with Brooke, Ashley, whoever...seemed liked a wonderful idea.

“A date?” she yelped, her face blanching. Damn, she didn’t need to look at him like he had just asked her to step into the bowels of hell

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

with him. Nothing like killing a man's ego. "You can't be serious."

"I assure you, the one thing I am is serious." Foster squared his shoulders. A date might even be a perfect way to provide himself with answers.

"What about your wealthy dinner companion?" Her tone seemed clipped...could she possibly be jealous? He certainly liked the sound of that. "Or do you have no conscience? She might just cut off your funds if she knew you consorted with me."

"Excuse me?" Foster chuckled, which quickly turned into peals of laughter the more he considered her offhanded comment. Celeste would be the one left without the money should their affair end. More than likely, she'd be more upset about the gifts stopping than their affair.

"I hardly think you need to be arrogant about this." She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and leveled her stare at him. "Surely, no man is worth the money she probably pays you if you cannot remain faithful."

"You, precious, are like a breath of fresh air," he responded, still chuckling.

Brooke opened her mouth to counter before snapping it closed again. Obviously, he had confounded her.

"You humor me."

"I really don't find anything amusing about this situation, nor should you."

"You think Celeste pays me to sleep with her?" Humor laced his words.

"I'm really not sure what to make of you, Foster Tyson," she responded. "You walk into my shop, looking as if you couldn't afford the bell on my door. Yet, you continuously throw money around as though it grows on trees. Then, you walk in here with a wealthy woman on your arm. Just what am I to think?"

"I'll tell you this much, Celeste doesn't pay me to sleep with her."



### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Foster started laughing again. "For that matter, I wouldn't sleep with anyone for the likes of money, including you, precious."

"If you thought I meant..." Brooke flushed.

"No, I didn't mean you wished to pay me to sleep with you. I only meant that I'd do for free." The humor shed his face as desire took over, like an arrow straight to his groin.

"Well, I never." Brooke raised her hand to strike him.

Foster caught her wrist, pulling her body flush with his. He looked into her defiant gaze. He had the same effect on her she had on him. He needed only to prove it.

"Look, I didn't come in here to test our wills as I think we both know we'd lose," he said, knowing the truth to his statement by the pressure of his aroused state. "A date is all I ask."

"But I'm engaged," Brooke whispered.

Foster could see the battle in her eyes. He needed to be more persuasive. "So you've said. A date between friends then."

"Friends?"

"Surely this fiancé of yours bequeaths you friends."

She shifted in her stance and glanced briefly to the floor. "Of course." "Sunday, then." Foster smiled, already feeling the win. "I'll pack us a lunch and pick you up in front of the hotel. Noon?"

"Sunday, noon."

\* \* \*

What in the world had she just agreed to?

Foster nearly collided with another female trying to enter the powder room in his haste to leave, causing her to giggle. He smiled at the lady, shrugged his shoulders and held the door open for her...not bothering for an explanation.

"Excuse me," Brooke added, feeling the flush crawl up her neck. She quickly followed Foster through the door before the woman demanded questions about what had just transpired between her and

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Foster in the powder room. Goodness, she had never been so daring.

*A date?* How in the world had she allowed herself to be talked into a sharing a picnic with a man she barely knew? It was simple, she stopped thinking in his presence. A condition she better cure herself of and quickly, before she allowed things to go too far.

What in the world would she tell Brian? That she and Foster had become fast friends? Even she didn't believe that. She couldn't tell Brian a thing or chance losing him for good. Brian was her fiancé, and to prove it, she'd finally agree to a wedding date on Saturday...before she ever shared a date with Foster.

The thought should have lifted the heavy weight on her heart. Instead, a two-ton brick had just been added to the already heavy load.

## CHAPTER 6

“Good morning, Mother.” Foster kissed her forehead. Dressed in a blue, smartly tailored suit he paid way too much money for, he was ready for the office. He’d wear blue jeans all day if he could get away with it. His glasses perched on the end of his nose, he took a seat opposite her at the white-topped kitchen table.

“What brings you by this morning, Foster?” the thin, older woman asked. He hated seeing his mother age.

Dressed in a floral night wrapper, the elderly woman looked at her son with the same chocolate-brown eyes. Though her dark hair was salt and peppered with age, there was no denying their relationship.

The kitchenette of the small apartment adorned the latest appliances, no expense spared. Foster had insisted on adding the apartment next to his penthouse. He’d appointed himself caregiver to his mother and sister years ago and would continue to be as long as they needed him.

“Amanda tells me you’re not feeling well again.” Foster accepted

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

the black cup of coffee his sister handed him. Strong...just the way he liked it. "Thanks, Sis."

"Breakfast?" she asked.

His sister stood taller than most women, her body voluptuous. Her mahogany hair lay in waves just past her shoulders where Foster's was nearly black. She made a stunning portrait. At twenty-three years of age, Foster often wondered why she hadn't taken a husband. She had plenty of suitors and stood out in a crowd. Maybe marriage held little interest for her. Hopefully not an inherited trait as Foster had held much to the same beliefs.

"Not this morning. I have a busy schedule. I just came by to see how Mother was."

"The two of you worry far too much." She shrugged, waving her hand in the air. "An old lady can't get any extra sleep around here without one of you worrying and stirring up commotion."

"That's just it, Mother, you aren't old, barely sixty, and you'd think you already have one foot in the grave." Foster took a sip of his coffee. "Why don't you let me take the morning off? I'll take you to the doctor's."

"Nonsense." She patted Foster's hand. "I won't hear of it. You are much too busy to concern yourself with an old lady. Go on to work. Amanda will see to it I'm taken care of. Won't you, my dear?"

Foster heard the sound of disgust coming from his sister. Knowing his mother's hearing wasn't what it used to be, he let it go without comment. He had left his sister to take care of their mother a big share of the time while he ran his business. But under the circumstances, he had little choice. Someone had to see the bills were paid and he wasn't about to hire a perfect stranger to watch over his mother. Besides, his sister benefited. She lived quite well off him and wanted for nothing.

"Of course, Mama." Amanda purred, sugar dripping from the sound. "You know I will take care of you. I always have, even if Foster is too busy with himself."

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Now, Amanda,” his mother’s face reddened, “your brother has done right by you. Without his dedication to his business, you wouldn’t be able to buy the expensive dresses you wear.”

“Sure, he’s a busy man, I won’t argue that, but he finds enough time to escort his whores about town.”

Foster stood abruptly, the metal chair scraped against the white tiled floor. The ungrateful little bitch. He braced the fullness of his weight on his hands against the top of the table and glared at her. Never once had she thanked him for all he had done.

“Amanda!” his mother intervened. “You apologize to your brother immediately.

He’s an upstanding citizen and dates only the finest women.”

“Celeste is nothing more than a high priced whore!”

“Enough!” Foster’s deep voice reverberated across the kitchen. “I will not have you belittle the women I date as long as you reside under my roof. Nor is it any of your business what I do with my free time and with whom I chose to spend it.”

“Ever since Lynette died, you haven’t dated a woman I would even consider having as a sister-in-law.”

“Who said I wanted marriage?”

“Mama wants grandchildren. Who better to give them to her than her perfect son!”

“What about you, Ice Princess? I don’t see you rushing into the state of matrimony.”

“My personal life is none of your business!”

“Nor is mine yours!”

“Well, thanks to you, big brother, the only men knocking at my door are gold diggers, thinking getting into my pants is a link to yours.”

“Foster! Amanda!” Their mother rose on shaking legs. “Please!”

“Look what you’ve done.” Amanda leveled her hate-filled gaze at him. “You’ve upset Mama.”

“Me?” Foster raised a brow. “Ah, hell. There’s no arguing with

## ***DARK SAVIOR***

you.”

He turned and headed for the door. He’d had enough of Amanda’s theatrics for one day. She called out, stopping him just short of leaving.

“What?”

“Shall I make enough for you at dinner time?” Amanda asked, her voice calmer. Cripe she had a way with doing an about-face.

“No, I might be running late. I’ll take dinner in the penthouse.”

“No doubt with that whore of yours.” She obviously couldn’t resist the last dig.

Not bothering to comment, Foster exited the apartment, slamming the door. Had he really been so tough on Amanda, leaving her to take care of his mother a big share of the time? Maybe he should spend more time with his mother so Amanda could get out more. He had been selfishly unaware of her needs. He thought of his date with Celeste on Saturday. Perhaps he’d allow Kip to escort Celeste to the clubs and spend some much-needed time with his mother. Celeste would be upset, but Kip had loads of charisma. He could charm the skirts off most woman.

He thought about his decision to allow Kip to escort Celeste and the sensibility of it. Maybe Celeste would find Kip more to her liking. He pursed his lips and wondered if he even cared. Love had never been a part of their relationship.

\* \* \*

Moments later, business at hand, he sat behind his desk, overlooking several ledgers. His hotels did quite well. Prohibition hadn’t hurt him, even if he couldn’t serve alcohol in his dining rooms. Though many went to speakeasies for entertainment and illegal booze, many people still patronized his dining rooms. Elegance had always been important as he catered to the wealthy. Cost had never been a factor, no dollar spared. He adorned his hotels in the latest fashions and hired the best musicians for his dining room.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

However, business wasn't at the forefront of his mind. Alex had been doing a splendid job overlooking things in Denver, leaving his mind able to wander to the more appealing. Two days had passed since he left Ashley standing in the ladies' room. The situation had turned out to be quite embarrassing for him. He chuckled, remembering the following day when the irate customer requested an audience with him.

The elderly woman stormed into his outer office, demanding Mrs. Dunlap give her an audience with the owner. She wanted the pervert in the ladies' room dealt with immediately. Mrs. Dunlap, not aware of the situation, led the woman to Foster's office. The older woman nearly fainted as she fanned herself and sat heavily in one of his padded seats.

"Oh, my," the woman exasperated, her face white as death. "You'll not hear the end of me. I'll see to it the entire city hears of this. You'll be ruined."

"Madam, I assure you, this sort of thing will never happen again," Foster tried to make amends before she cut in.

"What a scandal this will cause! No one will dare patronize your hotel when they find out the kind of pervert you are."

"I assure you, madam, scandal is not new to me. However, I would like the opportunity to alleviate some of the apprehension I've caused."

"How could you possibly lessen the trauma?"

"Two free weeks at any one of my fine hotels. Take your pick."

"Dinners also?"

"Dinners also." Foster grinned. She knew how to work him, he'd give her that. "I'm truly sorry for startling you and causing any inconvenience."

She smiled for the first time since entering his office. "Well, then, I do suppose I could find it in myself to forgive you any wrong doing."

"See my secretary on the way out and I'll see to it you receive a voucher good toward any one of my five hotels, your choice."

His impulse to follow Ashley into the ladies' room had cost him. He hoped she would be worth every penny.

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“Mr. Taylor,” Mrs. Dunlap broke into his thoughts.

“Yes?” He took the glasses from his face and placed them on the desk, rubbing the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

“I’ve just received word from New York and I thought you’d want to know right away.”

Foster sat back in his chair. “What have you found out for me?”

“Well, Mr. Taylor, that’s just it,” she began. “According to your manager, George, Ashley Heath moved out a week after you, leaving no forwarding address.”

“Did he check around?”

“Yes. He said to tell you as far as he knows, she disappeared. To his knowledge, there is no Ashley Heath living in or around New York City. He said he would put a detective on it first thing.”

Foster stood and began to pace. “I want to know what happened to her from the time she moved out of my penthouse. Come to think about it, she promised to write and I haven’t heard from her since I moved.”

“If he finds her, what should I tell him to do?”

“Tell him to sit tight until I instruct him further, though I highly doubt he’ll find her anywhere close to New York. She has a mother living in New York City. Tell him it’s as good a place as any to start. I doubt he’ll find her there. She wasn’t on speaking terms with her last I knew. It’s probable though, she might have had some sort of contact with her in the past three years.”

“Why do you feel he won’t find her in New York?”

“Because I think I know where she moved to three years ago, I just need solid proof. I need specifics.”

“I’ll tell him to get right on it. Anything else?”

“Yes, send in Alex Thurston.”

Foster continued pacing, waiting on Alex’s arrival, his newly acquired facts rolling through his mind. All the particulars pointed to Ashley following him to Denver. But why not show herself and wait for him to discover her working here of all places? What kind of games



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did she play? It wasn't likely she developed a case of amnesia, leaving the only possible answer she played him for the fool. If she thought to get him to marry her by coming out here and pretending to be someone else, then her judgment was sorely misguided.

Taking a seat behind his desk again, his fingers drummed, thoughts of Lynette occupying his thoughts. Her murderer had never been caught. Someone had taken her life and that of their unborn son. The culprit had set Foster up to take the fall, obviously hoping to see him prosecuted. His left-handedness saved him from a life behind bars. He had been the one to find Lynette in a pool of blood, atop their bed in his penthouse. Still alive, Lynette fought for air. She'd been stabbed in the back, collapsing a lung. The fatal wound had been done by a right-handed assailant. Foster rushed her to the nearest hospital where she and their unborn child died shortly there after. Having no other family than Foster, he held a closed casket funeral for her and his son with only him and a few close friends in attendance.

Not long before he had met Lynette, society blamed him for the suicidal death of his previous girlfriend, Allison McKay. She jumped to her death from the fifth story of his Georgia hotel. The rumor mill spread wide and fast telling of him pushing her to her death. No proof could be found and the rumors were laid to rest.

Later came the assault on Ashley, stabbed in the back in the same manner as Lynette. But luckily Ashley had survived. The assailant went unseen and uncaught. Thus the reasoning behind moving west—he didn't want to put anyone else in jeopardy and a madman still ran free in New York who obviously wanted to see the downfall of Foster Taylor. So why had Ashley followed?

"Foster?" Alex walked into his office, disrupting his thoughts. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes." His hand indicated the chair opposite him. "Have a seat. What can you tell me about Brooke Abel?"

"Well, for starters, her full name is Brooke Nicole Abel." Alex ran a

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hand over his shaven jaw. “She was born and raised here in Denver. Her parents, John and Debra Abel, were also from the area. He worked in a factory, not wealthy. They died in a train robbery about four years ago. Brooke was eighteen at the time. With no other family, she was left to take care of herself.”

“You say she was their only child?”

“Yes, only surviving relative is in New York, an aunt.”

“She has an aunt in New York?” Foster’s interest sparked.

“Yes, her mother’s sister I believe. She spent a year there after the train robbery.”

“You’re telling me she lived in New York four years ago for about a year and three years ago she moved back to Denver?”

“As far as I know. That’s when she rented the space from you to open her shop, Body Apparel.”

Foster took the glasses from his nose. Could he have been wrong all these years and there never was an Ashley? If so, he had been duped four years ago. “What else do you have for me?” Foster returned his attention to Alex.

“Not much, I’m afraid. She’s engaged to the man you asked me about, Professor Brian Thompson, but no wedding date has been set. According to my sources, she seems reluctant.”

Foster wondered if that reluctance had anything to do with him. Did she still think to trap him into a marriage? None of it made sense. Certainly she wouldn’t wait three years.

“As for the professor,” Alex continued, “I’ve found nothing special. He teaches at the University of Denver. He moved here with his mother about three years ago from New York, where he graduated with masters. He’s wealthy enough and is an avid collector of antiques. Oh, and by the way, I was unable to get the size of her hosiery, aside from asking her myself. She buys that from herself.”

“Don’t be sarcastic, Alex,” Foster growled. “I’m not in the mood.”

“What’s your sudden interest in the woman? After all, she’s worked

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here for three years.”

“My interest is my business.” Foster eyed Alex. The man seemed a bit protective of Brooke and didn’t seem to like Foster’s latest interest. “I like to know the people who work for me. Surely you know with my past experience, I can’t be too careful.”

“I highly doubt you have to worry about Brooke. Besides, she doesn’t work for you. She rents that space from you, nothing more.”

“Thank you for the information.” Foster fidgeted with a letter opener. Looking up, he glared at Alex. “If I require anything else, I’ll let you know.”

“Well then, I’ll get back to this week’s payroll.” Alex’s clipped tone spoke of his interest in Brooke.

“See to it you get a bonus for all your help.” Foster gave Alex his back and glanced out the window.

“Thank you for your generosity,” Alex said, before closing the door behind him.

Foster sorted through the information Alex had given him. It seemed he now knew more about Brooke than Ashley. Apparently, Brooke had roots in Denver and Ashley had a mother in New York, one he never met. He had met Ashley in a speakeasy in New York City. After a very short courtship, he convinced her to move into his penthouse. Could it be possible his entire time with her had been nothing but a lie?

Alex said Brooke lived in New York City for a year after the death of her parents. That placed her in New York the precise time he lived with Ashley. The more he thought about it, he’d lay odds there was no such person as Ashley Heath, but only a grieving daughter who tragically lost both parents...namely Brooke Abel. No doubt the detective he hired in New York would come up empty handed.

## CHAPTER 7

Brooke sat on the floral brocade love seat, watching the festivities. She felt more at an off-Broadway production than a dinner party. Nowhere had she witnessed so many who feigned wealth more than their actual worth. One might get the impression of an extravagant mansion in New York City had they not known they were in nothing more than a large house in Denver, Colorado. *Snobs*. And these were Brian's friends.

Rich silk dresses in an array of colors and cashmere wool suits seemed the dress code for the evening. Cloche hats adorned heads, and fur stoles draped shoulders. The houses they lived in were expensively furnished, many into antiques such as Brian.

Why had she agreed to come? She never enjoyed herself at any of these soirees. It was simple...she did so to please Brian, who chatted incessantly with another man across the room, ignoring her altogether.

The past hour had dragged on and Brooke had yet to hold a conversation. She sat quietly, hands crossed on her lap, greeting people

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as they passed her. Not a one took an opportunity to get to know her, most probably considered her beneath them. Marrying Brian would not likely change that. She would never fit. Her plain, wool, knee-length dresses and practical shoes were not the latest styles. And on her limited budget, she had little choice but to go for sensible.

“Brooke,” Lydia Fontaine, fiancée of one of Brian’s associates, caught her attention. “How are you this evening, dear?”

“Fine, thank you.” Brooke knew the woman asked out of politeness.

“Nice to see you could make it. Brian says you are to set a date soon.” The lovely brunette patted her short tresses. “How wonderful for you. Curtis tells me how truly happy Brian seems. He thinks you’re the best thing for him. Any ideas how soon the wedding will take place? I will need plenty of time to shop for the appropriate dress.”

“I’m sure I will give you plenty of time, Lydia.” Brooke smiled out of courtesy. “I’m in no rush, but Brian insists we marry soon.”

“If I were you,” Lydia lowered her voice to a whisper, “I couldn’t get my hands on him soon enough. Brian certainly is as handsome as he is wealthy. You must be dying to get him into the marriage bed.”

“Brian is certainly comely.” Warmth spread through Brooke’s cheeks. “As far as the latter, I’m in no real hurry. We have the rest of our lives to share the...uh, marriage bed.”

“Modesty becomes you, dear.” Lydia giggled. “If it were me, I wouldn’t wait until the day of the wedding. I wouldn’t allow such a catch to slip away.”

“Does the same hold true for Curtis?”

“Really, dear.” Lydia’s brow crinkled in disgust. “Look at him, will you? Who would steal him? He could stand to lose about a hundred pounds. I’m in no hurry to rush into a state of matrimony with him. But the gifts he bestows me with are enough to hold my interest for the time being.”

“Why lead him on? Surely the gifts aren’t worth the price of your happiness.”

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“Sometimes, I think you’re as naïve as everyone says.” Lydia clucked. “The man is loaded. If nothing better comes along, of course, I’ll marry him. But as for now, I prefer to keep my options open. Know what I mean?”

“Yes, unfortunately I do.” Brooke fumed at her arrogance. “But I—  
”

“Oh, there’s Victoria,” Lydia interrupted. “I must run along if you would be so kind to excuse me. I haven’t seen her in such a long time.”

Brooke watched Lydia caper off to greet the newly arrived woman. Victoria looked like a goddess in her silk, A-line sapphire gown, fringe dangling to the floor like a waterfall. Gold chains dressed her neck as jeweled rings adorned every finger. Her rich black hair, cut in the latest fashion, complemented the verdant color of her eyes. The beautiful woman graced the room in regal style.

Victoria floated across the room. Everyone’s eyes stationed on the exquisite woman. Who was she? Even Brian stopped in mid-sentence to watch her fashionably late arrival. Victoria passed Brian, their eyes making brief contact. If she hadn’t known better, Brooke would swear something more than a casual acquaintance passed between them from the way they acknowledged one another.

Victoria suddenly backtracked, stopped in front of Brian and whispered into his ear. Brian’s stance stiffened as he watched her walk away. Jealousy should have reared its ugly head, but instead Brooke felt nothing...not like when Foster bought the exquisite silky chemise for his girlfriend. She reflected upon her upcoming nuptials. Could she actually go through with it?

“I’m sorry, darling.” Brian startled her. So deep in her own thoughts, she missed his approach. “I didn’t mean to ignore you all evening. Curtis and I were discussing business at the university. Are you ready to leave?”

She raised a brow. “But we barely arrived an hour ago.” Though Brooke wanted to make a speedy exit, she knew Brian normally stayed

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until the last of the guests were to leave.

"I have an early start to my morning." Brian smiled a bit too sweetly. "If you don't mind, I'd like to call it an evening."

"Not at all." Brooke couldn't help but wonder what Brian was actually up to and if what Victoria whispered in his ear had anything to do with it. Not being able to resist, she asked, "I have to be up at dawn as well. Will I be seeing you in church tomorrow?"

"No. I...um...sort of promised Mother I'd be by to check on her."

"She's not feeling well then?" Brooke challenged. "She looked fit enough at dinner."

"No, she's fine. At her age though, one cannot be too careful. If you want, we can get together in the afternoon."

"No." Brooke flushed. "I have to inventory my shop."

"Tomorrow? Isn't that done at the end of the year?"

"Yes, but I'm trying to cut costs." Brooke looked for anything to come up with. She wasn't a very good liar. "Maybe, we can get together in the evening. If you would like to come by, we could discuss plans for our wedding."

"Certainly!" Brian's sudden excitement had her wishing she hadn't brought the dreaded topic up. "Will we finally set a date? I'd like to get married while we're still young enough to have children." His answering smile sent a shiver up her spine. Somehow she couldn't picture her and Brian ever doing what was needed to have children.

"We'll talk about it," Brooke responded. "Now, about making that exit..."

Brian escorted Brooke, around the crowded room, bidding his friends a goodnight. As they passed Victoria, Brooke glanced back, catching her attention on Brian's departure. Brooke couldn't help wondering if Brian might be having an affair with the illustrious woman. After all, a man's sexual prowess was much stronger than that of a woman's. Brian had given Brooke no more than chaste kisses. Certainly nothing open mouthed and intimate as Foster had.

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Butterflies fluttered in her stomach at the thought of Foster's uninhibited kisses, causing Brooke to second-guess the sexual desires of a woman. Maybe with the right man... She shook off the notion as wanton.

But what if Brian and Victoria were having an affair? Somehow, the answer really didn't matter. Maybe it was time to end things with Brian instead of thinking of setting a date. She could no longer see herself being Mrs. Brian Thompson. Another shiver passed her spine. Tomorrow evening would be soon enough to deal with the now intolerable situation she'd gotten herself into...after her date with Foster Tyson. A smile passed her lips as they exited the home. She, too, had her secrets.

\* \* \*

Foster sat across the kitchen table from his mother. Several silver coins and crisp green bills littered the surface. He carefully watched the impassive expression of her face. He could never guess her line of thinking. Her warm brown eyes remained straight-faced. Stealing a look at his own hand, he quickly returned his gaze. Damn, she never looked away. The woman had nerves of steel.

"Come on, panty waist," she barked. "The ball is in your court. Twenty dollars to stay in."

Foster looked in his hand again—a full house, aces over kings. The hand was good, damn good, but a lot could beat it and there was well over fifty dollars of his already in the pot. Looking at her expression again still told him nothing; a face set in stone. It was just a card game, but he hated losing—especially against his mother. She had a way with rubbing salt in wounds, kicking a man when he was down. Did she bluff or could she have a four of a kind or better? She had drawn three cards, for crying out loud. How good of a hand could she possibly have?

"What kind of poker player do you call yourself?" she snarled. "By



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the time you make up your mind, I'll be cold in my grave. You in?"

"I'll see you." Foster snapped against the pressure. "And I call. What do you have?"

"Ha!" she exclaimed, slapping her cards face-up on the table. "Four of a kind, jacks. Can you beat that?"

"Damn!" Foster spat. "Woman, I swear you could bluff the pants off a veteran and when you aren't bluffing, you're the luckiest damn player I ever laid eyes on."

"Don't swear at your mother, sonny." She giggled as she gathered in her winnings. "Two hundred and seventy dollars tonight. I'd say that's a fair night's worth of winnings."

"I keep this up and I'll be broke before you know it." Foster grinned. "I guess Sis and I will have to live off you then."

"Ha!" She laughed. "You two ingrates can get a job and support your own sorry asses."

"You're incorrigible." Foster loved seeing his mother's happiness sparkle in her eyes. "Where did Amanda go running off to this evening? She sure didn't waste any time high-tailing it out of here."

"You know she means well. She spends her days cooped up in here with a broken down old lady. She needs her own time, too. I can take care of myself. I don't need the two of you hovering over me like vultures ready for the pickings."

"Like you'd leave the two of us anything. You're so damn ornery, you'd see to it neither of us had anything to fight over even as you were drawing your last breath."

"You're right. The two of you find enough to argue over. When I go, I'll see to it you bury me so quickly there's nothing left for you to fight over. I'd love to see the day you two call it a truce."

"Amanda is ungrateful for all she has." Foster's tone turned serious. "Though I've seen to it she has everything she needs, it's still not enough for her. What more can I do?"

The older woman stood from the table, taking her winnings.

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Opening the wooden cupboard door, she extracted a large pickle jar filled with money, depositing her new earnings. She reached above her head to replace the heavy jar back on the shelf, when it slipped from her hands, crashing to the floor. Change, bills, and shattered glass scattered about the white tile, rolling in all directions.

Foster jumped from his chair. The metal frame clanged to the floor. Rushing to his mother's side, he clasped her shoulders, feeling the loose muscles shake beneath his touch.

"Careful, Mother." He guided her back to her chair. "Watch the glass."

She batted his hand away. "I'm capable of taking care of myself, Foster."

"For once in your life, Mother, listen to me. Sit. I'll clean up the glass."

"Oh, all right. You just want to get your greedy hands on my winnings."

Foster laughed. Even in a serious situation, she tried to get his dander up. He reached into the closet, pulled out a broom and dustpan, then bent down, gathering up the hundreds of dollars strewn about.

"What are you saving this for? A rainy day? Hell, if I knew you were going to just let the money lie around the apartment, I'd think twice about allowing you to win."

Mabel Ruth Taylor grunted in response. Foster hid his smile at her cluck of disapproval. No one allowed anyone to win in any of their poker games, and he knew it. They were both out for blood. He put her winnings into another jar, then replaced it in the cupboard and swept up the glass.

"What happened anyway, Mother? It's not like you to do something like this."

"My arm went numb." She rubbed the affected area. "You worry too much. It's just old age."

"No matter. I'm still going to take you to see a doctor first thing

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Monday.”

“I won’t hear of it, Foster.” She squared her frail shoulders. “I told you it’s no more than old age. Now if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll retire. The older I get the more trouble I have staying awake. You can sleep on the sofa if you’d like until Amanda comes home. Just keep the volume down on that radio you bought me. I still haven’t got used to the idea of voices coming out of those funny looking contraptions. In my day, you had to entertain yourself and if you wanted to hear the news, you went to visit the town gossip.”

Foster chuckled as he watched his mother’s retreating form, closing her bedroom door behind her. She would give the orneriest cowpoke a hard time, never wanting to conform to the modern times. She still hadn’t quite accepted indoor plumbing, still wanting to use a chamber pot, not to mention the modern day telephone. She insisted on going down to the post office to send telegrams to her friends in New York, instead of picking up the receiver and talking to the operator.

No matter how trying she could be at times, Foster dearly loved his mother. She had stood beside his sister and him through the roughest of times, seeing as how his father felt it necessary to pursue other avenues. Nine years old at the time, he was left to become the man of the family. With all the trouble he had gotten himself into in his early years, his mother stood by, switch in hand. She saw to it he grew up good and proper, right down to the day he landed his first job with Mr. McCarthy at the age of fourteen.

Mr. McCarthy, a stern man, believed in running things by the books, teaching Foster everything he knew about the hotel business. Mac took Foster under his wing and became the father he had been denied. Until the age of seventeen, Foster walked in the elder man’s shoes, learning diligently, everything he had to teach.

Lying down on the sofa, crossing his arms behind his head, he recalled the day Mac died.

“Them bastards come over from Sicily and think they can shoulder

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us honest men out of business,” Mac shouted, his face turning red. He leaned across the desk, inches from Foster. “Them two-bit gangsters think they can muscle their way in here. Well, they got another thing coming, by God. You promise me, Foster, them no good hoods won’t get a handle on my business when I’m gone. This hotel was built by these hands.” He raised his callused palms. “I swear on my grave, there won’t come the day they run my hotel. You gettin’ this, kid?”

Foster sat frozen to his seat. In the years he had known Mac, never had he seen him so up in arms about anything. Mac kept his temper reined in most of the time, including the day he had to bail Foster out of jail for a drunken fist fight with the sheriff’s son.

“These men are coming to take over the States I tell you,” Mac continued. “They’ll be the fall of all honesty if we don’t stick to our guns. Promise me, son...when I’m gone, you’ll see my business continues to run under honest hands.”

“I promise.” Foster agreed...and he would fight for all Mac stood for. “You know you can always count on me. You’ve done so much for me already, Mac. What you ask is certainly a minute request.”

“I’m tellin’ ya how it is, son, I’ll haunt ya to your dying day if you go back on your word,” Mac snapped, his face purpling. “Them sons-a-bitches think they can...”

Mac never finished his speech. He collapsed to the top of his desk, hand clenching his chest. Mac had left behind a very frightened boy, with a very large promise to uphold.

Foster grinned, fourteen years later, he still upheld his promise to Mac. Taking Mac’s one hotel and turning it into a conglomerate of five. He had lived his life as Mac taught, always taking the bull-by-the-horns. Mac would be proud of him. Though many might assume differently by his prospering business, he had never bowed to the demands of the gangsters. Because of his wealth and power, they left him to his own. Sure, he knew many mobsters personally, many patronized his business, but they respected Foster and his business.

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Some had even offered their friendship and protection along the way.  
Listening to the radio, he drifted off to sleep.

## CHAPTER 8

Foster awoke in a cold sweat. His heart pounded and his breathing quickened from a recurring nightmare. His vision trained on a cold steel blade glinting in the moonlight, pointing precariously close to his neck. Foster gripped the arm of the would-be assailant, twisting the wrist, and tossed the goon to the sofa beneath him, his weight immobilizing the attacker. His hold tightened, crushing the small wrist within his grasp, causing the steel blade to clang off the tiled floor in front of the sofa.

“For crying out loud, Foster,” the feminine voice squeaked.

“What the?” Foster recognized her features in the darkness. “Amanda! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I was trying to wake you. Get the hell off me.”

Foster released her and stood. “What in God’s name was the knife for? If that’s how you go about waking people, I’d rather sleep, thank you.”

“I was making me a sandwich.”

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“Cripe, in the middle of the night?”

“I was hungry. Besides, you looked so uncomfortable on the sofa. You know you’re too big for it. One of these days you’re going to break the thing.”

“Then I’ll buy a new one.” Foster jammed a hand into his hair. “Damn, don’t ever do that again. I could have hurt you.”

“You’re telling me?” Amanda giggled, rubbing her wrist. “Want a sandwich before you head home?”

“No. Hell, I don’t think I could eat a bite after you scared the life out of me.”

“How was Mom?” She retrieved the discarded knife, then returned to the kitchen area.

“Fine.” He followed her. “Although her arm went numb. Has she complained about this before?”

“She dropped something a couple days ago.” Amanda narrowed her gaze. “She told me her arm went numb, just as you said. Is it something we should be concerned about?”

“I don’t know. Keep an eye on her. I told her I was going to take her to see the doctor, but as always, she refused.” Foster headed for the door. “I’m going home to get some uninterrupted rest. Somewhere I don’t have to worry about getting my throat slit while I sleep.”

\* \* \*

The blazing sun warmed the chilled air. Birds flew about chirping in the cloudless sky and the smell of lavender hung thick. Spring was in the air. People bustled about wearing no heavy winter coats, smiles beaming. The gloominess of winter had passed, seeming to have the same light-hearted affect on everyone.

Brooke stood in front of the Ashford Hotel feeling the lightness of the new day. She breathed deeply and loved the heady smell of spring. Her lighter burgundy wool dress dipped low on her hips with a deep purple sash encompassing her waist. She hadn’t taken the time to

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change from her church attire, not wanting to take the chance of being late. She wore her finest silk stockings and kid-leather walking shoes, carrying a matching black handbag.

As the town's square clock rung in the noon hour, her stomach fluttered. She toyed with her golden finger waves as she glanced down the street, attempting to assure herself that her nerves hadn't just deposited a huge sized lump in her throat and affectively cut off her next breath.

*Breathe, Brooke, breathe.*

Several automobiles and horse-drawn carriages passed down the paved streets, but nowhere did she spot the black haired man she awaited. She tapped the toe of her shoe. What if he never showed?

Twenty minutes later, feeling as if she'd been duped, Brooke turned to walk up the street toward her apartment. He'd made her out to be the fool. As she reached the corner, a sleek black automobile pulled up along side the walk.

"Going my way?" Foster grinned from behind the wheel.

Stunned speechless, her gaze took in the Ford Sport Coupe. The man confounded her.

"Well?" One of Foster's brows quirked upward. "If I'm right, I think we had a date."

"Yes." Brooke's gaze centered on the arrogant man behind the wheel. "But as I recall, you said noon. You are precisely twenty-five minutes late."

"Well, I do hope you'll forgive me." Foster jumped from the vehicle to assist her. "I had a rough night and overslept. But, I'm here and so are you. Still wish to accompany me?"

"Well, I do suppose twenty-five minutes is forgivable." She took his offered hand and sat in the passenger side of the car. "I didn't realize you owned an automobile."

"There are a lot of things you don't know about me, precious." He returned to the driver's side. "Stick around long enough and I'll tell you



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all you want to know and possibly more.”

Brooke smiled as she settled herself into the soft leather of the seats. Rows of houses rushed by as they made their way toward the edge of town, causing her to wonder where they headed. Glancing at the man sitting beside her, she couldn't help wonder if she hadn't just made the mistake of her life. After all, she really didn't know him.

Foster wore jeans, which rode tautly across his thighs and a blue chambray shirt, the top three buttons undone, sleeves rolled to his elbows. He seemed comfortable enough in her presence. He sported silver bands on the middle finger of one large hand and the pinky of his other as he gripped the steering wheel. She could see the strength behind them, knowing without a doubt, if he chose to harm her, she would be helpless.

Brooke released her held breath, attempting to calm herself. But whether her nervousness came from fear or desire, she refused to examine. A proper lady would never ponder on what went on between a man and a woman behind closed doors.

“Relax.” Foster winked at her, his grin carnal. Dear Lord, she was in trouble. “I thought we'd go into the foothills for our picnic. This time of the year, with the flowers in bloom, the hills are breathtaking. I love the springtime. It's as if the earth is awakening from its long winter's sleep.”

Brooke returned his grin, but didn't brave a word. She still questioned her reasoning to go anywhere with a man she barely knew, especially one as devilishly handsome as Foster. The man could charm the skirts off just about any female he set his sights on. Just the warmth seeping from his brown eyes about swallowed her whole. She took a deep breath, reminding herself if he had intended to harm her, he would have done so before now.

Stealing another glance, she noticed the thin mat of black hair poking through the opened collar of his shirt. She wondered what it would feel like to run her fingers through it. Heat rose up her neck and

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to her ears; never had she harbored such thoughts before...not even with Brian. Although still a virgin, she didn't consider herself naïve. She'd heard the tales often enough. But normally, she wasn't one to dwell on what went on between a man and a woman. Now she found herself intrigued by the man sitting beside her. What would it feel like to have his work-roughened hand glide down the softness of her flesh?

"A penny for your thoughts?" Foster startled her from her musing.

"Oh, well, I...I..." Surely Brooke couldn't speak aloud her thoughts. He'd think her some tart. "What I mean is...I was wondering how much further until we get there?"

Foster chuckled, obviously amused at catching her off guard. As his grin increased, so did her embarrassment. He thankfully returned his gaze back to the road, rubbing the roughness of the few days' growth of his beard.

"A couple more miles," he said. "We should arrive there in about twenty minutes."

Brooke quietly groaned. How could she endure much more of the uncomfortable silence? The air between them cackled with electricity and her nerves were at the breaking point. By the time they arrived at their destination, she'd be like a high-strung violin, one pluck and she'd snap in two.

About twenty minutes later, Foster drove the car up a dirt path that disappeared into the foothills, then shut down the engine. Walking around the car, he held out his hand to help her alight. Brooke grasped his fingers and stepped from the vehicle. Foster reached behind her seat and grasped a wicker basket and blanket, handing her the latter. She held the red plaid blanket like a shield as she followed him into the copse of trees. As he climbed steeper terrain, he reached back and grasped her smaller hand, assisting her. They hiked a couple hundred yards, before coming to a sun-kissed clearing.

Foster took the blanket and spread it across the pine and leaf littered area. He set the basket on top, opened it, and spread out its contents.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

The scent of fried chicken wafted to her nose as he opened the container, setting it beside the basket. He extracted pasta covered in an oil-based sauce with cut peppers and tomatoes. Everything looked scrumptious. Brooke's stomach rumbled.

"Hungry?" Foster chuckled as he sat on the blanket and patted the area beside him. "Come on, I won't bite."

Brooke smoothed her skirt with trembling hands and joined him on the blanket. "As long as you promise to keep those pearly whites to yourself."

"They never go where they're not invited." Foster winked.

"Then we should have no worries." Brooke smiled, her eyes twinkling in mischief.

\* \* \*

Foster's gaze dropped to her lips, then slowly traveled the length of her. *All in good time*. His pearly whites would taste every corner of her savory flesh, nipping parts of her until she writhed in passion and moaned his name. He could wait as long as it took. But have her, he would.

"I brought a vintage bottle of wine imported from France." He pulled the bottle and a couple of glasses from the basket. "I thought we could use a bit of tension release."

"Where on earth did you manage to get that?"

"A gentleman never reveals his source, madam." He grinned. Not much was beyond Foster's reach if he wanted it badly enough, including the woman in front of him. And want her, he did. "I assure you, I am not a man without resources."

Brooke simply smiled as she watched him remove the cork from the bottle. After pouring a glass of the rose colored liquid, he offered the glass to Brooke. She took the stem from his fingers and brought the rim to her lips, sipping the contents. Her tongue traced her lower lip, catching the left droplets.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Foster's gaze heated. And his groin tightened. Dear God, it was going to be a long afternoon. Resisting the urge to follow the path of her tongue with his own, he poured himself a glass. He drank heavily, draining it before setting it aside. He needed to numb himself or wind up with a full-fledged erection he'd be hard pressed to hide.

"Chicken?" he asked.

Foster added a spoonful of the pasta and chicken to the plate, placing a fork beside, before handing it to her. Brooke accepted the dish, setting it before her on the blanket, keeping her gaze downcast. His presence made her uncomfortable, he had noted that from the tremble of her fingers. She'd be lucky if she didn't upset her wine. Had he the notion to actually touch her, she'd likely fly right off the blanket.

"Look." Foster pointed at a creature scampering near them under the coverage of foliage.

The small squirrel scurried up the nearest tree causing Brooke to giggle, hopefully helping to lighten the air between them. Foster had used the distraction to alleviate Brooke's anxieties. Although they had been alone in her shop, he supposed it only added to her apprehension. Every time he had been in her company, he couldn't help wanting to sample her lips. Surely she remembered the shared intimacy as well. He picked at the chicken on his plate, watching her. Brooke toyed with her food, but brought very little to her lips.

Damn, those cherry-colored lips. He wanted to lean forward and sample them yet again.

He pulled a piece of chicken from the bone and took it to her lips. Her gaze flew to his and for a moment he thought she might refuse the offering. Instead, she opened her mouth, closing it around the morsel. She chewed slowly, a bit of juice lingering at the corner of her lips. He licked his fingers clean, then reached for her. Brooke looked like a startled doe as her eyes rounded. He'd have to go slow. The last thing he wanted was to push her beyond his reach.

"Come here." Foster withdrew his hand and patted the ground

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

between his legs. "I only want to hold you, I promise."

Brooke hesitated then moved between his legs, settling her backside between his thighs. His arms encircled her and she rested against his chest. He kept his hold loose, not wanting her to feel threatened. The scent of fresh roses filled him as he placed his chin on her head, looking at the view beyond.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

"Very much so." She shifted in his embrace and looked up at him. "We hardly know one another."

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, for starters, have you lived in Denver all your life?"

"Nope. Anything else?"

Brooke slapped his arm. "That's not fair."

"What's not fair?"

"Where are you from?"

"Nowhere in particular." Foster pondered the question. Truth be told, he could claim to be from a variety of places. But he called no special place home.

"Everyone comes from somewhere." Brooke wrapped her arms around his. "Where were you born?"

"New York."

"So that's where your mother and father come from?"

"My mother is from Georgia. When my father skipped out on us, we moved from New York to Georgia."

"I'm sorry." Brooke fiddled with the sash of her dress, belying her nervousness. "You grew up in Georgia. Who, then, supported your family? Did you have any brothers and sisters?"

"One sister. My mother supported us until I was able to get a job." Foster hated talking about his upbringing. But somehow, he didn't think Brooke would judge him for a past he couldn't change. "I've supported them ever since."

"I suppose my original assumption about you and a particular

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

woman was off base, huh?" Brooke's cheeks flushed.

"Yep." Foster laughed. "Celeste is just a good friend."

Brooke's back stiffened ever so slightly at Celeste's name. Dare he hope it might be jealousy?

"So now you know my story." Foster attempted to escape further questions. "Tell me about yourself."

"You've hardly told me anything of merit." Brooke smiled. "Okay, I'll bite."

"You will?" Foster laughed.

"Stop it." Brooke pinched his arm lightly, causing him to yelp. "You know what I meant. I've lived in Denver all my life along with my parents."

"And where are they now, your parents?"

"Dead."

Foster couldn't see her expression and suddenly wished he could. "How?"

"They died four years ago in a train robbery. I've taken care of myself ever since." Brooke tensed within his hold. "We were headed to New York to visit my mother's sister. I was so devastated. I had never been on my own before. I was only eighteen."

Foster waited for her to finish her story, saying nothing, as she swiped the back of her hand across her eyes. He tightened his embrace, encircling her in his protective hold, comforting her the only way he knew how. She hugged his arms.

"Not knowing what else to do," she continued, "I finished the trip to New York. I thought I could spend some time with my aunt who I'd never met and get to know her. I had no one else. Once there, we didn't get along very well, so I pretty much came and went as I pleased. I got the feeling she really didn't care for having me as a guest. A year later, and ready to be on my own again, I moved back here and opened up my shop, end of story."

"Your aunt...what was her name?"

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“You wouldn’t likely know her. You said you moved to Georgia at an early age.”

“You’d be surprised at the people I know from New York,” he replied, kissing the top of her head. He felt the resulting shivers pass down her spine. “Who was she?”

“Aunt Roberta Heath.”

## CHAPTER 9

*Celeste walked into the lobby of the hotel, unaware of her surroundings. Most fools were. Her silk peach taffeta gown, worn shorter than most dared, bore fringe hanging to her knees. The shadowed observer watched the play of her calve muscles as she ascended the stairs. Her fur stole draped her left shoulder.*

*Rubbing manicured fingers, the viewer followed in step behind the radiant woman, unnoticed. Slowly, climbing the stairs only a landing behind, evil breath became labored, not from exertion, but from anticipation. The air of the stairwell grew warm; sweat dotted the brow. One step, then two, three, then four. Today Celeste would meet her maker.*

\* \* \*

Celeste climbed the stairs, her smile wide. Foster would be surprised to see her as she usually never went to see him unannounced. But they had to face the truth—their relationship had run its course.



### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Though she cared for Foster, she held no illusions. Foster would never marry her.

Kip came to mind, warming her. The night spent in his arms had been heaven. She wanted Kip, and he her. After today, they could be together, neither feeling the guilt again they shared last night.

Reaching the landing on the fifth floor, Celeste buckled. An intense pain started at the center of her back and shot upwards. Fiery heat coursed through her body like molten lava. Taking a sharp breath, Celeste reached for the railing when she realized she had been stabbed. The blade twisted and she dropped to her knees. Warm blood ran down her back and legs. Her world blackened and she slipped to the hard tiled floor.

\* \* \*

“What did you say her last name was? Heath?” Ashley’s last name. Was Brooke about to fess up or hand him clues?

“Yes.” She turned in his lap. “Heath. Although I didn’t know her very well, we seemed like two opposite ends of the pole. I was sort of headstrong and at the time I wasn’t very agreeable with my parents dying and all that happened. So, while I lived in New York I stayed with acquaintances more than I stayed with Aunt Roberta.”

“You stayed with acquaintances?” The more she talked, the more confused Foster became. “Anyone in particular?”

“No. My life in New York isn’t really relevant.”

“Did this aunt of yours have any children of her own?” He caught her gaze. He knew if she lied, he would see it in her eyes.

“No. Why?”

Foster saw no deception. His mother’s own poker face came to mind. “I was wondering if there were other living relatives or if you were truly alone.”

“Aunt Roberta was barren.” Brooke shrugged. “When she married Uncle Gregory, Mother said they tried to have kids for years with no

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luck. Uncle Gregory passed away ten years ago.”

“So besides your aunt, then you truly have no other family?”

“That about sums it up, Mr. Tyson,” she replied with a grin. “You need not pity. I came to terms with it years ago. Someday the good Lord will see to it I have a family of my own.”

“Enter Professor Byron.” Foster couldn’t help the sarcastic tone that crept into his words.

“Brian,” she corrected.

“Whatever. The result is the same.”

“And what is that, Mr. Tyson?”

“Foster.” He hated it when she used his formal name. Hell, it wasn’t even his real name. “I see you miserable a year after your marriage to the stuffy Professor. You—stuck at home with a screaming kid as he’s off petitioning some cause. Can you honestly say that’s the kind of life you’ll be happy ever after in?”

“As if my life has become your business. What gives you the right to say how my life will turn out?” Her back stiffened as she set herself away from him. “Tell me, Mr. Tyson...”

“Foster, dammit!”

“Excuse me, *Foster*. I’m unaccustomed to calling strange men by their Christian name.”

“It’s not as if I’m strange, madam. You’re the one who has skeletons riding in your closet. Not me.”

“Me? I just told you my life’s story and I have skeletons in my closet? Mr. I-moved-to-Georgia. Aside from your lesson in geography, you’ve told me nothing about yourself.”

Foster realized his mistake too late. He had pushed her away and now he’d never get the answers he sought. He needed to regroup. Reaching for her, she withdrew to the other side of the blanket. Sighing, he resigned to address her from across the expanse of plaid. What was once a warm intimate picnic became cold and impersonal. No more sharing.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Look, Brooke,” he held his palm over his heart, “I didn’t mean what I said.”

“Humph,” she grunted.

“I’m waving a white flag. The least you could do is meet me half way.”

“I fear there is no meeting you half way, Mr. Ty...*Foster*. I believe it’s your way or no way. So you will forgive me if I don’t trust you easily.”

“I would forgive you anything if you’d only give me the chance.”

“I realize Brian isn’t the model citizen, but I’m not exactly beating down other offers now am I?” Unshed tears glistened in her eyes.

He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss away all the hurts of her past, but knew she wouldn’t accept compassion from him. Not now...not after his outburst. “Maybe you don’t give yourself enough credit. Maybe, you’re selling yourself short.”

Her gaze narrowed. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m not sure myself. Maybe, I’m asking for a chance.”

“And what about Celeste? Where does she stand in all of this? Don’t you care what she might think?”

“Celeste and I are going nowhere. She knows that.” He contemplated what to say next. If he said the wrong thing, she’d likely never trust him. “I’m not sure myself where this could go, Brooke, but if you’d give me half a chance, maybe I could show you how much better we are for each other than you and Byron.”

“Brian,” she corrected again with a crooked grin.

\* \* \*

Brooke stared at Foster, wondering at his sincerity. Could he be worth the chance of losing everything she’d worked for? He offered her no securities, no promises, only that they might be more suited for one another. She knew Foster could easily sweep her off her feet, and she’d no doubt fall hopelessly in love with him. Could she risk allowing him

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in her heart?

Tears sprang to her eyes as she continued to stare at Foster when the answer suddenly seemed so clear. She couldn't afford to allow this chance at love to slip away. All she'd ever wanted was for someone to love her. The problem was Foster offered her no such assurances. Her heart ached at the thought of being left alone again. The dam opened and tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Oh, jeez," Foster whispered, pulling her back into his embrace. He smoothed the back of her hair. "Look, precious, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. If the prospect of leaving Brian is so difficult, then just forget what I said."

Brooke giggled between tears, clinging to his solid shoulders. Surely she baffled Foster with her insane response. Setting herself from him, she looked into the pain and warmth of his brown eyes. He'd already become nearly as important to her as drawing her next breath. Falling in love with him no longer seemed a stretch.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?" Foster's brows drew together.

"Yes," she giggled, tears still brimming her lower lashes. She must look a fright. "I'm willing to take a chance on us."

"Really?" Foster's tone rose. Could he be just as excited at the prospect? "You're going to give me a chance? What about Byron?"

"You were right." She ignored his mistake. "I'd be miserable with him in less than a year."

Brooke's laughter grew as she swiped at her eyes. Foster must think her wacky. But the idea of Brian and her marrying suddenly seemed absurd.

"What?"

"I'm already miserable in his company."

"If you were so miserable, why did you agree to his proposal?"

"I'm twenty-two years old." Brooke sobered. Her next statement could send him skipping off down the hills, and leave her to finding her

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

own way home. Looking at the palms of her hands lying in her lap, she continued, "I'm not getting any younger. I want to get married and have a family someday. I was afraid if I didn't except Brian's proposal, I wouldn't get another."

Foster sat motionless, his gaze not wavering. She wished he would say something...anything. The more minutes that ticked by, the more desolate she felt. She had just bared her soul and he couldn't even acknowledge it. His silence told her more than words. He wasn't ready to give up Celeste or his freedom for that matter. He was no different from any other man, but the pain hurt no less.

\* \* \*

Tears brimmed her eyes again and her lower lip trembled. *Say something.* But what was he to say? He reached out and drew her to him, holding her so tightly he left her no route of escape. She cried softly into his shoulder. Hell, what did he have to offer? He could give her more money than she would see in a lifetime, but he doubted it was the security she sought. He could introduce her to his family and small circle of friends, but that wouldn't fill the hollow spot in the cradle of her arms she yearned for. Kissing the top of her forehead, he held her face in the palms of his hands and looked into the pain of her stormy blue eyes.

"I can't promise you tomorrow, Brooke," he whispered. "Hell, I can't promise you anything. I can only assure you I would never intentionally hurt you. I can't give you the love you seek. My heart is as rigid as a stone. I don't think I'm capable of loving anyone."

She looked at him, but said nothing. Damn, but he wished he could read her mind.

"If you'd only give me the chance. I could see to your wildest dreams. I could give you the world on a silver platter. I just don't know if it will ever be enough."

She placed a palm against his cheek. "I guess we will never know if

## ***DARK SAVIOR***

we don't try."

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying what I can't live with is knowing we didn't at least try."

"Oh, precious." Foster placed a brief kiss on her lips. "You won't be sorry. I'll never hurt you."

And he prayed he could hold up to that promise.

\* \* \*

An hour later, Foster dropped off Brooke at her apartment, promising to come by the next day. His life was about to change dramatically. He no longer cared about Brooke's identity, maybe in time the answers would present themselves, all that mattered was she had stolen a piece of his heart. Fate had brought them back together.

Oddly enough, Foster had a connection with Brooke that was sorely missing when he had lived with Ashley. This time his feelings ran deeper. He chuckled. Here he actually contemplated as if these two weren't one and the same. Suddenly, he believed in the impossible. Maybe he could care deeply for a woman and not just as a friend or someone to slip between the sheets with. Not that he didn't want her. Oh, he did, but he'd wait for her...as long as it took.

Foster parked his Ford outside the Ashford. He'd have to reveal his true identity and soon. She'd no doubt be furious for his having deceived her, but he'd plead for her forgiveness and ply her with kisses. The thought of kissing her again heated his blood. Brooke evoked a passion in him, one like he had never felt before. Had it not been for his iron will, he would have tossed her on the blanket earlier and made love to her until the sunset. If she cared about him half as much as he dared hope, they'd get past this small bump in the road. As it was, they both had problems to deal with. She had to speak with Professor Brian and call off their so-called engagement and he had to break it off with Celeste.

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He knew of no easy way to let her down. But knowing Celeste as he did, she'd be angry, but she'd still land on her feet. Using the direct approach with her would be his best bet and the least painful.

Rounding the corner of the Ashford, a doctor rushed past Foster into the hotel, nearly knocking into him on his butt. Righting himself, Foster followed after the man. Pandemonium broke out in the lobby, most gathering around the foot of the staircase. Foster pushed his way through.

"What's happened?" Foster asked a nearby gather.

"Someone was stabbed."

"Stabbed?" A sense of familiarity hampered his breathing. *Dear God.*

"Yep, damndest thing," the man continued, unaware of Foster's rising panic. "Pretty, too. They say it happened on the fifth floor."

Not bothering to excuse himself, Foster ran the stairs, taking them two at a time. *Not Amanda, God please.* Pushing his way through the throng, Foster caught a glimpse of stocking feet. Feet and calves he knew intimately well. His heart plummeted. His gut wrenched. Not again. Not Celeste. His ugly past stared up at him from the cold tiles in a sea of red.

## CHAPTER 10

Foster paced the gray-carpeted flooring of his penthouse. Shirtless, his muscles worked with his every movement as his trousers, unfastened, hung low across his hips. His unbound hair hung about his face, making him look the caged animal he felt. He hadn't bothered to finish dressing. His nerves had him tied in knots. He couldn't stop moving if he wanted. He hadn't been this angry in years. Whoever played games with his life had made his way to Denver.

Because of Celeste's stabbing, not only did he have to contend with sorrow, but he had found himself once again defending his reputation. This time, though, the murderer had made an error; this time Foster had an airtight alibi, *Brooke*. Proving his innocence once and for all. Because of the similarities of each attempt and murder, the sheriff quickly dismissed Foster as a suspect.

Who hated him so much, he wanted to see Foster continually suffer? Foster searched his past again, but came up empty-handed. Someone's loathing of him had destroyed every woman to enter his



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life. He stabbed his fingers through his hair and sat heavily on the sofa only to bound out of it as quickly. Walking over to the window, he braced his hands on each side of the frame, overlooking the busy street. The clouds had let loose, down-pouring. People leaped over puddles and ran for cover beneath over hangings. His mood matched that of the fierce storm outside.

People bustled about their normal Monday activities as if nothing had happened at all. Foster clenched his teeth. What of Celeste? The story had made the front page of the paper.

Slamming his hands onto the wooden frame, he cursed those who treated this day as any other. Foster tilted his neck from side to side, trying to alleviate the tension.

A knock sounded on the door.

Now what? Thinking the sheriff had returned, Foster jerked open the door. He came face to face with someone whose expression mimicked his own. Walking away from the opened door, he asked, "Everything taken care of?"

"Yes. The funeral will be held tomorrow, closed casket as you requested."

"What the hell is going on, Kip?" Foster turned to face his close friend. "I'm losing my mind. Who the hell is out to get me?"

"I don't know." Kip wore wrinkled trousers and a shirt left half-buttoned as if he hurriedly dressed. "This thing has followed you from Georgia."

"Georgia? The first stabbing happened in New York." Foster narrowed his gaze. "Allison jumped. What are you trying to tell me, Kip?"

"Christ, I only meant all your girlfriends wind up dead or hurt. Hell, any woman in their right mind should think twice about getting involved with you."

"If you're trying your hand at humor, Kip, it's sorely misplaced." Foster shook his head. "But damned if you aren't right. I shouldn't get

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involved with anyone until this maniac is caught.”

Brooke came to mind; her tearful gaze as she told him she was willing to give them a chance. Only twenty-four hours ago he would have climbed the highest mountain for her. Now, he was left with little choice but to turn her away from him. He knew if he told her the truth, she would insist on staying by his side, no matter the consequences, placing her life in jeopardy. With the maniac now in Denver, he couldn't risk her life. His only alternative was to make her hate him. And the sooner, the better.

The assault in New York came to mind. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it before? The one sure-fire way to prove if Ashley and Brooke were one and the same, once and for all. Because of the incident, Ashley sported a scar under her right shoulder blade, therefore Brooke would don that same scar. But aside from making love to her, he knew of no other way to see the damning mark. And that he couldn't allow. Not yet anyway. Maybe once they put the ordeal behind them and the murderer was behind bars, he could convince Brooke to forgive him for what he was about to do. Then and only then would he have the answer scaring him the most, finding out Brooke was truly Ashley.

Would it destroy the feelings he had for Brooke? He cared more for her than he ever had Ashley. Would her deception destroy that? Part of him no longer wanted the answers, but not knowing the truth would slowly eat away at him, eventually destroying their relationship.

“Look, Kip.” Foster turned his attention back to his friend. “There's someone I need to see. Find Alex and he'll see the funeral arrangements are paid for and anything else you might need. Tell him, I'll be in the office latter. Right now, I need to take care of another problem.”

“Will do.” Kip headed for the door, only to pause by the entrance, glancing back. “We will catch this cad.”

“I hope you're right.” Foster picked up a white collared shirt from the sofa, shoving his arms into the sleeves. He slipped on a pair of

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

black leather oxfords. “I just hope no one else has to suffer before we do. If I get my hands on the son of a bitch, he’ll rue the day he was born.”

\* \* \*

Brooke walked about her shop, whistling a little ditty. She straightened and dusted the shelves, picking up soaps and perfumes, inhaling their fragrances. What a grand day. For once in her life, since the death of her parents, she was truly happy and she had Foster to thank for it. She could hardly wait to see him again. Looking at her watch for the hundredth time, she impatiently awaited for the end of business. Foster had promised to come by. But just being past noon, she had a long wait ahead of her and Mondays were notoriously slow.

Brooke walked behind the counter and unpacked newly arrived items as she recalled her conversation with Brian the night before. He had tried to persuade her not to end their engagement, but for the life of her she couldn’t figure out why as he didn’t seemed bothered in the least.

“You really can’t be serious, Brooke.” Brian grinned arrogantly. “I’m your only ticket out of poverty.”

“I realize this comes as quite a shock, but I don’t love you.” Brooke knew she had to be straightforward if she were to gain his understanding. “And I think if you were honest with yourself, Brian, you would see you don’t love me either.”

“Love?” Brian laughed. “What’s love got to do with it? I proposed to you because I thought you would make the perfect wife and mother of our children. I don’t have time in my life to be concerned with love. If you ask me, it’s a wasted emotion.”

“How can you say that?” Brooke felt as if she had been slapped. “My mother and father loved each other very dearly. I only hope one day I’ll have the same type of relationship.”

“You’re looking for a fairy tale alliance.” Brian clucked. “Is that

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what you're telling me? Well, I have news for you, Brooke, not in this life. You'd be better off marrying me with all I have to offer you than be penniless for a lifetime. And all for what? Love?"

"I can't believe I'm hearing this. I'm sorry, Brian. I didn't want to hurt you. I only wanted to be happy. And without love, I don't think I could be. Before today, I thought security and a sense of belonging were enough. But I don't even belong, not with you, not with your friends."

"Then tell me where it is you fit in."

"I don't know, but not with you. I have so little in common with you and your friends."

Brian shrugged. "Maybe you're right. But I still think you're making the mistake of your life. You won't find another man like me."

"That's for sure." How had she been so blind? "Look, I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused. I mean you no pain."

"Pain, my dear?" Brian scoffed at the emotion. "Of course, I will miss our companionship. But pain? Another wasted emotion. I'm sure I'll find another to be an immaculate wife and mother. I only wish you the best, Brooke. I hope you don't live to regret your foolishness."

How could she ever regret turning Brian down when he offered nothing of himself but home and security? She wanted love. Brooke smiled as she finished unpacking the box of undergarments. Nope, there would be no regrets. Reaching for hangers, she hung the silky garments on the rack in the center of the room, marking each with the appropriate price.

A warmth spread through Brooke's body as she recalled Foster's attentions from the day before. He had kissed her thoroughly, holding her tightly in his embrace. Never had she been kissed in such a manner before. Touching her lips tentatively, she thought about the upcoming night. She was beginning to crave the feel of Foster's strong arms wrapped around her.

One rose-colored, silky garment, trimmed in fine white lace, caught

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her eye. She held it in front of her, checking her appearance in the mirror. The color complemented the golden-blond of her hair. She smiled at the thought of wearing it for Foster. Heat rose up her cheeks at the positively scandalous thoughts. Surely her recent thoughts would condemn her.

\* \* \*

Foster stood in the opened doorway, watching Brooke. He froze. The wistful look in her eyes as she examined the exquisite garment had his blood temperature rising. Foster envisioned her in the garment—her long slender legs disappearing into the bottom of the white lace, the soft material flaring slightly at her hips, the rose-colored silk hugging her curves and accentuating the roundness of her breasts. Her nipples would pebble against the fabric, begging for his touch.

Foster nearly groaned. He needed to get control over his libido lest he stand here in her shop sporting a full-blown erection. Besides, he had come here on a mission and he couldn't lose sight of that. Brooke's very life may depend on it.

Brooke swung around, apparently hearing his groan of frustration. Her cheeks flushed as she quickly hung the garment she admired on the rack. Foster closed the door behind him, pulled the cream shade over the window and slid the locking bolt into place. He advanced on her and pulled her into his embrace. Leaning down, he seized her lips. Her arms slid around his nape, grasping the loose hair at his shoulders. He held her close as she returned his kiss with fervor. Foster could easily forget himself in her arms, let alone his true purpose for being here. He had a plan he had to follow through with. He couldn't lose sight of that—and damn if he didn't already hate himself for it.

Foster slid his hand up her side, grazing her breast. Brooke shuddered in his embrace but did not stop him. Furthering his purpose, he encompassed her breast, her nipple pebbling against his palm. A perfect fit.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Brooke gasped, tearing her mouth from his. She placed her hands against his chest and tried without purchase to push him away. He tweaked the hardened nipple as his other hand grasped her backside. Damn if he didn't feel like a cad.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Brooke pushed against him again. This time Foster backed away.

"What did it feel like, honey?" Foster winked. The look on her face made him want to take it all back and tell her the reason for his actions. But he knew he had to stay true to the course. He needed her hatred...not her adoration. "The way I see it, you can close down and we can be beneath the sheets within the half hour."

Brooke's brow furrowed. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me, babe. I don't believe I stuttered." A knife twisted in his gut. "Look, sweet cheeks, close the shop and we can get some motion rolling on the silk sheets. I think I've been patient long enough. Someone has to show you what a real man can do. Certainly that wimp of a fiancé couldn't have been much more than a dud in bed."

"For crying out loud, Foster!" Tears welled in her eyes but did not fall. "Had I not seen it with my own eyes, I'd swear the perfect gentleman I spent the afternoon with yesterday is not the same man standing before me. Do you have an evil twin?"

"Nope. Now quit stalling, babe," Foster said, winking at her. "Time's a-wasting discussing worthless morals. Let's stop squandering energy and save it for the sack."

"What's gotten into you?"

He chuckled cruelly. "This is the real me, Brooke." He tried to steel himself for the kicker. "Look, Celeste was murdered yesterday."

"Oh, Foster." Her angry expression changed to compassion. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't pity me, babe. My problem now is finding someone to replace her spot in my bed. I figure you're as good as any."

"Excuse me?" Brooke laid her palm over her heart. "If you're

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referring to—”

He didn't allow her to finish. “That's exactly what I'm referring to.”

“You despicable, depraved, wretched man. I have sorely misjudged you.” Tears tumbled down her cheeks. “Get out!”

Foster gripped her upper arms and pulled her flush, staring into the distress of her eyes. He fought the urge to back down from his plan. After all, it had gone off without a hitch. He masked his expression, hoping she only saw anger and decadence. Just as he leaned down to steal a kiss, her hand reached out and slapped his cheek. His face jerked, feeling the full impact clear to his soul. His tongue darted out, catching the drop of blood welling in the corner. When he released her, she collapsed at his feet.

He hardened his jaw and winked at her again. “If you should change your mind, honey, tell them at the front desk you wish to see Foster. They'll see to it I'm found.”

Foster turned and walked out the door, not looking back. He could hear her sobs. A sound that would surely haunt him until his dying day. Never in his lifetime had he treated a woman so callously, and never had he hated himself more. He vowed to avenge himself on the loathsome bastard who was the cause of his pain. He would see to it the man paid dearly with his life.

Then and only then, he would beg for Brooke's forgiveness. He hoped he wouldn't be too late.

## CHAPTER 11

Loneliness weighed heavy on Brooke. Two weeks had past since the day Foster had acted the complete cad. And since she had turned down his demeaning proposal, she hadn't seen him since. She had no real friends and other than an occasional visit from Alex, she spent her days by herself. She never dreamed things would turn out as they had. The prospect of marrying Brian no longer looked unappealing. But he hadn't bothered to check up on her following her announcement, and his mother snubbed her whenever their paths crossed.

What had she done? Her life had become mundane, opening and closing her shop and taking her meals alone. Aside from her customers, she had very little contact with anyone. Was she destined to live her life alone?

Tears sprung to her eyes at the thought of what could have been had she not bowed to temptation in the way of Foster Tyson. A large house in the country, a white picket fence, a dog running in the yard, and plenty of children to fill her days.



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Brooke chuckled. She was a sorry mess. She had survived her parents' death; she could certainly survive this. Two weeks of self-absorbed pity was enough. Her mother taught her to look at the bright side of things...now if she could only find the bright side, she'd start looking at it.

The shop bell rang interrupting her musings.

"Hello, Brooke." Alex smiled, his blue gaze filled with warmth. He was definitely a welcomed sight. "I thought I'd better check in on you. How have you been?"

"I've seen better days, thank you." Brooke returned his smile. "But I'm sure things will look up. What's keeping you so busy these days?"

"To be totally honest," Alex rolled his eyes, "the boss has been in a hell of a mood for over two weeks. He's been running us rampant."

"What has him so sour?"

"Celeste's murder here in his hotel, I suppose."

"He knew Celeste?"

"Of course. They were lovers."

Brooke gasped. Of course! Why had she not seen it before? Foster Tyson was none other than *the* Mr. Taylor. She had been duped.

"This thing has followed Mr. Taylor from New York." Alex shuddered. "His girlfriends are dropping like flies."

"Did you need something, Alex?" she questioned, suddenly in a hurry to get rid of him. "I have someplace I need to be and will be closing early today."

"Oh, certainly. Let me get it and be on my way. I didn't realize you had plans. The boss sent me to pick up a rose colored chemise. Apparently, he doesn't want anyone to know he's the one buying it. Or why send me?" Alex chuckled.

"I think I know which one he's talking about." Boy did she. "Shall I wrap it?"

"Yes. He did say something about a gift." Alex threw a fifty on the counter. "Keep the change. Oh, and he said to get some of the rose

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scented soap you carry as well. I don't know which lady he's courting now, but I'd advise her to steer clear. No woman is safe around him. When you're finished, just leave it at the registration counter. I'll pick it up later. I have a few other errands to run."

"How about I hand deliver it and save you some time?"

"I don't suppose he would care since he is purchasing it from your shop, but do be careful around him, Brooke." Alex gazed at her in concern. "The man is a womanizer. I have yet to meet a woman who could resist his charms."

"You just met one." Brooke grinned. "Believe me, the man couldn't begin to break down my barriers."

Alex laughed. "I don't suppose he could. Thank you for delivering the package. By the way, dinner...say about seven?"

"I'd love to."

Alex's smile broadened. "Great. I'll pick you up at your place."

Brooke watched as Alex exited her shop with an added spring to his step. Guilt washed over her. She knew her acceptance to his date had been made from her selfishness at not wanting to spend another lonely night. But it wasn't fair to use Alex. She'd have to set him straight where their relationship was concerned. They could spend time together as friends, but nothing romantic could ever come from it. Truth be told, she couldn't get Foster out of her head...no matter what a wretch he had been. And until she exorcised him from her thoughts, she'd be better off not dating anyone. Walking over to her display rack, Brooke withdrew the rose colored chemise and smiled.

*Foster Taylor won't know what hit him.*

\* \* \*

Foster sat behind his mahogany desk wearing a black, virgin wool worsted suit. The color had become his norm. For two weeks, he wore nothing but dark colors. He supposed it matched his mood. Everyone steered clear of him, including his mother, and no one entered his office

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unless summoned. His mother had tried to reason with him, but finally resigned to letting him live his own life. Hell, he wouldn't want his company either in his present state. The smallest problems set him on edge and had him barking orders. He took his meals alone, knowing no one would want to endure his company these days.

The only bright spot since Celeste's funeral had been the information gleaned from the New York investigation. George had located Brooke's Aunt Roberta Heath, Ashley's mother, or whoever the woman really was. She swore she hadn't seen Ashley in three years. George persuaded her to take an all expense paid trip west...to Denver. She would arrive within two weeks.

Foster stood and walked to the window. Brooke came to mind as she was never far from it. Damn if he hadn't regretted his actions in pushing her away. But he had little choice. His sudden impulse to possess the silky rose-colored chemise she had admired two weeks ago would probably come back to haunt him, but he couldn't resist. Hopefully Brooke wouldn't know Alex purchased the item for him. The thought of seeing Brooke in the exquisite fabric had become an obsession. Once this whole mess was behind him, he'd give it to her as a gift.

The thought of showering her with gifts brought a smile to his face. Surely, she wouldn't be able to resist his charm and would cave in to her forgiveness. Then and only then, he would reveal his true identity. As mad as she was at him already, he'd do best to steer clear from her, otherwise earn her scorn for him for that as well.

The door to his office opened.

Thinking Alex had returned, Foster turned only to have his breath catch. Brooke stood before him, package in hand. The cat was out of the bag. No lying his way out of this one.

"How dare you?" Brooke glared at him, slapping the prettily wrapped package on the desktop.

"How dare I what, madam?" Foster questioned, an eyebrow rising.

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“You know very well what I’m referring to, Mr. Taylor,” Brooke clamored. “You took me for nothing more than a joy ride.”

“As I recall,” he nearly cringed for what he was about to say, “I offered you a position. Have you come to take me up on that offer?”

“A position?” Her eyes widened. “If you’re referring to the position beneath you, I think not. You’re despicable. How dare you hide you’re true identity from me?”

“I am worth a great deal, babe. How could I not? Many women want me for my assets. Are you telling me you would have been any different?”

“And you would believe that of me?” Brooke squared her shoulders. “I always knew the owner of this hotel was a no good scoundrel. I’ve heard the rumors. No wonder I steered clear of you all these years. I wouldn’t be surprised if the grapevine wasn’t correct and you were behind these murders...including Celeste’s. What’s the matter, Foster? Did she get in your way?”

Foster clenched his jaw. His anger turned to fury. How dare she? He grasped the glasses from his face and threw them atop his desk. “If you know what’s good for you, madam, I suggest you evacuate this office immediately or I will not be held responsible for my actions.”

“You don’t scare me, Foster Taylor.” Her chin lifted a notch. “You’re nothing but full of false promises. The day they string you up for murder, I will dance on your grave.”

He chuckled, though not feeling the humor. Hell, he wanted to strangle the little minx. “Already planning my funeral? Lady, you’ll be waiting a good long time because I’m too damn mean to die.”

“I won’t argue with you on that. You are the most uncaring bastard I have ever—”

Foster circled the desk, pulled her flush, and captured her mouth, stopping her cruel words. He crushed his mouth to hers, thrusting his tongue past her lips, tasting her blood caused by the grating of her lips across her teeth. Brooke pushed on his unmoving chest as his arms

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crushed her to him. He deepened the kiss, his tongue coaxing a response. As her hands grew lax and she no longer pushed against him, he groaned. God, how he wanted her. His groin grew heavy between them. He fought to keep his senses, wanting nothing more than to throw her on his desk and prove once and for all, she belonged to him.

Foster released her, his hand sweeping the surface of his desk clean. Papers, ledgers, and his lamp crashed to the floor. Brooke's backside found the slippery surface and he parted her legs. As he stepped between them and brought her against his arousal; she stiffened in response.

Panic filled her wide-eyed gaze and she gasped for breath. She clawed at his shirt and batted his arms. Foster released her so abruptly she teetered on the edge of the desk and fell to the floor.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Foster grinned, looking down at her, "I just succeeded in proving you want the same end I do. Why not make this easy and give in to what we both want?" He held his hand out to her.

She batted it away. "You're a vile excuse for a human being."

"That may very well be. But that only proves you're no better than I. For whether you admit it or not, your body craves what evil-doings mine can give."

Tears filled her eyes. "Rot in hell."

"Cross my path again, Brooke," he threatened, "and I will see to it you find all the pleasures of hell my body can give."

Brooke shuddered as she stood without his assistance. Smoothing her skirt, she glared at him. "Never!"

"Don't make promises you can't possibly keep."

Brooke took one last look at him before stomping from the room. Foster stared at the package lying on his desk, the only item to survive the impact. He gently fingered the bow, then picked it up and flung it across the room.

## CHAPTER 12

The cool brisk evening breeze sent shivers along Brooke's spine as she adjusted her silk wrap across her shoulders. Her matching silk flapper dress bore fringe cascading to her knees with tiny pearls decorating the bodice. She saved the peach gown for fancy occasions. Tonight qualified. Alex was taking her to the Tuxedo Club, the finest speakeasy in Denver.

Alex wore an all black tuxedo with a white collared shirt. Satin stripes slipped down the outside of his legs, shimmering in the moonlight with each step. His black satin bowtie matched the glimmering stripe, while handkerchief matched the color of his shirt. His manicured hand rested lightly on the arm she wrapped through his elbow. Alex looked handsome in the moonlight with his silver eyes looking like twin shimmering pools. Brooke couldn't help but wonder why she had never been attracted to the man as more than a friend. He was certainly appealing. But the fact remained, even though he was a wretch, she had eyes only for Foster Taylor. Her heart sank. She'd no

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doubt be alone the rest of her life if she compared all men to him.

Rounding the corner, rows of run-down establishments lined the narrow street. The illegal speakeasies were often in out-of-the-way places, though many of the owners paid off the authorities to rule out unnecessary raids. The wet, wooden sidewalks clunked beneath the heels of her shoes as the smell of rain lingered in the air from the afternoon's showers.

Approaching an old brownstone, they stopped before an iron gate work encasing the front lawn of the building. Music and gay laughter flowed from the opened windows, radiant with warm lights. Alex released the latch and held open the gate, allowing Brooke to proceed through. Walking up the wooden stairway to the small porch, Alex held his hand gently in the small of her back. He rapped twice on the solid wood door with his free hand. A small shutter slid open and blue eyes peered through. The shutter closed and the door opened. A white man with a handlebar for a mustache greeted them.

"Mr. Thurston, good to see you tonight."

"Alabaster." Alex nodded, ushering Brooke inside the brightly lit room. Smoke swirled about, hovering in the ceiling.

Making their way through the throng of occupants, they found a small table for two near the back, partly shadowed by the stage where the band played jazz cover tunes. Women and men danced to the melodies. Flapper dresses of several styles and colors graced the dance floor and most men adorned tuxedos very similar to the style Alex wore. The room smelled of money.

Alex pulled out a chair at the table and seated Brooke before taking his own. Even before his backside landed squarely on the seat, a pourer stood beside them with two glasses in hand. Setting the glasses on the tabletop, he held out a bottle of very fine brandy, waiting for Alex's approval. He nodded and the man poured them two glasses full of the amber colored liquor. Alex picked up his brandy snifter, swirled the contents in the glass and brought it to his nose. Alex smiled, then

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brought the glass to his lips and took a long pull of the liquid, downing half of its contents. Placing the glass back on the clothed table, he smiled warmly at Brooke.

"I'm glad you decided to come," Alex stated as a uniformed waiter approached the table. "Hungry?"

"A little." Brooke fibbed. Truth be told, she was famished. She heard rumors of the fine, thick steaks served at the Tuxedo Room.

"Two," Alex told the waiter, indicating the number with his fingers. "Medium-rare."

The waiter hurried off. It was no wonder hotels and restaurants couldn't compete. These establishments served fine food and illegal liquor, although not all speakeasies served food. Most were famous for whiskey and women, which was enough to lure men to their dens nightly. But the Tuxedo Room attracted the elite.

"Do you come here often?"

"Sometimes nightly." Alex sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "I know it sounds like a lot. But being a bachelor, I have little choices for entertainment, and I'm quite picky as to the places I choose to patronize. So what made you decide to finally accompany me?"

"I'm sorry I declined your invitations in the past, Alex. But as you recall, I was engaged."

Alex smiled. "Yes...and now you no longer are."

"You're a patient man. Anyone else would have given up on me."

"You were worth waiting for. Besides, I knew eventually you would have tired of the stuffy professor and I would be there for you. You're a prize worth having, Brooke, even if it means waiting forever. I'm just glad it didn't take an eternity. Oh, by the way, I didn't thank you for delivering Mr. Taylor's package."

"My pleasure." Brooke thought about the look on Foster's face when he first saw her standing in his office. His shock had quickly changed to anger. As if *he* had something to be angry about. She was



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the one who had every right to be furious. He had treated her like a common whore.

“You seem lost in thought,” Alex said as the waiter placed two plates in front of each of them. One, a succulent steak smothered in onions and mushrooms, the other, a rich green salad covered in dressing.

Brooke picked up her utensils, hoping to divert the conversation. “The steak looks absolutely delicious.”

“Only the best...aside from the Ashford that is.”

“Of course.”

Brooke and Alex settled into a comfortable silence as they ate, listening to the music. She had to admit, she was enjoying herself. Better than sitting in her small apartment for another lonely night. The food, the music, and the company were all good. Suddenly, a hush grew about the room. Brooke glanced in the direction of several other patrons to an impeccably dressed man entering the club. Brooke couldn't see the identity from her vantage point as his face was shadowed.

Her breath stopped as he stepped further into the room. Feet slightly apart, Foster Taylor adjusted the sleeves of his white shirt so they appeared beneath the sleeves of his black tuxedo a perfect half-inch. The black dinner jacket sported a white lapel as the pristine tuxedo shirt adorned a single row of black seed buttons. His black bowtie donned pinpoint white dots, the red handkerchief of his jacket had matching black dots. His rich black hair combed back tightly across his head to a queue at his nape. The man looked flawless.

Foster seated himself at a small table, opposite side of the dance floor, with his back to Alex and Brooke. Thank goodness he hadn't seen them. Waiters and pourers rushed to his side. Brooke found the situation ridiculous as workers fawned over him. Even women greeted him as they passed him by, though none were invited to use the chair opposite him. Brooke watched as he downed one brandy after another.

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Eventually the attention died and Foster was granted his solitude.

“Brooke?”

Heat rose up her cheeks. She certainly hoped Alex hadn’t noted her attention on Foster. “I’m sorry, Alex. Was there something you said?”

“I was commenting on Foster’s lack of a companion. Rarely does he go anywhere unescorted. As a matter of fact, in the last couple of weeks, I don’t think Foster’s ventured out of his hotel. He must be having a hard time with Celeste’s death.”

“I’m sure you’re right.” But Brooke knew the opposite to be true. The devious man probably still searched for someone to replace Celeste’s spot beneath him.

“Shall we invite him to join us?”

“Of course not. If anything, I suggest we find another place to continue our evening.”

“Don’t be silly, Brooke. There isn’t a more acceptable place in Denver. A minute ago, you enjoyed the company. Now you want to leave. Mr. Taylor wouldn’t have anything to do with it, would he?”

Brook’s gaze snapped to Alex’s. “Certainly not. I was just thinking it is rather smoky in here.”

Alex’s lips turned down. “If you’d like, then—”

“Mr. Thurston...Miss Abel.” Foster greeted.

Brooke nearly leaped from her chair, having missed his approach.

“Mr. Taylor.” Brooke returned as politeness called for. Foster grasped her hand and placed a lingering kiss in the palm. Brooke withdrew her hand, wiping it on the side of her dress, hoping to wash away not only the wetness but the heat now traveling up her arm. Damn the man for making her desire him.

“May I?” Foster grasped a free chair at the nearest table and pulled it to theirs. “The steaks smell delicious as usual. Brendan has out done himself.”

Foster waved the waiter carrying his steak in their direction who hurriedly placed a large piece of meat in front of him...much larger

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than the one Brooke or Alex had been served. Pourers followed in the waiter's footsteps, refilling Foster's snifter even before the contents could be emptied. Brooke made a sound of disgust.

"The steak doesn't meet your standards?" Foster misunderstood her annoyance. "No, the food is wonderful." Brooke smiled. "It tastes much better than the one I had at the Ashford a few weeks ago."

"Is that so?" Foster laughed. "I bet you wouldn't know fine cuisine if it bit you in the butt, Miss Abel. Why do you think my hotel flourishes when so many these days are buckling under?"

"I don't know, Mr. Taylor. I've been asking myself the same question. Why is it you stay in business? Could you it be you have mob connections?"

Foster's expression soured. "I run my business along the straight and narrow. I would not tolerate any illegal activities going on in my building. It would do you well to remember that. After all, who do you think you rent your shop space from? The devil himself?"

Brooke tilted her chin upward, refusing to back down under his scrutinizing stare. "That may very well be."

Alex touched Brooke's hand. "If you would like to leave, Brooke—"

"No!" Brooke glared at Foster. "We were doing just fine until Mr. Taylor joined our table. If anyone should leave, it should be him."

"Now you really don't mean that." Foster's napkin dropped to the floor, and he bent to retrieve it. His hand slid up the back of her calf under the cloth of the table as he sat back up, causing her to shuffle nervously in her chair. "Do you?"

Heat traveled up her leg like an arrow aimed at her groin. Foster's right hand slipped beneath the cloth again, resting just above her knee. Brooke's heart hammered in her chest. How dare he? Not wanting to draw Alex's attention to the exchange, she slid her hand beneath the cloth, grasping one of his fingers, pulling it back. Foster grunted and quickly withdrew his hand.

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Alex cleared his throat. "If the two of you will excuse me, there is someone I wish to speak to." He rose from his chair, grasped Brooke's hand and kissed the back. "Brooke, I will return shortly."

"But..." Brooke stammered over being left alone with Foster, but Alex was oblivious to her plight.

"Afraid to be alone with me, Brooke?" Foster whispered.

"Afraid? Hardly! Disgusted comes to mind."

"If that were true, then I would hardly get such a response from my mere touch." Foster placed his fingers at the base of her throat, no doubt feeling her thundering pulse. He smiled. Surely, if she spent much time in his presence, he would drag her into the bowels of hell with him.

"You only imagine my body responds in delight to yours." She batted away his hand. "But my body responds in repulsion."

"You were hardly repulsed by my touch when you came to my office this afternoon. If I recall, you returned my kisses."

"A slight misjudgment. It won't happen again, I assure you."

"Shall we test that theory?"

"If you touch me again, Mr. Taylor, I'll—"

"You say my name like it's a disease. Surely, you remember our time spent at the picnic. I don't believe you were put off by me then."

"Then you were Foster Tyson."

"I'm still the same man, Brooke. Your body responded to mine. Deny it all you want, but someday I'll prove to you that your body seeks the same release as mine. Now if you'll excuse me, I must talk to Alex a moment in private."

Foster excused himself, leaving her fuming. The nerve of the man! What right did he have talking to her in such a manner? But although a scoundrel, at least he was being true to himself, something she wasn't. Foster ignited flames within her she tried desperately to deny. Too much time in his company and she'd likely combust. He left her trembling with a yearning she had never felt before.

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Brooke crossed her legs, her gaze following Foster where he tracked Alex. She hoped whatever he needed to speak with Alex about wouldn't take long. She suddenly felt the need for fresh cool air.

\* \* \*

"Alex." Foster stopped him en route to the men's room.

Alex turned at the door. "You need something?"

"Yes." Foster couldn't see Alex's full expression in the dim hall. Alex wouldn't be happy, but at the moment, he didn't give a damn. "I don't think you should see Brooke again."

"Excuse me?" Alex leaned a shoulder against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. "And why is this? Because you want her for yourself?"

"What I want is no concern of yours. I'm telling you to stop seeing the lady."

"I really think it should be up to the lady if she wishes to stop seeing me." Even in the shadows Foster could see the muscle in Alex's cheek tick. "You may be my boss during the daytime, but come evening, I'm on my own time."

"That may very well be, Alex. But if you were a smart man, and I know you are, you'd abide by my rules at all times."

"You don't scare me, Foster. I used to respect you, but after this..." Alex shook his head.

"Don't say something you'll regret later."

"What? Or you'll fire me?"

"You know I wouldn't. You're the best right-hand man I've had. Let's just say," Foster grinned, "may the best man win and leave it at that."

Alex stepped into the light; his face reddened. "You stay away from Brooke!"

"She's not engaged to you. I see no ring. So the way I see it, she's fair game."

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“I can’t compete with your money and status.”

“Brooke’s already made it clear she cares nothing about my wealth. And as it stands, you have a head start on me.”

“How do you figure?”

Foster laughed. “She hates me by her own admission. I plan on changing her mind.”

“Stay away from her, Foster.” Alex glared at him. “You’ll corrupt her.”

Foster’s eyebrow rose. “How’s that?”

“You’ll ruin her life, just like you did Allison.”

“Allison? How the hell do you know Allison?” Foster grasped Alex’s shoulders and threw him against the wall. “I met and hired you in New York. That was well after Allison’s death in Georgia. What the hell do you know about my relationship with her?”

“Allison was my sister!”

## CHAPTER 13

“Allison is Alex Thurston’s sister?” Kip’s gaze widened. “Damn! You’ve known him for six years and never knew Allison was his sister?”

“Allison was from Georgia. How the hell was I supposed to make the connection two years later in New York? Besides, after she jumped, I wanted to get on with my life and put the past behind me. I was only twenty-three years old for heaven’s sake. Besides, Alex never offered the information.”

“Yes, imagine that.” Kip crossed the gray carpeting of Foster’s penthouse to an oversized chair, taking a seat. “So why did he wait so long to tell you? You don’t think he had anything to do with the murders do you? I mean, some sort of revenge?”

“I don’t know.” Foster turned from the large window. “He doesn’t look like someone who’s capable of murder. But then again, one never knows.”

Foster began pacing the room, dressed in jeans, work shirt, and

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boots. His hair lay unbound as his hands clenched and unclenched at his side. He probably looked like the caged animal he felt. Kip drummed his fingers on the wooden arms of the chair, further unnerving Foster. He stopped his pacing and glared at Kip. Luckily he took the hint and stopped the incessant tapping. Kip reached inside his shirt pocket and extracted a silver case, withdrawing a cigarette. He struck a match and lit the end, exhaling a cloud of white smoke.

“You know those really are a nasty.”

Kip only shrugged and smiled, then inhaled and blew a perfect ring of smoke.

Foster ran a hand through his hair. “Do you think Alex could possibly be responsible?”

“Not counting Allison, the deaths began four years ago with Lynette. Right?”

Kip took another long pull on the cigarette. “After Lynette, there was the attempt on Ashley’s life three and a half years ago. Since then, nothing until Celeste. You’ve known Alex for six years since hiring him in New York. What do you really know about him?”

“Obviously very little if I just now found out his sister was Allison.”

“What I don’t get, though, is the spread between the murders. There were six months between Lynette and Ashley.” The tip of the cigarette glowed red as he sucked on the tip again. Smoke rolled from his mouth as he said, “Between Ashley and Celeste there were three years. Why?”

“Most likely because I didn’t date anyone seriously in that time, not until Celeste.” Foster returned to the window. Rain ran down the window in sheets.

“What reason did Alex give you for not telling you who his sister was?”

“He said he wanted revenge at first.” Foster faced Kip again, noticing a few ashes littering his carpeting. Grasping a clean ashtray, he shoved it at Kip. “For crying out loud, Kip, if you’re going to smoke, at



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least use one of these.”

Kip grasped the ashtray and took a final pull on the cigarette before stubbing it out in the ashtray. “He admitted to wanting revenge?”

“Yeah, he did. He said he wanted to destroy me and that’s why he wanted to work for me. He figured by managing my money, he could hit me where it would hurt the most, destroy my empire. But that’s the damnedest thing, he said after getting to know me and liking me, he realized his sister had to have been a little off to take her own life. He knew I wouldn’t destroy her life on purpose.”

Kip lit another cigarette. The pungent sulfur smell filled the air. “So why didn’t he tell you that sooner?”

“Since when did you smoke so much?”

Kip shrugged. “It calms me.”

“Alex said after a time, he began to admire my business ethics. Being Allison’s brother was no longer a relevant issue.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Yeah, I do.” And he did, though he couldn’t put his finger on why. “You remember Ashley don’t you?”

“Of course, I do. I wouldn’t forget a sweet face easily.”

“Did you ever run into her in New York after I moved out here?”

“No. I had no reason to. The last I saw her was about a week after you left town. We had dinner. I told her to keep in touch, but I haven’t seen her since. Why?”

“I think she’s here.”

“Did she follow you?”

“Not exactly.” Foster took a seat across from Kip. “She claims to be another person. But aside from her personality, she is Ashley in every other way.”

“What do you mean, besides from her personality?”

“Her face is Ashley’s, her legs are Ashley’s, her eyes and lips are definitely Ashley’s. The only difference is the person inside. I can’t explain it, but she seems more proud, more independent. Ashley

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depended on me, right down to drawing her bath water at times. This new Ashley wouldn't allow me to help her across the street."

"You always complained before about her needing you too much. So why the complaints?"

"Normally, I wouldn't complain." Foster leaned back in his chair and propped his chin on one hand. "The problem is she claims to be someone else."

"Someone else?" Kip laughed. "You can't be serious."

"She's holding true to this assumed identity. She calls herself Brooke Abel. I've been out with her and I'm unable to solve the mystery. She seems to believe who she says she is."

"Did you ever question her about the past?" Kip stamped out his second cigarette.

"Her parents died in a train robbery four years ago on her way to New York." Foster rubbed his chin. "She claims to have lived in New York for a year with her Aunt Roberta Heath following the accident."

"Her aunt? That was Ashley's mother's name. Do you think it's possible they're cousins?"

"No, they look exactly alike. My question is who was Ashley? When I invited her to live with me in New York, I didn't know her. Not really. Could she have been Brooke Abel and duped me into believing she was someone else? Brooke acts as though she had never met me before recently. As a matter of fact, I told her my name was Foster Tyson when I first saw her in Denver and she was furious to find out I lied and that I owned this hotel and I'm the man she pays rent to weekly for the shop she owns in the lobby."

"Doesn't make sense. Does Alex know her? He's known you for six years."

"I don't think Alex ever met Ashley. I kept my private life to myself in New York, following Lynette's murder. But he does know Brooke. Hell, he took her on a date after she broke up with her fiancé."

"Fiancé?" Kip's brows knit together. "Who was she engaged to?"

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“Brian Thompson. He’s a professor at a university here. I talked her into dropping him so we could be together, then I dropped her. Real smooth, huh?”

“I thought you and Celeste dated? What the hell is going on with you?”

“From the beginning,” Foster grimaced, “when I spotted Ashley, Brooke, or whoever the hell she is, she intrigued me. So I pursued her, trying to get to the bottom of the whole mess. After getting to know her, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answers any more. I liked the new Ashley...a lot. Anyway, I talked her into dumping the professor. He wasn’t right for her, but I was. After convincing her of it, I returned from our picnic to find Celeste had been stabbed. I was going to tell Celeste that night...poor Celeste.”

“She loved you, Foster. Don’t apologize for that. She wouldn’t want you blaming yourself for something you weren’t in control of.” Kip shifted in his chair. “So why dump Ashley or Brooke or whoever she is?”

“Think about it.” Foster clenched his teeth, the ache traveling to his temple. “Whoever is out to get me, didn’t realize that Celeste and I weren’t in love or maybe they thought she ruined herself just by being with me. I couldn’t take the chance with Brooke. I don’t want to put her in danger. Enough women have been hurt or died at my expense. Now that Alex is dating her, I can’t stand it. She’s mine, Kip. I’ll have it no other way.”

“Do you think she feels the same?”

Foster shrugged. “What does it matter? I can’t take the chance that this maniac might try to kill her next.”

“So you allow Alex to have her.” Kip snorted. “Interesting. So, where can I find her? I’d like to see if what you say is true. If she doesn’t recall you, she won’t recall me, but I’d like to see the resemblance.”

“She runs the Body Apparel shop in the lobby. You can probably

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find her there. She doesn't close until after eight."

"Did you try to track Ashley after she left your penthouse in New York?"

"Of course. George put a detective on the matter, but so far, nothing has turned up. I contacted Roberta Heath and she's on her way out here now. She says she hasn't seen Ashley in three years. Though that isn't surprising, they never got along."

"I tell you what, I'll go pay Brooke a visit and make my own conclusions. If she looks as much like Ashley as you say, I'll help you get to the bottom of this." Kip headed for the door. "I'll be back in a bit."

\* \* \*

*Ashley? What was she doing in Denver? The demon observed her from the shadowed corner of the lobby. The cloaked figure would allow her to live...for now. But if Ashley allowed herself to be seduced once again by his charms, the fiend would have to end her life, once and for all. The job had been left unfinished in New York, but the demon wouldn't make the same mistake twice. If Ashley allowed herself to be sullied by Foster once more, then she'd forfeit her life.*

*Pulling the cloak tight, the devil entertained the idea of finishing the uncompleted job. The taste for blood was once again close at hand, only being weeks since the death of Celeste. The fiend looked forward to more blood shed, wondering if maybe the events should be left to die before anticipating another so close. Afraid of giving itself away, the monster decided to let things run its course for the time being. Then and only then, if Ashley was fool enough to fall into the wiles of Foster Taylor again, would the devil strike.*

*Rubbing long fingers together, disappearing into the shadows, the demon reflected on the future.*

## CHAPTER 14

My God, Foster was right. Ashley stood before him dusting the shelves of her shop. He hadn't known her intimately as did Foster, but he knew her well enough. They'd become close friends in New York. Kip and Ashley spent time together when Foster allowed his business to take him long hours into the night. If this wasn't Ashley, then Ashley had to have had a twin she didn't know about. The woman was absolutely stunning. He hadn't seen Ashley in New York following a dinner date not long after Foster's departure to Denver, but her appearance had changed little. If Ashley had followed him here, then that would explain her absence in New York.

Walking into the small shop, wearing sleek black trousers and a white shirt unbuttoned at the collar, Kip cleared his throat to capture her attention. Recognition shone in her eyes and her breath caught in her throat. He smiled. Ashley couldn't hide the fact she knew him. It was written all over her face. Foster would be pleased to find out Kip had seen through her façade.

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Brooke couldn't believe her eyes. What on earth was he doing here? Before her stood the same man who sat with Foster and Celeste in the dining room the night she shared a meal with Brian's mother. She doubted a coincidence brought him to her shop. What game did Foster now play?

Placing her dust rag behind the counter, she approached the man. "Is there something I can help you find?"

"I was looking for something soft and satiny." He grinned slyly and winked. "Do you think you could supply something of the erotic nature?"

Brooke blushed. No wonder he and Foster were friends; they both had atrocious manners in front of a lady. She squared her shoulders. "We have several chemises, sir. If you would like, I could show you a few. Is there a color you're partial to?"

"Sir?" The man guffawed. "I've been called many things by you in the past, but sir was never one of them."

"I beg your pardon," Brooke clipped. "I don't believe we've ever met before."

"Come now. You surely recognized me when I entered your shop. I could see it in your face. You can't fool me."

"Of course, I recognized you. You were dining with Foster Taylor a few weeks back. But know you personally, I do not."

"Foster did say you believed your little ruse. What game are you playing, Ashley?"

"Ashley? What is it with you and Foster? My name is Brooke Abel. I thought I had finally gotten that through to Mr. Taylor, but apparently not. I assure you I don't know who you are, but my name isn't Ashley." Brooke narrowed her gaze. "If you must address me by my first name, then it's Brooke, but I'd prefer you call me Miss Abel."

Kip looked curiously at her. "Brooke Abel?"

He placed his hands on the counter and supported his weight. The

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man stood slightly taller than Foster and lighter in frame. He had perfect fingers for playing the piano, long and thin. He leaned inward, his face scant inches from hers. The warmth of his breath spanned her cheeks.

“If you insist, then Miss Abel it is.” He paused. “But like it or not, the name Ashley Heath will still come to the tip of my tongue. You, madam, are an exact match.”

“Heath?”

His brow rose. “The name ring a bell?”

“It’s the second time it’s been brought up to me recently, but yes, I have an aunt in New York by the same last name.”

“Aunt?”

“Roberta Heath.”

“Roberta?”

“Yes, but she had no children, and I was her only living relative after my parents passed away. So you see there can’t possibly be a connection. Although,” Brooke pondered, “I do recall her speaking of an Ashley once. She was an acquaintance of Aunt Roberta’s, but I never met her. Aunt Roberta and I never got along. Most of my time spent in New York, I lived with friends.”

Kip kissed her hand with a kiss. “If not for Foster, I’d ask you out myself.”

“Foster? What does he have to do with you being here?” Her brows knit together. “He sent you, didn’t he? That man is lower than a snake. I can’t believe I told you anything. Now if you’d excuse me, sir, I have work to do.”

“I do believe, I am your only customer at the moment.” The man’s arm did a casual sweep of the empty shop. “And I wish you would quit calling me ‘sir.’ It annoys me.”

“I don’t know your name.”

He bowed. “Kip Cameron at your service.”

“Well, Mr. Cameron—”

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“Kip, please.”

“Fine, Kip. I have work to do and unless you intend on buying anything, I suggest you take your inquiring mind back up to Mr. Taylor’s office and tell him you have nothing to report.”

“Oh, but I think I do.”

“And what is that?”

“You’re as fine as he says you are. Madam, it’s been my pleasure.” Kip bowed once more, gave her grand farewell salute and walked through the door.

Brooke stared at the closed door for long moments. Why would Foster send the man to her shop? What motive could he possibly have? Ashley Heath. For some odd reason, the two thought her someone else. Could there be a woman close in looks to her own...so much so that not only had Foster mistaken her but Mr. Cameron as well? And although he tried to prove otherwise, Foster’s interest in her was more than he cared to admit. Maybe she’d play him at his own games. A smile stretched across her face as she returned to dusting.

\* \* \*

Foster walked into his mother’s apartment. He thought it best to look in on her. After all, the last time he had seen her she complained of numbness in her arm. She really needed to take care of herself and Foster worried about her well-being, even if she didn’t want his concern. Amanda took care of her everyday needs, but he still needed to see her for himself. Kip and his findings could wait until later. But he had no doubt that the man would see exactly what he had.

“My, my, my, look what the cat drug in.” Amanda shook her head. “You never cease to amaze me, Foster. You disappear for two weeks, act as though we don’t exist, and walk in here carrying flowers, thinking all is well. Well, let me tell you something, brother—”

“Amanda, that’s about enough,” her mother scolded from the couch. “If anyone’s going to scold him for his insolence, it will be me.



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Foster Taylor, where in the hell do you get off acting like a spoiled brat for the last two weeks?"

"Sorry, Mother, I—"

"I could have dropped over dead and you wouldn't even have known it, sonny," she spat, wagging a finger in his direction. "Don't you ever do a disappearing act on me like that again. The next time I'd be tempted to turn you over my knee and give you the paddling you deserve."

Foster bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. His mother's tone spoke of her seriousness, so he dared not upset her further. Placing the bouquet of flowers he bought on the table, he returned his attention to her. Amanda grasped the flowers with a grumble and took them to the kitchen where she found a glass vase.

"I'm sorry, Mother." Foster spread out his arms and shrugged. "After the last time you talked to me, I didn't think you were in any hurry to see me again."

Mabel Ruth smiled. "Well, I certainly hope your disposition has improved. Come here and give your mother a hug."

Amanda harrumphed as she made her way to the door. She yanked her coat from the coat tree and slammed the door on her way out.

"What's her problem?" Foster asked, taking a seat by his mother.

"You know Amanda. She thinks you spend far too little time with me." Mabel Ruth eyed him with heavy lids. "And you know, today I'm inclined to believe her. What's kept you, sonny?"

"I don't know, Mother." Foster sighed. He leaned forward, forearms on his thighs, and clasped his hands. "Ever since Celeste, everything fell apart. I met another woman. Well, at least I think I met another woman or it's the same woman. Hell, I don't know."

"What the hell are you talking about, Foster? What woman has you babbling like an idiot?" Mabel Ruth's look of confusion had him nearly laughing had he not been so damn perplexed himself.

Foster rubbed his eyes. How long had it been since he'd gotten a

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good night's sleep? "I shouldn't be burdening you with my problems. I came to see how you were feeling."

"I'm fine, sonny." Mabel Ruth swatted the air. "Tell me about this woman."

"There's not much to tell. You remember Ashley from New York?"

"Of course. A petite little thing, though I can't imagine why she moved in with you and ruined her reputation like she did. You should have married her, Foster. You probably damaged her irrevocably."

Foster shook his head. His mother had an opinion on everything and never failed to speak it. She had sat him down several times in New York, scolding him about Ashley's reputation. He elected to not comment on her accusations. "I think she's here in Denver."

"She probably had to move out of New York, you know. No decent man would have her after what you did to her reputation. You should be ashamed of yourself."

He sighed. Obviously she wasn't going to let the topic of Ashley's reputation drop. "Yes, I know, Mother, but I wasn't in love with her. I told you that."

"Then you shouldn't have asked her to move in with you. I tell you, if your father—"

"My father what? He was never around to watch me grow up." Foster's ire grew. "If you wish to speak of my father, then his name is Mac. Mac McCarthy was a better father to me than the sorry excuse for a man my real father was."

Sadness consumed Mabel's Ruth's gaze. Foster knew she agreed with him. After all, Wayne had stuck around long enough to see Amanda brought into the world, then left them without support. Foster never had a chance to be a child. It had been his responsibility to step into his father's shoes.

"I'm sorry about Wayne." Mabel Ruth patted his hand. "I could never make that up to you."

His outburst was uncalled for. Looking into her eyes, he knew they

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shared the same memories. Neither sugarcoated the truth. Wayne Taylor wasn't worth the dirt beneath their feet and he hoped to the good Lord above, he never ran into the man as long as he lived.

"I'm sorry, too." Foster leaned back, the day's events draining him. "Allow me to finish what I'm trying to tell you."

"I'm all ears."

"As I said I think Ashley is here in Denver, at least I think it's her."

"How could you not know, for heavens sake? You bedded her didn't you? For cryin'..." Mabel Ruth stopped herself when Foster glared at her. "Sorry, continue."

"Anyway, I saw her a few weeks back. When I approached her, she acted as though she didn't know me."

"How in the world?"

"When I approached her and called her by her first name, she got angry."

"What on earth for?"

Foster chuckled, shaking his head. His mother couldn't help but add her comments. "I kissed her before I spoke to her."

"Do you really think that was the proper thing to do?"

"Of course not, but when have I ever been proper?"

"Well you know—"

"Mother, if you don't pipe down, I'll never get through this story before midnight and I do have other people to see. Now, after I kissed her, even though it wasn't the proper greeting," he quickly added before his mother broke in again, "I called her Ashley and she insisted her name was Brooke Abel. I argued, thinking it was a ploy to get me to marry her."

"You know—"

"Yes, I do," he quickly added. "Anyway, I was intrigued, so I took her on a picnic. After spending the afternoon with her, I think she truly believes she is who she says she is."

"A sister possibly?"

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"I know what you're thinking. I've already thought that." Foster shook his head. "Neither Ashley or Brooke have any sisters. Brooke's mother and father are both dead."

"Oh, my."

"Train robbery. Ashley's mother lives in New York and is on her way out here, at my request. Brooke claims this woman is her aunt. Maybe once she gets here, I'll get some answers."

"So, where does your misery come in? So far, you've only told me of your confusion. Besides, if you didn't love Ashley enough to marry her, then where's the intrigue coming from now?"

"That's what's confusing. I loved Ashley more like a sister. I know," he said, placing his palms in the air, stopping his mother from her comment, "you don't bed your sister. Anyway, this new woman, Brooke, intrigues me far more than Ashley ever did. I feel like I can't get enough of her. I want to be in her presence constantly."

"Have you slept with her?"

"No."

"Then, there's your answer," she replied, nodding. "Your intrigue is coming from your pants, Foster."

"Mother!" Foster exclaimed. "Please. I'm a grown man, thirty-three years of age, and I think I know when I'm thinking with that part of my anatomy."

"Do you deny wanting to sleep with her?"

"Of course not...I mean I do want her." His face heated. "But I know it's much more than that. I saw her the other day with a business associate of mine. I was jealous. I've never been jealous of anyone in my life."

"Then why was he with her and not you?"

"I stopped seeing her because of the murders. I felt I was putting her life in jeopardy. But the idea of her dating anyone else has me going insane. And the thought of her in another man's arms, I couldn't begin to even think of. That's why she's so different. I never felt

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jealous with Ashley, but Brooke makes me insane with it. Although she looks like Ashley in every way, she's different." Foster paused, her image coming to mind. "Her mannerisms are different—her walk, her smile, even the way she kisses. Hell, she even tastes different."

"Excuse me?"

"When I kissed her," Foster quickly amended.

"Sounds to me like you're falling in love with this new woman."

Foster pondered his mother's statement. He sighed. "I think you might be right. Which makes no sense to me at all since I never fell in love with Ashley. But Brooke Abel? I could see spending the rest of my life with."

## CHAPTER 15

Foster walked to the opened door of his office. “Mrs. Dunlap, could you come here a moment?”

He returned to his desk and sat down. Several business ledgers lay spread across the surface. Glasses perched on the bridge of his nose as he studied the papers before him. His secretary, dressed in a blue wool skirt and jacket, walked into the room.

“Yes, Mr. Taylor?” she asked.

“Have you received the monthly statements from my other hotels yet?” he questioned.

“Yes, sir, they arrived this morning.” She smoothed her hand nervously across the pleat in her skirt. “Mr. Thurston is always the first to see the ledgers. That’s why I haven’t brought them to you.”

“Normally that is the procedure.” He took his glasses from his nose. “This morning, however, I would like access to them first. If you could get them for me...”

“Right away, Mr. Taylor.” She turned to exit the room.

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“One more thing,” he stopped her, “tell Mr. Thurston I wish to speak with him.”

“Certainly,” she replied, leaving the office.

Foster stared at the closed door for several moments before retrieving his glasses and placing them on his nose again, glancing back at the ledgers. He lacked concentration. A couple of weeks had passed since he’d last seen Brooke and warned Alex against calling on her. But he knew Alex and she had been seen about town together since; he heard the rumors. Gossip traveled fast amongst his employees.

He should be elated. The more he distanced himself from her, the less danger she would be in. Unless Alex had anything to do with the murders. Hell, he hadn’t thought of that. Anyone who knew Foster and of his relationships could be accountable. Alex being Allison’s brother made him even more suspect. Had he made a huge mistake and handed Brooke into the hands of a killer? Maybe the best way to keep an eye on her would have been at his side. Even then, he’d have to keep a close eye on her at all times, which was impossible. Look what happened to Lynette, Ashley, and Celeste. He hadn’t protected any of them.

Foster tapped his finger on the desk as his thoughts shifted to Ashley. He hadn’t heard from George in weeks. He scribbled himself a note to contact the man and ask about his progress. He knew the answers he sought were very close at hand with the arrival of Roberta Heath later in the day. He’d send Alex to the train depot to retrieve her and see to her room before bringing her to Foster. Soon, he’d know the game Brooke played. If Roberta couldn’t provide him with the answers he sought, then surely, George’s detective would have come up with something by now.

A swift knock sounded on the door before Alex took the initiative to open it and walk in. His icy-blue gaze leveled on Foster. Ever since Foster told him to stay away from Brooke, he regarded Foster with frosty indifference.

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“You wanted to see me?”

“Have a seat.” Foster indicated the chair across from his desk. “I need you to do a few things for me.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Taylor, but I have those ledgers you requested,” Mrs. Dunlap interrupted. She laid them on the polished surface of the desk.

“Thank you.” Foster dismissed her with a nod then returned his attention to Alex. “Someone is arriving in town later today. I’d like you to meet her at the train depot. See to it she’s given one of the finer rooms and settled in before you bring her to my office.”

“How late will she be arriving?” Alex questioned. “I have a date at six.”

“If you’re referring to Brooke, then you’ll ask her to patiently wait.” Foster clenched his jaw. “This will not.”

“You’re doing this on purpose.”

“You work for me, Mr. Thurston. Are you questioning my ethics? If so, then you go too far.” Foster took his glasses from his nose, daring him to argue. “You will do as I ask. There is no room for argument. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes.” His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. “If that will be all, tell me who the woman is, and I’ll be on my way.”

“No, that’s not all.” Foster replaced his specks, studying the ledgers before him.

“If those are this month’s accounts, I have yet had time to review them.”

“Of course, you haven’t. They’ve just arrived.”

“I thought it was my job to go over them first, then report to you. Why wasn’t normal procedure followed?”

“I wanted to review. Don’t worry, Alex, I’m not questioning your judgment. You’re still the best right-hand man I’ve had.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” Alex replied, still eyeing Foster carefully. “I would hate to see this thing with Brooke affect your better



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judgment.”

“I assure you, Alex, where business is involved, nothing affects my judgment. I am a businessman first and foremost. I haven’t come this far allowing things like this to stand in the way. Now, back to the issue at hand. After studying these ledgers, I think we can afford to come down on the rent we charge on the shops in the lobby. Possibly twenty-five dollars a month.”

“Twenty-five dollars a month?” Alex shouted, nearly coming out of his chair. “That’s three-hundred dollars a year per shop, nine-hundred per hotel, and four-thousand-five-hundred for all five hotels if you include the breakfast shops. As your financial advisor, I would be inclined to tell you that this is not a wise move. That’s a quarter less than what you make now.”

Foster agreed with Alex, not a wise business move. But his decision had been made, nonetheless. “I’ve weighed the reasoning and I think it’s affordable.”

“I still advise against the move.”

“Well, Alex, it’s my money and I’ll choose to do as I see fit.”

“Does your wonderful generosity include a raise for all your employees?” Foster didn’t like Alex’s sarcastic tone but chose to ignore it.

“No, you know as well as I, they received a raise within the last year. I have always been charitable.”

“Then this has to do with Brooke.”

“As I said before, my intentions aren’t your concern. Besides, all the shop’s rents will be reduced, not only Brooke’s.” Foster laid the ledgers in front of Alex. “See for yourself, I can afford the small allowance.”

“No matter how you cover the truth, Foster, I know why you’re doing this.” A muscle ticked in Alex’s cheek. “You won’t be able to buy her.”

“You’re correct.” Foster clasped his hands. “Brooke is too proud to

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be bought and I assure that isn't my intention. I'm in a generous mood today. Now if you'll relay the news for me, I have work to do."

Alex's shoulders drooped. "Of course."

"Oh, and Alex," Foster smiled, "don't forget to pick up Roberta Heath at the train depot around five this afternoon. Get there an hour early in case it should arrive before schedule. You might want to inform Brooke. I'd hate to see you arrive late for your date."

"I'm sure you would," Alex grumbled before lumbering out of the office like a beaten man.

"Mrs. Dunlap," Foster called out.

"Yes?" She stepped through the office door.

"Mr. Thurston is picking up a Mrs. Roberta Heath at the train depot today. See to it you notify me immediately upon her arrival and show her in."

"Yes, sir," she replied, then closed the door behind her.

Foster grinned, knowing he had upset Alex. But Alex had misconstrued Foster's reasoning. He had no intention of trying to buy Brooke. No amount of money would ever impress a woman like her. Celeste, yes...but not Brooke. And certainly Brooke would never accept charity, she was far too proud. His motives for lowering her shop's rent had been to help her out monthly. The purpose for lowering all the shops' rent was to cover his reasoning.

\* \* \*

Brooke looked up from her customer as Alex entered her shop. The last few weeks had been fun. Although not romantic in nature, she enjoyed their time together and the fact they had become good friends. She knew it wasn't what Alex hoped for, but it would have to do. Foster came to mind; she hadn't seen him in two weeks. Just the mere thought of him set her stomach to fluttering. Why couldn't she fall for someone good like Alex? She sighed.

She smiled, but Alex didn't return it. Maybe something had

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happened. She hurried her customer along. “Thank you very much, Mrs. Andropolis. Enjoy the scents and if there is anything else I can do for you, you know where to find me.”

“Thank you, Brooke.” The older woman took her package. “My husband just loves the fragrances you carry.”

The elderly lady exited her shop as Brooke made her way over to Alex. He toyed with a music box. Music tinkled from it. As Alex looked up from the small box, his gaze seemed more hostile than sad as she had originally thought.

“What’s upset you so?”

Alex placed the intricate box back on the shelf and grasped Brooke’s hand. “I may be a little late picking you up.”

“That’s fine.” Brooke smiled again, grateful nothing disastrous had happened. “If that is what has you worried, Alex, I assure you, I am a patient woman.”

“You’re a good woman, Brooke,” he said, his disposition not changing. “I probably don’t deserve you.”

“Nonsense. You’ve been so good to me since Brian and I broke up. I can’t thank you enough. I look forward to the time we spend together.”

Alex took a deep breath. “Enough to marry me?”

Her breath caught in her throat. “What?”

Alex bent down on one knee, still holding her hand. He looked into her eyes as his hands trembled. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

A single tear slipped down her smooth cheek as she gazed at the brave man kneeling before her. Though she wished she could give him the answer he longed to hear, she knew she couldn’t. She could no more marry him than she could Brian. For much the same reason—she wasn’t in love with him.

Tugging slightly on his hand, she motioned for him to stand. A slight flush rose in her cheeks as another tear slipped past her lashes.

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“My dear friend—”

“Friend?”

“Yes.” It broke her heart to crush Alex, but he needed to know the truth. “I’m sorry. I love you as a friend, not as a wife should her husband.”

“But it’s a start. You could learn to love me.”

“You are a sweet man and deserve better. You need someone who will love and cherish you. I’m not that person. I shouldn’t have continued on our dates, but I enjoyed spending time with you. I’m afraid I’ve given you false hopes.”

“You never led me to believe you cared for me more than you do, Brooke.” He wiped a tear from her cheek with the pad of his thumb. “I had false hopes. That’s not your fault. Don’t cry. I assure you I’ll bounce back. You can’t hate a man for trying.”

“I could never hate you, Alex.”

“You don’t have it in you to hate anyone.” He glanced to the floor as though weighing what he was about to tell her. “There was another reason I came.”

“What’s that?”

“Were you aware that Mr. Taylor is investigating your background?”

Brooke’s mouth dropped open. “Why? What on earth does he hope to gain?”

“I don’t know, but I thought you should know.”

“Is he the reason you asked me about my parents a few weeks back?”

“Yes. But I couldn’t go along with his scheming, I had to tell you.”

Her ire rose. “Is this the reason you’ve been asking me out?”

“No... No!” Alex stammered. “I promise. I asked you out because I wanted to. Surely, you realize that. I’ve been after you since I met you.”

“That’s true and I’m sorry I accused you. What would Mr. Taylor

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want to know about me? My life is an open book, all he had to do was ask. He needn't go behind my back. The nerve of that man! He never quits."

"Not when he puts something in his mind." Alex took a deep breath. "Which brings me to another point, your shop's rent is being lowered twenty-five dollars a month."

"Why?" Brooke's fury went up a notch. "After checking my background did he find out how little I have? Well, I accept charity from no one. He can take his twenty-five dollars and stick it."

"I'll tell him." Alex smiled. "I must be going. I'll try not to be too late for our date tonight."

"Our date?" Brooke had nearly forgot in her anger.

"That is if you still wish to go out with me."

"Of course. I guess I didn't think you'd still want to go out with me after I turned down your proposal."

"We can still be friends, Brooke. Maybe someday you might even change your mind."

She smiled, not wanting to further dash his hopes and said nothing about the future. "I'll be waiting for you. As for now, I have to shut down my shop early. There is someone I need to see. I'll wait for you at my apartment."

"I'll see you in a couple of hours. Now I better get to the train depot and pick up Mr. Taylor's arrival," Alex said and rushed out the door.

Mr. Taylor's arrival? Brooke smiled. She was about to be his unexpected arrival.

## CHAPTER 16

“Mr. Taylor!” Brooke burst unannounced into Foster’s office.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Taylor,” his secretary apologized, fast on Brooke’s heels.

“You may go, Mrs. Dunlap.” He waved her off, seemingly unfazed by the interruption. “Miss Abel apparently feels she has business with me that can’t wait.”

Foster faced Brooke; their gazes locked. Her azure blue eyes flashed with fire. He strode around his desk to meet her hostility head on. He couldn’t help taking in the color of lightweight dress, almost the same as the rose chemise he purchased. He smiled. The color was superb on her...a little more material than he had wanted to see her in, but stunning nonetheless.

“Is there something you wish to speak to me about, Miss Abel?” he questioned, not sure what brought on this new bout of anger. Instead, she should be thanking him for the lowering the cost of her rent. *Women*. There was no pleasing them.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Brooke crossed her arms, her actions emphasizing her breast line. What he wouldn't do to undress her with his teeth. Her anger only enticed him further.

"You're damn right there is."

He couldn't help but goad her. "Such language from a lady."

She stuck her finger in the center of his chest and poked him. "Foster Taylor, don't you dare mock me."

"My dear, I assure you I'm not mocking you. On the contrary, I like your spirit. It makes me *hot*."

Brooke opened her mouth to speak, then flapped it shut. Foster chuckled at the thought of making her speechless for once. Hell, the woman usually never stopped talking unless...unless he was kissing her. His gaze dropped to her lips. And damn if he didn't want to be doing that again.

She harrumphed then said, "How could you?"

"How could I what? You want to give me a clue here, Brooke?"

"How could you have me investigated? First you send Alex to ask me questions, then you and your picnic, and finally Kip Cameron. Why? What is it you want to know? Just ask me and I'll tell you. Why send everyone after me to ask what it is you want to know so badly?"

"Ah, so this is the reason for your hostility." Foster approached her until mere inches separated them. Her rose scent drifted to his nose. His groin panged as he fought to keep his reaction to her under control.

"What the hell did you think it was?"

His brow cocked. Damn, she really was furious. "There isn't any reason for you to be profane."

"Oh, shut the hell up. You have no right to tell me what to do and you certainly have no right whatsoever looking into my past."

"You're right."

"And another...What did you say?"

"I said, you're right. I had no right checking into your background. Had you told me all I wanted to know, however, I wouldn't have." He

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

leaned against the desk surface and crossed his arms.

Her eyes darted to his as she swallowed, her throat gently bobbing. He could see the heavy beat of her pulse at the base of her throat. The fact he affected her sent his blood pulsing through his veins.

“Mr. Taylor,” she whispered, licking her lips.

“Foster,” he corrected.

“Foster...” Her gaze fell to the floor as she toyed with the fringe on her dress. “I...uh...I...oh, hell.”

“Yes?”

Her fingers touched her lips as her face reddened. She couldn’t even bring herself to look at him, he thought with a chuckle. He had her so flustered that she looked ready to bolt. With a heavy sigh, she turned and headed for the office door. She wouldn’t get away that easily.

Foster reached out with the speed of lightning and grasped her arm, halting her. He slammed the office door with his free hand. Brooke slowly turned to meet his gaze. She looked like a frightened doe.

“You aren’t going anywhere until we finish what you started,” he said, his face dangerously close to hers. Damn if he didn’t want to take her in his arms and end the torment plaguing his gut. Much more and he’d be sporting a full-blown erection.

“What was it you wished to tell me, Brooke?” Foster leaned in and whispered against her ear, “Tell me what you want from me.”

Brooke sucked in air. “What I want?”

“Yes. What is it you want from me?”

“I...uh...oh, damn. I wish you wouldn’t stand so close.”

“Why? Because you want this?” Foster descended on her, leaving her feeling the soft caress of his lips, nothing more.

“Please.” Her hands gently rested against his chest, as if she wanted to push him away but didn’t have the will to.

“Please, what?” He brushed his lips against her satiny ones again. “Kiss you?”

“No...no, I...don’t do that.” She blinked rapidly and pushed herself



### ***DARK SAVIOR***

from him, retreating, putting too much space between them for his liking. Hell, he should yank her into his arms, giving them both the release they desired. She wanted him...she was just too damned stubborn to admit as much.

“Why did you lower my rent?” Her hands shook as she smoothed them down the sides of her dress. “Did your little investigation turn up my money problems? I will not accept charity.”

“Charity?” Foster laughed, slowly advancing on her, closing the gap she put between them. “I assure that isn’t what this is. If you would have checked before rushing up here to chew me a new ass, you would have seen that I lowered the rent on all the shops, not just yours. It was purely a business decision.”

Brooke backed against the wall. “To lose money? I’d call that a poor business decision.”

“None the less, it was my decision to make.” Foster stopped just shy of touching her. “I like to keep my people happy and since I can’t give a raise to those running shops, I can only accommodate them by lowering their rent. You, my dear, are the only one dull-witted enough to question my judgment.”

Brooke held out her palms to keep some measure of distance between them, but he closed the gap. Placing his hands on the wall, trapping her between, he stared into the depths of her blue eyes. He thought he’d find fear written the depths, instead he saw an untried passion, not like the raw desire he used to see in Ashley’s eyes.

“I didn’t mean to question your judgment.” Brooke averted her gaze. “I was only questioning your investigation of me. If you wanted to know about me, all you had to do was ask.”

“I have, if you recall.” Foster grasped her chin, forcing her to look at him again. Surely he’d see the lie in her eyes, instead he saw innocence. “You sidestep everything I ask and I’m not one to wait for answers.”

“So you think that excuses you?”

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

He shrugged. "No, maybe just explains why I did it. But I make no excuses. Now, how long do you plan on continuing this ruse with Alex?"

"I...what? Ruse?" Her brows knit together. "What makes you think it's a ruse?"

"You can't lie to me, Brooke."

He descended on her until their lips were but a breath apart. He heard her tiny intake of air. She licked her lips.

"You have no designs on this man. It's cruel to lead him on."

She shifted her stance against the wall. "Lead him on? How would you know what I feel?"

"Are you telling me you desire him?"

"Desire?" The word trembled from her lips.

"Yes, Brooke...desire. Does he make you feel like this?" He kissed the corner of her lips. "Does he make you shiver with longing when he kisses you here?" He placed another tender kiss on the tip of chin.

"No," she whispered.

"And this?" He nipped at her ear lobe.

"He doesn't..." Her voice trailed off as her shoulders quivered.

"How about here?" He nibbled at the crook of her neck, then pushed her dress from her shoulder and kissed the exposed flesh. "Or here?"

"Foster," she whispered. Her hands clutched the folds of his shirt, telling him what her words didn't.

"Here?" His mouth made a wet path back to her throat and the center as she tilted her head back, giving him better access.

Foster placed teasing kisses up her neck and toward her awaiting mouth. His tongue slipped past her lips and into her mouth, deepening the kiss. Her body melded to his, and she no doubt felt the arousal pressing against her abdomen. He waited for her withdrawal, instead her hands moved from his chest to the hair at his nape. She took from him the way a gambler greedily reached for the next card.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

He moaned. She belonged here, in his arms, naked as the day she was born. He yearned to tangle their limbs and join with her body the way their tongues battled. Never had he been pushed to these fevered limits, as if he didn't make love to her today, then tomorrow would never exist.

Placing an arm beneath her legs, Foster carried her to his desk. He swept it clear with his free hand and sat her atop. He looked into her eyes, giving her a chance to deny him what was about to happen. He saw apprehension, but desire as well. When she reached for him, it was all the coaxing he needed.

Foster spread her knees and stood between them, wrapping her dangling legs around him. His fingers deftly unbuttoned several of the tiny seed ornaments, exposing the milky-white flesh beneath. Brooke grasped his nape and tilted her head, giving him what he sought.

He nipped a path downward as his hand pulled the rose fabric away, exposing her breast. His tongue darted out, teasing the exposed bud, encircling it before drawing it greedily into his mouth. Brooke's legs tightened around him, holding him flush against her. His heart thumped heavily in his erection. Damn, he couldn't be expected to take much more. He had waited long enough.

His suckled her nipple as his free hand teased the other, before bringing his mouth back to hers. She kissed him feverishly and moaned as his hands grasped her backside, holding her tightly against him. Tearing his mouth from her, he looked down upon her. Her cherry-red lips were swollen from his kisses and she looked at him through dazed eyes.

"Tell me." He sounded hoarse, even to his own ears.

She seemed unable to catch her breath. "Tell you?"

"Tell me what you want." He had to hear the words from her lips.

"What I want?"

"Who is it you want, Brooke?"

She looked straight into his eyes and said the one word he longed to

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

hear. “You.” “Are you sure? Because after this, there is no turning back.” He had to make sure she understood. After the shared intimacy, the last thing he wanted was her regrets. “Once we’ve done this, I won’t let you go. Do you understand that? I won’t share what’s mine.”

Tears pooled in her eyes. “I’m sure.”

“Then tell me who you want.”

“You.”

He kissed her with possessive force, his tongue intertwining with hers as his arms wrapped tightly around her. He wanted to swallow her, make her a part of him so that they each became a perfect half of a whole. He slipped his hand to her shoulder and pulled at the fabric, slipping it down her arm and to her waist. Brooke slipped her arms free, not caring at her nakedness, and moaned again, the sound pleasing to his ears. She released the leather thong holding his hair and it cascaded around them. Her fingers threaded through the strands.

His hand encompassed her breast, a perfect fit, when a knock came to the door, startling them.

“Yes,” Foster clipped.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Taylor, but Mrs. Roberta Heath has arrived and you told me to notify you immediately,” Mrs. Dunlap said. “I’ll tell her to have a seat.”

Foster glanced at Brooke, who had already righted her clothes. Her eyes sparked in fury. Feeling as though a bucket of cold water had been thrown over him, he shifted away from Brooke and ran his hand through his unkempt hair. He grasped her arm and pulled her from the desk top with a yelp.

“Let go of me,” Brooke said, her eyes narrowing to dangerous slits.

“Not until I’ve said my piece. We’re not done here by a long shot.”

She tried to yank her arm free from his grasp, but he held fast. “The hell we aren’t.”

He needed her to listen before going off half cocked. “You’ll hear me out.”

***DARK SAVIOR***

“Go to hell,” she hissed, smoothing the folds of her dress. She shoved her way past him, opening the door and walked out of his office and past Aunt Roberta without a word.

He stabbed his hand through his hair. “Dammit!”

## CHAPTER 17

Foster held open the door. “Mrs. Heath, if you’d like to come in, I’ll get this over as quickly as possible and you can be on your way to enjoy our lovely city.”

He followed the heavysset woman into his office, skirted around her, and pulled out a seat. Foster then took his own behind the desk and placed his glasses on his nose. He looked up at her and smiled. Though heavy from age, he noted her comeliness and couldn’t help wondering what she looked like twenty years ago. Roberta had some of the same features as Brooke—the same hair coloring, though slightly streaked with gray, azure blue eyes, showing the abuse of age, and the same pert little nose.

Clasping his hands, he leaned forward and scrutinized. Roberta shifted nervously. She opened her pocketbook, withdrew a cigarette, and placed it in a long holder. She leaned forward. He grasped the silver lighter from his desk, lit the cigarette and watched as she took several long drags from the holder, releasing the pungent smoke into

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

the air before finally turning her undivided attention to him.

“What could you possibly want from me, Mr. Taylor, that you would drag me half way across the continent to find out?” She glared at him and crossed her thick legs. “And exactly what did you do to my niece? She seemed pretty disturbed when she left moments ago.”

So she actually cared about Brooke’s welfare. “I assure you, Mrs. Heath, I wouldn’t harm a hair on your niece’s head.”

“I’m glad to hear that. She’s had a rough life.”

“I’m aware of that fact, madam.” Foster carefully watched the woman, unable to detect if she were indeed sincere or not. “Brooke Abel is your niece then.”

“Yes, of course. Why do you ask?” Her gaze suddenly darted about the room. “Do you have whiskey?”

“Whiskey?” Foster drew his brows together. “Of course.”

Foster walked over to a closed cabinet made of the same mahogany wood as the desk, opened the door and extracted a crystal decanter and two short glasses. Returning to the desk, he poured a heavy shot into both glasses before returning to his seat. He watched as Brooke’s aunt tossed back the contents, her eyes not tearing from the sting of the alcohol and held her glass out for a refill. Foster knew now which abuse made her look older than her years. Picking up the decanter, he refilled her glass.

“I only have one final question then, Mrs. Heath.”

She shrugged, lifter her glass to her mouth and said, “Ask away.”

“If you will pardon my profanity then, who the hell is Ashley Heath?”

Whiskey spewed from her mouth. Foster jumped from his chair, rushed to her side, and soundly slapped her on the back. When the coughing subsided, he held her stare.

“I believe you have yet to answer my question.”

Sweat beads popped out across her brow.

“Ashley Heath? Who is she?”

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Roberta's complexion paled shades lighter as she blotted her forehead and upper-lip with a handkerchief.

"I don't know who you are talking about," she finally replied.

"Given your reaction, I believe you do." He retook his seat across from her. "This will go by a lot quicker if you'll just answer my question, Mrs. Heath. One more time, who is Ashley Heath?"

"Okay, I'll tell you the story," she conceded, looking at her lap. "You must promise not to reveal this to anyone else. Promises have been made, Mr. Taylor, and I do not intend on breaking them."

He wasn't about to make a promise he couldn't keep. "Tell me the truth and I'll decide who I tell and who I do not."

Roberta dabbed her forehead again and released a heavy sigh. "This has been long ago buried and I do suppose it's time the truth came out. I do not have a daughter, Mr. Taylor. I'm barren. Ashley Heath is..."

\* \* \*

Brian, impeccably dressed as always, paced the wood flooring. His blond hair cut short around the ears, a hair not out of place. His unblemished pale skin complimented his pale blue eyes. His astute manners could at times weave beneath her skin, but she still considered him a friend. After all, she didn't have an overabundance of them. After what occurred, or nearly, in Foster's office, she could no longer lead Alex to believe that a relationship between the two was possible, and she desperately needed to talk to someone. So instead of going to Alex and giving him false hopes, she chose to speak with Brian.

Although she hadn't seen him since their broken engagement, she had hoped he harbored no ill feelings toward her. She needed someone unbiased in their opinion of Foster.

"You say Foster Taylor had you investigated?" Brian icy demeanor sent a shiver down her spine. Though she never considered Brian warm, she had never seen him this cold and unreachable. "Have you something to hide?"



## ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Of course I don’t.”

“Then why worry about what Mr. Taylor does?” He stopped his pacing and stood in front of her, folding his long, thin arms across his chest.

“Do you know him?” Brooke asked, suddenly curious about Brian’s disposition.

“Yes,” he clipped, not giving her any more.

She’d have to pry. “How?”

“I was in love with someone who worked for him in New York.” He walked to the window and gazed out, giving her his back. “She had thick black hair...quite the beauty. She didn’t return the way I felt. When Foster moved to Denver, a position opened up here at the university and I took it. But Foster dumped her for Celeste and she moved on.”

“What about you?”

“She didn’t really know me that well. Besides, by then I was engaged to you.” He turned his saddened gaze on her.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, she wasn’t. Anyway, we were discussing you.” He took a seat across from her. “If you have nothing to hide, then why the fury? Foster has a lot of money and can never be too careful. He’s probably doing nothing more than protecting his own interests.”

“He’s said as much.” Brooke recalled Foster’s reason for posing as someone else. “Maybe I could forgive the questioning, but he brought my aunt here, for heaven’s sake. He didn’t even tell me she was coming. What could he possibly want? She’s knows nothing about me. She wasn’t even there for me when my mother and father died.”

“I thought you lived with her in New York after their death?” Brian leaned forward and placed his hands on her knees.

Though usually self serving, Brian had been sympathetic when it came to the death of her parents. Looking to the floor, ashamed of what she was about to reveal, she shifted on the couch.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“I did live with her in New York, but not the entire time,” she replied, tears welling in her eyes. “You must promise not to tell another soul, Brian. I couldn’t live with myself if this were to get out.”

“You have my word, Brooke.” Brian clasped her hands in his. “We may not suit to be married as I once thought, but you are a good friend. I’ve missed your company the last couple of weeks. Now, take a deep breath and tell me what has you so upset.”

“I never told you before because I thought you wouldn’t want me if you knew.” A lone tear slipped down her cheek as she glanced back at him. “When my parents died, I was devastated. I decided not to return to Denver because the memories would kill me. I needed time to heal, so I decide to stay with my aunt for a while, though I barely knew her. When I first got there, I noticed she drank heavily. I’m not sure if I ever saw her sober. She was often cruel and even struck me on a few occasions. It was as though she resented me. Maybe it was her inability to have children, I don’t know. But after a few weeks, I couldn’t take living with her any longer. I had to find someplace else to stay and I wasn’t ready to return to Denver.”

“Did you know anyone else in New York?”

More tears fell down her cheeks. “Not at the time. I was desperate. I met an older gentleman at a speakeasy. He offered me a place to stay and I took him up on it.”

Brian sat silent for several moments, probably trying to digest the fact she had lived with a man. Brooke could see he wrestled with trying not to judge her for past mistakes.

“Did you sleep with him?” The question no doubt troubled him. Brian would surely scold himself for having been engaged to a sullied woman.

Looking back at her hands, she decided to tell him the unvarnished truth. She had lived in guilt for too long and felt the need to tell someone, even if it were only Brian.

\* \* \*

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

His fist struck the top of the table, nearly knocking his shot glass and bottle to the floor. He wouldn't lose to Foster Taylor. Though he respected the business in the man, he detested the way he conducted his personal life. And now because of him, he was in danger of losing another loved one.

His ice blue eyes stared into space. His body tensed in anger. Tossing back the remains of his drink, the raw whisky burned a path to his stomach. He glanced at the seductive woman before him. His groin ached. He was tired of being the proper business man. Tonight, he would satisfy his base needs.

Tossing a few green bills on the table, he winked to the red haired woman who snatched up his generous offering. She leaned forward, giving him a generous view of her cleavage. He swallowed, staying the urge to bury his face between her breasts. She licked the outer shell of his ear as her breath spanned the surface. His erection throbbed painfully. It had been too damn long since he last buried himself between the thighs of a woman.

The voluptuous woman whispered, "After the show, meet me in my dressing room and I'll show you a night like you've never had before, sweetheart." Then she sauntered off to the stage and her awaiting audience.

Pouring himself another shot of whiskey, he tossed back the fiery liquid. He had restrained from sex in his past, not wanting to take up with a whore. But tonight, he'd fulfill those long neglected needs.

Several drinks later, he left the table and walked to the back of the speakeasy. He opened the door to the dressing room and found the flaming haired woman sitting at her dressing table. He strode over to her, a cocky grin on his face, and positioned himself between her spread thighs.

His hands cupped her generous breasts, kneading them through the sheer fabric of her wrapper. Finding the belt of her garment, he pulled it free and pushed the robe from her shoulders, lowering his face to her

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

breasts. He drew her pebbled nipple into his mouth and suckled greedily. He wallowed between them before taking the other into his mouth. His groin throbbed painfully.

With deft fingers, the woman undid the front of his trousers, slipping her hand inside and encircling him. Alex groaned. He pushed her against the mirror, withdrew himself, and shoved into her. A few short strokes later, he finished all too quickly. Disgusted, he backed free of her groping hands, and redid the front of his black trousers.

She placed her palm on his cheek. "Don't worry, honey, it happens all the time. Come back and see me again soon and we'll work on that."

Alex gritted his teeth as he tossed several green bills on the table and exited the room. Brooke's wholesome image loomed before him. Christ, what had he just done?

## CHAPTER 18

Silver-blue eyes sparkled in the sunlight as Alex made his way toward the Ashford Hotel. Though things hadn't turned out as planned the previous night, surely he had sabotaged any relationship beginning between Foster and Brooke. He walked down the sidewalk with an added spring in his step. It was only a matter of time before Brooke would be all his.

Passing a flower vendor, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a twenty-dollar bill, purchasing a dozen pristine-white roses. He tipped his hand to his head and bid the vendor adieu as he continued on his way.

Bringing the blossoms to his nose, he inhaled deeply, relishing in the scent. It reminded him of the fragrance Brooke wore. Alex continued on his way, suddenly anxious to arrive. He couldn't wait to see Brooke. She'd no doubt need a shoulder to cry on after the previous night, and he wanted to be the one to offer it to her. Alex crossed the street, dodging a few automobiles. He approached the Ashford, barely

## ***DARK SAVIOR***

able to contain his excitement.

Nodding to the doorman, Alex greeted, “Kyle.”

“Mr. Thurston.” The tall blond man held open the door. “Have a good day, sir.”

“And you as well.”

Alex smiled, stopping just inside the lobby, taking only moments for his eyes to adjust. He headed for Body Apparel, stopping just short of the door. Damn. Foster had beat him as he made his way through the shop, a dozen red roses in the crook of his arm. His heart sank, his shoulders slumped. Too late as always.

He looked down at his paltry offering of white roses and tossed them in the empty dispenser beside a large potted fern. Turning on his heel, he stormed through the lobby and out the door, not acknowledging the nod from the doorman. To hell with them all. But if Foster thought he’d give in easily, he’d have a rude awakening. Alex wasn’t about to lie down on this one.

\* \* \*

Foster walked through the shop, his peace offering securely tucked in the crook of his arm and a smile she surely couldn’t resist upon his face. He wanted her back and he’d do just about anything to achieve it. Brooke gasped as she looked up from the accounts lying before her. He’d have her eating out of the palm of his hand in no time.

But instead of the smile he expected, she glared at him, crossing her arms beneath her breasts and shoving her lovely cleavage into his view. He licked his lips. Guess he better prepare to grovel.

Foster held out the flowers. “I come in peace.”

“And who might these be from?” Brooke’s stance looked battle ready.

Foster laid the flowers on the counter and grasped her hand. She jerked it from him as though the very thought of touching him repulsed her. Could he blame her?

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

She wagged a finger in his direction. "You can take those flowers and your well-shaped hind end out of my shop."

He frowned, hoping she might reconsider. He'd get down on one knee if need be. "You can't mean to hate me forever."

"The heck I can't!" She returned her icy demeanor to the paperwork before her. As if he'd allow her to dismiss him so easily.

"Brooke—"

"I told you to take those flowers and your—"

"Well-shaped hind end," he finished for her with a grin.

"Get out of my shop, Foster."

"Look, if you'll only allow me to—"

"What? Lie? Deceive?" Her glare cut him clear to the soul. He supposed he deserved that and more. "I think I've had enough of your games to last me a lifetime, thank you."

Foster placed both hands firmly on the counter. He was in no hurry to leave and he'd be damned if he'd allow this little slip of a woman to chase him away. He started this and he'd damn well finish it.

"I really hoped to avoid this ugliness—"

"Avoid the ugliness?" she shrieked.

Walking around the counter, she marched to the wooden door and slammed it shut, rocking the contents on the shelves in the aftermath of the blast. Throwing her closed sign over the door and drawing the blind, she returned to her position behind the counter.

"Ugliness? If you believe this is ugly, you haven't begun to see anything yet. I'll have you know my life is an open-book to all those who care and those I trust. Had you asked, I would have told you anything you wanted to know. But, no, you took matters into your own hands, didn't you? You couldn't ask me about my life in New York, you had to have me investigated. Well now—"

"I no longer care about New York."

"I wouldn't tell you a...what?"

"I don't give a damn about your life in New York."

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

"Oh, if that doesn't just beat all!" She raised her hands. "You no longer care about my life in New York. You have me investigated, bring my alcoholic aunt here, and now you don't give a damn about my life in New York?"

"Nope."

"Nope? Foster Taylor, I have half a mind to kick your—"

"Well-shaped hind end," he said with a wink.

"Knock it off!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that. It's permanently attached."

"Foster Taylor! You know what I'm referring to." She quickly raised a finger to his lips, stilling anything he might say. "I don't even know why I bother."

"Because you can't resist me."

"Resist you? You may have warm, compelling eyes, kissable lips, and hair made of God's own silk, but there isn't a man alive I can't resist."

"Kissable lips, huh?" Foster asked, touching two fingers to the mentioned area. "You really think so?"

"You're impossible." Brooke rolled her eyes. "Just what did you think to find out by bringing my aunt out here anyway?"

"She came here on her own free will. Ask her."

"I suppose you're going to tell me next, it was just a coincidence she was in your outer office waiting to see you then."

"Sort of."

"Sort of? What the devil does that mean? You sort of requested her presence. You sort of asked her to come to Denver. My aunt is an alcoholic and she doesn't travel far from her sofa and bottle, so how do you explain she sort of arrived on her own free will outside your office yesterday?"

"Ask her yourself." Foster shrugged. "She came to Denver to see you. When I noticed her name on the guest register, I requested to meet with her. I was curious."



### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Curious about my life in New York?”

“I told you, I no longer care.”

Her look spoke volumes that she did not trust him one iota. “Why? What did my aunt tell you?”

“We chatted about how enchanting you are.” Again, Foster grinned. He was beginning to worm his way beneath her skin. He could feel it. “If you don’t believe me, then ask her yourself. She is staying in room three-eleven. I told her I would inform you of her arrival, though she was skeptical as to whether you’d care or not.”

“She should be skeptical,” Brooke retorted. “That woman has no right coming here at all. But I will go see her and I’ll ask her about everything. I swear, Foster, if you’re lying to me—”

“What? You’ll never talk to me again?” Foster’s mouth turned up on one side. “You’re not talking to me now.”

“Then what on earth do you call this?”

“Yelling.”

“Yelling? I haven’t begun to yell.”

“Look, I’ve brought you flowers. I’ve said my apologies. There isn’t much more I can do. What do you want from me? You want me on my knees? I’m groveling, Brooke. I want you in my life, but I can’t tie you to my bed.” Foster’s grin widened at the image conjured up. “Well, I could—”

“Foster Taylor! How dare you insinuate something so indecent?”

“You bring out the worst in me.” He laughed, cocking an eyebrow. “And I can’t pretend that I don’t want you there, because I do, in the worst way. But I’m willing to wait...as long as it takes.”

“You may be waiting a lifetime, because I don’t intend to sleep with you...ever.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Brooke. It may not have been my bed, but had your aunt arrived a moment later, I would have had you on my desk yesterday.”

Brooke’s hand rose to slap him, but Foster caught it in mid-strike.

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He pulled her toward him, their faces scant inches apart. They stood motionless for what felt like eternity as he glared into her eyes.

Her breathing labored as her pulse beat in the base of her throat. The closeness affected her...that much he'd swear to. Her rose scent exhilarated him. Damn if he didn't want her right now. She yanked on her arm, but he held tight.

"You can't tell me you don't feel as I do." He leaned in, his nose nuzzling her cheek. "Your gaze screams of passion as your body shivers for my touch."

"You lie," she whispered as a tremor shook her, proving his theory.

"You're the one guilty of a lie, madam." His hand circled her nape and brought her lips to his. "Tell me you feel nothing when I kiss you."

He slanted his mouth over hers as he held her arm, not allowing her to escape. He felt what little resistance she put up as he molded his lips to hers. Moments later, he released his hold on her as her defiance slipped away.

Her hands snaked around his neck, tangling in his hair. His tongue tested the tight seal of her lips, her moan gained his entrance. He tasted her satiny flesh; his hand in the small of her back anchored her to him. She touched her tongue to his, sending him reeling and releasing her from the embrace.

She stumbled backwards into the shelf behind the counter, nearly upsetting a few of the bottles, touching her fingers to her kiss-swollen lips.

Foster grinned. "You can't deny it, Brooke. You're all ready mine."

"Get out!" Brooke reached for the cut roses and hurled them in his direction. He ducked as they sailed over his head. "Get out of my shop."

"Gladly." He saluted her. "Although, I will return. You can't get rid of me that easily."

"My door will be locked."

"I bid you farewell," he said, bringing his fingertips to his mouth,

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placing a kiss there and blowing it in her direction, “my love.”

The last thing he heard was breaking glass as the door to the shop closed behind him. Foster smiled. He certainly had a way of rankling her ire.

## CHAPTER 19

Walking down the floral-papered hall, Brooke's stomach fluttered. She hadn't seen her aunt since New York. Her feet felt leaded as she tread across the black and white marbled floor. Her heels clicked, echoing about the empty hall with each step. Taking her time, and in no hurry to arrive, she glanced at the floral arrangements, paintings, and sculptures she passed.

She had never been elsewhere in the Ashford other than the lobby, Foster's offices, and the dining room. The Ashford was indeed a grand hotel. Each painting had been mounted in exquisite hand carved gilded frames. Sculptures set on cherry wood and marble pedestals and floral arrangements, with freshly cut flowers in Chinese painted porcelain vases, sat atop a cherry wood étagère with a large mirror situated on the back and an enclosed cabinet for the base.

Brooke resisted the urge to touch each new piece as she passed. She wasn't accustomed to such luxuries; even Brian's small collection was trivial in comparison. Foster's self worth sank in. The man had more

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money than she knew what to do with in a lifetime. What would he want with someone like her? Was she nothing more than a challenge to him? A man of his station couldn't be honestly interested in her. Not when she had nothing to offer. Men of his ilk didn't consort with people of poverty.

Looking up, she spotted three-eleven on the heavy oak door. She paused. Bile rose in her throat. The idea of facing her aunt caused her stomach to churn. Why on earth had she come? To prove Foster's claims. She had to know if he spoke the truth. Because like it or not, she loved him, and there was nothing she could do to change that. Giving into his charms was only a matter of time.

She raised her hand to knock on the door just as it swung inward. Her aunt's eyes widened and her hand flew to her chest. Aunt Roberta obviously hadn't expected to see Brooke standing there. The older woman toyed with the buttons on her wool coat.

"Going somewhere?"

"Well, actually," her aunt swallowed and her eyes darted down the hall, "I was hoping to find you."

Brooke sneered. "I highly doubt that."

"Really, my dear, we haven't talked in so long. There is no reason to be rude." Roberta clucked her tongue. "Do come in."

"I hope I'm not interrupting you."

Roberta stood aside. "Nonsense."

Walking onto the wine carpeted floor, Brooke's jaw dropped. The sofa, of the same dark coloring, sat to one end of the cream painted room, flanked by a deep green upholstered chair with a cherry wood coffee table separating them. The lace canopied bed had been topped with a wedding ring quilt in the same rich shades as the furniture. A step stool sat beside the tall bed for easy ascension. Gas lit chandeliers hung from the ceilings, throwing shadows across the floor. The room had been spared no expense.

"How can you possibly afford this?"

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"I saved for three years, my dear. I wanted to come see you." Roberta smiled a bit too sweetly as she led Brooke over to the sofa, clasping her hand in hers. "You left New York on a bad note. We didn't quite see things eye-to-eye and I wanted to make it up to you."

"Somehow, I find that hard to believe. When I left your house, you were just as glad to be rid of me."

"But, my dear, did you have to run into the arms of that man? Surely, you know you damaged your reputation beyond repair."

Brooke glared at her aunt. "No one knows of my life in New York, unless of course you tell them."

Placing her palm across her chest, she said, "You don't think that I would—"

"Of course, I do."

"Well, I never!"

"You're right! You never did!" Her anger flared. "When I needed you most, you weren't there for me. My mother and father died violently. For heaven's sake, I watched their murder. And where were you? Hiding behind that damned bottle."

"She was my sister. I had a right to grieve for her loss."

"She was dead! She didn't need your compassion, I did. All I got from you was two black eyes. Face it, Aunt Roberta, you didn't want me there. I was a burden...a reminder that you couldn't have children. The way you treated me, not having children of your own was probably for the best."

Roberta raised her thick hand to strike Brooke. She flinched, ready for the blow. But instead, Roberta withdrew her hand and covered her face. Her shoulders shook as tears fell. Brooke placed a tentative arm across her shoulder and Roberta leaned into her embrace.

"I'm so sorry, Brooke," she sobbed. "I'm so damned sorry."

Brooke sat motionless, holding her sobbing aunt, not knowing what to say. Moments later, her aunt dried her tears and looked at Brooke through bloodshot eyes.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

"Can you ever forgive me? I could never explain my actions. Just know, I never hated you."

"I know," Brooke said, as tears slowly trickled down her own cheeks. "I'm sorry, too. I wasn't exactly easy to get along with myself. We should have been there for each other, but we weren't. We can't go back and change the past, but we can try to start new."

"I need a drink." Roberta placed a hand on the arm of the sofa and made to rise as Brooke laid a hand on her thigh, stopping her.

"No, you don't." Brooke looked her aunt in the eye. "It starts here, right now. You have a problem, Aunt Roberta, and if we're to start over, you have to quit drinking."

"I don't think I can. Look." She held out her shaking fingers. "I need to calm my nerves. Just a sip."

"No. If you really want to start over, then this is the beginning."

"I don't know if I can. For years, I've drowned my sorrows with that bottle."

"We'll do this together. I'm here for you." Brooke grasped her aunt's chin, tilting her face upward. "There's something else I need to know."

"What is it?"

"Did you come here on your own free will?"

"Of course, I did," Roberta said, pulling her chin free and looking at the floor.

"You're lying to me. Why?"

Roberta returned her gaze. "I'm not lying, Brooke. It's the truth. Had I not wanted to come, I wouldn't have."

"But someone brought you here, didn't they? Tell me the truth, Aunt Roberta. It's very important to me. Did Foster Taylor ask you to come here?"

"Yes."

Brooke jumped to her feet, ready to bolt for the door and find the conniving little... "I knew he was lying!"

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Brooke, wait.” Brooke faced her aunt. “He did ask me to come, yes, but he cares deeply about you.”

“He doesn’t care about me, Aunt Roberta. He’s only satisfying a curiosity at my expense. So what did you tell him? Did you repeat every sordid detail? Did you tell him of my shame?” Tears flowed freely as she collapsed back to the sofa, burying her face in her hands. “Why can’t I leave New York behind?”

Roberta pulled her into her embrace. “Relax, Brooke, I told him nothing about your life in New York.”

“Then what did he want? Why would he bring you all the way out here if you had nothing to tell?”

“He only wants what’s best for you as do I. Yes, he brought me here, but had I not wanted to see you, I wouldn’t have come. I know I’ve never shown my love for you and New York proves that, but give me another chance. Three years ago was a bad time for both of us. I’m only going to be here another week, then I’m going back to New York to face my demons. I have many sins for which I need to atone.”

“But what about your drinking?”

“I promise you, I’ll give it a shot.”

“But we are each other’s only family, why can’t you stay here with me in Denver?”

“There is so much I can’t tell you right now, but you must trust me to do what is right.” Roberta smoothed the blonde waves from Brooke’s eyes. “Someday, when it no longer matters, I’ll tell you everything about me. For right now, your own life is troubled enough. You don’t need mine burdening you also.”

“But I want to help.”

“You can help me, my dear, by taking me to the masquerade on Friday night.”

“The masquerade? You secured tickets? That event is sold out months in advance.”

“I’m not without my resources, dear. Now if you’ll accompany me,



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I'll see to both our costumes. Deal?"

"I'm not so sure."

"What better way for us to become more acquainted. Besides, a certain gentleman caller has requested my presence and I certainly cannot go unescorted now, could I?"

Brooke's brow rose. "Aunt Roberta!"

"I may be old, my dear, but I'm far from dead. Now would you please do me the honor by escorting me to the masquerade?"

"I would be honored."

"It's settled then." Roberta grinned. "I shall see to our costumes. Come by Thursday and I'll make sure yours is a proper fit."

Brooke felt lighter in heart as she walked from Roberta's room; a stone had been lifted from her chest. She couldn't help but wonder what troubles her aunt referred to, but quickly dismissed them, knowing her aunt would confide in her when the time seemed right. At least for now, she felt assured their lives had been put back on track. Now what on earth would she do about Foster Taylor? He had said he no longer cared about her life in New York. Her aunt must have in some way appeased his curiosity, otherwise he would still be pursuing the answers plaguing him, answers she wasn't yet ready to give. The man was simply too nosey.

Shrugging, knowing life wasn't about to get any easier, she went in search of Alex. She needed to apologize for her sudden declination of their date the other night. Hopefully, he'd forgive her. He had been the one true friend she'd cherished over the past few years. Maybe, she would even tell him about her appearance at the upcoming masquerade. If he had secured his own invitation, they might even be able to share a dance or two. Brooke headed for the stairway leading to Foster's offices. At this time of day, she was sure to find Alex buried in work behind his desk.

## CHAPTER 20

Brooke walked through the corridor, lost in thought, barely acknowledging passersby. She encountered several closed doors on her way to Alex's office, including that of Foster Taylor's. But she was in no mood to confront him today and if luck had it her way, she wouldn't see him at all. Brooke hoped to slide by Foster's secretary unnoticed, not wanting Foster to know she had happened by.

"Excuse me, Miss Abel." Mrs. Dunlap caught sight of her. "Can I help you? There is to be no admittance beyond my desk without first approval."

Brooke groaned. She certainly hoped Foster wouldn't pick this moment to exit his office. "I am here to see Mr. Thurston."

"If you'll have a seat, I will see if he is available." The older woman strode down the hall to the last door on the left.

Brooke sat on the gray-colored sofa set opposite Mrs. Dunlap's desk, her gaze traveling to the closed door directly behind it. She couldn't help but wonder what Foster was up to and if he did happen to

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walk out, if he'd be happy to see her.

Tapping her toes on the tiled flooring, she glanced around the office hoping Mrs. Dunlap would hurry. Brooke let out a sigh of relief as she saw the woman head back in her direction. She stood and smoothed her skirts just as the door to Foster's office opened. Brooke headed for Mrs. Dunlap, ignoring the arrogantly handsome man, hoping Foster would let her by without comment. Mrs. Dunlap smiled, her hand indicating Alex's opened door when she caught sight of Foster. Brooke gave Foster a quick smile, then skirted Mrs. Dunlap to head for the office down the hall.

"Miss Abel," Foster stopped her retreat, "and how are you this fine morning?"

Brooke turned to look at him. "Just fine."

His appearance made her breath catch. His hair tied neatly at his nape and glasses perched on the end of his nose, adding an air of elegance. His deep-brown worsted suit complemented the color of his eyes. He never failed to stun her speechless.

Foster grinned, her ogling not going unnoticed and held out his arm, indicating his own office. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like a word with you."

Brooke bit back a retort and opted for politeness. "Oh, but I would."

"Please, just a moment." His self-assuredness made her want to refuse, but he gave her little choice with Mrs. Dunlap's open curiosity on them.

Shoulders slumped, she granted him his wish. "Only a moment." Then with a quick glance at Mrs. Dunlap, she said, "If you could tell Mr. Thurston I am detained, and I will be with him shortly."

"Of course." She smiled and turned her attention to Foster. "Mr. Taylor."

"Tell Mr. Thurston, I will not occupy but a moment of her time."

Foster held open his office door and Brooke shouldered by. "What do you want?"

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“I take it you’ve talked to your aunt.”

“I have.”

“And?”

“You lied to me. She told me you requested her to come here.”

“Yes, but she did come on her own free will.”

“But—”

“It seems to me, you’re angry because I brought your aunt here to be with you.” Foster one brow raised. “I would think you should be thanking me.”

Brooke’s gaze widened. How dare he turn this around and make his actions noble. “Thanking you?”

“How was your visit with your aunt? Pleasant? Did you resolve your past problems?”

“We were civil if that is what you are getting at.”

“Very well then, you see I have done some good.”

“For crying out loud, Foster, how can you turn this around in your favor? You’re forgetting your motives for bringing her here in the first place.”

“Which were?”

“I was hoping you would supply me with that bit of information.”

“You see,” Foster closed the gap between them, coming to stand only inches from her, “you question my every move. Maybe, I was concerned with your lack of family.”

The charged air between them fairly crackled. Brooke tried desperately to take in a deep breath and still the beating of her heart. As she stepped back to widen the gap, Foster wouldn’t allow her the reprieve and wound up backing her against the wall. She needed to diffuse the situation and quickly before she allowed him something stupid like kissing her. Every time she gave him the allowance, her mind muddled and ceased its thinking.

“Your only concern is to get me into your bed.” She fought back with words. “You don’t care about me or my lack of family. It’s none

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of your business.”

“I make it my business, Brooke...because I do care.”

“Well, don’t.”

“Are you telling me you aren’t glad you and your aunt talked?”

“Yes, but...”

He leaned in, his face scant inches from hers and his breath feathered her flesh. “Then I did you a favor and our conversation is complete.”

Her pulse raced through her veins and her breath ceased. He did it to her again and darned if she wasn’t allowing it. She reveled in the closeness and a part of her actually wanted him to kiss her, to pull her into his embrace and wrap his presence around her. She couldn’t very well help herself, for heaven’s sake. After all, she had fallen in love with the fool.

She placed her hands on his chest, meaning to push him away. Her mistake in judgment. The contact seared her flesh, traveled up her arm and aimed straight toward her abdomen. Her knees weakened and she leaned against the wall for support. God help her, she was powerless to resist him.

Foster grasped her wrists and pinned them easily over her head, his nose nuzzling her neck. He placed tiny chaste kisses there, sending shivers of delight along her spine. He made a damp path up her throat and to her ear, tugging on the lobe with his teeth, then soothing the area with a tender lick of his tongue. He leaned in and whispered, “I believe you have an appointment with Mr. Thurston.”

“Yes,” she uttered, his words barely registering.

“Then, certainly, do not keep him waiting.”

Foster pushed from her, leaving an icy gulf in his wake. She wanted to grasp the lapels of his worsted suit and pull him back to her and kiss him senseless. How dare he be the one to pull away?

Foster walked to the door and opened it. “We’ll meet again soon.”

Brooke gritted her teeth, more angry at herself than him. “In your

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dreams,” she snapped and stormed from his office.

“That too,” she heard before the click of the closing door.

Brooke growled in frustration. How could she allow him to do this to her every time? She had no one to blame for today’s actions but herself. Her mind simply refused to work whenever in his presence. Had she believed in witches and warlocks, then she’d at least have a reason to think the man had cast a spell on her. As it was, she had no other excuse than to deem herself wanton.

Alex stood to greet her as she entered his office. “Brooke, to what do I owe the pleasure? Have a seat.”

“Thank you.” Brooke sat in the oak chair, smoothing trembling hands over her skirt. “I’m here because I feel I owe you an apology.”

“Nonsense, you owe me nothing,” Alex replied, walking around the desk, sitting on one corner.

“I think I do. I’m afraid I behaved badly the other night when I broke our date. But under the circumstances it couldn’t be helped. I do hope you’ll forgive me.”

Alex grasped her hand, his cold and clammy to the touch. “Of course, I would forgive you anything. All you need do is ask.”

Brooke grinned, though the gaiety of it escaped her. “Well then, certainly you won’t mind saving a dance for me if you attend the masquerade on Friday.”

“Of course, I would be delighted. I hadn’t planned on attending, but knowing the glorious company I will be sharing, I wouldn’t miss it for the world. What will you wearing, so I’ll know it’s you when I see you?”

“I don’t know. My aunt is securing us costumes, but I’m sure we’ll find one another.”

“I don’t think I could very well miss you. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I hate to be abrupt, but I have work that must be completed by the end of the day. And although you are pleasant distraction, I certainly can’t afford the diversion today.”

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“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Nonsense, the pleasure is all mine, I assure you.”

Alex helped her rise and placed a cold chaste kiss upon her cheek. Brooke stayed the urge to wipe it off and smiled at him. His lips turned up, but his grin did not reach his eyes. Today they seemed different...cold and calculating almost. Had she somehow missed his icy demeanor in the past?

“Until Friday, then.” He walked her to the door. “I shall wait anxiously.”

Brooke left his office, rubbing the gooseflesh on her arms and wondering about the sudden iciness in Alex. Where had that come from? Certainly she hadn’t done anything to upset him. Or had she? Not paying attention, Brooke ran into a solid chest.

“Oh, excuse me,” the man said, grasping her shoulders to prevent her from falling.

“How clumsy of me.” Brooke righted herself. “I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going.”

The handsome man bowed with a flourish. “The pleasure is all mine.”

“You’re Mr. Taylor’s friend...the one who came into my shop the other day.”

Kip laughed. “Guilty. But please don’t spread the word about being a close friend of Foster’s. I’d hate to ruin my reputation.”

Brooke smiled. She instantly liked Kip. “Well, at least we agree on that point.” she added with a laugh.

“Maybe we should go to dinner...get to know one another sometime.”

“I’d like that very much, Mr. Cameron.”

“Kip, please.”

“Okay, Kip, providing you call me Brooke.”

“I’ll definitely come looking for you then.” Kip’s easy smile warmed her. “Dinner?”

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“I would be honored.”

“Guess I better see what the lion wants.” Kip indicated Foster’s office with a thumb. “When he roars it can get quite nasty.”

“I don’t think I’ve met that side of him and I’m certain I don’t want to.” Brooke giggled. “But I have seen his overbearing side. What Foster wants, he seems to get.”

“Ahh, his charm. I should warn you, though, it’s deadly. Once you fall for it, there’s no escaping.” Kip winked. “But don’t fret, he’s actually nothing more than a big pussycat. When he shows you his playful side, then you have to worry. You’ll be hopelessly ensnared forever. I’ve seen it happen many times. It’s been nice chatting with you, Brooke, but the lion awaits. Dinner?”

“Dinner,” Brooke agreed, watching him disappear through Foster’s door.

Hopelessly ensnared? Brooke laughed. Foster already had her spellbound with little hope for escape. But a playful side? She had never seen Foster other than serious. Even when they were together, he seemed intent on getting her in bed. Brooke smiled as she passed Mrs. Dunlap, and walked off down the hall with an extra spring in her step. She’d definitely like to see this playful side of Foster, though dangerous it might be. Should she ever be lucky enough to see it, she’d likely be lost forever, if she wasn’t already.



## CHAPTER 21

“Mother,” Foster called as he entered her apartment. “Amanda? Is anyone here?”

Where in the devil had the two taken off to? His mother rarely ventured out unless she had good reason. Turning on the gaslight, illuminating the living area, he looked for signs of where they might have gone. Finding nothing, he continued into the kitchen, illuminating the room which he also found empty. Foster rubbed his forehead, perplexed. At the least they could have left him a note so he wouldn’t have worried needlessly.

Foster strolled back into the living area and turned on the radio. Jazz filled the room. Something nagged his gut, but he couldn’t lay a finger on it. He brushed it off as a silly notion. Exhaustion took over and he sat on a high-backed tapestry chair, leaning his head against the stitch work, allowing the sounds of brass to soothe his tired mind.

Minutes ticked by, though it could have been hours for all Foster knew, for the second his head hit the back of the chair, his mind drifted

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into a dream-filled sleep. Visions of Brooke in a rose-colored chemise danced through his mind and plagued his aching groin. He reached for her, his hand cupping one soft breast, his thumb grazing the pebbled nipple. His other hand reached around her, centering just above her derrière to pull her into his embrace. He lowered his head for a kiss...

The key rattled the lock of the door, yanking him back to full consciousness. He rubbed a work-roughened hand down his jaw and blinked away the remaining images of the erotic dream. Damn, great timing. Hell, he couldn't even make love to Brooke in his dreams.

Foster sat up as his mother and Amanda entered the room carrying an abundance of packages. *Shopping*. He should have guessed as much. Amanda never missed a chance to spend his money. He chuckled. For taking care of their mother, she deserved that much and more.

"I see your day has proven fruitful." Foster chuckled as he stood and helped them with their packages. "But really, Amanda, don't you think you could have told me where you were off to? If nothing else, I could have come up and watched Mother. I'm sure her tagging along wasn't comfortable for either of you. How are you feeling anyway, Mother?"

"I'm fine, Foster, just a little tired. And don't you dare scold your sister. I insisted on going. I can only take so much of being cooped up."

"Really, Foster. Do you think I'm so ignorant? I know Mama hasn't been herself, but she insisted it was from being cooped up." She tossed the remaining bags on the sofa. "You're always quick to think the worst of me, aren't you?"

"No reason to get so defensive, Amanda. I'm only concerned about my mother's welfare."

"Your mother? She's mine, too." Amanda glared at him. "Or have you forgotten I even exist?"

"The way you spend my money? How could I forget!"

"Well if that's the way you feel, you can—"

"Amanda! Foster! For goodness sake." Mabel Ruth yanked on both

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their ears. "I ought to box the both of you. Quit talking like I'm not even in the room. I'm fine and I'll decide if I'm capable of taking a trip to the store. Besides, I needed a new nightgown."

As Amanda and Foster rubbed their ears, Mabel Ruth swayed on her feet, grasping for the nearest table to steady herself. Foster grabbed his mother's shoulders and led her to the sofa, sitting her down.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," she snapped, obviously annoyed with his doting. "I just got a little lightheaded. The two of you will be my undoing, I swear. We're family, and we're all we have. Maybe, you ought to appreciate one another, because someday, I won't be around to keep the peace between you."

"You'll be around for a long time, Mother. You're too damn ornery to die." Foster sat beside her. "Besides, if it wasn't for you, Amanda probably would have ended my miserable life long ago."

"Don't even joke about such things. You're sister loves you, whether you see it or not."

"Sure she does." Foster laughed. "She shows me every day just how much by spending all my money. And, gee, just think how much she stands to inherit should I die."

"Thanks for the idea, Foster." Amanda winked at him. "I'll have to keep that in mind the next time you go on one of your mean streaks and I can't stand to be around you."

"Me? Mean? I beg to differ. You seem to reap from the benefits of being my sister." Foster looked back to his mother. "Where's this nightgown you were telling me about, Mother? There's certainly more in those bags than a simple nightgown."

Amanda's demeanor shifted as a smile lit up her becoming face. "I found the best costume for Friday. Mrs. Dunlap has agreed to come by and watch Mama for us so we can both go to the masquerade. I hope you're not upset that I took her up on her offer." How could he be? He could see the excitement dance in her eyes. "Of course not. So, what

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are you going as?”

“Pocahontas.”

“With you’re dark hair and coloring, you’ll be perfect. Just don’t be aiming any of those arrows my way.”

“Then I wouldn’t be upsetting me if I were you.” The mischievous glint in her eye left him chuckling. “And you? What will you go as?”

“A gypsy.”

“And you think my costume is perfect? You’ll make a devilish gypsy. You always have been dark and alluring. I think that’s why you seem to have no trouble finding an abundance of women. They’re drawn to you like flies to a horse. Have you secured a costume?”

“Not all women find me irresistible.” Foster thought of Brooke. “And, yes, I have a costume, gold-hoop earring and all. Pocahontas will have to save a dance for the prince of darkness.”

“Well, maybe one.” Amanda smiled. “There is another’s attention I am hoping to attract.”

“My sister is striving for a man’s attention? What and stand to lose my income you seem to enjoy so much?”

“I’ve told you before I have to be careful who I choose. The men who seem to vie for my attention only want a link to you.”

“And how could you possibly determine that?”

“They always ask about you, Foster.” She grimaced. “I can think of much more appealing topics. ‘Your brother is Foster Taylor?’ ‘Your brother owns several hotels?’ ‘Your brother...’ I’m sick of it. Just once, I’d like a man who didn’t care who my relatives are.”

“Point taken. So who is the lucky man? Do I know him?”

Mabel Ruth waved a hand in the air. “It’s all she babbled about this afternoon.”

Amanda shot her mother a look in jest, then winked at her. Foster could see the love his sister held for their mother. “As a matter of fact you do. He works for you and at the moment, he’s not one of your fans. I’ve known him for years but until recently, I’ve never quite thought of

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him as anything other than an acquaintance.”

Foster couldn't help himself. His curiosity peaked. “Have you been on a date with him? Does he return this interest?”

“As of now, his interest lies elsewhere. But I do believe he's about to lose her attention.” Amanda sat up straighter. “When that happens, I will be there to pick up the pieces.”

“How can you be so sure? How do you know this woman won't fall for him?”

“Because, my dear brother, my money is riding on you.”

Foster creased his brow. “I don't understand.”

“According to the gossip mill, there is a pretty young woman running a shop in the lobby.” Amanda laughed at the dawning look on Foster's face. “I believe her name is Brooke Abel. Funny, she bares an uncanny resemblance to Ashley Heath. Oh, I paid her a visit, but didn't talk to her. I had to see my competition. Anyway, according to the gossip, you two are both vying for Brooke's attention. And as I said, my money is riding on you. I've never seen a woman who could resist you.”

“You have now,” Foster grumbled.

“I thought it quite odd that she looked like Ashley, yet she treated me like a perfect stranger.”

“You are...to her anyway.”

“Is this what you were telling me about the other day?” Mabel Ruth interrupted.

“So what's the story, Foster? Why is Ashley pretending to be someone else?”

Foster evaded both their questions. “So you're vying for Alex Thurston's attention?”

“Yes.” Amanda smiled warmly. “I've become quite enamored with him lately, but that's not answering my question about Ashley.”

“I'll tell you both what I've just learned myself. But you must promise to keep this between us. At least for the time being. And, yes,

### **DARK SAVIOR**

Mother, this is what I was telling you about the other day.” When they both agreed to secrecy, he started his tale.

\* \* \*

*The sun set, casting orange threads of light across the marbled lobby. The demon watched from a shadowed corner, surely oblivious to any passerby. Ashley had made an error...a grave one by falling into Foster Taylor’s snare, not once but twice. The watcher could not allow him his happiness. Something would have to be done and soon. The soul’s main goal had been to see to the downfall of Foster, and all because of Mac.*

*A name from the past, one the soul tried not to think of...Mac McCarthy. Had the devious man acknowledged the watcher, all of this ugliness would have had no chance to fester and grow. But no, Mac never acknowledged the one person he should have. Now, because of the singular love shown toward Foster Taylor, the demon must seek revenge on the survivor, Foster.*

*Ashley’s time neared its end. Tonight, death awaited her. She would not be given a second chance...not this time.*

*Waiting patiently for several hours, concealed by the many plants in the lobby, the demon’s pulse rose.*

*Closing time.*

*The watcher observed Ashley exiting her shop, securing the door. Blood hummed in its ears, drowning out all other sounds. The demon had tunnel vision, seeing no one but Ashley. Withdrawing the thin blade from beneath its darkened cloak, the devil advanced slowly on her. Nerves on edge, the demon could smell victory.*

*Pale blue eyes sparked in anticipation as silver blonde hair shown beneath the dark cloak. Two more steps and the victory would belong to the evil one. Long, manicured fingers tightened around the cold steel of the blade. The soul’s breathing labored. One more step and...*

## CHAPTER 22

Unease crept over her. Something gnawed at her nerves, tingling down her spine. Brooke's gaze darted about the lobby but saw nothing amiss. She couldn't shake the feeling and nervously looked behind her as she made her way through the abandoned lobby.

As she approached the exit, she noticed the absence of Kyle. In all the years she'd worked in the lobby of the Ashford, he had always seemed to be at his post. She swallowed. She had nothing to worry about. Everything was fine. Something shuffled behind her. Brooke barely contained her scream and instead twittered nervously. One more step and she'd be out the door.

A hand landed on her shoulder and the squeal left her chest as she surely jumped a foot off the ground.

"You okay, Brooke?" Kip kept his tight hold on her to keep her from bolting. "You really should watch where you're going. You nearly tumbled into the plant and urn. What was so important behind you?"

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Brooke chuckled, looking at the fern she had almost went head long into. What a picture that would have made. “I was being silly, I guess. I had this feeling of being followed and then when you grabbed my shoulder—”

“No one other than you and I are in the lobby. Are you positive you were being followed?”

“Just a feeling I had. Kyle not being at his post at the door didn’t help my foolishness. Silly, huh?”

“Not at all.” Kip smiled warmly. “How about escorting me to the dining room? I was about to dine and I hate eating alone.”

“I really should be getting home.” Brooke’s gaze did a quick sweep of the lobby, still finding them completely alone.

“Have you eaten?”

“No.”

“Well?” Kip held his arm out. “Surely, you need to nourish your body then.”

Brooke smiled and grasped his outstretched elbow. “You’ve convinced me.”

Moments later, Brooke and Kip sat in a remote corner of the dimmed dining area, with two lush, garden salads between them. The meal fare was certainly delicious and the company even better. Kip’s eyes twinkled in the candlelight as he talked, totally at ease. “Tell me a little about yourself, Brooke.”

“Only a week ago, you thought me someone else.” Brooke took a bite of her salad and studied him. “Now you’re so sure that I am who I say I am?”

“I was wrong.” Kip shrugged. “Foster tells me you’re from Denver, have been all your life.”

“I’ll bet Foster could tell you my whole life story. He probably knows more about me than I do.” Brooke laughed. “I should be furious with him. But I’m finding it quite hard to stay angry for long.”

“Foster has connections and is always cautious when it comes to his



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personal affairs. But I would much rather hear about your life from you.” He reached across the table and clasped her hand in his warm one. “Tell me.”

Had Kip been prying, she would have got up from the table and walked home. Instead, he seemed genuine in his desire to get to know her. “Where would you like me to start?”

“Wherever you want.”

“If I tell you about me, then you must tell me your story.”

Kip laughed. “Agreed.”

“I was born in Denver. My parents were quite poor. Growing up, I was alone most of the time. I had a lot of chores since both my parents worked, so I had little time for friends.

“I’m not complaining.” She shrugged. “I loved my parents. I knew of no other way. But there were times I cried. Girls would tease me because my hair wasn’t right or my clothes were tattered, but I never faulted my parents. They worked hard for everything we had, right up until the day they died.”

Brooke’s eyes misted and Kip tightened his grip on her hand. She swallowed the lump in her throat, disengaged her hand, and took a long pull from her water glass. “I thought I’d come to terms with their deaths, but it seems as though it were only yesterday.”

“If you don’t want to talk about it, I understand.”

She fidgeted with the napkin on her lap. A waiter set two steaming plates of succulent roast beef, baby carrots, and rice before them. The smell wafted through the air, causing Brooke’s stomach to rumble.

Brooke giggled, lightening the mood. “I guess I’m hungrier than I thought.”

Kip shared her humor. She really liked him and could see why Foster cared so much for him. She hoped to get to know him better in the future and remain friends.

After taking a bite of beef, she swallowed and continued her tale. “I guess I’ll never forget the pain of seeing my parents killed. When I lost

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them, I lost everything. Clinging to the only family I had left, I went to see my aunt who turned out to be an alcoholic. She didn't want to be saddled with a grieving niece any more than I wanted to be abused by her. So, I left, and after a time I came back here. That's when I started Body Apparel. Now you know the rest. What about you, Kip—where do you come from?"

"Sorry to say mine is less riveting."

"I want to hear it anyway."

He winked, then touched a finger to his lower lip. "My story begins in New York. I was born into money. The world was mine for the taking and I took more than my share of advantage over it. Are you getting the picture?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"I was rich, arrogant, and spoiled rotten." Kip laughed, his face flushing slightly. "I think that sets the picture pretty accurately. I could have had any woman I wanted. And they all wanted my purse. I took advantage of that and slept my way around New York."

Kip paused, glancing at her. "I wasn't a likeable person at the time. That's when I met Foster. We didn't like each other. His money was pretty much self-made and mine was old money. I couldn't appreciate the other side and how hard he had worked to get where he was because I had never lived without it."

Brooke leaned in. "How did you become friends?"

"Now that is a story." Kip's grin grew. "Foster taught me a lesson or two in manners. All over one woman...his sister. It was a lesson I wouldn't soon forget."

"What did Foster do?"

"I courted Amanda. She was a sweet young thing, but very innocent." The word itself seemed to leave a bad taste in his mouth. "I took her to a dance I had no idea Foster would be attending. I led Amanda to the garden, hoping for a few passionate kisses and whatever else she might bestow me with. But as it was, Foster was in the garden

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

as well. Anyway—I hadn't noticed him or him me. After all, it was common practice to steal away at these events. After a few chaste kisses—let's just say parts of my anatomy ruled my thoughts and acted completely on its own."

Brooke's gaze widened. "For heaven's sake. What did you do?"

"My hand sort of...oh, landed on her...uh..." His hands indicated his chest and Brooke gasped.

"Exactly." Kip grinned, his face streaked with red. "Amanda screeched and Foster came running. His fist connected with my nose. Broke the damn thing."

Brooke caught a case of the giggles as Kip rubbed the affected area, before joining her in laughter.

"I'm sorry Kip, but I can't help imagining the situation." She apologized, using her hand to stifle the humor. "How in the world did you ever become friends?"

"That's the damndest thing. I felt so terrible over the whole ordeal. I went to Foster to apologize."

"What did he say?"

"He accepted my apology." Kip grinned. "After all, he is a gentleman. Providing, I never came within a hundred yards of his sister again."

"Did you?"

"Hell, no! I wasn't stupid. I might have had money, but with Foster's power, he could have crushed me."

"If Foster is self-made, as you put it, then how did he get so powerful?"

"Respect." Kip sobered. "No one could ever link Foster with the mob, but they definitely respect him. All he would have to do is snap his fingers and they would have his back. Something to do with an owed favor. But that's one area Foster doesn't talk about...with anyone. Not even me."

Brooke and Kip finished their meal in silence as Brooke pondered

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

her newly

gained information. How did he get into a position where the mob owed him a favor? She dabbed her mouth with her linen napkin. “Well, I think it’s getting late and I should be going.”

Kip rose from the table. “Allow me to see you home. It’s getting dark and you shouldn’t be walking the streets alone at this time of night.”

“Normally, I’d decline as I walk home nightly by myself. However, I think I’ll take you up on it this evening. My walk through the lobby earlier still has me spooked.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

“I think we’re destined to become friends.”

Kip snorted. “Isn’t that the way it always goes? Foster gets the women, and I get their undying friendship.”

## CHAPTER 23

Kip stared at the white stucco ceiling, hands crossed behind his head. His thoughts ran rampant. *Who?* The one question he could not answer. The puzzle he knew they were nowhere near solving. Who would want to kill innocent women just to get back at Foster? Someone hated him to the point of madness.

After talking to Brooke the night before, Kip was all the more eager to solve the puzzle. He didn't want her life at risk any more than Foster. Like it or not, her involvement with Foster had already put her at jeopardy. Kip could no longer sit idle. He had to do something—anything—that might help protect Brooke.

A killer could easily position himself at the masquerade, and neither him nor Foster would be any the wiser. Without seeing faces, they couldn't distinguish between friend or foe. Kip knew Foster would be near Brooke at all times, not leaving her side for anything. But somehow, Kip worried it wouldn't be enough. This maniac needed to be stopped.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

A slender hand snaked up his bare torso. Grasping the hand, he brought it to his lips and kissed the palm. Sweet honey came to mind. His lips moved to the inside of her wrist, where he continued placing playful kisses along the inside of her arm. The woman purred like a well-stroked kitten. Pulling her into his embrace, he placed a tender kiss on the top of her chestnut-brown waves. His arms tightened possessively around her.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart? Something troubling you?” She placed warm tender kisses above the heavy thudding of his heart.

“It’s these damn murders.” His hand caressed her exposed back. “I swear I’ll go insane before the bastard is caught.”

“Neither of us are in danger.” Her shiver gave way to her underlying fear.

“No, for now we are not.”

She snuggled into his warmth. “Stay with me tonight.”

“You know I would if I could.” He tilted her chin up. “If I had my choice, I would never leave your side.”

She sat abruptly, taking the sheet with her. Anger sparked in her eyes. Her knuckles whitened from clutching the sheet. As Kip reached for her, she backed from his reach, tears welling.

Her lower lip trembled. “You can’t do this.”

Kip reached for her, this time catching hold of the pristine sheet, pulling her back into his embrace. His hand smoothed down her back. How he loved the way her body conformed to his. He had never been so content in his life to sit and hold someone.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said, kissing the top of her head again. “I’ll be safe, I promise.”

“How can you be so sure? You told me you were going to the masquerade tonight and you thought the murderer might be there.”

“It’s not me he wants...it’s Foster. Since the very beginning, it’s always been Foster. You know that.”

“But what if he decides to go after his friends? What if he goes after

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you?”

“He won’t.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Foster has another woman in his life. She will no doubt be his next target. Brooke is the one in danger. If Foster hadn’t pursued her—” Kip tightened his grip on the sheet. “No, matter...since he’s already made his intentions known. The murderer must already know as well.”

“So why pursue her if he knew the danger he put her in?”

“He’s afraid he will lose her all together if he doesn’t make his move. Someone else is vying for her attention. Foster would never allow someone else to have her.”

“How would you feel if it was me?” She sat and straddled his waist, holding his face between her palms. “If you were afraid someone might try to murder me?”

“But—”

“Allow me to finish, Kip. If you were afraid you would lose me to another, would you put distance between us because you were afraid for me?”

“I couldn’t stand the thought of another man’s hands on you.” Kip grasped her derrière. “I love you, my sweet.”

“And I love you.” She placed a tender kiss upon his lips. “Do you think Foster loves this woman?”

Kip shrugged. “He hasn’t loved anyone since Lynette. But I’ve never seen him this obsessed with a woman before—not even with Lynette.”

“Then maybe you can understand how he feels. He’s afraid of allowing her to slip away. I’ve known Foster for some time, and I don’t think he’s ever been intense about a woman. Not since I’ve known him.”

“You must understand how I feel then. Why I must be with him tonight.” Kip spanned her waist with his hands. “He cannot protect

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Brooke by himself.”

“I’m just scared of losing you.”

“You won’t lose me...ever. Marry me.”

“What?” She squealed.

“Marry me. Spend the rest of my days with me.”

“Yes!” She kissed him fully. “Oh, yes!”

“As soon as this is behind us, we’ll make it official.”

“When will you tell Foster?”

“Soon. Now, enough about Foster.” He grinned. “No come here and show me how much you love me.”

She ground her hips against him, eliciting a groan. “You don’t have to ask me twice.”

\* \* \*

“You can’t think to make me wear this.” Brooke stood in the center of her aunt’s hotel room.

“Why?” Roberta asked. “You’ll be beautiful.”

“Beautiful? The costume is all wrong, Aunt Roberta.” Her hands slapped her sides in frustration. “Look at me!”

“You have always been a free spirit.” Roberta laughed. “What represents freedom more than a gypsy?”

“Gypsies have black hair and dark eyes. I’m as far from that as they come.”

“So, you’ll wear a wig.” Roberta shrugged. “And I already took care of that. See?”

Brooke looked at the long, silky-black hair her aunt held up. “Since I have no time to change the costume, I might as well get use to the idea. What will you be going as?”

“A fortune-teller. A scarf for my head and bangles for my wrist, combined with layers of silk scarves to form a purple dress. I think I’ll make a fine fortune-teller. Don’t you?”

Brooke sighed, still unsure of her own costume. “Of course you



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will.”

“Don’t look so horrified, my dear. We’ll have a splendid time.”

“Just so you remember I’m only doing this because of you.”

“Of course you are.” Roberta waved her hand in the air. “Now let’s hurry. The masquerade begins in one hour and I told him we wouldn’t be late.”

Brooke’s brow furrowed. “Who?”

“Oh...the, uh...man down the hall I met,” Roberta stumbled. “Who else would be inquiring? Now hurry, get dressed.”

Brooke allowed her aunt to rush her into the powder room, gypsy clothes and all. She slipped on the blowsy embroidered top, which hung nearly to her knees, lacing the black ties tightly to her throat. She stepped into the orange and yellow billowy skirt. The shawl matched the coloring in the skirt, trimmed with black fringe. Brooke knew most at the ball would be dressed like English aristocrats and she would be going as a gypsy. What was her aunt thinking? She’d stand out like a sore thumb. Brooke twirled, sending her full skirt billowing about her. Had she not felt so ridiculous, she might consider her attire quite beautiful.

Placing the black wig atop her head, she looked into the mirror hung above the sink. Aside from the blueness of her eyes, she definitely looked the part of a gypsy. Jewelry popped to her mind as she glanced in the looking glass. Gypsies sported lots of gold.

“Aunt Roberta!” Brooke called, as an older woman, silver scarf tied about her head, poked her head through the door, causing her to jump. “Oh, goodness. I barely recognized you.”

“Good.” Roberta laughed. “The makeup ought do the trick for you as well. Allow me to assist.”

Roberta took a black kohl pencil and painted a thick line above and below Brooke’s lashes. Surveying her handy work, she smiled then dabbed a small amount of rouge to Brooke’s cheeks before painting her lips a bright red.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Looking in the mirror, Brooke said, “I hardly recognize myself. What about jewelry?”

“I’ve taken care of that, never fear.” Roberta disappeared for a second, returning with several gold chains and bangles. “Here.”

Placing the gold around her neck, Brooke marveled at the beauty. Twisting the chains between her fingers, she asked, “So how do I look?”

“Beautiful. Oh, and one more thing—” Roberta ran from the room and returned with yet another scarf.

“But I already have one.” Brooke indicated the one draped across the sink.

“This is for your head.” Roberta tied the fabric around her forehead, allowing the streams to float down her silky-black wig and back, before placing the final scarf about her shoulders.

Standing back, the two women surveyed their handiwork. Brooke hardly recognized herself or her aunt—Brooke in bright yellowish-orange and Roberta in deep purple. Staring back at her from the looking glass was either the most exotic woman she ever saw...or the most ridiculous.

Brooke giggled. The costumes were perfect. She placed her arm around her aunt. “Well, madam fortune-teller, are you ready?”

“I sure am.”

Walking from the room, the two women laughed as they made their way to the masquerade.

## CHAPTER 24

The elegant ballroom swam in a sea of vibrant colors. Many turned out in lavish costumes for the annual spring masquerade thrown by Foster Taylor. Normally, Foster would be pleased with the turnout, but not on this eve. A murderer no doubt mingled among the many guests. A scowl turned down his lips as he scanned the crowds milling through the vast room.

The band Foster hired played a waltz, droning out the conversation. Women and men whirled about the floor in the age old dance as others stood about, huddled in private tête-à-têtes. Had it not been the threat of a killer being among them, Foster would consider the event a complete success. Brooke came to mind. He'd have to stick by her side as she seemed the most probable target due to his interest.

Damn his attraction! He had placed her life in danger. He had tried to no avail to stay at bay. The last thing he wanted was to put her life in jeopardy. But she had made it impossible for him to resist. Now he would have to keep a constant eye on her to insure her safety. Maybe

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he should hire someone to watch over her. She'd likely be spitting mad if she found out. He grinned. At least she'd be safe. He'd have to consider his options and decide how best to handle the situation.

Foster glanced about the guests again, catching sight of Kip making his way about the room, also keeping an eye out. Dressed as a pirate, Kip nodded. He made a dashing buccaneer. Foster returned the gesture. Thankfully Kip had offered his services for the night. He'd needed all the manpower he could get.

Yellow and orange caught his gaze. His heart skipped a beat as he caught site of Brooke, her arm linked with a large woman dressed in purple as a fortune-teller. Aunt Roberta had gotten the costumes he'd sent over. Brooke looked like sunshine spilling into the darkened room. Besides being breathtakingly beautiful, the bright colors would be easily spotted among the crowd.

Brooke's gaze spanned the room, a smile lighting her face. Her excitement shown clearly in her eyes, like a child in a candy store. She turned and spoke to her aunt, who then left her side and descended the stairs into the grand ballroom.

Foster left his position near the far wall to personally welcome her. He got halfway through the room when he spotted a gentleman, dressed in English garb, standing before Brooke. *Alex Thurston*. Jealousy inflamed his arteries and rushed though his veins. His body temperature rose. Tonight would be his night. Alex Thurston be damned.

\* \* \*

Alex bowed, grasped Brooke's hand and kissed the back. Brooke pulled her hand free of his clammy one, though smiling as she did so. "Alex."

"Brooke, you look stunning. May I have the honor of the first dance?"

She shivered. Dancing with Alex held little appeal, but she certainly couldn't be rude. Besides, one dance would hurt nothing. "I—"

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Foster grasped her elbow. Where in the devil had he come from? He gave her no time to either accept or decline Alex's offer, but answered for her. "I do believe she has already promised this dance to me." He whisked her onto the floor.

"Foster Taylor, what in the devil—" She gasped, noticing the similarities in their costumes. "You planned this...the costumes...my aunt's invitation! You orchestrated this entire evening."

Seemingly unfazed by her rebuke, he asked, "Would you have come, had I asked?"

"No, but—"

"My point proven." He sported a cocksure grin. "I assure you, I'm not above a ruse if that's what it takes to get you into my arms."

"I can't believe you would stoop to such...such—"

"Trickery? Ah, but I would do that and much more if it meant having you by my side."

Foster looked charming dressed in black breeches, knee high black boots, a blowsy white shirt, and hand-embroidered black vest trimmed in gold. Maybe she could put their animosity behind them for one evening. After all, tonight was about fairy tales.

"The earring is a nice touch." Brooke tugged lightly on the golden hoop Foster sported in his left ear.

"You think so?"

"Had anyone else been wearing this costume, I would say it was quite handsome, but—"

"Because it is I and not Alex," he misinterpreted, "you find it revolting?"

"Not at all!" She had meant to say stunning. "I mean...not Alex."

"Then perhaps someone else? In this room, whose arms would you rather find yourself in?"

Brooke set her jaw. Always so quick to assume. If he wanted to play games, then so be it. "Any one of them."

"You lie."

## ***DARK SAVIOR***

“And how would you know?”

“Your body betrays you, Brooke. Your blood rushes through your veins. Feel.” He placed her palm above her erratically beating heart, then above his own as they waltzed among the crowds. “You can’t deny what you feel for me.”

Her knees weakened and her mind numbed. Dear Lord, he was right, though she would die before allowing him to know it. “I can.”

He chuckled. “Then surely you must be exhausted as you can hardly catch your breath.”

Foster held her gaze. She should tell him she had no interest in him, that everything he felt was the excitement of the masquerade and nothing more.

“All you need do is say the word, Brooke—and I’ll walk from your life forever. Can you live with that?”

Her mind whirled. Foster offered her the chance to return to her normal and uncomplicated life. But did she want to? Her heart ached at the thought of Foster being ripped from her chest. Surely a big gaping hole would be left. He had made her feel alive for the first time in her sorry life. Her thoughts spun, making her dizzy and lightheaded. Had Foster picked this moment to walk away, she’d no doubt collapse to the marbled floor. If she didn’t say something, anything soon, she’d die inside.

“So what’s your answer, Brooke?” Foster asked, as the waltz ended. Brooke caught sight of Alex approaching them. “Either I fill your dance card this night or you find the comfort of others for life. Which will it be?”

Brooke panicked and her heart pained. She glanced at Alex’s cold blue eyes as he neared them. Excitement and passion from her dark savior? Or the frigid safety net Alex offered? Suddenly realizing there never was a decision to make as it had been made by her heart long ago, Brooke grasped Foster’s face between her palms. His eyes swam in heat and richness. She could easily lose herself in his gaze...already

## ***DARK SAVIOR***

had.

Pulling his face to hers, she kissed him. There, in the middle of the dance floor as everyone watched, stopping Alex in his tracks. Warmth spread through her like molten lava as he returned her kiss with fervor, forgetting all others until applause brought her crashing back to reality. Heat rose up her neck and no doubt flushed her face. Brooke stepped from Foster's embrace.

Alex spun on his heel and stormed from the dance floor, only to be stopped by an auburn haired woman, dressed as an Indian princess. Brooke couldn't regret her actions, but she never meant to hurt Alex. She turned back to Foster, when Alex shook off the beautiful woman's touch.

Foster tucked Brooke's hand firmly in the crook of his arm and led her from the dance floor. Sidestepping guests and skirting the activities, Foster led Brooke to the French doors and the gardens beyond. She should have stopped him, stayed among the festivities, but her reputation be damned. She wanted Foster to herself and not have to share him with all those rivaling for his attention.

Brooke dare not breathe a word should her courage suddenly flee and she found herself running back to the crowded room. Her heart lodged in her throat, threatening her air supply. Her emotions were raw and gaping. But without taking a chance, she'd never know if something wonderful lay ahead. She prayed she wouldn't live to regret it.

Stopping, Foster turned to face her as he pulled her into his embrace. He didn't give her a chance to utter even a sound as he slanted his lips over hers and continued what she had started moments ago on the dance floor. His soft lips moved gently over hers as he used a hand in the center of her back to anchor her. She slid more fully against him, eliciting a groan from him. Foster deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding past her lips and tempting her to respond in kind.

Brooke smoothed her hands over his vest and up his chest to tangle

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

in the hair at his nape. She held nothing back and gave herself to him freely. For the first time in her life she knew what it felt like to be cherished. Foster handled her like one might fine china. Never taking more than she was willing to give, yet tentatively testing the boundaries.

His mouth left hers, leaving her gasping while his lips trailed past her ears, down her throat, to the pulse point at the base of her neck. Her hands clutched at him for fear her legs would give way. His hands roamed her sides, grazing the sides of her breasts as his mouth kissed a path to her cleavage. Brooke moaned, knowing she should push him away, stop him before things escalated beyond either of their control. Now was not the time or the place.

She released him, and pushed gently on his chest. “No, Foster.”

Grasping his face in her hands, she looked into his eyes. The intensity she saw written there made her breath catch in her throat.

“I’m sorry.” He smiled sheepishly. “I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to take this slowly, but your kiss in the ballroom was my undoing.”

Brooke returned his smile. “It’s okay, Foster.”

“No, it’s not. I want to do this right this time. Come to dinner with me? Sunday night.”

“You’re asking me on a date?”

“Just the two of us, no distractions.”

“Where?”

“Come to the dining room at six o’clock sharp.”

“I’ll be there.”

Foster leaned in for another quick kiss, sealing their engagement. “I think we better make another entrance if we’re to smother the gossip we’re sure to have unleashed.”

\* \* \*

Reentering the ballroom, Foster caught sight of Kip, who motioned



### ***DARK SAVIOR***

for his immediate attention. He excused himself, promising only a short absence, and walked over to Kip to find out what pressing news he had that couldn't wait.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Foster, but someone mingling among the guests was heard asking a lot of questions as to where Brooke had taken herself to. I thought it quite odd and thought you might want to know. I cannot help but worry—"

A scream cut the conversation milling about, followed by a dead silence. Foster's heart pained as he looked in the direction where he left Brooke standing. When he couldn't see her, he turned and sprinted to the French doors where he left her. Brooke lay crumbled in a heap on the floor.

## CHAPTER 25

Foster pulled Brooke into his embrace, hearing her tiny gasp for air. Relief slipped through him as her body trembled. Dear Lord, he had almost lost her. His hands traveled her back for any telltale signs of wetness. Nothing. His own body shook, knowing what could have happened.

“Foster?” Her voice seemed so fragile.

He ran a hand down her smooth cheek, feeling the iciness. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, I think. Just a bit lightheaded.”

“Then what happened?”

“I don’t know.” Brooke grasped his arm tightly. “Someone grabbed me from behind. It all happened so fast and I blacked out.”

Tears slipped down Brooke’s face. Guests stood in a semicircle around them, hushed murmurs filling the silence that had followed the attack. Wanting privacy, Foster stood and helped Brooke to her feet. He led her from the floor and motioned for the band to continue before

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entering a side parlor. Kip entered the room behind them, closing the door, barring further intrusion.

Kip helped Foster lower Brooke to a settee then asked, "What can I do?"

"I'm sure the culprit has fled, but why don't you find out if anyone saw anything."

Kip took his leave and Foster sat beside Brooke on the emerald sofa and pulled her into his embrace. She clung to him like a frightened kitten as Foster caressed her back. He placed a warm, reassuring kiss atop her head.

A shiver shook her shoulders. "I felt like I was reliving New York. I don't know if I'll ever feel safe again."

*New York?* "You're safe, Brooke. I won't let anyone touch you again. I shouldn't have left your side. I'm sorry."

"This isn't your fault."

"The person attacking you was after me, Brooke. Had you not been involved with me, this wouldn't have happened. Until we find this maniac, I can't promise you complete safety. Maybe, we shouldn't—"

Brooke placed her fingers over his lips. "Don't, Foster. I'll never regret the time I spend with you. I made a decision and I don't intend to change it. Don't you dare push me away."

"Brooke," he whispered. Grasping her face, he pulled her to him, their mouths meeting in passion, fear, and anxiety. He kissed her, his hunger raging as his tongue entered her mouth, thrusting as his body yearned to. His groin throbbed. Damn if he didn't want to possess her right here.

Brooke returned his kiss with fervor. She desperately needed him to make her feel safe, to take away all her fears. Butterflies began in the pit of her stomach and numbness spread through her joints and ended with a pleasing ache between her thighs. She ran her hands up his shirtfront, reveling in his heat. She wanted more...so much more. Brooke yanked the shirt from the confines of his trousers, needing the

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warmth of his flesh beneath. Her hands traveled up his chest and reveled in the feel of the hair that tickled and teased her fingers. She stopped when she reached his heart and flattened her palm over the area, feeling it beat as fast and furious as her own.

Foster gasped, fueling her actions. Never had she been so bold. His dark gaze centered on hers, although asking permission or seeking denial she wasn't sure. Obviously seeing no resistance, he gripped the sides of her blouse from her costume and pulled it from the skirt's waistband. His hands covered her chemise covered breasts.

Brooke moaned as her nipples hardened. The new feelings were almost more than she could bear. She backed from his embrace and gasped for air. Foster sat deathly still as he watched her, no doubt waiting for an explanation. One minute she groped him and the next she pushed him away.

His brows met over the bridge of his nose. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Brooke laid her palms on his cheeks. "I want you, Foster. I'm just not so sure I'm ready for this. I'm the one who should apologize for touching you the way I did."

"Don't ever be sorry for touching me, Brooke." He pulled her back into his embrace. "You can't possibly know what it does to feel your touch. Don't ever apologize for that. You take all the time you need. Sweetheart, for you I'd wait an eternity." He grimaced. "I won't have to forever will I?"

"No." Brooke giggled. "Not a lifetime."

Foster's expression sobered. "Are you ready to tell me what happened out there?"

"I was watching you make your way to Kip. I guess I wasn't paying attention." She sighed. "A gloved hand smothered my mouth and nose. I tried to twist from the grasp, but the hand on my arm was much stronger. The more I struggled, the tighter the hand on my mouth. I couldn't breathe. When the person finally lost his or her grip, that's when I screamed. The next thing I know, I was on the floor and you

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were beside me.”

“So, you never got a look at the man?”

“I never got to look at the person at all so I couldn’t even tell you if it was a man.”

“Trust me, it was a man. Only a man’s vengeance runs this deep.”

Brooke shivered from the icy shards coming from Foster’s eyes as he stared at the wall. The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees as she rubbed the gooseflesh from her arms. Had the killer been standing in front of them, Foster would have no doubt taken his life. A knock on the door startled her.

Foster looked at Brooke. His gaze warmed. “Come in.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt, but there’s something I think you should see.” Kip entered the room, dangling a pendant from his fingers. “It seems that no one saw a thing, but I did find this on the floor near where Brooke collapsed. Do you recognize it?”

Foster grasped the object Kip held out. The gold twinkled from the low lighting. He held the locket closer for his inspection before crushing it within his grasp, followed by a string of curses.

Brooke’s stomach sank. “What is it?”

Foster paced the small room, reminding Brooke of a caged lion. He ran his hand through his hair, a muscle in his jaw ticking. Brooke was afraid to move, let alone speak again.

Kip’s brow furrowed as he mimicked Brooke’s question. “What is it?”

Finally turning to them both, the hard planes of his face softened. Brooke wanted to run to his embrace and hold him for a lifetime, protect him from anything more happening. He had been through so much already.

“The locket,” he finally said, his voice cracking, “it’s Lynette’s.”

“Lynette’s?”

“My fiancée. I gave it to her just days before she was killed.”

Tears slipped down his cheeks unheeded. Brooke crossed the space

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between them and Foster opened his arms, enveloping her. She wrapped her arms around his back and laid her cheek against his chest, feeling his thundering heart. Her heart mimicked his.

“I’ll let the two of you sort through this.” Kip winked at Brooke. “I need to keep an eye on the guests.”

“You see anything out of the ordinary, you come get me.”

The tune of the waltz faded as Kip shut the door. Brooke looked up at Foster. She reached out and wiped a tear from his cheek, her heart cracking in two. Foster obviously loved the woman dearly. She couldn’t help but feel jealous.

Brooke stepped back from his embrace. “Tell me about her.”

Foster glanced at her and placed a palm against her cheek and she reveled in the warmth. “Sit.”

Foster handed her the locket as she sat on the sofa. She rubbed the precious gold between her fingers. Foster tipped her chin to look at him. A deep sadness rested in the depths of his chocolate brown gaze. “I first met her in Georgia. Her beauty was of innocence. She was still a child in many ways.

“I was dating Allison at the time, but I wasn’t ready for a serious relationship. We dated casually—at least I thought it was. She wanted to get married. I scoffed at the idea. I was far too young to make a lifelong commitment. Lynette tried to steal away my attentions, and in many ways did catch my eye. It didn’t take Allison long to see that. She jumped from the top story of my hotel in Georgia, dying instantly.”

Foster paused, looking above her head at the wall. His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. “I couldn’t take the guilt. I was in the process of building another hotel in New York, so I moved, hoping to put the past behind me. About five years ago, I ran into Lynette there. She had grown up, looking more beautiful than ever.

“We started dating. A few months later, we consummated the relationship. I got Lynette pregnant and I asked her to marry me. We moved in together and everything was fine until the day before our

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wedding. She was a little over seven months pregnant and complaining of a horrible backache. I ran to the doctor's to get her something that might relieve the pain. When I got home..."

Brooke grasped his hand and urged him to sit beside her. He complied, laying his arm across the back of the sofa. He sighed as Brooke snuggled into the crook of his arm.

"The color of her blood haunts me yet today. It covered the white sheets of our bed. It was in her blonde hair, her clothes, the pillows. Her blue eyes seemed lifeless. I cried and pulled her into my embrace, covering myself with her blood. Finally, I ran to the phone and dialed the switchboard, telling them to get me a doctor. When I went back to her, her breathing was shallow and raspy as if she couldn't catch a good breath. I held my hand over her swollen belly and kept telling her to hold on."

Foster swiped his free hand over his cheeks, mopping away the wetness. "I kept mumbling, 'Don't let my baby die.' Over and over. I was so focused on my child I don't think I even told Lynette that I loved her. As my hand lay on her stomach, I felt him fighting for his life, kicking at my hand. That's when the doctor arrived. They rushed her to his clinic as I sat in the waiting room, praying to the Lord not to take my child from me.

"What seemed like an eternity, the doctor came out, full of blood...Lynette's blood...my child's blood...I don't know. But the look on his face told me all I needed to know—neither made it. I cried out, smashing my fist into the wall. I couldn't believe it, Brooke, my child...dead. I never knew for sure whether I would have had a girl or a boy, but I believed with all my heart it was a boy."

Foster blew out a breath of air and looked to the ceiling. Brooke nestled against his chest, her tears soaking his shirt front. His arm tightened around her. He tipped her face to his and gently kissed her lips. "Thank you."

Brooke's brows knit together. "For what?"

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“For listening. I cried for the second time in my life when the doctor walked away. A part of me died. I didn’t even ask to see Lynette. I just walked away. There was no way I could have looked upon her swollen stomach and survived.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Two days later, I held a small funeral,” he continued. “Only my friends came. Lynette had no family or friends. She died alone.”

“She didn’t die alone, Foster, she had you.”

“Yeah, she had me.” His face hardened. “I never even really realized when I held her that night the locket must have been missing. Everything felt so right when I went to the doctor’s to get her something for the pain. The murderer must have taken the locket after he stabbed her and waited until now to taunt me with it. He murdered my child, Brooke. For that alone, he will pay.”



## CHAPTER 26

Brooke checked her appearance in the mirror. She smoothed a shaking palm over her blonde finger waves. Her cherry-red lips stared back at her. She couldn't help wondering about Lynette and how she fared. The thought of comparing herself to a dead woman turned her stomach. Not for the first time had she thought it impossible to compete against her memory. After all, Foster and she had shared a pregnancy.

She glanced down at her own flat abdomen and couldn't help thinking what she might look like, her belly swollen with Foster's child. Giving Foster a son brought a smile to her lips. He had been so distraught over losing his first child, that surely, giving him another would please him. Until now, she had never really thought about giving birth. Finding the right man had always been her goal...someone she could spend her nights with. Someone who would chase the loneliness away. But a child? Brooke thought about nights sitting in front of a roaring fire with Foster at her side as they tickled the infant to giggles. They'd no doubt make a happy family.

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Brooke sighed. Nothing like getting ahead of herself. Foster had just asked her for a date and nothing more. Here she envisioned herself fat with his babes and spending cold evenings in front of a fireplace. She chuckled. She definitely needed to get out. Her imagination was getting the best of her.

Walking away from the mirror, Brooke glanced at the wall clock. She still had a half hour before their date and her apartment was but a block away from the hotel. Anxiety had gotten the best of her over the past couple of days. She had wanted to close up shop yesterday and go to his offices, hoping to vie for his attention. Such a silly love-struck girl. Foster would likely scoff at the idea she spent so much time thinking of him as of late. She acted like a school girl with a crush. She needed to get a grip on her emotions or wind up broken hearted in the end. Foster had yet to marry any girl he had dated in the past, only having proposed to Lynette when she carried his child. Maybe he wasn't the marrying kind.

Brooke chuckled. Even after church this morning she had passed the Ashford with the hopes of catching a glimpse of him. No such luck. She'd have to wait for their date. Just the thought of being alone with him sent her stomach to fluttering. Goodness, she hoped she calmed down before she met him or she'd likely babble like an idiot.

Checking the clock on the wall for what felt like the hundredth time, she saw that only five minutes had passed. Six o'clock, he had said. Six o'clock seemed like it would never get here. Brooke pulled her new dress over her head and quickly fastened the pearl seed buttons. She smoothed her hand down the silky material and decided she liked the color rose on her. Foster had obviously thought the color would go well since he had sent Alex to purchase the chemise with her in mind, though he had yet to give it to her. When she had seen the new dress in the store as she window shopped, she had decided on the spot to spend the money. Hopefully the money would be well spent and Foster would be unable to resist himself...well, within reason. She

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laughed aloud. Having to resist Foster's charms had definitely become a challenge.

She knew he wanted to make love to her, and she wanted that as well. No use denying it. But Brooke had hoped to wait it out until Foster was ready to admit he loved her. Should she give in before his declaration, she'd wind up alone. Gentleman didn't keep those that were gotten so easily. Those they kept as mistresses, and Brooke had no intention of being that for Foster. She couldn't bear the thought of another becoming his wife while she only shared his bed.

Drawing in a deep breath, Brooke took one final look at herself, then grasped her key and pocketbook, heading for the door. She still had plenty of time to kill, but no reason she couldn't arrive a bit early. Just maybe he'd be as anxious to see her.

\* \* \*

A knock sounded. Brian walked over to the door and opened it. He couldn't believe his eyes. He'd never get used to looking upon such natural beauty.

"Victoria."

"Brian." Victoria brushed past him, not waiting for an invitation. "How have you been?"

"Well." He eyed her carefully, wondering what game she played. The last time he had seen her was at the house party he and Brooke attended. "What brings you by? You haven't been here since you walked out on your boss. Why come back now?"

"I don't know. I missed you?" She shrugged, sitting on the antique sofa and patting the space beside her. Brian quickly complied. "I heard you broke off your engagement to that woman I saw you with at the last soiree. I don't believe I caught her name."

"Brooke Abel." Her presence didn't sit well with him. Victoria always came with baggage. "But I hardly doubt you missed me. It's more likely that you miss the man you worked for."

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“Foster?” She chuckled, the pitch high and grating to his nerves.

“How many men have you worked for that you took a liking to, Victoria?” His agitation laced his cruel words. “Of course, I’m referring to Foster Taylor.”

“No need to be testy, Brian. I’m here now, am I not? I could have gone to see Foster instead.”

Brian harrumphed. “You probably did and he wouldn’t see you.”

“I suppose I deserve that. But you are right—I did go to see him and the righteous son of a bitch wouldn’t even take time to see me. Said he had plans and that I’d have to come back on another day. Do you believe him? I gave him years of my life. And what do I get in return? A door closed in my face.”

“What did you expect, Victoria? You’re the one who quit.”

“I know.” She glanced at her clasped hands in her lap. “I couldn’t take working for him anymore and watch him go through women. I would have given him everything. I had to leave. He dumped me for Celeste, for crying out loud. The woman was a tart. I should have never come back.”

“Don’t say that.” Brian took her hand in his, knowing already he’d regret it. “Whether Foster is or not, I am glad to see you again, Victoria.”

“Why would you be glad to see me?”

He wore his heart on his sleeve. “You had to have known.”

Victoria’s brow furrowed. She didn’t know. God, help him...all these years.

Brian expelled his breath. “I worshiped the ground you walked on, Victoria. I would have traveled to the ends of the earth just to have you. Why did you think I followed you and Foster to Denver?”

“But what about, Brooke? You were engaged.”

“You never showed interest in me, Victoria. I had to move on with my life. But I never felt for her the way I did you.”

“I never knew.”

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Brian shook his head. "You were too busy vying for Foster's attention that you never saw me...not really."

"And now, how do you feel?"

"If only you could forget about Foster, I'd love you a lifetime. I just don't think you can."

She smoothed her hand over her auburn hair. "One never knows. After all, it seems Foster has already moved on. I saw him with your Brooke at the masquerade." Her face held contempt for his ex-fiancée. Clearly Victoria still had feelings for Foster.

"Do you think we could try?"

"Possibly." Damn him, he already regretted giving her the chance. He'd be the one losing in the end. "I would do anything for you, Victoria. But I don't know if I could take the hurt—"

"I wouldn't hurt you intentionally, Brian." She placed her palm on his cheek. "I would do everything to keep that from happening."

*Unless Foster Taylor came calling.*

"If only—"

"If only what?"

"Nothing." The only way he'd ever have Victoria would be to let the past go and pray that Foster never tired of Brooke. "The important thing is you're here with me now."

Victoria smiled, though the warmth never reached her eyes. "Yes, Brian, I am."

\* \* \*

Foster skirted his mahogany desk, sporting a pair of jeans, a work shirt, and black boots. He hadn't intended on working today, not Sunday. His plans had been to meet with Brooke, six o'clock, in the ballroom. But life often intruded. Room two-fourteen had been unhappy about their accommodations and needed to be placated. A free comp stay did the trick. The kitchen had experienced a small fire, burning the roast for the dinner crowd. A new menu for the evening

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

had to be made. And one of the staff had cut themselves, needing medical attention. In all it had been one thing after another. He glanced at his tuxedo hanging by the door. He'd need to get dressed soon or chance being late.

He had seen to all the arrangements. His staff prepared for the elaborate event. No expense had been spared. Foster wanted the night to be perfect. The weekend had passed in a whirlwind of activity and had kept him quite busy, allowing him very little free time. But his thoughts often turned to Brooke and his eagerness to see her again. He just hoped the evening went better than his day. He had waited all weekend for this moment. Grasping the tuxedo from the door, he headed for his penthouse.

All day yesterday he slaved behind his desk, hoping to avoid coming in at all. But that hadn't happened. Rubbing his temple, Foster chuckled. Just his luck.

Victoria came to mind. Another variable in his day. He shook head. The last person he would have thought to see. She had been damn mad when she threw her key at him and told him she wouldn't work for him any longer after he had stopped their affair. Good god, what a mess he'd created. What had he been thinking to date someone who worked for him? A lesson well-learned. When hiring her replacement, age had been a huge factor. The last thing he wanted was to find himself yet attracted to another secretary. Mrs. Dunlap had been the perfect choice, and she had turned out to be a damn good secretary.

When Victoria knocked on his door and he found her standing there, he had been dumbfounded and at a loss for words. She pushed past him, waltzing into his office like she belonged there. He had little trouble escorting her back to the door and showing her the way out. She'd been spitting mad. The woman could be insane at times and the last thing he needed was her back in his life.

Foster glanced at the clock. Five remaining minutes. Locking his office door, he headed for his penthouse, taking the stairs two at time.

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He'd be lucky to make it to the ballroom in time. The last thing he wanted was to keep Brooke waiting. Hell, he couldn't wait to be in her presence again. Just the thought of it sent an ache straight to his groin. He laughed. Not only couldn't he wait to see her, but another part of him couldn't wait to get her in his bed.

Once in his apartments, he pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor. Foster shoved his arms into the white shirt of his suit, tugged it across his shoulders, and buttoned it. His fingers actually shook. He hadn't been this nervous to see someone in a long time. Brooke's vision came to mind. Much more and he'd be walking into the ballroom sporting an erection any man would be proud of.

Stepping from his jeans, he pulled on the trousers of the tuxedo, heading for the door. He quickly fastened the cuffs of his shirt, then grasped his jacket and shoved his feet into his shoes. He didn't even have time to check his appearance as he finger combed his hair, opting to let it hang loose. A quick glance back toward the window told him sunlight waned. Foster slammed the door and headed for the stairs.

Just as he reached the landing, he heard his phone ring. Foster grumbled, then walked back to his apartment, unlocked the door and grasped the receiver on the third ring. "This better be good!"

"Foster!" Amanda exclaimed. "It's mother."

## CHAPTER 27

With only a few minutes to spare, Brooke climbed the few steps leading to the ballroom. Good thing her dress covered her knees or surely everyone would observe their trembling. It was a wonder she could even climb the few stairs. Her stomach fluttered to the point of near nausea. Goodness, she hadn't been this nervous in a long time, if ever. She only hoped she didn't live to regret her hasty decision.

A *matrè d* dressed in a black tuxedo bowed before her at the ballroom's entrance. He extended his arm and led Brooke to the lone table set in the center of the enormous room. Violins filled the room and calmed her jangled nerves. The scent of fresh cut roses filled the air from several bouquets of the flowers positioned about the room on marble pedestals. Brooke giggled, thinking how ridiculously alone the small table appeared, covered in red linen. Atop it sat a crystal bud vase with one single red rose along with fine white china and crystal water goblets all trimmed in gold.

Upon seating her, the *matrè d* poured water into her goblet as a



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waiter came from a side door, placing a basket of fresh bread, still warm from the oven, in front of her and a crock of garlic butter to the side.

“Would there be anything else, madam?” the matreèd asked.

Brooke glanced around the room, overwhelmed by her surroundings. “No, thank you.”

Without so much as another word, he bowed again and return to his station by the door.

Looking around the dimly lit room, a sense of loneliness set in. Even though the elegant room had been prepared for her, without Foster, she couldn’t possibly enjoy it. The man was who she sought and not the elegance. The violinist ended his tune and began a slow ballad. The string instrument had a solemn sound, only adding to her sense of aloneness. She glanced at the door and wished Foster would hurry along. Foster certainly wouldn’t go to all this trouble and then stand her up on their date.

The clock on the wall chimed, once, twice...six times. Six o’clock had arrived but without that of her companion. Buttering a slice of the warm bread, she nervously tapped her toe of her shoes on the marbled floor, trying not to stare at the entrance.

*A watch pot never boils*, her mother had always been so fond of saying.

Three slices of fresh bread and a few minutes turned into a quarter of an hour. Where was he? Brooke shifted in her seat, horrified that Foster would keep her waiting. Maybe she should just go. After all, he knew where to find her. Her heart sank as did her hopes of how the evening would have turned out. She glanced to the wall clock and noticed yet another fifteen minutes had passed. Angry, Brooke grabbed her pocketbook and headed for the entrance. She had had enough of waiting. Foster Taylor and his grand affair be damned.

“Madam?” the matreèd questioned. “I’m sure Mr. Taylor has a reasonable excuse. If I could detain you a few more minutes, I could

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send someone to see what is keeping him.”

Brooke set her jaw. “I’ll not wait another minute.”

“May I give him a message then?”

“Yes, tell him not to bother.” And with that, Brooke descended the stairs.

\* \* \*

Alex stood in the lobby as Jacob Hesterman ran by, nearly out of breath. The boy worked for Foster on occasion and Alex wondered to where he might be in such a hurry. Alex grasped his shirt sleeve, halting him from rushing by. “Excuse me, Jacob. But what’s the hurry?”

Breathless, the youth replied, “I have an urgent message for a lady. She wasn’t in the ballroom where Mr. Foster told me I could find her, so I’m to go to her residence and make sure she’s given it.”

Alex narrowed his gaze. “And who might this be?”

“Miss Brooke Abel.”

“I’ll save you the trouble, son.” Alex smiled, seeing a way to exact his revenge. “I’m on my way over there now. Give me the message and I shall see she receives it.”

“Mr. Taylor said to make sure she gets the message personally.”

“I’m Foster’s right-hand man, for heaven’s sake. Your message is secure with me. You can be assured I’ll see she gets the message.”

“Well, I do suppose it couldn’t hurt. Promised my ma I’d be home early this night.”

“See?” Alex winked at the boy. “I’m saving you some time. Now what’s the urgent message?”

“Mr. Taylor said to inform Miss Abel of his apologies for letting her stand this evening, but it couldn’t be helped. His mother was rushed to the clinic. She had a heart attack. Though she’s holding on, she’s not quite stable yet. He said to tell her to come to the clinic. He needed to see her. That’s it, but he said to stress his need to see her and for her to come to the clinic immediately.”

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“I’ll see to it she gets the message, Jacob.” Alex patted him on the back, handing him a few green bills. “Now get along. Make your ma happy.”

The boy grasped the bills with a huge smile on his face and rushed out of the lobby. Alex stood in the center of the room, chuckling. Brooke would be furious for Foster standing her up, and Foster would be angry for her ignoring his plea. Alex shook his head. Served them both right. He had no intentions of seeing the message delivered.

\* \* \*

Foster locked his office and tested the knob. He deposited the key into the pocket of his trousers, extinguishing the lights as he went. This time of night, the rest of the office had gone, leaving him alone. Foster thought about his mother, who still lay in a bed at the clinic. She was doing well, the doctor had said, but he wanted to keep her a few more days for observation. Amanda kept a vigil by her side. It was small miracle she had survived, but Mabel Ruth was a fighter.

As he climbed the stairs to his penthouse, he thought for the first time how very lonely it was. With Amanda and his mother gone, it left him in solitude. Any other night he could pop in and check in on the both of them.

Damn. Why the hell had Brooke ignored his summons and left him alone to deal with this? He could have used her compassion and had thought of no one else he would have rather had at his side. Had the situation been reversed, he would have been there for her. Hell, she couldn’t even bother herself today to come and check to see how his mother faired. She likely brooded at being stood up. Turning on the landing, deep in his thoughts, he nearly ran into Kip who descended the stairs.

“Just the person I’m looking for.”

“You’re about the only one,” Foster grumbled.

Kip ignored his sarcastic jab. “How is she?”

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"She's holding her own, you know Mother. She'll live. She's too damn mean to die. Besides, Amanda needs her."

"And you don't?"

Foster harrumphed. "I don't need anyone."

"What the hell is wrong with you? I know you're upset, but why the bitterness?"

"I told you, she'll live. Now drop it!"

Foster continued his way up the stairs, but to his bad luck, Kip wouldn't let it drop and trotted up after him.

Kip followed Foster into his penthouse. "What's wrong with you?"

"It's none of your damn business! I don't need you or anyone else. I grew up on the streets. I'm a survivor. The one man who meant anything to me, died fourteen years ago."

"Do you think Mac would appreciate the Foster I see right now?"

Foster yanked his jacket off and tossed it over the arm of the sofa. "Why the hell do you care?"

"We're not talking about Mabel Ruth here are we?"

Foster grumbled, but didn't reply.

"You're talking about Brooke. She's the one you think you can live without."

"I don't want to talk about Miss Abel. Now if you'll excuse me—"

Kip ran a hand through his blond hair. "What the hell happened between the two of you? When you left the masquerade the other night, you were inseparable."

"Things have changed."

"Your date last night—"

"I said—"

"I don't give a damn what you said! When did Mabel Ruth..." His gaze widened. "You never made the date, did you?"

"No, but it no longer matters."

"The hell it doesn't! Didn't you send Brooke a message?"

"Why do you think this is my fault?" Foster growled. "Of course, I

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sent a messenger. I asked her to meet me at the clinic and she never came.”

“Are you sure she got the message?”

“Yes, I questioned Jacob today and he said she got the message.”

“And you took the word of the boy?”

“I had no reason not to.”

“Well then, I’ll let you to brood.” Kip turned and walked from the living area as Foster slammed the door on his retreating back.

\* \* \*

Brooke paced her small apartment. At least her anger had kept her from feeling sorry for herself. After all, she had invited this upon herself. She should have known better. Not one word as to why Foster stood her up. He didn’t even have the decency to come to her shop or send word as to what had happened. Brooke closed early because she had snapped at one too many customers. If her attitude didn’t change, she’d lose her business she had worked hard for. And of course, she’d blame Foster for that as well. The audacity of the man!

A hot soak in her tub might just be the remedy. Brooke headed for the bathroom when a knock sounded on her door. She grasped the bud vase sitting near the sofa and hurled it at the door. She’d be damned if she’d allow him to apologize now. Another knock sounded.

Storming to the door, she swung it wide open. “I don’t want to hear...oh, Kip. It’s you.”

He chuckled. “Don’t sound so excited to see me.”

“Not that I don’t want your company, Kip—now is just not a good time.”

“Obviously.” His gaze traveled to the broken glass at their feet. “What’s up?”

“If you must know, the man you call a friend...I don’t care if I ever see him again.”

“If anyone has a right to be mad, Brooke, I think it’s Foster. I’m

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going to have to side with him on this one.”

“Excuse me?” Brooke’s brows rose. “How dare you side with him? He stood me up, for heaven’s sake!”

“But what about you?”

“What do you mean? I waited a half hour for his arrival. He was the one who didn’t bother to show.”

“He had good reason.”

Brooke rolled her eyes. “I don’t care if—”

“His mother had a heart attack?” Kip finished for her.

Suddenly Brooke felt foolish. “Well, I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Then you don’t know?”

“Know what? He never sent—”

“He did send a messenger, Brooke. Are you telling me no one spoke to you?” Oh dear Lord! Brooke grasped Kip’s shirt. “What’s happened?”

“His mother had a heart attack. He sent a messenger last night, asking you to meet him, but you never showed.”

Brooke covered her mouth as the blood drained from her face. “I never received the message. Had I known...”

“He said he talked to the messenger. The boy assured Foster he delivered it. I don’t know where the mix-up is, but—”

“I have to go see him.” Tears trickled down her cheeks. She headed for the door. “I hope you don’t mind, Kip, but I have to go.”

“Not at all,” he said, following her out the door. “I have some questioning of my own to do.”

## CHAPTER 28

A knock sounded on his door. Damn. Foster wanted nothing more than to be left alone to wallow in his self-pity and loathing. Certainly Kip hadn't returned as he wouldn't bother with knocking. He was in no mood for visitors. If not for his mother's present condition, he would have disregarded the intrusion altogether.

Foster walked to the door and opened it, finding a teary-eyed Brooke on the other side. Her tears wouldn't work...not this time. He walked away from the entrance, not giving her an invite to come in, but not exactly shutting her out either. He'd love to hear her excuse.

"What the hell do you want?" Foster snapped.

Brooke stepped into the apartment, her heels clicking off the floor behind him. "I wanted to see how you were and to apologize."

Foster braced his arms on the window sill and looked into the darkening night. "Save it."

"Please, Foster." He could hear the tears in her voice. Damn her if she thought he'd fall for theatrics.

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“Just stay the hell away from me, Brooke.” He turned, anger oozing from his pores. “Don’t you get it? I don’t want to see you. If you know what’s good for you, you’d leave now or—”

“Or what? You’ll hate me forever? Foster, I only want—”

Foster growled. “I don’t want anything from you except your absence. Now get out of my sight while I’m still being civil.” He turned his back to her, dismissing her.

The storm clouds gathering matched that of his soul. He wanted to reach out for her...ached to. But she hadn’t been there for him when he needed her. He had finally been ready to give his heart and she had squashed it like a bug.

“Foster,” her whisper barely sounded over the thundering of his heart.

Tears clogged his throat as he heard her approach, felt her heat as she stood precariously close. She placed her palm in the center of her back, scorching him. He wanted to turn and wrap himself around her and never let go. Damn, he was pathetic. She had betrayed his faith in her and all he could think about was holding on to her.

“Why?” he finally asked.

“Why?”

“Why are you still here?” he clipped.

He heard her shuffle behind him as she removed her hand. “Because I care.”

“If you cared, you would have been by my side yesterday when I needed you. Not groveling at my feet now.”

“That’s not true! I didn’t know!”

“My messenger said he delivered the message.”

“To whom did he deliver it? Surely not to me! I only found out moments ago. Had I been told, I would have been there.”

Dare he trust her? Jacob said he had told her. Her arms snaked about his waist as she pressed herself against his back and placed a tender kiss on his shoulder blade. A low groan escaped his lips. Sweet



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torture. He turned in her embrace and grasped her face between his palms, forcing her to look him in the eye, daring her to lie.

“No one told you about my mother?”

“No. Kip told me only moments ago. He told me your mother had a heart attack. I promise you, Foster, I had no idea.”

“But I sent a messenger.”

“I must have left before he got word to me. I would have been there for you.”

“If you weren’t at the ballroom, he was to go to your apartment.”

“No one came.”

As her words tumbled over her trembling lips, he could see no deceit in her eyes. She hadn’t known. Jacob? Why had the youth lied to him?

Foster stepped away from Brooke and paced to the sofa. His body trembled in anger over the treachery that had caused them both so much pain. Dear Lord, she must have been just as upset at him for not showing up the night before. He glanced up and saw uncertainty in her eyes. Didn’t she know he could forgive her anything? She had done nothing wrong, and yet she had come to apologize.

A throb began in his groin. Damn, he wanted her. A quick glance to her right brought his unmade bed into focus, calling and beckoning him forward. He wanted nothing more than to sweep her into his arms and make up for the world of hurt they had caused each other. And all for what? Because a young boy had been lax in his job?

He made fists at his side. “I think you better go.”

Brooke’s eyes widened. “Why can’t you believe me?”

“I do.”

“Then why are you sending me away? Don’t you want me?”

Foster took in the sight of his bed again. “In more ways than you know, Brooke.”

“Then why do you want me to leave?”

He chuckled, the sound filled with loathing. “Let’s just say that I

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don't trust myself at the moment."

"Are you afraid to get too close to me?"

Running a shaky hand down his whisker stubble, he said, "Yeah, I'm afraid of getting too close to you right now."

"Don't be, for my sake...our sake."

"This is for your sake, sweetheart. If it were for mine, I'd carry you into that waiting bed and bury myself deep inside you. Now go before my will breaks and I carry through with my threat."

Brooke held her ground. She didn't move an inch. His iron will snapped and he swiftly crossed the room, scooping her into his arms. He carried her across the short distance and laid her atop the white sheets.

"This is your last chance."

Instead of rolling from the bed as he half expected her to do, she fisted her hands in his shirt front. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Then you're mine," he growled.

This was not how he envisioned their first time. Hell, he wanted candle lights and clean sheets. He wanted to move slowly, get to know each other, revel in their lovemaking. Not this raw hunger and need now surging through his body. It would likely be over before the blink of an eye. He didn't know how long he could actually hold out. One touch from her and he'd likely explode.

Foster grasped her wrists to avoid the inevitable, and pinned them over her head as he came to rest between her spread thighs. They had far too many clothes on for his liking. His erection lay intimately between them. Brooke gasped as his mouth nuzzled her neck. She smelled of clean soap and fresh roses. He placed chaste kisses along her throat and up her jaw until his mouth covered hers. Her hips arched into him. Her kiss swallowed his moan as his groin throbbed painfully. Their tongues met and sparred, each thrusting then retreating just as his body plagued him to do.

Using his free hand, he ran it along her side and grazed her breast,

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testing the weight and her readiness. When she did not deny him, his palm covered the soft mound, sending her yet again arching from the mattress. He would have chuckled at her eagerness to have him, had he not been so far gone in the throes of passion himself. Never had he desired a woman so and he reveled in the pain of it.

Foster began unfastening the seed buttons of her dress, then slipped his hand inside, beneath her chemise and to finally fill his palm with her silky flesh. Her nipple puckered as he teased her to awareness. Brooke squirmed beneath him until he released her wrists. Her hands tangled in his hair and returned his kiss with fervor.

Breaking contact, Foster looked into her dazed eyes. "If you want to stop, now's the time."

Brooke shifted from beneath him. His whole body felt the loss as he thought she meant to leave. Instead, she grasped the sides of her dress, and hauled it over her head, leaving her bare except for a peach colored chemise. His jaw nearly dropped at the sight of her in the silky material. Hell, his dreams didn't even compare.

Foster flattened his palm in the center of the bed and pushed her back to the pillows. He hastily tore his own shirt over his head and came back to her with a growl. Her fingers danced up his chest and entwined with the sparse hair, teasing the flat nipples that were slightly hidden beneath. She would be the death...albeit exquisite...of him yet. As he leaned in to kiss her again, her hands grew bolder, heading like an arrow straight to the fastening of his jeans. He grasped her hands and broke the kiss. Her gaze narrowed.

"Sweetheart, touch me now and it will all be over."

He chuckled at her innocent expression. Surely she understood. Foster stepped from the bed, undid his jeans and pushed them down his hips, his shorts quickly following. Her gaze widened as she looked him over. He smiled as she stopped on a certain part of his anatomy. Stepping back to the bed, he grasped the chemise and pulled it from her head, leaving them both as naked as the day they were born. God had

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blessed her with a body of perfection. The only thing that could ever make her look better would be her flat stomach swollen with his babe.

He'd marry her tomorrow if she promised him a houseful of children. He smiled at the thought of a bunch of blue-eyed, blonde toddlers running through the house and, of course, a few dark haired ones causing havoc as well. Nothing would make him happier. He'd best keep his desires and dreams to himself before he sent her screaming from the room, consummation be damned.

Their mouths met again, mating feverishly as Foster's hands found her breasts, caressing the hardened bud beneath his palms. His mouth left hers, traveling down her neck to the soft mounds. As he took one nipple into his mouth, Brooke's body arched, her hands holding his head firmly against her. The sweetness of her body beneath his teasing tongue drove him beyond ecstasy as he encircled each nipple before drawing it into his mouth, suckling greedily. His body throbbed heavily and he trailed a hand down her stomach to the center of her thighs, feeling her readiness.

He braced his arms on both sides of her and glanced at her. "I need you now, Brooke."

Her legs opened further as her hands reached out to him, encircling his neck. Foster gripped her hips and positioned himself over her. The adoration and unbridled passion he saw in her eyes drove straight to his heart as he thrust into her, breaking through the barrier marking her a virgin. Brooke gasped.

"Dear Lord," he whispered, holding himself as still as his iron will would allow. "I had no idea I would be your first."

Brooke's hips slowly moved, urging him to do the same. He needed no further coaching as he slipped in and out of her taking him to the brink of heaven. Brooke cried out, gasping for air, her pulse hammering in the base of her throat, as she tightened around him, giving him the final push over the top before he collapsed atop her.

He lay there moments later, hearing her heartbeat return to normal

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before rolling off her and drawing her into his embrace. She wrapped her arms about his waist.

“I’m sorry I hurt you.”

Brooke’s cheeks rose against his chest. “Don’t be. It only hurt for a second, and then...well, I think you know.”

Foster cocked one brow upward. “First time for that as well?”

She chuckled. “You were my first everything.”

He liked the sound of that. She had definitely gifted him. For the first time in many years he felt complete. Nothing ever felt so right. But the next time, he’d take his time and show her what passion could really be like. The next time he’d make her his wife.

“Foster?” she asked, bringing him from his revelry.

He stroked the back of her silky blonde head. After all, didn’t one normally marry the woman they loved? Foster smiled. He had fallen hard. “Yes, sweetheart?”

“Why does the mob owe you a favor?”

## CHAPTER 29

Sensing his reluctance to broach the subject she opened, she looked into his warm eyes shadowed with secrets. She didn't want any veiled truths between them. Brooke wanted to know all there was to know about the man lying with her, just as she was ready to share herself.

Placing a tender kiss above his heart, she said, "You know you can tell me anything."

"Why do you want to know? There's not much more to tell than what I've already told you."

She noted he avoided the topic. "But you didn't answer my question."

Foster shifted, his movements tense. "Who told you they owed me a favor? I'm not involved with the mob, nor will I ever be."

"Kip told me, but he said you wouldn't want to talk about it."

"Kip has a big mouth and has no right meddling. But he's right—I don't want to talk about it. As far as I'm concerned, it's a favor never to be collected. I'd much rather change the subject to more pleasant topics

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like..." He leaned in to kiss her.

Brooke responded to his kiss, holding his face between her hands, allowing his tongue to explore her mouth, but she wouldn't be so easily put off. If anything, her curiosity was fueled by his reluctance.

She broke the kiss and looked at him. "I want to know everything about you. Besides, I should know if I need to be concerned. If we are going to continue our relationship, then I need to know if there is something I should be worried about."

Foster shifted from the bed and stepped into his boxers. For a minute Brooke thought him ready to bolt. Coldness settled in her at the fear of being abandoned. He stalked across the room, shoved a hand through his unkempt hair, then glanced back at her.

"If I'm to tell you the story, then I must start from the beginning. Otherwise you might not understand completely. It's important to me that you know why I feel as I do."

He returned to the bed and sat beside her. "Shortly after my ninth birthday, my sister Amanda was born. We had the perfect family. Then one day, my old man walked out the door and never came home."

Tears formed in Brooke's eyes. How horrible for such a young boy.

"I don't want your pity, Brooke. I'm not sorry my old man walked out, so you shouldn't be either. We were left to fend for ourselves, but the man was an ass. My mother raised two children on the small amount of money we had. We did okay."

"When I turned fourteen, I went to work for a man named, Mac McCarthy. He was my mentor, taught me everything I needed to know about running a hotel. He was the father I never had. I loved Mac."

"Where is he now?"

"He died when I was seventeen...left everything to me. Seventeen years old and a hotel to run. I had to grow up real fast. On Mac's deathbed, he made me promise I would never allow the mob a piece of his hotel. I kept that promise and never allowed them to muscle in on his business. I took a few beatings, but in the end they respected me,

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left me alone. I don't know why, but maybe one of them knew Mac and as a favor to him, left me be."

Brooke's heart broke for the seventeen-year-old boy who stood up for his beliefs, no matter the consequences. He could have been killed. Her respect of him went up tenfold. "So why do they owe you a favor?"

"Mac taught me well." Foster smiled. "I turned his one hotel into four, this hotel didn't exist yet. Money rolled in like I'd never seen in my life. I took care of my mother and Amanda so they would never have to worry about money again. Lynette and my child died and I was alone, except for Ashley."

"Ashley?" Brooke crooked her head. She had reminded Foster of an old lover? "The same woman you thought I was? Is that why you wanted me?"

Foster pulled into his embrace. "Believe me, you're nothing like Ashley."

"But when we first met—"

"I know, sweetheart. I was wrong. You may look like Ashley, but you're as different from her as night and day. I'm sorry about the way we met. But believe me, if it was Ashley I wanted, I'd still be with her."

"Anyway, one day I was walking through the lobby of my New York hotel, the Ashton—"

Brooke's brow crooked. "The Ashton?"

"You know of the hotel?"

"I was there once when I was in New York. I never made the connection."

"Is it significant?"

Dear Lord, could it be? "Please, finish your story."

"The son of one of the mob bosses came through the lobby, dragging a poor reluctant woman behind him."

She gasped. "What did she look like?"

"Are you okay?"

"Did you see the woman?"



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“Not really. She wore a scarf. Did you know her?”

Tremors traveled through her causing her fingers to tremble. “What happened?”

“I didn’t trust this jerk. Even his father had commented on his lack of respect for the family. He ordered a room and dragged the woman up the stairs. She obviously didn’t want to be with him so I followed, keeping my distance. When he entered the room, locking the door behind him, I stopped and listened.”

Foster paused and took in her composure. Brooke had tried to hide it, but surely her paleness and tears had given herself away.

“What is it, Brooke? Did you know her?”

She nodded, afraid to voice the truth. She placed a hand over her lips as a sob tore through her.

Foster let out a stream of curses. “It was you!”

He pulled her into his embrace and held her, rubbing his palm down her back and kissing the top of her head. Brooke welcomed the comfort.

“I never saw you. After hearing you scream and the sound of him hitting something...you, I used my key and let myself into the room. I didn’t even look at you. I threw him against the wall and hit him so hard I shattered his nose. Blood splattered everywhere. I was so furious, I wanted to kill him. But when I finally controlled my rage, I turned and you were gone.”

“And my uncle promised you anything for saving me, only you never collected,” Brooke finished for him.

“Your uncle’s a godfather?”

“He’s not my real uncle,” she affirmed. “I was so embarrassed, so scared...I just wanted to get out of there. I didn’t even take the time to thank you. I just ran. I told my uncle everything. If not for you, I would have been raped or worse. He told me he would take care of it. Everything was swept under the rug, I never heard about it again. I was so devastated I secluded myself and after six months, I returned to

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Denver.”

“Which is about the same time I came to Denver.” Foster set her away from him and looked at her. She knew he wanted answers.

“I guess it’s my turn.” Brooke pulled the white sheet more tightly about her. “When my parents died in the train robbery, I continued to New York to stay with my aunt, as you already know. We didn’t get along. I had to find someplace else to go but I had no money. Returning to Denver was out of the question. I couldn’t go back until the memories of my parents lessened. I had little choice, so I went to work at a speakeasy. I had no idea the mob ran it. One night I came to work with a black eye. My boss was furious. When I told him it came from my aunt and I had no other place to stay, he offered me a room.

“At the time I didn’t know. He treated me like family. He told me to call him Uncle, and I did. Once I figured out who he was and what he did, it didn’t matter so much. He never did anything to harm me and did everything to take care of me.”

“He harmed others.”

“I know.” Shamed, Brooke dropped her gaze on the bed. “I had no one else to turn to.”

When Foster said nothing, she continued, “There was this animosity between the families. There usually was. But something had happened and my uncle warned me about going out by myself. Said it wasn’t safe for me. I wasn’t aware the bitterness ran so deep. I was naïve. I didn’t know how these things worked and felt my uncle was just being overprotective. I went to the corner store, wore a black scarf to conceal myself just to be on the safe side. I turned the corner from my uncle’s and that man grabbed me. He dragged me to the Ashton, threatening to cut my throat if I screamed. I didn’t know his name, only knew him by sight as the son of the rival family. Foster, I was so scared.”

Brooke swallowed the lump in her throat, threatening to cut off her airway. She wished he’d say something...anything. His face revealed nothing. Even if it meant losing him, she had to finish the story.

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"I should have never left the house without an escort. It was stupid, I know. Once he got me into the room and locked the door..."

She hiccupped, trying to continue, her lower lip trembling. "He threw me on the bed, slapped me across the face and bloodied my lip. Just as he ripped my dress you entered the room. I never took the time to look at you because I was so ashamed. I grabbed my scarf and ran. I never quit running until I was at my uncle's. He took one look at me and flew into a rage." Brook placed her hand on her lip. "He was going to have him killed. And a part of me wanted him to, but I convinced him not to. It would have created a war. I didn't want people to die because of me. Instead, he agreed to find out who you were and repay you."

"You never even bothered to make sure I was okay."

"I did! I asked my uncle. He swore you were fine. I couldn't face you, Foster. Not after what had happened. I was so ashamed." Brooke swiped a tear from her cheek. "A few months later, the son that attacked me was found dead, riddled with bullet holes. My uncle and I never spoke about it."

Foster stood and paced to the window, staring into the darkened night. He rubbed his palm down his whisker-roughened jaw. She knew he had a lot of information to digest. She only hoped he'd forgive her for not making sure of his safety. Brooke rustled from the bed and padded across the floor to her clothes. As she pulled the chemise over her head, Foster turned to look at her. She had to leave and save what little dignity she had left. She couldn't take his censure.

He stepped in her direction. "Don't."

"What do you want, Foster? I can't take the way you've been looking at me. I can't change what happened."

"No more than I can change my past." He placed his palm on her cheek and Brooke leaned into the warmth. "I need time to think about all of this, true—but I don't want you to leave."

"I can't take your scorn, Foster. I don't like my past either, but I

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can't change it."

"I don't want you to. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't change anything about you, Brooke. It's who you are and what's made you the person standing in front of me." Tears glistened in his warm brown eyes. "I need you in my life. I've needed you there since the day I met you. If you walk out now, I'll never fill the void you'll leave. I love you."

"What?" Brooke gasped. Dare it be true? "Could you repeat that?"

"Which part?" Foster's mouth turned up in a lopsided grin.

"The part about loving me."

"I love you, Brooke Abel." He got down on one knee before her. "Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

A chuckle erupted from her as she pulled him to his feet. "Foster Taylor, you are the most infuriating man I have ever met, but I would be a fool not to say yes."

"Yes?" Foster sounded as giddy as a schoolboy. Brooke smiled and her heart swelled as he pulled her tightly against him. "Does that mean you love me?"

"Since the first day you walked into my shop."

## CHAPTER 30

Kip stormed up the last few steps to Foster's office. His ire had hit a high note. He had yet to find the messenger boy, Jacob...but after talking to Shelly, the hotel clerk, he had a good idea why Brooke never received her message the night before. Alex Thurston should count his lucky cards Kip didn't just beat him to a bloody pulp. The no good scoundrel had interfered. Once the boy arrived, he'd be able to prove his suspicions. But first, he needed to talk to Foster. Hell, he'd likely be ten times more furious than Kip. Alex would be lucky to keep his job by day's end.

"Mr. Cameron," Foster's secretary greeted, a cheery smile on her face.

"Good morning, Mrs. Dunlap." Kip grasped her hand, kissing the back of it, sending her into a fit of giggles as her face reddened. "Is Foster in this morning?"

"Sorry. He hasn't come down yet."

His brow rose. "It's nearly ten in the morning. I've never known

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Foster to be late a day in his life.”

A look of worry crossed the secretary’s face. “As long as I’ve worked here, Mr. Taylor has always been in his office by seven-thirty sharp. I hope he’s not ill.”

“I’m sure he’ll be along soon enough.” Kip hoped that Brooke was indeed the cause of Foster’s tardiness. “Is Mr. Thurston in? I’d like a word with him.”

Mrs. Dunlap nodded. “Should I tell him you’re here?”

“I think I’d like to surprise him. But do let Foster know I want to speak with him when he gets here. That is if he makes it to the offices at all today.”

“I do certainly hope so. George Burke called early wanting to speak to Mr. Taylor. I’m supposed to have Mr. Taylor call him immediately upon his arrival. It sounded urgent.”

“If Foster’s not here by the time I finish with Mr. Thurston, I’ll retrieve him myself.” Kip winked at Mrs. Dunlap and she smiled in return.

“Thank you, Mr. Cameron. I do believe you could charm the habit off a nun.”

Kip laughed as he walked down the short hallway to Alex’s office. His mood sobered quickly enough. If Alex was behind any of this, he would see to it he couldn’t sit for a week after he promptly planted his size nine and a half boot up his...

“Alex.” Kip burst into his office, causing Alex to jump and fumble a few papers to the floor. “I’d like a word with you.”

Alex retrieved the papers, wisely not saying a word.

“You look a little shaken, Alex,” Kip taunted, bracing his hands on the desk. “Could your conscience be bothering you, maybe? Impossible! I don’t believe you have one.”

Alex backed from Kip’s presence. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I believe you do. Where were you the night before last? Here perhaps?”

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“I was home...by myself.”

“I think you’re lying. As a matter of fact, I think you were in the lobby shortly after six-thirty. Care to disagree with me?”

Alex seemed to size Kip up. Probably wondering how much he actually knew or if Kip bluffed. The man would suit himself better if he just came clean. If he chose to lie, Kip would make sure Foster gave him his walking papers *and* a boot in the ass.

“I was here,” Alex wisely admitted. “But since you seem to know about my whereabouts, why question me? Why not barge into Foster’s office and tell him what you think you know?”

“Well, you’re right on one account, I will tell Foster. But fortunately, he’s not here at the moment, so I opted to see you first.”

“Foster’s not in his office? He’s always here by seven-thirty. You can set your clock by him. I hope it’s not his mother.”

“Actually, I don’t think his mother has anything to do with his tardiness.” Kip grinned. He’d definitely enjoy being Alex’s bearer of bad news. “I’m going out on a limb here, but I think he might be late because of the very thing you tried so hard to stop. You breathe a word to anyone about his private life, I’ll be back in here so fast your head will spin. You’re damn lucky I don’t beat you to a bloody pulp as it is.”

Alex swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat.

“What’s the matter, Alex? Things not turning out as you hoped?”

Alex rose from his seat and slammed his palm on the desk. “I don’t regret any of it. I’ve loved Brooke since the day I set eyes on her.”

“She never loved you back, Alex. You can’t force someone to.”

Alex down-turned his gaze, his shoulders slumping. “For three years I hoped I could change her mind. When her engagement to Brian ended, I thought I finally had a chance. Then Celeste died and Foster turned to Brooke.”

“Brooke was lost to you before Celeste. Foster never loved Celeste nor she him. But the day Foster walked into Brooke’s shop, she had captivated him the way no other woman had. You never had a chance,

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Alex. Face it. And remember what I said, stay out of Foster's business or I'll be back."

Alex slumped back into his chair as Kip turned and stalked from the office. Alex's roar followed him down the hall.

"Mrs. Dunlap." Kip smiled, trying to contain his laughter. "Has Foster come down yet?"

"He just arrived, Mr. Cameron. He told me to tell you to go right in."

\* \* \*

Foster motioned for Kip to take a seat, returning his attention to the phone. Kip complied, lighting a cigarette.

"George," Foster said into the phone. "What have you got for me?... I see... Wonderful news!... What I want for you to do is make the necessary arrangements. Tell her I must see her... All right, tell her I'll call, but I want her out here in two weeks... Yes, of course, arrange passage for them both. I'll see to it the accommodations are taken care of on my end... Thanks, George. You'll be rewarded on your next pay check... Talk to you later."

Foster placed the phone back on his desk. He smiled. For once, things were finally going his way.

"I haven't seen you this happy in a long time." Kip chuckled. "Dare I ask the cause?"

"I think you know." Foster returned his amusement. "A certain blonde angel who agreed to be my wife."

"Did I hear you correctly?"

"Yes, you heard me. I asked Brooke to marry me. She said yes."

Kip jumped from his seat with a resounding yahoo and shook Foster's hand. "Looks like we are both headed for the altar, my friend."

"Are you saying?"

"Celeste has agreed to be my wife. Damn, never thought I'd see either of us married."



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“We’ll have to wait a bit before celebrating your union.”

“Of course.”

“The funeral service hopefully fooled her attacker. We all agreed it was the best way to protect her.”

“She’s safe with me.”

“I’ll have to hire someone to watch Brooke. I can’t be with her every minute of the day. The sooner we get married, the better. Then I can keep her in my penthouse with me.”

“When’s the wedding?”

“Not for at least two weeks.”

“Does that have something to do with your phone call to George?”

“Yes.” Foster’s smile returned to his face. “They found Ashley.”

“Ashley?” Kip’s eyes rounded “What the hell is going on?”

“Ashley and Brooke aren’t one in the same as we might have surmised early on. She has a twin.”

“But I thought—”

“Neither has a sister?” Foster finished for Kip. “Brooke’s family was extremely impoverished. It seems that when Brooke and Ashley were born, their parents couldn’t afford to raise them both. Brooke’s mother’s sister, Roberta, was barren. They agreed to each raise a child, but never tell the siblings about each other. They were afraid they would never forgive them for splitting them up.”

Kip stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray. “So they still don’t know about each other?”

“No. I plan to tell Ashley the whole story when I call.”

“When do you plan to tell Brooke?”

“My wedding present to my beautiful bride...her sister.” Foster hoped her reaction would be a good one. He certainly prayed it wouldn’t ruin the wedding. “I can buy her anything, money is no object. The one thing I can’t buy her is the family she tragically lost and misses dearly. I can, though, bring Ashley out here and unite her with the sister she never knew about.”

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Kip winced. "Don't you feel a slight bit worried how she'll react when she finds out you slept with both of them?"

"Hopefully, she'll understand. I can't make up for past mistakes."

"Let's hope so." Kip shifted in his chair. "There's something else I think you should know. I just came from speaking with Alex."

"Mrs. Dunlap informed me you were there." Foster sat back and folded his arms across his chest. "What's up?"

Lighting another cigarette, Kip continued, "He was the reason your message never made it to Brooke two nights ago."

"What the hell did Alex have to do with it?"

"It seems he intercepted the message from your herald."

"I ought to fire his ungrateful ass!" Foster slammed a fist onto the desk. "Maybe he's the one behind the murders. I've known him as long."

"I doubt that."

Foster stood and paced the floor. "What makes you so sure? It could be anyone." "I don't think Alex would go to that length. Sure, he admitted to being in love with Brooke," Kip said, taking a pull off his cigarette. "But by killing Celeste, he stood to gain nothing. He would have opened the doorway for you and Brooke and the way I see it, he would have done about anything, short of murder, to keep that from happening."

"Who then? Who hates me so much they would kill everyone I care about? I'm baffled...don't have a clue."

"I have an idea. The murderer only goes after the women you possibly love. Right?"

"Right," Foster said, bracing his hands on his desktop. "So far, anyway."

"So, we set a trap."

"If this involves Brooke, forget it. I won't endanger her any more than she already is."

"Whether you like it or not, she's already involved, Foster."

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Remember the masquerade?"

Foster grumbled. "I haven't forgotten."

"We'll announce your engagement publicly. Tell everyone of your upcoming marriage to Brooke. Then we'll keep Brooke out of sight until the wedding. We'll get someone else to run her shop. You said you can't wait to get her into your penthouse, so lock her in there."

"She'll never go for this. Hell, I would be a fool to allow it." Foster could see Kip's point. But to put Brooke in jeopardy? He'd never forgive himself if the plan backfired. And if it worked? He'd finally get these murders solved and the nut behind bars. Besides, having Brooke in his bed every night did have a certain appeal.

"You may have an idea...an idea that might catch this nut. We'll get the murderer acting on our terms, make him play our game. Let's just pray it doesn't backfire."

"It won't. I promise to help guard her with my life. I'll start the plan into action." Kip stood and headed for the door. "First, I'll see to it the newspaper announces your engagement on the front page of tomorrow morning's edition. Then, I'll see to it that as many of your employees know about the upcoming nuptials as possible."

"I'll find someone to take over Brooke's shop." Foster tapped the table with his finger. "I'll use the excuse I want her to meet my mother. After I take her to the clinic, she won't leave my sight or my penthouse without me."

## CHAPTER 31

Foster sat behind his mahogany desk, impatient. With Kip spreading the rumor of his upcoming wedding in two weeks, he had put Brooke in grave danger. He needed to put this business of Alex Thurston behind him as quickly as possible and retrieve Brooke. He had already found a reliable replacement to take over the duties of Brooke's shop until after the wedding, if not permanently. Brooke no longer would need to work. She belonged at home raising their children. Foster smiled. He might have devil of a time convincing her of it, though.

Visions danced in his mind of a young lad about the age of six, tugging on Brooke's skirts while a babe nursed. She'd make an excellent mother. He could see a whole passel of children running about. He wanted enough to fill his house so that neither would ever feel lonely again. Foster couldn't help thinking of Lynette and the child she carried. Had the baby lived, he'd have been about six.

He sighed, refusing to give into the melancholy. Life for him was

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about to get a whole lot better. He planned to start that family immediately, the hell with propriety. He wanted Brooke swollen with his child and the sooner, the better. Their marriage was just a few shy weeks away...no one would notice should she conceive before.

"Mr. Thurston is here to see you," Mrs. Dunlap broke into his musings.

Foster's gaiety fled him like the skin of a snake. "Send him in."

"Mr. Taylor, you wanted to see me?" Alex's appeared uneasy. He should be. The man would be lucky to keep his job.

"It's Mr. Taylor now?" Foster glared at Alex and offered him a seat. "Since when did the friendship end? Tell me, Alex, when did the hatred begin? Do I not pay you well enough?"

"My paycheck is never lacking."

"Does your hate run so deep you would commit murder?"

"Murder?" Alex gasped. "You can't think to accuse me—"

"Of what? Murdering Lynette? Celeste? I'm not sure what to think any longer." Foster leaned forward, clasping his hands in front of him. "At one point, I thought you my devoted right-hand man. Now?" He shrugged. "You tell me."

"I've worked for you for years, given my life to this job. I did the best I could and now you're going to fire me?"

Foster chuckled. "You underestimate me, my dear friend. You're an asset to my company."

"I'm glad you feel that way."

"Don't be so confident, Alex." Foster narrowed his gaze. "I am not foolish enough to allow my personal life to run my business decisions. Otherwise, you'd have been clearing your desk out. But because I am a man of business, I do see your worth to my company. I am not going to fire you as you probably thought was the reason for my calling you in here.

"I will warn you, however. You interfere with my personal life again, don't bother coming back to even clear your desk." Foster's

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glare caused Alex to visibly shiver. "If I find out you're the one behind these murders...it will be your funeral I attend next. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly." Alex gulped. "Was there anything else?"

"Yes," Foster's tone lightened. "My sister Amanda will be expecting you to call upon her Friday evening."

A frown furrowed Alex's forehead. "Excuse me?"

"Amanda finds herself enamored by you."

"You want me to take your sister out? You just accused me of murder."

"Had I actually thought you capable of killing, you'd be about six feet under right now. Besides, Brooke has agreed to be my wife and you'll no longer have her to chase after. Amanda isn't a bad consolation."

"Consolation? Amanda is beautiful." Alex spoke with sincerity. "Had I known I ever had a chance in hell that she would say yes, I would have taken her out long ago."

"Had it not been for your fascination with my wife?"

"Your wife? Oh, yes, of course...But Amanda is beautiful. And so is Brooke...well, what I mean—"

Foster grinned at Alex's discomfort. "I understand."

"I just thought Amanda was way out of my league." Alex blushed to the blond roots of his hair. "Friday you say?"

"Friday, seven o'clock, and not a minute late."

"Friday, seven."

Alex rose and quickly left his office as though he thought Foster might just change his mind. Foster grinned. Alex would be a good man for Amanda. She'd definitely keep him in line.

"Mrs. Dunlap," Foster called to his secretary who quickly appeared at the door. "I'm leaving. If anyone needs me, they can find me later in the penthouse. You may take the rest of day off with pay."

She straightened her shoulders and smiled. "Thank you, Mr.

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Taylor.”

Foster dismissed her, grasped his jacket from the back of his chair and headed out of the office. He had wasted too much time already. He needed to retrieve Brooke before something dreadful happened. He'd never survive something happening to her.

\* \* \*

*Eyes of ice filled with fury. So, the witch had agreed to be his wife. A cold day in hell, came to mind as the cloaked figure stood in the lobby, watching the opened door to the Body Apparel shop. The event would never take place. Long tapered fingers wrapped stealthily around an icy blade in the pocket of the black cloak. Maybe today Brooke would be spared and death would not call, but soon.*

*This wedding would never take place. Foster would lose everything he held dear. He'd never be happy the rest of his days. The demon had vowed to make his life a living hell for taking what belonged to the fiend. And all because of the cold man named Mac McCarthy. The demon's life had been stripped, forced to live a life of poverty.*

*Fingers tensed in an anger running years old...miles deep. Anticipation of the coming murder crawled through the veins, tingling the very nerve endings. A satanic smile appeared on thin lips. Soon, dear Brooke. Soon.*

\* \* \*

Brooke leaned on the counter of her shop, looking out the door and into the lobby. Business had been slow. Probably a good thing. Brooke had trouble keeping her mind on work. She tingled from head to toe in remembrance of the night she spent in Foster's arms.

He had asked her to marry him! Part of her still couldn't believe it. A smile lit her face. For the first time since her parent's death, she felt loved again. If only they could have lived long enough to meet Foster. Surely they would have loved him as she did.

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She thought of the day she had her own children. Brooke wanted several. Enough so that the rest of her days on earth, she'd never feel alone again. The past years without her parents had been one long nightmare that Foster had finally awakened her from. She'd be forever in his debt for that and never allow him to regret his decision to make her his wife. She'd spend the rest of her days being the wife he yearned for. And the rest of her nights...heat warmed her face. She never knew intimacy with a man could be so...

A chuckle erupted. Positively scandalous thoughts ran through her mind and what the night before her surely held. Foster had awakened a passion inside her, one she planned to explore. Her limbs numbed and her stomach fluttered. She was positively wanton. But first she'd meet his mother. Foster had sent word down that he'd be there soon to pick her up and that they would go to the clinic. She hoped to get along with her splendidly. After all, she would love to have a mother figure in her life again.

The bell over the shop jangled. Brooke glanced up to see Brian and Victoria enter. She remembered her as the woman Brian spoke to at the party they attended sometime back. Had she been correct in her assessment? The two had been having an affair while she was engaged to Brian?

Victoria sauntered to the counter, dressed in a deep violet gown with sequins falling like a cascading waterfall from the hem, shimmering with her every step. On her head, she wore a wide matching violet headband accented by a single feather of the same coloring. Victoria looked at Brooke with contempt, which confounded Brooke as she was no longer a threat. Brian and she had broken their engagement. Brian, on the other hand, seemed totally at ease.

"Brian." Brooke smiled, trying to hide her unease. "How are you faring?"

"Quite well." He returned her affection. "There is someone I'd like to introduce to you. Brooke Abel this is Victoria Henderson."



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Brooke extended her arm, which Victoria ignored. "Glad to meet you."

"This is Foster's new interest?" Venom laced her words. "I certainly don't know what he sees in you, dear."

"Excuse me?" Brooke gasped at the woman's dislike of her. Good heavens, she didn't even know her.

"I'm sorry, but you don't look his type at all." Victoria angry gaze bore into Brooke, making her shift. "You know, you look an awful lot like someone else I used to know."

"If the person you're referring to is named Ashley, I've already been told." Brooke crossed her arms over her chest in defense. "How would you know my fiancé and why the interest?"

"Victoria Henderson," Foster's deep voice boomed from behind them.

"Foster." Victoria voice turned to sugar, causing Brooke to roll her eyes. "If I'm not wrong, this positively beautiful lady just called you her fiancé."

"You're not wrong." Foster approached the trio, stopping just shy of Victoria. "Brooke is soon to be my wife."

"How cozy. She looks just like Ashley." She clucked, placing a finger on the tip of his chin.

He shook off her touch as though distasteful, and skirted the counter. He slipped a possessive hand around Brooke's waist. "I assure you, she is nothing like her. If she were, I wouldn't be marrying her."

"I'm surprised you're marrying at all." Victoria's tone seemed deadlier than the sting of a scorpion as Brooke wondered about the exchange between the two and where Brian entered into all of this.

"Brooke," his grip tightened, "this is my former secretary."

"This is who you were telling me about, Brian?" Brooke asked, amazed. She suddenly wondered at his choice in partners.

Brian shifted his stance. "Victoria showed up unexpectedly on my doorstep. Quite the surprise, though I assure you it was a pleasant one."

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Brooke wondered how anyone could be pleased at the arrival of this spiteful little witch, but wisely did not say so.

"I guess congratulations are in order." Victoria sneered. "I really thought you'd never marry, Foster. Lynette was always your one true love."

"Was, Victoria. But I assure you, I've never loved anyone the way I do Brooke...including Lynette."

The warmth of Foster's words seeped through her veins. Hearing his words spoken in front of others turned her knees to jelly. She was still getting used to the idea he loved her. And Foster professing he never loved another as he did her, overwhelmed her.

"I stand corrected." Victoria raised her chin. "You must forgive me if I do not attend the wedding."

"You're not invited, Victoria." A muscle ticked in Foster's cheek. "Now if the two of you would excuse us, we must be going."

"Certainly," Brian spoke up, a look of relief passing over him. "Victoria? You've come to see for yourself and now you know it's true. Shall we?"

"Not soon enough," Victoria spat, then stormed out of the small shop with Brian quick on her heels.

Brooke turned to look at Foster. "What was that all about?"

"A long story I'll tell you over dinner." A smile slowly curved up his cheeks as he leaned in to kiss her. "I've been waiting to do that all day. Now, shall we go?"

She didn't think she would ever get used to the heat spreading through her veins every time he touched her. Her blood rushed through her like molten lava and her heart nearly beat through her chest. Nothing could dampen her spirits, not even the likes of Victoria Henderson.

Brooke linked her arm in his and smiled. "After you."

## CHAPTER 32

Mabel Ruth rested peacefully as Amanda looked out the window. Luckily, her mother survived the small heart attack. Her mother's mortality stared her in the face. She hadn't realized how much her life centered around her family until now. She needed something more...someone other than her mother and Foster. She had already allowed too much of her life to pass her by, being the sole caretaker of her mother. She didn't regret it by any means, but she wanted more.

Amanda listened to her mother's even breathing behind her. Maybe it was time to find a husband, to settle down. Alex came to mind as he had the past couple of weeks. And even though she tried to gain his attention at the masquerade, he had looked right through her. As her reflection stared back at her through the window, she wondered what she lacked that Alex wanted in a woman. Brooke came to mind. Alex obviously had only eyes for her that night. But with Foster courting the woman, Amanda knew Alex didn't stand a chance. Maybe once Brooke was out of the way, Alex would see her instead of through her.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

The bed sheets rustled behind her. She turned to find her mother trying to right herself. She quickly rushed to her side. "Mama, you know you're not to exert yourself."

"Oh, phooey!" Mabel Ruth swatted at Amanda's hands. "I'm fit as a fiddle and I'll not lie in this bed a moment longer. Now, help me up."

"Mama, I don't think it's wise—"

"What on earth are you doing?" Foster roared as he came into the room, Brooke close on his heels. "You lie back in that bed, Mother, or I'll have you strapped to it."

"I've been on this earth much longer than you and I think I'm capable of knowing whether I need up or not. Now, get out of my way before I slap you into next week. I'm going home."

"The hell you are. You'll do no such thing until the doc tells you." Foster helped Mabel Ruth back to bed. Amanda could see her mother still lacked strength, no matter how she protested. "When did the doc say she could go home, Amanda?"

"Possibly in two days."

Mabel Ruth grumbled, but lay willingly back in the bed. "I think I'm capable of handling my own affairs. Foster, I want out of here tomorrow."

"Two days, Mother."

"Tomorrow."

His eyebrow rose in challenge. "Two days."

"Tomorrow. I think I can stay abed at home," she stated firmly, then glanced at Brooke who held her position by the door. "Ashley?"

"No, Mother—Ashley still lives in New York."

Her brows came together over the bridge of her nose. "Then who is this beautiful creature? Have we met before, dear?"

Brooke smiled. "No, ma'am."

Foster crossed the room and pulled the blonde to his side. "This is Brooke Abel, the woman I've been telling you about."

"Do come closer, my dear." Mabel Ruth held her hand. "My eyes

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ain't what they used to be. Do you love my son?"

"Mother—"

"It's all right, Foster." Brooke patted his hand before approaching the bed and taking Mabel Ruth's offered one. "Yes, Mrs. Taylor, I love your son very much."

"Now, don't you go hurting him." Amanda saw the mischievous gleam in her mother's eye. "I've seen him go through enough pain for one lifetime."

"As I said, I love your son." Brooke smiled warmly. Amanda already liked the woman. No wonder Alex seemed so taken by her. "I only want his happiness."

Foster glanced to Amanda. At least he hadn't ignored her altogether. "Brooke, this is my delightful sister, Amanda."

Brooke turned and smiled at Amanda. "I'm very glad to meet you."

"Don't believe a word he says about me," Amanda said with a wink.

Brooke returned to Foster who draped a possessive arm over her shoulder. "He has only told me good things about the both of you."

Amanda eyed her brother. Wonders never cease. "I would have thought the complete opposite from him."

"I'm full of surprises." Foster shrugged, an impish grin on his face. "Anyway, there is another reason I am here. I wanted you both be the first to know that Brooke has agreed to become my wife."

Amanda gasped. "I never thought I'd see the day since..."

"Lynette died," Foster supplied when Amanda's voice trailed off in embarrassment and her face heated. "It's all right. I've told Brooke about her."

Mabel Ruth harrumphed, gaining everyone's attention. She winked at Brooke. "Somebody certainly must warn you about Foster's bad manners. We'll have to talk."

Brooke laughed. "Of course."

"You better make it a speedy recovery then," Foster added, giving

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Brooke's shoulder a squeeze. "The wedding will be held in my ballroom...one week from Friday."

Brooke gasped. "But I'll hardly have time to prepare. I need to have a dress made. The minister must be contacted so we can marry in a church. I'll have it no other way. Surely, less than two weeks is not enough time."

"If a church wedding is what you want, then you'll have one." Foster grinned. "But mark my words, Brooke—we will be married in under two weeks."

"Foster Taylor!" Mabel Ruth nearly came out of her bed again. "You can't think to force this poor child into a speedy wedding because you can't control yourself! Bah! I won't have it."

Brooke's face reddened at Mabel Ruth's obvious meaning. Amanda smiled. Brooke would have to get used to their eccentric family if she was to be a part of them.

"Mother—"

"I think two months will be soon enough," Mabel Ruth interrupted Foster. Her look dared him to defy her.

"You pipe down, you ornery old woman. I'll not budge on this and it has nothing to do with controlling myself, I assure you." Foster's deep voice boomed across the room. "I'm getting married a week from Friday. You can either be there, or I'll tell you all about it the day after."

"Foster, maybe we shouldn't—"

Mabel Ruth cut off Brooke's attempt to salvage the day. She'd soon realize it was just Mabel Ruth's way of showing affection. But the poor dear did look distressed, Amanda thought.

"You listen here, sonny. You're not too old I can't turn you over my knee."

"You're much too weak, Mother. Save the dramatics. Now, if you want out of here in two days—"

"Tomorrow," she corrected.

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“Two days,” he supplied, not giving. “You better behave or I’ll leave you here until the wedding if you think you can dissuade me from the date I chose. The decision has been made and plans are already set into motion. Brooke will be my wife a week from Friday.”

“See?” Mabel Ruth turned to Brooke. “These are those manners I was speaking about.”

Brooke chuckled, snuggling closer to Foster’s side. Amanda could clearly see the love she held for Foster in her eyes.

“I knew you’d see things my way,” Foster told his mother, grinning as though he won round one.

“Fine. A week from Friday it will be,” Brooke conceded. “But I’ll need a maid of honor. Amanda would you please? I know I just met you, but I was hoping we could become friends.”

Amanda smiled, then stuck her tongue out at Foster. “I would be honored.”

Foster held a hand over his heart. “Betrayed by my own family.”

“Wonderful.” Mabel Ruth clapped. “Everything is set then and once I get home tomorrow—”

“Two days!” Foster and Amanda chimed together.

“Fine, two days.” She glared at the unmoving siblings. “Then, I’ll help Brooke prepare for the upcoming wedding.”

With a sheepish look, Foster jumped in. “I’ll see to everything.”

“Foster, a bride has the right to plan her own wedding,” Mabel Ruth pointed out.

“Not in this case.”

Brooke’s eyes widened as she looked at Foster. Amanda could see Foster’s decision was not a popular one with his bride-to-be. “But Foster—”

“I’m not moving on this issue.” Foster fixed Brooke with a glare that should have sent her running. Instead, adding humor to the already delightful day, Amanda smiled at the squaring of Brooke’s shoulders. No matter what Foster said, Brooke would dog him every step. She’d

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be good for her brother.

"Now, if the two of you will excuse us..." Foster glanced from Mabel Ruth to Amanda. "Amanda, I nearly forgot...Alex asked for my permission to ask you out. I told him I didn't see why not. I hope that was okay with you."

Amanda sucked in her breath, warmth spreading through her. "Of course!"

"I told him mind his manners," Foster said, with a wink. "He'll pick you up Friday at seven."

Amanda eyed Foster. "Foster you didn't ask him..."

"Of course not!" Foster retorted. "You don't think I'd actually set you up with a friend of mine do you?"

She beamed. "No, of course not."

Holding an elbow out to Brooke, he said, "We'll be seeing you at home."

Brooke placed her hand in the crook. "It was nice meeting you both."

"You, too, my dear," Mabel Ruth said, "and do call me Mother."

Brooke smiled, obviously pleased by the request.

Amanda looked at her mother once the two had gone. She chuckled. "I do believe Foster has met his match."

\* \* \*

Sitting quietly beside him in his black Ford Sport Coupe, Brooke watched the rows of houses pass before pulling up to the entrance of the Ashford. She turned to Foster. Why on earth had he decided to stop here?

"Did you forget something?"

"No. Why?" Foster stepped from the automobile, handing his keys to Kyle. "Park this for me."

"Certainly, Mr. Taylor." Kyle entered the vehicle as Foster retrieved Brooke from the other side.



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"I don't understand. Don't you think you should be taking me home?"

"I have something I want to show you."

"Can't it wait? I really am tired, Foster. It's been a long day." She looked briefly to the street as heat crawled up her neck. "After all, we didn't get much sleep last night."

Foster's smile could have melted butter, causing her stomach to flip. "As I doubt you will tonight."

"You can't mean—"

Foster grasped her hand and headed up the stairs so quickly, Brooke nearly had to run to keep up. "Oh, but I do, Miss Abel...tonight and every night from now on. I won't be letting you out of my sight."

"I really think we should wait until after the wedding. What about my reputation?"

"Like that matters, sweetheart. You'll be my wife in less than two weeks. Who will care?"

Brooke trotted the rest the way up the flights of stairs, nearly breathless, trying to keep up. When they reached the top floor, she spotted a man standing in front of Foster's penthouse. Brooke shied behind Foster. The man certainly looked threatening enough.

"Foster, I don't think—"

"He works for me." Foster nodded to the man, skirted his hulking form and unlocked his door. Once inside, Foster yanked Brooke inside and slammed the door shut, pinning her against it. "Any objections, Miss Abel?"

Before Brooke had time to form a thought, Foster descended upon her lips. His tongue traced the taut line of her mouth, her gasp gaining him entrance. Her knees weakened and her limbs numbed. She circled his neck just to keep herself from sliding down the door. Foster's affect on her was astounding. She could spend the rest of her life kissing him and intended to do just that.

Suddenly, Foster stepped back, leaving her feeling as though a

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bucket of ice water doused the flames he had begun. She wanted him back in her arms. Brooke ran a shaken hand over her lips as she looked into his chocolate brown eyes. With a chuckle she decided she had become quite wanton where Foster was concerned. The man made her act positively scandalous.

"I've been waiting to do that all night." Foster laughed. He grasped her hand and pulled her tightly against him so she could feel his arousal resting intimately between them. Foster leaned in and whispered into her ear. His breath fanned the delicate skin. "I want to make love to you, Miss Abel...until the sunlight comes in the window."

"But..." Brooke tried to think of a valid excuse to hold off until after the nuptials. "The wedding isn't even two weeks away. Can't you wait—"

"No." He scooped her into his arms. "Not even another hour."

Brooke giggled as he carried her to his waiting bed, still rumpled from the night before. If she were truthful, the gnawing ache between her own legs spoke of her desire to make love to him as well.

As Foster laid her upon the bed, she asked, "What about the man outside?"

"Get used to him, Brooke."

"What do you mean?"

"Until the wedding, he'll be at the door." Foster laid down beside her, brushing her collarbone with chaste kisses, rendering her nearly thoughtless.

Her fingers threaded through his black hair, untying the queue. "Why must he guard you?"

"You, my dear." Foster worked the buttons on the front of her dress, exposing her further as his kisses trailed to the center of her breasts.

"Me?" Brooke squealed, stilling his hands. "Why are you afraid of me?"

"I'm not afraid of you, Brooke." His tone spoke of his impatience. "Can't this wait?"

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“No.” She shifted away from his touch. “What are you afraid of?”

“I’m afraid for you.” Foster reached for her, but she backed away.  
“Brooke—”

“No, Foster, I demand to know what’s going on.”

“I put him there to guard you, Brooke. With a murderer running around, attempting to kill the woman I love, I can’t be too careful.”

“So, he’ll be following me around until the wedding?”

“Not exactly.”

“Until the murderer is caught?”

“Not exactly.”

“Then what exactly do you mean?”

“You’re not leaving my penthouse until after the wedding.”

Brooke gasped, then ceremoniously deposited him on the cold, hard floor with one shove of her hand.

## CHAPTER 33

“What the hell was that for?” Foster roared from his position on the floor, his ego severely bruised. Never had he been kicked out of a bed before and certainly not his own.

“Foster Taylor, if you think you can lock me in this penthouse, you’re sorely misguided.” She looked positively eatable as she looked down on him, hands on her hips.

“The decision has been made, Brooke.” Nothing she said would change his mind. He meant to keep his adorable fiancée safe from harm. He stood, brushed off the seat of his pants and stared down at the little imp seated in the center of his bed. “You are not to leave this penthouse and Alabaster is posted at the door when I’m not here to make sure you don’t.”

“That ape of a man, standing at the door?” Brooke squeaked. “Surely, you can’t think to keep me here for the remainder of the two weeks. I have a shop to run.”

“I do intend to keep you here. And nothing you say will change my

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mind.” Foster tried to sit on the bed, but her outstretched foot stopped him. He wasn’t about to get any at this rate. “I’ve taken care of the shop. One of my employees will be running it for you.”

“It’s my shop and I’ll run it!”

“Like hell you will! You will not leave this penthouse.”

“Get away from me!” Brooke used her foot to shove him away from her. “If you think you’ve deposited me nice and cozy in your bed for the next couple of weeks, think again! I may not have a choice about staying here, but you surely won’t be sharing this bed with me.”

“You can’t be serious?” He’d have to turn on his irresistible charm. “You can’t resist me.”

“I think that’s a challenge I’ll just have to take.” She tossed his pillow at him, which he caught and hugged to his chest. “You can sleep on the couch.”

“But you said you loved me.”

“Love has nothing to do with this. You’re holding me against my will.”

“But that’s because I love you and I don’t want to lose you.” Foster blew out a puff of air. “Dammit, Brooke! Don’t you understand? There’s a murderer running loose. If I allow you to walk freely, who’s to say you won’t be next? Hell, had I been smart, I would have waited to ask you to marry me until the son of a bitch was caught. But you got the best of me. I couldn’t wait to have you with me every night. Don’t push me away!”

Brooke tossed a second pillow at him. This one he dodged and it hit the door before landing on the floor. “I hope the sofa is comfortable enough for you, because that’s where you’re spending your nights until after the wedding.”

Dejected, Foster turned and headed for the door. He stopped just before going through it. But as he opened his mouth, Brooke cut off his retort.

“If your decision is final, Foster, then so is mine.”

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Foster stormed back to the bed, yanked the quilt from her grip, causing Brooke to squeal. He turned on his heel and stalked from the room, slamming the door behind him. *Fine*...he'd spend the night on the sofa. But come the middle of the night, she'd be shivering and begging for him to come back to bed. Two could play her game. He grumbled all the way to the sofa where he promptly dropped. The furniture groaned from his weight.

"Damn ungrateful woman," Foster mumbled. If she'd only take the time to look at the situation, she'd realize he was doing this for her own good. Instead, she acted like a cornered wildcat, having her freedom stripped. *Women*, he'd never understand them.

Foster bunched the pillow beneath his head and smiled. Little did she know, just having her near was enough for him. He threw an arm over his eyes and hoped sleep would soon come.

\* \* \*

Brooke paced the confines of Foster's room. His presence was stamped everywhere, heightening her senses. Maybe she had been too hard on him. She not only punished him for trying to protect her, she punished herself. She wanted nothing more than to walk over to the door, throw it open and beg his forgiveness. A night spent in his arms was surely better than pacing the floor. Her breasts ached for his touch. Her breathing thinned just thinking about the night before and the feelings he invoked in her. She was either damn stubborn or just plain stupid.

Walking to the door, she paused when her hand touched the knob. If she gave in now, he'd likely think he could control her. She wanted to make love to him, but at what cost? Certainly he wouldn't think to try this tactic to get his way in the future on some other disagreement. Brooke had lived alone for so long she was used to doing things she wanted without having anyone to answer to. Brooke ran her hands through her hair, turned and threw herself on the bed, punching her

## ***DARK SAVIOR***

pillow.

Ecstasy waited just beyond the door and here she lay all by herself. Yep, she was just plain stupid.

Brooke rolled from the bed and approached the wardrobe. If she were to stay here the night, then she needed something to sleep in besides her dress. She grinned. Grasping one of his shirts from the hanger, she tossed it to the bed. She quickly undid the buttons of her dress, stepped out of it, then donned Foster's shirt, raising it to her nose. It smelled just like him. After she slept in his shirt, he'd not be wearing it to work. She giggled. That would be Foster's problem and would serve him right. Brooke returned to the bed and wrapped herself around the remaining pillow, drifting to sleep.

Hours or minutes later, a noise awoke her. Sitting abruptly, she listened. Her heart beat heavily against her ribs and her blood rushed through her veins as she reminded herself that Foster slept just beyond the closed door. At least she hoped he still slept out there. What if the killer...

The muffled sound increased along with a violent thrashing of the furniture. Brooke gasped. Not thinking her actions through, she flung open the door and burst into the darkened living room. Her breath caught in her throat.

Foster tossed to his back. "God, no! Please, no!"

Brooke ran to his side and shook his shoulder. "Foster, it's only a dream."

He woke with a start, sat abruptly and rubbed his eyes, blinking at Brooke. He reached for her and pulled her against his chest. Brooke could feel his heart beat frantically against her cheek. His hands tangled in her hair as he took deep, steadying breaths. After a few moments sitting tangled together, Foster pulled her head back and glanced into her eyes. His gaze lowered to her mouth before he covered it with his own, kissing her deeply. She responded in kind and opened to him. Their tongues sparred violently, their lips grated against teeth. They

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

wanted each other with a hunger that bordered on violence.

His hands left her hair and smoothed down her back to grasp a cheek of her buttocks in each hand. Her skin burned from his touch, the juncture of her thighs ached. She needed him inside her, wanted him more than she ever thought possible. She gasped as his mouth left hers to make a wet trail down her throat and up her neck to her ear. He tugged on the lobe with his teeth, then soothed the area with his tongue. Shivers of delight danced along her skin.

Her hands ran up the planes of his chest, tangling in the crisp hair. She reveled in the contrast of her smooth palms to the coarse hair. Foster moaned as her fingers found his flat nipples and tweaked the centers. She knew she affected him in the same manner he did her, fueling her desire to open herself to him. But if she gave in to him now, he'd think he could always control her, using sex as a tool to get her to do what he desired.

She pushed at him until he released her. His chest rose and fell with his heavy breathing as he looked at her in confusion. "No, Foster. This isn't the reason I came out here. I wanted to make sure you were all right."

He raked his hands through his hair, pushing the long strands from his eyes. Pain rested in the depths.

"What is it?"

Foster sat back on the sofa and tucked an arm behind his head, staring at the ceiling. He took in a deep breath and released it. He said nothing for long moments. Brooke took his silence to mean he didn't wish to confide in her. She moved on the sofa and meant to rise when his hand stopped her.

"I couldn't reach him."

"Who?" Brooke shifted in her seat and placed a palm on his whisker roughened cheek.

"My son."

Tears glimmered in his dark eyes as his Adam's apple bobbed in his



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throat. She wished there was something, anything she could say to take away the pain.

“He stood beside me, about three years old...knee high. His dark shiny hair brushed the collar of his starch shirt as he held my hand.” He grasped her hand from his cheek and kissed the palm. “Suddenly, a cloaked figure appeared in the center of the street. My son was drawn to him, like flowers to the sunshine. I couldn’t stop him. He pulled at my hand, but I wouldn’t let go. With a violent yank, he broke free, running into the street toward the man.

“Just before he reached him, a car sped down the street, sending him flying through the air. I dropped to my knees, feeling as though I had been hit by the car myself. That’s when you woke me.”

Tears slipped down Brooke’s cheek. “I’m sorry.”

“Love me, Brooke.”

Her brows drew together. “You know I love you.”

“I need you to show me.” He pulled her back into his embrace, his lips hovering dangerously close to hers. “Love me, Brooke. Take away the pain.”

Brooke couldn’t deny him. Suddenly her defiance seemed silly and misguided. After all, Foster had only meant to protect her and she had repaid him by pushing him away. She ran her hands up his chest, feeling his muscles bunch beneath her touch. She wanted his hands, his mouth, on her flesh, making her feel alive and out of control.

His mouth covered hers as his hands covered her breasts with only his shirt between them. Her nipples hardened against his touch, leaving her gasping for much needed oxygen. The heat from his touch zeroed down her abdomen and arrowed straight for the juncture of her thighs. She straddled his lap, needing to feel him against her. The abrasion of the rough cloth of his jeans against her bare flesh sent her reeling. She wanted...no, needed...him inside her should she faint from the light headedness now plaguing her.

As though knowing exactly what she desired, Foster tossed her to

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

her back and came to rest between her thighs. Brooke arched against him. "Please, Foster."

He chuckled. "A change of heart, sweetheart?"

She slapped at his hand. "Don't make light of this."

"Never."

He grasped each side of his shirt and ripped it opened, sending buttons tinkering about the room. Her eyes widened as he looked down at her with such intensity she swore he could look into her soul.

"Seeing you in my shirt is sexy as hell," he whispered, before his mouth covered one of her breasts and suckled greedily.

Unable to utter a word, Brooke's fingers tangled in his hair, holding his head flush, not wanting the delicious torture to end. Her blood turned to molten lava, burning a path through her body as it traveled from her head to her toes. She wrapped her legs about Foster's slender waist, his jean covered groin tight against her burning flesh.

Brooke couldn't wait to have him a moment longer. Her hands slipped between them and unfastened his jeans, her feet pushing at the waist band, trying desperately to push the cumbersome material from his hips. Foster rolled to the side, giving her hand better access as a look of pain crossed his face, causing Brooke alarm.

"Am I hurting you?"

Foster laughed. "No, sweetheart, I think I found heaven."

He assisted her in divesting him of the rest of his clothes. He wasted little time entering her, pushing to the hilt. Brooke gasped as she rose up to meet him, thrust for thrust. As pleasure stole over them, sending them both to the heaven he had found, Brooke silently prayed he would plant a babe within her womb, to give him back what had been stolen. He collapsed in her arms, rolling to the side to shift his weight from her, but still holding her tightly. He kissed the top of her head and said, "Thank you," before drifting off to sleep.

Brooke smiled. *No, thank you.*

## CHAPTER 34

A week had passed since Foster sequestered Brooke in his penthouse and she had settled in quite comfortably. Locking his office, he quickly bid Mrs. Dunlap a good evening. Foster had always been the last to leave his offices, but since Brooke awaited him in the penthouse, he no longer dallied. Instead, he worked hard at finishing his tasks, just so he could head to his home...their home, and be in her presence.

Walking up the one flight of stairs, he spotted Alabaster at his post in front of the door. Hopefully soon, Foster would no longer require his services. Brooke's safety had been his main focus and would continue to be until this son of a bitch was caught. Alabaster's handle bar mustache turned upward as he approached.

"Any problems today, Alabaster?" Foster already knew the answer as Brooke had been quite the agreeable prisoner over the last few days once she realized nothing would change Foster's mind or remove the man at the door.

"Not today boss." His rich baritone echoed down the hall. "If only

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

my job at the Tuxedo Club was as easy.”

“Glad to hear it. How’s Brendan fairing without you?”

“I’m not the only doorman in the city, though you might think differently talking to him, but he’s doing okay.”

“Well, I for one am certainly glad he allowed me to hire you for a few weeks. If you see no trouble, you may leave shortly. I’ll handle things from there.”

“Are you sure?” Foster knew Alabaster had become quite fond of Brooke and worried for her safety as well.

“I’m sure everything will be fine. Besides, you could use the time off. Sixteen hours a day, standing in front of this door has got to be monotonous.”

“Miss Abel’s a gracious host. I spend a good deal of time with her when she invites me in to visit.”

“She’s become quite taken with you.” Foster’s brow rose. “Maybe I should be protecting her from you?”

Alabaster unlocked the door and stepped back, holding it open for Foster. “Nothing to worry about, boss, she’s only got eyes for you.”

“So she says.” Foster laughed, entering the penthouse and closing the door behind him.

The click of the lock followed him as he walked toward the kitchen, the smell of cooked beef wafting to his nose. The idea of supper being on the table on his nightly return appealed to him. The kitchen hadn’t been used for cooking in the three years he lived there. Foster placed his stack of papers on the sofa table and followed the scent. His stomach panged. As he entered the kitchen, Brooke flew into his arms and kissed him soundly on the lips. He could get used to this.

In every way, Brooke had already become the perfect wife...well almost. He still slept on the couch and had the aching balls to prove it. Brooke wouldn’t budge on the matter of him sharing her bed. Not since his nightmare. And damn if that sofa made for a lonely bed partner.

“I missed you.”

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Really?” Foster grasped her buttocks. “Care to show me how much?”

Brooke smiled saucily and slapped at his hands. “Not until after the wedding.”

“You’re killing me, Brooke.” He growled into her ear. “I can hold you, touch you...but I can’t have you.”

Brooke smiled, twisted out of his grasp and walked over to the oven. “Not until the end of the week. I think you can hold out.”

“Then you obviously don’t know the effect you have on me.” Foster grasped her hand and yanked her back to his embrace, his arousal resting against her abdomen. “But I bet you can feel it.”

“You are positively scandalous. Don’t think that I don’t want it as well.”

Foster nipped at her neck. “If you did, then we wouldn’t be standing here arguing the point. I’d be burying myself between those luscious legs.”

Sliding from his embrace, Brooke returned to the oven to fetch the roast and potatoes she had been cooking. He knew she fought the same demons he did. He could see it in the blush on her face. She desired him as well, which meant that she had to be suffering nearly as much as he. *Serves her right.*

Brooke set the platter of the table. Foster pulled out a chair and sat down. “Smells delicious.”

“Amanda stopped by,” Brooke said, slipping into the seat next to him.

“Really? What did my illustrious sister have to say today?”

Foster plopped a bite of beef in his mouth. Brooke’s gaze dropped to his lips which made his groin clench. Why the hell did she have to be so stubborn about this? They could easily end both of their suffering. Her gaze traveled back to his, causing her cheeks to flush further as she realized she had been caught ogling.

“She brought by her dress for our wedding.” He could see the

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

excitement sparkling in her eyes. “It was a deep blue...as dark as the midnight sky. I think your tuxedos would look handsome trimmed in the same color.”

“If that’s what you want, then I’ll see to it.”

Foster plucked a small morsel from his plate and held it out for Brooke. She took the offering, her lips lingering on his flesh. He used the pad of his thumb to wipe off the remaining juice. He wasn’t about to make this easy for her, even if it meant making himself suffer as well. With any luck, he’d break down her resistance and he’d be back in her bed well before the wedding.

Brooke cleared her throat and backed from his ouch. “Amanda said she had a wonderful time with Alex the other night.”

“Alex told me pretty much the same.” Foster smiled at her attempt to stop his seduction. If she intended to hold true to her vow, then he intended to torture her every step of the way. “How’s your dress coming?”

“I was told it would be ready by Friday. I can’t wait until you see me in it, Foster. It’s simply beautiful.”

Foster clucked his tongue. “I can’t wait to get you out of it.”

Brooke stood, her face shade deepening. For a minute he thought he had pushed too far. But when he caught a glimpse of the desire she tried to bank in her gaze, he knew instead that he had affected her. Maybe stepping up the efforts would finally get him between the sheets.

As she cleared the dishes, Foster’s gaze traveled leisurely down her legs and back up to her tiny waist, only to land on her small breasts. His mouth watered. “You look positively eatable.”

Brooke straightened her spine and shot Foster a look meant to shame him. It hadn’t worked. “I swear you’re going to be the end of me.”

She turned her back on him and began washing the dishes. Another diversion. Foster stepped silently behind her and wrapped his arms

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

about her waist. He licked the shell of her ear, feeling her body's shiver. "One kiss," he whispered.

Brooke tried shimmying from his embrace to no avail. "Please, I have dishes to do."

He turned her in his embrace, sending water flying about the kitchen and soaking his shirt front as she clenched the rag like a lifeline. "One kiss and I'll leave you to your dishes."

"One kiss is never enough for you, Foster."

"Just one," he mouthed, before his lips descended on hers.

To his amusement, Brooke didn't resist. Instead her arms slipped around his neck as the rag dropped to the floor in a soggy splat. She opened to him and he slipped his tongue past her satiny lips, tasting, teasing hers into a response. Her excitement rose, he could feel it in her kiss, as his own arousal plagued him. He could easily bend her to his way of thinking, which brought a smile to his lips as he ended the kiss and backed away. He'd allow her to think she controlled the situation.

He licked his lips, still savoring her taste. "Until the night of the wedding, dear wife."

"Of course," she agreed, smoothing her palms over her blonde hair. "And not a minute before."

Foster hid his chuckle and reached down for the discarded rag, handing it to her. Their fingers touched and lingered as her gaze traveled briefly to their hands.

"Why do you wear the twin silver rings on your fingers?"

Taken aback by her sudden change in topics, Foster glanced at the bands. He had never discussed their representation before, and no one had ever cared to ask. Truth be told, he hadn't thought about them in a long time. They had become a part of him.

Foster held his left hand up and looked at the ring adorning it. "They've been there for so long, I never think about them."

Brooke looked at him, her curiosity clearly written in her gaze.

"I bought them six years ago. The one I wear on the middle finger

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

of my left hand was my wedding band. Lynette's is the one I wear on the small finger of my right. I picked them up at the jeweler, and when I returned home, Lynette was having severe back pains. I went to the doctor's to get the medication and when I returned she had been mortally wounded. I never had the chance to show them to her."

Taking Lynette's off, he looked at the worn engraved inscription: *cherished one*. He tumbled the small ring about his large hand as though testing the weight of it, before tossing the ring on the nearby table. The sound of the metal clinked loudly as it hit the surface of the kitchen table. He supposed he no longer needed them...not with Brooke in his life.

As he began removing the other ring from his left hand, Brooke stopped him. He glanced at her, looking for answers. What he saw, love and adoration, nearly stopped his heart from beating.

"I'm not jealous of your past, Foster. Those rings are as much a part of you as I am."

His heart swelled. "Are you sure?"

"Lynette will always be a part of your past." Brooke touched his cheek. "I don't want to erase your memories. I only want to be a part of your future."

Brooke picked up the small ring and grasped his hand, sliding the token back to its resting place. "I love you, Foster. That means everything about you, including your past. Our past makes us who we become."

"I think I love you more now, Brooke, if that's even possible. Thank you." He leaned down and kissed her soundly. Grasping her buttocks tightly, he growled against her lips. "I think you better run for the bedroom and lock that door before I change my mind about taking you here on the kitchen table."

"Foster!" Her eyes widened as well as her smile.

Squealing, she ran for the bedroom with him in hot pursuit, slamming the door behind her. Foster chuckled all the way to the sofa.



***DARK SAVIOR***

He settled upon it, arm behind his head and smiled at the ceiling.

## CHAPTER 35

“Frank?” Kip nearly shouted from his seat in Foster’s office. “You can’t be serious. You know who he is?”

“Of course I do,” Foster said dryly. “I don’t go around inviting crime bosses to social events every day.”

“Then why invite him to your wedding?” Kip shoved his fingers through his blond hair. “I know he owes you a favor, but—”

“He’s already on his way.” Foster frowned. He didn’t like the idea any more than Kip. But for Brooke, he’d do anything. “This really isn’t up for discussion.”

“What about Brooke? Does she know the kind of company you’re keeping? How will she feel when she knows you invited one of New York’s notorious gangsters.” Kip winced. “I’d hate to be there when you tell her.”

“I won’t be telling her until he arrives and neither will you.” Foster stood, stretching his muscles. The nights of lying on the sofa were really starting to get to him. Two more days. “But I hardly think she’ll

## ***DARK SAVIOR***

be appalled.”

“Ha!” Kip laughed. “I bet she’ll be mad as a hornet.”

Foster walked to the window and braced his hands on the sill, looking down on the puddle-filled street. The closer the wedding, the tenser he became. Certainly he couldn’t wait to share his bed with her, but more importantly he had a murderer to catch. If all went as planned, he would finally be rid of the menace following him since New York. Foster rolled his neck. He didn’t even want to think about what would happen should the plan fail.

“She was the one I saved in New York,” Foster said quietly, as lightning flashed across the sky.

“Who?”

Foster turned from his position and sat on the sill, looking at Kip. “Brooke. She was the one I kept from getting raped three and a half years ago.”

“So she’s the reason Frank owes you a favor.” Kip downed the remainder of his whiskey. “Frank is Brooke’s uncle?”

“Frank took Brooke in when she needed a place to stay. She worked for him. At the time she didn’t know who or what Frank was. He told her to call him Uncle and she did. When she found out he was a mob boss, he was already like family.”

“Wouldn’t you have recognized her? At the very least thought she was Ashley.”

“I never saw her face. By the time I gave the son of a bitch the beating he deserved, the girl fled.” Foster poured himself a glass of the amber colored whiskey, tossing back the contents. The fiery liquid stung a path to his stomach. “I was afraid of his family retaliating, but I couldn’t allow him to rape her.

“Frank came to see me later that day. He told me he would take care of everything. And I guess he did, because I never heard anything more about it. He said he owed me one for saving his niece.”

“Damn!” was all Kip could mutter as he polished off a second

## DARK SAVIOR

tumbler of whiskey.

“Yeah, I know...quite the mess.”

Mrs. Dunlap walked into the room, handing Foster an envelope. “This just came for you, Mr. Taylor.”

Foster examined the envelope, turning it over in his palm. Foster Taylor was typed across the white envelope, with no address. “Who gave this to you?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Taylor, when I came back from lunch, the envelope laid on my desk.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Dunlap.”

She turned and exited the office, closing the door. Foster perched his glasses on his nose. He turned the envelope over and broke the seal, extracting a single sheet of white paper. The blood drained from his face as he stared down at the single typed sentence.

Kip approached Foster. “What is it?”

Foster handed Kip the sheet of paper. *She will never become Mrs. Taylor* had been typed across the middle. Kip looked up from the paper and back at Foster.

“Double the security for the wedding,” Foster clipped. “Take care of things here. I’m going to find Brooke.”

Foster didn’t wait for a response as he took the stairs to the penthouse two at a time.

\* \* \*

“How are you feeling, dear?” James patted the blonde’s knee sitting beside him.

She rubbed her swollen abdomen. “I’m fine, sweetheart. You overly worry.” He linked his fingers with hers over her stomach. “Are you comfortable?” “Really, James, I’m fine.” Ashley brought his hand to her mouth and kissed the back. She snuggled into the crook of his arm. “We should be arriving sometime tomorrow.”

“Are you worried?”

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

"I'm afraid how she'll accept me. Foster said they would meet us at the train depot. With my mother...aunt..." Ashley sighed. "I haven't had a chance to talk to anyone about this. A sister, for goodness sakes! How could they keep that from me all these years?"

"Don't upset yourself, dear. Think of it as a blessing. That cow you called Mother, really isn't your mother. I would call that good news."

"James!"

"No reason to defend her now, Ashley," James continued, his deep brown eyes flashing in humor. "I think she's been drunk since I met you. Hell at our wedding, she was so drunk she stumbled into that portly gentleman. I think you said he was your friend's fiancé."

"Stop!" Ashley giggled, holding her stomach to stay the jiggles, remembering exactly what James spoke of.

"She stumbled into him just as he was helping himself to another glass of punch," James continued, sharing in the amusement. "He fell into the table, the one holding the refreshments, face first, toppling it over and wound up wearing the red punch as Roberta's round butt landed squarely in our cake."

"Oh, James," Ashley swiped at the tears of humor from her eyes. "Mother was so mad, she preceded to hit the poor man over the head with her pocketbook even though it was all her fault. Our reception was ruined. We had no food to feed our guests."

"A day we will certainly remember the rest of our lives." James stifled his laughter. "They aren't allowing Roberta anywhere near their cake are they?"

"I hope not." Ashley sobered. "I wonder how Brooke will receive me. You don't think she'll feel I'm intruding on her life, do you? After all, I slept with Foster."

"You don't love him any longer. She can't hold your past against you or Foster." He shrugged. "Besides, she's getting a wonderful woman for a sister."

"I hope you're right, James. We need godparents for our baby, and

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

if it's all right with you, I'd like to ask Brooke and Foster."

"Of course. Why wouldn't it be?"

Her breath caught in her throat as she looked at her husband. She had yet to get used to the fact he loved her as she did him. God had blessed her. His brown eyes complemented the dark blonde of his shoulder-length hair. His square jaw added to his powerful appearance. He stood at least three inches taller than Foster, and outweighed him by a good twenty pounds. Ashley never felt more secure than when she found herself wrapped in his powerful arms.

Shortly after Foster walked out of her life, she had met James. It was love at first sight. Three months later, he had proposed and they married shortly thereafter. Two years later they expected their first child, and both anxiously awaited the arrival.

She sighed in content. "Even if Brooke doesn't want to accept me, I'll always have you and our daughter."

"Son," he corrected, eliciting another giggle from her. Either would be a blessing. "Why don't you try to get some sleep?"

"Hmm?" she cuddled into his waiting warmth, already on the verge of dozing off.

"I love you, Ashley Brighton," he whispered against the top of her head.

Ashley dozed off to the metal sound of the steel wheels turning on the tracks.

\* \* \*

Foster came sliding to a halt in front of his door, Alabaster missing. His heart beat heavily. Where had the man taken off to? The man had never been known to be lax in his job, the reason Foster had hired him. He glanced down the hall and found it empty.

He slowly advanced on the closed door, blood roaring his ears. The murderer had never before contacted Foster, which scared the hell out of him. If he had just himself to worry about...

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Brooke,” he whispered, feeling as though his very breath was knocked from him.

Hand on the doorknob, he found it securely locked. He raised the key to the hole when he heard a scream and a heavy thump from the other side. His keys dropped to the floor. Not waiting to fumble with lock, Foster threw his shoulder against the giving door as someone from the inside swung it inward. Foster landed with a thud against the floor, his breath rushing from his chest.

## CHAPTER 36

Brooke fidgeted in Foster's shiny Ford Sport Coupe. What could Foster possibly hope to surprise her with? She had been holed up in his penthouse going on two weeks and though she enjoyed spending her evenings with Foster, and Amanda and Mabel Ruth's occasional visits, she needed a desperate a change of scenery. A smile turned up her lips. In just twenty-four hours, she'd be Mrs. Foster Taylor. Her stomach fluttered at the thought of sharing his bed again. Though she set the terms, the sexual tension residing between them could be cut with a knife. She didn't dare speak her real feelings to Foster, he'd likely stop the automobile here and now and flip up her dress. Her face heated at the image conjured up.

"We're almost there," Foster brought her from her musings.

"Where?"

"Not until we get there." He bestowed her with a warm smile, one that could melt butter. "All in due time, Brooke. You're too inquisitive for your own good. You need to trust me."



### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Brooke giggled, remembering Foster's own mistrust and impatience and what it had cost. Foster's attention wavered from the road. He cocked a brow.

"Dare I ask at the cause of your amusement?"

"I'm just recalling the look on your face when your shoulder hit the floor."

His face twisted in a wry sense of humor as he looked back to road. "Had Alabaster been at his post and not entertaining my wife to be, I wouldn't have been sporting a bruised shoulder."

"And ego," she added with a sly grin. "I think the whole thing is endearing, Foster. In my haste to show Alabaster the cake I made you, I hurried around the corner not expecting Aunt Roberta to be standing there. I wasn't even aware the poor dear arrived. She wore the entire cake as she fell to the floor."

Foster chuckled. "Hell, apparently Alabaster couldn't get out of there fast enough. Upon hearing your scream and the thump on the floor, I threw all of my weight into the door about the time he jerked it open. I think you giggled all day."

"I'm sorry, Foster." She laughed, not remorseful at all. "But seeing my dark savior lying in a heap on the floor was too much to handle."

"Some savior I turned out to be," Foster quickly added, pulling up to the train depot. "We're here."

Brooke glanced at the small brick building in front of the metal tracks. She turned to Foster, suddenly realizing they were there to retrieve a guest she hadn't known about for the wedding. Who could it possibly be? Her aunt had turned out to be a pleasant surprise, though she hadn't known it at the time. And the fact she had promised to reform and hadn't taken a drink in a couple of weeks had been an added bonus. But who else might Foster have up his sleeve? Uncle Frank?

"Are you expecting family of yours I haven't yet met?"

"You could say that." He winked. "Except, it's not family of mine."

## ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Whose?”

“Yours.”

“I don’t understand, Foster.” Her stomach clenched. She wasn’t sure she was up to many more surprises...especially of the mob boss kind. She certainly loved the man, but with the way Foster felt about him, it probably wouldn’t be a good idea to have him come to Denver. “The only family I have is Aunt Roberta. Unless...”

“What are you thinking, Brooke?”

She tilted her face to the ground, not wanting Foster to see the hope she had of having her uncle attend her wedding. “Frank?”

Foster tipped her chin up and looked into her eyes. She saw no hatred resting in the depths of his gaze, only concern and a bit of mischievousness. “Frank is on his way as we speak.”

“Truly?” Brooke’s excitement bubbled over and she threw her arms about Foster’s neck, kissing him soundly. “Oh, thank you, Foster. I know you don’t like him, but I’m glad you put aside your differences to bring him here for me.”

Foster grasped her face between his palms. “I would do anything for you, Brooke.”

“I know.”

“But Uncle Frank is not your surprise.”

“I thought you said—”

“I did.” Foster glanced briefly down the tracks about the time she heard the whistle blow. “Frank is coming by automobile. He should be arriving sometime tonight.”

The train slowly made its way down the tracks, its metal wheels clacking loudly against the iron rails as the whistle blew and steam hissed from the stack.

Brooke glanced from the black and red engine back to Foster. “If Uncle Frank isn’t on the train, then who is?”

“This is my wedding gift to you, Brooke.” Foster exited the Ford and retrieved her from the other side. “I can give you anything money

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can buy. That wouldn't be much of a wedding gift in my eyes."

"But I thought with all the new dresses you've bought me this week that they were my wedding gifts."

Foster escorted her into the depot. "All the money I have could never show you how much I love you. Giving you something money can't buy is the only way to express how deep that love goes. I want to give you a family, one you weren't even aware existed."

Brooke stood by Foster's side, wringing her hands in her pocketbook. Certainly Foster couldn't raise the dead, so who did he have tucked away on the train? Her heart beat heavily and her stomach roiled. She hadn't been this nervous in a long time. Obviously, Foster was quite proud of himself with the huge smile pasted upon his lips. They stepped onto the wooden loading dock as the passengers disembarked.

"You certainly have money and power, but I find it hard to believe you could raise the dead and bring back my parents."

"Though I wish I could, you are correct. But I can give you..."

Foster's words were lost on Brooke as a blonde, a face mimicking her own and obviously pregnant, descended the stairs. Brooke's world spun as blackness faded her vision. Her knees gave out and she collapsed to the wooden deck.

Moments later, Brooke blinked, trying to focus on her surroundings. Foster cradled her head in his lap, softly calling her name. What happened? Suddenly images flooded back...it to be a dream.

"Fo...ster?" Her voice cracked.

He smoothed her curls from her face. "You okay? You had me worried."

Brooke glanced around, realizing Foster must have carried her inside and laid her upon a wooden bench. Luckily the depot was fairly deserted. "What happened?"

Foster chuckled. "I believe you fainted."

Brooke tried to sit, but laid back down when dizziness threatened to

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consume her again. She closed her eyes. “I had the strangest dream, Foster. I looked into a mirror and my abdomen was swollen with a child.”

“I could only hope you are carrying my child, sweetheart, but there was no mirror.”

Brooke sat up and looked at him. Her breath caught in her throat.

“As I was about to say before you surprisingly stepped out on us, I want you to meet your sister.”

“Sister?”

Brooke scanned the room for the woman who stepped from the train. She stood behind the bench, a tall man standing behind her, his arms encompassing her swollen belly. She anxiously wrung her hands as she looked at Brooke. Aside from her swelling stomach, they looked exactly alike.

“You’re Ashley.” Brooke whispered.

Foster smiled. This had been the woman he thought her to be when they first met. “Brooke, I want you to meet your twin, Ashley Heath Brighton.”

“No wonder you thought I was her.” Brooke rose on shaking knees. “But how?”

“Roberta told me because of your parents’ dire straits, they both agreed to raise a child when the two of you were born. Roberta couldn’t sire a child, so she took Ashley in as her own.” He paused, grasping her hand. “They didn’t want either of you to find out, afraid of what you would think, knowing they split you up. I knew Ashley in New York, and when I moved out here and found you—”

“You thought I was Ashley.” Brooke recalled their first meeting, her face heated. “My God, you slept with my sister!”

“I won’t deny it.” Foster pulled at her hand. Brooke resisted his embrace. He, thankfully, did not push the issue. “That was over three years ago, Brooke. And as you can see, your sister is happily married.”

“You moved to Denver because Ashley fell in love with another

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man?”

Foster said nothing in his defense.

Ashley approached Brooke. “Foster left long before I met James. I was crushed by his decision to move west. I tried to talk him into marrying me, but he wouldn’t have me. I was sure Foster Taylor would never marry. Then I met James and realized Foster knew all along we weren’t meant to be. I never loved him...not the way I do James. Foster did us both a favor. But it took me some time to come to that realization. Sure, we’ll always be friends and I hold a special place in my heart for him, but I’m in love with James.

“I’m as taken back by all of this as you. I’m still getting used to the idea Roberta isn’t really my mother and that I have a sister. I want to get to know you, Brooke. I want to make up for all the years we lost. I can’t blame Roberta, nor can I blame your...*our*...mother and father. They couldn’t afford to raise us both. We need to make up for lost time. God gave us back to one another through Foster. Had it not been for his meddling and knowledge, we’d never known the other existed.”

Brooke stared at Ashley as fat tears slipped past her lashes and rolled down her cheeks. She hiccupped as she looked from one person to another as they waited for her to say something. She could clearly see James loved her sister. Just as she saw the love shining in Foster’s eyes. He loved her, and how could she ever hold his past against him? Whatever Ashley and Foster shared belonged in the past and she certainly couldn’t resent her sister for it.

Brooke opened her arms and Ashley stepped into them. How could they ever make up for the lost time? Their shared tears washed away the missed years. Now that they had found each other, nothing would stand in their way to be together but the miles that separated them. Brooke smiled. She’d put Foster’s money to good use. Their vacations to New York would be quite frequent.

## CHAPTER 37

Foster's stomach clenched and he swore it had lodged in his throat as he paced the confined area at the front of the church, awaiting the minister to collect him and Kip for the service. Though he had placed several bodyguards near Brooke, he still worried for her safety. He wondered at his sanity for agreeing to Kip's plan. If they made it through this day, he'd pray his thanksgiving to the Lord and never doubt His existence again.

Peeking from the small room, Foster saw the church was filled to capacity. His mother thanked Alex and sat in her pew, patting her hair. A nervous gesture of hers. All guests now seated, the tinkling of the piano signaled the start of the ceremony. Closing the door, he looked at Kip.

"Calm down, Foster." Kip laughed, patting his shoulder. "It will all be over before you know it. She'll have you hog tied in no time."

"I'm certainly not worried about taking Brooke as a wife. I can't get her in my bed fast enough," Foster grumbled. "It's getting her there

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safe and unharmed that causes me concern.”

“You hired a small militia, for crying out loud! I doubt the murderer will have a chance of coming within yards of her.”

“I can’t forget that damned note, Kip. This psycho said she wouldn’t become Mrs. Taylor. If he holds true to his word, then that means he’ll have to strike during the ceremony.”

“He doesn’t stand a chance.” Kip grasped his shoulder. “Now calm down and let’s get you married.”

The minister opened the door, motioning for them to enter the church. Kip followed Foster to the head of the church. Foster scanned the room. He couldn’t help but wonder if the murderer was among them. He wanted this nightmare to end. Smoothing the front of his black tux, he glanced down the aisle.

Music filled the church as Amanda started her way, dressed in midnight blue satin, her train gliding across the white tiles. She carried a bundle of red roses with a sprig of white baby’s breath. Amanda made a stunning picture with her auburn hair. Alex had better treat her fairly or he’d be answering to Foster. As she reached the front of the church, she winked at Foster then turned to the opposite side of the aisle. The music changed in pitch to announce the coming of his bride. All guests turned to the back of the church as his vision made her slow ascent up the aisle, her arm linked through Uncle Frank’s, her free hand carrying a huge bouquet of white roses. The guests rose and temporarily blocked her from Foster’s view.

His heart slammed against his chest. He needed to keep Brooke in sight at all times. Lightheadedness set in as he held his breath before she came back into view. He exhaled and said a quick prayer of thanksgiving as their eyes met again. He looked amongst the sea of guests, but saw nothing out of the ordinary, then turned his attention back to his bride. His heart swelled. Never had he imagined feeling this way. Foster had given up on love long ago. The veil of white organdy concealed her face. He wanted to lift it and take her into his arms, the

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hell with etiquette. Her white organza dress bore pearls sewn in intricate patterns about the high-necked bodice. The skirt flowed from her tiny waist like that of a cascading waterfall. He was certain he had never seen a more beautiful bride. But she wore too many clothes for his liking. He would definitely enjoy divesting her of them.

“Who gives this woman?” the small portly minister asked.

“I do.” Frank’s chest puffed in pride. Pulling the veil over her face, he bussed Brooke’s cheek with a kiss before presenting her hand to Foster.

The rest of the service whirled by as Foster barely caught the words. His senses tuned to impending danger and wondered at what moment the murderer would strike. He squeezed the small feminine hand within his grasp. She looked up at him, eyes full of love and faith. He only wished he trusted himself half as much to protect her from any harm. Foster’s heart slammed against his chest as the minister spoke the words, “If there is any one who feels this union cannot take place, speak now or forever hold your piece.”

The room nearly spun in his anticipation. When no one spoke up, Foster exhaled a sigh of relief as the minister said, “I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Foster clasped Brooke against his chest, leaned in and kissed her soundly. Brooke moaned as her small hands clasping the front of his jacket. His tongue slipped between her lips and swept her mouth in possession. She belonged to him and he pitied the man who tried to take her. When he released her, Brooke stumbled back dazed.

He leaned in, a smile curving his lips and whispered, “That’s only a promise of the night to come.”

Brooke blushed profusely.

The minister turned to the guests and said, “I give to you Mr. and Mrs. Foster Ryan Taylor.”

Foster led Brooke down the aisle, his eyes scanning the guests. He hated the paranoia this psycho had caused...today of all days. Because



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of the circumstances, they waited at the entrance of the church to receive their guests, instead of on the walk outside the building.

The next hour passed slowly as the well-wishers filed from the church. When the last of the guests had cleared, Foster looked for the man he had put in charge of security. Foster found him only twenty feet from where Brooke stood, partially hidden, but keeping a keen eye on his bride.

“Damien, follow us to the reception and have everyone placed around the ballroom before we enter. I want no chances taken. Keeping my bride alive is the main focus of the evening.”

“Foster?” Brooke questioned. He hadn’t realized she followed. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, sweetheart.” Foster kissed her briefly, hoping she hadn’t heard his words to Damien. He certainly didn’t want her wedding day spoiled by worries. “Just precautions.”

Foster’s hand indicated the direction of a horse drawn Town Coach with a driver perched out front. Brooke gasped as she grabbed her skirts and made her way toward the elegant carriage waiting to take them to the reception.

She looked back and grinned. “Just for us?”

Foster grinned. “I want a few moments alone with my wife.”

Giggling, Brooke allowed Foster to assist her into the waiting coach, before he climbed in beside her. Tapping the roof, the driver started the team of horses in a slow canter. Foster opened his arms and Brooke settled back against him. She sighed and snuggled more fully against him. Foster ran his hands up the fabric of her dress, covering her breasts with his palm...each a perfect fit. Brooke gasped and Foster leaned down to kiss her neck, then licked the shell of her ear. A shiver passed through her, causing Foster to chuckle. He tweaked her nipples between thumb and forefinger. Brooke arched, pressing her breasts more fully into his hands. One hand left her breast and trailed to the juncture of her thighs.

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Brooke gasped. “You can’t think to—”

Grasping a handful of gown and pulling it upward, Foster whispered, “Oh, I assure you, Mrs. Taylor, I do.”

\* \* \*

Foster glanced around the grand ballroom and smiled. The reception had been a complete success as the many guests feasted on roasted turkey and prime rib. Couples waltzed across the large dance floor as the band kicked out tunes. The whole event was an elegant affair in extreme good taste and would probably be talked about for years to come. No expense had been spared. Rose bouquets sat about the room, the scent making a pleasant backdrop. The large floor to ceiling mirrors glinted from the many chandeliers, making the room appear larger than its already enormous size.

Foster stood to the side of the room, watching the guests. Too bad he couldn’t enjoy the festivities. Hell, this was his wedding, for crying out loud. Instead, he had been apprehensive and paranoid throughout the evening. He had seen nothing out of the ordinary, yet he couldn’t let his guard down. He should feel at ease, knowing the murderer had already failed to hold true to his promise. Brooke had become Mrs. Foster Taylor and not just in name. He thought about the carriage ride over and grinned. The two week wait had been worth every minute as he had slid between her silky thighs. His groin hardened just at the thought. He wouldn’t leave here soon enough for his tastes. Hell, he wanted her all over again. He doubted he’d ever tire of making love to her.

Foster’s gaze landed on his bride. Her face glowed. Since meeting her, he didn’t think he’d ever seen her quite so content and he had given her that. Hell, truth be told, his face likely mirrored hers. She had made him whole.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Kip asked, startling Foster from his reverie. His gaze followed Foster’s and smiled. “Can’t wait to get her

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home, huh?”

“Once I get her in my bed, I doubt I’ll allow her to leave.” Foster chuckled. “I’ll keep her so worn out she won’t have time to look at another man, let alone think of one.”

“I doubt she would, Foster.” Kip patted Foster’s shoulder. “There’s no doubting that she is totally in love with you.”

Foster’s smile broadened as Brooke turned to look at him. She waved, her smile turning her cheeks up. Kip was correct, and damn if he didn’t feel like the luckiest man alive. She loved with such enthusiasm that his heart ached. If anything ever happened to her, he doubted he’d survive it. He needed to make quick work of finding this son of a bitch threatening the love of his life. He’d break his neck with his bare hands if the blackguard ever laid a finger on Brooke.

“Amanda appears to be enjoying herself.” Kip interrupted Foster’s dire thoughts.

Foster’s gaze left Brooke and landed on his sister. Her skirts flared as she circled the dance floor in the arms of Alex Thurston. Kip was correct. Amanda seemed indeed pleased with her escort. Alex whispered into Amanda’s ear and she giggled in delight. Foster smiled. Amanda deserved to be happy and if Alex Thurston was the cause, then he wished them both happiness.

His mother sat to the side of the room, enjoying herself immensely, chatting with Roberta. The two had made fast friends. Foster felt blessed she hadn’t died and was able to see him marry. She’d no doubt be bugging him for grandchildren. Foster would happily oblige.

Amanda circled the floor and smiled at Foster as she danced by, once again capturing his attention. “I don’t think I’ve seen Amanda this happy. She always thought men would only be interested in her to get to me and my money. She’s probably right, but Alex would be the exception. After all, he was enamored with Brooke, and she hadn’t much to speak of.”

“Besides,” Kip added with a laugh, “you pay him well.”

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Yes, I do.” Foster scanned the crowd, looking for his lovely bride. He no longer saw her, causing his stomach to flip. “Where’s Brooke?”

“Don’t panic. She’s probably in the powder room.”

“I want to know where she is at all times! We can’t be too careful. I’m not about to lose her.”

“I’ll go check with the guards. I’m sure there’s an easy explanation. The murderer said Brooke would not become Mrs. Taylor.” He shrugged. “She already has.”

“He may be thinking of the wedding night and consummating the marriage. But if that’s the case, I took care of it.”

Kip’s brow rose. “Already?”

“In the carriage on the way over.” Foster chuckled. “Why do you think I wanted it to ourselves?”

Kip laughed as he walked off in search of Damien. Foster continued to search the throng of people as dread snaked up his spine. Something was amiss. He could sense it. Foster stepped down from his post and weaved his way through the dancers. He had to find her and fast.

\* \* \*

Brooke stood on the balcony and breathed deeply. The ballroom had become stuffy and overwhelming. She’d needed a breath of fresh air. Glancing at the cloudless night, the stars twinkled back at her and the moon cast light about the gardens and manicured lawn. She couldn’t have asked for a more beautiful evening.

Spotting an alcove in the center of the garden, Brooke thought about Foster and how glorious it would be to make love beneath the stars. She smiled at her positively scandalous thoughts. Foster had made her wanton. Her blood warmed her veins as she thought about the trip from the church to the reception. Foster had made love to her in fevered passion as though he couldn’t wait another possible moment to have her. His enthusiasm had driven her passion. They were lucky their clothes hadn’t been wrinkled beyond repair.

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She turned on her heel, ready to join her guests when she nearly ran into one of them. She squealed in startle, unaware that someone else had come out to the balcony.

"Excuse me," she apologized, staring into the lightest blue eyes she had ever encountered. "I thought I was alone."

"I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to offer my congratulations."

"Thank you." Brooke smiled at the handsome blonde. "I was just now on my way to retrieve my husband."

The breeze shifted, sending goose flesh popping along her flesh. Brooke smoothed her hands across her arms. Something in the blonde's eyes caused a shiver to snake along her spine. Suddenly, Brooke was in a hurry to leave the balcony and find Foster. It had been foolhardy to leave his side.

"If you'll excuse me, I must return before I am missed." Brooke sidestepped her guest.

The blonde grasped Brooke's upper arm, staying her position.

"You're hurting me." Brooke tried without purchase to yank free. "Let go of me."

"Keep quiet!" Icy blue eyes flashed in anger as light glinted off the dagger the guest had produced. "That is unless you want me to hurt someone else."

Brooke choked back tears. "What do you want?"

"Your husband's unhappiness," the words tumbled on a hiss.

"Just let me go. I promise—"

"Your promises mean nothing to me. I can't allow Foster to find happiness...ever. Don't you see? He must suffer as I have. All he has was destined to be mine...not his. He had no right to my inheritance. But Mac McCarthy, the crazy old fool, gave it to Foster instead of his legitimate heir."

Brooke needed to stall. Maybe Foster would notice her absence and come looking for her. "I don't know what you are talking about."

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“Mac was my father. That hotel he gave Foster was to be mine, not Foster Taylor’s. Foster stole what belonged to me.”

“Why would your father do that to you?”

“Because the crazy fool cast me aside. Never acknowledged me. Now, Foster must pay for that. I can’t allow you to consummate the marriage. Foster mustn’t bare an heir.”

“You’re crazy. Foster said Mac had no children.” Brooke’s head snapped to the side as the sting of the slap set her cheek afire.

“You will pay with your life, just as the others. You should have resisted his charm.” The guest shoved Brooke down the steps and toward the garden.

She thought of making a run for it, but knew her heels would only hinder her. She’d likely fall to a heap and be stabbed in the back for her actions. She needed to buy time. Surely, Foster and Kip already had begun looking for her.

A sickening thud sounded from behind. Brooke spun around, her heart in her throat, as the crazy woman collapsed in a heap. Her gaze flew from the woman to the butt of the pistol still poised in the air.

“Uncle Frank!” Brooke cried, running to his strong embrace. “She was going to kill me.”

Frank’s strong jaw worked as he looked at the woman lying prone at their feet. “Who the hell is she? I should have killed her...would have but I feared hurting you.”

“I don’t know.” Brooke tried hard to catch her breath. She had never been so scared in her life. Had her uncle not happened along, she shuddered to think what would have happened. “She followed me to the balcony.”

Foster skidded to a halt, his eyes on the woman. “Dear God in Heaven...Lynette!”

## CHAPTER 38

Brooke's head rested lazily on Foster's shoulder as she listened to the lulling sound of the metal wheels clack against the iron rails. She glanced at the diamond resting on the ring finger of her left hand. *My Only Love* had been etched on the inside of the wide silver band. She had cried when he had first showed her the inscription. His wedding band had three small diamonds, now the only ring he wore.

She watched out the window as the landscape disappeared, replaced by the city. *New York*. Brooke hadn't been back in three years and was in no hurry to arrive. She preferred the slow life of the west compared to the faster paced life in the east. Even now Denver grew rapidly and she would be sad to see it become like that of New York. Maybe they could build a small ranch on the outskirts where they could raise their children. Body Apparel still belonged to her, but now she allowed one of Foster's people to run it. She needn't see to the day to day operation of it any longer and wasn't sure she would miss it. Maybe in time she'd even sell it. Brooke settled into the crook of Foster's shoulder and

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sighed. They had come so far.

“What are you thinking about?” a sleepy voice whispered hoarsely in her ear.

“I’m sorry, I thought you were still sleeping. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I felt you stirring.” Foster wrapped his arms around her and kissed her temple. “I can always tell when you’re not sleeping and restless. What’s bothering you?”

“I was thinking how I haven’t been back to New York in over three years and I’m not in any hurry to get there.”

“We’ll return home soon, sweetheart. Our trip here will be short lived.”

Brooke turned and looked at Foster. “Do you think we’ll find him?”

“I don’t know, but I won’t stop looking. Lynette said her stepfather was the attending physician. I guess he’s as good a place as any to start.”

“The whole thing is too bizarre to grasp. I can’t believe Lynette would fake her own death to punish you. And killing her child is too much to grasp.”

“She’s psychotic. The police are bringing her back to New York and placing her in an asylum. I didn’t know the woman who attacked you...that wasn’t the Lynette I knew. The woman I talked to wasn’t the same one I pledged to marry.”

“She’s ill, Foster. I don’t think you can fault someone who is mentally incompetent.”

“She admitted to killing Allison.” His jaw tightened. “Pushed her off the top floor. All this time I thought she jumped, committed suicide because I told her I wouldn’t marry her. Do you know the guilt I’ve lived with all these years?”

“Now you know the truth.”

He shook his head. “Lynette even had herself stabbed to keep me from getting what I wanted. She knew how badly I wanted my own



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family. And then to do the unthinkable and kill an unborn child...”

“We don’t know that she did.” Brooke turned in his arms and placed a warm palm over his whisker-roughened cheek. “She said her stepfather was to get rid of your son after she gave birth. All we know is that you were told they didn’t survive the attack. I’ve prayed faithfully that God kept your son alive...that Lynette’s stepfather had a conscience.”

“I pray you’re right.”

Foster leaned in and kissed her. Brooke’s arms slid around his neck and opened to him. His tongue slipped in and possessed her. Everything felt right about being in his arms. If she could only give him back the son taken from him. One way or another, after meeting with Lynette’s stepfather, they would have the answers they sought and the past could finally be put to rest.

Tears glistened in his eyes as he pulled away. “What if this is nothing more than a cruel joke on Lynette’s part? Another way to get me back for Mac not acknowledging her?”

“You must believe, Foster. Faith can move mountains.” She placed a tender kiss on the tip of his chin. “Something tells me we’ll find him.”

Foster turned his gaze back out the window and settled her against his chest. “I only hope that if we find him, he’ll accept me. He’s never had the chance to know me.”

“We’ll work through it, Foster. How could he not love you?” She smiled, knowing the truth to her statement. “I still can’t believe she talked her stepfather into her madness.”

“She couldn’t stab herself.” Foster sighed heavily. “I get so angry when I think of all the suffering she caused, and all because Mac never acknowledged her. If I had just stayed away from her...”

“She’s a very beautiful woman. Besides—even if you wouldn’t have been enticed by her, she still would have followed you and made sure you suffered.”

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

"I suppose in some way, I deserve all of his."

"Stop it, Foster. You can't keep punishing yourself for the past. We need to concentrate on finding your son."

"The first person we'll look up is Dr. Windsor, Lynette's stepfather. He holds the answers. He's the only one who can tell me if my son is alive or—"

Brooke turned and placed her fingers across his lips. "Don't even speak it. Whatever the outcome, we'll deal with it. Either way, we have each other. I'll give you plenty of sons and daughters, Foster. We'll never lack for love."

Foster grinned wickedly, his palm brushing her nipple, causing it to harden. "You got that right. The first thing on our agenda is getting you flat on your back and me between your legs. And I definitely can't wait to see you in that rose colored chemise I bought you."

"I forgot completely about that."

"I saved it for a special occasion. I guess our trip to New York qualifies."

"You brought it?"

"I packed it with your things. It's still wrapped in the box."

Brooke smiled. "I can't believe you remembered it."

"How could I not? I knew the day I saw you holding the garment you would look like a temptress in it. An exquisite one at that."

She laughed. "I think you would like me in anything as long as it's as little as possible."

"The less the better." He tightened his embrace. "We better quit talking about it, or I'll be flipping up your dress right here on the train."

Brooke smiled, knowing she could hardly wait to reach his hotel either. Even after two weeks of marriage, the thought of making love to Foster sent shivers of delight skittering about her abdomen. Foster Taylor had been her savior in more ways than one.

\* \* \*

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Brooke and Foster approached the old clinic on a seedy side of New York City. Wooden boards secured the windows. An old dusty sign, *Closed*, hung over the cracked window on the door. The place had gone neglected and it appeared no one had been here for quite some time. Foster's hopes plummeted as his stomach roiled. The faded paint on the building read, *Dr. Henry Windsor*. But it was obvious that the doctor no longer resided within.

He had asked around before coming here, only to find out that the doctor had suffered a breakdown of some sort and closed up shop. No one knew the man's whereabouts. Coming to New York had been nothing more than a dead end and finding his son or the answers he sought seemed now unreachable. He blinked away the emotion. He couldn't allow himself to suffer through this a second time. Foster struck the old wooden door, it shook beneath the force. His knuckles bled from scraping the old wood. But before Brooke could administer to it, he wiped them on his jeans. She withdrew her hand and simply looked up at him with compassion as tears slipped down her cheeks.

Bracing his hands on either side of the door, Foster's head rested against the old cracked window and allowed the years of pain to take over. Hot tears slipped down his cheeks and every muscle in his body felt taut enough to snap. He wanted to rant at the Lord for the false hopes Lynette had bestowed him with. Why bring her back into his life to reopen old wounds?

He turned and pulled Brooke into his arms, holding her tightly against his beating heart. Her tears soaked the front of his shirt as they stood holding each other for what seemed forever. Finally he whispered against the top of her head, "Where do we go from here?"

"I don't know." A board creaked. Brooke lifted her head and looked at the old door. "Did you hear that? There's someone inside."

A shuffle came from the other side of the wooden door. Foster turned and pounded furiously on the wood. An old man approached the cracked pane and glared at them. "Can't you see I'm closed," came the

## ***DARK SAVIOR***

man's hoarse reply.

"Please." Brooke nearly danced in excitement. "We need to speak with you. Are you Dr. Henry Windsor?"

"Yeah, what of it?" The crabby man eyed them carefully.

"We just need a few minutes of your time." Brooke fisted Foster's shirt and a good thing or he would have ripped the door from its hinges. "We won't take long."

Henry gave them a final look before sliding the bolt free and opening the door. "What did you say your names were?" He paused as recognition set into his gaze. "My God!"

Foster wanted to beat the old man to a pulp. But he needed answers. "Yes, Dr. Windsor, in the flesh and wanting answers."

"I haven't seen Lynette in years if that's what you're asking. Now if you'll excuse me..." He tried to close the door, but Foster stuck his foot in the way.

"Mr. Windsor," Brooke clasped the older man's arm. "We're not blaming you."

"The hell we're not!" Foster snapped. His anger had reached the boiling point.

Brooke leveled her gaze at Foster and he clamped his mouth shut. "We know Lynette isn't in her right mind. She came to Denver and tried to kill me. The authorities are bringing her back to New York to a hospital where she'll be safe."

"The hospital?"

"Yes, Mr. Windsor. If you contact the authorities, I'm sure they'll tell you where you can find her." Brooke paused, shifting in her stance. "We know she plotted with you to fake her death, but that's not why we're here. We want to know where—"

"Where the hell is my son?" Foster stepped in front of Brooke. He could hardly control the rage surging through him. If the man didn't come up with answers soon, he'd be guilty of beating him to an inch of his life.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

The older man backed up, knocked into a chair, rocking it on all fours. Foster stalked him to the interior, smelling the man's fear. Brooke grasped his shirt and halted him from doing anything stupid.

She stepped around him again. "As I was saying, all we want to know is what you did with the child Lynette carried. Did you do with it as she asked? Did you kill the baby?"

The old man sat heavily into the chair and looked up at them both. His hands trembled as he grasped the arms. "I'm tired of going along with that crazy bitch's schemes. I'll tell you everything if you keep my name out of it."

"This better be the truth, old man, or my wife won't be able to keep me from snapping that scrawny neck for the hell you and your selfish stepdaughter put me through."

Henry's Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. "My stepdaughter was the child of Mac McCarthy, and should have been his sole heir."

"We've been told." Foster's jaw ached as he gritted his teeth.

"Mac refused to acknowledge Lynette. You see, my wife had an affair and Lynette was the result of that union."

"How would you know Lynette isn't yours but a product of that affair?"

"I never sired any children. When Lynette's mother told me she carried a child, I wanted to throw her on the streets. I knew it was from the loins of that fancy pants. Then, when I thought things through a little better, I figured we could have a better life for ourselves. After all, my practice never thrived. I hadn't counted on the scoundrel refusing Lynette as his heir.

"I was left with his brat to raise and his whore to feed." Henry's eyes took on a look of pure malice. "I was angry and rightfully so. I made her mother give Lynette her maiden name. I didn't want that brat bearing my name. I never touched Lynette's mother again. She died shortly thereafter of pneumonia, leaving me to raise the bastard's child alone. So when Mac died and left you everything, I was just as mad as

## ***DARK SAVIOR***

Lynette.”

“It was his money to do with as he pleased.” Foster thought about what Henry had suffered because Mac refused to believe he had sired a child. He couldn’t help but understand in some small way. “That may justify your actions against me. But to kill an innocent child?”

“I agreed to help Lynette make you suffer, but I washed my hands of her when she wanted to kill the boy and I haven’t seen her since.”

Foster grasped his bony shoulders and hauled him out of his seat. “My son, what did you do with him?”

Henry held his hands out. “He’s alive, I swear.”

“Where?”

“I took him to the orphanage down the street. Named him Christopher Taylor...after you of course, should the boy ever get old enough to look for you.” Foster released Henry, who wiped the sweat from his brow as he stepped from Foster’s reach. “After taking him to Sister Mary, I closed my clinic. He’s still there. He’s healthy. I check on him every month.”

“Thank, God,” Brooke gasped. She smiled as she grasped Foster’s hand. “Your son is alive.”

## CHAPTER 39

Foster lay atop the quilt of the canopied bed in his New York penthouse, staring at the white ceiling. His arms hooked behind his head and his feet crossed at the ankles. Brooke paced the floors casually stealing glances in his direction. Not once had his gaze left the ceiling in the past hour. Not once! Certainly Foster didn't think he could lie here all day. They had his son to retrieve and he acted the coward, worried about how the boy would receive him. Well, if he wasn't about to go rescue his son, then she would.

Walking over to the bed, she glared at Foster, hands fisted on her hips. He didn't move...not even a flinch, which fueled her ire.

"Foster Taylor!" she shouted. "I have had about all I can take from you. Let's go get your son. He belongs here with us."

He finally glanced at Brooke, his sensual mouth turned down in a frown. His normally warm, loving eyes were shadowed in fear. Brooke saw a vulnerability in him she had never seen before.

"What if he doesn't want to go with us?"

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

Brooke sighed in exasperation. “How do you know until you see him? I’ve never known you to be a coward, Foster. Now get your sorry butt out of that bed and let’s go retrieve your son.”

Foster sat up. “He doesn’t know me. For four years, all he’s known is the orphanage and the children there. If I walk in there now, I’ll uproot his whole life.”

“If you don’t, you’ll cheat that little boy from ever knowing his wonderful father.” Brooke sat on the bed and grasped his cold hand in her warm one. “Surely his life would be much better off with you. We have so much love to give him. You aren’t thinking of your son here. You’re thinking of yourself. You’re afraid of rejection. That little boy may not know you now, Foster, but he will. Time will show him how much you love him.”

A tear slipped down his cheek. “I’m scared, Brooke.”

“I know you are.”

“I can’t bare to lose him a second time.”

“Who says you’ll lose him? For crying out loud, Foster, the best things in life are worth fighting for. You fought for me and look at the love we share. You would have walked over mountains to get me. Why can’t you do the same for your son?”

“I would kill anyone who tried to harm either of you.”

“Then prove it.” Brooke pulled him from the bed. “Let’s go get Christopher.”

\* \* \*

Moments later, they ascended the brick steps to the orphanage. Foster’s hand trembled in hers. She squeezed it, giving him strength. He glanced at her briefly and smiled. He let out a shaky sigh.

Opening the door, Brooke entered with Foster trailing. The sound of playing children came from the courtyard at the center of the building. They followed the direction of the pleasing sounds when a woman dressed in a black habit greeted them.



### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Good afternoon.” She extended a hand. “My name is Sister Mary. What can I do for you?”

Foster cleared his throat. “You have a small boy here named, Christopher Taylor.”

Her rosy cheeks brightened. “Yes, Christopher Ryan is a joy.”

“Christopher Ryan?” Foster swallowed the lump in his throat. “His middle name? How?”

“I believe the gentleman who brought him here four years ago listed him as such,” Sister Mary responded, a puzzled look shadowing her gaze. “Dr. Windsor said his father was missing and his mother dead. The good doctor comes by monthly to check on the boy. Who might you be, sir?”

“My name is Foster Ryan Taylor.” Foster squared his shoulders. “Christopher is my son. Dr. Windsor told me I would find him here.”

The nun fanned her face. “Oh, my.”

“I’ve only recently found out that my son is alive. I would like to take him home.”

“Certainly, Mr. Taylor,” Sister Mary flushed. “And is this lovely woman your wife?”

Foster placed his arm across Brooke’s shoulder, his smile growing on his face. “This woman is indeed my wife. Now, if you’ll kindly retrieve my son for me.”

“But of course,” the nun responded. “I’ll have to contact Dr. Windsor to confirm.”

“By all means.”

“You do realize Christopher will need a time of adjustment. He won’t know you. I would suggest weekly visits until Christopher is comfortable leaving his home.”

“I’ve already thought about how Christopher will perceive me, Sister. I’m aware he’ll need to adjust to the changes in his life. But I assure you, this is no longer his home. Now if you’ll kindly get my son, I’m anxious to see him.”

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

"Of course, Mr. Taylor." Sister Mary's jaw hardened. "If you'll have a seat, I'll get your son."

"Thank you. I'll see to it this orphanage is given a hefty contribution for my son's care."

Her face brightened. "That's mighty gracious of you, Mr. Taylor."

The weight on Foster's chest increased. Now that he sat here, waiting for the arrival of his son, his stomach crawled up the back of his throat. What if the boy wouldn't go with them? What if Christopher hated him? He needed to talk about something. Anything to take his mind off the meeting.

"I know we didn't talk about it much, but I was glad your Uncle Frank came to the wedding."

Brooke smiled. "I can't thank you enough for that."

"Looks like I owe him one for saving your life."

"Uncle Frank said he preferred to think the two of you were even. I think he's right. It's time to put the past behind. You both saved my life. I'll miss him, but it's best he lives in New York."

"He'll always keep an eye on you."

She laughed. "Then I'd say you'd better take good care of me."

Foster's expression sobered as he glanced back down the hall.

Brooke grasped his hand and squeezed it. "It will be fine, Foster."

He gave her a tentative smile. "Maybe, we should think about building a home."

"Are you serious?"

"Maybe outside of Denver. I could buy some horses, a dog. We'll be a real family."

"But what about your hotels?"

He shrugged. "I'll still be going there everyday. Living in a hotel is no way to raise a family."

"What about your mother and Amanda?"

"I'll build a small guest house. Mother can live there." The look of excitement on her face alleviated some of the weight plaguing his

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

chest. “Amanda can live there or remain in her and Mother’s apartment. I’ll allow Alex the use of the penthouse. What do you think?”

Brooke wrapped her arms about his neck and kissed his lips. “I love the idea.”

“You won’t get lonely?”

“Never! Speaking of your mother, I’m glad she’s feeling better. She looked lovely at the wedding. Aunt Roberta seemed to get along with her pretty well.”

“Mother said she thought your aunt was lovely.” Foster laughed. “I’m not so sure I’d use that word to describe Roberta.”

“Foster!” Brooke playfully slapped his arm.

“Hell, Roberta even seemed to get along with your sister since getting away from the bottle,” Foster continued. “Who knows, maybe Ashley and Roberta can start over.”

“I’m going to miss her.”

“Who? Roberta?”

“Ashley, silly! And, of course, Roberta. But I wish Ashley lived in Denver. I just found her thanks to you. We need more time to get to know one another.”

“You know that’s not possible with her husband’s law practice.” Foster kissed her cheek. “We can come to New York whenever you want. I’ll need to oversee my hotel here from time to time and you can visit your sister.”

Brooke ran her palm down Foster’s whisker-roughened cheek. “I love you, Foster. You’ve given me more than I ever had a right to dream for.”

“And I you. More than you could imagine.”

To prove his point, Foster gathered her in his arms and kissed her soundly. His tongue slipped passed her lips in possession causing a growl to escape. He’d never get enough of Brooke. Even now he couldn’t wait to get her home. Sister Mary cleared her throat, startling him. He let go of Brooke and wiped his lip, heat traveling up his face.

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“Mr. and Mrs. Taylor, I would like you to meet, Christopher Ryan.”

Foster’s gaze traveled to the small boy, coyly holding the nun’s hand. His hair, a rich dark brown, barely reached his shoulders. He stood tall, holding his spine straight, trying to be a big boy. Tears brimmed Foster’s eyes. He wanted to run to the boy and scoop him into his arms. He could tell by the trembling of Christopher’s fingers, though, that he’d have to take this slow.

Foster stood and walked to the nun and his son, going down on one knee. He swallowed the lump threatening his air supply. “Christopher,” he whispered.

“Sir,” the little boy replied in a brave shaken voice.

“Did Sister Mary tell you who I am?” Foster asked.

A small nod was the boy’s reply.

“Then do you think you could call me Daddy and not sir?” Foster asked, waiting for what seemed eternity for a reply.

Christopher’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “Yes, sir.”

Foster’s reaction was to clasp the small boy to his chest, not wanting to let him go. Brooke hiccoughed behind him and the nun wiped the wetness from her face. Foster allowed his own emotions to take over and large tears made a watery trek down his cheeks unheeded. Brooke grasped his shoulder, giving him a reassuring squeeze. He finally had his family.

Foster set Christopher slightly away and peered into his scared eyes. “Would you like to go home with me and your new mother?”

Looking up at the woman who stood above him, he said, “Are you my mommy?”

Brooke choked on a nervous giggle. “Yes, sweetheart, I’m your mommy. We’re going to build a big house for us. One with horses and a dog. Would you like that?”

His head bobbed rapidly. Then he turned to Sister Mary and asked, “Can I please go with my daddy and mommy to our big house, Sister Mary?”

### ***DARK SAVIOR***

“You sure can, honey,” she replied, new tears flowing down her cheeks. She leaned down and hugged him.

Looking back at Foster, straightening his stance, Christopher said in a sure proud voice, “Then I’ll go with Daddy and Mommy.”

Foster picked his son up and resisted the urge to let out a whoop. The last thing he wanted to do was scare Christopher. “Thank you, dear Lord,” he offered to the heavens.

Foster grasped Brooke’s hand and led his family from the orphanage. Brooke had expounded the news that morning that she had missed her monthly and she thought she carried his child...his second child. He led the trio into the sunshine and tilted his face heavenward. God had blessed him.

## PATRICIA A. RASEY

A daydreamer at heart, suspense author, Patricia A. Rasey resides in her native town in Northwest Ohio with her husband, Mark, and two teenage sons. At the age of twenty-nine, her boys both tucked away in school all day, she decided to put her creative writing studies to use. A graduate of Long Ridge Writer's School, Patricia has seen publication of her short stories in magazines. With the writing of *Deadly Obsession*, she was able to see her true dream come to pass and become a full-time writer, thanks to the support and encouragement of her very own hero, Mark.

Ms. Rasey is a three-time recipient of the Word Weaving Award for Literary Excellence and a three-time winner of the prestigious RIO Award Of Excellence. She is also a three-time EPPIE finalist and was a 2001 nominee for *Romantic Times Magazine's* Best Electronic Book. Additionally, *Twilight Obsessions* and *Twilight Visions*, two anthologies she was a part of, was nominated for the PEARL, the Paranormal Excellence Award in Romantic Literature, in the Best Anthology category. Her short story, "In The Mind of Darkness" won the P&E 2002 Horror short story category.

Patricia is a member of World Romance Writers (WRW). She also belongs to Sisters in Crime (SinC), and their Internet Chapter. When not behind her computer, you can find Patricia cheering on her sons at various sporting events, or taking karate, which she enjoys doing with her eldest son.

You can visit Patricia's website at: [www.patriciarasey.com](http://www.patriciarasey.com)

You can also write to Patricia at:

Patricia A. Rasey  
P.O. Box 385  
Napoleon, OH. 43545  
(SASE for response and freebies would be appreciated!)

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