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JENNIFER'S WAGER

by

Tigra-Luna LeMar & D. M. Dulton

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Dedication

From author Tigra-Luna LeMar:

To D.M Dulton for helping me through my writer's block and for making me smile when I feel down.

Corny but true...

To Dirty Diana, thanks for making a girl look sexy;

it's hard work but you do your thang!

Love you and good luck in NB!

From author D. M. Dulton:

To Liz, who never got jealous about me writing about things we don't even talk about in private.

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Prologue

The two little girls sat across from each other staring into each other's eyes. "You look like chocolat." The little white girl with the long brown hair and pink cheeks giggled and Sydney smiled before looking down at the tattered blue octopus that was clutched tightly in her arms.

"I like chocolate," Jenn continued.

The ice was broken. "Wanna hold Occie?" Sydney asked. That was her way to tell someone that she trusted them because Occie was the only thing of any value to her and she would never give it to someone who wasn't worthy of it.

Jenn nodded causing her pigtails to dance and Sydney readily handed over the toy.

* * * *

The term raining cats and dogs was given a new meaning by the way it was raining outside. Lightning flashed and thunder scraped across the sky and the little girl with the stuffed octopus trembled beneath the bed, crying softly into a blue tentacle. She was afraid of thunderstorms and when she had gone rushing into her foster parents' bedroom they had screamed at her telling her she would be going back the next day.

In her young years, she knew going back was the last thing she needed. She didn't want to go back there but every time something happened she would find her way back there.

With a sniffle, she sucked on her finger and dried her eyes with the tentacle but the tears continued flowing.

When the rain had finally stopped she was on her way back to that horrible place. The dark place filled with mice and screaming.

She was back at the orphanage.

The little girl had spent the whole night under her bed, cuddling her stuffed octopus close as she rocked back and forth. She was scared because they had told her that in the morning she would no longer live there. She was tired of being boxed around from home to home. She had been doing it every since she could remember. She used one of the tentacles from her beloved Occie and wiped more tears from her eyes. Her thumb found its way back to her mouth and she sucked on it mercilessly trying to calm herself as she waited for the first bit of light to show through her small window.

When morning light finally came, she still hadn't gotten any sleep. With her eyes stinging, her limbs aching from being in one position for too long, she crawled out from under the bed and wiped her face with a piece of wet cloth that had been sitting in a bowl of clean water. The heat in the water was long gone, but the cold rag felt wonderful against her face as she waited for her fate.

This was the time she never looked forward to. They would come and stand there with smirks on their faces, peering down at her with their beady little eyes. Then they would say things like, "the poor darling," and "oh, what a pity."

Poking her to make sure she wasn't skin and bones was a regular next step and she would squeal out in pain as nails dug into her arm.

She had managed to get sent there again from another home and the mistress was not pleased. After the foster parents had left, the mistress had screamed as she paced her office waving her arm in the air. The little girl had cringed in a corner with her eyes squeezed shut and Occie pressed against her face. She had prayed for it to stop. When it finally did the silence was unbearable and she prayed for the yelling again but it never came.

By the time her door was opened, she was ready, or as ready as she would ever be for another disappointment. She just knew the family was going to bring her back just as soon as she had ticked them off enough or impressed their bosses and friends.

"And here is your little girl," the woman at the orphanage told the white lady with the beautiful hair. "Her name as I told you before is Sydney Bouvier. She's seven and cute as a button."

A small thought of why the mistress couldn't find people with skin like hers crossed Sydney's mind but she stood there blinking as though she had no clue what was going on.

"Well, hello there, Sydney," the woman bent over at the waist and waved her fingers at the scared little girl hiding behind the older woman, "I'll be your new mommy."

A little girl that resembled her new mommy waved to her too and Sydney smiled. "This will be your new sister, her name is Jennifer. Are you ready to go to your new home?"

Sydney was scared but she knew better than to remain still so she nodded. Soon enough her new parents would be tired of all the barbs they got for being white and having a black kid and they would bring her right back to the horrible orphanage. Then she would go on sleeping underneath her bed with Occie. No words left her lips, but when the woman extended a hand to her, the little one took it, nodded and dragged her beat up stuffed octopus behind her as she walked beside her new mommy and sister.

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Chapter 1

"One and one and one makes three." The two girls sat cross-legged in the back yard playing clap hands and singing the rhyme. "We are sisters let us be..."

It seemed as though they had not a care in the world and that was a good feeling to have. They were, after all, children.

Even though they were different races, Sydney and her new sister got along famously, for they were all each other had now that their mother had a new man. He was constantly taking her out and leaving the two girls all alone in the house.

"Damn it, woman!" the voice echoed from inside the house and both girls gasped while leaping off the ground. A shriek came from the house followed by things crashing. The kids may not have known what it was but they were scared. They darted in through the back door and slammed into the hard body of a man.

...and the nightmares began...

* * * *

It had taken all she was worth not to haul off and beat the little ignoramus into the ground. Who did he think he was dealing with? He had made a giant mistake. She wasn't like every other woman who would tuck their tails between their legs and run the moment he began huffing. She could sue him for being racially biased and not paying her for the job she was hired to do. He didn't want the work because she was black, but she wasn't in the mood and who would want

him anywhere around them? He said he had wanted the best and suddenly she wasn't the best anymore. She hated people like that, but if she were to beat them up every time someone acted like an idiot she would never see sunlight again.

Sydney stood and picked up her portfolio. "First of all, Mr. Matterson," she spoke slowly and deliberately, "I am going to use small words because I don't think your little brain can understand anything else."

Gasps came from behind her but she didn't care. It was as if everyone was afraid of this pitiful excuse of a man and he knew it. But she wasn't everyone, he had messed with the wrong sista this time and he was going to pay for it.

"Since no one died and made you God, you're going to sit down, shut the hell up and listen. I didn't ask for this job. You asked for my services. You made the mistake of sending your assistant and not coming to see me for yourself. You owe me five thousand, three hundred and eighty-seven dollars and ninety-five cents. You have twenty-four hours to pay us. If not, you will hear from my lawyers. That clear enough for ya?"

Sydney leaned in closer. "Come anywhere near me or Mary again, and you're going to wish you had stayed under the rock you've been living under for the last four hundred years."

With that she scooped up her things and walked from the room, swinging her ass proudly, with her head held high. He probably thought when he barked like a Neanderthal she would apologize like a wilting flower. Matterson was in for a big surprise. Sydney was no shrinking violet and she would be

damned if she allowed anyone, especially a little idiot like him, to walk all over her.

When she walked into her offices again, her assistant and best friend Mary came flying around the front desk, "What happened? Tell me everything! Don't leave anything out!"

"The man's a giant ass!" Sydney spat. "And to think the world sees him as a genius! Some genius! More of a jackass if you ask me! Who the hell does he think he is? If he thinks I am going to back down from this, he's got me twisted."

"Ah ... what?"

"He doesn't want the photographs because I'm black ... can you believe that shit? He doesn't like the 'style' or some bullshit like that. Thinks it's too 'hood' and I'm too black. I could have wrung his scrawny little neck with my bare hands." Sydney twisted a piece of paper she had in her hand as though it was Matterson's neck and took great pleasure when she yanked. The paper snapped.

Mary's eyes widened and Sydney stormed off for her office with Mary following close behind. "So he won't pay? He said that in those exact words?"

"That's what he thinks." Sydney flopped down into her seat and crossed her legs as Mary closed the door. Sydney was already forming a plan.

Mary sat in the other chair. "This isn't going to turn out well, is it?"

"For him. I have no intentions of getting screwed on this deal. I'll handle it..." Sydney smiled evilly. "When I'm through he's going to know the real meaning of the term 'a woman scorned'. Know what I mean?"

"No," Mary eyed Sydney nervously. "And now I'm scared..."

"Mare, you worry too much. Relax! How would you like to knock off early today? It's a nice day out and I'm aching to start my partying a little early and put this Matterson stuff away for a while."

Sydney grinned at Mary's excited giggle. "Sure thing. boss lady. I need to shave these legs and that takes a hell of a lot of time. It's like I grew a forest! Why do you think I've been wearing pants this week?"

"There I go thinking it was because your skirts are way too sexy for the workplace." Sydney lifted her keyboard to see if her pen had rolled under it. She frowned when it wasn't there. When Mary cleared her throat, Sydney looked up to see Mary handing her a pen. "Thanks."

"My skirts aren't too sexy." She pouted and shifted in her seat. "They're ventilated, so there! And, oh, before I forget and we leave for the weekend, Cover Girl called again."

Sydney moaned. "I'll get to them next week. I still have to finish Maybelline and NV." She scribbled something down and shoved the paper into her pocket before standing. "Well, it's that time of day again..."

"Great, I'm so outta here!" Mary grinned and stood to give her a hug. "You have fun with that sexy man of yours this weekend ... this is one of the times when I simply have to say, do everything I would do and more. I mean that."

Sydney laughed so hard she thought she was going to burst a lung. "I don't think I could do everything you would do in one weekend, Mare."

"It's tiring, let me tell you." Mary winked at her and darted out the door to grab her purse. "Drop me off at the subway, will you, doll? I left my car at home this morning. Emission in the air, hole in the ozone and all that jazz."

"Sure thing. On second thought, I still have plenty of time, why don't I just drop you home?"

Mary giggled. "Even better!"

* * * *

Dinner went a little strange when Dwayne choked on a piece of fish. The restaurant, being scared of a lawsuit had called the ambulance even after Sydney had done the Heimlich and Dwayne said he was fine. The ambulance departed and they were promptly asked to leave and were told that the dinner was 'on the house.' It made perfect business sense to Sydney for a lawsuit would cost the restaurant more than a free meal. That was one experience Sydney could have done without.

With the thought that they could somehow salvage what was left of their night, Sydney allowed Dwayne to drive her home. She didn't normally let guys drive her home after dates. How bad could the night get after a near death experience?

Sydney opened the door as Dwayne ran his hands over her butt. She could tell he was in the mood for some booty because he hadn't kept his hands off her since she picked him up at the bar. He had explained that he had to meet some friends there before their dinner date. Leaving her convertible

in the garage, Sydney had taken a cab to meet him and he had driven them to the restaurant.

The door shut as she turned to him and slid her fingers over his shaven head before pulling him toward her for a kiss.

Breaking the kiss she motioned for him to go into the living room. "I have to go freshen up," she told him with a slight wink as she dropped the mail on the coffee table and walked off down the hall, swinging her hips more than was needed. Seduction was something Mary had taught her, though it wouldn't take much to seduce Dwayne for he was more than ready to jump her in the car ride over. Eyeing the lingerie in the drawer, she wondered which would be fit for the night. How did she feel about Dwayne? She picked up a hot black number and turned it over in her hands. What outfit was he worth?

When she had looked into his eyes, she could see he was nervous. All those times he had acted like such a macho man he was nothing but a timid little punk. Instead of hurrying to get back to him, she smirked and moved slower than she normally would. If he wanted any action he would have to wait on her. Raising her head proudly she continued what she was doing. Sydney made sure that she smelled amazing. She rubbed baby oil against her skin to give it a smooth, silky feel. Squirting perfume against her neck, she hummed softly before stopping to add a bit of the scent against her wrists. When she was finished, she stopped to watch television for a few minutes before getting up and getting dressed.

"Well then," Sydney grinned at him as she walked slowly back toward him. "I wonder..." She walked around the sofa

and moved away from him. When he reached for her, "Ah!" she wagged a finger at him and trailed her free hand against the back of the sofa.

"Come and get me." She grinned sexily at him as she made herself comfortable on the sofa.

Her gaze focused on Dwayne as he walked over and stood over her. She knew exactly what he was looking at. He was looking down at her short hair, dark skin, and slightly wide hips. The smile on his lips told her that he liked what he saw. That meant she had picked the perfect outfit for the occasion. She wore a sheer nightgown that barely shaded the red bra and bikini underwear beneath and left nothing to the imagination. Kneeling in front of her, Dwayne leaned forward and kissed her chest between her large breasts.

A sigh escaped Sydney's lips as she reached up and glided her palms against the smoothness of his shaved head. Pressing down slightly, Sydney bent her head to kiss his.

The one thing Sydney hated about this man so far was that Dwayne wasn't one for small talk. He simply spread her nightgown open and pulled down on the bra, letting her breasts spill out. A large grin appeared on his lips. Taking each of them in his hands, the man drew one nipple into his mouth, almost devouring it. His teeth bit down roughly into the soft flesh causing her to arch her back off the seat—but not in pleasure. What she was feeling wasn't in the same ballpark as pleasure.

A cry of pain left Sydney's lips and she shoved him away. "What the hell are you doing? That hurts you jerk! Get off me!"

"Come on, baby, you'll like it if you give it a minute."

Dwayne released her breast and rubbed a hand along her stomach. "Maybe you'd like me to use my tongue somewhere else?"

She shivered slightly, the pain forgotten. "Well..."

"That's what I thought," he said as he lowered himself.

Looking down at him, Sydney wondered what he was doing. It was as if he was going to taste an ice-cream cone but didn't know what to expect. She wanted to tell him to take his ice-cream licking and go to hell but she wanted him. She figured why not give him the benefit of the doubt. Sure, he started off like an awkward teenager. Maybe he wasn't as bad as she thought.

When he started again, she rolled her eyes and bit down on her lower lip to keep from laughing. She sure knew how to pick her men and this one was no exception. What kind of grown man had no idea what to do with a woman?

Sydney was wrong.

He was worse than she thought. She shifted and sighed as she rested back against the seat. She might as well fake it to get it over with. She made a small sound in her throat.

After a while Sydney felt like laughing but didn't want to hurt his feelings. Taking deep breaths to control her mirth, she closed her eyes and wondered how much longer she could just sit there.

One fake orgasm, coming up!

Taking a deep breath, she squirmed her body to the left, then to the right, then moaned his name before letting her whole body go rigid. She tightened her muscles for a bit

around his finger, then released before slumping back against the sofa.

"You like that? I got more where it came from."

Oh, please don't. But she smiled up at him from beneath heavy lashes and writhed her body in 'anticipation'.

Just when she thought he couldn't possibly get any worse, he pushed in his finger and scraped it against her sensitive insides.

Sydney winced in pain again and shoved at his shoulders as she got up, "I think we should stop," she told him. As her mouth opened to speak again, her eyes caught the name on one of the envelopes on the coffee table. She reached down and picked it up. "You need to go. I have to take care of something." The words were directed at him but her eyes were focused like a laser beam on the letter as her fingers ripped through the paper to open the envelope.

No response came and Sydney looked up to see what the problem was. Confusion lit up his face that got Sydney wondering what was going on inside his head. "I said I'm sorry, baby. Don't need to throw me out for something like that."

"I'm not throwing you out," Sydney snapped, "but I will if you don't leave. Now!"

Backing up, she saw the surrender in his eyes. Sydney could tell that he had barely refrained from throwing an expletive at her before he closed the door. Biting her lower lip, she took a deep breath and looked down at the letter again. This time the handwriting called out to her.

After reading the letter a few times over Sydney glared at it and frowned.

Dear Sydney, my how the time flies when you're having fun. I know this letter may be a surprise to you but I cannot help it. We have put off doing the things we should until sometimes it is too late. I'm sorry I haven't gotten in touch with you earlier and I'm sorry that I didn't return your emails but this is important. The regret of what happened the day you left here has eaten away at me over the years but my pride wouldn't let me make any effort to return your calls or most of your emails. I feel horrible but I cannot let that affect what I have to say in this letter. I know you probably don't want to have anything to do with me right now, but please, don't crumple this letter. If you're reading it, then I am happy you didn't throw it out with the junk mail. I found out a year ago that I have cancer. They thought they could operate and get rid of it but nothing they did seemed to work. I'm dying, Syd. I have a husband, and a little less than a year ago, I had a son. A perfect little thing named Conner, after my dad. Remember we used to joke about that? His dad's a kind and gentle man named Maximillian. With me gone, they won't have anyone. I want you to promise that when I'm gone, you'll come to my house and take care of them, Max and Conner. Promise me Sydney, I don't trust anyone else with this because I care too much about them to leave them after I'm gone. They're my life and I'd like them to be a part of yours...

Sydney picked up the envelope and looked at the postmark. It had gotten to her on a bad day where every bit

of news was something to drive her into a wall. It was one of those days that started out with her sleeping through her alarm clock and falling out of bed. Then when she got over the pain from her ribs smashing into the wooden floor, she hit her head into the bedside table and groaned a profanity that would make a prostitute cringe. To top things off, her boyfriend was a lousy lover; that was bad news for sure. Still, it wasn't an excuse as to why she hadn't seen the letter. Lately she hadn't been very attentive to the mail because all she got were bills, proposals for jobs, offers to change her long distance plan and coupons that didn't actually mean anything. Sydney should have paid more attention to who had sent it but she had simply glanced through the stack of mail and tossed them on the coffee table. She couldn't believe her sister would put her in such a position. Sydney highly doubted Jenn told her husband about her. The day Syd had left Jenn declared she had no sister. She could see the look on her husband's face when she walked in. "Hello, I'm Sydney, the sister you never knew your wife had. She wanted me to fill in for her now that she is dead!"

A sigh left her lips and she tilted her neck from side to side to work out the kinks. The small popping sounds made her moan and she opened her eyes as though she thought that when she looked down again the letter would be gone.

Again, Sydney looked at the letter.

You are my sister and no matter how stupid I have been over the past few years for shutting you out of my life, I am sorry. God knows, I should have told Max about you but I didn't. You saved me on so many occasions and we were so

close. Sydney what happened to us? What happened to me? Was I so selfish that I couldn't see that this town would have killed whatever light that was left in you after him?

I was angry with you for going to Hollywood. I told Max that I had no family ... but that's not true, I have you ... If you call and get the answering machine, do not leave a message, just call back. Please do this one last thing for me Sydney. Then if you don't want to ever think of me again, I cannot say I blame you ... Love always, Jenn. P.S., told you that the Curse of the Bambino would be broken soon.

Sydney couldn't help but smile at the Boston Red Sox joke but as soon as she looked down at the letter again, all happiness left her. Groaning, she got up from her seat and began pacing the room.

Cancer?

What the hell man?

Her sister had cancer and she didn't know. What kind of sister did that? If there was a hell, Sydney figured she was going to it, and with her luck, there was a hell. Not the kind where they played the 'Love Boat' theme over and over, but the hell with fire, prodding pitchforks and models that had brains enough not to need her.

She was supposed to be a good sister but Jenn was dying and Sydney didn't know until the letter showed up.

A barrage of questions flooded Sydney's mind as she looked down at the beautifully written letters on the piece of paper. Was Jenn in pain? Was her husband good to her while she was alive and well? Who was her husband anyway? Sydney's heart fell at the thought of a nephew that she had

never met. That hurt her more than all the calls Jenn never returned.

Taking in a deep breath, Sydney squeezed her eyes shut to fight against the tears that were now stinging them. She had a nephew, a perfect, beautiful nephew.

Walking over to the telephone she dialed the number in the letter but all she got was a voicemail. Her sister's voice sounded so cheerful.

"You've reached Jennifer Durant," Jenn spoke cheerfully.

"And Max Durant," a deep voice joined in over the line that caused Sydney to shiver and guilt to wash over her like a cloud.

"Leave a message," Jenn and Max said together and before the beep, Sydney heard her sister giggle and a flood of old memories flashed before her eyes.

"Jenn have you seen my red dress?" Sydney asked digging feverishly through her side of the closet. A giggle caught her attention and she turned to see Jenn standing at the door all decked out in her red dress.

"Jenn!" she moaned. "I needed that for today!"

"I'm sorry," Jenn told her. "I kinda have to impress Brad today so he'll ask me to dinner or something and you were sleeping and I didn't want to wake you..."

Sydney held up her hands and took a breath. "Alright. Can I borrow something from you?"

Jenn nodded before darting across the room to hug her sister. Sydney's anger dissipated at that moment even though she hated borrowing Jenn's clothes. Jenn had smaller hips so the clothes never really fit right. After rummaging through the

closet for what seemed like forever, Sydney found a short red skirt with black polka-dots. She topped that off with a black top, a large black belt and large hoop earrings.

"Awesome!" Jenn giggled giving her sister the thumbs up. Grabbing their books they rushed out the door to run all the way to school because if they didn't they would be late.

Running seemed to have saved them again because they had gotten to first period in time to dash into the room just ahead of the teacher and crash into their seats. Panting for air, a note fell on Sydney's desk and she looked up to see Jenn giggling at her. Arching a brow, Sydney unfolded the note. "Isn't he dreamy?" Jenn had scribbled on the paper. Looking up with a smile, Sydney rolled her eyes.

She beamed and turned around in her seat. Sydney sighed, wondering why her sister didn't just ask the boy out.

* * * *

Following the instructions in the letter, Sydney did not leave a message. She hung up and flopped down on the bed beside the telephone with the letter still in her hand. She had to do it, didn't she? After all, it was her sister. They grew up together but after Jenn got married she sort of disappeared. Throughout the years, with email becoming such a big deal, the two had finally begun 'speaking' again. They were always talking about getting together but they just never got around to it and after a few years, they never spoke at all.

Music started pounding from next door and Sydney's head pounded right along with it. She pulled open the small bedside drawer and picked up a bottle of Aspirin and shook it.

She groaned as no noise emanated from the inside of the small white bottle, telling her that it was empty. Of all the times she was out of painkillers, it had to be then. She glanced at the clock beside her. "Those bastards," she grumbled as midnight flashed on the face of the clock.

Sydney walked to the window facing the other house and hung half her body out it. "Some of us work for a living!" she screamed even though she knew they wouldn't hear her over Eminem and Dr. Dre. She slammed the window shut and headed for the shower.

"Damn ingrains. Note to self, buy a house in the country, far, far away from people! Inconsiderate little jerks..."

The shower hadn't done much in the way of clearing her head, or her mood, and hours later Sydney tossed and turned, for the dream she was having would not go away. She brought her knees up under her chin like a scared little girl and tucked her face into them, but the dream still persisted.

"Ready or not here I come!" Jenn called as Sydney hid behind a large oak tree in the back yard.

"Syd!" Jenn called. "One, two, three..."

Sydney giggled when Jenn stopped speaking. There was a thud and Sydney stuck her head out to see that her sister had tripped over the laundry basket. There was mud over everything. She ran over to them and moved Jenn away. "Go out front," she whispered and Jenn nodded then took off running. The next thing Sydney knew, she was in a dark cellar.

It was where her stepfather put them when they were bad, but Sydney would never let him put Jenn in the cold, dark, dampness. Sydney was used to the cellar, but Jenn would die in there. It was creepy. It felt like tiny fingers were dragging their nails against your neck once the door was shut, killing all light. Her stepfather had told her the ghosts in the cellar would teach them a lesson if they didn't behave and that was why he locked them in there. Sydney knew better, deep down, but every time she thought about it she wanted to bang on the door. She knew that would only get him mad and he'd leave her there longer.

Sydney's heart lurched as the slam of the lock told her she wouldn't be getting out until he came back to let her out or until Jenn snuck back with some food. Normally it was the latter because their stepfather lost all sense when he drank. His memory got shot and his temper dwindled down to a short fuse. Pulling her knees up under her chin, she sat down, buried her face into them and began rocking back and forth, "just two more hours ... he's got the whole world in his hands..."

Bolting upright in bed, she looked around the room. It was still dark outside. She had to do what Jenn had asked in her letter. Sydney knew then, that she had to go into the cellar one more time.

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Chapter 2

A loud banging sound could be heard and Max knew someone was kicking the jukebox as usual to get it to work. Conway Twitty's Slow Hand came like a cool whiff of wind on a hot summer's day. He had just finished a job interview and a cold drink and some food was just what the doctor ordered. It was like he was new in town because he had left for college and returned after graduation. People in town were treating him differently and that had its disadvantages. People still didn't know if they could trust him again. He was getting tired of it.

It had been almost three months and every day he entered Mosely's he looked for the same waitress. He had never seen her before and assumed she had just moved there while he was away. She had told him her name was Jenn Cook and each time he visited, he had asked her out. Every time she had refused. Normally, with any other woman, he would have given up. But Jenn Cook was different.

Maximillian Durant didn't know what it was about her that drew him but he knew he wanted her, so he kept asking. One day before he even had a chance to ask she walked over to his table and sat down. "I thought Mosely would get cross if you stopped working," he said in a cool voice.

"I'm not working today." Jenn smiled and crossed her legs. "I got the week off."

"The week? Mosely must be feeling unreasonably generous these days."

"I'm not busy tonight." Jenn leaned forward. "So you can take me out for dinner and dancing tonight. You will come get me at seven."

Max arched a brow at how bold she was now. "I will?"

"Oh yes ... you just don't know it yet ... well, now you do.
You know what I mean."

He sat back in his seat and watched the way her lips curled sexily into her smile as she reached across and snatched a fry from his plate. He nodded. "Alright. I'll take you to dinner and dancing..."

"Good..."

"Good..."

* * * *

"Thank you, Miss Bishop," Max said as his next-door neighbor walked into his house. "I hope we won't need to do this too many more days."

Max felt like an awkward son when Mary Bishop turned and put her arm around his shoulders. "Son, don't worry about it. My bones can handle a toddler for a while until you get your affairs in order."

Max had been off work for two months trying to get things settled after his wife had passed away, but now he had gone back to work and still hadn't figured out what to do with his young son, Conner.

"At least let me pay you, Mary," he said as he grabbed his coat.

"Nonsense, dear. Now go off to your meeting. Conner and I will find something to amuse ourselves."

Max smiled before leaving the house and closing the front door quietly behind him. He didn't know why he was nervous but there it was. It was like he was heading into the principal's office in high school and couldn't remember what he had done and if he got suspended again his parents would strangle him.

When he got to the door of the lawyer's office he tried to take in deep breaths to calm his rattled nerves but his mind kept wandering. With his hand on the doorknob, he swallowed the lump in his throat and pulled the glass door open.

Maximillian Durant sat in the lawyer's office with his feet tapping against the floor. Though Jenn never talked about a will before she got sick, she felt it was important to make one once she learned that her condition was deemed terminal. He was surprised when he had heard the lawyer wanted him to come by for the 'reading of the will', considering he already knew what was in it. When he got there though, he was taken aback when the man said that the 'letters' had been sent. "What letters?"

The lawyer whom Jenn had hired was a good friend of hers from college, as she had told Max, though he had never met him until now. Jenn had made up the will with the lawyer's help because Max was never a big one on the whole death and dying thing. It scared the hell out of him. Jenn had kept him updated on what the will would entail, though she seemed to have left out certain parts.

"Letters to loved ones, people she knew, informing them of her death herself," the lawyer said taking a pen off the desk in front of him and scribbling something on a piece of paper.

"She didn't want them to be wondering or see it on the news so she asked me to send them out for her."

"What did the letters say, Mr Finley?" Max asked, sitting forward in his chair.

"I don't know. I was only asked to send them when her death was imminent. Other than that, I'm afraid I can only tell you what you already know—lawyer-client privileges."

Max stared at the man, not sure what to say. As her final act, she had gone behind his back and sent letters to people he didn't know. It just didn't seem like Jenn at all. "How many?" he whispered.

"Three," the lawyer said simply.

The meeting was over soon after that. There weren't a lot of details due to the fact that everything Jenn and Max owned they owned together. Disbursement of her life insurance would guarantee Conner's education, but for Max there wouldn't be any sitting around getting fat on her money. There was still work to be done and a son to raise.

* * * *

Many times Sydney picked up the phone, dialed the number then slammed it back into the cradle. She was nervous. Her heart was beating too hard to control the slight tightness she now felt in her chest. It was as if someone was sitting on her chest for a while before bouncing up and down. These were the same nerves that had kept her from calling Jenn all those years ago. Maybe it wasn't nerves at all. Maybe she was jealous of her sister for finding a good man and settling down. The thought of the green-eyed monster made

her sick to her stomach and she heaved as though she was about to throw up.

Dropping the letter on the bed, she ran to the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. Each slap of the water brought her back to feeling like her normal, confident self. Stepping into her bedroom again where the letter lay, killed that newfound confidence. She slumped onto her bed beside the letter. She wished she didn't have to, but she knew she had to speak to her sister.

Finally, Sydney got the energy up to dial the number again. She pressed each button extra hard as though she was afraid the number wouldn't dial if she pressed them normally. Her heart hammered inside her chest and by the time the line began ringing, her finger was burning from all the pressure.

"Hello, Durant residence." The voice answering the phone startled her at first but she knew it wasn't Jenn.

"H-hi," Sydney stuttered. "I'm sorry if I am calling late, but is Mrs. Durant available?"

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Durant has left for a meeting. Can I take a message?"

"No, I do not want to speak to Mr. Durant, I want to speak to my ... to Jennifer."

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line and Sydney thought it had taken forever for the woman to speak again. "I'm sorry, Miss. Mrs. Durant died a little..."

Sydney froze and felt behind her for the bed and fell against it. Every word the woman on the other end of the line said after 'died' had completely gone over her head. She couldn't hear anything but that her sister was dead. It was as

though someone had punched her in the gut and was now holding her lungs closed, restricting her breathing. "No," she whispered, "She ... she ... can't..."

She knew her voice probably sounded far away to the woman because that was the way it sounded to Sydney.

The woman on the other end continued. "I'm sure Mr. Durant can help you or at least return your call if you leave a name."

"She's ... dead?" Sydney managed before she somehow found the cradle and dropped the phone into it to hang it up. She buried her face into her hands as sobs began rocking her body. She was too late. Jenn was gone. Sydney felt her heart break and each time she remembered putting off going to see her sister or even calling her, Syd's heart broke all over again.

"Seriously, Boss lady." Mary spoke while hopping onto Sydney's desk to sit. "You really need to call her again."

"I won't do that, Mare." Sydney spoke and flipped through the photos she had to approve for a client. "I tried over and over and each time she ignored me or called to argue with me. I can't keep doing that."

"All I'm saying is that she's your sister."

"And all I'm saying is let it go..."

Sydney walked into her storage room where she kept her suitcase and hauled it back to her bedroom. She dropped it onto the large bed and flipped it open. Biting her nails, she walked to her closet, walked back to her bed, made a frustrated sound, then walked back to her closet and began pulling clothes out. She didn't stop to see what she was

grabbing. She just grabbed some clothes and yanked. They came off the hangers easily and with her arms full, she walked back and stuffed them into her suitcase. There was no turning back now. She wasn't there for Jenn when she was sick and Sydney wasn't about to make the same mistake now that her sister was dead.

They hadn't had such a nice childhood, especially when their mother had taken up with this new man, who had completely tortured them. But, they had each other and to them nothing could change that. Their mother wasn't a very strong woman. She was the kind who treated their men like gods, and to hell with the consequences. Maybe that was why Jenn blamed Sydney for leaving her. Their stepfather was a terror, and even after his death, just before Sydney left town, Jenn was still scared.

With her suitcase full, she flipped the lid back but there was too much packed in it. Climbing onto the bed, she sat on the suitcase to press it down so she could pull the large zipper around. When that task was done, she walked over to her computer and sat down. There had to be something leaving New York for Copper Bay that night because there was no reason to wait. As her fingers danced over the keyboard of her laptop she ran over in her mind what she would say to Max when she got there.

"Hi Max, I'm Sydney, Jenn's sister".

"Hi, you don't know me, but your wife wanted me to come and take care of Conner when she died."

A million other scenarios ran through Sydney's mind, but unfortunately, none sounded plausible. She concluded that

she would just fly by the seat of her pants when she got there. Booking her plane ticket and a hotel room close to the address that was in Jenn's letter, she sighed and rested back against her chair. She had a little over one hour to get dressed and eat something. Her stomach lurched at the thought of food, daring her to eat. Sydney moaned, because she knew exactly what would happen if she called her stomach's bluff; she would throw everything up and she wasn't in the mood to clean anything. Skipping the food bit, she used the extra minutes to take longer in the shower. She was placing the last bobby pin in her short, black hair, when the airport limo arrived and honked from outside.

The ride to the airport met Sydney with a cell phone call.

"Cook," she answered while running an exhausted hand over her thigh.

"Sydney? Sydney Cook?" the voice asked and Sydney rolled her eyes. She wasn't in the mood for some fan looking for an autograph. Even though she was a photographer, young girls saw her as this person deserving of a pedestal and it drove her nuts, especially now when all she wanted to do was curl up into a ball and be human; curl up into a ball and sob until she couldn't sob anymore.

"Yes, who is this?"

"Jessica, Jessica Travis? You, me, Brad and Jenn used to hang out in high school."

"Hey, Jessica, long time."

"Yeah. I was calling about a letter I got from Jenn ... Is this for real?"

"That she was dying of cancer?"

"Yeah."

"If I got a letter," Jessica replied sounding jittery and Sydney could tell that she was crying. "Then yes, the next call you field will be Brad's."

Sydney had barely hung up from Jessica when her cell phone rang again. She ignored it, hoping whoever it was would go away but it stopped ringing then started again. She cursed then picked it up, "Cook."

"Sydney? It's Brad ... I got a letter..."

"It's true Brad..."

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[&]quot;Yeah," Sydney said simply and the line went silent.

[&]quot;She's gone, isn't she?" Jessica wanted to know quietly.

[&]quot;Yes. I guess I should expect a call from Brad."

Chapter 3

It was the time between the first two classes ... lunchtime. Sydney grabbed her sandwich from her locker and dashed through the hall with a teacher screaming at her that she knew the rules about running in the halls. Sydney didn't stop. She didn't want to be late for the little time she had with her sister and their friends.

"Syd!" a voice yelled and she looked up to see Brad waving at her. She walked over to them and gave Brad and Jessica a hug before sitting down in the circle. "Man, I hate math," Brad moaned.

"Didn't I tell you I'd help you?" Jenn wanted to know.

"Girl, you're getting a D in math, how the hell can you help?" Jessica questioned and the group broke out in laughter. "I say let me tutor you. I am good in some areas of math."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Jenn pouted before biting into her sandwich. "I can do math ... a little..." They laughed again.

"I think you should get a tutor," Sydney cut in around bites of her sandwich. "I mean our parents are paying for it anyway so you might as well use the services."

They nodded in agreement before Brad leaned over and pressed a kiss to Jenn's lips. It seemed one of them had asked the other out after all.

They ate in silence, then lay on their backs staring up at the clear sky. It was as though they were thinking of their

futures and what they saw scared them. Their silence was the only way they could deal with what they saw ahead of them.

The sky glistened above Sydney's head and she smiled and sighed contently. Something she hadn't been able to do in a long while and she wondered why she was so nervous about the bad things in life. She tried to tell herself that she had no control over them and those things were not worth the headache. For that mere moment, she didn't have to worry about getting smacked around or about the yelling and fighting all the time.

An image of her future popped into Sydney's head. The sad thing was she couldn't see her life any better than her mother's. The yelling, name calling and fighting was there in her life as well. What scared the young girl was that even though she wasn't related to her mother by blood, she would turn out just like her.

Jenn was the first to break the silence. "I wish we could stay like this. You know ... just silent and happy."

"Me too," Brad whispered. "I feel so good right now." Silence.

"But we can't..." that was Jessica.

"We can't," Sydney confirmed.

* * * *

Sydney's mind came back to the matters at hand. She tried to come up with a way to get in as little Conner's nanny without too many questions about her private life, but everything she thought about eventually ended in disaster in

her mind. If Jenn wanted to make Sydney's brain explode, job well done.

Frowning, Sydney sat up in her seat and ran a hand over her face before burying it in her hands. She had to think of something, and fast. The ringing of her cell phone did not make anything easier and Sydney was tempted to smash it to tiny pieces. Instead she gritted her teeth and answered the phone.

"Hello," a nervous voice spoke. "This is Stacy from the Good Tidings Childcare Services. I'm calling on behalf of one Jennifer Durant."

Sydney's brows went up. "Yes? How can I help you?" This could be the break and the way in she was looking for. Holding her breath, she waited for more from Stacy.

"Yes, Mrs. Durant has requested we call this number in regard to a child care position that we have available."

Sydney could have only guessed how confused the woman from the Good Tidings Childcare Services must have been when everything was dropped in her lap. She could imagine the woman sitting there trying to figure out what to do, who to call or if she should even take the case.

To say that the Durant's and Sydney's case was odd didn't even begin to cover it all but it would have to do.

"Is that so?" Sydney asked happily. She wondered briefly how Jenn got the number to her cell since it wasn't listed, but she didn't dwell on that for long. This phone call would make it much easier for her to get to know Max. "What exactly did she say?"

"Well, she is looking for a full-time sitter with a possible move-in option. The position is starting immediately, if you are interested."

"Oh I am very interested, Stacy, as a matter of fact I am on my way to Copper Bay right now. Anything I should know or do before I can start?"

"Well, you should stop by our offices. Normally we would require a police background check, but since you were referred to us by the mother, we can overlook that for now. We need to get background info and a workup done on you."

"Sure," Sydney pulled out her day planner. "I should be there later on tonight, but I doubt you will be open ... how about first thing in the morning?"

"That will be fine, Miss.... how do you pronounce your name?"

"Sydney ... Bouvier." Sydney had almost said Cook and that would have spoiled everything because then they would have told Max. Max would start asking questions, then it would get really messy.

"Okay, I've got you down for a nine o'clock appointment. We'll see you in the morning Miss Bouvier."

"Thank you, Stacy," Syd said before hanging up and writing down the appointment. She had to get her resume in order, though if Jenn had anything to say about it she wouldn't need it. She had some babysitting experience but she could give them Marsha's name and number. Marsha could give a reference for her. Settling back in the seat she tried to enjoy the rest of the trip.

The flight went well though Sydney couldn't sleep. She wasn't antsy about the flight even though she hated flying. She was scared about meeting Max and little Conner. She sighed and turned her head to look out at the darkening sky. There was something about the sunset casting an orange glow over everything that gave her a sense of peace.

Landing went well, and soon Sydney was driving down a street toward her motel. The town was too small for a hotel and she figured she should get a room and freshen up before meeting the daycare person and Max the next morning. If nothing else, she should at least try to get some sleep.

After checking into the small motel, she sat in her room with her hands in her lap as she tried to gather enough courage to do what she was about to do. Getting to Copper Bay in itself was an act of bravery since she kept having second thoughts the whole way there. The whole situation had 'bad idea' written all over it.

Sydney flopped down on the bed beside her sister and wrapped an arm around the girl's shoulder. "You can't cry over it, sis," Sydney encouraged. "I mean, if he doesn't see what a beautiful, smart girl he had then it's his loss. One of these days, you're going to find a man who loves you for you."

"But you don't believe in love." Jenn sniffed and turned tear filled eyes up at Sydney.

Sydney had to admit that Jenn had her there. "That's where you're wrong. I don't believe in love for me, Jenn, but you're the good one. Anything can happen for you."

Sydney lifted Jenn's chin and kissed her cheek. "Don't cry," Sydney begged. "You'll get wrinkles."

"What?"

Sydney burst out laughing at the genuinely scared look in Jenn's eyes as the younger Cook sister bolted across the room to stare at her face in the mirror. "Made you look!"

Jenn growled and rushed across the room to toss a pillow at Sydney. "That's a dirty trick!"

* * * *

Sydney wished this whole thing was a trick. She wished that when she showed up at Jenn's house the next morning Jenn would jump out from somewhere and tell her it was all an elaborate hoax. Something inside Sydney told her it wasn't, but a girl can still dream.

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Chapter 4

Hand in hand, Max walked beside Jenn. He only hoped his palms weren't sweaty because he didn't want her to know how nervous he was feeling or suspect anything. Their second date had gone well but he hadn't officially popped the question. Feeling a sense of bravery he stopped and stood before her. "Can I ask you something?"

The wind took her gorgeous brown hair and tangled it about her face. Max reached up and pushed the strands behind her ear. "Sure." Her smile made his heart soar.

"Would you mind terribly being my girlfriend? I mean, I know I'm not much to look at and I can't buy you..."

"Took you long enough," she laughed and socked him in the shoulder before jumping into his arms. That night, outside Mosely's and down the road from Jenn's apartment, they shared their first real kiss with a car going by, honking at them.

* * * *

Conner was up and playing in the living room when the sound of the Flight of the Valkyries came from Max's hip. Flipping open the cell phone, one of his brows shot upward because of who was calling. He sat in his chair and cleared his throat. "Hello?"

"Mr. Durant, it's Mr. Finley. Do you have a moment?"

He should have known it was Mr. Finley. But why would he be calling?

"Yeah," he said as he exhaled, at least it wasn't more bad news ... yet.

"Before she died, your wife contracted with a nanny service, Good Tidings Child Care Services. to have someone help you watch your son."

It took him a minute to process what the lawyer had said and when he finally did, he wasn't sure whether he was mad at Jenn, or just disappointed that she had gone behind his back again. Sure, a nanny would be nice, that's what he was going to work on today, but why didn't Jenn say anything? "Why didn't you mention this at the meeting?"

"Sir, Jenn's request was that I only contact you about this after we found the nanny."

"I don't have a say in who it is?"

"Your wife was pretty adamant about the arrangements. You can fire the woman if you want, but I'd suggest you see what she is like first." The lawyer paused for a moment before continuing. "According to the service, she'll be there within the hour."

Max flipped the phone closed without even saying goodbye. Who had he married that she was so cold and calculating about how he should run his life after she was gone? When she was around, Jenn was so open about everything, but now in death it felt like she had been keeping a lot from him.

The need to hit something gushed through him and he growled and lifted his head to stare at the ceiling then pressed his eyes shut as he tried to reign in his temper.

The ringing doorbell caused Max to look through the window in the front door. On the other side was a well-proportioned black woman with short hair, long earrings, and a nice looking blouse. He watched as she fidgeted around then knocked on the door this time. Taking a breath he opened the door. "Yes?"

* * * *

Syd had pressed the doorbell and waited, then took the time between knocks to fix her hair, her suit, the buckle on her shoe. She hoped she didn't screw this up.

They door opened and a deep voice greeted her. After getting over her shock, Sydney's eyes feasted on Max and she wondered how Jenn had managed to snag him. To say the man was gorgeous would be an understatement and she quickly bit down on her lip to bid her brain to tell her lips to move. She was staring and she knew it.

"My name is Sydney Bouvier. Your wife ... your wife requested me."

"Yes, of course, from the nanny service. Please, come in." He took a step back from the door as she walked in. "Can I get you something, a drink perhaps?" Max couldn't for the life of him figure out why Jenn would have insisted on this woman. If it was someone she knew, Jenn would have at least talked to Max about her.

"No," she replied slowly. "Thank you..."

Max led her into the living room. "Very well. Please have a seat." Max motioned to the couch as he sat in his chair.

Conner was lying on his back, cooing up at the ceiling. "So, how did you know my late wife?"

"We grew up together," she said simply. "Same high school."

"Ah," was his reply because he wasn't sure he liked that answer. "So, do you have any experience in raising kids?"

"I've been babysitting for a friend of mine for three years. She has three little girls ... triplets," she handed him her resume with Marsha's home number, name and job telephone number.

To Sydney, Max had the look on his face that said he wasn't sure what to say because her childcare experience didn't seem like much experience, at least with his son. She wanted to tell him the nanny service wouldn't approve anyone who didn't meet their criteria. "How did she contact you? My wife I mean."

"She wrote me a letter..." Sydney told him, hiding the fact she wanted to cry. She looked away from him. Taking a deep breath she looked back when she was sure she wouldn't start crying. "She sent us a letter in which she explained the situation."

Max nodded. It explained the letters, or at least one of them. "Who is us, if I may ask?"

"In high school we all used to hang out ... Jessica, Brad, myself and Jenn," she said, being careful not to give anything away, especially that Brad was Jenn's boyfriend up until they all started college. "We were the nerd runners in school ... kinda tight."

"Oh," he said quietly. "Jenn never told me about you, I'm sorry to say. She always seemed open, but didn't talk about her past much. She was a wonderful wife."

He was broken and Sydney could tell he had lost a part of himself. Her eyes stayed on his frame as Max got up from the chair and picked up Conner from the floor. She bit harder against her lower lip hoping to concentrate on something else other than the pain that was inside her. Sydney watched Max hold the baby with a gentleness surprising for someone of his presence.

Sydney forced a smile. "Yes, well," she said waving at Conner with a little giggle, "we kept putting off getting together ... and putting it off ... I don't know what happened. Life just got in the way I guess."

"It always does." Max walked over to the window, bouncing the boy in his arms. "Alright. The pay is eighty dollars a day. You are welcome to stay in the guest room, since it sounds like you came in from out of town—that's if you'd like."

Sydney wanted to tell him that she didn't want his money but if she didn't take the pay, he would know something was definitely wrong. Mentally shrugging, she figured she could put it into a fund or something for little Conner. He might want a car someday to impress the little girlies. That caused a smile to crease her lips. "That would be acceptable."

Conner tried to climb over Max's wide shoulder to see her. She covered her eyes then looked at him again and he laughed. She grinned and did it again but this time she stuck her tongue out at him. "Peek-a-boo!" Sydney laughed.

Conner giggled and Sydney smiled as Max turned around to look at her. She loved kids and the thought of not having any of her own swam in to torment her. She tried her hardest to keep the smile on her face.

"Would you like to hold him?"

"Ah," she looked at her clothes then her hands. "Is there somewhere I could wash my hands ... I've been driving a rental car and I don't know if it was ... you know ... clean."

"No problem." Max walked her over to the bathroom and opened the door. "Careful, I gave the boy a bath earlier and the floor might be a little wet."

"Thank you." She smiled and pulled off her heels. She placed them by the door and stepped in. Her warm feet stuck to the wet floor and she smiled as she made her way to the sink. She washed her hands, gave herself the once over then straightened her clothes before heading back for Conner.

Gratefully, but with a bit of fear, he put his son into the woman's arms. She was a stranger, but somehow he felt some consolation in the fact that his wife had almost handpicked her to watch their son.

"Hey there, handsome," she said touching Conner's cheek but the little boy looked up at her and grabbed her finger. He reminded her of Jenn. When those big eyes smiled back at her, Jenn was there. She laughed and sat down with him. "I'm Sydney, but you can call me Syd..." she giggled as Conner pulled her finger into his mouth and began trying to chew on it. "Well, I take it you like me ... and you, my handsome little guy, are teething."

"Yeah, I'm starting to develop bite marks," his father said, holding up two fingers.

Sydney took her finger from Connor but he reached out, making a sobbing sound that told Sydney he was about to start hollering if she didn't give him the finger back. "I-I didn't mean..." She let the boy take her finger again. "Sorry," she said, not knowing where a teething ring or anything was.

"It's okay. He obviously doesn't mind, and neither do I." Max looked at the clock. "It's getting about time for me to go to work. Miss Bishop, my next-door neighbor will be stopping by about a dozen times. She's a little concerned about Conner and me since Jenn's been gone. If you need something, my emergency numbers are on the fridge."

She nodded, "Ah, alright," she told him. "I'll find things ... right Conn?" The little boy nipped at her finger in response and she laughed.

"We'll be fine ... and I think I spoke to the neighbor already ... I called a few days ago and I think I must have scared her. It will give me a chance to apologize."

"Alright," he said after a while, without asking why she had called. He hadn't gotten a message about someone calling though. He had other things on his mind—things like the fact that he really wasn't ready to leave his son with this woman, but he didn't want to stay. Sometimes it felt easier if he wasn't in this house. He wanted to just take Conner and go. While he could afford it, he just couldn't see it happening. Working gave him something to keep his hands busy so that his mind would concentrate on work and not on how empty he was feeling inside. It gave him a way to kill the depression

that was waiting on the sidelines, ready to pull him under and drown him.

Losing Jenn was the worst thing that ever happened to him. The day he had found out about her illness he remembered he had stopped breathing and had to be jabbed in the ribs to remember. Even then, Max literally had to tell himself to breathe. His eyes had widened, and his grip on Jenn's hand went tighter. He couldn't remember saying anything other than, "No..."

Grabbing one of his chef outfits from the hall closet, still covered in plastic sheeting from the dry cleaner, he turned to Conner. "See you later, little boy."

"Gaga!" Conner uttered with a bounce.

"Say bye to Daddy." Sydney waved one of Conner's arms at Max then watched as he left. She sighed. "There goes a broken man," she whispered. Sighing again, she turned to Conner. "What do you say we go and check out your digs, huh? Wanna show me your room?"

Conner bounced in her arms and made a happy gurgling sound that made her smile. Sydney remembered how much Jenn wanted this little boy and tears sprang to her eyes.

As she changed Conner's shirt, since he had gotten drool all over it, her mind wandered briefly before Conner, pulling his big toe into his mouth, caught her attention. She might as well give the boy another bath. Sydney figured she needed all the practice she could get.

Sydney could see what Jenn saw in Maximillian Durant. He seemed to be the perfect male specimen. He was sexy. He had beautiful blue eyes and wide shoulders a girl could really

cry on, or rest her legs on. She blushed as the thought of Max on his knees, doing delightful things to her while her legs were draped over his shoulders crashed into her mind like a ton of bricks.

Conner, flipping water at her, caught her attention and dragged her back to reality. She felt horrible for thinking about her sister's husband like that. She felt close to dirty.

"Well a booga booga to you, too." Sydney imitated the sounds Conner was making as she lifted him and wrapped him in a towel. "You should never interrupt a lady's daydreams." She rubbed her nose against his stomach and he laughed and grabbed for her hair. Her hair was too short though because when he pulled his fingers went right off the ends. "Ha!" She smiled down at him lovingly. "Thought you could pull the hair, eh?"

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Chapter 5

The week had gone like a whirlwind for the chef and Max wanted something to calm his nerves. He sat at the dinner table and eyed the basketball where it laid in the corner behind the door. It had been a while since he played any ball and the fear that he might be rusty rattled through his body. Hauling his body from his chair, he reached for the ball and dribbled it a few times before smiling and grabbing his keys to head out the door.

Max walked onto the court and bounced the basketball against the pavement. It wasn't much of a court but it would do perfectly to let off some steam. He had been working like a demon lately and his body just wanted to let off some steam. He dribbled the ball and faked to the left, then to the right before dipping in a circle and going for the lay-up.

"Nice shot," a voice came from behind him before clapping started. "But let's see how you do against a real partner. I feel it's only fair to warn you. I got mad, skills hommes."

Max smiled and dribbled before chucking the ball at him. "Alright, 'hommes' let's see these mad skills you keep talkin' about. Best five out of seven," he smirked. He knew it was a weird number but it was his call.

"I have been playing with you for years and let's face it your game is nothing spectacular."

Gregory chuckled. "Oh! Don't hurt yourself!"

Pulling at the legs of his pants, Max bent over so that he was ready to spring in any direction needed to block Gregory from the basket.

"I asked her to be my girlfriend," he confided as he moved with his best friend.

"About time." Gregory moved backward before going up for a three pointer. "What did she say?"

"She punched me in the arm and said yes." Max laughed and caught the ball when it went through the net.

"What did I tell you?" A wide smile broke on Gregory's face. "Told you not to take too long, man. She might have gotten spooked and run to the love machine." Gregory motioned to himself and grinned.

Max laughed and as Gregory went up for another shot, Max was there to block him. "Not a chance..."

* * * *

The court wasn't much, just a patch of asphalt with fading white lines. It hadn't changed much in the seven months since Max had last set eyes on it. A little more grass was growing out of the cracking pavement, the rust was a little more prevalent on the chain link fence surrounding the court, and the bare basketball hoop looked a little worse for wear. The court wasn't unused in his absence, neighborhood kids used it almost daily, but it was the first time Max had been here since Jenn had passed.

Today, Max's only close friend stood in the middle of the court and waved him over. Between Jenn's illness and taking care of Conner, Max hadn't seen Gregory in months. They had

grown up together in Copper Bay and it was Gregory who had pointed out the woman who would be Max's wife in a bar downtown, four years ago this September. While Max worked in a restaurant, Gregory worked at an insurance agency. They kept in touch, having a pickup basketball game every week, but that was before Jenn's illness.

Sydney had been watching Conner for two weeks now. It was still a little odd for him to have someone else watching Conner, but it did give him some time to get back to his life. "Hey Gregory," he called out to the dark skinned man.

"Glad you could make it, Max." Gregory tossed the age-old basketball toward the fair skinned chef.

"You didn't give me much choice. I believe you said 'If you don't come, I'll track you down and help you cash in that life insurance I sold you'."

"Well, I figured it'd work."

"It did." Max took off his shirt and stretched his arms behind his back, the stiffness announcing itself openly. He didn't realize how much he had gotten out of shape. Picking up a fifteen pound infant wasn't the same as real exercise. Walking to the middle of the court, he bounced the ball off the ground a few times as if to make sure he still knew how to do it. "How have you been, Gregory?"

"Same as always, but we're not gonna make this about me. How are you doing? Haven't talked to you since the funeral, and I'm not ashamed to say I was getting a little worried." Gregory pulled off his own shirt, revealing an old scar he'd had since childhood where he got stabbed by a

wooden stick wielded by the future chef. Hopping from one foot to another, he took up station in front of Max.

"I've been okay." Max faked to one side and dribbled the ball toward the hoop. Making a half-hearted jump attempt, he missed the basket by a wide margin.

"Bullshit, try again." Gregory hardly had to try to cover the man. Max knew Gregory could tell that Max's heart wasn't in the game yet, which was perfectly understandable.

Max retrieved the ball and tossed it to his friend. "Well, I found out Jenn had hired a nanny to watch Conner. It's allowed me to go back to work, but it still feels weird, you know? She didn't even tell me about any of it. This woman just showed up after Jenn's lawyer called..."

"That's strange. It's not like Jenn to just do something like that." Gregory took his turn at the basket, bouncing the ball off the rim before jumping up and dunking it. "I thought I saw Conner at the grocery store the other day in the arms of a nice-looking sista. I should have called, but I wasn't sure it was him."

"Yeah, that's Sydney. Jenn knew her from when they were growing up, so she says. Either way, it's been good to have her around."

"Man, she's hot. She got a cell number?" Gregory smiled and tossed the ball back. "I wanna holla at her and see if she would like to have my babies."

"She does, and no, I'm not giving it to you. And dude, we don't need any more of you running around."

"You sure? You wound me..." Gregory chuckled, grabbing his heart as though in pain. "I mean she's got it all, and I need to get me some."

Gregory had to work to keep up with Max this time, but still managed to bat the ball away as Max tried a lay-up.

"What about Alice, the socialite of Copper Bay?" Alice Green was the daughter of the long serving mayor and she and Gregory had been going steady on and off for years.

Gregory smiled. "Okay, I gotta get me some more."

"You're a horny bastard, you know that?" Max walked over and retrieved the ball. Slapping the ball, he thought about Miss Bouvier. She was attractive, but he hadn't given it much thought. She was the babysitter after all. While that idea held some water for him, it was better as a fantasy than something real.

"You betcha," Gregory replied as he took the ball from Max and started dribbling. "But the ladies don't complain, my friend."

Feigning a cut to the left, Gregory spun around to the right but came face to face with a much improved Max. They went back and forth, jockeying for position, until Gregory gave up and made a shot from a distance, sinking it easily. "What's she like?"

Max retrieved the ball. "What's who like?"

"Einstein! Who do you think I mean, genius?"

Max chuckled. "What makes you think I'm going to tell you?" Max inquired and Gregory gave him an annoyed look. "Okay, she's nice and talks like she's from back east somewhere. She's good with Conner and can cook a pretty

decent meal. Sydney reminds me of Jenn a little, but that's probably because they knew each other."

"How does she look in a night shirt?" Gregory covered Max, but the chef ducked under him and made an easy layup. The smile on his face was showing brightly in the midday sun.

Max had to think about that for a moment. On one or two occasions he had seen her in one when Conner woke up early, but it took him a few seconds to recall.

"Pretty good, actually."

"Come on, don't leave a brotha hanging like that. I'm in pain here. Gimme details man!"

"Forget it, she's too high class for you, but then the wicked witch of the west would be too high class for you." Max blocked his friend's shot and grabbed the ball. Finally he was beginning to have some fun.

"I'm hurt. As I remember, you have to drop a house on her to curl her toes. I can do that to a woman with just my tongue."

Max laughed at Gregory's attempt at humor. "So you keep saying. Anyway, she's just the babysitter. Nothing is going to happen there."

"Just a babysitter? Bro, tell me you're kidding." Gregory held onto the ball with an 'I-can't-believe-you-just-said-that' look on his face. "Haven't you learned anything from me? Nobody's just the babysitter. That's one of the hottest fantasies a guy can have. Though mine is still the Swedish Swim Team and a tub full of whipped cream, ah ... good

times ... but the babysitter one takes a close second on my list."

Max took the ball from Gregory's hands with ease and made a lay-up around the insurance salesman. "I don't even know if she has a boyfriend. Guess I never asked."

"Don't you think it's time you found out? Besides, she's been here for a while, if he isn't around, then he probably doesn't exist. Take it from me, a man with any sense doesn't let a sista like that out of his sight for a minute, much less to go live with another man. Besides, I'm sure Jenn wouldn't mind. So you can't really use her as an excuse."

Max stopped and dribbled the ball in one place for a while, thinking. "Jenn told me after we knew there probably wasn't a way around the cancer that she wanted me to get remarried, and not wait until I was an old man, in order to honor her memory."

"Sounds like Jenn."

"At the time I never wanted to be with anyone else so I simply shrugged it off. But now, I'm not so sure." Breaking the spell of rekindled memories, Max tried to make a dash for the hoop, only to get the ball stolen.

"If you want something, you have to go after it. If it is meant for you, then it'll be fine. Both with you and with Jenn."

Max broke out in a smile. "Isn't that what you said about Suzanne?" Suzanne was a one-time girl of Gregory's whose hold on reality was not quite as strong as others. They found out sometime after he started dating Suzanne that the woman wasn't all there when she showed up one day with a

homeless man she said was a clergyman on one arm, a big bouquet of flowers in the other, and a veil. That had spooked Gregory beyond anything else. To this day, Max still laughed every time he remembered it.

"Hey, I didn't know she was psychotic. It just sort of happened. But never mind about her, take Sydney on a date or something. See what happens."

"We'll see." Max panted as he went in for the next lay-up. This thing with Sydney was turning into more than just a working relationship, they were fast becoming friends.

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Chapter 6

"Seriously Syd," Jenn rested against the back of the kitchen counter. "You can't just leave! What am I going to do without you?"

"I can't stay here, Jenn," Sydney pleaded. "It's the middle of nowhere ... how am I supposed to make anything of my life if I stay here? I feel like I'm being suffocated and to tell you the truth there is nothing here for me. Come with me."

Sydney moved over to Jenn to take her hands but Jenn simply shrugged out of her grasp. "Stay away from me! I can't believe you would leave me here!"

"I said you could come with me! Or do you have selective hearing again?"

"I'm not leaving! This is my home!"

Sydney sighed. "Jenn, what do you have here that you want to remember? Tell me that honestly. All we have is bad memories and I want to rid myself of feeling like every time I turn he's going to be there, ready to lock me in a dark room."

"You want to go to your big city so bad? Then go ... but know that if you leave you're no longer my sister!"

"Jenn!"

The sobbing young woman darted from the room slamming the door hard behind her and Sydney fell back into her chair as though her legs had given out.

* * * *

Syd's cell phone rang and she wiped her hands onto the apron she was wearing and picked it up. Before she could say anything at all a familiar voice spoke. "Syd, Cover Girl called ... they want to know how long they have to wait for those pictures. I didn't tell them about your little run to Copper Bay just so I didn't freak 'em out." It was her secretary.

"I'm so sorry, Mare. I completely forgot," she moaned and rubbed her face. "Things here have been insane." How could she have forgotten something so major? She had a contract with them and if she didn't get the work done, then that could not only be bad publicity but could also mean no more work for Sydney Cook and lawsuits coming out the wazoo. Sighing, she moved over to the table and collapsed into one of the chairs.

"Okay listen ... I can fix this. There has to be a way ... got it. Tell them I'll call them later on today ... I have some things I need to do." She stopped speaking long enough to wipe some milk from Conner's face then switched chairs to sit down beside him. "Find out about where I am. Maybe I can have Giselle come here for the shoot..."

"Yah, that'll be the day," Mary said with a chuckle. "We both know Miss Thang won't agree to it unless it makes her look good ... though that seems to be a chore lately."

"Well, how else are they going to get that shoot done? They can't say I breached the contract because they didn't specify where they wanted the shoot done ... so in essence they would be breaching if I tell them where I want the shoot and they say no."

"You know boss lady, I'd hate to have you pissed at me. I'll give them a call."

Sydney laughed before hanging up and looking around the room. She needed to find a phone book or yellow pages or something to tell her what kind of background she was looking at in Copper Bay. All she found was a yellow pages and that was no help. She slammed it shut and began packing up Conner.

"Alright sweetie, you and Auntie Syd are going on a play date." She grinned as he tried again to pull her hair but his hand slipped off easily.

"I love your persistence." She chuckled and kissed his nose.

"Gaga!" Conner told her.

She strapped him into the car seat that Max had given her for him just in case they wanted a ride out. She pressed a kiss to his cheek then double checked the car seat before closing the door. She yanked the baby bag from the roof of the car and as she got in, placed it on the passenger seat. Getting a vision of a baby flying out of a car, she darted out of the car again to re-check the buckles on his baby seat then breathed a sigh of relief before they were finally on their way.

Scoping out places in Copper Bay was easier than she thought. She found a beautiful park that would be absolutely perfect and after stopping to get permission from the local city hall, she was set. Feeling like celebrating, she stopped at an ice cream shop and bought herself and Conner a cone. She laughed when she looked over at Conner because half of his ended up on his clothes and face. He had refused to eat it

when she tried to feed him so she asked for a plastic spoon and pressed it into his hand. Laughing harder, she pulled her camera from over her shoulder. That was an opportunity not to be missed as Conner's face was half brown from ice-cream. She took a few pictures before Conner clued in, waved his ice-cream covered hands at her and smiled. She snapped another set of pictures and tucked her camera safely back into the bag. "Well, let's get you home," she told him as she wiped the dessert from his face as best she could with a baby wipe. "You need a bath..."

"Gaga!" Conner shouted proudly waving his hand while chucking the chocolate covered spoon at her. It smacked her in the chest but Conner wasn't through there. His chubby palms smacked lightly against Syndey's shoulders.

"And I need to put this in some water before the chocolate sets in," Sydney moaned.

Dunking all the used paper towels and wet wipes into a nearby trash can, she picked up Conner and proceeded out the door. She was surprised at how empty the shop was, but then again, the kids were probably at the beach hanging out. She sighed dreamily as she strapped Conner back into his baby seat and got into the car.

* * * *

After putting Conner down for his nap, she sat at the table to make some notes and some calls. After she finished, she closed her day planner and crossed her legs wondering if Max had even come home the night before. She hadn't seen him since he put her through the Spanish inquisition then left for

work. Glancing at the clock she saw it was getting close to dinnertime and she got up to browse the fridge. Even though this wasn't her first time looking in a fridge she was still bewildered. There wasn't much there. She guessed because he was a chef and Conner only ate formula or mashed potatoes, he didn't need much. She found vegetables, steaks and rice. She hummed one of Jenn's old lullabies as she cooked. Deep down, she wondered if her cooking would be even a fraction of what he was used to. A gourmet chef was something Sydney wasn't but she could hold her own.

Being in the kitchen felt like home to her. It had been a while since she had cooked anything. She didn't really have to cook because it was only her but since arriving in Copper Bay, she couldn't wait to cook.

"Okay so dinner is ready," she told Conner a few hours later when she sat down and fed him mashed pumpkin mixed with butter after his bath. "Think Daddy will like it?" Instead of answering, Conner made a happy gurgling sound.

"I think so too." She nodded to him.

Sydney hadn't had time to shower yet because as soon as she had finished supper, Conner was awake and needed changing and feeding, and he would not go back to sleep. That had been a few hours ago. Now she walked around the living room feeding him a bottle of apple juice and she couldn't help it, she had to speak to him.

"Your mommy is so proud of you," she told him even though he probably couldn't understand what she was saying. "No matter what you do ... I know Jenn ... you could never disappoint her."

The baby kicked his feet and let the bottle go with a soft pop and she smiled down at him before lifting him to her shoulder. She wrapped a soft towel under him so if he puked it wouldn't go on her and began to gently rub his back. Conner made the typical baby sounds until he went silent and Sydney freaked out and held her finger beneath his nose, laughing because he was only sleeping. She sat down with him, just watching him sleep for a while before carrying him to his crib.

Conner in bed, Sydney took time to take a shower. It was nothing too long though, just in case Conner woke up while she was pampering. A simple run in and run out shower was exactly what she got. After getting dressed, she checked on Conner then went downstairs in her nightgown to get a cup of tea. She cuddled into the sofa and began watching some late night movies. She wasn't tired yet, just needed her "me" time before she went to bed.

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Chapter 7

"Jenn, hurry up we're going to be late!" Max yelled up the stairs as he heard her heels clicking back and forth against the wooden floor. He looked into a mirror by the door and fixed his tie. When he heard her coming down the stairs he moved to take her hand and was left speechless. Her brown hair was down over her shoulders in large curls, her dress hugged her hips ever so gently and her legs were sexier in the heels. He grinned at her. "I think I should be the envy of every man tonight," he whispered, kissing her hand when she placed it in his.

"Good." She lifted her chin proudly but yelped happily when her feet left the ground because he picked her up to kiss her soundly. When he lifted his head he had a mind to carry her back up to the bedroom.

"No way." Jenn read his thoughts. "We are going. I know what will happen if you take me back to that room. We'd never leave until sometime tomorrow. You can have your naughty way with me later."

Max moaned in disappointment but smiled and kissed her again before placing her back on the ground. "Later then."

"It's a date," Jenn giggled, stole a kiss from him and rushed out the door.

* * * *

Why did Jenn keep things from him in her last days and why did he feel cheated about it? Max had asked himself that

any number of times over the past month. It hurt at first, but now he was more curious than anything. Mostly he thought about it at night, still in the large queen sized bed that he had shared with Jenn. This time, though, he was on his way to work. Turning the car from its almost automated drive to the restaurant, he headed out of town and up an old dirt road off the main road. He needed to talk to someone, a specific someone.

The dirt road ended at a small parking area and a gate. Max felt a now-familiar tightening in his chest as he unlocked the gate and walked up the two-tracked path. The grass was well tended here and the man wondered how it was kept so trim but he knew his mind was only trying to run away from what he was here for. Finally, he walked up to a patch of grass that wasn't as green as the rest, not having completely healed from being torn up a few months earlier. At the far end of the patch a large stone stood on end and bore the name of his only love, the one he thought he'd spend the rest of his life with. The name Jennifer Durant shone in the morning sun. His eyes blurred with every passing second, welling up with tears for his love.

Gently, he sat on the ground at the foot of her resting place as his tears broke over his cheeks. Max's mind raced with questions, things he wanted to ask her about what she had been planning, what she had been thinking and feeling. Instead he started with the weather. She couldn't see it from way down there after all. Then he got to Conner and his new nanny before asking her all those things he had wanted to over the last month. Jenn had been gone over six months

now, but he had only had the guts to come up here a half dozen times ... less so now than he had in the beginning. The thought that she was slipping away wouldn't enter his mind, only that he was becoming used to her not being around.

Jenn didn't give him any answers. He really hadn't expected her to though. It felt good to at least let her know how he was feeling. Wiping his eyes, he sat there for the longest time, until his cell phone buzzed. It was work, according to the number in the display. The owner was probably threatening to fire him for not being there on time. Instead of answering he just dropped the cell back into his pocket and stayed there for another few minutes before getting up and returning slowly to his car.

The shift had been long and hard, the boss riding his ass the whole time. He was thankful when the dinner rush had ended and he tossed his chef's coat into the hamper on his way out. The sun was down, nearing ten o'clock when he fired up the engine on his car and headed home.

* * * *

A light rain had started ... early summer in Copper Bay, Max thought as he walked up his drive and put his key into the lock. The house was dark, except for a light coming from the living room and the sound of something on the TV. Putting his coat on the hook by the door, he walked toward the sound, not saying anything in case Conner was asleep in there, but as he got closer, he heard the sound of someone enjoying themselves.

Sydney was laughing, holding her stomach. She had forgotten how much she loved the Three Stooges. She used to watch them with Jenn when their parents weren't home because their stepdad hated them watching television. She looked up in time to see Shemp crashing into a door and that only made her laugh harder. She covered her mouth, afraid she was getting loud.

The sound of laughter coming from the house was something he hadn't heard in a while, not since Jenn had gone into the house the last time. Setting his keys on the stand, he walked into the living room. There he stood in the dark corridor at the doorway, just watching her almost rolling on the sofa laughing. He found a smile on his lips, by just watching her, before he stepped into the dim light of the room. "Something good on TV?"

Sydney spun around and the remote went flying. "Max!" she exclaimed. "Ah ... sorry ... I was watching the Three Stooges." She stood to get him dinner then looked down at her night gown and fell back into the sofa. "Ah, your dinner is in the oven ... it may not be what you're used to but its food."

His mind registered that she had stood, but he didn't even look at her nightgown because he was too tired. "I don't cook much at home. I do too much at work. Thanks." He sat in his chair and put his head back.

Sydney saw him close his eyes and smiled as she wrapped the blanket that was on the back of the sofa around her. It wasn't cold, but then it wasn't the kind of nightgown her mother wore around the house either. Hurrying to the kitchen she pulled his dinner from the oven. Sydney nuked it in the

microwave because she had long since turned off the oven so his dinner wouldn't burn. Placing it on a tray, she walked back to him with a glass of orange juice. "Here."

He graciously took the plate from her hand. "That wasn't necessary. I could have gotten up and taken care of it myself. But thanks." He ate a few bites and watched as she sat down. "How was Conner?"

"A perfect gentleman," she giggled. "He's a good kid..."

She sat back on the sofa and pulled her legs underneath her.

"Good. Jenn always said he was good in the evenings. The mornings though, they are more problematic."

"I know what she meant." She retrieved the remote from where it had fallen across the room. Thankfully it still worked and she muted the television. There was something about Max that made her feel as though she should take care of him, too. Jenn did ask her to but she didn't want him to feel as though she was babying him as she did Conner. She stood and walked behind his chair and took his shoulders in her hands and began squeezing and rubbing. He had more knots than she did and no one had more knots than Sydney Cook ... er ... Bouvier.

Fatigue and the pleasurable sensations of her hands on his shoulders made him put down his food on the centre table and lower his head. She felt familiar, and he felt at ease with her for some reason. She'd only been around for a month and he already found himself comfortable with her being there. Relaxing, his thoughts drifted for a few seconds and he could almost feel Jenn massaging his neck like she had so many times before. Jenn, he thought with a start. His head popped

up and Max shrugged out of her grasp to look up at her. He wanted desperately for it to be Jenn, that what had happened was some horrible dream and he'd simply fallen asleep under her ministrations. His eyes showed him the truth his mind didn't want to face—it wasn't Jenn, but Sydney he stared up at.

Holding up her hands she frowned. "Sorry," she said simply. "I think I'm gonna ... ah ... turn in ... for the night."

He turned in his seat to better face her. "No, it's okay. I just ... was startled, that's all. Please, have a seat. I ... haven't had anyone to talk to in a while, and you're usually turned in by the time I get home."

Something tugged at her heart and she stopped, turned and went back to the sofa. "I hope you don't mind, I gave Connor ice cream today and he seemed to love it. At least I know he's not lactose intolerant."

Relieved she didn't bring up the reason for his sudden reaction to her touch, he settled back into his chair. "No, he isn't, thankfully. He doesn't like peas, but I can't blame him there."

She laughed. "Note to self, make Max and Conner peas for dinner tomorrow," she joked.

"Careful," he said with a little grin. "One of us would throw up, not sure which." Max picked up his dinner and took a bite before continuing. "So, since you're here, who's watching your house or apartment?"

Sydney wanted to tell him she had the best security system guarding her house, but didn't. "It's taken care of ... so is my job. Speaking of jobs, I have a photo shoot

tomorrow. It won't be a problem for me taking care of Conner because I am the photographer so I can do what I want ... just thought I'd let you know."

"Okay, just as long as you have your cell with you I guess." His dinner done, he leaned back in the chair. "What kind of photographs do you take?"

"Mostly people," she told him as she watched him. "Cover Girl is having a cow because I missed my deadline by two days." She smiled.

Max's eyebrows rose. "You work for Cover Girl? The magazine? I'm not paying you enough then."

She laughed. "Don't be silly," she told him. "I would have taken care of Conner for free ... and I am on contract with them for a year."

He was growing concerned. Watch Conner for free? She didn't sound like a normal nanny, not from a service of women who were looking to put one of the only skills they knew to good use. "How could you afford to watch Conner for free?"

"You said it yourself, Max," she told him sitting up straight on the sofa. "I work for Cover Girl."

"Only for a year though," he parroted her words back to her. "What about after that?"

"Along with that I have my own business." Sydney didn't like where this conversation was going. "I have a bunch of photographers working for me ... I'm the boss so taking time off is not a problem. I can run the business from anywhere. It's no big deal. This is more important to me."

Fatigue was making his mind foggy, but the last words struck him as odd. "Why?" he asked simply.

"Because Jenn was my ... Jenn was my heart..." Sydney had almost said too much; that Jenn was much more than a friend from school. "I would do anything for her ... haven't you ever had a friend like that?"

"If I had the means, sure, there's at least one. It's getting late and Conner will be up in a few hours."

Taking that as a brush off, Sydney stood. "Yeah ... you're right ... goodnight," she said and turned up the stairs silently. She had been sleeping on a cot in Conner's room. That meant she was closer to him and could jump as soon as he woke up ... if he woke at night.

Max went upstairs to say goodnight to his son while Sydney was in the bathroom. He gave Conner a peck on the cheek and walked to the bedroom, wondering how long it would be before sleep took him.

* * * *

Sydney lay on her bed and held hands with Jenn. Their step-father was drunk again and he was beating their mother around. Both girls had tears streaming down their faces and they squeezed each other's hands tightly. Jenn had found out about the intoxication, and had caught Sydney's hand and shoved her into the room before locking the door behind them. "He's drunk again," the fourteen-year-old spoke to her older adopted sister.

"Damn." Sydney spoke simply but she wasn't surprised. It seemed he went out every night and each time he got drunker than the last.

Their mother's screaming got louder and their stepdad was yelling for her to put a cork in it. The two sisters scooted closer to each other on the bed and pressed their foreheads together.

"It'll be over soon," Sydney whispered and Jenn nodded.
"It'll all be over soon."

"I wish we could kill him just to make it stop," Jenn confided in a whisper. "I know it's wrong but there has to be a way to make him stop."

Sydney said nothing. She simply squeezed her sister's hand tighter and began singing a song she had heard her mother sing during happier times. "Summer time, and the livin' is easy..."

* * * *

Sydney stripped down to her silk panties and tank top and crawled into the bed. Tonight, she slept in the guestroom, which was small but not terrible, and she had made a pretty good little home out of it. She pulled the blankets up to her neck and rolled over to face the closed door. She had doubts that she was going to fall asleep anytime...

The dream came to her like the sun dawning over Copper Bay, slow and tantalizing. A warm feeling washed over her body starting at the top of her head, over her face. Tilting her head back, she closed her eyes and smiled in the sunlight while resting her hands on her hip.

Then everything switched.

Sydney was on a blanket at a rest stop just outside of town. It was barely anything more than a bare spot on the side of the road, with a trail leading down to the water. It was a secluded little shore with short green grass and a warm breeze. She wasn't sure how she got there as she looked out over the water. Behind her she heard noise, a rustling of leaves.

It took her a second, but she realized she was naked! Confused, she wrapped herself in the blanket and looked behind her to see what or who was in the bushes. She got ready to take off running.

She watched as Max stepped out, wearing only a pair of jeans and black boots. His strong chest seemed to glow in the morning light. He stepped closer to her slowly, with desire in his eyes. His eyes alone were enough to make her skin grow hot. A nervous lump formed in her throat and she tried to smooth her hands over her thighs to get rid of the sweat that was there.

She tripped as she tried to back away from him. Scooting backward on her butt, she looked up at him but then stopped moving. This wasn't supposed to be happening, but she wanted it. Letting go of the blanket, it fell away from her naked body. She licked her lips then stood up slowly. The first thing she did was press her open palms against his chest. His muscles rippled against her hand and she moaned.

He was hot...

She watched Max raise his hands, putting them on her waist and pulling her forward, their lips locking in a kiss.

Tongues played over each other as he kneaded her butt with his strong hands.

She felt her body slam against his, and his tongue moving against hers was driving her insane. She reached back to press his hands closer still against her. She pressed her chest forward however, to squeeze against his bare chest, her hard nipples piercing holes in him.

Max raised his arms and smoothed them down her shoulders easing her to the blanket. Her eyes glazed as he stood over her. He undid his pants and slid them down, causing him to sway as he lowered himself onto her. She felt him attack her breast, kneading it with his hands as he sucked and bit on her nipples. The sensual attack sent her heart racing and her skin sweating.

Sydney didn't think she would enjoy something like this. He wasn't tender, but he wasn't hurting her. Every flick of his tongue, every graze of his teeth was calculated to give her optimum pleasure. She arched her back toward him like a cat moving against the fingers scratching its stomach. She let out a purr as her legs lifted and wrapped themselves around him.

When Max brushed her hair aside and bit on her neck, something surged through her and she whimpered. Sydney felt goose bumps grow on her body as he hit all her nerves. She felt his arousal slipping inside her causing her to shriek in pleasure. He hadn't waited for an invitation. He filled her completely and she felt every vein of him throbbing within her.

"Oh..." she groaned through gritted teeth. "Oh Max!" She began moving against him instantly. She raised her body up a

little, as much as she could with his weight on her, and ran her teeth down his neck. She sank her nails into his back and fell back against the ground.

Sydney raised her legs higher and higher until Max reached up and pulled them up until her knees were almost touching her chest. His pressed in deep, causing sweet ecstasy to flow from her and Sydney dug her fingers into her lover's shoulders and purred as he groaned in her ear.

She braced her legs against him harder, trying to pull him closer to her. She needed more. He was pleasing her, stroking, loving her all in one and she felt as if she would go insane. He kept repeating something over and over against her ear but she couldn't understand nor did she care. She needed release and she aimed to get it.

She looked up into Max's eyes as he gave her pleasure. There was something in his eyes, but she couldn't tell if it was love or just lust. He smiled before lowering his head and taking her nipple between his teeth and biting lightly.

That caused Sydney's back to raise off the ground, her head tried to dig a hole into the sand as her feet went weak. Her whole body went still...

A small cry left her lips as Sydney opened her eyes. Her back was arching off the bed and her body was in the midst of a powerful orgasm. She tried to scream but the sound was dead in her throat. Instead, she turned her head slightly and bit down into her pillow as her body trembled.

In the other room, Max heard something, a movement and something that could have been a cry. Wrapping his robe around him, he went across the hall to the room where Miss

Bouvier was staying. He knocked lightly on the door. If she was asleep, he hoped he wouldn't disturb her. "Miss Bouvier? You okay?"

Her orgasm still wasn't over when the voice came at the door. She rolled her eyes. You have got to be kidding me! Her thought was cut off by a knock. Frowning at his bad timing, she nestled back into her pillows and closed her eyes. Men have such horrible timing!

As she heard steps walking away from the door, her cheeks burned with embarrassment. Here she was watching her sister's husband and his child and she was having erotic dreams about him. Sydney shuddered from the orgasm that had woken her up. It was the first time that had ever happened to her. The thought of masturbating herself awake made her cheeks burn even more before she rolled over onto her side, trying to put the image of his body as it towered over her.

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Chapter 8

Sydney sat on the railing at the small park beside her sister and they watched people go by. Everyone else seemed so happy back then. The young girls sat quietly, enjoying their free time before they dashed home and locked themselves in their bedroom, then listened to their father stagger home and the bedsprings begin jerking. Then their mother would sob herself to sleep. If not that, it was their free time before their step-father stumbled home drunk and began beating their mother around.

A woman walked by with a baby in a stroller and Jenn giggled. "What's so funny?" Sydney turned her head to look at her sister.

"Ever wondered what it would be like to have kids?" Jenn wanted to know as she squinted her eyes to keep track of the lady disappearing in the distance.

"Not really." Sydney turned her head back to watch some kids on the swing. "I mean, to have kids you need a man right? And I don't want to have anything to do with any of them."

"You're so pessimistic." Jenn hopped off the rail and Sydney followed. "You need love in your life. I'm sure not all men are like Papa."

Sydney cringed. "Don't call him that."

"What? Papa? That's what he is. Isn't he?"

That brought a frown to Sydney's young face and she picked up a rock to toss into an empty sandbox as she passed it. "I don't know. But you want to have kids?"

Jenn nodded.

"What would you name it if you had a boy?" Sydney went on.

"Conner ... I like that name and besides, its short for Sean Connery!"

Sydney rolled her eyes. "I don't like Conner. It sounds like he's going to grow up to be a con man or something."

Jenn laughed and reached in to tweak Sydney's ear. "Well, I'll test it out. If he gets arrested for conning people then you were right and can bail him out of jail. But if not, then I gave him a perfectly good name."

Laughing Sydney wrapped an arm around her sister's waist as they ducked through Mrs. Presley's back yard to sneak in the back door of their house.

* * * *

Max decided to take some time off to spend with Conner and that meant spending time with Sydney. He didn't know why he felt he needed to but as he sat in the living room with Bob Seger's Wait for Me playing softly on the speakers and watched her twirl around with Conner in her arms, he found himself smiling at her. She was a free spirit, just like Jenn. The thought of seeing Sydney moving so gracefully with Conner clutched at his heart, gave him such peace and something else that he couldn't quite put his finger on ... and that surprised him. He loved feeling like that again.

It was like flying, with not a care in the world.

The sun shining through the window cast a wonderful glow over her dark skin and he squeezed his eyes shut for a second to get control of his runaway emotions before looking at her again. Her short hair, brown eyes and those curves ... He looked down at his hands that were lying in his lap. At some point, he had sat up in his chair eagerly, leaning forward. He tilted his head to check out her ass and had to chuckle. It was like he was a teenage boy all over again.

Max felt horrible though, when Sydney looked over at him, but the bad feeling was replaced with something else.

Thinking he was caught, he cleared his throat and sat back in the leather seat.

"Come on, Daddy!" Sydney turned to look at him with that smile that always seemed to make him swallow hard. "Come dance with us."

"Oh no." Max held up his hand as he laughed. "You don't want to see me dance. I'd probably break all the bones in your feet."

"Come on already!" Sydney pushed as she shimmied sexily to one side then the next. "Stop being such a stick in the mud."

Max watched her for a little bit more before getting up and walking over to them. He wrapped one arm around Conner's back and one around the small of Sydney's and began moving with them. Her scent swirled upward to his nose and he felt his body tense. Her arm slid around his back as Conner was braced against both their chests. He shivered slightly and smiled down at her.

Closer, he moved. His lips were just inches away from her as he watched her eyes drift closed and knew what was coming. He couldn't do it ... could he? Kiss a woman in front of his son, a woman who was not Jenn? No matter how wrong Max thought it was, he still wanted it. His lips brushed hers softly and when he opened his lips to kiss her fully the telephone rang.

Max felt thankful for the interruption and shot away from her so quickly it was as though she had the plague. Scooping up the phone, he waited for his breath to return to normal before opening his mouth. "'Sup fool?" came Gregory's voice from the other end. "I wanted to let you know the Sewer Club is getting together tomorrow evening for their fall classic. People were pussy-footing around calling you because they weren't sure how you would take it."

The Sewer Club was a group of people who grew up in Copper Bay. Once or twice a year, they got together to have a little party. Max and Gregory were in it, as well as another dozen couples. It usually cost some money, but being with friends certainly was worth it. "We're counting on you to come, even if you are alone. Though, you could bring Sydney with you if you wanted, give me a chance to actually have a chance to talk to her." Gregory had run into Sydney and Max at the grocery store once or twice and the playboy was always fawning over her.

Max sighed, feeling just a little jealous. "I'm not going to set you up on a date with her." Max hadn't been to a Sewer Club meeting since Jenn died. He skipped the one that summer because of her passing. No one blamed him for

missing it though, not that it helped any. He wanted to go, but didn't know if he should. Going alone didn't feel right to him either. Sydney was his nanny, but she was becoming more than that—she was becoming a friend.

"I don't get what your problem is," Gregory said. "You don't want to date her and you don't want me to. Man, that ain't right."

"Yeah, whatever."

"Well, anyway, you can still come, man. It's at the restaurant again so we can get the employee discount."

Max sighed, he'd rather it be anywhere else but at his work, but then Gregory liked to keep things on the 'easy on the checkbook' side according to him. "Alright, I'll be there." Gregory congratulated his friend on getting out then hung up. Max pondered what he should do for a moment before heading upstairs where he heard soft singing.

* * * *

New Kids on the Block blasted from the small radio that stood in the center of Sydney's and Jenn's room and the two sisters were lip-syncing into their hair brushes before the mirror. They had finished their chores and were taking a break between that and homework.

Jenn broke into a really sloppy version of the "Step by Step" dance routine and Sydney started laughing. She laughed so hard she thought her lungs would explode.

"Let's see you do better." Jenn giggled and started a whole series of pelvic thrusts simply because she had used up all

her NKOTB dance moves. Sydney held her stomach with one hand and wiped tears from her eyes.

"That was a good one." She panted for air. "Bravo Jenn!"
"Turn that crap off!" It was their stepfather. Jenn gasped
and dashed under the bed and Sydney turned the music off
and bolted after her sister.

* * * *

Sydney turned down the stereo when she saw Max's conversation would take longer than a couple seconds but she continued humming the song quietly to herself. Walking into the kitchen, she leaned against the counter and hugged Conner to her again. The little boy giggled and pressed his drooling mouth against her shoulder. He was completely oblivious as to what almost happened between her and his father and she was glad for that, but her body was in a tizzy. He was so close, so hard and strong against her. She felt like crying but she bit down on her lower lip and walked over to the stereo to flip it off. She couldn't fall for Max Durant. It wouldn't be right. A flash of her dreams came flooding back to her and she pressed her lips into a thin line. She couldn't fall for Max Durant. At that point her brain began mocking her.

Keep saying it sister, but that won't let it be true.

Sydney walked up the stairs whispering to Conner that it was time for his nap and she needed to take a shower. She placed him down and began changing his diaper. She thought about a song she had heard a while back and had fallen in love with. "I'm lost without you," she sang, "Can't help myself

... how does it feel?" She made a mental note to find the CD by Robin Thicke at her next stop in town.

"Sydney," she heard from behind her.

Sydney looked up from the powder bottle she had been wielding intently. "Yeah?"

"They are having this thing at my workplace tomorrow," he said. "I was wondering ... if you'd like to go with me."

"A thing?" She arched a brow at him. "What kind of thing?"

She almost giggled when Max hung his head and moved into the room to stand by the crib. He remained silent until she went back to fixing up Conner. "It's like a dinner ... they have it once or twice every year."

Sydney didn't answer. She fixed the diaper and tossed the used one into the garbage. She then turned her attention to brushing what little hair the baby had. "I suppose," she whispered. "I would love to."

* * * *

The night faded into morning and as Max wandered around the house with Conner, Sydney took the chance to go into town to pick up a few things that she might need for the night. She used a few minutes to grab some toys she thought Conner would absolutely adore then left to find the things that she had actually gone shopping for. It had taken her almost half the day but she finally found a dress that she thought would be perfect.

"Can I get those earrings in blood red?" she asked the woman behind the counter.

"I think so." The clerk smiled. "Let me check."

Sydney walked around the store to see if there might be another dress that was better than the one she had found that she may have missed earlier but after finding nothing, she walked back to the counter.

"Here we are." The woman held up the blood red rubies at her and she smiled.

"Perfect, I'll take them."

"I have to tell you," the woman said as she rang up Sydney's purchases, "no one around here has ever bought anything like this."

"That's just what I wanted to hear." Sydney smiled.

Leaving that store she walked into a shoe store. She was trying on a beautiful pair of stilettos when her cell rang. She rummaged through her purse and found it. "Hello?" she answered it.

"Syd, you ever coming back?" It was Max.

She laughed. "I was thinking about it," she joked. "But I don't know."

"Very funny."

"Hey! Genius at work here! Getting ready for an elegant dinner takes time ... it cannot be rushed."

Max laughed and Sydney moaned at the sound. It was all masculine, all sexy and she licked her lips. "I'll be home soon. I just have to stop at one more place."

She could almost hear Max grin before the sound of Conner's rattle came through the phone. "Alright. Oh, and I got my neighbor to babysit."

"That's wonderful news!" Sydney beamed.

"I'll see you when you get back," Max told her before hanging up. He wondered what was taking her so long but he was used to it. Jenn had always taken a while to get ready and even longer to shop. He sighed and knelt down beside Conner's playpen. "I don't know what's happening, Con," he whispered as he reached in and shook a small yellow rattle at his son, "but it feels good. If that's the case why do I feel so guilty?"

"Gaga!" Conner shouted and reached for the rattle.

Max chuckled. "I guess," he whispered and stroked Conner's head. "I'd better get my suit out."

Conner was down for a nap and Max had just left the shower when Sydney almost knocked him over hurrying into the bathroom. She crashed into his chest and he instinctively wrapped an arm around her to steady them both. "Hey! Where's the fire?"

Sydney giggled as she felt his body against hers. "I have to hurry!" she groaned out at him. "I'm late, aren't I?"

She was, but he'd be damned if he was going to say so. "Nah, we got plenty of time."

Max watched her go and closed his bedroom door behind him. He looked down to see the towel he had wrapped around his waist was beginning to rise in a tent. "Damn it!" he swore. "Not now."

He moved about his room getting dressed but the effect of her against him was still there. He tried thinking about cold water, but he felt like a teenage boy with a crush on his teacher. Frustration surged through him as he dragged his

fingers through his hair. When he was finally dressed, he took a deep breath and walked into Connor's room.

"Max?" the voice called from downstairs and Max kissed Conner on the nose before hurrying down the stairs.

"Mrs. Bishop," he greeted her with a slight hug. "Thanks for watching Conner for me."

"You know I love to watch the little one." Miss Bishop smiled at him like a mother to a child. "Now you and that young lady have fun."

"She's not ready yet." Max grinned.

"Says who?" Sydney called from the top of the stairs and Max turned around.

He almost choked on his tongue as his eyes drank in the beautiful sight before him. He wondered where she had gotten that dress as she began descending the stairs. He willed his feet to move and walked toward the base of the steps to take her hand as she got to him. His gaze roamed her body as she got closer. Her curves were punctuated by the way the dress hugged her figure.

Sydney found herself loving the way he was watching her. It was like he was seeing her for the first time. She smiled and moved down the stairs slower, her heels clicking against the floor. When she got to him and took his hand, she did a little twirl for him. "So?" she wanted to know. "What do you think?"

Max couldn't speak. He only looked at her and nodded. "Ravishing." The older woman spoke up for Max and he nodded again.

"Hi, I'm Sydney Bouvier," Sydney said to her.

"It's nice to meet you, sweetie," returned Mrs. Bishop. "I'm Mrs. Bishop from next door."

"Pleasure." Sydney shook her hand. "Shall we?" she turned to Max.

"Of course."

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Chapter 9

The two girls got dressed excitedly. It was the best day of a young girl's life, prom. "Pass me that lipstick?" Jenn asked Sydney who picked up the lipstick and looked at it before studying Jenn.

"Nah, this one wouldn't work. It's too bright." Sydney explained her theory and moved for another lipstick and applied it to Jenn's lips. "Now look."

She watched with baited breath as Jenn patted her lips together before pouting in the mirror. "So?"

"Nice." Jenn nodded in satisfaction as she smoothed her hands over her dress. Their stepfather had died the month before and both girls knew how much that had changed the outcome of that night. If their stepfather was still alive they would be cowering under a bed instead of getting all spruced up to head to a school dance.

Their mother wasn't mourning. Instead the woman was singing and had even shelled out money for the girls' prom dresses. They had to work part time to buy everything else and to get the limousine.

"Tonight is our night, Syd." Jenn pressed her forehead to Sydney's. "We won't let anything ruin it for us."

"Deal." Sydney glanced at the clock after giving Jenn a quick hug. "The boys are late."

"They'll be here." Jenn turned to check out her ass in the mirror.

"They'd better because I didn't get this dressed up for nothin'."

The two giggled.

* * * *

The night was warm, even for Copper Bay. Gregory
Thompson leaned against the outside wall of the restaurant
taking a deep pull from his cigar. Gregory wasn't a smoker by
habit, but once in a while he did like a good 'stogie'. He had
only been out there for five minutes or so when he saw the
dark sedan pull up. He knew the car, and for just a second
wondered if Max would be bringing Sydney to the gathering.
His suspicions were answered a second later as he saw the
dark skinned beauty behind the passenger window.

Grinding the end of his cigar on the brick wall, he pocketed the unused portion in his coat pocket and walked over to the door to wait. His eyes never left Sydney's form as Max helped her out of the car and she slowly walked toward the door. Her body accentuated the dress rather than the other way around. From her bare dark shoulders setting off the red of the thin straps that ran up from her bosom, to her hips swaying from side to side, she could stop traffic. To his eyes, she seemed some sort of Nubian angel, coming down from on high to show him the promised land. She wasn't walking arm in arm with Max, but she was close enough so that Gregory knew who she wanted to be with for the evening.

As much as he wanted to stare at her all night, his attention was torn away by the sound of his friend. "Enjoying your evening, Gregory?" Turning his head slightly, Gregory

noticed Max talking to him, but his mind didn't process the words. He'd be blushing if his African heritage didn't make it almost impossible.

"Hello Max. Hello Sydney."

The beautiful woman reached up, brushing a wisp of hair behind her ear and grinned. "Good to see you again, Mr. Thompson.

"The pleasure is all mine. Please, call me Gregory. Come on in folks, the party hasn't started without a beautiful woman." Gregory led the last couple into the restaurant and into a back room where a dozen tables had been put together into one long table for the occasion. Half the room was dedicated to a portable dance floor, and while it didn't have a lot of lights like you'd expect at a club, it did have a DJ behind a large console. Everyone in the group was too old for the rock music and moshing that seemed to permeate the current culture, but they were young enough to have a lot of fun in their own right. As Sydney and Max walked in behind Gregory, the couples already sitting at the table stood, but did not applaud in deference of Jenn missing from Max's arm.

Gregory sat down next to Alice Duvan, his date for the night—who currently wasn't the most striking woman in the room to him—and waited while Max helped Sydney into the chair. "Thanks for inviting me back guys. It's good to see everyone," Max said as the salad course was being served. "I'm just sorry Jenn couldn't be here to see you all again." The room went quiet and Gregory noticed Sydney get a little uncomfortable as the words sank in, but she recovered quickly. Gregory watched as Max picked up his glass. Within

the first two words, Gregory knew it was the traditional toast he always gave.

"To friends, acquaintances, and loved ones, we join together to make sure we never drift apart. For never is there such a lonely man than one who doesn't have anyone to turn to." He sat down and used the napkin to wipe his eye. Sydney dropped her hand below the table and Gregory knew she was touching his leg in support.

The dinner passed unabated but everyone knew to keep away from stories about Jenn or any other touchy subjects. The wine flowed and the food eaten, until everyone settled into their own little conversations. Roy and Vivian were talking about their latest timeshare in Cancun while Mr. and the third Mrs. Dabney were talking about a pine tree that fell over in their yard, and Max and Sydney chitchatted quietly. All in all it was a good evening.

Gregory's date whispered to him and squeezed his leg with her hand. "Alright," he said to her quietly and gave her a kiss. "Everyone, why don't we move to the dance floor?" he said and pushed his chair back. The conversations quieted down and the gentlemen took their companions' hands and together the group strolled to the next room in the restaurant where a portable dance floor had been set up. A DJ stood behind his equipment and started up a slow dance to get everyone in the mood. Taking Alice's hand, Gregory led her to the dance floor and brought her close to him and they danced.

Max tried to smile as Sydney pulled one of his arms around her waist and kept her breasts just a couple inches from him

as they started into the song. He watched as she turned her head slightly to look back where Gregory was watching, as the other couples slowed or stopped their dancing as the two turned on the dance floor. It took Max a few moments of uncertainty, but he finally got into the moment and danced with Sydney like they were on "Dancing with the Stars", just a lot slower. They moved gracefully, taking turns learning from each other's movements until the song ended and Max dipped Sydney.

All around the room couples clapped. Even Gregory had to let go of Alice as they both clapped. The sound was of appreciation for the show, but you could almost feel some of the tension and worry over whether Max could get past Jenn's death. The applause finally died down and Gregory took his date in his arms and they followed Max and Sydney and danced to the next slow song.

The evening passed quickly, people danced, Gregory and Max led the group in a chorus of their version of their high school fight song, and generally people had a great time. Max had stayed by Sydney's side for the greater part of the night but she finally told him to go mingle. Even then, it seemed he had to work up enough courage to leave her alone for a few minutes. He was across the room talking to Roy and Vivian when Gregory walked up to Sydney. "How has your evening been, Miss Bouvier?"

"I can't complain." Sydney turned with a glass of wine in her hand and smiled. "Gregory!" she greeted him.

"That's good. I see you finally got Max to dance. He used to be on a ballroom dance team in high school. Don't think he

ever took a medal, but at least he learned how not to fall over himself."

Sydney laughed and crossed her legs. "He did well in his own right." She raised her chin. "Please, have a seat."

Gregory set his glass on the table and slid into the chair. "How's Conner?"

"Beautiful," she beamed. "He's so big now, you really should stop by and see him ... why haven't you?"

"I dunno. I've never been much for going somewhere to just say 'hi'. Never know what to follow it up with." The look he was giving her wasn't one she was used to getting from men when they spoke to her. In their minds, she could tell they were tearing her clothes from her body, and spreading her out on a table for their own personal enjoyment. She wondered what, if anything, had changed his view of her. Maybe it was because she was with Max. "But then I don't see you and Max busting down my door to visit either."

Sydney laughed. "That's fair," she told him before sipping from her glass and turning to stare at Max. There was something incredibly sexy about him. She couldn't quite tell what it was. Sure he had a great body, chiseled good looks and that ass—but that wasn't what was so alluring about him.

Gregory followed her eyes before turning and looking at her face. There was definitely something there, a contentment to be sure, but something more. "He's a lucky guy, having you around. He was a mess for a while, after. I didn't know if he was going to bounce back."

That got her attention from Max back to his best friend. "He's a strong man, Greg." She smiled proudly. "Stronger

than many give him credit for ... all he needed was a little push in the right direction."

Gregory lifted his glass and motioned at her. "And someone to do the pushing."

That caused Sydney to blush and look away. "Yeah," she said simply. "Someone to do the pushing."

"I'm sorry, did I say something wrong?"

"No," she assured him. "Just got me thinking, that's all." Thinking was an understatement. She was seeing the delicious ways she could push Max and have him push back. She emptied her glass and looked over at Gregory. "But Max was always all right. He had you."

"Men can only help another guy so much when a woman's involved. We can help them accept what's happened, but it takes another woman to get them past it." He paused and reached out, putting his hand on her wrist, her dark skin warm under his palm. "That's why he has you. Maximillan is a tough man, but his heart is the size of his head, and sometimes he talks without consulting his brain."

Sydney could tell he wanted to say something else when he opened his mouth. Instead, he clamped his lips shut again and squeezed her wrist a little before letting go.

He nodded with a hint of confusion in his eyes. She tilted her head and gave Max a little wave when he looked at her before giggling and turning back to Gregory. "You will take care of them when I go home, right?"

A crestfallen looked flashed in his eyes. "I will, but I thought you'd be staying for a while longer. Max seems to like having you around and you two make a good couple."

She nodded. "The deal was to make sure they were alright ... and they are ... but I am here for a while longer..." she gave him a broken smile. "Now I believe your date is fuming because you are spending more time with me than with her..."

Sydney watched as Gregory looked over at Alice and gave her a reassuring wave before turning back to Sydney. "Deal?" he asked getting up and pushing his chair in.

"That's why I'm here," she told him simply. "That's what I told myself when I came here ... that I was only going to stay a while until they were fine ... they're fine."

That was close.

She had almost let something slip and she hated the feeling of keeping this horribly morbid secret from everyone.

He patted her shoulder and leaned over. "Don't break his heart. I don't think he could go through it again." Without waiting for an answer he walked over to Alice and took her by the hand for the final dance of the evening.

Sydney was shocked by the words. She didn't see it as breaking Max's heart because Max knew that one day she would be leaving. He didn't love her and vice versa. Right?

* * * *

It was their second Christmas together and Max woke up extra early and just laid there watching Jenn sleep. She was beautiful. Reaching over he caressed her cheek gently and leaned in to press a soft kiss against her skin. Her scent pushed his mind into overdrive and he moaned.

The sound caused her eyes to flutter open and like every other morning, she gave him the most beautiful smile to start his day. He knew then, that very moment, that he loved her. No other woman had smiled at him and caused him to feel like superman.

"Morning," she whispered huskily and he took her lips as his reply.

When he lifted his head he reached over her to the bedside table and picked up a parcel. "Merry Christmas," he told her as he handed it over and her eyes lit up.

"For me?" she asked. "I mean, didn't we agree to leave presents until after breakfast?" she said, even as she ripped into the wrapping.

He smiled and studied her excitement until nothing but another wrapped box came to her view. She glanced over at him and tossed the first box to the floor. This went on for a few seconds and each time the boxes got smaller until she got to the actual present. It was a small, red velvet box.

"Max..." Jenn's dark eyes were filled with confusion as they turned to him but he was on one knee on the floor looking at her. Her free hand flew to her mouth as tears toppled down her cheeks. "Max..."

"Would you marry me?" he asked hoping she accepted his proposal.

Jenn didn't answer. She simply dove from the bed against his chest and the two of them fell backward. The wind was knocked from Max's lungs but he didn't have time to complain because Jenn was raining kisses all over his face and yelling, "yes!" between each kiss.

* * * *

Max took Sydney's hand and helped her out of the car. The night had gone wonderfully for him, he had touched base with a lot of friends he had neglected for too long and felt really happy for the first time in a long time. Sydney had been a great companion to him for the evening. He loved the way she had danced with him throughout the night and gave him space when he needed it, though he didn't need much space from her because to him, she was the most beautiful woman there.

He smirked at that thought and remembered the way the hair on the back of his neck had stood up when he saw other men greedily eyeing Sydney. Max had been jealous and he knew it. He had tightened his hand around her hips as they stood speaking as though to tell every other man in the joint that she was with him and at that thought guilt tore through him. Was he falling in love with Sydney?

How could he? Jenn...

The clip of her heels against the ground caught his attention. Shaking his head he tried to get back to reality but the swinging hips of Sydney Bouvier caught his eye and he found himself transfixed on them.

Sydney walked ahead of Max into the house and the first thing she did was kick off her heels and pick them up. She walked into the living room and flopped down with one leg curled beneath her as she rubbed the other. "I hate being a girl," she muttered.

She had never had a chance to go out dancing with a man before. The dancing she did was at a club in New York with Mary by her side. It felt different, breathtakingly beautiful, to have a man wrap his arms around you when you danced. Everyone was staring at her during dinner; even after the hypocrites had applauded Max when he dipped her. Maybe they were staring because she was with a married man who, in their eyes, should still be mourning or maybe they were staring for a different reason altogether. Either way, she didn't care. She had a fun night and there was nothing anyone could do to change that.

Max walked in behind her and over to the living area. Mrs. Bishop was dozing in the chair. "Mrs. Bishop," he whispered and she woke up with a start.

"Heavens, it's that late?" she said looking at the clock on the wall before looking over at Sydney and blushing slightly. "I'll be going. Conner is all tucked in for the night. You two should be alone until morning." She grinned and walked out the door.

Max felt embarrassed heat rise in his cheeks despite himself and smiled at her, thanking her for taking care of Conner. He locked the door behind her before pulling off his suit coat and walking back into the living room to answer what Sydney had said earlier. "Next time, you could go barefoot," he joked. "Easier on the feet."

She stuck her tongue out at him and laughed. "That would be fun," she told him as she moved her other leg beneath her.

Sitting on the couch next to her he reached down and touched the toes on her left foot that stuck out from under her bum. "Well, you do have cute feet." He dragged a couple fingers over her toes and watched her squirm.

She giggled and pulled her foot away. "No fair!" she exclaimed. "The feet are sensitive."

"I bet lots of things are sensitive tonight," he said as he pulled off his tie, then blushed. "Sorry," he whispered.

"Maximilian Durant!" she laughed. "You know, a gentleman wouldn't speak that way to a lady..." she pouted and watched him closely. There was something irresistibly sexy about the way he smirked as he pulled at the material. She licked her lips self-consciously.

"Probably not, but then again, I try not to be a gentleman. It's too hard to live up to." He shifted on the couch to face Sydney. "Did you have a good time?"

She smiled and nodded before moving her face closer. "Splendid time. I don't think Gregory's girlfriend liked me though. I swear if looks could kill..."

"Alice? She's okay. They've had an on-again, off-again thing for a couple years. Why don't you think she liked you?" Max took the tie and hung it around Sydney's neck. The ends ending up dangling over her breasts.

Looking down at the tie, she grinned. "Because he was speaking to me for a bit. She didn't look pleased. I do say this tie looks better on me."

"I'm sure you're fine. She's probably just jealous. Alice has tried to get Gregory to marry her for a long time. I think he's finally coming around though." Max reached out and took

both ends of the tie in his hands, gently pulling Sydney's face closer to his. "Yeah, the tie looks real good on you."

Using the tie as a guide, he brought their lips together before letting it go and wrapping his arms around her. Sydney's lips were warm and inviting and the smell of her perfume was even more intoxicating now than when they were dancing. Max felt his heart, and something lower, surge at the taste of those lips. His heart began slamming against his chest and he prayed she couldn't feel it. He felt like the hands of time had been turned backward and he was a teenager again—experiencing his first kiss. It was sweet and wild, and he wanted much more.

She shivered against his body and whimpered as he deepened the kiss. She felt her body being pulled forward and she moved with it. Her brain wasn't firing properly to tell her to stop. She wouldn't, couldn't stop. Surely she would die if he was to stop drinking from her lips.

Heat surged down her spine and caused her to shiver visibly as she felt her head spinning faster. She clung to him like she would life.

Max lay on his back on the couch with Sydney's body on top of him like it was meant to be there. There was something about having a woman lying on top of a man that just made him feel like he could take on the world. He finally broke the kiss and nuzzled against her neck, small spots of moisture appearing where his lips pressed against her hot skin.

"Max," she whispered as she moved against him. When his lips broke away from hers, her brain kicked in. "I don't think we should do this ... I want to do this ... but we shouldn't..."

Her words brought him back to reality and his mind jumped on its own to a picture of Jenn. Carefully he sat up and helped Sydney to a more vertical position. "Yeah. It's okay," he said quietly. "Let's get you to bed. We've both got to sleep."

"Let's get me to bed?" She eyed him. "You promise to be a gentleman and tuck me in?"

Max nodded, a smile crossing his face. "Never hurts to be a gentleman."

"I thought you try not to be a gentleman because the reputation is too much to uphold?"

Max chuckled, rolled his shoulders and winked at her. "What can I say? I'm a walking contradiction."

Sydney laughed.

Getting up, he took her hand to help her up and Sydney walked upstairs. Max checked the door and turned out the lights before following her up.

Sydney quickly changed into a silk night gown and stood there waiting for him to actually come and tuck her in. She never thought he would really do it.

He stopped at the top of the stairs. Sydney's outfit hung in all the right places and Max imagined what she'd look like with it crumpled on the floor around her ankles. "All ready for bed?" he asked as he walked up to her.

Giggling, Sydney nodded. "Are you really going to tuck me in?" she asked with a shy smile.

"Course, can't have you cold all night." Max chuckled and walked into the room, pulling the covers down for her. "After you."

Sydney smiled and crawled into bed while looking up at him. No wonder Jenn fell in love with him.

Max leaned forward and placed his lips against hers again, this time parting them and letting his tongue touch her lips gently, asking for entry.

A shock went down Syd's spine and she gasped. She opened her lips, enjoying the scent, taste and feel of him.

He leaned into the kiss as his tongue went on its mission of exploration. Without thinking of it, he raised his hand and laid it gently against her breast, feeling the nipple swell and press against his open palm. He massaged it gently as he continued the kiss. Max's mind swam as he absorbed the feelings that had for so long been pushed to the dark recesses of his psyche.

Something caused her body to push up against his hand as her arms snaked up and around his neck. She sighed in satisfaction as he touched her breast and she took the liberty ofdeepening the kiss. She moaned and ran one hand down his back while the other buried itself in his hair.

Desire filled him and he wanted to take her, show her all that he felt, but something in his head started screaming for him to take it slow, to make it have all the meaning in the world. His hand left her breast and made a slow trek down her stomach, sliding down and under her nightgown, until he rested his fingers on the mound of her pussy. Ever so gently he pressed his fingers against the fabric.

A hiss left her mouth as she wrenched her lips away from his to breathe, and try to get sane again. She reached down for his hands. "Tease," she accused darkly.

Max smiled evilly and slid his hand up slightly before sliding it under her panties. Painfully slowly, he slid his fingers through what felt like a well-trimmed bush before sliding two between her lips and against her very swollen clit.

Her hips jutted forward and a low sound left her throat. She wanted to keep her eyes open but they drifted shut as they rolled back into her head. Something told her to push his hand away and go to bed, but she wanted this. She bit down on her lower lip to keep from saying or making a sound as she slowly moved her hips to get his fingers to drive her mad.

With his free hand Max pulled on one of the thin straps of her nightgown, over her shoulder and down, until the soft silk slid off her chocolate colored breast, exposing the hardening nipple to the cool air. Lowering his head, he licked a trail from her chin downward and made little circles around her nipple before taking it between his lips.

Reaching up, Sydney pressed his head down while she arched up against him. She moved her hips against his inquisitive fingers and whispered his name. She whispered encouragement and things that didn't really mean anything but felt right at such a moment. She let her legs fall further apart as she pressed upward, trying to get as close as humanly possible to him and even then, get closer.

Max's fingers dipped lower, entering her to the second knuckle. It was warm, tight, and inviting, her juices ran thick over his fingers as he slowly pushed them back and forth.

With his thumb, he circled her clit and rubbed it gently as her words spurred him on. He wanted to respond, but the breast in his mouth kept him mute as he sucked and flicked her nipple with his tongue.

Her breathing escaped her in short, quick bursts as she heaved and shifted. She moved against him. Sydney could feel it building. The orgasm tingled from her toes and every one of her senses stood at attention, waiting, wanting it to come.

Her body tensed under him and Max responded by sliding a third finger into her and buried all three to the hilt. She let out a moan and her legs parted farther. Max smiled to himself as he touched his teeth to her nipple and nibbled gently.

Sydney's body shivered as her whole world shattered around her. "Max..." she let out as she bit down harder on her lip to avoid screaming. Her legs stiffened against the bed and she whimpered.

Max worked the orgasm though her, savoring the feelings almost as much as she seemed to be doing. As her body softened, Max withdrew his fingers and gave one last gentle kiss on her nipple before pulling the strap of her nightgown back up and putting her underwear back in place. "All tucked in?" he asked gently.

She smiled and opened heavy eyelids to look up at him. "And then some," she panted.

"Good," he sighed, relieved that he did it right. Leaning down he gave her a kiss on the lips.

She kept her eyes closed even after he lifted his head. "Night," she whispered.

An image of Jenn flashed in front of his eyes and he was secretly happy Sydney wasn't looking for reciprocation. He didn't know if he was to that point yet. "Night," he said quietly and pulled the blankets up before walking to the door. As he pulled it closed, he paused and looked at her for a long moment. A little shiver went up his back as he thought about the night he could be having right now. He was as much scared as excited about it.

With a satisfied sigh, Sydney drifted off to sleep.
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Chapter 10

Sydney had just gotten Conner to sit and play with the toys she had picked up on her shopping trip for the party when her cell phone rang. She rushed to the counter and almost dove at it so that the strange sound didn't startle Conner. She flipped it open and looked down at the number and a smile caught her lips. "Mary! Dahlin!" She spoke with the old accent she had once heard her adopted mother use. "How are you?"

"Wow, boss lady!" Mary exclaimed, "You're in a good mood."

"I am?" Sydney chuckled. "I guess I am..."

"New man?"

"Not really." Sydney giggled and could tell Mary was rolling her eyes. "Don't you give me that look!"

"What look?" Mary asked innocently. "I swear, I knew you had cameras around here!"

"No cameras, Mare, I'm just that good." Sydney giggled again. "It's not a new man. It's just Max ... We've clicked..."

"Clicked? That's so nineteen-ninety. Boss lady, no one talks like that anymore, believe me." Mary laughed. "Just say you bumped nasty. Did the deed. Got jiggy with it. Got yo' freak on!"

"Mary!"

"What?"

"Don't you 'what' me." Sydney's cheeks were on fire. She was thinking about dancing around the room with Max, or the

way it had felt to kiss him and have him touch her. She remembered the disappointment she felt when he pulled away from her and pulled the sheets up to her neck. Her cheeks grew hotter and she began drifting. Then her dreams ... she looked over her shoulder to make sure Max wasn't there before continuing. "I've had these dreams, Mare ... they would make a porn star blush."

"You go girl!" Mary laughed. "So you two did it?"

"Did what?"

"Do I really have to repeat myself?"

"Not really ... we got close but he just 'tucked' me into bed." Sydney could hear Mary laughing. An image of the woman hanging off her chair came to her and she couldn't help but laugh, as well.

"Now, Boss Lady, be honest."

"Be honest about what?"

"Was he any good?"

"From what I can tell, yes." She grinned. "But we didn't go all the way."

"You mean you didn't have sex?" Mary wanted to know, almost in a surprised voice. "Oh come on, woman. Haven't I taught you anything?"

Sydney laughed.

"What? It's a valid question and if you don't want him, give him my number and hook a sista up!"

"You're not helping, Mare." Sydney tried to sound angry but she wasn't, really. She couldn't be angry with Mary. "Why did you call me?"

"To see how things were going," Mary said soberly. "And I'm going to pretend I didn't realize you just switched topics on me."

Sydney shook her head and moved to sit down with Conner on the floor then began playing with him. "I got some new gigs for you. Cover Girl is still having a donkey about you taking their models to ... how did he put it? The middle of nowhere?"

"Oh, Paul was always a drama queen." Sydney rolled her eyes and waved a plane at Conner. "Don't let him intimidate you."

"Yeah right. Me intimidated? Nah! All I'd have to do is sit on him. I ain't trying to hear his drama. I'm gonna email you those dates and deadlines. You let me know which ones don't fit."

"I will." Sydney replied.

"And get in there Syd," Mary advised. "Show him why they say once you go black you never go back!"

"Oh, bite me! And Mare?"

"Yeah, Boss Lady?"

"Thank you."

"Any time, sweet thang. And oh, Matterson sent over that cheque for us."

"I guess Andy got to him." Sydney smiled at the thought of her young lawyer. "Send him a little extra something."

"Same as last time?" Mary wanted to know.

"Nah, add a thousand to that," Sydney said. "I'm sure he had to deal with Matterson personally."

"You got it, boss."

Sydney hung up the phone and looked over at Conner. "Was she right, Con?" Sydney asked Conner. He simply reached over and grabbed Sydney's hand to pull one of her fingers into his mouth and began rubbing his gums against it. Sydney grinned. "I guess we'll find out, eh?"

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Chapter 11

The summer before their mother died, Sydney and Jenn worked the whole school year and saved every penny. Then they surprised their mom the morning of her birthday.

"We'd like to take you to the beach," they told her. "We will pay for everything."

She'd sat there on the chair with tears in her eyes as she watched them with disbelief. "How can you afford all this?" she wanted to know.

"Jenn and I saved everything we earned." Sydney beamed, pulling closer to her sister. "We wanted you to have a great day out."

It was a few hours later when they finally made it to the beach. They walked for a good twenty minutes before Jenn pointed out the perfect spot for them to set up their picnic basket and towels. They did just that and slipped into their matching sunglasses before lying on their backs beside their mom.

"This is the best gift," their mom admitted. "Even after the life I've put you guys through..." They heard tears in her voice but Sydney remained quiet.

"It's alright, Mom," Jenn whispered. "Sydney said everything would turn out okay and she was right..."

* * * *

Summer arrived unexplainably late to Copper Bay, and Max was enjoying the seaside with Conner. The last few

months seemed to spin by, his life taking a roller coaster ride, from the loss of Jenn, to meeting Sydney, to the 'encounter' they had shared after the Sewer Club meeting. They hadn't gone any farther than that and had only gone that far again a couple times. He still wasn't sure if those times he had pleasured her were more than just two people enjoying each other's company, or if it was something more. For now, they were just together and appreciating their time spent that way.

Conner was well lathered in sunscreen and playing in the sand as Max helped the boy make a sand castle. It didn't hurt whenever he looked into his son's eyes anymore, and they had grown into a pretty good routine with Sydney watching the boy. For Max, she was a godsend, taking care of the Conner while he worked in the evenings.

She had been running around during the daytime, trying to get photo-shoots done and he had the pleasure of watching her work. After a while he got tired of the models trying to pick him up, though.

"That's it, Megan," Sydney called as she snapped swimsuit pictures for Silver Lingerie. "Gimme some attitude with the lips!" she called.

Max looked over at the far end of the beach where Sydney was standing in her swimsuit and a wrap so she didn't look too relaxed as she worked on the shoot. His eyes kept glancing at the models, but they didn't stay long because they didn't do anything for him. Sydney had a great body, filled out where it should be, but the thin models that she was taking pictures of were just too ... something. Max hadn't

really pursued anything with Sydney because he thought it was too soon after Jenn. She'd never forgive him if she was still alive. Then again, if Jenn was still around, he wouldn't have met Sydney.

This whole thing was too complicated.

Sydney knew that she had grown attached to Max and Conner. She didn't know if she could move on. The two seem to be doing much better but still she stayed around, wondering when her debt to Jenn was fully repaid, or if it would ever be repaid.

After the shoot was over, Syd packed up and ran over to where Max was with Conner. She fell into the sand beside them. "God, I hate those snotties." She sighed as she closed her eyes.

"You didn't say that the other day when you got your monthly commission check, Syd."

Laughing she tossed some sand at him. "Yeah that's the good part."

"Yeah, it certainly is." He put another pile of sand down in front of Conner in the shape of the pail so he could systematically destroy it with a little yellow shovel like he did the one before it. "Have you given much thought about what you were talking about the other day? Moving out?" Syd had been sleeping in his spare room since she arrived. He loved having her around and she was great with Conner. He hated the thought of her leaving, but he knew the time would come when she had to.

"Yeah," she sat up to make a pile for Conner to destroy. "I think I'm going to buy a place here ... it's peaceful ... quiet ...

close to ... Conner..." She wanted to say close to "you" but didn't. She laughed as Conner smashed the pile of sand and turned to find more. "I don't know yet. Life just seems to be twisting and turning, you know?"

"Oh," he said slowly. "Yeah, I know how life can be, believe me."

"I know you do." She laughed as Conner tottered over to her and fell against her stomach, "Ouch!" she laughed. "Hey there you," she greeted him as she picked him up so he could sit on her stomach facing her. "You just about squeezed what little food I have..." she stopped as her stomach growled loudly, "correction ... had in there. I'm hungry..."

Max watched her with Conner. He had just started talking, barely anything but he knew 'daddy' and 'nanna'. Good enough to get his point across. To Sydney's credit, she appeared to love watching the boy, like he was the one she never had. "You want to get something to eat?"

She was about to say no, that he should stay and spend some time with Conner, but her stomach shut her up. "Sure ... my stomach seems to be in love with the idea."

"Alright," he said standing and picking up Conner. "Where do you want to eat?" he asked, brushing sand off the front of his trunks.

"Anywhere. As long as its food, I'll eat it." She laughed as she hauled on a pair of jeans and a tank top over her swimsuit. She didn't really like her body and having a massive amount of people looking at it was just not her thing.

"Alright, let's get some dinner at the KFC. It's only a few blocks." He got everything together and they drove over.

They ordered some chicken, sides, and a couple of biscuits for Conner to gum on. They sat down and as usual, Sydney insisted on sitting next to Conner to help him eat. Max got his fair share, but usually he let her when she wanted to.

She tried to feed Conner a pea and he only took it from his mouth and dropped it on the table. "It was worth a try." She grinned and gave him one of the biscuits.

"See?" Max said as two kids walked by and slowed down. By the looks of them, they were in college or had been in the workforce for a few years. One had a shaved head, the other a mullet. Neither looked like the cream of Copper Bay. As one they turned and looked at Max, then at Sydney, and finally at Conner

"White, black, white," the bigger of the two said as he pointed at each one of them. "Which one of these doesn't belong?" He laughed at his joke and his friend jumped in too.

Max wasn't the most chivalrous man in the world, but the boy's words set him off. "You two might want to leave while you can." Max was a good-sized man, but sitting down and with his loose shirt covering him, he didn't appear that large.

"What you gonna do man, just sit here hanging around with your 'girl'?"

Sydney felt as though she was going to die ... true she had been having thoughts of Max being her man but this was insane. This pushed it over the edge, where she knew she would not be able to be with him, even if Jenn wasn't her sister. She wanted to cry but she gripped her fork a little tighter. She was thinking of throwing it at the kids and even

though she knew in her anger she wouldn't miss, she would probably be arrested.

Max swung his legs out from the bench and went to stand when one of the boys shoved him back down. "You shouldn't be seeing this skank, white man." The words barely registered in Max's head as fury flashed in his eyes. It would take some time for him to realize why he was so upset. He would have been upset if they were ripping on any black girl, but this was his girl. White, black, or green, Max wasn't going to let them get away with it.

Standing up again he took one step toward the boys, leading with his fist. His hands did everything from manhandling sides of beef to nimbly skinning an apple every day. They had always done him right before and this time was no different. Max smashed a fist into the offending kid's mouth. Blood from the two newly missing teeth flew up into the air as the man collapsed backward. The other boy looked for a moment like he was going to join in, but when he saw Max's eyes he quickly scooped up his partner and they ran out of the building.

As the adrenalin wore off his legs became weak and Max collapsed back down onto the bench, suddenly exhausted. He thought he was going to be sick to his stomach after hitting the man and he fought for a moment to keep down what he had eaten of his lunch.

When the whole thing broke out, Sydney had reached for Conner and picked him up. She held him protectively against her chest so he was looking behind her and not at the fight in front of them. She had to protect him from anything that

might come flying at him and from seeing what was happening. When it was over, she handed him to his father and walked out of the restaurant.

Max took Conner from Sydney, thinking the boy was upset. As he looked up, he saw her walking out of the building. "Sydney," he called out as he ran after her, holding his son in his arms.

"What?" she asked, not stopping but moving faster.

Max caught up with Sydney and walked beside her. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. He was..." There wasn't really any excuse for what he did, but Max couldn't let them talk down to her. "He was insulting you and I guess I flipped."

"That's not why I'm upset," she told him walking faster still. "You know, my people didn't ask to be on this goddamn continent! We were taken here against our will because a bunch of ignorant assholes, with a bad fashion sense, didn't want to do their own fucking work! You would think, that after all these years people would recognize that true love is more than color..."

"It is," he continued, not really registering who she was talking about for a moment. "At least it is for me. But I wasn't going to just sit there and let them spew slurs at us."

Sydney didn't stop walking. She was way too embarrassed with how much she had said and how angry she was, so she kept walking. Her mind raced as she thought about her life over the last few months. Too much was happening, too fast. If she had the good sense she had been given she would tell him she was Jenn's sister, hand over Conner, and run as fast as she could from Copper Bay.

"Please don't shut down on me, on us. Let's get out of here. Go put Conner down for a nap and we can talk about this." He didn't intend to sound desperate, but he couldn't stand the thought of going home without her being there after this long.

She stopped and turned to face him. She wanted to snap at him again but couldn't when she saw his eyes and saw Conner rest his head against Max's shoulder. She opened her mouth to be angry, to shout, rant and rave but instead she simply felt herself melting at the sight. She nodded. "Alright," she said and turned toward where he had parked.

* * * *

"You know," seventeen-year-old Jenn spoke as Sydney pushed her gently in the swing, "I've been thinking..."

Sydney stopped her task and sat down in the swing beside her sister. "About what?"

"Who I want to marry. You know those romance novels that Mom reads all the time?"

"Those men aren't real, sis. And you don't just meet someone and fall in love. I don't think true love exists and Mom and Dad are living proof."

"Just because they fight doesn't mean they don't love each other."

"Jenn, think about It. A man who loves his woman doesn't hit her then turn around and treat her kids like crap."

"But he always apologizes. Doesn't that count for something?"

Sydney stopped her swing and moved to stand before Jenn, grabbing both chains. "You listen to me." She glanced over her shoulder to make sure no one was there. "If I hear that a man hits you and you stay with him, I'll find you, kill him, then kick your ass! You know better than that. You're smarter than that. As soon as he raises his hands to you, get out. You hear me? No man is worth being miserable for the rest of your life!"

Sydney's anger could be seen through the tight line that her lips were pressed into and the veins that throbbed in the side of her young temples.

Jenn nodded.

"Good because you deserve nothing but the best..."

* * * *

Sydney sat the whole trip, not saying anything, and it was driving him nuts. He wanted to say something, anything to make it better but was more afraid of making her angrier. He had stood up and defended her, her honor, and civility as a whole, so why did he feel so bad about it?

When they got home, Max put on Conner's favorite CD in the little player near his crib and put him down for a nap. Max hoped that he'd stay like that for a few hours. With the boy napping with little evidence that the altercation at the restaurant would have any lasting effects, Max went back to the living room to see Sydney sitting alone on the couch.

Clasping her hands, she rested them between her knees and pressed her knees shut. She hadn't realized how much she had wanted Max until those boys began their jeering. It

wouldn't have mattered otherwise. Why had she not taken the easy way out and left when she could? She would tell Max she had to leave. She would...

A thousand thoughts went through his head as he walked those few steps to the couch and they all came to the same conclusion. Max sat next to her and put his hand on her knee, feeling her quake through her jeans. His mind felt like it was wading through molasses. He wanted to say something to make her feel better. Words wouldn't form for the longest time, but as he studied her profile, her nose, her dark skin, and a single tear welling up in her eye, they finally came to him. "I love you Sydney," he whispered and wondered if Jenn would be happy or furious with him. Somehow though, it didn't make any difference to him right then.

Sydney felt her breath catch in the back of her throat as she heard what he said. Maybe he hadn't said it and she was only imagining it. That had to be it. He never said those three little words that every woman wanted to hear.

No matter how hard she tried to ignore the fact that Max had said he loved her, she couldn't. Pressing her lips into a thin line, she began panting for air as she moved from beside him and began pacing. "No, you don't," she told him shakily. "You can't love me. You don't know what you're saying."

Max didn't know what to say. Was she telling him she didn't feel the same way about him? It was hard enough for him to admit it to her, not to mention himself. "I do," he said quietly as he looked up at her.

"Oh no, what have I done?" she muttered more to herself than to him. "Oh no. This has to be wrong in some way."

"I know it isn't really expected. I didn't give you any sort of ... I never told you how I felt. I don't think I could even admit it to myself."

Sydney stopped pacing long enough to walk over to him and fell to her knees in front of him. "You can't love me. I'm not Jenn, Max. I've never been a mother, I'm going to suck at it ... God knows I've screwed up my life but good ... Are you sure?"

"You've done a great job with Conner. He looks up to you." He hadn't thought about Conner, how he'd be later. Would he forgive his father for trying to love again? "Yeah, I think I do love you."

She smiled. "See? You think," she said moving closer to him, between his legs. She reached up and touched his face. "It's no big deal, Max, you won't be the first man to think he loves me and you won't be the last." She was glad. Another excuse not to tell him how she really felt. She felt horrible enough about lying to him about who she was.

"Look into my eyes and tell me you don't love me and we'll just go back to being friends."

"No, you will not do that to me!" Looking away she got up from in front of him and walked to the window. "That's not fair, Max, and you know it."

"Do what?" Max wanted to know.

"It's not fair," Sydney repeated.

"Why? You sit here and tell me that I don't love you, that no one can love you." He paused for a moment, letting what she said sink in. "You're probably right. I was being naive, thinking I was ready."

His words tore at her heart and she felt sick. She felt ready to hurl. "That's not fair. I didn't say I didn't love you." Sydney's voice was tiny and she couldn't believe it was her own. "That would be a lie ... but if you're not ready..."

"Please don't do this to me, Sydney. I told you how I felt. Now do you feel the same or not? Because if you don't want to say no because you think it'll hurt my feelings, they've already been torn apart this year and left tattered on the floor. You'll do no worse than they already are. I don't know if I'm ready or not, but I can't deny what I felt at the restaurant, the need to protect you, to hold you, to love you."

"How can you think I don't feel the same way?" she snapped turning to face him. "Do you think I'd stick around for almost a year to take care of you and Conner in the same house? I would have moved out and bought my own place close to here already! If you want to know if I want your touch, yes! If you want to know if I hunger for your touch, your taste, yes! Did I enjoy it when you finger-fucked me after the Sewer Club dinner, after you ate me out after the Fourth of July party, yes! If you want to know if I've dreamt of you doing lustful, delicious things to my body, yes! If you want to know if I love you, hell yes! I do ... but I'm scared ... I'm scared that I'm not the right person..." she trailed off as sobs rocked her body. "I-I-I'm..."

Max had messed up again, angering Sydney instead of comforting her. He got up slowly and walked over to her, pulling her into his arms. Having her close was trouble forhim. He felt her body, smelled her hair and his head spun. She was sobbing into his chest and it tore at his heart. "It doesn't

matter who you are, I don't care who you are, as long as you are here with me."

"You won't be..." she stopped herself as her arms circled his waist and he cradled her head against his chest. "How can you not care ... why do I feel like this?"

He didn't answer, he just stood there and held her against him, rubbing his hand gently up and down her back.

Lifting her head slowly, she looked up into his face. Something came over her and she reached upward. Going up on tiptoes, her lips hovered close to his, feeling his breath on her face, tasting him by inhaling. Should she?

Max watched her as she closed in on him, her eyes, her lips. Not knowing what she wanted was torture, but he finally couldn't deny his own feelings any longer. Closing the two inches between their lips Max felt as if he was crossing a chasm of lost love and self-doubt. As he did, he brushed his lips against hers before pressing them forward.

Sighing as though the world was being lifted off her shoulders, Sydney immediately opened her lips to him as she pressed her breasts against his chest.

Her lips formed to his and Max felt something wonderfully odd from the other times he had kissed her. There was more than passion this time, more than contentment. There was love; a love he hadn't felt in a long time. Max let out a low moan as her tongue brushed against his lips and he opened in response. As their tongues danced, Max's mind ran with images of encounters he'd had with Jenn. Again they were trying to ruin this for him, to stop him as they had before.

This time though, they washed away as he opened his eyes and saw the dark skinned beauty before him.

Sydney smiled up at him, wondering why he had stopped. "Haven't changed your mind?"

He held her tighter and put a little peck on her nose before returning his lips to hers. Running a hand under her shirt, he felt her heated skin. "Have you?" he asked, coming up for air.

"God no, I couldn't if I tried." She panted for air. "I would die if I changed my mind now ... I've tasted you, Max Durant. Now I can't forget. I don't want to forget."

Reaching down, he wrapped his arms under her bum and lifted her up. She giggled and kissed his forehead as he walked carefully upstairs where the bedroom was. "I hope I remember how all this goes," he said with a smile before her mouth found his again.

Looking down over his shoulders, she was about to say he seemed to be doing fine, when she was interrupted by his mouth on hers. She shivered sweetly and held him tighter. Kissing Max was like eating her favorite candy over and over again. She felt giddy and knew for certain that if he hadn't been holding her, she would definitely have fallen.

Topping the stairs he instinctively turned to his room but stopped in the doorway. His heart wouldn't let him take another woman across the threshold yet. Bashfully he found Sydney's eyes. "Let's use your room."

"I understand," she whispered and rested her head against his shoulder. That was in resignation that this might be a one time thing. She surrendered to the fact that she could just have a little of Jenn in her and he'd managed to see it, and

that's why he told her he loved her. She sighed as he walked with her. Either way it didn't matter, she would have one night with Max Durant and that meant more to her than anything.

He made it to her room and laid her on the bed, covering her with his body, never letting his lips leave her skin for more than a few seconds.

Sydney felt wild under his mouth. His cock that stood at attention, pressing against her heat, made her feel like a woman again. She tried to use her hands to move his head to where she wanted but he wouldn't allow that. His hot mouth was causing her body to dance under its ministration and caused Sydney's head to float.

The desire he felt in his chest exploded outward as he worked her shirt up over her tits then completely off. Max felt a little cheated and smiled as he looked down and saw her pale yellow one-piece swimsuit from earlier still clinging to her body. Lowering his gaze to her chest, he attacked her cleavage, licking and sucking on the dark skin between her breasts as his hands began pawing at them. Finding the small nubs of her nipples, he pinched and rolled them between his fingers, excited at the small noises she made.

A low growl rose from deep within her as she locked her ankles around his hard body. She pulled herself against him, rubbing his still clothed dick against her jeans. She could hardly breathe with the passion going through her and his aggressiveness only heightened the feelings coursing through her body. She felt like she'd cry if he stopped.

Pulling the straps off her shoulders, Max exposed her breasts. He left the straps just below her tits, holding her arms down to her sides as he flicked at the nearest nipple with his tongue. The almost black skin of her areola was sweeter than the richest chocolate, and he took it into his mouth, sucking and nipping at it.

"Max," she sighed and pressed her breast upward to his mouth by lifting her shoulder a little. Her hands being held at her sides forced her to find new ways to get the pleasure she wanted and knew he could give her.

Long dormant things came back to him, things he knew would turn on a woman. As he almost savagely attacked her tit, his hands ran down her stomach, pushing her down and making her release him from her pleasurable confinement. With her legs down, he unbuttoned her jeans and began to slide them off her hips. He only paused a minute to look at the swollen mound between her legs as it pressed up against the material of her swimsuit before he switched to the other breast. Not wanting it to feel left out, he sucked and pulled on the skin even more than he had the previous one.

Gritting her teeth she tried wrapping her legs around him again but he wouldn't allow it. Sydney wanted to feel him pressing sweetly into her, his heat radiating through both their bodies but he would have none of that. She knew he was having fun torturing her like he was and she let out a moan that was filled with utter frustration.

"If you want me to stop," he said as he let her nipple go for a moment, "let me know. Otherwise..." he didn't finish the

sentence, just bit down on her nipple before leaving them alone.

"Don't you dare stop now!" she warned.

Her pants came off easily, and he stared at the woman lying on the bed for a moment. Thoughts boiled up through his desire, but he didn't acknowledge them. Instead he knelt at the edge of the bed and slowly spread her legs apart, kissing up her thighs. When he got to her pussy, still covered in her swimsuit's yellow cloth, Max used a finger to pull the fabric to one side. Her swollen lips were slick with moisture that had nothing to do with the water from the beach they were at a few hours earlier. At the top, her delicate clit poked its head between her lips, and Max introduced himself to it with a gentle lick.

Her entire body, from her heels to her head, rose from the bed when his tongue rubbed against her clit. She moved her arms around trying to get them free but the swimsuit still held them fast against her body. She needed to touch him, he was driving her insane. She braced the soles of her feet against his shoulders as her body fell back against the bed and her back arched to press her pussy down against his tongue.

Max's tongue parted her lips before he pulled her clit between his lips and lovingly pinched it. His free hand that he had been using to rub his own crotch for the last few minutes came up and he pressed two fingers until they just entered her. With small strokes, he rubbed against her pussy, just enough to keep her aching for more.

Listening to her, you'd think he was hurting her, she was moaning, thrashing, and shuddering at his touch. Finally, when he thought she couldn't take anymore, he reached up and grabbed the straps of her suit and pulled it the rest of the way off her body.

Her hands went free and the first thing she did was sit up slightly, supporting her upper body by leaning on her elbows. She looked down at him as he ate her. "I want to see your eyes, Max," she whispered biting down on her lower lip.

No sooner had the words left her mouth, than her whole body exploded. His tongue flicked over her clit and she felt the waves of her orgasm approaching. She grabbed the back of his head and shoved it down into her wetness as he lapped at her. Her legs went weak. Her body went rigid as she rode his face to her orgasm.

Max looked up at her, slowly crawling up her body, making sure her pussy rubbed against his chest, stomach, crotch, until he was looking right at her, only a few inches away. With a final dart, he caught her lips with his, kissing her deep and lovingly as he again pressed her into the bed with his weight.

She tasted her own wetness on his lips before her head fell back. Sydney could feel his body caress hers as she recovered from the powerful release. He was perfect and everything he did was perfect. Even the taste of herself on his lips felt like an aphrodisiac to her.

Max kissed her for a few more moments before sitting up as he straddled her thighs and pulled off his shirt. "What is your pleasure, my dear?" he asked gently as he brushed her cheek.

Sitting up with him across her, she rubbed her palms up his smooth chest and a purring sound left her throat as she leaned forward to kiss his chest, dragging her teeth down the skin before flicking her tongue over a tiny bud of a nipple. She pressed a kiss over his heart then looked up at him. "Your turn."

Smiling, he kissed her head and rolled off her and onto his back on the bed. Fluffing the pillow under his head, he looked at her longingly and waited to see what she had in mind.

Sydney climbed on top of him, perching herself over the bulge in Max's pants. His dick was straining to get out, but Syd wanted to have her fun first. Pressing her sopping pussy down onto him, she ground herself along the shaft. His rough jeans stimulating her clit caused her to gasp, her eyes locked on his. Their stare was only broken when Max closed his eyes and let out a moan that made her nipples ache with anticipation.

Leaning down, she licked at his lower lip, his chin, neck, whatever she could reach as her desire got the better of her for a moment. Calming herself, she dragged her tongue down his neck, over his Adams apple as she slid off his hips. Torturously she kissed him on her way down his chest as her hands unfastened his pants and slid them down, along with his trunks, until his cock popped up and hit her in the neck. Surprised but undaunted, she took a hold of his dick and looked at it. Circumcised and straight as a light post, she swore it was the size of her wrist but knew it was only her desire doing the measuring for her. She wrapped her hand around the shaft and felt her pussy throb with excitement.

Max felt her cool hands on his warm dick and it was a pleasant experience if there ever was one. He squirmed under her touch as she pulled him up and down, her soft skin turning him into a raging pit of desire. He willed his hands not to move from under his head as she licked the head of his dick and gently blew on it.

The lick was just the beginning. She pressed one hand against the flatness of his stomach as she lowered her mouth to him and began sucking. He tasted of salt, musk, and Max. Flicking the head with her tongue, she pulled him back into her mouth until the head was pressing against the back of her throat.

God. He didn't know if it was the longing or the experience, but Sydney was driving him crazy. As he felt the back of her throat against his dick, he finally couldn't stand it anymore and his hands came up from the pillow. He ran his fingers through her hair, pulling her down until he felt her nose against his pubic hair. Slowly, she moved up and down on him, his hands helping to set the pace while she took her free hand and massaged his balls, rolling them in her fingers as she took him fully within her again.

Feeling his hands on her, she took them and put them by his side, wishing she had thought of bringing her handcuffs from home. Not that she had ever got the nerve to use them. He was beginning to drip onto her tongue and she figured she was doing something right.

He wanted to let go, the months of waiting making him sensitive, but he held back. With his hands in their imaginary prison, all he could do was pull his hips down. His dick came

out of her mouth with an audible 'pop'. Rubbing the side of her face lovingly, Max rolled her off him and climbed out of bed. Laying her down gently, with her legs hanging off the bed, he lifted and spread them around his waist. Placing his ever-hardening cock against her inflamed pussy, he looked up at her, silently asking for permission to take what she was offering.

Sydney licked her lips and pushed herself up while pushing against his ass with her heels. "Don't stop now, Max," she whispered huskily. "Give it to me."

Max pushed himself just inside her and paused. She was tight and it felt so wonderful that he thought he was going to cum right away. It took him a moment to get a hold of himself, then he looked into her eyes as he started to slide the rest of himself deep inside her. Sydney's juices flowed out soaking his balls as he pushed against her cervix. He only waited a moment before pulling almost all the way out then crashed back into her. The quick, hard thrust caused her eyes to go wide and her full lips curled into a contented smile.

Her head fell backward as she moved against him, meeting each of his powerful, slow, thrusts. She wanted to run her nails over him but the position they were in didn't permit that. She settled for running a hand down his sweat covered chest before falling back against the bed, with her hips in his hands. She wanted to scream again but couldn't because she remembered Conner sleeping in the next room. Instead, she pressed her lips together and a stifled squeal left her body. Her head thrashed from side to side, as she began cumming for him. This was insane. Having one orgasm during

lovemaking was something to Sydney, but two in one was something she had never experienced before.

Max watched as she lost control under him, amazed at how she looked on the bed. She was so content, but he still wanted more. Withdrawing his now soaked cock, Max unhooked her legs from around him and using her leg as a lever, rolled her over on her stomach. She got her legs under her and laid there, her ass pointing at him as her top half laid on the bed. Running his hands over her back, he lined up on her pussy again and slid himself into her. On her stomach, he felt himself go deeper into her, pushing past her cervix until he thought he was going to go right up through her. As he slid back and forth he leaned over her, until his chest lay on her back.

He reached his hand up and lifted her head gently so she could look at his face, now close to hers. "Once more for me?" he asked, speaking at just above a whisper.

She licked her lips. "Anything..." was all she got out before he hit her spot again and she whimpered and began pushing backward against him. With Max she felt liberated. She didn't feel as though she had to be a proper lady for him, she could be wild and free ... she could improvise.

Max smiled at her and drove himself into her harder. She bounced under him and he dug his teeth into her shoulder as he felt his own orgasm build. "Come with me, baby," he said as he drove himself deep within her. Sydney's legs splayed out behind her as she tried to press herself against him. It was all he needed as he felt her tighten under him. He growled low and deep but it grew into a yell as his orgasm

overtook him. Max wanted to pull out, because he didn't know if she wanted to be saddled with another of his kids, but he couldn't. His body didn't respond as he spewed forth what felt like a gallon of sperm. Sydney must have felt him cum because he heard her let out her own scream into the pillow as her pussy contracted so tight on him he thought it was trying to milk him for every drop he had.

Slumping forward, she was satisfied in every sense of the word. "Max," she whispered as she tried to turn around to cuddle him against her, but his weight against her back wasn't allowing it. She settled with just lying there, trying to learn how to breathe again.

Max stayed there for a few minutes, his hands supporting most of his weight, sweating and breathing like he had just run a mile. Finally after what seemed like an eternity, he crawled off her and onto the bed before pulling Sydney up against his body.

"I love you Max," she whispered against his chest before she drifted off into blissful sleep. This time the dark, cold cellar was gone, in its place, stood a tall and proud sunflower plant.

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Chapter 12

Something had woken Sydney from her slumber. She lay there in that blissful moment between sleep and reality.

"Syd!" the urgent voice called dragging her further from her sleep and she turned her head.

"Jenn? What's wrong?" Sydney glanced at the clock. "It's three in the morning! Where have you been?"

"Keep your voice down, you're going to wake Mom."
Sydney sat up and rubbed her eyes. "What's wrong?"
"I had sex with Brad."

"You did what? You're too young to be having sex! Did you use protection?"

Jenn went silent and Sydney got her answer. "God, Jenn, you know better!"

"I know! Don't you think I know that?"

Sydney paced the room frantically with all sorts of possibilities going through her head. "Okay ... no need to freak ... we'll just wait until your next period and then if you don't have it we have to tell Mom."

"What? We can't tell Mom!" Jenn cried in a hoarse whisper.

Sydney rolled her eyes and grabbed Jenn's shoulder to shake her. "Don't you get it? It's going to be kind of hard to hide the fact that you got a bun in the oven from Mom!"

The two sisters slumped silently to the floor praying for a miracle. Jenn wasn't pregnant.

* * * *

Something dragged Max out of his dream. At least he thought it was a dream. Jenn was in it, saying goodbye and that it'd be all right. Sydney was also there, holding his hand, and Jenn just smiled at both of them before she left.

Opening his eyes, Sydney was cuddled up next to him. She didn't have her arm around him which was just as well because he had to use the bathroom. Sometime during the night they had gotten under the covers, but Max couldn't remember when. Climbing out of the bed the light coming through the blinds drew his attention to something sitting on the stand next to the bed. It was a letter that simply read 'Sydney'. He wouldn't have thought about it at all after his mind registered it, but it was written in Jenn's handwriting. Something told him that he shouldn't snoop ... to let her have her privacy, but he couldn't help himself. The letter was half covered under some magazines and a couple of pictures, but he gently pulled it out and turned it over in his hands. Fearfully, he opened the envelope and pulled out the single sheet of handwritten words.

He read it twice without understanding what it meant. On the third time, revelation hit him like a hammer and he turned his head to look at Sydney. As she lay there he could see the resemblance; the way she laughed, sang when she thought she was alone, tossed salt over her shoulder; all this was something Jenn would have done. She had many other cute quirks that he had fallen hard for and as he sat there watching her sleeping form, he remembered that Jenn had most of them. It was all there for him to see all along but he had been too sad, then too occupied with Conner to realize

what they meant. Then again how could he have guessed Sydney and Jenn were sisters? Jenn was white and Sydney was African American. He couldn't even begin thinking of the different signs that had been there ever since she walked into his life with her designer clothes

Sydney reached out with her eyes closed to feel for Max but he wasn't there. She opened her eyes to see him looking at her and smiled, but the smile quickly died when she saw something she didn't recognize in his eyes. "What's the matter?" she asked sleepily.

Max didn't say anything, and her mouth went dry when he simply lifted the letter so she could see it past his shoulder. Questions were written all over his face and Sydney knew what was coming. She could almost hear his thoughts. What did it mean? Did she love him? Was she simply here to fulfill a promise made to a dying sister?

She saw the paper and her heart sank. She moved to sit up. "Max..." she started. What does one say at a moment like this? I'm sorry, I'm your dead wife's sister? I'm sorry you fell in love with me? I'm sorry I fell for you?

So many things ran through her mind as she watched him.

"I always wondered why you liked Conner so much, why you'd simply drop everything to be with him. It wasn't that Jenn was a good friend, she was..." Max leaned back against the wall, suddenly not able to sit up on his own.

"My sister," Sydney said as she moved to touch his arm then let her hand fall. "I was adopted into her family when I was a little girl ... but that's not important. I've always had her back, but with life getting in the way, I drifted, so I

figured honoring her last wishes I could somehow find redemption I guess."

In less than five minutes, Max's life, his beliefs that had supported everything else, collapsed around him. Sydney was here because of a mistake, and his new lover was just trying to find a way to feel better about herself. "Do ... do you feel anything for me, for us? Aside from clearing your conscience?"

"I'm not a whore, Max," she said getting agitated. "I don't sleep with people because I feel it will clear my conscience." She got up off the bed, slipped on her robe and turned for the door. "Conner will be up soon. I've got to get ready. You might want to find a new nanny for him."

Max watched her go before returning his glare to the letter. What had he done?

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Chapter 13

Gregory set up the shot and smiled. "Seven ball in the center pocket," he motioned with the cue stick and made the shot. "I'm telling you man. Just make her a nice dinner or something. Something with candles, soft music and lots and lots of bubbles."

Max watched Gregory miss the next shot and lined up for his. Calling it, he shook his head. "I don't know. She's been really tired lately. I don't think she would be up to all of that."

Gregory shrugged. "Maybe all she needs is a little lovin'. That tends to work miracles for one's disposition."

Max laughed. "Sex. The answer to all man's troubles." he drank from his beer.

Gregory lifted his bottle in a toast to Max. "Here, here," he laughed as he watched his friend aim for his shot. "Are you sure she's not pregnant?"

That caught Max off-guard just as he was about to make his shot. It shocked him so much that Max hit the ball at a wrong angle. It soared through the air and flew past Gregory's head to land in a glass of beer behind them. The glass shattered sending cold beer everywhere.

"Hey!" a stunned voice shouted and Gregory turned.

"Sorry..." he said. "I'll buy you another."

"Pregnant?" Max asked, "I don't think ... oh no..."

* * * *

The bar used to be a normal hangout for Max, someplace he could go when he needed a little breathing room, or if he just needed to unwind while Jenn was out doing something else. After the night, and the fight. with Sydney Bouv ... Cook, he found himself back in the bar, at the corner table facing the rest of the room.

Tonight he was dining on ashes, the faint remains of another love lost. His first love was taken, torn from him by the unrelenting power of nature. The second was taken by his own jealous hand.

Irony. Simple, twisted, irony.

He could no longer blame God or blame the cancer that had ruined his life. It seemed God had given him a second chance at love and he let it slip away. No, this time it was all his fault and he had to accept it.

"Figured I'd find you here," came a baritone voice from nearby. Max looked up from his pondering of the bottom of his beer mug. The tall and well-built form of Gregory Thompson looked down at him. "Sydney said you had left, but she didn't know where you went. What bothered me is that, she didn't sound like she particularly cared."

"After the ass I made of myself," Max frowned, "I can't say I'm surprised."

Max leaned back and ran his fingers though his dark hair. He was in no mood for company but he knew his best friend. The man was more stubborn than a mule.

"Have a seat Gregory. I know how you hate to take no for an answer."

The black man sat down next to his friend and just stared at him, waiting for Max to grow tired of the attention and spill his guts. Max always hated expressing his feelings, but somehow Gregory could always bring it out of the man. After all, Gregory was the first person who knew Max would ask Jenn to marry him. Max always smiled at that thought, for Gregory was sure he knew it before even Max did.

It didn't take long before Max relented. "It's about Sydney, and Jenn. I don't know where I went wrong."

"No shit. What's up?"

Max was about to start when a waitress brought Gregory the beer he ordered at the bar, as well as a replacement for Max. After she left, Max took a healthy drag of the liquid and spoke. "Sydney and I were getting serious, I think. Things had been going so well..." Max's voice trailed off as he took another drink of beer.

"So? What's the problem? She seems like a good woman, and she's hot as hell."

"She's Jenn's sister."

The revelation sent Gregory's brows up in surprise. Max watched as he turned away trying so very hard to hide his shock. When Gregory turned to face him again, Gregory hid his emotions under humor as he always did. "Yeah, and..? She's fucking hot and you stare at her like a puppy dog. What more do you want?"

"She never told me. She just said she was a friend of Jenn's. So I fell in love with her, but how can I trust her if she lied once?"

"I have to admit that this is strange, to say the least. I would never have guessed..." Gregory's brows lifted before he leaned forward and stuck his finger down on the table. "But even so man, you need to get over it," Gregory said eyeing Max. "So she didn't tell you who she was. You're going to let a good woman walk out of your life because of one lapse in judgment? Listen, it sounds to me like she was doing it to protect you. You told me Jenn didn't have any sisters, so who should you be more pissed at?" Letting out a breath, Gregory sat back. Getting Max upset with him wasn't the way to go.

"I love Jenn, I really do, but if some of the things you told me about her in the last few months are true, the letters, the nanny, and now lying about her family tree, don't be mad with Sydney about that. It's not her fault. Sydney's trying to do the best by you, I know. Jenn put her in this position."

Max drained the rest of his beer before sliding the glass across the table. "Whose side are you on anyway?" he asked Gregory who only chuckled.

"The side where you end up happy."

"You're right, as usual."

"I'm the love machine, remember?" Gregory said with a smile. "I'm never wrong."

"Right, dipshit. But seriously, it's too late for that now. I've already pissed her off enough that she'll probably leave."

"Just get home and actually talk to her, would you? Beg her forgiveness if you have to. She's worth it. If you let her go, though, that means she's fair game." Gregory put on his best evil grin to show he was mostly kidding.

"If that isn't a reason to make her take me back, I don't know what is." Max clasped his friend on the shoulder and stood up. "For that, you get the bill," he tossed over his shoulder as he walked out of the bar.

Gregory smiled.

* * * *

The scream tore through the house like a nightmare and Sydney jerked from her bed. Had she dreamt it? That would have to be the only explanation. That thought quickly flew out the window when the scream came again and she glanced over at her sister's bed. It was empty. That caused her to shove her feet from the bed and dart out the door. She looked into their mother's room but it was empty as well. The next logical location was down the stairs. Stumbling down the stairs but hanging onto the railing for dear life, she finally made it to the bottom and skidded to a stop as though trying to figure out which way she wanted to go first.

Another scream caused her to rush into the kitchen only to go flying the other way. Her stepfather had slammed a fist into her chest which sent her reeling across the room to land against the far wall.

Coughing and sputtering for air, she could see him slapping Jenn through the daze that clouded her eyes and anger tore through her body. He was stinking of beer again and this time he could really do some damage if he kept hitting her like that.

Looking around, Sydney saw her mother cowering in a corner and fury stole through the young girl's body. She got a

shot of adrenaline and pushed her pain riddled body from the floor where she had slumped and picked up a chair. "Let her go," Sydney warned in a voice stronger than she felt. "Don't make me say it again."

It didn't look as if her stepfather took her seriously for he only smirked at her and lifted his hand to belt Jenn another slap. Sydney brought the chair crashing down against his back and his hand let Jenn go. He was looking up at her as though he couldn't believe that Sydney had hit him.

"Run," Sydney told Jenn.

The girl with the bloody nose didn't think twice. She took off like a shot out the door ignoring her pain and the blood dripping from her face. Sydney took a look at her mother before turning to the man shaking on the floor. "Do that again and I swear to God, I will kill you in your sleep! I mean it! And remember this, Daddy dearest, they can't prosecute without a body!" She then took off after her sister.

The beatings for the girls stopped but the ones for their mother got worse.

* * * *

The afternoon passed quietly after Max had returned with a light scent of beer on him that got Sydney's back up. Any scent of alcohol on a man and that spelled trouble. He didn't seem drunk but she wasn't going to take that chance. She had moved into the kitchen and slipped a small knife into her pocket.

Sydney didn't say more than a few words to him all day. She could tell that once or twice he wanted to say something to her, but he didn't so Sydney didn't press him.

Since he was home, Sydney left the house around lunchtime to take some pictures. Not that she had to, but because she didn't want to be around Max at that moment. He thought she was a slut and that hurt her. And not only that, he was drunk. She knew if he dared hit her she would take her revenge on him. She couldn't let what happened with her father happen with Max. She would see him dead first.

It pulled at her core that he thought she purposefully lied to him. She was pushed into a situation and she did the best she could with it. After all, she didn't really lie to him ... she just hadn't told him the full truth. That rationalization didn't make her feel any better by the time she got back home close to dark. She found her package on the table and opened it. Mary had come through for her again and that made a sliver of happiness shoot through Sydney. Mary had sent the pictures of Conner sooner than she had hoped.

Tears stung at her eyes as she looked at the pictures. They were beautiful. Conner was a very sweet boy and with the decision she made while out on her little picture taking meditation, she would probably never see him again. She hated to get attached to anyone or anything. It always ended with her heart breaking and her crying herself to sleep for months afterward. Mary had been a dear and had the pictures framed as well for her. Sighing, Sydney started to wrap the frames back into the tissue papers then figured she should

give them to Max. Picking up the pictures, she walked into the living room.

* * * *

Max had put Conner down after he'd eaten so he'd sleep through the night. Afterward, he sat in the living room watching the Three Stooges on TV. TBS was running a marathon and Max couldn't help but remember Sydney saying she liked their brand of slapstick. Max hadn't watched them in years and was only lukewarm to their humor. Tonight though, they were damn funny. Between them and the beer in his hand, his spirits were lifted a little by the time the door opened. His mind raced with many different possibilities of what to say to her. He even wondered if he should say anything at all. Would his silence be something good or a wedge set between them, driving them further apart?

Sydney figured she might as well look in on Conner before her shower and head for bed. She heard the television so she assumed Max was watching. Walking into the room she handed him the frames. "I'll be leaving tomorrow," she told him. "They were supposed to be a Christmas present but ... these are for you."

Putting the beer down, he took the pictures. Conner had never looked better. Something caused his gut to clench into a knot. The sinking feeling wasn't for Conner, but at the thought of losing the woman he couldn't even bring himself to look at.

"Why?" he whispered. "Why didn't you tell me?" He paused before turning and looking at her jeans, the closest he could get. "I've always been honest..." his words died in his throat.

"I didn't tell you because it was easy, alright?" she told him. "Is that what you want to hear? I didn't tell you because it was easier for me if you didn't know what a horrible person I was to my sister. And I didn't want you to feel like I pitied you."

Max nodded, not sure he understood. His mind was working a mile a minute just to make a quick decision that would backfire. He had to be careful because this wasn't just about him and her leaving. Conner had to be the center of his decision, the one factor that was held higher than all the others.

Finally he stood up and looked at her. "Sydney, I'm not going to say this to be mean but ... I don't care how you were to Jenn. It's obvious that she'd forgiven you or else she wouldn't have asked you here, to be around our son, if she didn't love you. I'm hurt because you didn't tell me, but I've been sitting here thinking and I can't get around the fact that I still love you."

He reached out and took her chin between his fingers, turning it toward him. "If you want to leave, I won't stop you, but don't leave because the truth came out for everyone to see. I love you, Sydney, not for who you are related to, but for who you are."

"I'm not leaving because of that," she told him and was surprised at how true that was. "I'm leaving because you and your son don't need me anymore ... and it doesn't make

sense staying here because you think I'm a skank who is only sleeping with you, and loving you, because someone asked me to. I can't wake up every morning to that, Max. And I can't be in love with a man and hate him at the same time! It's just not me."

...A skank...

That word left a foul taste in his mouth, as bad as when the boy had said it while they were at dinner. "It was just the hurt talking, you have to believe that. Even if you don't believe anything else I say, you have to believe that I never meant to call you names. Conner needs you, I need you and I want you to stay with Conner and me."

Without answering, she turned and walked from the room and up the stairs. That was the hardest thing she had ever had to do. Walking away from Max ripped at her heart and she felt alone and hurt. She felt as though nothing else mattered in the world because she loved Max. On shaky legs she climbed the stairs, gripping the railing to avoid falling backward. She found her room and crashed onto the bed.

Defeated, Max tried to sit in the chair, but missed and landed on the floor. His tears ran hot across his face. First he had lost Jenn, now Sydney. How in the world could he be so lucky and unlucky at the same time?

"You're on a roll.... "the voice inside his head mocked and Max felt hollow inside; two women in less than two years. He was on a roll—one that he wanted desperately to end.

Conner would never have someone to look after him besides him and he'd never love anyone so deeply as Jenn, or as completely as Sydney. Max wanted to climb into a bottle, a

can, whatever he could do to make the hurt stop, but it wouldn't be fair to Conner so he sat there and wept for the longest time, until tears wouldn't fall anymore. He finally got up and went upstairs, barely acknowledging Sydney's open door. He went into his bedroom, crawled into his bed and buried his face in the pillow.

* * * *

It was pitch black outside when Sydney sat up in bed. She was so conflicted, but now she knew she was making a life altering decision. She stared out the window into the darkness and tried to lose herself in it. Darkness had always been there for her, making her feel protected. The darkness had never harmed her, never lied to her. It had held her in its arms, rocking her gently to sleep.

Drawing her eyes from the shadows, Sydney crossed her legs and rested her elbows on them to think. She knew she had to make everything better for Max and Conner, so she climbed out of bed and pulled on her robe. She took longer than normal to tie the ribbons in place, a flurry of thoughts dancing through her mind. No set idea came to her about how she could do that, which caused frustration to vibrate through her body as she walked into the bathroom. She took a long shower, washing every part of her body carefully. The water beat down on her head and slipped slowly over her body, kissing her curves before running down her legs and into the drain.

The water mixed with the tears that flowed soundlessly from her eyes as she tried to come to a conclusion that could

change her life for the better, or for the worse. She wasn't any good at making decisions when it came to life, but with business, she could make a decision in a second. Wishing she could mix her business self with her real self, she turned off the shower and stepped from the tub.

Using a large white towel to dry her body, she squirted some scents onto her neck and wrists. She rubbed her hair furiously with the towel before brushing it back, and walked out of the bathroom naked.

Walking into Max's room she sat slowly on the foot of his bed and gently ran a hand over his back before leaning in and kissing a trail down his spine, letting her tongue linger and taste him. His skin was hot beneath her mouth and she moaned.

Something was touching his back, warm and inviting. It wasn't a dream, just a dim set of feelings. His mind swam up out of his fitful slumber. Rolling onto his side, Max looked down in the dim light from the window and saw a pair of bright eyes looking back at him. "Sydney," he whispered. "What..."

"Shhh," she hushed him as she moved up his body like a snake. "Just feel. That's all I ask ... feel."

He didn't know what to think. Was she apologizing, seducing, loving? Max felt he should do something, say something but instead he simply rolled onto his back and closed his eyes as her body moved along his.

Reaching up, Sydney kissed his cheek, his nose, his forehead, every inch of his face she could reach. She moved slowly down to his neck, licking as she went toward his chest,

her hands bracing her body over his. Sydney felt as though she was punishing herself by not touching him fully with her body. This was supposed to be his pleasure, for the pain she had caused.

Whenever she kissed his lips, he kissed back as best he could, but Max couldn't move the rest of his body. He was suddenly terrified. He felt like a virgin who was about to have his first time. This wasn't lust, or the carnal love he felt with her the day before. This was true love, a love to replace all he had lost, and the thought scared him. Even as his lover kissed his chest and licked his body, he was scared.

Tasting his body with each kiss, Sydney worked her way down to the waist of his underwear. Lifting them gently over his half-hard cock, she pulled them down until they came away and slid off his ankles. The photographer of the human form smiled as she straddled Max's legs and bent over his quickly stiffening dick. Breathing out a cool breath on his arousal, she pulled it into her mouth savoring every ... delectable ... inch.

As Sydney pleasured him, Max's mind eased, the fear ebbed away and was replaced by love for the woman who had been a mother to his child for the last few months. This time, her lovemaking was gentle. It felt like she was trying to make up for something, giving all her pleasure to him and that knowledge spurred his desires for her onward. She sucked on him, her tongue darting out and licking the head of his cock before she took him back inside her mouth. He tightened his thighs and ass cheeks, pushing his dick farther to attention,

giving her more to work with as his orgasm came rushing toward him.

Sydney felt his body go rigid and she pulled away just in time and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Smiling down at him, she got off the bed and walked out the door, back to her room. The storm outside was still raging as she crawled into bed and pulled the sheets up to her neck before rolling over and facing the wall.

Max felt ready to explode when the sensations just stopped. He expected her to come up and kiss him, or to put something in his face for him to enjoy, but it didn't happen. Sitting up, he looked around. The room was empty. Only the door moving slowly back into place gave him any hint that what he had just experienced was nothing more than a good dream with a bad ending. Climbing out of bed, he walked naked out of his room and over to Sydney's. His semi-hardness bounced around between his legs, still wanting to find an outlet for its frustrations.

Pushing the door to her room open a little, he saw Sydney lying on the bed in the moonlight, covered with her blankets. Was it just a dream? Had he so desired the woman that his mind had made it all up? He had to know. "Sydney?" he whispered as he took a step into the room.

"Yes?" she responded without moving.

"It wasn't a dream was it?"

She rolled on her back and looked up at him. "No," she whispered.

"Why did you stop? Did I do something wrong?"

"I'm sorry, I thought you..." she moved to sit up and brought the blankets with her. "Come in, sit down. Let Syd take care of you."

Confused, Max walked in and sat down on the edge of the bed.

Dropping the blankets, Sydney's naked body glistened in the moonlight as she walked over and closed the door then moved back to him. She fell to her knees in front of him and ran a hand up his chest before reaching down and taking him into her hand.

While he enjoyed the attention, Max needed more than a blowjob right now. Gently he reached down and pulled Sydney to eye level. Locking eyes with her, he tried his hardest to read what was there but he couldn't.

"Tell me you aren't leaving tomorrow, Sydney. Tell me that you love me and will never leave me. If you are going to leave, then I don't want to fall more in love with you tonight. Any more than I already am, at least. It hurts too much already."

She looked away from him and tried to move away but his grip held her in place. "What if love isn't enough?"

With his fingers on the side of her face, he turned her to look at him. "What more is there?"

She searched his eyes without knowing what she was looking for. After what seemed like an eternity, she nodded. "I'm not leaving tomorrow..." She trailed off. "I love you ... and I'll never leave you." Tears began pooling in her eyes, casting him in a shimmering glow. She blinked to clear them, but the tears welled up again.

With his thumbs, Max wiped her eyes before kissing her deeply. The love was so palatable, he could taste it on her lips, her tongue, feel it through her skin. He wrapped his arms around her and lay back, bringing her up and letting her lie on top of him as he continued kissing her.

Tears streamed down her face faster than he could wipe them. As she wrapped her arms around him and lay on him enjoying his kiss, she wondered if this was the way Jenn felt about him. How could any woman see or know Max Durant and not love him?

Max thought they had kissed for hours, sharing their love for each other. Sometime during their kiss, Sydney dropped her legs to each side of his waist and Max felt his dick press against her swollen labia. He let out a little moan into her mouth as he came in contact with her warm skin.

Sydney tried not to thrust against him but her body wanted him as much as her mind did. She arched against his chest, lifting her head and pushing down on her hips. He sank into her heat and a long purr of satisfaction escaped her throat.

Max felt her pussy tighten on his dick as he slowly impaled her. They sat there, entwined as completely as any two people in love could be, enjoying each other's closeness. It felt like an eternity, yet it wasn't long enough. Max pulled himself back and forth slowly, feeling every fold and wrinkle of her pussy as it pulsed around him. He took great pleasure in the hot wetness that threatened to swallow him whole. The feelings were so complete he couldn't see or hear anything else but Sydney and how she was making him feel. That was

all he needed for that moment, and forever, as he tightened his arms around her.

Pressing down half her body against him, she began writhing, grinding against him. She dragged the nails of one hand across his chest and bowed her head to taste him. She mused about exchanging love with someone other than just plain sex. What she and Max were doing was earth-shattering, mind numbing and she loved every bit of it. It was so much better, so much more pure. So many feelings pulsated through her body and she knew then, that she was very much in love with Max. If she wasn't sure before ... the truth had been laid out before her and she accepted it without question.

Max ran his fingers through Sydney's hair, loving her for who she was and not just how she made him feel. This feeling inside of him was so strong that he felt a little guilty. He had loved Jenn, but not like this. The love he felt for Sydney made him feel almost invincible and that scared him for a brief moment but that was all gone when her moan came to him.

As she moved herself on and off him, Max could feel her juices flowing down between his legs. It was wonderful, but he needed to give her more of himself and not let her do all the work. Holding her close to his chest, he rolled over, putting himself on top as he looked into her eyes and thrust deep into her, willing her to lose control and fall with him.

"Max..." came off her lips like a prayer as she felt him go deeper than any other man she had been with. He was touching her soul, breaking down her walls, tearing away the protection she had built around herself after years of being

hurt. He was slowly erasing all the years of pain she had endured at the hands of other men, especially her stepfather. The years spent in the foster system were a blur and it was all thanks to this man.

He looked into her eyes and watched as he withdrew and slowly drove back into her. Her eyes were full of love and he almost cried as he fell into the wonderful pools that were Sydney's eyes. All her hopes and dreams were now in his hands and he hoped he could complete her as much as she did him.

His pace quickened as he finally broke contact and took one of her nipples between his lips and let his tongue go to work on the hardening nub.

Sydney's body shuddered as his arms wrapped around her and began moving her the way he wanted. She was still sensitive from the last time they made love and now every touch, every movement of his body made her whole being tingle. She moaned as she felt her orgasm building. When it surged through her body, she pushed herself up to him, then sank her head back into her pillow as lightning flashed behind her eyes.

Max stared into her eyes as she came and her pussy tried milking his dick. He watched her mouth open in a silent scream. It was all he needed. He drove himself deep into her as his orgasm overtook him. Shooting jets of cum deep into her, he was amazed as she kept her heels dug into his back, holding him inside of her.

Finally, she slumped back against the bed and her arms were too tired to stay up around him on their own. They fell against the bed as her chest heaved.

Max kissed her lips before rolling onto his side, his cock leaving her with a wet sound as her now very tight pussy closed up, holding his seed inside. Letting her cuddle up against him, he stroked her hair and kissed her forehead.

"Conner..." she curled her body into his side and wrapped her arms around him. She tossed a possessive leg over his groin. "Conner will be loved ... I promise."

"I know he will, Sydney. I know he will." Max smiled a smile with no worries behind it, no fear of waiting for bad things to happen. It had been a long time since he had been able to smile like that.

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Epilogue

"Damn it Jenn!" Sydney called up the stairs. "You really need to come down and say good-bye."

"Leave me alone. You're not my sister anymore!"

"Okay, now you're just being childish!"

"I don't care! You can't just leave me here. Who's going to help me when I do something stupid? And you know I will!"

Sydney sighed and let the duffle bag she was carrying fall to the floor and went up the stairs. She tried Jenn's door but it was locked. Slamming her fist into the door a few times she growled, "Jenn, open the door!"

No answer.

"Jenn, I'm warning you!"

Laughter broke out from the other side of the door. "That's rich! I don't have a sister so you can't threaten me like one. Go away. Go to your big city and leave me alone."

Sydney sighed. "Fine." She tossed her hands up in surrender before moving back down the stairs. She picked up her bag from where it fell and left.

...Unbeknownst to Sydney, after she left, Jenn opened the door and stood there crying.

* * * *

Standing over the beautiful tombstone with blue roses in her hand, Sydney smiled down through her tears at Jenn's name. Max had the writing on it changed from, "Beloved wife and mother" to "Beloved wife, sister and mother."

She knelt not caring that her designer pants might be ruined from the dirt and pressed a kiss against the cold stone before placing the flowers on the grave.

"I did what you said, Jenn," she whispered through her tears. "But I fell in love. I don't know if this is some sick way for us to continue sharing things but I don't care. He loves me back Jenn ... but I feel so guilty..."

* * * *

"Conner!" Sydney called as she waddled to the front door, her very swollen stomach making her feel like she was carrying a basket of laundry in front of her. She heard Conner laughing and shook her head. Pulling the door open a man stood there. "May I help you?"

"The name's Finley. I'm Jenn Durant's lawyer. Is Mister Durant in?" he asked.

"Ah, yes," she said, confused, but stepped aside. "Come in, please."

She ushered him in as she closed the door behind him. "This way please."

A pregnant Sydney led the man into the living room. "Please have a seat." She smiled as she wobbled out of the room to get Max. "Max, Jenn's lawyer is here."

Putting the sauce on low, he wiped his hands on a kitchen towel and walked into the front room. "What can I do for you, Counselor?"

"I am here about one final piece of business that your late wife left for me to do." He smiled as he opened his briefcase and pulled out a letter. "This is for your current wife ... and

this," he pulled out a certificate, "is a bond valued at a cool ten thousand dollars, to pay any debt that your wedding to a Miss Sydney Cook, may have caused and the rest is in a trust fund for little Conner. I could only give this to you if you should ever marry Miss Cook but I couldn't discuss it before. When I saw your wedding announcement, I waited until after the wedding date to make sure it happened."

Max took the letter and looked at Sydney. The startled look in her eye told him she didn't know anything about the letter, or the bet Jenn had made with herself that Max would end up marrying her sister. He opened the letter and skimmed it over, Jenn's handwriting like a visit from an old friend. He handed the letter to Sydney who was in tears by the time she finished reading it.

Dearest sister. I hope this letter finds you well and you are happy. If you are reading this, then you did what I asked of you and not only that, but you are happily married to Max. Congratulations! I was never a betting woman, so I figured God would forgive me if I did, just this once. Thank you for caring for my child, and watching him grow. I do not have to ask because I know you will love Max and care for him as long as you both shall live. I give you my blessings, Syd. You can start smiling again and stop feeling guilty. I know you too well. I left a little something for you and Max, just in case your wedding broke all records! Take care, all of you. Max, I will always love you. Please tell little Conner about his other mommy that's in heaven ... I hope ... I love you all, Jenn.

When she was finished, she folded the letter and stuck it in the side of her bra. The lawyer blushed and looked away but Max only leaned in and kissed her cheek.

"Jenn knew me well, and this was a huge gamble she took. Somehow I think I have won more than she expected. Counselor, take the money and put it into the trust for.... "He stopped and walked over to Sydney Durant, putting his hand on her stomach. "Create a new trust for the money and put it in the name, Tiara Jennifer Durant."

"Very well," the lawyer smiled scribbling down the name before getting up. He extended his hand first to Sydney then to Max. "That concludes Jenn's account. Good luck to you both."

"Thank you." Max said and watched the lawyer grab his coat and walk out the door. It was odd how things worked out. Max and Sydney got married, and even Gregory had gotten engaged to Alice, though their wedding was still a couple months away. Turning to Sydney, he took her into his arms, and carefully hugged her. It was the kind of hug you gave a pregnant woman so you could get close enough to actually feel all of her body against you and not just her stomach. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you..." Sydney stopped in mid-sentence as the little girl inside her kicked. "Tiara and I love you, too," she laughed. "Now about some food ... I'm eating for two and I think we should go see what Conner is doing. He's quiet ... too quiet."

"Yeah, just one big happy family," Max moaned before stealing another kiss.

Sydney giggled.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Konichiwa! Tigra-Luna LeMar was born on the island of Jamaica then moved to Canada.

I am a culturally obsessed Jamaican, baseball/hockey chick who loves CFL football (go Argos!). I started reading romance novels to keep myself out of trouble and out of the way in high school. I began writing poems, songs (lyrics) and short stories then escalated into writing romance (NaNoWriMo) when I was about seventeen. In my spare time (though sometimes it seems I have none) I love singing, watching Asian Dramas (my favorite being Liar Game and Death Note), listening to music, watching movies and the History Channel/Comedy network, trying to cook like an Iron Chef, and spending time with friends and family. I speak English, Patois, a survival amount of Spanish and a smattering of Japanese. I am currently a university student.

D.M. Dulton lives in Michigan with his wife, son, a dog, and four very loud cockatiels.

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