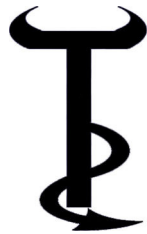


# AYDEN'S SECRET

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**Ayden's Secret**

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## CHAPTER 1

It was a hot July day in North Carolina. July first. Two months to the day, he had forgotten the anniversary. Alone in a coffee shop in Las Vegas she had waited, and waited, and waited. When he didn't show, it set her on fire with both fear and anger. She knew how dangerous his job could be. It gnawed at her gut constantly. She worried for him everyday. She had to find him, had to know he was all right, and after she knew he was okay, she'd either kiss him or kick his ass for leaving her in suspense like that. The moment she met him she felt connected. His baby blue eyes looked too soft to be a part of such a hard man. Everything about him was etched in stone, except his eyes.

Year after year, they would meet for one day, at least one cup of coffee. Year after year, she prayed it would lead to more. This year she was going to make it happen, but he never showed up.

She stepped out of the cab and grabbed her bags. Thankfully, the cab driver helped her unload the two large suitcases on wheels, placed two duffle bags on top of those, and then handed her a smaller bag, which she slung over her shoulder. The red sundress was sticking to her body. She pulled it away, but the fabric went right back in place as she took a step forward, pulling the heavy luggage behind her. The humidity was a far cry from the dry desert heat of Las Vegas. It felt like even her waterproof makeup was beginning to slide.

It seemed as though she would never make it to his house. She took great pains to cover her trail. Even greater pains to face a few fears and get on a bus filled with strangers. No one really understood how she could perform on stage night after night, yet have a panic attack at the supermarket. The anxiety was real. She used medication at first, but then she stopped. The pills she had saved, she used on the long route here.

Looking at the large two-story house on Ann Street in Beaufort, North Carolina, she shook her head. Never in a million years did she see Ayden in a small town like this. He belonged in Memphis, close to Graceland, close to the King. It seemed like a nice enough place; she just didn't understand why he would be here. Resigned to her fate, she took the first steps toward the rest of her life, with or without him. Either way, this was it.

Inside the old Patterson house, a group of very hot men were finishing up the final touches on the place. The windows were open due to the paint fumes, and everyone was down to shorts and shoes. All of them were singing, well crooning, along with the King. No wonder they didn't hear the knock on the door.

Charlie opened the door. Elvis blared through the open windows, along with some very off key back up singers. This had to be Ayden's house.

If she thought it was hot outside, she had just stepped into hell.

Half-naked men were all over the place, painting, hanging things, and here she thought Vegas had the best show around. This one could sell out. A tall tanned man with chocolate brown hair rolled paint on the wall. The motion displayed a very impressive back. A shorter blonde in starched Tommy Hilfiger shorts with a tight little behind was standing high on a ladder hanging some kind of candle holder on the wall. The man holding the candle holder balanced on tiptoes. The position flexed lean brown leg muscles.

“Excuse me?” Charlie spoke, but no one heard her. She set the bag she had on her shoulder down and headed for the counter with the radio on it. She turned it off.

Everyone turned and looked at her.

Chase was aiming for the nail, but he hit his thumb. Malcolm stepped too quickly, lost his balance, and landed on his ass. Ethan hit the ceiling with the paint roller leaving a big green spot on the white ceiling.

Joshua came down the hall and saw the woman standing there with a look of ...lust maybe? Hell this day was turning out better every minute. Nothing made him happier than catching his brother-in-law off guard, and damn if this woman hadn't caught every man in the room off guard. He couldn't wait to see Ayden's reaction.

“I'm looking for Ayden Wolf,” she said and tried not to laugh at the men who fumbled.

“Are you little red riding hood?” Joshua couldn't help himself. The woman was stunning. A short red dress with spaghetti straps left just enough to the imagination. It clung to her more tightly than it normally would have, and she seemed a little wet. Hell, she almost looked him eye to eye. Like a supermodel. And she was looking for Ayden, the Wolf. A woman in a red dress was looking for the Wolf? He looked around the room. Chase had his thumb to his lips. Malcolm was pulling to his feet again, and Ethan just smiled from ear to ear.

“No. I'm Charlie, Charlie Mann. Is he here?” Charlie extended a hand. This one was tall with black hair and amazing green eyes. His chest was peppered with black hair. They were all sweaty, and the room was intoxicating with the smell of raw man and paint. Where was Ayden?

“Let me go get him.” Joshua tried to be cool considering everyone else had faltered, but he slipped on the rag that had fallen from his back pocket when he came in. Steadying himself, he picked up the rag and headed out back for Ayden. *His* reaction would be priceless.

Charlie stood in the room and looked around at the three men. They all tried to act cool and looked anywhere but at her. She was used to it. She wasn't used to having so many impressive men in one room though. It was usually the other way around in her world. All the women were beautiful. All the men were in the audience.

Ayden came running through the back door and stopped when he saw her, sliding a bit on the newly waxed wood floors. “Charlie?”

Charlie's heart jumped from her chest into her throat. She had forgotten how impressive he was without a shirt on. She could feel her face getting hot, but in this weather and all these men around her what red-blooded woman wouldn't be blushing. God he looked good. Then again, he always looked good to Charlie.

"Ayden!" She smiled as her heart fluttered. He seemed happy to see her.

"Darlin', what are you doin' here?" Ayden had to get a grip. Everyone was watching them. At least they were all watching Charlie, and he wasn't blind. He knew why. For some reason today he was more aware of her.

"Tom told me I would find you here. The question is *what are you* doing here?" Charlie sent him a hurtful glare. He was safe, really safe. That meant he just didn't show, and that hurt. "You didn't show up. I was worried to death about you."

"Shit!" Ayden moved slowly toward her. He had no excuse. The renovations had consumed him, and by the time he realized what day it was, it was too late to get there. "I'm so sorry. I have been tied up with this house. I..."

"Forgot about me?" Charlie lowered her head.

"No, darlin', I didn't forget about you or the day. But it was too late for me to get out there." Ayden took her hands. He knew her feelings were hurt. Ten years he had never missed a meeting until now. He hadn't forgotten about her. He thought about calling; he could get the number if he really wanted it. But she hadn't called him either. "Look at me, Charlie."

Charlie lifted her head. At six foot tall plus her three-inch heels, she only had to glance upward to look him eye to eye. Her platinum blonde hair was loosely curled and disheveled. The wispy bangs almost hid her right eye. Charlie was enough to take a man's breath away. Her green eyes were big and sad looking at him. Her lips stilled in a natural pout. They were perfect, with a little space between them that made her look ready for kissing all the time.

"I'm sorry. I should have..."

"Oh Ayden!" Charlie threw herself into his arms and tears streamed. She didn't care that he was dirty and sweaty. She didn't care that four other men were watching. She sure as hell didn't care about crying. She had gone through hell to be there. The relief of seeing him, knowing he was all right, just took her over.

Ayden wasn't sure what to do. He pulled her away from his chest, practically peeling her off, of him. He had hugged her before. Once a year actually, but this time was different. This time she really affected him. He could feel her on his bare chest. He could smell her scent against the paint fumes and his own sweat. She smelled good. Too, damn good. Maybe it was because he was no longer on the job that she penetrated his senses. He wasn't sure, but he didn't like it. Or maybe he liked it too much.

"Darlin', you're ruinin' your clothes now. Tell me, what's wrong?" Ayden looked at her. She brushed her tears and straightened her dress. Not a streak of mascara, of course not. She had a waterproof face on.

"I can't." Charlie smiled a weak smile back trying to pull herself together. Ayden was her hero. She had loved him since the day she met him. She was nineteen, and he had captured her twin sister's killer. They met each year to celebrate. Each year in May, each year, but this one, and this year she needed him most. "Not in front of everyone."

It was then Ayden was aware that they had everyone's undivided attention. "Guys, do you mind?"

The four men collectively went about acting as if they hadn't been watching with jaws dropped. But really, this was the Wolf, and this woman named Charlie, Charlie Mann no less, had thrown herself on him. Everything about her name was masculine, but one look at Charlie told you she was all feminine curves and wonder. She had indicated a relationship, and she was jaw dropping hot. The real shocker was that Ayden had never mentioned her before, ever.

"Gentlemen, your wives are a few doors down. Please. Go to them." Ayden shot Joshua an evil glare. Joshua married Ayden's sister Evelyn last year. Ethan and Chase were his cousins, married to Grace and Megan also cousins. Poor Malcolm was dating Joshua's sister Stephanie. This was the first of an annual tradition they were trying to establish. Everyone together for the Fourth of July. Ayden's other sister Noel and her husband Tom would be arriving later that evening.

"All right, all right. No need to bite me on the ass, Wolf." Joshua winked at Ayden.

Indeed the Wolf was marking his territory though every other man in the room was unavailable. He also called her darlin'. He only called his sisters darlin'. None of the women would believe this. Charlie looked like an angel, impossible for any man to ignore completely.

They filed out the door. Ethan stopped, hauled the luggage into the house without a word, and then headed back out to join the guys.

Ayden could hear them whisper and laugh all the way down the porch. Evelyn no doubt would be on her way back up the street in minutes.

"Okay, Charlie, what's going on?" Ayden looked her over from head to toe. With those heels, she practically looked him eye to eye. Her long legs disappeared into the short red dress, and her breasts filled out the top. He had to remind himself that she was a case, not touchable.

"I'm...Well. I'm looking for a new start. I quit my job, gathered everything I thought was important, and came here." Charlie didn't want to tell him the whole truth. Not yet. She spoke very light but matter of fact about it all. The best way to avoid Ayden's interrogation would be to head it off in short quick bursts.

"What do you mean, Charlie?"

"I called the FBI, not the brightest idea by the way, because they sent agents out to question me. They got all freaked out because I knew anything about you. I gave them my information, and then a couple days later Tom called me." Charlie swallowed. "He said you moved to North Carolina. I went online and here you are. I found you."

There's a lot to be said about the security of a man's personal business when a showgirl from Las Vegas tracks a former FBI agent down on the internet. Ayden immediately began reevaluating his plan to open the bed and breakfast. Most likely, it was the business license that gave him away. Shit. Oh well, he wasn't ready to let people into his life anyway. He kept finding something in the house to change, prolonging the plan. He needed an excuse to be near Evelyn, to establish a relationship with his sister. The house was a bed and breakfast before; it sounded like a plan at the time.

"Ayden, I...I missed you. I look forward to seeing you every year." Charlie took a breath.

"Charlie, we have been over this. You're too young for me, darlin'. You were a child when I met you." Ayden thought of her as a child, but she had been working as a showgirl for three years by then, her and her twin sister both. Michael was the reason they met. Her murder brought them together.

She sure didn't seem too young for him now.

"Where were you when you were nineteen?" she snapped at him.

"That's not the point. The point is I have almost six years on you." Ayden knew she had a major case of hero worship. He had brought her sister's murderer to justice. It was his first case, and he caught the bad guy.

"Fine." Charlie waved a well-manicured hand in the air. Her eyes dropped to the floor, looking at his big feet in steel-toed work boots. She was tired and felt defeated. She could fight this fight another day. "Call me a cab. I'll go. Find somewhere else to stay. It's been a long day."

"Go? Ayden, she just got here." Evelyn stepped into the house and looked the woman up and down. Maybe she should go. The woman was stunning, like a model, perfect proportions everywhere. With the red dress clinging to her like a second skin, anyone could see that.

"She's not going anywhere." Ayden looked at Evelyn and laughed a defeated laugh. "The whole area is booked solid. There's nowhere else for her *to* go."

"And she is..." Evelyn smiled.

"Charlie, Charlie Mann." Charlie extended a hand toward the woman.

"Evelyn, Evelyn Young. I'm Ayden's sister." Evelyn shook her head. Now she understood what all the fuss was about. The men had come through the door like a bunch of wild dogs hooting and howling talking about little red riding hood. She came to see for herself. Sure enough, a woman was here for Ayden.

"The bounty hunter?" Charlie lit up. He had finally told her they were family. God a lot had happened in the last year. Charlie knew all about his family. Apparently, they had no idea who she was.

"Yeah, how did you...?"

"Darlin'..." Ayden wanted to stop this conversation right away. Charlie had a way of talking, or rather getting him to talk. She knew more about him than anyone, he realized in that moment.



“Yes?” They answered in unison then looked at each other.

“Are we related, too?” Evelyn looked her over closer now. She didn’t look like either of them, but she answered to darlin’. And Ayden only called women he cared for darlin’.

“No,” Charlie said blushing, and Ayden said distinctly at the same time.

This was exactly what he didn’t need in his life—confusion and reminders of the past. He wasn’t in the Navy anymore; he wasn’t in the FBI anymore. He was a regular guy trying to lead a regular life. Charlie was complicating that just by being here. She knew things that other people didn’t know about him. He knew the same things about her, but they didn’t *really* know each other.

“Oh. Well, anyways, you met my husband Joshua earlier.”

“Actually, I didn’t meet anyone. They left moments after I got here. Someone asked if I was red riding hood, but that was it.” Charlie shrugged.

“Black or brown hair?” Evelyn smiled though she already knew who it was.

“Black.”

“That was Joshua. The one with brown hair is Ethan; the blonde is Chase, and the guy who looks like Warrick from CSI, that’s Malcolm.” Evelyn shook her head. Ayden was practically blushing. That threw her for a loop. He loved his family; that he was open about. When it came to outsiders, Ayden was withdrawn and cautious. Charlie had him almost flustered. No one would believe it. “They have been working, and I use that term loosely, all afternoon.”

“We have been playing video games most of the afternoon, only working for a few hours when Charlie showed up.” Ayden smiled and nodded to Evelyn. Oh, Joshua would get it good now.

Nothing made him happier than getting Joshua in trouble. He didn’t have a brother, and he and Joshua were so much alike they could have been brothers. Besides, he needed to get her attention off Charlie, at least until he could figure out what to say. Of course, Evelyn didn’t wait to take charge.

“How long have you known him?” Evelyn could have sworn Ayden was now smiling. The big bad Wolf, a man even she once feared, seemed nervous in this woman’s presence. Evelyn turned it over in her mind, *who was this woman, and why had he never spoken of her before?*

“Almost eleven years.”

Evelyn choked though there was nothing in her throat. “The hell you say?”

“Evelyn, Charlie is a very old friend of mine. Please. We’ll be down in a bit, but I need to catch up with her first.” Ayden needed to get Evelyn out of there. He needed to talk to Charlie. He needed to sit down and plan. He hated surprises.

“I bet you do.” Evelyn looked at Ayden with a very suspicious eye. This didn’t seem right at all. Ayden had been trying to date unsuccessfully over the past year, now this bombshell drops in and says she has known him for eleven years. Evelyn felt an itch,

an old itch. She didn't like it. She closed the door behind her and planned to make a call if Charlie was still there come Monday.

Ayden walked over to Charlie's bags and picked them up, two large suitcases on wheels and two duffle bags. "Follow me."

"You don't have to do this. I mean I can find somewhere else to stay." Charlie followed him, thankful she was staying. She had no place else to go. She was running. Hopefully, she had run far enough.

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Ayden set the duffle bags on the guest bed. The house had five bedrooms, set up almost the same as Joshua and Evelyn's house but bigger. He had stocked them with furniture, good solid wood beds and dressers. He turned one into an office where his secrets remained safely locked. "You carried all this?"

"I set the duffle bags on the suitcases and rolled all that." Charlie pointed at the wheels.

"You pack everything you own?" Ayden looked around the room, anywhere but at her. Each bedroom had a different theme, thanks to Evelyn. This one was serenity. It was earthy and comfortable; he liked it. The main reason he put Charlie there though was because it was right across from his bedroom. He needed to keep tabs on her. Something wasn't right.

Charlie had come a long way to see him. He didn't know why. She'd told him years ago, she loved him, but Ayden knew that was just her grief talking. She had a lot of living to do then, and he was a green FBI agent eager to get promoted. He had no time for a woman. It was the same when he was in the Navy. He was a part of the SEAL team, always on an operation. No time for a woman then either. Actually, Ayden hadn't made time for a woman since high school. He had been with only a few women in the last fifteen years. He gulped hard at the realization. He was always on the move, always on a case. He was so busy he never realized the time had passed him by so quickly.

"Yes." Charlie looked around the room. The queen size bed looked like an antique. The dresser and bed were made of cherry wood and aged. A nice sitting chair next to the window gave a welcome and peaceful feel to it.

She knew he was opening a bed and breakfast. That's what the business license was for. As far as she could tell, he should be open already. He'd had the license for six months. Charlie thought it was a stretch for him to let so many strangers into his life. Maybe he was still debating it. Or maybe he had met someone.

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Ayden had been dating a year now, and it wasn't going well. He considered himself a nice guy, but he didn't like the dating scene. Women seemed too fast. They

were ready to jump into bed on the first date. That just wasn't his way. He had to know a woman before he could sleep with her. His past could catch up to him any day now, apparently today, since Charlie was in his house. He wasn't afraid to let Charlie stay here. It seemed almost natural for her to be in his home. An old memory from hiding her surfaced.

A serial killer had murdered her sister and other girls. They thought the killer was after Charlie next. Ayden broke several rules to keep her safe. He kept her at his apartment. Charlie knew him all right. She had nothing else to do but sift through his stuff and watch television. He never touched her sexually though he was rarely home to indulge the thought. When it was all over, she made him promise to come see her.

"You wearin' that to dinner, darlin'?" Ayden looked her over again.

Damn he had to stop looking at her like this. He knew she was beautiful by any standard. The twins had just accepted a contract for a well-known lingerie company when their lives were turned upside down. Of course, the contract was cancelled when Michael was murdered. It wouldn't have been smart to put Charlie in the public eye. It was a shame though. She could have been living a good life, her and Michael both. Instead, she was stuck in Vegas, on the stage, night after night performing.

"What are *you* wearing?"

"Different pair of shorts, T-shirt, some flip-flops." Ayden was sure she wasn't expecting that, but it was July and the coast was hot and humid this time of year. He had long hung up his suits and ties. Now he only wore them when he taught classes at the college for their Basic Law Enforcement Training known as BLET classes, or when the FBI called him to give a class for them. "Those kids will be all over you."

"Kids?" Charlie gulped. She was a showgirl. She was single; not many people she knew had kids. They were all young single women like her. A couple may have been married or dating, but many were too caught up in the career to have a life much less children.

"Three of 'em." Ayden nodded.

"Are you taking a shower?" Charlie let her eyes wander over him freely now. His feet were in the work boots, big socks pushed down above them, a pair of green cargo shorts and no shirt. Charlie looked him over slowly, and it felt like she stroked him with her fingers everywhere her eyes traveled. Ayden was grateful she was at his chest by the time his shorts had tented. He had to get out of there and fast. What was happening to him? Charlie needed his friendship and his protection, he was sure of it. Not his wandering eyes, definitely not his wandering hands.

"Yeah. I'll meet you downstairs in a few." Ayden hurried out of the room.

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Fifteen minutes later, he had talked himself down from the ledge of lust he had been standing on. Cold water poured over him, and he scrubbed his hands over his face.

After another five minutes, he was ready. He had showered and was now prepared to take Charlie down the street to meet the family. He would never hear the end of it. No amount of planning would be good enough, and now there wasn't time.

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Charlie sat on the couch in a pair of cutoff jean shorts and a T-shirt. She owned flip-flops, too. Looking at the men earlier, they were all tall, at least her height, but Evelyn was shorter. Tall for a girl but not tall like Charlie and that had always been a problem in her youth. She didn't want to draw too much attention, but she always did.

"You ready?" Ayden asked. When she stood, he wanted to die. The shorts weren't real short, but Charlie had legs so long that anything looked short on her. The T-shirt clung to her like a second skin showing generous breasts and a flat stomach. This was going to be one hell of a family dinner.

"Yes." She walked to him. "I'm a little nervous. I didn't plan on meeting so many people."

"It'll be fine." Ayden pressed his hand in the small of her back to lead her out the door. Charlie stumbled and then caught herself. "You okay?"

"Fine, just caught my shoe." Just caught her breath was more like it. Having him touch her always threw her off balance.

They walked side by side to the house a block down. Charlie felt more nervous by the step. "So, why did you choose to live here?"

"Evelyn."

"So how long have you been here?"

"Almost a year now."

"Your house is beautiful." Charlie was really running out of things to say, yet she had so much she wanted to tell him.

"Charlie." Ayden stood outside the front door. "I'll follow whatever you tell them about how we know each other. If you don't want to tell them..."

"No, I'm fine about that. It's just...women tend not to like me."

"What's not to like?" Ayden smiled. He knew she was afraid of crowds, knew this would be a challenge for her, so he would stay next to her, protect her, even though she wouldn't need protection from his family. "You'll do fine."

He opened the front door and walked in. Charlie stepped in behind him, and he could have sworn time stopped. Everyone froze and looked at them, even the kids.

"Holy cow, you're as tall as my daddy!" Chase Jr. ran right up to meet her. "My name's Chase. What's your name?"

"Charlie."

"Charlie? That's a boy's name, lady." Gray was now at his cousin's side.

“Yes, it is. My dad named us. He thought me and my twin sister were boys because he showed up to the hospital late and saw twin boys in the nursery.” Charlie smiled down at the little monsters. Leave it to kids to tell the truth.

“What’s your sister’s name?” Chase asked.

“Michael.”

“Is she here, too?” Gray looked around to see if anyone else was coming.

“No.” Charlie swallowed hard.

“What is this? You guys with the census bureau?” Ayden looked down at the boys.

“No,” they answered in unison.

“You’re very pretty,” Gray informed her.

“Gray Alexander Young, are you flirting with another woman in front of me?” Evelyn teased the toddler who, up until Charlie walked in, was in love with Evelyn.

“She is.” He shrugged and went about his business.

“He is his father’s child.” Grace walked to the door to meet the woman. “I’m Grace. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Come on in.”

“Thanks. I’m a little nervous,” Charlie admitted. Grace was about the same size as Evelyn. Both had red hair, but Grace’s was bright and curly, wild. Evelyn had dark red hair, pulled into a ponytail. “I’m not used to being in large crowds.”

“We’re harmless.” Grace smiled then looked at the three-year-old boys who now followed behind Charlie. “Most of us anyways.” To the boys, she said, “You guys go play out back with your dads and uncles.”

“Are you coming, Ayden?” Chase Jr. looked up at him.

“No. I’ll be out in a while.” Ayden stood by Charlie. Evelyn circled around him.

“Ayden, go play out back with the boys. You’ll be the only man in here.” Evelyn came around and pushed him with both hands toward the back door. “Scoot.”

“I’ll be just outside if you need me...”

“For what?” Evelyn cut him off and shook her head. “Get!”

“Men!” Evelyn turned back to Charlie. The poor woman looked like a deer trapped in headlights watching Ayden go.

“Are you okay, Charlie?” Evelyn looked at her with a concerned eye.

“I, uh, yeah, I’m just not used to crowds.” Charlie felt like she would hyperventilate. Being on stage in front of hundreds of people was one thing. Actually talking to people, that was another matter entirely. She never went out. The world was a dangerous place. She’d learnt that the hard way. She did all her shopping online. Getting to Ayden had been one of the most challenging events of her life. Now she had to be in a crowd and talk to people.

“Honey, this isn’t a crowd,” Grace added with a warm smile. “We’re all family.”

“Oh.” Charlie swallowed. It sure seemed like a crowd to her.

“Hi, I’m Stephanie, Joshua’s sister.” Stephanie Young entered the room, and Charlie felt her whole body relax. Stephanie was almost as tall as she was, blonde and

beautiful. “Megan’s on her way in to meet you, too. We’re all excited to meet Ayden’s woman.”

“Oh, well you may be disappointed then.” Charlie looked away. “He’s not interested in me. Not like that.”

“That’s absurd.” Megan bounced in the room. Her brown curls were pulled back in a loose ponytail. “Chase couldn’t stop talking about you. Now that I see you, I know why. I’m Megan, Grace’s cousin and Chase’s wife. There are a lot of us, I know.”

“Uh.” Charlie was feeling cornered. The four women were all looking at her, and apparently, they thought she and Ayden were an item. She wished it, but it was far from true. They were friendly and expectant. “No.”

“Well why not?” Evelyn took a seat at the kitchen table and motioned for everyone else to do the same. They followed, with all eyes on Charlie as she sat down.

“You’d have to ask Ayden.” Charlie shrugged. “I love the man. I do. But he’s never indicated we could be anything more than friends.”

“Have you told him this?” Grace asked.

“Yes. Years ago.”

A collective gasp followed.

“What did he say?” Megan looked scandalized.

“That I was too young for him.” Charlie didn’t care. It was the truth, and she didn’t hide her feelings for Ayden. He rejected them flat out. Besides, they would know now that she had eyes for Ayden only and none of their men.

“How old are you?” Stephanie asked.

“Thirty.”

“You don’t look a day over twenty-one.” Megan looked at the woman with a new appreciation. Charlie was thirty with a face like an angel and a body of a supermodel.

“Guess that doesn’t help my case.”

“How old is Ayden, Evelyn?” Grace asked.

“Thirty-six,” Charlie and Evelyn both answered.

“He looks younger than that.” Stephanie nodded.

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The women continued the question and answer session inside while the men circled Ayden outside.

“Who is she?” Joshua asked.

“Charlie is an old friend,” Ayden answered.

“No shit, spill it, Wolf. A woman like that doesn’t just fall from the sky on your doorstep without wings attached.” Joshua challenged him now.

“She is really hot,” Chase agreed.

“I second that motion.” Malcolm nodded.

“She looks like she stepped out of a *Victoria Secret* catalogue. *I know*, Grace has lots of them, and I have painted several of the women in them.” Ethan looked up at the

back door to make sure they weren't going to get caught talking about this woman, or they would all be on the porch tonight.

"She's a Vegas showgirl. Her sister was my first real case, killed by a serial killer. I kept her safe, found the man who did it, and Charlie has hero worship. A bad case of it." Ayden huffed. They were still looking at him for more information. "Yes, she is amazingly beautiful, but she is also smart and quirky and afraid of crowds. Don't hover over her, don't stare at her, and I'll break you in half if any of you touch her."

"Malcolm is the only one not married here, Wolf, calm down." Ethan laughed. Oh Charlie was more than just a friend all right. Ayden all but howled at them. If he was this defensive among friends and family, he would be lethal to the general population of men in the area.

"I'm not on the make though. I have Stephanie. She's more than enough for me." Malcolm held his hands up.

"What the hell does that mean?" Joshua growled at Malcolm.

"It means she is the love of my life, and I plan to marry her." Malcolm wasn't as big as Joshua, and he didn't want to fight with him. Stephanie's big brother needed to realize she was a grown woman, not a child.

"Congratulations, man." Chase put a solid hand on Malcolm's shoulder.

"She better be wearing white down that aisle." Joshua growled.

"Look who's talking." Ayden now growled at Joshua. "You thoroughly debauched my little sister."

"Oh contraire, your little sister *thoroughly* debauched me." Joshua smiled.

He and Ayden were on the ground wrestling in a heartbeat.

"Gray, go get your momma." Ethan pointed his son to the door. Chase Jr. and Gray headed for the house, full of excitement.

Ethan tried to break them up but got elbowed and started wrestling himself. Chase tried to get Ethan, and before they knew it, everyone had a hold of everyone, and it looked like a football pile up. By that time, Ayden was on the bottom, followed by Ethan, Joshua, Malcolm then Chase. The women headed outside, and Grace headed right for the pile.

"Up." She grabbed Chase and Malcolm by the ear. They moved. "Next two?"

Ethan and Joshua scrambled before she could get a hold of them, but the Wolf was catching his breath. Grace bent down and stared him right in the eye.

"Ayden Wolf."

"Grace?" Ayden smiled as he pushed up to face her. Grace wasn't mean like Evelyn, but she was known for pinching and grabbing an earlobe at an angle that no man liked. Evelyn had taught her well.

"You should be ashamed of yourself." Grace lifted her eyebrow and pinched him on the arm. "Ashamed."

Ayden sat there confused for a long second. How did she know he started it? Or did she assume that because he was on the bottom of the pile? He took one look around

the yard. All of the men were either, being scolded, hugged, or pampered by their women, except him. Then he looked to the porch. There was Charlie, and damned if the sun hadn't cast a halo around her pale blonde head.

Charlie was really confused. She stepped outside and saw a pile up of pinching, biting, and twisting grown men acting like children. On the bottom of the pile was Ayden. She had never really seen him playful before. They all had marks from each other or from Grace. Charlie looked around and then looked at Ayden. She wasn't sure if she should go to him or just wait to see if he came to her. The women of the house seemed to have faith that if she gave it time and a concentrated effort she could indeed lure Ayden out of his den and capture her Wolf. Charlie hoped they were right.

Ayden pushed to his feet, dusted himself off, and headed toward the porch. Charlie started walking toward him. She met him halfway in the yard.

"What were you guys doing out here?" Charlie searched his eyes. He seemed more playful and free than she had ever remembered seeing him. She liked him this way.

"Just screwing around. Happens a lot when we get together. Too much testosterone in one small yard." Ayden winked. "What were you gals doin' in there?"

"Talking about you." Charlie smiled.

"That can't be good." Ayden huffed.

"Depends on how you look at it. I thought it was very good." Charlie reached up and touched the scar on his eye. "How did this happen?"

"Joshua." Ayden was surprised that she noticed. "I gave him that scar on his lip though. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried. I know if you wanted to you could kick all their asses." Charlie dropped her hand. She realized he was the only man there without a woman. What if he had a girlfriend? Maybe that's what kept him from showing up this year. "Are you always the odd man out at these things, or is there another woman in your life? I don't want to mess up your plans for this week."

"I'm usually the odd man out. I'm used to it." Ayden was used to it. He didn't like it anymore, but Charlie was still too young. She could find plenty of men her age that would have more in common with her. Hell he didn't know what they had in common other than her sister's death.

"Well, you're not alone tonight." Charlie took a deep breath and turned to walk back inside following the rest of the women.

Ayden swallowed that comment hard, digesting the meanings. He wasn't alone tonight. Charlie was here, and it had been so long, too long since, he had the attention of a woman. All the men were in agreement that he was nuts for not snatching her up. Maybe he was.

The life he had lived was dangerous. His father died because of a dangerous job. He wouldn't put a wife and kids through all that, but now he had nothing but time.



Maybe he would spend some of it getting to know her. Give her a chance. Maybe, but first he had to figure out why she was here in the first place.

“You missed a perfect chance to kiss her.” Malcolm put a hand on Ayden’s shoulder. “I know Stephanie wants me to kiss her if she puts her hands on my face. Unless I have food on my face. That happened once.”

“Thanks for the advice.” Ayden snickered. Great now the kid was giving the old man advice. Malcolm was all of twenty-five years old. “I’d keep that out of Joshua’s ear shot.”

“I’m not afraid of the Big Dog. I know he can whip my ass, but I’m not backing down when it comes to Stephanie.” Malcolm shrugged. “She’s waiting on his seal of approval. I know she is.”

“You need to talk to Evelyn.” Ayden turned to the young man. “She’s your only hope on that.”

“She hates men,” Malcolm reminded him.

“No. She hates most men. She has softened a lot in the last year. Joshua can whip your ass, but Evelyn can whip us all.” Ayden nodded and headed inside. Charlie was spending too much time with the women. Not enough time with him.

## CHAPTER 2

Ayden walked into the kitchen to find Charlie squatting down talking to the three-year-olds. They were smiling and nodding at her. Even at that age, they knew she was beautiful. Her mother was a Swedish immigrant. Charlie and Michael were born in California. Her father worked at a casino, and her mother was a showgirl until she got pregnant with the twins. They did the best they could for the girls. Their mother became a dance instructor after they were born. The girls had natural talent, and they were performing at a young age. At seventeen their parents died in a car accident on the way back to Vegas from California. The girls had each other, but then Charlie lost Michael. All she had now was Ayden. He was fully aware of that.

The two boys laughed hysterically.

"What's so funny?" Ayden asked the boys as he stepped closer to Charlie. She stood and watched their faces.

"Charlie," they said together.

"What?" Ayden was really curious about what had them so enthralled now.

"Tell him. Tell him." They jumped up and down.

"Tell me what?"

"It's a joke," Chase Jr. said.

"Tell him, tell him," Gray chanted.

"Tell me." Ayden smiled. These kids could be handy.

"Lettuce, tomato, and pickle were walking down the street. Tomato was far behind. Pickle turned around and said..." She stomped. "Ketchup."

The boys were laughing again. Ayden was sure they didn't really get it, but it was a joke, and they wanted to laugh. It was so corny he had to laugh, too.

"I didn't know you were a comedian." Ayden looked her over. She was trying hard to fit in, he could tell.

"It's the only G-rated joke I know." She shrugged with a smile.

"Ayden, will you take this out for me and tell the rest of them to get the tables set up?" Evelyn handed him a plate with hamburgers and hot dogs ready to be grilled.

"Charlie, you wanna come out back with me?" Ayden wanted to talk to her.

"No," Evelyn answered for her. "She was just about to tell us what life is like in Vegas."

Ayden growled and shook his head. Evelyn had him pegged. He wanted to get Charlie away from the women, before they poisoned her mind against him. He could only imagine what they would tell her. His past three dates had been a disaster. Apparently, he didn't know much about how to treat a modern woman.

Charlie felt trapped. She wanted to go with Ayden but was stuck with Evelyn. His little sister was determined to know as much about her as possible. Charlie understood

that, but Evelyn seemed a little dangerous. No one bossed Ayden around, but Evelyn pushed him out the door and gave him orders all the time. It was weird.

Once Ayden was out of earshot with the two three-year-olds behind him Evelyn turned to Charlie. "He doesn't want you talking to us."

"What do you mean?" Charlie watched him walk out the back door. The boys were trailing behind him, trying to walk like him. It made her wonder if he wanted to be a father some day.

"I'm sure he's worried about what we will tell you, or what you will tell us. Ayden is a private guy." Evelyn lifted a shoulder. "But no worries, we won't tell him we know."

"As a matter of fact I think we should do our best to help." Megan chimed in. "Do you have to be back in Vegas soon?"

"No. I'm never going back to Vegas." Charlie shook her head. "If Ayden doesn't want me, I'll just go."

"Go where?" Grace asked.

"Leave the country. Go to Sweden. See if I can track down any distant family there." Charlie hated the thought of leaving, hated being rejected by Ayden. If he didn't want her, she would leave the country and never look back.

"God, that sounds so...desperate." Stephanie propped her head on her fists. "I understand how you feel though."

Everyone shifted to look at Stephanie. She was leaning on the counter with her elbows propped up and her chin on her fists.

"Malcolm asked me to marry him," Stephanie confessed.

"Oh my god!" Megan beamed and ran to her pulling her in a big bear hug.

"Wait." Stephanie stepped back. "I haven't told him yes yet."

"Why?" Grace entered the kitchen with Logan on her hip.

"Joshua says I'm too young. He argues with Malcolm all the time over me. I don't know. You know I'm still a virgin. What if he marries me and then I'm no good?" Stephanie looked at the floor. "I'm nervous about it all."

"That's ridiculous." Megan pulled at Stephanie's chin. "*You* decide if you want to marry him. And don't worry about the sex, honey. He won't be disappointed."

"Don't worry about your brother, Stephanie. He likes Malcolm, a lot." Evelyn smiled. She would have to rein Joshua in. He had no idea his little sister was waiting on his seal of approval. He had no idea Malcolm had asked her to marry him. He knew he planned to soon, so he had been giving the kid hell.

"If you're worried about bedroom skills, you should be worried about him disappointing you, not the other way around. You've done other stuff, right?" Grace had grown into a very sexual woman. Her first experiences were horrid. Since she met Ethan she had become the authority, and as a writer she outlined the act in detail.

"Grace!" Stephanie blushed. "No."

"How can you date a guy for two years and not explore him? You must have discipline made of...I don't know what." Megan was shocked.

“What about you, Charlie? You’ve known Ayden for ten years?” Stephanie looked to the other woman who was quietly sitting at the kitchen table now taking in the conversation.

“I...I...Uh.” Charlie wanted to disappear.

“You never?” Stephanie looked at her with relief and wide eyes.

“I’m not a virgin. I’ve been with men. Two, but not since I met Ayden. And even when I slept in his bed with him, he never touched me. I’ve never even kissed him on the lips.” Charlie swallowed hard.

“Well I feel so much better.” Evelyn let out a big sigh.

“Why?” Megan looked at her.

“I thought I was alone. I was thirty and a virgin. Of course, I hated men till I met Joshua, so I thought that was it. But apparently it’s about waiting for the right one. If Malcolm is that man, honey, jump on him. Marry him.” Evelyn smiled as Stephanie relaxed and blushed.

“And test the waters,” Grace cautioned.

“Yeah, you definitely have to fool around a little,” Megan agreed.

“But what if I can’t stop? I mean when I kiss him I get so tempted to do more that I pull away. He has the patience of a saint. He has told me all along that he will wait, promised to wait until we were married.” Stephanie blushed again. “I believe he can; he doesn’t even try. I don’t know that I can.”

“You have to be in control.” Evelyn nodded. “Your body and your rules, he will play it your way.”

Charlie thought about it. While listening to the women talking so openly about sex, she felt like she was in a dressing room again. God she hadn’t had sex in a long time. In her mind, no man could hold a candle to Ayden, and she hadn’t wanted another man since she met him. Her thoughts filled with the various fantasies she had come up with over the years. Then there he was, walking into the kitchen coming right for her.

“All right women, we are ready when you are.” Ayden looked at Charlie. She seemed flushed, her cheeks pink. Like a woman ready to be taken to bed. Damn he had to stop thinking like that.

“Charlie, will you hold Logan for me?” Grace passed her the baby so quickly Charlie barely had a chance to hold him, but she did. She held him straight out at arms length. She stood up and looked at Ayden with desperate eyes.

“Here.” Ayden adjusted the tike for her. “Just hang on. He likes to jump and scoot.”

“I don’t think I’m the best person to hold him,” Charlie whispered. She had never held a baby before. It seemed ridiculous, she knew that, but no one close to her had ever had a child. She cooed at babies in strollers when tourists took the backstage tour at the show, but she had never held a child.

“I’ll stay close by.” Ayden held one hand to the baby’s back as he stood in front of her.

Charlie looked at Logan who smiled and drooled at her. He grabbed a hold of her shirt and didn't let go. He smelled so good, like a baby should smell. His curly brown hair looked like a Mohawk.

After a few moments, it seemed natural to have him there on her hip. She relaxed and cooed at him making him squirm with laughter. He was a cute little thing. He looked like Gray, and Gray looked like his daddy. Charlie wondered if Ayden's babies would look like him.

"So what did they say about me?" Ayden watched her coo at the baby, and it tugged at his heart. He planned for a family someday. It was about time to start following through on those plans, but first he had to find a woman, a woman that would want kids. At least two, maybe even three. He couldn't imagine Charlie giving up her perfect body, and the way she held Logan at first proved she didn't take too well to kids. But she had stopped to play with the boys, and she seemed fine with the baby on her hip now. Ayden shook it off. Those thoughts were getting him nowhere. He needed to find out what she was doing here, not find out if he could knock her up.

Charlie shrugged. "Not much really. We talked about you briefly, then about Malcolm, then about sex."

Ayden choked on his next words. He cleared his throat and started again.

"You were talking to them about sex?" Ayden kicked up a half smile. It was forced. He wasn't sure he wanted to know about Charlie's sex life. Surely, she could have any man she wanted. He just didn't want to know she had chosen to be with any other man.

"No. Can't talk about something you don't have. I listened." Charlie was satisfied with his look of shock and started toward the backyard where everyone was.

Ayden followed moments later and sat next to her on the bench. She still held Logan. Grace had offered to take him back now that everyone was eating, but Charlie wasn't hungry. She had stopped to eat on her way. She played with the baby instead.

The summer sun began to set, and the three-year-olds were getting cranky. The meal had been cleaned up and the tables removed. Stephanie and Malcolm lay in the hammock while Charlie sat in the rocking chair watching with a longing she couldn't deny. Malcolm was so in love with the girl. His face lit up just looking at her. His blue eyes sparkled when he said her name.

Malcolm had explained over dinner that he was a real mutt. His mother was a proud black woman and his father a brave Irish man. Malcolm said that approaching Stephanie's dad was easy compared to what his dad had to go through with his grandfather. Especially since his grandfather was a minister, and his dad's boss at the time. He had the whole table laughing and crying before it was all said and done.

Oh to have a man so willing to walk through fire to be with a woman. Charlie sighed. Ayden always had a special look for her. A gentle expression she only saw when he talked to her. Of course, she rarely saw him around other people though. Maybe it

wasn't special; maybe she just wanted it to be. The six months she lived in his apartment in hiding, she only met Tom, another FBI agent.

Ayden was never easy back then. Years later he was smoking, growing harder in his features each year. It made her worry even more. She hadn't seen him light up once, and she wondered if he had finally quit. He started as a cover for a case, but the next year he was still smoking. So much had changed in this past year for him. She wanted to hear all about it.

"You ready to get out of here?" Ayden stood in the doorway looking out the screen at her.

"Yes." Charlie stood. "Bye Stephanie."

"Will you be back tomorrow?" Stephanie started to rise against Malcolm's protesting arms.

"We'll be back tomorrow." Ayden opened the door.

Charlie waved and shrugged. She guessed they would be returning since he said so. It made her feel good deep down that he said *we*, like she belonged with him.

"I thought you said Tom and Noel would be here tonight?" Charlie asked as they walked back up the street to Ayden's house.

"Apparently the baby's sick. They're still trying to make it this weekend for the fourth. It was Noel's idea." Ayden snickered. "Evelyn has a house full of guests because of it. She likes her in-laws, don't get me wrong, but that house is packed right now."

"Why doesn't someone stay with you?"

"Tom and Noel were staying with me."

"What about Stephanie and Malcolm?"

"Oh no. Joshua would throw a fit. In his house, he can keep tabs on those two. Malcolm's on the couch." Ayden opened the screen door and unlocked the front door letting them inside.

"They have been dating two years, and he hasn't touched her. I think he would be safe to stay with her." Charlie sounded annoyed by the whole thing, poor Stephanie.

"You like her?"

"She reminds me of Michael," Charlie whispered that truth.

Ayden took a deep breath and wrapped his arms around her as he turned. He knew she would be sobbing soon. Without the high heels, his lips pressed naturally to her forehead. At six four he wasn't a small man by any measure, but Charlie had a way of humbling him. She made him feel inadequate, like he wouldn't be enough. Maybe because he didn't get to Michael in time, he couldn't get to her in time. Then he found Charlie, and he vowed to keep her safe; he promised Michael. Her last request was for him to keep Charlie safe. His promise, the last words she heard. Ayden Wolf always kept a promise.

Charlie cried freely. She hadn't cried over Michael in a few years, but Stephanie was so much like her sister, wide eyed and innocent. Charlie always had to look out for her. Explain the world to her. Ayden knew that; he knew all her secrets, her fears. Well,

almost all of them. The safety of his arms was almost as overwhelming as her sister's memory. Charlie remembered how he held her all those years ago. She had to get it together. She had to stop crying. As long as Ayden saw her as a broken soul, he would never see her as a real woman. She took several deep breaths and pulled herself together.

"I need a shower." Charlie pushed out of his arms gently. "It's so humid around here my hair will be sticking out all over the place from now on."

He tucked a soft tendril behind her ear and pushed the long soft bangs to the side. "Showers at the end of the hall. You want me to wait up for you?"

"No, I'll be fine. It's been a long day. I should probably get some sleep." Charlie drew another deep breath. Only this time it shuddered because of his touch not her tears. He was so attentive. Why no woman had snatched him out from under her was beyond comprehension.

"Long flight?" Ayden pressed his forehead to hers. He couldn't resist touching her. He had held her before, but this felt different.

"No, I took a bus." Charlie reluctantly pulled away from his gaze and started away.

"Bus?" Ayden didn't like that one bit. Charlie was afraid of people, of crowds and strangers. He was amazed she would go to an airport and take a long flight. The fact that she rode a bus didn't add up.

"Not all the way. I sold my car, picked up another one, then dumped it and rode the bus the rest of the way." Charlie didn't give him the chance to probe farther. She headed up the steps quickly. It was only a matter of time before he stewed in that revelation and came after her.

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She was right. The knock on the bathroom door sounded and she waited. The door opened, and she knew he was there.

"Charlie, what the hell is going on?" Ayden stood in the bathroom looking at the shower curtain waiting for a reply. He looked around, and then his thoughts began drifting from anger to inquiry. On the floor were her clothes. The jean shorts, a thong, a pretty silk bra and the T-shirt. It was then he fully realized she was naked in there. He was so steamed that she hadn't told him why she had tracked him down in the first place he just barged in.

"I told you. I need a new start." Charlie's body was on full alert. He was right on the other side of the curtain. She was naked. God she wished he would draw the curtain and step in the shower with her.

But she knew better.

"Charlie." Ayden wanted it to sound angry, but it sounded weak and strangled, lustful.

The way he said her name spread like fire from her head to her toes. She took a deep breath and drew the curtain back peeking out at him. "What?"

"Nothing." Ayden had to get out of the bathroom. He could see her face. She was looking at him, and he had his fingers on her pajamas. He would have to get answers tomorrow. "Good night, darlin'."

"Good night, Ayden." Charlie sighed. He was stroking her pajamas when she looked out at him. Then he ran, the big bad Wolf. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way around?

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Ayden hit the shower again. Another cold one was in order. He hit the CD player and listened to the King. "Devil in Disguise" filled the bathroom, and Ayden thought how appropriate the song was for the moment. Indeed Charlie looked, walked, and talked like an angel. However, she was hiding something. He knew her well enough to know that. He hoped that none of the scenarios he had running through his mind were true. A woman only ran if she was afraid. That meant there would be a man involved. The thought of a man hurting Charlie made his body itch with anger.

Ten minutes later, he was in the hall. Her door was closed. He opened it without knocking. She was asleep, her blonde hair spiraling around her head. Her lips parted. Damn if she didn't look like she wanted to be kissed even in her sleep. Satisfied that she was safe he returned to his own bed, where he tossed and turned all night. He was dreaming of Charlie one minute, kissing her, touching her. Then he began dreaming of losing her, finding her like he found Michael, like he found the others.

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Down the street, another man tossed and turned. Malcolm finally left the couch and opted for the recliner. It was then he heard Evelyn.

"What the hell are you doing down here?" Evelyn seemed shocked to find him in the living room. Stephanie and Malcolm had arrived this morning with Megan and Chase.

"Joshua said I had to sleep on the couch." Malcolm gave her a look of duh!

"Joshua said." Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Two things. First, you tell anyone where my snacks are I will break your legs."

Evelyn pointed to the top of the entertainment center. Malcolm cautiously walked over and reached up grabbing the bag on top of the console. Cautiously he handed the cookies to Evelyn who despite her size looked every bit as menacing as her husband at the moment.



“Thank you.” She opened the bag. Chewing on a chocolate chip cookie, she spoke. “Now. You go sleep with Stephanie. I’ll handle Joshua. He likes you. He will kick his own ass if he finds out she is waiting on him.”

“You sure about that?” Malcolm was a little frightened, both by the prospect of getting drug out of bed in the morning, and by the wild look in Evelyn’s eyes as she devoured the cookies. “You okay, E?”

“Put these back up there, and remember, tell no one you saw this.” Evelyn nodded and handed him the bag of cookies. He placed them back on top of the entertainment center, and she followed him up the stairs to the end of the hall. He paused but she pushed him, hard. “Go.”

“Okay.” Malcolm opened the door and stepped inside. Ayden was probably right Evelyn was tougher than all the men.

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Evelyn crawled back in bed with Joshua. He was awake, and she was about to put the Big Dog on a leash.

“Did he just go in my sister’s room?” Joshua growled.

“I told him to.” Evelyn pulled him back down as he started to sit up. “Now you listen to me, Joshua Daniel Young. Your sister is waiting on you to give a seal of approval, so she can tell that poor guy yes. He asked her to marry him, and she hasn’t replied because she thinks you don’t like him.”

“I like him. I respect the hell out of the kid, but she’s my little sister.” Joshua growled.

“No, honey, she is a woman. Remember when we were going to go to New York and I asked if I could sleep with you?”

“Yeah.” Joshua grumbled.

“Don’t turn into your mother, honey.” Evelyn eased the pain of those words by punctuating them with a cookie flavored kiss.

When Joshua came up for air, he had forgotten what he was upset about to begin with. Evelyn had a way of putting things in perspective.

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Across the hall, Malcolm slid next to Stephanie under the blankets. Pulling her close to him and nuzzling into the back of her neck.

“What are you doing?” Stephanie was alarmed. Joshua would kill him.

“Sleeping with you.” Malcolm could feel her heart racing. “Don’t worry, I have permission.”

Stephanie rolled to face him. “You do?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t disrespect your brother’s rules. It’s his house.” Malcolm’s own heart was racing now. God he hoped Evelyn was right. Even their dad had told him numerous times that Joshua would come around. He was more like his controlling mother than he would ever admit. Once he realized it, he would let go and accept his little sister was a grown up.

“Do you love me, Malcolm?”

“You know I do.”

“So if I said I was ready you would...”

“Hold up, ready for what? Are you saying yes?” Malcolm smiled. She was saying yes. He could howl at the moon right now, jump out of bed, grab her ring and wake the house.

“Oh, I mean ready, ready.” Stephanie felt his whole body tighten at that.

It took a few long minutes to process. Ready, the word just pounded in his head.

“No. We can’t do that. I mean we can, but you have waited, *we* have waited. Not till we get married, Stephanie. I promised you I would wait. It was important to you when we met, important the past two years. When I take you, it will be on our bed, in our place. Not here.” Malcolm had to use every moral fiber in his body to restrain.

It had been two years, and Stephanie ran hot and cold all the time. He knew how important it was to her to wait till she was married. Joshua approved of him, not of him deflowering his little sister in his house.

“So I can’t touch you at all?” Stephanie had decided earlier that she indeed wanted to get a feel of him before marriage.

“I’m going back to the couch.” Malcolm strangled on his words, kissed her on her forehead, and darted for the living room.

The couch was uncomfortable. It hurt his back, but it was safe. Now, instead of fearing Joshua, he had Stephanie to fear. The woman was after him. He was raised in a very strict home, with high morals, and one of the things he liked most about Stephanie was that she held to her values. Though it was tempting, he would hold out, or they would elope this week.

### CHAPTER 3

Up the street at Ayden's house, Charlie slept like an angel. The birds were singing when she opened her eyes. She was in a safe place, Ayden's home. He was across the hall in his own room. That was the only thing she dared complain about. She should be in bed with him. In time...she was sure of it. She stretched and grabbed her yoga mat from one of the suitcases. Ayden was probably already awake; she could smell the coffee.

Ayden awoke in a sweat, angry and snarling ready to attack. He looked at the clock, eight a.m. He felt like he just closed his eyes and already he had to get up and face the day.

He opened the bedroom door and smelled the coffee. That was usual since he had the timer set. The smell that came from Charlie's room was new, faint. The door was open and she was gone. Ayden had never been much of a morning person. It took two hours and three cups of coffee before he felt right. He grumpily tromped down the stairs expecting to see her at the kitchen table. He hoped she made breakfast. He was surely in no mood to cook. Instead, he saw her in the living room. The couch was pushed back and she was on her toes bent over at a very suggestive angle with her fine ass in the air and her arms stretched down palms flat on the floor.

Evelyn had tried to convince him to do yoga at her studio. He thought it was a load of crap, just stretching. He took one lesson to shut her up. He was glad he did now because he knew Charlie was in a down dog and damn if it didn't hit every canine bone in his body.

He continued to watch her as she lowered her hips to the floor and pushed up arching her back. He could have stood there all morning just watching her. Already his bad mood was beginning to lift. Her body was so long, lean and beautiful. Maybe there was something to all that stretching after all. He preferred to run, or hit the gym, or do good old-fashioned work. That left his muscles tight and bunched, and though he stretched, he wouldn't say he was flexible. Not like that.

Charlie heard a knock on the door and stood. Ayden crossed the floor, and she realized he was there. Was he watching her? She had decided last night to talk to him today. To tell him that she was going to stay here in North Carolina until she knew for sure he didn't want her. She wanted to talk before breakfast, before his family was around them again.

Ayden opened the door with a scowl on his face. It was Ethan.

"You guys coming down for breakfast?" Ethan smiled and wiggled his eyebrows at Ayden. He turned his gaze to Charlie. Then he blushed. "Didn't mean to interrupt anything."

"You didn't." Ayden realized that he was in a pair of boxers and nothing more. Charlie was in a pair of shorts that looked like underwear more than shorts, hell they

may have been underwear for all he knew, and a little spaghetti strapped shirt. “We’ll be down in a few.”

“Take your time.” Ethan winked and turned before Ayden could shut the door in his face.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think.” Ayden closed his eyes, knowing the impression Ethan had gotten.

“About what?” Charlie was drinking in the sight of him. His body glistened like he was wet. His hair clung to his forehead. He looked like he just tumbled out of bed with a woman. Except he was still hard, tenting his loose cotton boxers, dangerously close to slipping out of them.

“You’re not dressed, and I opened the door.” Ayden really needed his coffee. Charlie had him all messed up this morning.

“Ayden, you’re the one almost exposed.” Charlie smiled. Here he was trying to be noble. She pulled her gaze away from his crotch and settled her eyes on his face.

Ayden looked down and grimaced. Shit. He tried to play it off. “It’s morning.”

“Can I make you some coffee? You look like you just ran a mile. Are you feeling okay?” Charlie pushed the couch back in place and rolled up her yoga mat. She swallowed hard. She was always thinking of him this way, but getting to see him live and in person with bed rumpled hair and fresh morning wood, he might just steal her breath.

“Fine.” Ayden headed to the coffee pot and poured his own coffee.

“You want to know why I’m here, right?” Charlie placed the mat under her arm. He was cranky and agitated. This was the Ayden she knew.

“Yes.” Ayden took a sip of the coffee. It tasted good, refreshed his brain a moment. He wasn’t going to act embarrassed though he was. Charlie apparently had some new effect on him, and he couldn’t control it. Well, she always had this effect on him, but now he couldn’t control it.

“I’m here to start a new life. I left Vegas and I left without a trace. I am never going back there. I’m here, and I plan to stay here until I figure out a few things.”

He was listening.

“I don’t have to stay here, in this house with you if that makes you uncomfortable, but I will be here in the area for now.” Charlie wasn’t lying, but she didn’t want to freak him out with another profession of love, or worse.

She told him once years ago, and he was a gentleman about ripping her heart out. Every year he came back to see her and never mentioned anyone else. She knew it would be hard for a woman to understand him. He was a complicated man. He took his time, always processing. He still used some southern words like darlin’, but he could change his accent without notice. His hair had been in several styles over the years, long when he worked narcotics, short for white collar crimes. He had so many faces, but so did she.

Grace suggested she let him get comfortable around her again. Megan suggested she show him exactly what he had been missing. Evelyn said she needed to take control.

Stephanie didn't say anything. Of course neither did Charlie. She didn't see how she was going to get control with Ayden. He was always in control, except this morning.

"You can stay here, you know that. What brought this on?" Ayden was relaxing into the role of investigator again. It was strange having her around like this. They were familiar with each other but not intimate. They had shared intimate moments in the past, like when she cried herself to sleep in his arms, but they had never kissed or fooled around. That made him think. "Man troubles?"

"In a manner of speaking I guess you can say that's true." Charlie waited while he formulated his next question. His body was starting to relax, and she knew he was gaining control. Then she said it was man trouble and his left bicep flexed.

"Who? Did he hurt you?" Ayden was cool and even in his tone, but he could feel his muscles twitching, itching for a fight.

"No, just broke my heart a little." Charlie left on that note, leaving him to think about that one. Maybe he could figure out it was him.

In her room, she dressed for the day. She had just slipped her feet in the sandals when he knocked on her door.

"It's open." She stood in the mirror applying mascara.

"I called and told Evelyn we would be going out for breakfast instead." Ayden leaned in the doorway. She smelled like vanilla, like cookies almost.

"Why?" Charlie turned to face him. He was showered, shaved, and dressed.

"I thought we could catch up. I missed our annual talk remember?" Ayden missed more than the talk.

He wasn't prepared to admit that yet. He didn't know how the day got away from him. He enjoyed seeing her every year. This year he missed it, and this year she needed him. Charlie never talked about a man in her life though he was sure in the course of ten years she had to have seen someone. Apparently, that bastard broke her heart. Ayden wished he could kick the guy in the ass. Couldn't he see how special she was?

"There isn't much to talk about." Charlie shrugged. "At least on my end. I've been doing the same thing as last year. Same show, same apartment, same life. That's why I had to change. I've been dancing all my life, performing on stage. I want to be real again, a real woman, not a fantasy."

"You are a real woman, Charlie. This guy, the one who broke your heart, he was a fool, darlin'. You deserve a good man, one that can give you everything you want in life."

"I think so, too." She smiled and looked him over from head to toe. She knew she deserved him. He, however, didn't know he deserved her. Ayden was always too humble, not realizing his power over women, over her. Maybe that meant she had a power over him. Maybe Evelyn was right. "So, you don't mind me staying here a couple weeks?"

Ayden shrugged. "Don't see why not."

"Well, I figure I have thirty days. If I can't accomplish my goal in thirty days, I'm leaving." Thirty days should be enough time for a man who has known her more than ten years to make a decision.

“What’s your goal, darlin’? Maybe I can help.” Ayden decided she may just need a new start. Hell he did. When he was seventeen, his mother signed the release for him to join the Navy right out of high school. At nineteen, he was creeping into foreign countries. At twenty-five, he was tracking down a serial killer, and the last ten years he had been dealing with the horrors of humanity. He knew about needing a fresh start.

Charlie blinked at him a couple times trying to gather her thoughts. She didn’t want to come right out and say it. Luckily, a knock sounded on the door downstairs, and she didn’t have to explain anything for now.

“I’ll be downstairs, darlin’. Take your time.” Ayden turned and headed down the hall. He wanted to fight away the smile on his face. Thirty days. She would be here a month. He could really get to know her in that time. Maybe they could find a start together.

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Ayden opened the door and found Stephanie arms crossed foot tapping.

“Hey there.” He gave her a quizzical look.

“Is Charlie here?” Stephanie entered the room looking around for her. “I need to talk to her. I can’t talk to them, you know. But I think I can talk to her.”

“She’s upstairs. Can you talk to me?” Ayden didn’t like the desperate look on Stephanie’s face, like she was frustrated, maybe even mad.

“Ha!” Stephanie glared at him. “You wanna explain to me why my fiancé hauled ass out of my bed last night when I offered him sex?”

“Charlie!” Ayden called for her. “Go on up, honey.”

Ayden knew breakfast was out of the question now. “Tell her I went to Evelyn’s to eat. You guys are welcome to whatever I got here. Take your time.”

“Thanks.” Stephanie looked defeated. She headed up the stairs to talk to the one person who wasn’t related to her. The only other person being rejected by the man she loved. If Charlie had been dealing with Ayden for years, surely she had a plan. Maybe Stephanie could use that plan on Malcolm now.

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Ayden approached the house down the street to find Malcolm on the porch stairs head in his hands. When he looked up, Ayden knew immediately the man had not slept a wink. “Rough night?”

“Damn couch.” Malcolm groaned straightening his back. “I could have slept in the bed, man. I could have just snuggled in and held her, but oh no. No. She decides last night was *the* night. After two years. Her brother finally trusts me one inch, and that girl tries to run me a mile.”

Ayden laid a hand on his shoulder, nodded, and then sat next to Malcolm on the stairs. “Women!”

“I didn’t know what to do. If I stayed, she would regret it. So I left, and now she’s pissed.” Malcolm put his face back in his hands. “Joshua has been trying to catch me all morning. He knew Evelyn said I could stay with her, but I was on the couch when the boys came down this morning. Little monsters put cheerios in my nose.”

“Kids tend to take advantage like that.” Ayden laughed. “So did she say yes, or did she just try to get in your pants?”

“Pants!”

“I don’t know why you’re complaining. I’d love to have a woman trying to bed me down.”

“You do.”

“Who?” Ayden looked seriously at the kid.

“Charlie. Stephanie explained in great detail how the woman has been waiting ten years just to touch you.” Malcolm stood. “She came here for you.”

“Well I’ll be damned.” Ayden scrubbed his own face now. Shit. “She still thinks she’s in love with me?”

“Yep.” Malcolm was ready to go crawl in Stephanie’s bed and take a mid morning nap. “So, how do you feel now?”

“Pretty fucked up.” Ayden laughed. He did feel all messed up inside now. He had definitely noticed Charlie this time around. Hell he always noticed Charlie, but he would never hurt her. She didn’t know him. She knew the FBI guy, but he could change that and hold her at bay until he knew if she was safe to touch. Damn, he was the fool, and she let him believe it was someone else. Or maybe it was someone else and they were both fools. That he had to find out.

“There you go. It feels great to be wanted. God, after two years I’m chomping at the bit to touch her. But, I know how important it is to her to wait till she’s married.” Malcolm ground his teeth. “I’m a fire fighter, but Stephanie seems a little too hot to hold right now. She may just consume me. Make me forget all the promises I’ve made the last two years. Not a good way to start a marriage.”

“I agree. A man has nothing if he doesn’t have his word.” Ayden respected the kid. Malcolm was a good man. “But that said. You don’t have to do it all to get the job done.”

Ayden winked and smacked him on the back as he entered the house. His stomach was growling, his eyes were dry from lack of sleep, and Charlie wanted him. She was probably formulating a plan. He’d wait and see what she came up with. One good thing about being from the south, he had patience. A lot of it. His step dad was a real good man and taught Ayden how important patience was when he didn’t force a relationship with him. The man wasn’t his father. He wasn’t Noel’s father, but he loved them both as though he had planted both their seeds. He’d have to give him a call today.

“Is Malcolm out there?” Joshua asked as Ayden entered.

“Take it easy on the kid,” Ayden said as he nodded.

Joshua stepped out on the porch. Reaching his arms up, he grabbed the roof and stretched. Malcolm was pacing the porch of all places, for the whole world to see.

“So what’s going on?” Joshua didn’t look at him.

“What do you mean?” Malcolm gave an exasperated sigh and sat in the rocker. He didn’t want to discuss this with her brother.

“Well last night Evelyn said you had asked her to marry you. I would guess she said yes. Evelyn also let me know you would be staying in the guest room from now on, but this morning the vandals were decorating you.” Joshua smiled. He wasn’t like his mother. He could accept Stephanie was grown. He just liked messing with Malcolm. This morning, however, the kid looked beat, and his sister was pissed. He felt a twinge of guilt for that. “I’ll tell Stephanie that she has my blessing. I hope this morning had nothing to do with me.”

“No. It has to do with me. I don’t feel comfortable talking to you about it.” Malcolm dropped his head back on the rocker, closed his eyes, and smiled. He understood why Joshua gave him a hard time; his little sister was sixteen, and he terrorized any guys that came near her. Part of why he respected Joshua so much was because of how he treated women. He knew that a lot of Stephanie’s temper tantrums and spoiled ways came from her brother. Joshua let the girl get away with murder and dared any man to question her about it. Malcolm was the same with Raven, and his little sister Raven was a little diva indeed.

“Why not? I mean, I have been married to a moody difficult woman for a year now, I may have some insight for you.” Joshua couldn’t imagine much more than a lovers’ quarrel.

“You want to hear it, Big Dog?” Malcolm had been waiting two years to get the best of Joshua, just unsettle him. Joshua had joked, played and tortured him the last two years because of Stephanie. She did no wrong in Joshua’s eyes. Let’s see how Miss Innocent stacked up now.

“Shoot.” Joshua stretched again.

“She wanted me to *sleep* with her last night.” Malcolm opened one eye to watch his reaction.

“So you slept on the couch instead?” Joshua hung his head. Damn he was a good man, stronger than Joshua was at that age. “And now she feels rejected.”

“Bingo.”

“You may not believe this, but I understand completely. Evelyn all but tied my ass up and took advantage of me. What’s your plan?” Joshua half turned to see him.

“Still working on it.” Malcolm closed the eye.

“Take my advice, and get some rest. You’re going to need it.” Joshua headed back inside. He knew that Malcolm respected his little sister and that Stephanie would probably wear him down eventually, just like Evelyn had. They were getting married



anyways. What difference did it make in the long run? Except that, he wanted to be the first to have children.

Malcolm dozed off on the porch with the sun warming his face. Joshua was right. He was going to need rest. Tonight he would sleep in that bed and still keep his promise. Ayden was right also. Maybe if he just took care of her she would let things be.

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Up the street at Ayden's house, Charlie and Stephanie plotted and schemed at his kitchen table. Charlie was so happy to have her around. They bonded instantly. She found a part of herself she was missing. Michael was her world; they shared everything. Ayden was the only other person she trusted. Now Stephanie was there, so genuine and open. Stephanie needed someone to talk to who wasn't related to her. Charlie just needed someone other than Ayden. They fit together perfectly.

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It was almost noon, when the blondes decided to show up. Grace, Evelyn, and Megan were out back playing with the kids, and the men were in the kitchen at the table playing cards.

When Stephanie and Charlie stepped in, the men stopped, looked over to them, and waited. They had been gone all morning and giggling all the way in the door. Every man there knew they were up to something.

"What?" Stephanie put her hands on her hips defiantly.

Joshua excused himself and towered over his little sister. "We need to talk. Come on."

Stephanie had seen that look directed at other people but never at her. She gulped hard and followed him. Malcolm was at the table, and she could have sworn he was smiling. Joshua should be threatening him, not her.

"Pick up Joshua's hand, Charlie. Join us," Chase called.

"I'm no good at cards." Charlie looked at Ayden, but he ignored her.

"Then I insist you pick up his hand." Ethan stood and pulled out Joshua's chair for her. It sat her right across from Ayden.

"Ayden?"

Charlie was looking at him; he could feel it. She could have burned a hole through him she was staring so hard, but he was on to her game now and though she was right, he would have rejected her flat out before. He wasn't sure he wanted to reject her flat out now. That complicated a few things. He wasn't sure how to deal with it all. He still wasn't sure she was being totally honest with him. He looked up at her. After a moment of being ensnared in her gaze, he winked at her. That seemed to do it.

"What are we playing?" Charlie asked.

“Poker,” Malcolm responded. “Don’t be afraid to throw that money in. Most of it was mine anyways.”

“Okay.” Charlie shrugged. If they really wanted her to take their money, she would.

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Joshua had marched his sister up the stairs and down the hall to the room she was staying in. “What the hell is going on with you?”

“Joshua?”

“Don’t Joshua me, young lady. You didn’t tell me he asked you to marry him. You sure didn’t tell me you wanted him to stay with you. You used to tell me everything. Now dad knows before I do.” Joshua had his hands on his hips, and his green eyes were directed pointedly at her.

“I stopped telling you because any time someone argued with me you would kick their ass. I love him. I thought you were serious about us being too young, and about him sleeping on the couch, so did he. Malcolm won’t touch me because of you.”

Stephanie sat on the bed and crossed her arms looking up at Joshua with a scowl on her face. Her green eyes reflected back at him. That should settle him. He hated for her to be upset.

Joshua looked at his little sister and realized she had been playing him all her life. Now she was pouting and looking mad. Well he was mad. Joshua launched into his speech.

“Bullshit, he won’t touch you because of you, and because he’s a good man. I wish I had an ounce of his morals at that age, and I’m glad as hell you found someone like him. You’re no walk in the park kid. And that’s okay. You’re my sister. I love you. I respect your decisions, but you aren’t going to use me to chase him away. He’s too close, and you, young lady, are running. Now that you have my blessing, you’re scared. Don’t expect me to do anything to him. You want to chase him off? You do it on your own.” Joshua stalked out of the room.

Stephanie sat there with her mouth open and her eyes wide. She had always used him to intimidate boyfriends. It was easy because he enjoyed the fight. He protected his sister. It wasn’t until she got older he realized she used him as a defense. Their mother was a real controlling bitch most of their lives. Only in the past year, had she come around and treated them like her children and not like her property. Stephanie feared intimacy where Joshua searched for it. He realized that now. She wanted to be treated like a grown up. Well he just kicked her out of the nest. Fly, little bird, fly.

Stephanie sat there in shock. Joshua had never yelled at her before. She had done some pretty bad things over the years, but he always took her side, right or wrong. Now he was on Malcolm’s side. Never in a million years did she see that coming. He was her back up, her last line of defense. Malcolm wasn’t kidding, Joshua approved.

Now her heart was pumping. Now she really had to decide. She loved Malcolm, she knew that. But what if she wasn't good enough for him? What if he changed his mind? What if she changed ten years from now, like her mother did? Their family watched her go from loving to cold, only in the last year had she warmed up again. Stephanie dropped to the bed. Maybe she just needed a nap. She hadn't slept at all last night.

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Joshua tromped loudly down the stairs. When he reached the kitchen, he looked at Charlie who had lost most of his winnings. Malcolm had won most of them back. "Your woman's upstairs. You may want to go talk to her."

Joshua knew Malcolm just reclaimed all the winnings he had lost. Fair enough, he had cleared the air with Stephanie, so it was worth it. "Here."

Joshua took his hand and settled in next to Ayden. "Now that I'm back where I started, let's play some cards."

Ethan and Chase grumbled. Ayden tossed his hand in. "I'm out."

"Me too." Ethan pushed back.

"Coming dear," Chase called to no one in particular and headed for the back door.

"Come on guys!" Joshua laughed. "Pussies!"

Ayden spit the soda he was drinking through his nose. Ethan turned and Chase stopped mid step to hear what came next. Joshua never disrespected women, and Charlie was still there.

"Actually the only one here with a pussy is still in, Big Dog." Charlie blinked at him innocently. "That's what they call you right? So tell me are *you* in, or are you afraid of a little cat fight?"

"My apologies. I let that slip. I didn't mean to..."

"Are you in or out?" Charlie had been playing them, losing money at first. She was from Vegas for crying out loud. Like these guys could beat her at poker. Ayden knew it, but this dog, as they called him, was about to learn a new trick.

"Out." Joshua's face was red from embarrassment and guilt.

"Pussy," Charlie challenged him.

"Excuse me?" Joshua looked at Ayden.

"Why are you looking at him? I'm the one talking to you."

"It's all you, Big Dog." Ayden pushed his seat back for the show. Ethan and Chase came back to the table to watch also.

"All right. I'm in." Joshua knew in that instant he was dead. Charlie had him, and Ayden knew it. He wasn't going to drop her challenge. Maybe she wasn't as good as she thought she was. He was the best.

It didn't take long before Charlie had all of his money. She kept the same poker face the whole time. Evelyn and the others had come inside to watch the show as well. When he lost his last dollar, the women all cheered.

Charlie looked at Ayden, and he smiled a full smile at her and winked.

"Evelyn, come hold me. Charlie just whipped my ass." Joshua feigned a tear.

"Oh, you poor baby." Evelyn crawled into his lap and held him close. Then she smiled at Charlie with a devious wink.

Charlie felt good. She wasn't nervous or afraid here. She was happy. They were a family, and they accepted her. It felt so good to be there. She wished they didn't have to go back after the weekend. She really wished she could crawl into Ayden's lap like that and celebrate with him.

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Malcolm had slipped into bed next to Stephanie. She was asleep, and he was exhausted himself. It had been a few hours when the celebration noises downstairs woke him. His eyes opened to see Stephanie staring back at him.

"Do I get a ring in all this?" Stephanie smiled. His blue eyes sparkled. His full lips lifted into a real smile.

"It's in my suitcase."

"Well can I have it?" Stephanie shoved him playfully.

"In a minute. First, I have to make something clear." Malcolm wavered on his own resolve, but he had to be the strong one. He was the man after all.

"Go on."

"We can't have sex until we get married. I didn't promise you to wait until you decided it was okay. I promised I would wait till we were married." Malcolm watched her lip pout. It felt good to be wanted, really wanted. "But, now we are both clear on that. We can do other things till then."

"What other things?" Stephanie felt her heart race. She hadn't done other things with anyone. To say the physical part of a romance wasn't what had her scared the most right now would be a lie. She thought about it constantly, but he had experience; she didn't.

"I haven't decided yet, but you'll be happy. I hope." Malcolm was sure he could make her happy. He had to. He wanted to make her happy for the rest of her life.

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Downstairs Charlie realized Stephanie and Malcolm were still missing. Maybe Stephanie had put her plan into action already. Smart girl. That made her think of Ayden and her own plans. She ran her gaze over him. He was holding Logan, tossing him slightly in the air and bringing him back down. The kid was laughing and giggling.

Then he threw up.

Ayden was lucky it was on the down. It only got on his shirt.

“Grace.” Ayden laughed. “Logan, I don’t think you’re getting that scholarship into the space program after all.”

Charlie laughed. He had such an easy way with the kids. Of course, a little baby vomit wasn’t offensive to Ayden. In his job, he had worse spilled or thrown on him. The thought of that made her glad he was no longer working for the FBI. She knew how valuable he was to people like her, people who needed him. At the same time, she knew if he were still in that life, he would never have settled down in this town. He would still be smoking, and he wouldn’t be playing with babies.

“I’m going to head back up to the house and change.” Ayden announced to no one in particular, but Charlie stood and followed him.

“He got you pretty good, huh?” Charlie was ready to get him alone. One second, one good, opportunity. That was all she needed.

“Yeah. I knew better though.” Ayden pulled his shirt over his head as they entered the house. “I need to clean this up.”

Charlie went to the sink and wet a washcloth from the drawer.

When he came out of the laundry room, she was there, in the hall waiting for him. Ayden stood frozen for a moment. The woman had a definite look in her eye. Not one he could recall seeing before. She placed the warm cloth on his shoulder and began to gently wipe.

“Charlie?” Ayden felt his breath catch and his pants tighten.

“You’re very tense, Ayden. You should let me take care of that for you.” Charlie didn’t look him in the eye, didn’t look at his face at all. She focused on the washcloth and his chest beneath it.

“What did you have in mind, darlin’?” *Okay, this is it. She’s making a move.*

“I don’t know. A massage maybe?” Charlie pressed a little harder into his chest as she said it.

“I could go for that.” Ayden tipped her head up to look at him, with his fingers under her chin. *God he wanted to kiss her.* A massage would do for now. If this was her game, he was decidedly happy to let her play it, now curious as to how far she was willing to go.

Charlie expected more resistance, but since he said yes, she knew she had to act fast or he would change his mind and start thinking of her as a woman to protect and serve again. Hmm, that last part wasn’t so bad. She could go for Ayden playing her servant. Not that he would.

“Do you want to lie on the bed or on the floor?” She was trapped in those eyes. Her heart was beating so fast just because he was going to let her touch him. Not just hug him, no. She wanted him naked and ready. She would show him what he had been missing. Let him know exactly what he would miss out on if she had to leave.

“Floor?” *Bed, good grief she wasn’t cutting any corners.* He wasn’t going to be that easy.

“Okay. You lock the door. I’ll be right back.” Charlie wanted to steal a kiss, but she held back. She didn’t want to push it too fast.

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Ayden was pacing the living room floor when she returned with the little bottle in her hand, two sheets, and a small pillow.

“Ready?”

“Guess so.” Ayden shrugged. “What do you want me to do, sit here?”

“No.” Charlie spread out the first sheet between the couch and the entertainment center. She pushed the couch back a bit and handed Ayden the other sheet. “Take your clothes off and lie down.”

“Take my clothes off?” he strangled on the words.

“Yes. That’s what the sheet is for.” Charlie put a slow jazz CD in and turned the volume low. “You act like you’ve never had a massage before.”

“I haven’t.” Ayden felt a little nervous now. Hell it had been a long time since he was naked in front of a woman, and now Charlie wanted him stripped down and on the floor so she could touch him at her leisure. His eyes drifted over her standing at the surround sound system adjusting the music. *What the hell.*

Charlie heard him unzip his shorts, and that sound zipped right up her back like a lick. She had to maintain control. She couldn’t just sleep with Ayden. She loved him too much for that. She had to seduce him. Make him want her. She had to make him realize he could love her if he just gave it a chance. With a deep breath, she turned to face him.

He was sitting on the floor with the sheet across his lap only. “Front or back, darlin’?”

“Back” Charlie moved to where his head was and lifted it to her lap. “Close your eyes and relax.”

“I make no promises.” Ayden couldn’t relax. His head was now in her lap, and her fingers were slowly circling over his scalp. She smelled like cookies. He wanted to taste her and see if she tasted like cookies, too.

His eyes were closed, and she knew she was affecting him because his sheet was moving, rising. Charlie had to stay focused on his body though. Once her hands moved to his chest, she used a little of the vanilla scented oil to smooth the way. It was difficult to keep her eyes open and her breaths even. He felt so good to the touch.

She had been massaged several times, twice a month actually, so she knew how it felt to receive one. She was sure her massage therapist, an older Asian woman, didn’t get turned on from the job. Ayden was like warm steel. His muscles felt tight and hard as if they had never relaxed a day in his life. His body was getting hotter with every touch, but then so was hers.

Charlie rested his head on the pillow and moved to his side. Starting at his shoulder, she took her time. Each callused finger got her full attention and was pulled and stroked into submission. Ayden was dizzy from it all. He couldn't open his eyes if he wanted to. She moved to his thighs and seemed to pay no notice to the fact that he was pitching quite a tent with the sheet. That left him to wonder what her intentions were really about.

Did she want to seduce him, or really just treat him to some relaxation? Either way she was doing a good job at both. Tennessee farm boys didn't do yoga, and they didn't get massages. Charlie had him reevaluating both.

His thighs were impossible to penetrate. She worked them as much as she could, but they were like rocks. His calves weren't much better to loosen up. Once she was done with the other shoulder and arm, she took great pleasure in his expression, a lazy smile.

"Turn over," she whispered in his ear.

Ayden moaned. He actually moaned. He felt so relaxed, so good. He felt intoxicated by the vanilla, the music and Charlie's hands. Her breath was warm and tickling on his ear. He wanted to pull her right down on top of him and kiss her, but she said turn over, so he mustered enough strength to do just that.

Charlie repositioned herself at his head. Her knees were touching the tips of his shoulders. His head was face down on the pillow between her legs. She tightened her thighs and tried not to focus on the fact that he was that close to her.

It was too late. Her breath shuddered as she pressed her hands down his back. Her eyes closed, and she imagined the scene quite differently. Her hands moved in a rhythm, from his shoulders to his tailbone stroking, kneading, and gripping all the way. Charlie imagined he was kissing her thighs, slowly working up to her apex and dipping his tongue in.

Ayden was right between her thighs, and suddenly he could feel the heat from them, from her. He inhaled deeply and caught her scent. He could hear her breathing and felt the cool drop of something hit his back. Was she sweating? Was she turned on? God he was dizzy. The smell of cookies and Charlie combined to make him crazy. He wanted to just push her back and plant his face...

"Charlie?" Ayden's voice was muffled and strained.

"Yes?" It was more a gasp than a response.

"You okay up there, darlin'?" He had to smile. She was turned on and moving quickly away now that she was caught. His back was like mush, she had worked it so well.

"Fine," she said breathless. Charlie moved and couldn't help herself. She straddled him, sat right on his tight butt, and then began working the back of his thighs.

*Yep. She was hot all right.* And she just lit his ass on fire. Ayden wanted desperately to roll over and have her sit proper, but he knew that's what she was after. She wanted him to lose control. He wouldn't do it.

Charlie took less time on his legs and finally got control of herself. She wanted him to react to her, but she was near climax just touching him. He didn't take the bait and roll over, so she had to calm down. She was so wound up every part of his body seemed sensual. Now at his feet, she wanted to see his face again. "Turn over."

Ayden took a deep breath and rolled. He wasn't sure what to expect. If she moved on top of him, he'd give in. Hell he was ready to bust as it was.

Charlie watched him turn and his erection remained. He put his big hand over it pushing it down. Good thing because she couldn't take it much longer. She took one big foot in her hand and treated it to slow sensual circles from her thumbs. Ayden groaned.

"God, woman, where did you learn this?" He had to speak. Tell her how good he felt. No one had ever treated him to such pleasures in his life. When she said massage, he envisioned getting his shoulders rubbed. That in itself would have been a treat. Maybe she would let him return the favor. Soon.

"I get it done twice a month. Well I used to anyways." Charlie watched him lick his lips. She wanted to crawl right up and kiss them.

"Must be nice."

"It was nice. Did *you* like it?" Charlie pressed a little deeper in his foot with that question.

"Too much." Ayden was in a fog. A nice relaxing fog.

"Good." Charlie let out a long breath and stood. "All done, cowboy."

"No happy ending, huh?" Ayden wanted to stop the words, but he was too relaxed and his lips were loose.

"Not this time. We need to get back for dinner. I promised to make mashed potatoes tonight." Charlie began gathering her pillow and the bottle of oil. *Happy ending? Yes, she wanted to give him a happy ending, the fairy tale kind, with marriage and kids.* The fact that he was obviously not immune to her sexually gave her a new edge. One she planned to use to her full advantage. "I'm going to clean up. Be right back."

Ayden sat up and the room spun. He really was drunk. At least he felt drunk. He staggered on his own feet and pulled his shorts on. He headed upstairs to get another shirt. Charlie was coming out of her room at the same time he was coming out of his. Ayden couldn't help himself. He was still in her haze. He stepped up to her and kissed her on the cheek.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Charlie was flustered. If he hadn't taken her so off guard with that, she could have reacted. Instead she almost fell.

"Whoa, careful." Ayden grabbed her arm. "It amazes me how you managed to dance around on a slick stage in crazy high heels, yet you're always tripping up in regular shoes."

"Not always." Charlie caught her balance. *Just around you.*



Ayden headed back downstairs. They had scheduled a flag football game this afternoon, and now he wasn't sure he was up for it. All he could think about was Charlie, her hands pushing down his back and across his chest. Hell, even his legs and feet. He had no idea his feet were such a hot spot for erotic pleasure, but each stroke of her thumb across the sole sure ended in his groin.

## Chapter 4

“Wolf.” Ethan smacked Ayden on the shoulder. “Look alive.”

“Oh.” Ayden wasn’t into it. The touch football game was just getting him all tensed up again. His belly was full from dinner, and he could still smell Charlie all over him.

“Time out,” Grace called.

It was the boys against the girls.

Evelyn let Grace play while she and Joshua took care of Logan and kept the three-year-olds occupied.

In the men’s huddle, everyone was looking at Ayden.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Ethan asked.

“What?” Ayden barked.

“Dude, you are letting them right by. You don’t have to tackle them but damn, grab a flag.” Chase was in agreement with Ethan. The women were up by two touchdowns, and that sucked since they all used to play football in high school.

“I say we call in the Big Dog.” Malcolm nodded.

“Did you get laid this afternoon?” Ethan had been eyeballing Ayden, and Ayden was still dazed. He kept looking at the women’s huddle.

“Humm?” Ayden jerked his head back to their attention.

“Did you get laid this afternoon? You were gone forever, and now look at you. You’re the Wolf, cold, calculating. You’re known for striking fear into the hearts of men. I have to tell you my image of you is crashing.” Ethan laughed. Man, this guy had it bad, and he smelled like cookies, though they didn’t bring any cookies back.

“Not that it is any of your business but, no, I didn’t get laid.” Ayden snapped at him.

“A blow job then? Yeah, I get a little mellow, too,” Chase agreed.

“No. Shit.” He didn’t want them picturing Charlie in the act of anything. That was for his imagination only. “I took a nap. God, I couldn’t sleep last night, and I feel like hell now. You know what. I’m out.”

Ayden stalked away from them.

“Ayden, come back. We’re sorry,” Ethan called laughing. Damn they hit a nerve.

“I’m up!” Joshua jumped eagerly. He hated being on the sidelines. “You want to take Charlie out, baby, and play?”

“No, you guys go ahead. I think Logan’s almost asleep now.” Evelyn kissed him, and as Joshua headed out, she grabbed Ayden who was on the way in. “Hey, come talk to me.”

“You want to know where I was all afternoon, too?” Ayden snapped.

“You went home, probably took a nap, apparently not long enough though.” Evelyn drew her brows down and scowled at him.

“Sorry, the guys have been riding my ass over Charlie.” Ayden hugged her.

“No wonder.” Evelyn shook her head.

“No wonder what?”

“Ayden, are you aware that you smell like cookies?” Evelyn snickered.

“Shit.” Ayden didn’t shower. He just threw a shirt on. He couldn’t really smell the vanilla anymore, but he could still smell Charlie. Now he knew why.

“Come on.” Evelyn walked inside the house. Logan had finally drifted into a sound sleep. She placed him in the playpen, hovering over him, stroking his hair.

“You look comfortable like that, E.” Ayden sat on the couch. He was exhausted, and he didn’t know why. He hadn’t really done anything today. Except, think about Charlie.

“I don’t know. Do you think I will be a good mom, Ayden?” Evelyn sat next to her brother. Ayden knew her better than anyone other than Joshua. Though she’d only known he was her brother this past year. He had always been there in her life, in the shadows. He had saved her on more than one occasion. When she was a bounty hunter, having a family seemed surreal. It was a fantasy. Now she had plenty of family. Could she handle a family of her own?

“Of course you will. You’re smart, and you know the difference between hard work and hand outs. A kid would be lucky to have you.” Ayden pulled her in for a hug. “Joshua, on the other hand, let’s just say I hope you have sons.”

“I don’t know. I hope it’s a little girl.” Evelyn sighed. “Do you want kids, Ayden?”

“I do.”

“Do you like Charlie?” Evelyn liked her. Especially now that she knew how much she adored Ayden.

“Yeah, she’s a good kid.”

“No, Ayden. She is not a kid. Do you like her?” Evelyn sat up and looked at him pointedly.

“I don’t really know her. She doesn’t really know me.” Ayden shrugged. “Relationships take time.”

“Ten years?” Evelyn shook her head at him.

“That’s different. She was a case, Evelyn. I couldn’t get involved with her then. I’m not sure I can now.” Ayden heard the screen door open and knew the football game had ended. “Something is still a little off about her being here. Keep that to yourself please.”

Ayden pushed up and headed out the front door. He didn’t want to deal with anymore questions about Charlie tonight. He had to work in the morning.

Evelyn drew her brows together. That raised her instincts to a whole, new level. Ayden was worried about the woman, but he hadn’t contacted anyone to find out if something was going on. Not a problem. She would find out.

The crowd bustled into the kitchen and living room. Joshua sat his large body hot and sweaty, on Evelyn’s lap.

“Where’d the Wolf go?”

“Home. He’s tired and cranky. Besides he has class in the morning, remember?” Evelyn swatted him making him get up.

“Maybe you should go with him.” Joshua bit her nose and stood. Evelyn had been unusually moody the past few weeks. He hadn’t seen her this moody since they first met.

“Are you trying to hurt my feelings?” Evelyn felt a surge of emotions and a tear.

“No, baby, damn.” Joshua wasn’t expecting that. To avoid a scene, that would likely get his butt chewed by her later, he pulled her up and went to the porch. He hated having all these people in his house. No privacy. “What’s wrong, honey?”

“Nothing.” Evelyn sobbed on the porch. “I’m just tired.”

Frustrated beyond belief he sat in the rocker, pulled her in his lap, and held her. If he didn’t know any better, he would think she could be pregnant. They said it could take a year for the birth control shot to wear off. They were hoping to start trying next year. Evelyn wanted to get the studio up and running. Maybe she was just overwhelmed by the new business and all the guests.

Or maybe she was just tired since she was snoring in his lap now. She had been getting up in the middle of the night all week. He didn’t mind because she woke him up in various ways, but tonight he would ensure she went back to sleep instead.

Malcolm and Stephanie headed out with a blanket in hand.

“Where are you guys headed?” Joshua gave them a curious glance.

“To the beach, we can still catch the sunset.” Stephanie smiled and tugged Malcolm along.

“Be safe.” Joshua shook his head, poor guy.

The door opened again and Charlie stepped out.

“Is she okay?” Charlie looked at a sleeping Evelyn in his arms.

“Yeah, little cranky. Runs in the family.” Joshua lifted Evelyn. “Hold that door for me?”

“Where’s Ayden?”

“Went home, he has to work tomorrow. He didn’t tell you?” Joshua paused in the doorway. Charlie shook her head. “See, runs in the family.”

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Charlie closed the door behind him.

She felt alone and awkward walking up the street to Ayden’s house. Why didn’t he tell her he was leaving? She opened the door and locked it behind her. The large house was quiet. Too quiet, it needed more life inside it in her opinion. Maybe a couple kids running around like they were at Evelyn’s. Yes, she decided, that is what was missing. But did Ayden want a family? Would he want one with her?

She headed up the stairs and peaked in his room. He was asleep. Face down in the center of the bed butt naked. Snoring. He must have been tired. Or maybe he was leaving her an opportunity open?

Charlie stepped into the room and moved closer. *God he looked good in the buff.* He had a dimple on his right butt cheek. From his waist to mid thigh looked pale white and the rest of his body a golden tan. Smooth and sleek. His brown hair was wet leaving a water halo above it. He was definitely asleep.

Charlie pulled the blanket over him from both sides wrapping him like a burrito. Ayden felt her tuck him in and then kiss his cheek. He was asleep until he heard the door open, but he realized he was butt ass naked and was curious what she would do. It was a double-edged sword. He felt relief that she didn't try to handle him in his sleep and disappointment because she didn't try to handle him in his sleep. *Shit.* He needed to figure out what he wanted and soon.

Charlie headed to the shower and took a nice long cold one. Ayden was making her crazy. Too much of his body exposed in one day. She needed relief. He needed relief, but he wasn't ready to have sex with her. He wouldn't unless he really cared about her. She couldn't unless she was prepared to deal with the rejection that followed if she pushed him into it too soon. There had to be a way. Yes. There was a way. She turned the warm water on and relaxed. She could modify Stephanie's plan.

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At the beach, Stephanie and Malcolm enjoyed a nice sunset. They had driven Megan and Chase's minivan. It had tinted windows, so no one could see in, but they could see out. The tourists had packed in for the day, just a couple stragglers left behind. The parking lot was nearly empty. The minivan sat alone. When Malcolm unlocked the doors, he got in the front driver seat, but Stephanie got in the back. She began pulling and adjusting the seats creating a flat surface on one side.

"What are you doing?" Malcolm turned to see what she was up to.

"Making room."

"Room for what?" His blue eyes zeroed in on her. *Damn she had him trapped.*

"Us. Now get back here."

"This is a public place, Stephanie." Malcolm smiled. She was inventive, he had to give her that much.

"No one can see us. Leave the sun visor up and no one will know we are in here."

"What do you plan to do in here?" He looked around the area. He had to admit it was a little exciting. It was already dark, and the few tourists left on the beach were using flashlights to search for shells. The van wasn't under a light, so she was right. If they kept quiet, no one would know.

"I plan to let you make me happy."

She said that like he owed it to her. Like because he wasn't going to have sex with her until they got married that now he was obligated to do what she wanted. "How exactly do you plan for me to do that?"

"You tell me. You said you would. You won't in Joshua's house. Megan and Chase are cool. Megan gave me the idea, so get back here and do your thing." Stephanie's heart was galloping. She was ready to explode with nerves, and he wasn't making things easier. He had all the experience; he should be able to handle this easy. Instead, she felt like the one in control.

*Do his thing she said.* Problem was he didn't really know what to do. Malcolm had told her he had been with two women. It wasn't a total lie. They had done stuff to him, but he didn't have sex with either of them. His mother had taken him to a clinic at the age of sixteen and scared him to death with all the diseases. When his cousin got pregnant at fifteen, his parents made him become her Lamaze coach. He was only seventeen at the time.

After that, he was determined not to be some child's daddy unless it was with the woman he loved. Women had tried to get in his pants all his adult life. That's why he liked Stephanie so much. They had the same principles. She didn't pressure him, and he didn't pressure her. At least she hadn't until now.

"You know every woman is different, so if you know what you like, you have to tell me." Malcolm opened the driver side door and got out. He took three deep breaths before he opened the passenger door. He had heard all the stories at the firehouse; he could do this.

"Okay." Stephanie relaxed a little. At least he was in the back seat.

The tension was thick, and time seemed suspended for long seconds. Finally, she touched his face. She loved to touch his face. His soft blue eyes drew her in, but it was his lips that she loved the most. Pulling a thumb across his bottom lip always made his eyes close, but this time it made him moan.

Malcolm knew he was in for it. She kissed him hot and heavy. Not waiting to warm up at all. Stephanie just shoved her tongue in past his lips, assaulting him. She grabbed his hands and put them on her breasts. When he barely moved them, she gasped. If this was any indication, then maybe things would go better than he thought. He kissed her neck and collarbone as he pulled the tank top over her head. The swimsuit top left little to the imagination and too eagerly, it was gone.

"Kiss me." She moaned.

He went to take her lips, but she shook her head no.

"Here." Stephanie pulled him to her breast. The feel of his lips gently exploring her breasts made her squirm.

Malcolm realized that a woman's breasts could be more than just a treat to look at or touch. The way she squirmed and pulled at his back as he licked the rosebud nipples had him in a painful pleasure he never knew existed. Stephanie had straddled him, pushed him back and practically smothered him with her breasts.

“I have to adjust.” He strained to speak. If he didn’t get control soon, she would have both of them naked.

He flipped her over hitting his head on the roof. It wasn’t comfortable for either of them. Stephanie was almost his height and her long legs twined with his long legs in a battle to keep him pressed against her. He went back to her nipple with his mouth and teased the other with his thumb and index finger. She ground against him, lifting her hips as though her shorts and his didn’t exist between them.

“Touch me.” She gasped.

*Shit.* He was on the verge of losing it. His erection strained to the point of breaking, and now she wanted him to touch her. He would explode on contact, he knew it. He took a breath and slid his hand down over her silky soft hip and under the waistband of her shorts. Malcolm had no idea a woman could feel so hot and wet.

“You’re on fire.” He groaned into her neck.

“So put it out.” Stephanie slid her hand down and over his.

“Show me, Stephanie.” He could feel his own body ache for release. She had to be as wound up as he was. Having her touching him while he touched her, guiding him, was better than he ever imagined.

Stephanie guided his hand farther sliding in between the folds and pressed on his middle finger edging it in. It was a real turn on that he didn’t mind her touching herself. She knew how to get this job done, but it felt so much better, more intense with his hands instead of hers. She worked him into a rhythm and then finally when she couldn’t take it anymore pulled him to her clit and showed him how to circle it between his index and middle finger.

When his name escaped her lips, he thought for sure the police would be tearing the doors off the van at any moment. She screamed her release, and he couldn’t fight his own. His large hand cupped over her. She was still hot and wet and the muscles clenched and released. It was amazing. When she caught his lips with her own, he knew she was happy. Satisfied and full, so was he. This he could do. Obviously not in her brother’s house because that scream would get him killed. He liked it, a lot. And he wanted to hear it again and again.

“Did you come?” Stephanie asked him breathlessly.

“Yeah, I couldn’t help it.”

“Too bad.” She let out a long satisfied sigh.

“Why’s that?” He laughed. Was he supposed to hold back? He wasn’t made of steel.

“I wanted to touch you next.” Stephanie flashed her devious smile, and he nuzzled in next to her neck.

“You will be the death of me, woman.”

## Chapter 5

Charlie heard the alarm clock go off in Ayden's room. Elvis began singing then stopped. She had left the door open, so she could hear when he woke up. The coffee machine had already made the coffee. She wanted to have breakfast ready when he came downstairs. Apparently, he was already up when the alarm went off because he met her in the hall fully dressed.

"Mornin' darlin'." Ayden was surprised to see her stepping into the hall at the same time he did. The delight came from what she was wearing though. It was a pink gown that barely covered the matching pink underwear and barely hid the color of her nipples.

"You're dressed?"

"Have to work." Ayden wished he hadn't signed on for the class now, but he had and it was an all day affair. "Class starts at seven, ends at three. I should be home by four."

"I wanted to make you breakfast." Charlie pouted. He had an hour before it started, but unless she was mistaken, he probably had to go to Morehead City to teach it.

"Too early, I'll grab a cup of coffee." Ayden started but Charlie moved out ahead of him.

"Then I'll make your coffee." He wasn't getting out that door without her doing something, damn it!

"I drink it black, darlin'." Ayden smiled at her backside. The panties had ruffles on them. Charlie had the most masculine name, but she was all woman, so soft and feminine. He was surprised to hear her cursing yesterday at Joshua, but proud of her for standing up to him. She had guts. He always knew that.

In the kitchen, Charlie snatched up the thermos he had ready. How could she convince him he needed her if he always had everything ready? She poured the coffee and screwed on the lid. Ayden leaned on the counter and watched her with a lazy smile.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"Ayden, what I feel like is a free loader. I want to make sure you know how much it means to me that you're letting me stay here. I don't want you to think I'm trying to take advantage." *What I want is for you to fall in love with me and then fall into bed.*

"So you want to make sure you contribute?" Ayden had a great idea to keep her all to himself tonight and really get to talk to her. If she wanted to contribute, this would play right in.

"Yes." She nodded.

"Well, I'll probably be beat when I get home tonight. I usually eat with Joshua and Evelyn, but I don't feel up to the whole crowd." He looked her over slowly. She shivered a bit. The air was on, but it wasn't that cold. "You think we could have dinner here tonight? Alone?"



“Yes.” She smacked the counter and he jumped. She didn’t mean to have that reaction but alone was exactly how she wanted him tonight. This would be perfect.

“I’ll see you tonight then.” He could have walked around her, around the counter and out the door, but instead he felt like touching her, so he walked next to her. He pulled her in his arms and kissed her on the cheek. “Behave yourself today.”

With a swat to her butt, Ayden left Charlie staggering. She watched him walk out the door. He looked like the old Ayden this morning, black suit and blue tie. His hair combed and coffee in hand. He sure didn’t act like Ayden this morning. That kiss and the swat, she could still feel it. Not that it was hard. It was just a playful pat really, but the first of what she could only hope would be many to come.

In his truck, he fought the smile that had somehow become a new natural expression for him. He slept so good last night. His dreams filled with that massage, of crawling in between her legs and taking her. *God she smelled so good.* There was no good reason to ask her to sleep in his room, none. Last night he really wondered what it would feel like to have her in his arms this morning. He hit the button on the CD player and listened to the King singing “I’m all shook up.”

Charlie sat at the kitchen table. She had nine hours to get something together for tonight. It was early, but they had kids there. Surely, three-year-olds were awake at this hour. She headed upstairs and got dressed.

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Charlie knocked on the door and was greeted by Ethan, Gray, and Chase Jr. How Evelyn could deal with all these people in that house for a week was beyond comprehension. Then again, it would be nice to have family around, maybe for a weekend only though.

“Morning,” Ethan grumbled.

“Hi. Is Stephanie up?” Charlie was wide-awake and excited.

“Just me and the boys so far. Come on in.” Ethan grabbed the boys on the tops of their heads redirecting them to the table with their cereal. “Want some cereal?”

“No. Do you think anyone will be up soon? Evelyn, Grace, Megan?”

“Grace probably won’t be, but Megan might. Evelyn should be down any minute. Stephanie would sleep all day if we let her.” Ethan smiled. Charlie was dying to talk to someone, and he was all she had this morning. “You can talk to me, Charlie. I’m an artist. I deal with women all the time.”

“I don’t need help with a woman. But if I do, I’ll keep you in mind.” Charlie heard footsteps and eagerly awaited anyone other than a man. No such luck.

“Hey there, Ayden kick you out when he went to work?” Chase smiled.

“No. Is Megan up?” Charlie was ready to go shake one of these women awake.

“Yeah, but she takes a while to get dressed.” Chase shrugged. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Yes. I need a woman!”

“Well that explains why you’re attracted to the Wolf. He has such feminine qualities. Maybe it’s his walk or the way he drinks black coffee.” Joshua sashayed into the kitchen from the stairs. For a man of his size to sashay she had to laugh.

“I personally like the way he wears his hair.” Chase fluffed imaginary hair and batted his eyelashes at her rapidly.

“Oh no, it’s the way he kisses that just sets a girl on fire.” Ethan puckered up and made kissing noises. Then Joshua and Chase began making kissing faces and noises, too. Of course, Gray and Chase Jr. wanted to play.

“What the hell are you guys doing?” Evelyn stopped at the entranceway with her hands on her hips. Grace and Megan were right behind her, followed then by Stephanie and Malcolm.

The three grown men stopped prancing around and looked at the floor. The two little boys kept dancing and kissing air, hugging themselves.

“We’re uncle Ayden,” Gray said and made kissing noises.

“No, no, no,” Ethan clarified to the boys. “We’re making girl talk with Charlie. Girls like to talk about kissing.”

“You said he walks like this.” Chase Jr. demonstrated.

“And this.” Gray made blinking eyes.

Evelyn crossed her arms. If Ayden found out, three grown men would be getting their asses kicked tonight. “Boys. Don’t listen to your daddies or your uncle Joshua. Uncle Ayden doesn’t do any of those things.”

“We know,” Chase Jr. said. “He does this.”

Watching the little man stroll around, his chest puffed up and proud was cute.

“And this.” Gray leaned against the refrigerator and propped a leg back while crossing his arms, nodding as he looked around with a very serious face.

“Yeah, my daddy does this.” Chase Jr. made kissing faces. “To my mom all the time.”

“And my dad does this.” Gray pushed his hands through his hair several times mussing it up. “And my mom says...”

“Gray Alexander,” Grace interrupted. She would have to be more mindful of what she said from now on. She moved to get the little rogue quickly.

“Chase, daddy doesn’t make that face.” Chase looked down at his son who mirrored him exactly.

“Yes, you do,” the tike debated.

“Yes, you do,” Megan agreed and picked him up.

“So why were you guys making fun of Ayden, Joshua?” Evelyn had not let the toddlers, who obviously thought Ayden was just too cool; bail them out of this one.

“We weren’t. We were making fun of Charlie.” Joshua shrugged.

“Of me?” Charlie looked offended.

“Yeah, you only wanted to talk to the girls, so we were acting like the girls.” He dismissed it.

“Hold up, Big Dog” Evelyn grabbed him by his belt loop. “So then you were actually making fun of us?”

All eyes on Joshua he needed to bail himself out of this sinking ship quickly. “Why don’t you ladies go out for breakfast? We’ll keep the boys a while.”

“That’s a good idea.” Stephanie beamed. Her big brother and cousins were always goofing around. Joshua bailed her out all the time, so she could return the favor now.

“Yes.” Charlie smiled with relief. “I have a lot to talk about.”

“You’re off the hook for now, Young, but I got my eye on you.” Evelyn swatted his butt. She knew they were joking around, but Ayden liked Charlie and so did she. Therefore, she didn’t want the three stooges chasing her off. Not when Ayden really needed a woman in his life. Not when she could use someone with Charlie’s talents at her studio soon.

“Yes ma’am.” Joshua snapped to attention and saluted her.

“Let’s go before I hurt someone.” Evelyn headed for the door. Joshua snatched her up for a kiss, whispered in her ear, and then patted her on the butt when she smiled.

“Chase, do I get a kiss or what?” Megan looked up at him tapping her foot impatiently.

“Do I really make that face?” He looked down at her then off to his son who made it for him again. Megan stomped and he really made a face. He bent to kiss his little princess anyways, trying not to make any face.

Charlie took in each of the couples. It was Grace and Ethan who normally clung together longer than the others, but this morning it was Malcolm and Stephanie. The way he lingered at her lips with little kisses and the way, he brushed her hair back with his hand revealed a lot to Charlie. Stephanie indeed had made headway with her plan.

“Stephanie, give the guy some air.” Joshua growled at her.

“Oh.” She turned to see that everyone was watching them. Even Grace was ready to go, and normally she had to be physically pulled from Ethan.

“Yes, well. See ya.” She stole another kiss leaving him bewildered.

## Chapter 6

The women were all a buzz at breakfast. Charlie needed help making sure she had a special dinner prepared for Ayden tonight. They had everything all planned out in no time. Megan and Charlie were both dying to get Stephanie alone, so it was no problem when Evelyn and Grace were ready to go back. Grace and Evelyn went back to Evelyn's house to pick up the Christmas lights. Charlie, Megan, and Stephanie went to Ayden's house.

"So." Megan searched through the CD's in Charlie's case.

"It was different." Stephanie blushed. "Wonderful."

"Good for you." Charlie nodded. "Do you think this is over the top?"

"Oh honey, I think it is right on." Megan looked her up and down. The three were in Charlie's room deciding what she should wear.

"Wow!" Stephanie agreed. "If he doesn't notice you in that, he has to be dead."

"Okay." Charlie clapped. "So tell us."

Now that her outfit was out of the way, they could get the details of Stephanie's big night.

"It was weird at first because I expected him to want to do more or to want me to touch him, but he didn't." Stephanie took a long breath. "He said 'show me' and I thought I would just die. I mean it was like he was turned on by me touching myself. Only I was guiding him."

"Guys like to watch." Megan nodded. "I stripped for Chase once, but I ran into the damn dresser again, so I gave up on it."

"So did you touch him at all?" Charlie was interested to know. Malcolm seemed pretty smitten this morning.

"Not really. Just kissed him, I mean he kinda came anyways." Stephanie was blushing again.

"And you didn't touch him?" Megan asked.

"Nope. Guess guys really like it." Stephanie sighed. "I know I wouldn't mind watching him. It's fascinating don't you think?"

"It's less fascinating over time but right now, yes. Learn it take good notes. You'll need them later when it becomes real fun." Megan patted her on the knee and stood as the door opened downstairs. "Evelyn won't tell Joshua, Stephanie. You can trust her. She may have a few torture techniques of her own."

"I know." Stephanie looked at Charlie sharing a knowing expression.

Joshua was her brother. She didn't care that Evelyn knew what she did with Malcolm. Stephanie just didn't want ideas of what Evelyn did with Joshua. The same reason Charlie couldn't discuss too many details with Evelyn. Ayden was Evelyn's brother after all. Grace and Megan were cousins, and they were both pretty open about their sex lives. Stephanie was too conservative for that. Standing, she had a new motivation to help make Charlie's plan a reality tonight.

Grace and Megan brought the table in from outside making sure to put socks on the wrought iron legs so they didn't scratch the freshly waxed wood floors. Evelyn situated the clear lights around the countertop and placed a few more candles strategically around the kitchen. Charlie tied coverings on the table and two chairs with the ribbons Evelyn found. Once the kitchen and living room were set up, the women took a lunch break.

"Malcolm is like a love sick puppy down there." Grace looked at Stephanie.

"What makes you say that?" Stephanie spun the engagement ring she now wore proudly on her finger.

"He asked three times when we were coming back. The three dogs are in full testosterone mode even with the babies." Evelyn smiled. "Okay. I have to potty. Can I use your bathroom, Charlie?"

"Yeah, of course." Charlie shrugged.

Evelyn disappeared upstairs. Charlie shook it off and continued to follow the conversation. It was weird that she went upstairs and not just down the hall.

"I want to get married soon." Stephanie emphasized soon.

"Of course you do." Grace laughed. "Do you guys want kids?"

"I don't know." Stephanie thought about it. "Not right away. His schedule is pretty tough at the firehouse, and you guys moved out of the loft because it was tough to drag two kids in and out of there. Malcolm will probably move into the loft with me at first."

"Take your time. You have plenty of time. Plus you can really enjoy each other," Megan advised.

"Yes, I don't regret anything, but Ethan and I steal moments so often we get caught half the time." Grace giggled. "But I still can't keep my hands off him."

"That's a good thing," Charlie agreed. "I hope when I finally have a man that wants me, he will still want me years from now, with babies and a body that had babies in it."

"True, I was nervous about that, but Ethan doesn't care. He loves my body." Grace shivered. "I need to go steal him away for a bit while we have babysitters. See ya ladies."

Grace left.

Megan patted her foot a few moments then got her own idea.

"So Stephanie, you think the back of the van was comfortable?" Megan raised her brows.

"No, but it wasn't uncomfortable either." Stephanie laughed. "I'll watch Chase Jr. Go."

Megan slipped out the door with Stephanie, skipping all the way.

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Evelyn finally returned.

“Where did everybody go?” Evelyn looked around the kitchen as Charlie sat smiling and shaking her head, alone.

“Off to have sex would be my guess. Are you okay?” Charlie looked at her. She seemed pale.

“I’m pregnant.” Evelyn smiled. She knew it, just knew it.

“Oh my God! Congratulations.” Charlie stood and hugged her tight. “Is that what you were doing?”

“Yeah, there’s no privacy at my house right now. I need to steal my own husband away for a private dinner tonight. Don’t tell anyone okay?” Evelyn looked up at her. “Are you crying, Charlie?”

“I’m sorry it’s just that I feel so safe here. So welcome and I hate to think of leaving.” Charlie felt like she was home, but this was Ayden’s home, his family not hers.

“It’ll work out. Ayden’s not like other men. He was raised in the south, and he likes to take his time. Don’t give up on him.” Evelyn brushed Charlie’s tear away. “I’m counting on you being here.”

“What do you mean?” Charlie sniffed and tried to collect herself.

“My studio, you can dance, do yoga, you can work there if you want. As I get bigger, I won’t be able to do most of the classes, the Yoga for mommas maybe. Hey, that’s an idea.” Evelyn smiled in thought. “Well look, you have everything you need for tonight. He loves the chicken Alfredo. Get ready, and good luck.”

“You’d give me a job?” Charlie was on the verge of really sobbing tears now.

“Of course.” Evelyn had called an old friend and was checking Charlie out. Evelyn could feel there was something else going on, but she could also sense that her feelings for Ayden were real. That superseded everything else. “If you’re willing to stick around longer than thirty days that is.”

“I’m afraid he’s going to break my heart,” Charlie confessed quickly.

“I know.” Evelyn of all people knew that fear. “He won’t.”

Charlie hugged her again. “Thanks.”

Evelyn left and Charlie set about making dinner and getting ready. At three fifty-five on the nose, Ayden put his key in the door. He had thought about Charlie all day. He couldn’t decide what color her nipples were. The pink pajamas seemed so thin; he wondered how they felt. She looked like an angel this morning. He smiled again.

## Chapter 7

Charlie opened the door and took a deep breath. This was it.

“Well hello, darlin’.” Ayden wasn’t expecting this at all. He imagined a dinner in front of the television. Charlie obviously had other plans.

“Welcome home.” Charlie relaxed as he smiled, and his eyes trailed over her in a sweet slow manner that left tingles in its wake.

“All this for me?” Ayden stepped inside. The room was lit up only by candlelight. Soft Italian music was playing in the background. The table was set. Charlie was fully dressed in a slinky black number that fit like a glove in some places and swayed just enough in others. Her hair was pulled back and her make-up was flawless. Cherry red lips made her eyes bigger and brighter. God he wanted to kiss her.

“Yes.” Charlie stepped behind him and slid his jacket off. Folding it carefully she placed it on a kitchen chair. Stepping back to the door she locked it and then guided him to the table they had situated between the kitchen and living room. “I felt like Italian tonight. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” Ayden was surprised when she pulled the chair out for him. “Shouldn’t this be the other way around, darlin’?”

“Not tonight.” Charlie pushed the chair in as he took a seat.

She lingered there rubbing his shoulders and neck for a soft massage. “How was work?”

“Not bad, I mean it was just a narcotics class.” Ayden wasn’t used to being coddled like this. Not even his mother treated him this way. Sure, he was pampered if he was sick or hurt but damn. She stopped rubbing him.

“But I have to hold my arm up a lot to write and stuff.” Charlie started rubbing again. All right, she wanted to baby him, and what a wimp he was turning into just to keep her pampering attention.

“You poor baby, is it this arm?” Charlie knew he was just making it up so she would keep touching him, and that was exactly what she wanted to do.

“Both actually.” *Hell why not?* He deserved a little attention. *God, would she do this everyday?* Would she be there at the door waiting in some little outfit ready to feed him, pamper him and love him? He had to push that out of his head. “So what’s for dinner, darlin’?”

“Chicken alfredo.” Charlie moved to get the plates ready. He tried to stand but she stopped him. “No, no, you just sit here and relax. I’ll get the plates.”

“Charlie, I gotta tell ya, darlin’, I’m not used to all this.” Ayden took in her long lean legs. She was in heels again, and they pushed her calves at an angle, tightened her thighs, and lifted her already perfect behind a little higher.

“You’ll get used to it.” Charlie brought the plates back setting his salad and entrée down in front of him. She then retrieved her own and sat across from him.

They had brought in the wrought iron table from out back so it would be more intimate. The clear Christmas lights were twined around the countertop giving it more of a restaurant feel. Charlie loved the way the candlelight played with his features. Casting shadows then light, picking up the pure blue heat that was now in his eyes.

“Do you like it?” Charlie watched him eat. Every move he made set her on fire with need.

“It’s very good.” Ayden enjoyed the meal. He was more a steak and potatoes kind of guy, but Charlie had gone to a lot of effort and he could tell by the recipe that this was Evelyn’s idea. He always ate at their house when they had chicken Alfredo. It was more because he wouldn’t take the time himself to make it than because it was his favorite. However, looking at Charlie by candlelight, her beautiful eyes so focused on him, it was rapidly turning into the best meal he had ever eaten.

They ate in near silence, the lights glowing, and placing shadows on the wall. Charlie was filled with anticipation. She barely ate anything because of her nerves. She had to make this night special, something he would remember. Something he would want to have again.

“You look wonderful tonight, darlin’.” Ayden had a whole, new appreciation for candlelight.

“So do you.” Charlie blushed. He noticed, and he commented. Could she take him upstairs now?

“Must be the lighting.” Ayden knew he looked hardened. He had too many lines permanently in place from his work. He had a scar on his eye and another on his chin, yet Charlie was looking with wide-eyed wonder, like she always did.

“No. You always look delicious.” Charlie reached for his empty plate as she stood, but he grabbed her hand and pulled the back to his lips. They were so smooth and sinfully soft.

*Delicious?* “Thank you, darlin’.” Ayden kissed the back of her hand like the gentleman he was. He couldn’t let her clean up after all she had done. “I’ll clean this up.”

“Actually, the tub should be just about right by now. There’s a bath upstairs waiting on you. I’ll clean this up.” Charlie pulled her hand back and grabbed the plates. “And be up in a few.”

“You’re coming up?” His heart threatened to bust out of his chest it started thumping so hard.

“I have something I want to show you.” Charlie began loading the dishes in the dishwasher. “Go soak and relax. I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

“What are you up to, Charlie?” Ayden was itching to know.

“You’ll see. Now go before your bath gets cold.” Charlie had him right where she wanted him. Interested, and she was in control.

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Ayden headed up the stairs taking his jacket with him. Sure enough once, he got to his bathroom a hot bath was turning nice and warm. He debated it for several minutes, soaking in a hot tub while Charlie made plans to do whatever it was she was going to do. Damn, he really wanted to know what she had planned next. He prided himself on knowing what the next move was when it came to criminals. Here, Charlie had him clueless. Maybe she would come in the bathroom and climb in the tub with him. That was a nice thought, so he stripped and turned on the CD player, listening to Elvis while he soaked in the tub.

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Charlie had straightened the kitchen up and blown all the candles out. She took several deep breaths before heading upstairs. Of course, he had turned on the CD player and Elvis sang about "Blue Suede Shoes." Ayden had to be nice and relaxed by now. That was what she wanted. To catch him off guard, and then wind him up so tight he could burst. Charlie tapped on the door.

"Ayden?"

"Yes, darlin'?" Ayden smiled; this had to be it.

"After you dry off, come to my room so I can show you something."

"Charlie?" he called, but she was gone. Now he really wanted to know what was going on. Maybe it wasn't a seduction after all.

Ayden pulled on a pair of long pajama bottoms. He thought Noel was nuts for sending them last Christmas, but now he understood that a man can't always be naked in his own home, and boxers weren't appropriate. He crossed to Charlie's room, and she was there waiting. Sitting on the bed with the light on, still dressed...and nervous?

"What did you want to show me, darlin'?" Ayden leaned in the doorway and began to wonder if maybe she needed him after all and not for sex. He was beginning to feel like a real jerk for thinking it.

"You have to promise me, Ayden, that no matter what I say or do you will sit in that chair and wait until I'm finished." Charlie was so nervous. She had never done anything like this before, but there was no turning back now. He leaned in her doorway wearing long cotton pajama pants. She never imagined him wearing those. She had always seen him in boxers and T-shirts. At least it covered him, giving just his chest to focus on.

"Are you okay, darlin'?" Ayden moved to stand in front of her. "You can tell me anything. I'll do whatever I can to help you. You know that, right?"

"Well, you can help me by promising to sit in that chair." Charlie stood and waited.

A long moment of silence fell between them. He was winding up all right. His muscles began to bunch, and his expression grew more intent and serious.

“All right, Charlie. I promise I will sit in that chair till you’re finished, but if someone has hurt you, that’s where it ends.” Ayden looked her eye to eye. He knew something was wrong, and she wanted to keep him out of it. Now she was going to tell him. “I make no promises as to what I will do once you’re done. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.” Charlie made a slight laugh. He was still trying to protect her. She was sure she was safe here. All she needed from Ayden was love. He needed to realize that.

Ayden paced to the chair and sat down. He crossed his arms and drew a serious expression. He looked ready to jump up and fight at any moment.

“Remember, you promised to stay in that chair, no matter what.” Charlie took a deep shivering breath.

“I’m a man of my word. You know that.” Ayden was sure she was afraid. Her breath was shaking and so were her hands. *God what had happened to her? Can I still do something about it?*

Charlie dimmed the light but not a lot. The whole point was for him to see. She moved next to the bed and began to explain. His eyes followed her intently, and she knew he was confused. Good, so was she.

“What I want to show you, Ayden—” She pulled her dress from the hem up and over her head. “—is me.”

“Charlie?” He gulped and swallowed his tongue, he was sure of it. She was naked. Totally naked. Her perfect body pale and proportioned, was bared to him. He looked her over head to toe. She was without a flaw in his eyes and without hair, but he should have expected that. She was a showgirl after all.

“I want you to look at me, Ayden. See me as a woman, not as some case you solved years ago. Do you see me, Ayden?” Charlie’s breath shook with nerves. He was looking, and his entire body seemed to tighten.

“Kinda hard to miss you, darlin’.” *Holy shit!* She had him cornered. Literally in a corner and bound by his word not to move. He didn’t anticipate this, not by a long shot.

“Good. Because I plan to tell you what I think about every year before we meet.” Charlie moved to the bed and sat down.

“I think about you. I think about you touching me. I think about how you would touch me. Do you want to know how, Ayden?” She scooted back on the bed still sitting, still focused on him.

“Do you want me to touch you, Charlie?” Oh, he could easily get out of the chair and take care of this for her. His whole body was tight with need. She had twisted that around on him so fast he was still spinning.

“Yes, but not tonight.” Charlie licked her lips and sat a little straighter. “So do you want me to show you or not?”

“I want you to touch me and let me touch you.” Ayden wanted control of this situation and fast.

“You’re not ready.” Charlie bit her bottom lip.

“It doesn’t get more ready than this, darlin’.” Ayden was now leaning forward, hands on his knees as if he would pounce on her at any moment.

“You have to stay in that chair, but you can show me how ready you are if you’d like. I plan to show you.” Charlie lifted a hand and stoked her left breast. “I plan to show you everything.”

Well that knocked the air out of his lungs. Ayden couldn’t speak. He realized he wouldn’t be able to touch her. She was going to let him watch her touch herself. The only ounce of control he had was to keep it in his pants. If she wanted to torture him, fine. He had been trained to deal with torture, just not this kind.

“Well if I can’t touch you, I definitely won’t touch me either.” Ayden took a shaky breath and wavered on his resolve.

“Suit yourself.” Charlie dropped her voice to a low husky whisper. Not on purpose, it came out that way naturally. “So, shall I continue?”

“Do I have a choice?” Ayden was frustrated because there was nothing he could do. She made him promise and damn, if he didn’t feel like breaking it. Of course, that’s what she was counting on, his discipline to keep him in that chair. He wouldn’t disappoint her, and she apparently had quite a show in mind for him.

“You could close your eyes, but I’m still going to tell you everything.” Charlie smiled a devious smile. He was defeated, and he would have to deal with it. *She wanted him damn it. Now he would know what it felt like to want something so bad and not be able to have it when you wanted it.* “Like how the night before we meet I lay in bed and do this. Only I imagine that it’s your hands, not mine. Your big, strong hands caressing my breasts.”

Charlie raised both hands to cup her ample bosom. She stroked her thumbs over her nipples, and as her breath caught, so did Ayden’s. He didn’t put a shirt on, so she could see his chest rising and falling in rhythm with hers. His thumbs on his knees stirred.

“They’re big and heavy, and you’d pluck and pull until finally...” Charlie lifted her right breast high as she shifted her face down. “You would lick it and suck the nipples till I just went mad with need.”

Ayden watched as she stroked her own tongue over the nipple on her right breast. He didn’t know a woman could do that, but Charlie had ample cleavage and a nice long tongue. His tongue moved inside his mouth mocking the motions. He desperately wanted to stroke those puckered, pink, silver dollar sized nipples with his own hands, explore her with his own mouth.

“Then.” She scooted a little farther back on the bed and propped her legs up. “You would open my legs, like this.”

Charlie slid her hands over her knees and pulled her thighs wide apart, so he could see her. All of her. She thought he was going to fall out of the chair. Instead, he shifted around a bit and settled back in.

Ayden could see it all. Charlie was hair free because of the little costumes she wore on stage. He knew that when she took the dress off. Nothing quite prepared him to see it like this though. She looked like an exotic plant or some wild fruit. He just wanted to taste her, just a little bit.

“Can you see me, Ayden?” Charlie was sure she heard the chair scoot along the floor. In her mind, she hadn’t thought about him moving the chair, but he didn’t seem any closer so maybe he was adjusting. He looked wild. Like a real wolf. His blue eyes were flamed, and she could have sworn he was drooling.

“Open a little more.” He growled.

When Charlie’s breath caught at his words, he realized she could be affected. When she opened farther just to please him, he almost lost it. His cock strained against the cotton pajamas, and he had to keep his hands on his knees to keep from easing the pain.

“Then.” Charlie put her fingers in her mouth and pulled them out slowly. Watching Ayden watch, her was such a turn on she felt on the verge of climax. “You would slide your fingers right here.”

Charlie slid her thumbs along the outer folds and opened the swollen flesh so he could see. She was ready. He hadn’t touched a woman in a long time, but he knew she was ready. The pink skin glistened and flexed at her touch, and he inched the chair forward. She didn’t say he had to remain in the corner, just in the chair.

“And then you would stroke lightly up and down.” Her toes began to curl, and her legs began to waiver. “Then slide a thick hot finger inside.”

“God, Charlie.” Ayden was on the verge of insanity. Violent with need. He was going to break the damn chair if she didn’t let him touch her soon.

“You like that, Ayden?”

“Yes, I do.” He inched closer again.

“Say darlin’. I love when you call me darlin’,” Charlie confessed. She did love that he used that little term of endearment with her.

“Yes, darlin’, I like it.” He felt his heart tugging. He only called a few women darlin’: his sisters and Charlie, aside from his mother. The only women he cared about. *No, this was not the time to think about it.*

“Good. Watch me, Ayden.”

“I may need to move closer.” Ayden wanted to move all the way in. Charlie just smiled and didn’t tell him he couldn’t, so he inched the chair again. There was still a lot of floor to cross though.

“You would say to me, Charlie, you’re so tight and hot and wet.” She worked two fingers in and out mindlessly. “I would say, of course I am. I haven’t let another man touch me since the day I met you.”

“I’ll touch you, Charlie.” Ayden thought that maybe he could convince her. She was closing in on a climax, and he wanted to feel that with his own hands, taste it with

his own mouth. Damn, she had been untouched in over ten years. That sparked a primal urge that made him ready to howl. "I'd like to taste you."

"Then you would lick your fingers like this." She had to ignore him. He was telling her everything she wanted to hear, and she really wanted him to be the one touching her.

He watched her pull the fingers up and lick them, and he struggled to keep his eyes open. The room was starting to spin. How could she do this? He was blind with lust, but he promised to stay in that chair. *No chairs in any bedrooms from now on*, he thought.

"Do you taste good, Charlie?" Ayden struggled to speak.

"Mmmm, yes," she replied.

"Can I taste you?" *Please say yes!*

"And then you would press your tongue right here." No way was she going to give in that easily. She slid her fingers over her swollen clitoris and began circling and stroking. "And you would lick and suck and tease me, over and over."

He could see she was reaching her peak as her legs began closing in at the knees, and she fought to make sure he still had a good view. *Damn it! She would come before he could get there.*

"Are you going to come for me, Charlie?" Ayden was ready to explode. She knew it. She had him right where she wanted him, out of control, or so she thought.

"Harder and faster..." Charlie climbed that peak on her own. Watching Ayden inch the chair closer, she knew she had to speed it up or he would take her. "Yes, Ayden."

It was too late. He was within inches of her, still in the chair when she collapsed calling his name. Her hand covered her wet mound, and her legs trembled. He felt like a coiled spring wound too tightly. He had to release. It was beyond pain not to, but he wanted to be with Charlie, inside her, feeling her milk his orgasm with her own. Not sitting next to her bed watching her come while she called his name. Though he had to admit it was quite a treat.

"Charlie?" he rasped.

"Mmmm?" She still felt his tension on the air. She expected him to have come from it all, sought his release, but he had discipline. She could feel his heat at her legs. His breath was passing over her skin in warm tickling waves.

"Can I touch you?" Ayden was right there next to her now. He could smell the heat from her body. The sweetness of her orgasm filled the air. Her hand still covered in her own juices lay in place. She was limp and lifeless, making him ache. He felt like ravaging her and taking credit for her satisfaction.

"Yes." Charlie knew it was too soon, but she wanted him so badly. She had wanted him for so long. How could she deny him now when her body called out for him?

Ayden lifted the hand that covered her. He wasn't going to have sex with her. She made it clear she wasn't ready for that, but he had to at least taste her. He had to find his own release that threatened to consume him with madness.

His hand was hot and trembling; she could feel it. Then she felt his lips, soft and sensual against her fingertips. The air pulled deep over them. Then a hot, thick tongue licked out and over her fingers.

## Chapter 8

*God she tasted good.* Ayden inhaled the scent so deeply it settled into his lungs and clung to him, planting a permanent memory. He licked her long thin fingers taking them in his mouth one by one sucking them clean. His cock strained for freedom, and he cupped his hand over it for release.

The doorbell rang.

“Ayden?” Charlie was in a thick fog of emotions. He was licking and sucking her fingers, eating her whole, like he wanted to take every inch of her body in his mouth at his leisure. She desperately wanted him to do just that. “Is that the doorbell?”

The bell rang again.

Reality lifted the fog, and he looked at the clock on her nightstand. Ten p.m.

“We’ll pick this up later, darlin’.” Ayden stood on shaky legs. “I promise you that.”

Charlie watched with wonder as he staggered to her door. She had accomplished her mission. Ayden wanted her. He really wanted her. It felt so good.

Ayden grumbled and growled all the way downstairs. He hurt with need, and someone was at the damn door. If it wasn’t for the hour, he would have let them wait. Ten o’clock was late for visitors. It must be important.

“Ayden?” Tom looked his brother-in-law over. He was sweating and breathing like he just got off a treadmill. Of course, he was also pitching quite a tent in the pajama’s, which made Tom think they should have called ahead of time like he’d suggested. Ayden knew they were still planning to visit for the reunion, but he didn’t know they would be there for sure tonight.

“Shit!” Ayden shook his head. Noel was on her way up the porch stairs with the baby and Tom had two bags and a portable playpen in hand. “It’s the third isn’t it?”

“Yeah. We can go to Evelyn’s...” Tom started.

“No, no, no.” Ayden’s tent deflated quickly, and he prayed Charlie put real clothes on if she decided to come downstairs. “Come in, come in.”

Tom entered the house.

“I’ll be right back.” Ayden ran for the stairs. He couldn’t kiss his little sister with the taste of Charlie in his mouth and touch his niece with her on his hands. Shit! This was the worst timing ever.

“Charlie?” Ayden tapped on her door then opened it. She was asleep, naked and still sprawled out. So tempting.

“Charlie, darlin’.” Ayden shook her. As her sleepy eyes opened, he wanted to kiss her and pull her into his arms. “My sister and brother-in-law are here.”

“Oh,” Charlie said in a satisfied, sleepy tone.

Ayden knew she was asleep for the night. He would see to it she knew they were there in the morning. He slipped over to his room while Tom argued with Noel to hold on. She was coming up the stairs anyways. He knew that for sure.

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Noel stormed into his bedroom with her hands on her hips and looked up at him with a scowl.

“Ayden Wolf, why did you run off without seeing me?” Noel was too mad to realize his condition.

Ayden tried to speak with the toothbrush in his mouth, but she didn’t understand. He rinsed his mouth out. “I had to brush my teeth.”

“That makes no sense,” she snapped.

“Baby, that makes a lot of sense if you would calm down a minute.” Tom reached for his wife and tried tugging her out of the room. There wasn’t a woman in Ayden’s bedroom thankfully, so maybe he was watching porn. Either way, it wasn’t his business or Noel’s.

“It’s all right, Tom. I just had dessert. Charlie made me a wonderful dinner and...”

“Oh that’s right. Shit.” Noel cautiously looked around the bedroom as if a woman would jump out at any moment.

“Baby, let’s get settled in.” Tom was more successful in tugging the woman away now.

“Where is she?” Noel asked quietly.

“She’s asleep.” Ayden sighed.

“Is she invisible?” Noel asked smartly.

“No.” Ayden laughed. Noel had grown up with him since she was nine. She was a real little sister, bossy like Evelyn, but more curious and sassy. Evelyn was curious and lethal. “She’s in her room.”

“Oh. Well, when do I get to meet her?” Noel stopped in the doorway against Tom’s insistent tugging.

“In the morning.” Ayden laughed and followed them out of his bedroom and downstairs.

Page was sleeping in the stroller, her red hair sticking out all over her head. She looked like her mother. Ayden unfastened the baby, who was almost one, and held her.

“She’s such a little princess.” Ayden kissed her forehead. She smelled like baby. Her little lips pursed together in a tight bow, and her fat cheeks made him smile. She looked like a baby doll in a store. He wanted children of his own before he turned forty. Time was catching up with him, and he had begun to realize it.

“Yeah, let’s see if you think that in about three hours when she starts screaming to eat.” Noel plopped into a chair. “So where’s the cake, pie, whatever?”



“What are you talking about?” Ayden looked around the counter trying to see what she was looking at. He could definitely eat again.

“Dessert?” Noel said taking note of the wrought iron table in the center of the floor. “Why in the world would you put that there?”

“Honey, I think we should just settle in first while Page is still sleeping.” Tom shook his head.

Was it so beyond thought that Ayden could be with a woman? Tom had known Ayden since they were in the Navy. He practically dragged him to the FBI with him, and he had met Charlie twice when she was hiding out in Ayden’s apartment years ago. She was the only woman Ayden wasn’t related to that lit a smile on his face. Tom never discussed Charlie with Noel. It was Ayden’s business.

“Yeah, settle in while I spend time with my niece.” Ayden walked to the living room and flipped on the television. He hated not living close to Noel and Tom, especially now that Page was there, but he had spent years with Noel. He needed to spend time with Evelyn. Since Evelyn married Joshua, that meant he had to live in North Carolina.

Noel huffed back out the door to get her bags, and Tom apologized to Ayden as he backed out the door behind her.

Ayden shrugged it off. Noel was a little brat; he made her that way. She had been abused and tortured, and when she came to live with Ayden’s mother and step-father, they all just spoiled her rotten. She had a great big heart and always saw the best in everyone and everything. It was easy to love her, and it was easy to make her into a spoiled little diva. Noel fussed over those she loved, to an annoying fault, but it was just her way. Thank God Tom had patience.

## Chapter 9

Joshua and Evelyn had escaped the busy house and enjoyed a quiet dinner alone at The Net House. Evelyn took him on the same walk they had taken the first time they had eaten there. Now she stopped at the same spot she stopped at over a year ago to ask him an important question.

“Do you love me, Joshua?” Evelyn smiled as he stood behind her and rested his chin on her head. The same way he did on that first dinner date.

“More than life itself.” Joshua hugged her close. She had been so moody lately. Maybe things were changing too fast in her life. He had feared a small town life wouldn’t be enough for Evelyn. She was a bounty hunter, always in the thick of danger, seeking out adventure. Now she ran a fitness studio doing what she did best. Teaching people martial arts, yoga, and a couple other classes he didn’t fully understand, but was it enough? “Do you still love me?”

“You know I do.” Evelyn smiled and sank right into him.

“You know how we were talking about starting a family soon?” Evelyn eased into it. They planned to start next year. She had only been off the birth control shot for three months. They said it could take up to a year to get out of her system, apparently not.

“Next year when you would be more comfortable with the business.” Joshua felt a lump in his throat. He didn’t want to wait any longer. Having the kids around made him wish for his own. Teaching second grade was getting harder to do. The kids reminded him of what he wanted and didn’t have, at least not yet.

“Do you want to wait that long?” Evelyn knew it was a loaded question. She was the one who insisted they wait at least two years.

“I want what you want.” Joshua kissed the top of her head and smelled her hair. She still used the jasmine shampoo. It still made him crazy for her.

“So then you’re ready now?” Evelyn tilted her head back and looked at him upside down.

“Are you?” He smiled and turned her to face him.

“I better be.” Evelyn took a deep breath. “Because I am.”

“Pregnant?” Joshua bent to look her eye to eye. “Baby, are you saying we’re having a baby?”

“Yes.” Evelyn smiled. He looked so relieved and happy it eased all her worries instantly.

Joshua opened a big hand over her belly. “God, Evelyn, we’re having a baby.”

“Are you scared?” She was.

“No. Are you?” Joshua hugged her tight and rocked her.

“A little,” she admitted. “I mean I have no control over this. My body is already crazy. I have eaten almost all Noel’s cookies.”

“I know.” He laughed. Noel mailed them two dozen cookies, and he had eaten only one; then they were gone. He searched the house after Evelyn came back to bed

tasting like cookies and found them stashed on top of the entertainment center. He thought that maybe it was a serious case of PMS.

"How did you know? Did Malcolm tell you?" Evelyn was serious now. She would kick his butt if he told on her.

"Baby, you came back to bed tasting like chocolate chip cookies and randy as hell. I searched the house." Joshua smiled. "I thought Noel put some serious aphrodisiac in those cookies."

"Joshua." She swatted at him.

"Come on, let's go home and wake the house." Joshua turned and bent down. Evelyn jumped on his back, and he carried her down the street toward the house.

"I don't want to tell everyone right away. I want to go to the doctor and see how far along I am." Evelyn kissed his cheek.

"I hadn't planned on telling them anything."

"You said we'd wake the house?" Evelyn questioned.

"Indeed." Joshua was ready to take her home and make love to her. They had been quiet the past couple nights because the house was full of guests. He was too charged up now with the news to care about all the people there. Hell, they had been sneaking off all day to be alone. It was his house, his wife, and they would make as much noise as they damn well pleased.

"You are so bad." Evelyn bit a gentle love bite on his neck. He growled a low growl. She loved when he growled. "Shit!"

"What?" Joshua stopped and automatically started to pull her off his back to protect her.

"Stop that." Evelyn swatted. "Noel and Tom are here. I see the car."

"Why is that so shocking? We knew they were coming. You almost gave me a heart attack." Joshua shifted her weight back around so she could be comfortable on his back again.

"Charlie had plans for Ayden. I'm sure they are interrupting." Evelyn soothed him by stroking his hair. He was always trying to protect her.

"Well no one's interrupting us." Joshua smiled as he continued to walk home. "There is a tent in the backyard that Ethan and Chase put up for the boys."

"Ethan and Grace are probably in it." Evelyn laughed.

"Then we'll kick them out."

"Sounds like a good plan."

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Back at Ayden's house...

Noel came downstairs to find Ayden stretched out on the big plush couch with Page snuggled on his chest. They were both sleeping. The sight of her big brother with a baby on his chest seemed so strange. Ayden was definitely a family man, but finding a

woman who could handle him was always a challenge. He wasn't easy. He was set in his ways, and he had no intentions of changing that.

His high school girlfriend broke up with him when he was in Navy boot camp. Stupid girl. Noel hadn't heard him speak of another woman since then. She was sure he had to be like other men on some level, but he was her big brother, so she couldn't imagine him taking advantage of women on a whim. Certainly, she couldn't picture it at this moment, while her baby girl was sleeping so safe and sound on his chest. She only hoped Ayden could find a woman able to keep up with him and hopefully love Elvis because Ayden sure did. She kept in touch with Jessica just in case she was the only woman he ever loved. It was a desperate situation, women and Ayden.

Noel scooped Page up and shook Ayden gently.

"Ayden, go to bed. You're tired." Noel nudged him again.

"Fine." Ayden grumbled and finally sat up.

"Hello sunshine?" Noel turned the television off and headed for the stairs behind him.

"Sorry, I'm a little beat." Ayden grumbled.

"See you in the morning." Noel was always cheery except when she didn't get her way. She placed a kiss on his cheek at the top of the stairs and headed into her room.

"Night, darlin'." Ayden headed down the hall. He started into his room then changed his mind.

Stepping inside Charlie's room, he saw Charlie sound asleep, just as he left her. He paced across the floor, turned out the light, and pulled the covers down underneath her. Finally, he shifted her over in the bed.

She slept sound; she always did.

He could have tossed her out the window, and she wouldn't have woken up. He pulled the blankets up over them both as he slid in next to her.

Folding his large arms behind his head, he closed his eyes. He would be there in the morning, and then they could discuss last night.

## Chapter 10

Charlie was dreaming, a good dream. She was alone with Ayden, and they were making love. She grinded into him and held on tight. She could sense him everywhere. The feel of his chest pressing into her; his scent filled the air. She lifted and plunged over and over driving him deeper and deeper.

Ayden awoke facing Charlie. She was facing him, her nails digging into his back and her sex pressed and wiggled against his thigh that had somehow moved between hers during the night. Charlie was asleep, but she was moaning and grinding on him in a parody of the sex act. Again, she threw him off guard.

Charlie felt the climax so strong it cramped her stomach and forced her awake. Opening her eyes, she felt the final waves of the orgasm and at the same time faced Ayden who was staring at her in wide-eyed wonder. It was a little difficult to process both things at once. She tried to push back, but his big hand tightened on the small of her back holding her in place.

“Good dream?” Ayden was amazed at what he knew just happened. A surge of wetness seeped right through the cotton pajamas and onto his skin. Damn she was hot. Charlie could easily blind a man with her sexuality.

“Ayden.” She gasped. “What are you doing in here?”

“Sorry, darlin’.” He let go of her. He didn’t think she would mind. That was her whole plan, he thought, to get him in bed. Now he was there and she wanted him out? “I didn’t want you to wake up and head downstairs in your underwear when we have guests.”

“Guests?” Charlie slowly relaxed. She still straddled his thigh, and her hand was now on the arm that he had removed from around her. She wanted him right here where he was. She didn’t want to wake up molesting him in her sleep.

“Noel and Tom are here with the baby, Page.” Ayden fought the urge to touch her hair or kiss her lips.

“Oh.” Charlie remembered last night like a flashback. All of it pouring in at once. Ayden licking her fingers, the doorbell ringing and watching him leave her room. “OH.”

“What?” Ayden noticed her eyes open wide and her soft mouth form a perfect little circle with that last thought.

“Last night, you didn’t...” Charlie slid her fingers up and down his arm in a loving caress now.

“No, but that’s not what I’m here for,” Ayden lied. He knew damn good and well he hoped she would let him relieve the tension that threatened to strangle him soon. As soon as he walked past her door last night, his cock reminded him of what he had seen earlier.

“No?” Charlie sounded disappointed.

“Well.” Ayden lifted his hand and pushed her bangs aside. Her hair was so soft and silky. “I have to admit I thought about it. But...”

Charlie wasn't hearing it this morning. He had watched her have two orgasms within less than twenty-four hours, and he hadn't had one. She could feel his erection pressed against her. She knew he had to be aching to find release. He wasn't ready to sleep with her. She could tell. This was her seduction. Giving him ideas of what he would miss if she left. In his current condition, this might just do him in.

Charlie silenced him with her fingers. She pinched his lips shut then placed a hot kiss on his neck. The room began to blur as she took him over. Pushing him back and climbing on top of him while kissing and licking his neck. Ayden wanted to kiss her. Her lips felt so good on his neck. Charlie didn't give him a chance. She was pushing her way south, and though he tried to protest so he could savor her kisses and get a hold of those lips with his own, she grabbed his wrists and set them above his head.

“Stay there,” Charlie whispered then went back to her mission.

“I want to kiss you, darlin’.” Ayden strangled on a laugh of frustration as her tongue dipped into his navel. His steel erection nuzzled between her breasts. “What are you doing?”

“Something I've wanted to do for a very long time,” she whispered into his abs.

Ayden went to reply, but he ended up groaning instead as her hand slicked beneath the pajamas and twisted the hair surrounding his sex gently with her fingers.

Charlie pulled the pajama bottoms down and exposed him completely. Her heart beat a solid thump at the sheer size of Ayden. He wasn't just long, he was thick. Starting at the base, she made one long lick to the top and enjoyed every bit of his reaction. His thighs tightened, and his hips pressed down into the bed urging her to the top quicker. Her name was soft and desperate on his lips.

“Feel better?” she teased.

“Almost,” he croaked.

Ayden wasn't sure what he had done to deserve this, but he hoped he did it more often. Charlie was licking him, and like an ice cream cone on a hot summer day, he was melting quickly. When her lips parted over him and her tongue slicked out, he thought he would explode. He had to hold out as long as possible. Savor every moment.

“That's better. God that's good.” Ayden fought to keep his hands above his head where she had placed them.

Charlie devoured him with greed. He was trying to hold out, but she didn't want him to last. She wanted him to give up, surrender and then want more. Charlie worked her left hand in unison with her lips while her right hand cupped and stroked his testicles. They were tight and he was ready, so she began humming and sucking harder. She was in control here, not him.

“I'm gonna...Charlie,” Ayden warned with what breath he had left.

*Let go, Ayden. I want you, all of you.*

Charlie wouldn't let him pull back. His entire body twitched and jerked in the wake of his orgasm. He knew it had been a while, but nothing he remembered felt that intense before. He was spent, breathless. Charlie remained at his crotch gently licking and milking the aftershocks. Why hadn't he let her do the things she wanted to do before? He began considering letting her do whatever she wanted to do from now on. *Hell, plenty of people jumped right into relationships without knowing half the things they knew about each other.*

Charlie felt his trembling fingers on both sides of her face, gently urging her upward. She complied but stole nips and kisses along his abdomen and chest. She expected him to release her, but he pulled her right to his lips.

*Oh no*, she didn't want to kiss him. She thought for sure if she waited to kiss him, she would be able to feel his love through his lips. Through that first kiss, now, as his lips pressed into hers, she didn't know if it was love or lust.

Ayden didn't know what he was feeling for her right now. His vow to protect her and keep her safe didn't include kissing or any of the other things they were doing. It was dangerous to get this involved. If things ended badly, it would be impossible to keep his word. He promised Michael on her deathbed to protect Charlie. Now Charlie was twisting him inside. Part of him wanted to be with her, just like this. Another part was scared to death to try it. They had to slow this down. Too much was at stake, his honor and their friendship.

Ayden placed soft gentle kisses on her lips, taking his time, exploring her mouth with his. Finally, he pulled back and Charlie felt dazed. He had a smooth manner that made her feel like she was so out of place. Here she was steamrolling him with desire and he was still gentle and tender with her. That made her crazy. She wanted that tenderness, to be cherished, but only if it was real and only if it was love. Maintaining control around Ayden was next to impossible. Both of her seduction attempts had left him the victor, in control, while she steadily lost it.

"Charlie?" Ayden opened his eyes and regained his balance.

"Yes?" Charlie rested alongside him now. She put her head down on his chest and closed her eyes, listening to the strumming of his rapid heartbeat. Satisfied, that she had created all that excitement for him.

"We have to slow this down, darlin'." Ayden stroked her soft hair and wavered on his resolve. "I know you think you want me, but you don't really know me."

"But I do..." Charlie lifted her head to protest.

"No, you don't. You know who I was, not who I am, and the same goes for me." Ayden hugged her tightly. "I can't take the chance of hurting you and losing you forever."

"I want to..." she started again.

"No. I promised Michael." He pushed her head to his chest and held it there.

Charlie exhaled in submission. She had no choice but to hear him out.

"If we are going to see about this, then we have to slow it down. We have to agree that no matter what happens, in the end, we will still be friends." Ayden remembered Jessica, his high school sweetheart. The only woman he ever thought he loved. They had worn each other out with teenage lust. Blind to what the other wanted, who they each really were. When he left for the Navy and the sheets cooled, she realized she didn't really love him. She broke his heart. He wouldn't risk it again, and he wouldn't do that to Charlie.

"So you're willing to give it a try?" Charlie felt her heartbeat quicken in her chest.

"Do you promise if it doesn't work out we will still be friends?" Ayden knew this was what she came for, him. He was willing to see if they had something. Hell, he knew they had something, but it had to be something real. Something that would sustain them both for the long haul.

"Yes. I promise." Charlie knew it would work if he would just accept her love.

"No sex." Ayden groaned. "Not for a while anyways."

"What about kissing?" Charlie was willing to negotiate, but she wasn't giving up everything. After all it was sex that had gotten her this far.

"Kissing's fine." Ayden smiled. "We'll take it step by step."

Charlie wanted to tell him she loved him, but that was jumping about a million steps ahead she was sure. Instead, she just squeezed him tight. It was such a nice moment. Then the door down the hall opened, and Ayden sat right up knocking her off, of his chest.

"Shit." Ayden scrubbed both hands over his face. "We can't sleep together either, not while everyone's here. I don't want them jumping to conclusions."

"I understand." Charlie didn't bother to tell him that all the women were already at this conclusion, but she would be sure to let them know to keep it under wraps. If he wanted to take it slow, she would take what she could get. She had been waiting ten years, what was another few months in the long run?

"You're awfully agreeable this morning." Ayden realized she hadn't disagreed with anything. That wasn't like a woman. Something had to be going on.

"Ayden, I've been wanting you for over ten years. *You* have been wanting me for less than two days. I'm used to it. Let's see how you do, cowboy."

Charlie pushed out of the bed and made no attempt to cover herself. She patted him on the back and headed for the closet. She didn't look back at him. She bent right over and picked up her robe. She heard him make a strangled sound. Good. He wanted to torture himself by delaying the inevitable? Fine, she would make every attempt to remind him what he just put on hold.

Ayden watched her stroll over to pick up something, and before he could speak, she bent over, giving him a full view from a different angle. So she was going to play dirty. Okay, he could handle this. He walked over and swatted her lightly on the behind. She yelped. *Good. She wasn't expecting it.*

"See ya downstairs in a few, darlin'."



“Humph.” Charlie tried to maintain her composure, but she really didn’t expect that.

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In the shower, Elvis related with “Mean Woman Blues.” Ayden crooned along in a low satisfied tone. Damn he was satisfied this morning. Charlie had seen to it. All part of her seduction plan, all the more reason to take things slow. If she was pulling out all the stops now, surely she would tire and reality would set in. No more massages, no more candlelight dinners, no more wild and tantalizing sexual advances. *Whoa*. He needed to stay focused on the other things.

It was the fourth of July. His entire family was here now. They would be surrounded by people all day long.

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Noel and Tom sat at the kitchen table with Page. Noel insisted they wait on Ayden, but she really wanted to meet Charlie. Especially since Ayden had detoured to the woman’s room last night.

“Hi. I’m Charlie.” Charlie entered the kitchen and saw a familiar face, Tom. The woman at his side looked just like Evelyn only she had short hair that wisped out in every direction making her look more like a pixie or fairy. The little girl in Tom’s arms had the same spiky hair. “She is so cute.”

Charlie was drawn to the little girl. The boys were also cute, but this was a little angel.

“Hi, I’m Noel. This is my husband, Tom, and our little teething monster, Page.” Noel extended a hand over the table. Page was chewing on the teething ring leaving a great drool puddle in her wake. Noel was worried that her husband may be doing the same. Charlie was awesome. The woman didn’t have an ounce of make-up on, and she looked beautiful. Her hair was pulled up in a loose ponytail and soft bangs trailed over her forehead and were swept to the side. She stood taller than Tom, almost as tall as Ayden.

“It’s good to see you again, Charlie.” Tom nodded.

“Again?” Noel looked to her husband now.

“I met him once at Ayden’s, years ago.” Charlie wanted to clear the air quickly.

“Hold up, years ago?” Noel looked at Ayden who now walked into the kitchen.

“Yeah, you remember. I was in Vegas, the showgirl case.” Ayden lifted a shoulder like it was no big deal. “Tom came out to visit. Charlie was living with me then.”

“I didn’t know that.” Noel scrunched her brows together. Obviously offended Ayden hadn’t told her a woman was living with him at the time. She looked at Tom. “Why didn’t you tell me that?”

"It was his case, babe." Tom looked at his wife knowing he was going to get the third degree later for this.

"Ayden?" Noel looked at her brother now.

"Noel, we can talk about this later, darlin'. Evelyn is probably chomping at the bit to see you." Ayden didn't want to hash this out in front of Charlie. He didn't have to go through the details with Evelyn. She was more practical, accepting of his privacy. Noel on the other hand wanted every detail of his life. Impossible.

"Fine, but we will talk about this, Wolf." Noel stood and smiled at Charlie. "Please don't take it the wrong way. I'm excited to meet you, really, but I don't like not knowing about the women in my brother's life."

"Oh God." Ayden poured a cup of coffee. He couldn't wait until they got to Evelyn's; he needed the caffeine now. Noel would crucify him before the day was out, and all because he hadn't disclosed private information. How was he to know that Charlie would track him down?

"Women?" Charlie looked at Noel. The woman was smaller than Evelyn but carried the same demanding presence. She wasn't afraid to speak her mind, and apparently she wasn't too thrilled about Ayden having any woman in his life without her approval. *Great, she was like Joshua.* "How many women are in your brother's life?"

"Apparently one more than I was aware of." Noel didn't want to start off on the wrong foot with Charlie, but she was pissed at Ayden, and if she didn't get out of there, it would turn ugly.

Noel headed out the door with Page on her hip. Tom walked backwards and apologized to Charlie as he followed her. Ayden stood at the counter with half a smile and tipped his cup up for another drink.

"She doesn't like me." Charlie gulped. Shit. How long would they be staying here? Maybe she could sleep on Evelyn's couch. Or maybe Evelyn would side with her sister and Charlie would watch Ayden be ripped from her hands.

"She doesn't know you, and that's what she doesn't like. She's pissed at me because she thinks she's my keeper. I told you how she came to live with us. Noel speaks her mind without a filter." Ayden set the coffee cup in the sink. "Come on. She'll lighten up."

"No, I don't think she will." Charlie was nervous. More nervous than the first day she went to meet the rest of them. A false sense of security and familiarity had settled over her. Now with Noel, it seemed dangerous again.

"You've been waiting ten years, darlin'. You gonna let my little sister stop you now?" Ayden couldn't help it. Charlie was getting nervous, and the anxiety showed. This was the reality of relationships. It wasn't always butterflies and rainbows. Could she stand up under pressure?

"Will she stop you?" Charlie wouldn't let Noel's opinion influence her desire for Ayden, but Ayden loved his little sisters, cherished them, protected them. Would he choose against them?

“Hell no.” Ayden realized then it was him she was worried about, not Noel. “And she won’t sway Evelyn either. Don’t worry.”

Ayden looked her over, no make-up this morning. Her hair was in a ponytail, and aside from the frown she couldn’t hide she looked naturally beautiful. He liked her like this. Just being herself. Even with the frown, which he was sure would change once they got to Evelyn’s.

“You ready for the beach?” Ayden wasn’t ready for the long day ahead. He didn’t like crowded venues, and the beach would be packed today. Charlie had a lot of crowd issues but had agreed to go. He told Joshua to pack a paper bag just in case she had an anxiety attack. He couldn’t do it himself without her knowing about it.

“I don’t like crowds.” Charlie was a little anxious about the beach.

“Don’t worry, darlin’. I’ll be there. I promise nothing will happen to you.” Ayden stole a quick peck on the cheek and started for the door.

Charlie tripped, like she usually did, when he caught her off guard like that. Maybe she would get used to his sweet kisses. Maybe they would forever throw her off balance.

## Chapter 11

Ayden led the way into Evelyn's where babies were being passed around. Charlie held on to the back of his shorts by his belt loop, and he instinctively wanted to protect her. He thought to pull her into his arms and reassure her that everything would be all right.

Stephanie beat him to it.

"Charlie, thank God! Come out back with me. I have to talk to you." Stephanie grabbed her by the arm and tugged her away.

Ayden smiled. It was better this way. Tom nudged him and motioned back out the front door. Ayden followed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know she was going to track you down, man." Tom smiled. He hoped she would, and she did. He knew the moment he saw them together that she was the one for Ayden. Charlie had the patience of a saint. Six months in hiding would be hard on anyone. Hiding out at Ayden's was like living in a dungeon for six months. Good thing she made the best of it.

"It's fine. I'm actually glad she did. I missed our date." Ayden grabbed the top of the porch and stretched. It really was a beautiful day. "I can't believe I let it slip away from me."

"Well, you're not on the job anymore. I didn't know what to tell Noel." Tom settled into one of the rocking chairs. "That sister of yours is a real pain in the ass when she doesn't get her way."

"I know." Ayden laughed. "She still wants me to come home and marry Jessica."

"Yes, she does," Tom agreed. "I guess she thinks the old flame's still burning."

"Jessica has no doubt led her to believe that. I want a family, but one of my own. She has three kids, two ex-husbands, a little late to decide all along she wanted me."

"I agree. I don't think Noel cares about Jessica as much as having you home again. I was up for a position in Quantico; she threw a fit." Tom groaned.

"I warned you when you got involved with her. Noel got all the drama queen genes." Ayden laughed. "I spoiled her rotten, I know. She has never forgiven me for leaving, and though she understands why I need to be near Evelyn, *her* full blooded sister, she hates that I'm not there with her."

"She doesn't like that Joshua won't move to Tennessee. She thought for sure Evelyn would make him leave and come be near her," Tom confessed. "I told her we could move here. There's an office in Charlotte."

"Good luck. The only way Noel would move is if it were her idea." Ayden laughed again. *Stubborn woman*. That's where he got most of his ideas that women were difficult and always ready to disagree with a man, his little sister.

"Ayden?" Noel stepped outside with Evelyn behind her. "We have to talk."

"Talk." Ayden's face drew into a grimace. He was in no mood for her today. He was happy damn it. Wasn't that good enough?

"I don't agree with you keeping her a secret from me." Noel swatted Tom on the leg making him uncross his legs so she could sit on him. "But I am willing to accept the fact that she will be around a while. Evelyn even offered her a job."

"What?" Ayden looked at Evelyn who shrugged.

"I thought you guys were a couple, and it hurt my feelings that you wouldn't tell me something like that. Evelyn explained that you're friends. That Charlie needs your help right now." Noel crossed her arms feeling bad for snapping at Charlie earlier.

If she had known the woman had been through so much, she wouldn't have. It was hard enough being away from Evelyn most of her life, now Ayden was gone, too. Evelyn had protected her and spoiled her when she was younger. Ayden had picked up that role when she moved in with his parents.

"You know I am a passionate person when it comes to my family. I love you both so much. I miss you both. I don't want Page growing up only seeing you guys on holidays. Plus now I have Joshua's family to compete with." Noel felt Tom's soothing touch on her back. The man had a heart of gold.

"You're not competing with anyone." Evelyn reassured her little sister. It was extremely hard being away from Noel since she spent most of her adult life searching for her. Their stepfather had killed their mother, and Noel testified against him. They separated them and sent her to live with Ayden and his mother. Evelyn went into the foster care system. She was told her little sister was dead. "I wouldn't ask you to make Tom leave his job and his life to come here. Don't ask me to do that to Joshua."

"We could come here though, if you're both so damn determined to stay here." Noel hated that they wouldn't come back home, but she always made the best of things. She always had hope for the future. Now that she was over her mad spell, she really thought about it.

"He could get a job in Charlotte. They have an office there." Ayden started right in. Evelyn loved Noel, had almost died trying to find and protect her. The least the kid could do was move a couple states over for her big sister. "I know the guy in charge. I do a couple training exercises with them each year."

"Well, Tom, I guess we're moving to North Carolina." Noel looked at her husband as if she didn't just steamroll that decision on him. "How far is Charlotte from here?"

"Three hours." Ayden smiled. "You have a way of working things out, Noel."

"I know." She shrugged. "So, you like Charlie, huh?"

"I do," Ayden admitted. It was getting easier to admit it every time he said it.

"Well, I'll give her a chance, but I warn you I'm not going to be easy on her. You're my big brother. I don't want you to get hurt like before." Noel pushed up from Tom and headed back inside.

"Did you turn her into a tyrant?" Evelyn asked.

"I thought it was you," Ayden answered.

“It’s hormones. She’s pregnant again. We were trying to wait, but apparently Noel can’t remember to take a pill every morning.” Tom lifted out of the chair. “What, you thought she just gained weight?”

“Yeah, actually I did.” Ayden shook his head.

“Don’t tell her you know. She wanted to wait until after the holiday.” Tom shrugged and headed back inside.

“Well, what are you hiding, Evelyn?” Ayden joked.

“Actually, I’m pregnant, too.” Evelyn laughed. “Don’t tell anyone, only Joshua knows.”

“Jesus. Is everyone pregnant?” Ayden laughed. It was going to be an interesting weekend.

Evelyn went inside, and Charlie stepped out on the porch.

“Hey, you hiding out?” Charlie sat in the rocking chair.

“No, family conference.” Ayden took the rocker next to her. “How’s Stephanie?”

“Married,” Charlie whispered.

“What?” Ayden couldn’t believe this. One more secret and he would check for cameras. This had to be a set up, a joke they were all playing on him.

“They eloped last night.” Charlie looked around to make sure no one else could hear. “They feel so guilty today. I told her not to worry, just go ahead with the wedding as planned. No one has to know right?”

“Not around here.” Ayden looked at Charlie. Was she keeping secrets, too? “What else do you know?”

“What else do you know?” Charlie wasn’t telling him about Evelyn.

“Evelyn and Noel are both pregnant,” Ayden whispered. It was nice to have someone to share things with.

“Wow. This is exciting don’t you think?” Charlie had relaxed again. In the great scheme of what was going on this family, her feelings for Ayden wouldn’t take up time on anyone’s list of concerns.

The door opened and everyone filed out with beach bags and children.

“You ready?” Joshua looked full of life and energy today.

“What the hell.” Ayden stood and held a hand out for Charlie.

“Can we ride with you, Ayden?” Gray and Chase Jr. looped their arms around each of Charlie’s legs.

“Take ‘em.” Ethan struggled with the assorted equipment in his arms. “Seats are in the vans.”

“Go grab your car seats.” Ayden couldn’t say no when Charlie put her hands down and patted their heads, at the same time giving him a pleading look. She liked the little monsters, and they thought she was funny. Probably why she liked them, he decided. The woman had the worst jokes ever.

The two boys stormed past Ethan almost knocking him over in the push to get to the vans to grab their car seats.

“You need anything from the house, darlin’?” Ayden stepped closer to Charlie.

“I don’t think so. I have sun-block and a change of clothes in my bag.” Charlie looked at all the gear Malcolm, Chase, and Ethan were loading in the vans. “If I don’t have something, I’m sure they do.”

“It’s going to be packed at the beach today.” He wasn’t sure how well she was going to do with a crowd the size they were no doubt headed into. Charlie shrugged her shoulders and smiled. Ayden nodded. “Let’s do it.”

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The boys were struggling with the car seats Joshua had unlocked and handed them. Ayden grabbed the seats and headed to his truck. After locking them in place, he lifted each kid in and strapped him in. Charlie sat in the passenger seat, and when Ayden got in the driver seat, he took in the scene completely.

Two happy kids in the backseat, one happy woman next to him, life was good. Looking in the rearview mirror, he smiled. His was the only easy going vehicle at the moment. The wives were directing the husbands, and the seating arrangements of the two minivans changed at least once more while they waited.

“You guys like Elvis?” Ayden turned to face the boys waiting on the others to get situated in their vehicles.

“Who?” Gray asked.

“You don’t know who Elvis is?” Charlie feigned shock. “He’s the king of rock and roll.”

“My daddy likes rock and roll.” Chase nodded.

“I love Elvis,” Charlie told them.

“Me too.” Gray nodded.

“Yeah, me too,” Chase agreed.

“Good thing or you guys would be walking to the beach,” Ayden teased as he turned the engine on and waited for the minivans to pass before pulling out.

“Ayden,” Charlie scolded him playfully. “You guys sing?”

The boys shrugged. “Well you have to sing when you listen to Elvis.” Charlie hit play. She knew Ayden already had a CD in there. He rarely listened to anything else.

By the time they made it to the beach, the boys were twisting and crooning along with Ayden and Charlie to “Don’t Be Cruel.” Of course, they missed most of the words, but they were trying to make Elvis lips like Charlie had showed them. They knew the chorus to a few songs in no time. Their favorite song they were singing now.

“You ain’t nothing but a hound dog...” The boys shook their butts and curled their lips as they followed behind Ayden and in front of Charlie.

“What in the world?” Megan looked at her son and his cousin.

“Elvis, mom.” Chase gave her the lip.

“Oh I see.” Megan patted him on the head. “Thank you, Ayden.”

He winked at her, grabbed two small beach buckets out of the van and handed one to each of the boys. He grabbed a couple chairs by the straps and slung them over his shoulder, then grabbed the cooler.

"Come on guys. This is man's work." Ayden headed toward the beach with the toddlers trailing behind feeling useful.

"We're men, mom," Gray told Grace as he passed giving her Elvis lips.

They started singing again making Ayden laugh.

"What are they doing with their lips?" Grace smiled looking at Charlie.

"Elvis." Charlie shrugged. "Can I grab anything?"

"We got it," Joshua said as the rest of the men filed past with their arms full.

"You get used to the testosterone after a while." Evelyn sighed and followed behind the men. "Joshua, you be careful going down the stairs."

Charlie followed suit with Stephanie behind everyone else.

"Malcolm thinks we should plan for a quick wedding, like as soon as the church has an open day back home," Stephanie whispered.

"Sounds like a good plan." Charlie nodded.

"You and Ayden will be there, right?" Stephanie held Charlie's hand tight.

"I know I will," Charlie reassured her. "I'm so glad you're here."

"No, I'm glad you're here." Stephanie beamed.

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The beach was packed with tourists and others. Charlie stayed near the blankets and the tent shades. Grace stayed under the tent with the babies applying sun-block to herself and the kids every thirty minutes. Noel and Evelyn took a walk down the beach while Megan and Stephanie sunbathed. The guys played in the water body surfing, and when Chase Jr. and Gray wanted in they took turns watching them. Finally, Ethan and Chase began working on a sand castle with their sons. Malcolm and Stephanie headed off for a walk, Joshua and Tom sat on the blanket drying off, and the big bad Wolf finally came for Charlie.

"You haven't been in the water all day, darlin'." Ayden stood over her dripping with both water and mischief.

"I'm not much for the ocean. Things live in there." Charlie squirmed at the thought. People were fishing not too far from where they were swimming for crying out loud. Hadn't he heard of sharks?

"You can swim, right?" Ayden put a lot of suggestion in that question.

"Yeah," Charlie said cautiously.

"Good."

Without warning he had her lifted right off the blanket and tossed over his shoulder like a cave man. Charlie squealed and squirmed, but that only made her afraid



her boobs would pop out of the bathing suit top, so she held onto her top and tried to talk him out of it instead.

“Ayden, there are sharks in that water.” Charlie squealed.

“Bullshit.” Ayden pressed into the ocean with his woman on his shoulder. Charlie was so girly squealing and protesting, it made him feel good to torture her a bit.

“Ayden!” she screamed as he dove right into the water taking her with him.

Coming up for air, she swatted him. “Jerk.”

“Oh, darlin’, you looked so hot on that blanket I thought you might like to cool off,” he cooed and pulled her close to him.

“Is that a fish on my leg?” Charlie wrapped around him instinctively trying to get away from the unknown in the water.

“No, I think that’s me.” Ayden wrapped his arms around her more thoughtfully now. This is exactly what he wanted. Charlie, as close as possible right now. He had missed her all day. She sat on the blanket or under the tent with Grace, chatted with the women as they came and went, and held the babies. She didn’t come out and play with him. He was admittedly a little jealous of not having her undivided attention. The need to touch her again rode him hard.

“Not that.” Charlie calmed down and enjoyed the fact that he was holding her so closely. She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. He had been in the water or playing with the boys all day. She enjoyed his family, but she wanted to spend more time with him.

He smiled. Ayden relished the feel of her clinging to him now for protection. So much in fact, that he forgot his whole family was on the beach watching them.

When Ayden kissed her, she wasn’t prepared for it. It wasn’t a soft and gentle kiss like this morning. It was a hot biting kiss that could have boiled the water. Charlie opened her mouth and let him in. Her legs clenched around him as his sex began to grow against her. His tongue was thick and heavy, like everything else on his body. She could easily have forgotten where she was, but then something felt painful on her foot. Like a bite.

“Ouch!” Charlie jumped. “Ayden, something...Oww!”

“What?” Ayden was alarmed because she was really hurting, and it wasn’t from the little nibble he gave her.

“My foot, shit.” Charlie lifted her foot, and it was bleeding.

“Son of a bitch!” Ayden grabbed her foot almost knocking her over. He grabbed her hand and pulled her back up. Then he grabbed the line that was attached to the hook now in the side of her foot. “It’s a fishing hook, darlin’. Hang on.”

“It hurts.” Charlie was a little shocked.

“All right, hold on, darlin’. We gotta get you out of the water, so I can see this.” Ayden lifted her up and began the march out of the water. Tears began to stream down her cheeks as she saw the blood dripping from her right foot. It ripped at him to see her

in pain. The hook wouldn't kill her, but she didn't know that. He promised her nothing would happen today and here she was, bleeding.

"I don't want stitches or a shot, Ayden." Charlie sobbed. "I don't want to go to the hospital."

"We'll see. Just hang on, Charlie. Let's set you down and get a look at it." Ayden sat her down on the beach and grabbed her foot.

Charlie saw the blood and felt squeamish.

"Oh, it's okay, just a little fishing hook." Ayden knew he had to minimize the damage. She needed at least a stitch, and he didn't want to pull the hook out himself.

"Can you pull it out?" Charlie sobbed as Joshua and Tom approached and loomed over her.

"Pull what out?" Joshua bent to look at her foot that Ayden held with blood streaming down between it and his hand.

"Fishing hook." Ayden sighed.

"You're gonna have to go to the hospital to get it out, may even need a stitch or two." Tom nodded.

"No!" Charlie cried. "Ayden, you can pull it out. I won't cry."

"Please don't do that, darlin'." Ayden swallowed hard. She was trying to suck up her tears and be brave. Just the mention of hospital and she was already on the verge of a panic attack.

"Noel," Tom called up the beach to his wife and motioned for her. "She's a nurse. If she says you need to go, then you need to go."

"Ayden, please, I can't go to the hospital. I can't you know that." Charlie began hyperventilating. The last hospital she was in she saw Michael in the morgue.

"Joshua, grab a paper bag please." Ayden handed her foot off to Tom and moved beside her. He gave Tom a look that could have killed. Why did he have to keep saying hospital? "Charlie, it's okay, baby. Just look at me. Breathe."

Joshua returned with a paper bag and set Ethan, Chase, and Evelyn on crowd control. The last thing she needed was a bunch of people around her. Noel was looking at the foot now. Reassuring her it would be all right. Because of the holiday, EMT's were staged around the beach, and two were on their way now as a crowd of people gathered.

Charlie could see Ayden, but she couldn't hear him. Then he was fuzzy, then gone.

"Damn it!" Ayden shouted as she passed out. The EMT's were there with the first aid kit and checking her out.

"What happened?" one guy said.

"Fishing hook, right foot." Ayden pointed and held her head.

"This will probably need stitches," the other guy spoke.

"No shit." Ayden lifted Charlie up and began carrying her away.

"Sir...", the first man started.

“It’s okay. He’ll take her to the hospital. Thanks for your help.” Joshua blocked the EMT. Ayden would tear the man up if he tried to stop him now.

“I’ll go get the seats out of the back.” Ethan ran to catch up with the Wolf who was making great time in bare feet while carrying a six-foot woman. He grabbed Ayden’s keys and tossed his shoes in Charlie’s bag. The man would likely break into his own vehicle and hot wire it rather than walk back.

“Ayden,” Ethan called as the Wolf unlocked his door. He slowed down and gave him a quizzical look. “How the hell?”

“I keep a key hidden on the truck just in case.” Ayden nodded toward the door, and Ethan opened it.

“You never cease to amaze me with all of your super secret shit.” Ethan opened the back door to the double cab and unlatched the car seats. “Your shoes are in her bag and here.”

Ethan handed Ayden the keys. “Call us.”

“I will.” Ayden buckled Charlie in and headed around to the driver’s side.

## Chapter 12

Charlie woke up with her head in Ayden's lap. She was cold and uncomfortable. Her chest hurt and so did her head.

"Ouch." So did her foot.

"Hold still. He's almost done." Ayden stroked her hair, and she relaxed closing her eyes again.

"Am I in a hospital?" she whispered and felt her chest begin to tighten again. Damn panic attacks.

"You're with me. Keep your eyes closed and focus on me." Ayden stroked her cheek. The doctor was tying the last little stitch, only three. There wouldn't have been any, but the fisherman thought he hooked a fish and gave a good pull. The hook was barely in there, but Ayden wouldn't take chances with Charlie. "You remember when I told you about SEAL training?"

"Yes." Charlie closed her eyes tight and concentrated on Ayden. She was in a hospital.

"We stood out in the ocean all hours of the day and night, freezing our asses off." Ayden still stroked her cheek. The doctor nodded quietly and left the paperwork on the bed with directions and a prescription for an antibiotic. "Never in a million years would I believe that some fisherman would catch your foot in a body of water that size."

"I'm not a lucky woman." Charlie laughed. It was absurd. They had been in the water all day. As soon as she got in, something happened.

She felt Ayden picking her up.

"Keep your eyes closed. Just talk to me." Ayden walked out of the room and down the hall.

"Are we going back to the beach?" Charlie asked.

"No, I think everyone was packing up when we left." Ayden guessed at that. They had planned to spend the day there and then catch the fireworks, but with all the excitement, he wasn't going back. "We can see the fireworks from home."

"I'm freezing," Charlie admitted.

"That's because you're almost naked in an air-conditioned building. We're almost outside." Ayden passed through the sliding doors and into the scorching July heat. "There we go."

Charlie opened her eyes to the blinding sunlight. She looked at Ayden as he still carried her across the parking lot. "You're cold, too."

"That's because *I'm* almost naked, darlin'. There wasn't a lot of time to put clothes on *and* get you to the hospital." He laughed as he sat her inside the truck. "Look what you did to my truck."

Charlie looked at the blood-stained floor and felt bad. He loved this truck. It was immaculate. He opened the driver's side door and slid in.

"I'm sorry about the mess."

"I was just teasing you, darlin'. It's just a truck. You hungry?" Ayden tilted her chin toward him. She was on the verge of tears again. "What's wrong, darlin'?"

"I'm embarrassed." Charlie tried to look away, but he held her chin in place on his fingers.

"About what?"

"Everything, crying, passing out, God I'm a mess." Charlie had no choice but to look at him.

"Why are you embarrassed about that?" Ayden let her go and started up the truck. The hot sun had warmed them quickly, and he needed air again.

"Now everyone will think I'm a nut case." Charlie fished through her bag and pulled on a T-shirt and shorts.

"If you are, then you came to the right place, darlin'. You know how messed up Noel and Evelyn are. Grace and Megan aren't much better. Stephanie, well, she's related to Joshua, so that should sum it up for you." Ayden laughed. "Nobody's perfect, Charlie."

"You are." Charlie looked at him.

"No, darlin', I'm not." Ayden let out a long breath. Here was the crux of his problem with Charlie. She thought he was perfect. How he had no idea. "I have flaws, Charlie, lots of them."

"Not character flaws."

How could he argue with that without telling her the horrible things he had done in his past? He didn't want Charlie to look at him as a killer, but he had killed before. He didn't want her to think of him as a failure, but he had failed her sister and the other girls by not catching on to the clues in time. He had failed Evelyn by not revealing himself as her brother until years after he knew her. The list could go on.

"I'm not perfect, darlin'." Ayden left it at that. Charlie surprised him by sliding her hand over to his thigh and just resting it there. It felt nice, reassuring.

Charlie knew he blamed himself for a lot of things. Things he had no control over, things that he was required to do in the line of duty. Ayden wasn't perfect, but he was perfect for her. He just didn't understand that yet. She placed her hand on his thigh to reassure him that it didn't matter to her.

He grew quiet and distant.

"I'm hungry." Charlie squeezed his thigh.

"We're almost home now. I'll order us a pizza when we get in." Ayden shook his head. She had to wait until they were on the bridge, less than ten minutes from the house, to say she was hungry.

"That sounds good." Charlie smiled. "When is everyone leaving?"

"Sunday."

"You're ready for them to go?" She knew that tone of voice.

"Yep."

"Me too?" She squeezed his leg again.

“Nope.”

“You sure about that?” Charlie smiled as they pulled up in front of his house, and he realized everyone was there, at his house, probably waiting on them.

“I’m sure.” Ayden pulled into his space and leaned over to kiss her, but the passenger door opened, and Joshua yanked her out. He was carrying her up the stairs while Evelyn and Noel fawned over her from both sides. “What the hell?”

“You coming in or what?” Tom poked his head into the truck and looked at Ayden. All the women were worried and so were the boys, so they packed up and came home. Ayden looked a little worn out. Tom understood why. He had a woman in his life. Tom gave him a knowing look and laughed as he walked away.

Inside the house Joshua sat Charlie on the couch, and Evelyn propped her foot on a pillow. The two boys were hanging on the back of the couch telling her how worried they were. Ayden headed up to take a shower. Charlie was out of his reach for now. The feelings that shot through him were new. Possessive *and* protective. He wanted her to himself, he wanted to be the one to pamper her, was that more jealousy?

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When he returned downstairs, she was alone watching television. He knew he had spent a while in the shower and even longer in his bedroom getting dressed and checking e-mail. He wanted to give them a chance to wind down. Apparently, they had and moved on. At least they fed her. Pizza, they stole his idea, too.

“Pizza’s on the counter.” Charlie pointed over the couch.

“Thanks.” Ayden pulled two cold slices out of the box, slid them on a paper plate, grabbed a soda from the refrigerator, and headed to the living room. “Where did everybody go?”

“To watch the fireworks.” Charlie tried to move her legs, but he just lifted them, sat down, and pulled them in his lap.

“You want me to take you out to the porch so you can see them?” Ayden slid a hand along her calve. Her legs were a mile long and smooth as silk except where the sand still stuck to her.

“No, I’m beat. I need to take a shower. I still have sand all over me.” Charlie closed her eyes at his touch. The moments they shared in private were so good. She couldn’t wait for everyone to leave. Then she could have him all to herself.

“I’ll run you a bath. You need to keep that foot out of there. You don’t want all the sand and stuff running down into those stitches.” Ayden patted her legs and looked at the foot. Her first scar and it was his fault. He hauled her out to the ocean, and some other man tried to reel her back in. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Dragging you out to the water. If I would have just left you alone...”

"I wouldn't have had the chance to enjoy that kiss." Charlie searched his eyes and found him feeling guilty. She just knew it.

"Don't you dare blame yourself for this. That guy had no business fishing that close to people." Charlie wanted to kick him for even thinking it was his fault. He took on way too much responsibility. That's why she didn't tell him about the ordeal in Vegas. He would be on full alert and hunting again. No need. She was away from there and safe, here with him. "I'm just glad it caught me and not one of the boys."

"Now you'll have a scar." Ayden looked at the stitches.

"And someday I'll have stretch marks and wrinkles. Hell, I already have wrinkles." Charlie pointed to her eyes. "Right here in the corners."

"You don't have wrinkles. I have wrinkles." Ayden pointed to his forehead and his cheeks.

"Those aren't age wrinkles. They're character lines from smiling or frowning or thinking." Charlie knew they were more from frowning and thinking than smiling, but they looked the best when he smiled. "I think they look sexy on you."

"Thanks, darlin'." Ayden smiled. She had no reason to be attracted to him, yet she was. Any man with eyes that could see was attracted to Charlie. He wanted to rip the heads off the EMT's that came to check her out. They perused her body more than her foot, and that was what pissed him off the most.

The phone rang, and Ayden got up to answer it. Charlie heard his side of the conversation, and he seemed a little stressed by the end of it though as far as she could tell it was just a meeting of some sort next week.

"Charlie, I have to tell you something, and in light of our current situation, you're probably going to be mad." Ayden paced at the foot of the couch.

"What?" Charlie sat up anticipating something horrible.

"I forgot about a date I had made for next week. I would cancel, but it's one of the other instructor's cousins, and she's only in town for a few days. He already told her I would take her out." Ayden didn't want to take her out. He wanted to stay home with Charlie.

"Oh, well, that's okay." Charlie was a little jealous, but he had made the commitment prior to their agreement. Plus it gave her wiggle room to test his emotional progress. "Are there any more dates lined up I should know about?"

"No." Ayden held his hands up. "This was the only one. I swear it."

"It's okay, Ayden. I mean we're just getting to know each other on this level, right? Maybe a date would be good for you. Maybe I should..."

"Like hell. Look, I have to take her to dinner, that's it. Leon needs to take his wife out for their anniversary, and his cousin happened to schedule her visit around that day. It's not even a real date. It's more like a favor." Ayden propped his hands on his hips and scowled at her. How could she think it was a good idea for him to date other women? The mere thought of Charlie out with another man made him seethe with anger. "Do you want to come along?"

“No, don’t be ridiculous.” Charlie was satisfied with his reaction. Now she just prayed the woman wouldn’t grab his attention.

“Come on. Let’s get you in the tub.” Ayden pulled her up into his arms.

“I can walk, you know?”

“I know.” He kissed her nose. “But I like carrying you, makes me feel like a cave man. Besides, I haven’t been to the gym all week. Lifting you is a good workout.”

“Ayden.” Charlie feigned offense. She knew she wasn’t fat. He knew it, too, but she was tall and had a lot of lean muscle. Not the lightest feather in the pile that’s for sure.

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Ayden ran the bath while Charlie sat on the commode watching him. She could have drawn her own bathwater, but he insisted. His big body sat on the edge of his tub, and he circled the water occasionally with his hand to make sure it was warm and not hot. The night was coming to an end, and she hated not sleeping next to him. Her foot could play a sympathy card in that direction, but she didn’t want to overplay her hand either.

“Are you going to bathe me, too?” Charlie teased.

“What, you think I should?” Ayden would love to, but he was the one slowing things down. Bathing Charlie wouldn’t slow anything down.

“You can if you want to. I mean I can’t walk, can’t run water, why should I be able to wash myself?” It was his idea to slow down not hers. She would jump ahead any safe spaces she could at any sign of weakness.

“Hummm.” He thought about it long and hard, just like he was getting. “It does make sense, but I think I better not.”

“That’s too bad.” Charlie started undressing as he turned the water off. He wanted to be the tough guy, fine. “Can you at least pull the bottoms off for me?”

“Sure, darlin’.” Damn, that didn’t work. “You need help getting in the tub?”

“I think so, yes.” Charlie pouted and nodded innocently. She felt horns growing out of her head she was being so devilish.

Ayden slid her shorts and swimsuit bottoms off at the same time carefully pulling them over her feet. There she was, naked again. Why couldn’t she have shown up in November? Instead, it was hot as the devil and Ayden knew why. He was looking at her in the flesh. Temptation, yes, Charlie was tempting him, so he returned the favor.

Ayden trailed his big hands over her legs tenderly, slid them up her sides and then around her back. Charlie was so enraptured by his caress she closed her eyes and tilted her head back. His touch affected her so much. Slowly he slid them around then finally in place to lift her. He sat her in the warm water. Charlie somehow managed to remember to leave the right foot on the side of the tub. She thought for sure he would leave, but he sat on the side of the tub instead.



“Are you going to bathe me?” Charlie said hopeful.

“Nope, just thought I’d watch.” Ayden dipped the washcloth in the water next to her and grabbed the soap. He lathered the cloth and handed it to her. The tub was large and deep, and he bought it for that exact reason. Charlie was realizing that it was going to take some balance, and he stayed close in case she really needed his help.

Charlie took the cloth and managed to get most of her clean before asking him for help. Keeping her balance with one foot high in the air was a little more challenging in a slippery bathtub. Ayden’s tub was big. Large enough for two people, but just right for a man of his size.

“Can you get my back please?” Charlie was frustrated and agitated at his pleasure in her predicament. His smile was kicked up, and he almost laughed. It took all the seduction right out of the moment and left her defeated, again. “This was supposed to be a seduction technique not a stand up routine.”

“Darlin’, you don’t have to do a whole lot to seduce a man.” Ayden actually laughed. He knew she was working a new angle. He scrubbed her back. “But I do appreciate your efforts.”

“You are impossible.” Charlie laughed in frustration. If it didn’t take a lot to seduce Ayden, then she had no idea how to get the job done. Ten years she built their friendship and made passing suggestions. He never accepted. She had exposed herself openly several times in the past few days, and he still didn’t bite.

“Me?” Ayden dipped the cloth in the water and watched the soap slide down her long lean back. Charlie was completely naked, and she wanted him. He knew he liked her, but he also knew she thought she loved him. He wouldn’t take advantage just because she wanted him to. “I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop, darlin’. You have been pulling out all the stops, and that won’t last. We need to learn about each other. Not just, go at it like two teenagers. There’s too much at stake. If all I wanted was to get laid, I could have done that several times over by now and not just with you.”

“Excuse me?” Charlie felt a little indignant. Yes, she had come on a little strong, but that was because ten years of polite conversation had gotten her nowhere. How could he lump her in the same category as other women?

“You heard me.” Ayden was still teasing.

“Well, you won’t have to worry about that anymore.” Charlie pushed his butt off the tub with her shoulder in a quick nudge causing him to scramble to his feet. She pulled the stopper with her toes, and as the water drained down, her temper raised up.

“Worry about what? What’s wrong with you?” Ayden stood there bemused.

“Will you hand me that towel?” Charlie brought her stitched foot into the tub standing like a flamingo. Once all the water had drained, she stood with one hand ready to snatch the towel.

“Charlie...what is it?” Ayden handed her the towel and noticed a new expression. One he had never seen before on Charlie.

“You dare lump me in with the rest of those hookers you’ve been dating. I’ve known you for over ten years, Ayden. So yes, maybe I did come on a little strong, but don’t worry. The fire’s out now.” She wrapped the towel around herself and climbed out of the big tub refusing his help. Her foot was a little sore to walk on, but she wasn’t about to be all girly in front of him right now. Oh no, he wanted the other shoe to drop. Well, he was getting it, right on his toes.

“Charlie...”

“And pulling out the stops, I haven’t done anything for you I didn’t plan to do everyday from now on. But I may just rethink that plan now.” Charlie headed across the hall to her bedroom. Ayden was right behind her.

“You’re sleeping in here?” Ayden wanted her to sleep in his bed, so he could tend to her. He was trying to pamper her, but now he had apparently made her mad. Shit, the other shoe was in his mouth along with his foot.

“Oh yes, I’d hate to rush you.” Charlie shut the door in his face and then limped to the bed. She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. She wanted to open the door and ask him in, but she knew better. Apparently, Ayden had women throwing themselves at him, and she had made the same mistake. It was time to regroup.

Ayden started to knock on the door, but people were trailing back in downstairs. He would have to deal with Charlie later, in private.

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Ayden headed down to mingle with the family.

Stephanie practically bulldozed over him to get up the stairs.

“You okay?” Ayden grabbed her arm halting her for a second.

“Fine.” Stephanie raised her eyebrows suspiciously and tugged free. “Is she in her room?”

“Yep.” Ayden shook his head and gave up. Women were not on his communication plane today.

At Charlie’s door, Stephanie knocked softly then heard the sobs and opened it anyways. Charlie was wrapped in a towel dripping wet and her foot was bleeding. She had busted a stitch stomping back to her room.

“What happened?” Stephanie sat next to her.

“I busted a stitch. It hurts, but I’m not telling him that. Jerk. God.” Charlie wiped her eyes and looked at Stephanie. “He said if he just wanted sex he could have already had it several times with other women. What does that mean? That he doesn’t know me any better than a stranger he meets or goes on a blind date with? All this time I was afraid I didn’t know enough about him, he doesn’t know me at all.”

“Men are ridiculous. Malcolm’s the same way. He won’t consummate our marriage because we eloped, and he feels bad. The whole reason we eloped was to have sex. Now I’m married and still a virgin!” Stephanie hugged Charlie.

“Malcolm doesn’t want to hurt you. He wants to make sure you don’t regret one single moment with him.” Charlie smiled. The poor guy had acted on a moment of passion, fueled by Stephanie, and then realized all too late the consequences.

“I know.” Stephanie shrugged. “I guess Ayden’s the same. He didn’t say he didn’t want you, right? He just wants you to know that it’s not just sex he’s after. That’s a good thing, right?”

“When you put it that way, I guess it is.” Charlie laughed. “I’m so used to being naked, or almost naked, around guys who are always wanting more. Being in that environment for so long I forget he’s different in that way. Maybe because I have wanted him for so long I just turned into one of those groping guys that the waitresses at the casino always complain about.”

“Me too. We’re pigs, Charlie, shameless horn dogs. If we were men, we’d be appalled by our actions. I’m practically forcing a man to have sex with me.” Stephanie laughed. “It seems absurd, but it’s true.”

“You’re right. I mean if he took all his clothes off and masturbated in front of me, I would have thought he was a pervert.” Charlie was laughing harder now.

“Poor Malcolm, he’s afraid to be in a room alone with me because I constantly try to corner him.” Stephanie wiped the tears now breaking through the laughs.

“Look at us!” Charlie laughed.

The women continued to laugh and talk upstairs. Downstairs Ayden found Malcolm on the back porch. He had a pack of cigarettes stashed for emergencies, and Charlie had him in the frame of mind to smoke. One minute they were laughing and playing, the next she was sleeping alone. His gut was tearing in half over it. He knew they needed to take things slow, but at the same time, he really wanted to be with her because she felt so comfortable.

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Malcolm jumped when Ayden landed a hand on his shoulder.

“You all right?” Ayden asked.

“Yeah.” He bobbed his head looking around toward the door. “Stephanie has me a little jumpy right now.”

“I feel your pain.” Ayden sat on the steps instead of in a chair.

“No, believe me. This is my personal hell.” Malcolm opened the screen and shut the back door completely sealing him and Ayden off from the family inside. “Can you keep a secret?”

“I’ve been known to.” Ayden smiled.

“I know, but I mean a family secret.” Malcolm considered it then blurted. “We’re married. Stephanie tricked me. She got me all worked up and then at a moment I couldn’t say no...Bam.” Malcolm hit his fist to his hand for emphasis.

“So what’s the problem?” Ayden relaxed, a little squabble with Charlie was nothing compared to the kid’s problem. At least Charlie wasn’t chasing him down the aisle.

“I can’t...you know.” Malcolm was looking at the door again. “You know.”

“Oh. I see. Nerves?” Ayden asked seriously.

“No, I mean look...I’ve never, and she’s never. I want to make sure she doesn’t regret it. If we go home and get married in the church like she has planned since she was a little girl, no problem. Now, if we do this, I have to lie to my grandfather, the minister, and so will she.” Malcolm paced the porch. “I must seem like a prude, a wimp, an idiot...”

“No, you seem like a man of character. Not a lot of us around.” Ayden leaned against the rail. “Want me to put you out of your misery?”

“How?” Malcolm stopped and faced him.

“Your marriage isn’t legal. Charlie told me and I made a call. That guy’s not a minister or a justice of the peace, so you’re not married. This is North Carolina not Las Vegas. Tell her you called about picking up the license, and they explained the scam.” Ayden watched as Malcolm’s whole body relaxed. The kid had stuck to his convictions and good thing too as, they would have regretted it. “How much were you out?”

“Two hundred.” Malcolm sat in the chair on the porch. “Why would someone do that?”

“Military town, easy money, once enough people show up to pick up a license and don’t get one, he’ll move on.” Ayden nodded. “Women are ferocious when they want something.”

“Yeah, Stephanie seemed so meek and mild, a little on the diva side when it comes to maintenance, but always a lady. Now, I have to watch my ass, seriously.” Malcolm shook his head.

“Well, don’t piss her off or you’ll go from burning hot passion to ice cold showers in no time.” Ayden spoke from recent experience. “Good luck, kid.”

Malcolm thanked Ayden and headed back in the house. He felt safer now that he wasn’t married. He could look Joshua in the eye again, and once Stephanie knew the truth about her nuptials, she was sure to cool off.

Ayden enjoyed the breeze that kicked up and the rustling of people in his home. It wasn’t so bad having family around, especially the kind that was headed out the door after him now.

“Ayden, Ayden!” Gray and Chase Jr. stopped in front of him. “We saw the fireworks.”

The toddlers were awake well past bedtime and it showed. He talked to them and listened to the play by play of the entire firework display. Once Ethan came to retrieve them, he said his goodnights and farewells to everyone. Noel and Tom climbed the stairs with Page already sound asleep and turned in for the night.

Ayden locked all the doors and checked the windows. He was tired, but he didn't want to go to bed. He at least wanted to make sure Charlie didn't need anything.

Outside her door, he tapped lightly. Maybe she was asleep and he could just go to bed and not have to deal with it tonight.

"Come in." Charlie was wide awake and reading. Noel and Tom had said goodnight, and Noel put a butterfly stitch where the other had popped out. It might make a wider scar, but it was so small already Charlie didn't care. Who would be looking at her feet anyways?

"I brought you a glass of water." Ayden made the peace offering. "How's your foot?"

"Thank you." Charlie took the glass and sat it on the nightstand. Ayden was reaching for her foot when she pulled it back not wanting him to see. He caught the foot and lifted it for inspection. "Fine."

"What happened?"

"Apparently you shouldn't throw a temper tantrum with stitches in your foot." Charlie pulled her foot away from his scrutiny.

"Hmmm." Ayden crossed his arms and looked down at her. She was wearing some little green silk nightgown looking so feminine and tasty. "I'm not sure what happened earlier. I'm sorry if I said anything that...well, I don't want you to be mad."

"I'm not." Charlie was over it.

"Good." Ayden was out of reasons to be in her room. Charlie made no move to coerce him into bed like he'd hoped she would. He began to wonder if she was lying about not being mad. He wanted to sleep with her tonight. Last night he had the most restful sleep he could remember. No nightmares, no dreams at all, just a peaceful solid sleep. He cleared his throat. "Well, I guess that's goodnight then."

"Goodnight, Ayden." Charlie wasn't about to ask him to sleep with her. Of course, she wanted him to. She desperately wanted to curl up on his chest and put an end to a long day. Maybe she needed to look for an apartment because it wouldn't be easy to take things slow when they shared the same living space.

"Goodnight, darlin'." Ayden leaned over her and kissed her forehead. He pulled himself away and walked out her door. It took all of his effort to push his body out of her space. Once in his room he plopped onto the bed and prepared for a restless night. He was already thinking of reasons to go back to her room.

## Chapter 13

The doorbell rang.

Ayden was only half asleep when the doorbell rang. He looked at the clock and realized it was two in the morning. Alert and alarmed he was on his feet and down the stairs. At the door, he greeted Evelyn.

"Is everything all right?" Ayden looked her over and then past her to the quiet street.

"No." Evelyn felt like a maniac, completely consumed with her thoughts. "I know it's two in the morning, but I need cookies."

"Cookies? What the hell are you talking about, darlin'?" Ayden stepped back and watched her tromp inside.

Evelyn went to his counter and searched for the cookies Noel had sent *him*. They were in the cookie jar. *Thank God*. She picked up the whole jar and took one out. "I feel crazy. It's like I have to have them."

"Well, I have to admit you do look kinda crazy." Ayden laughed. Evelyn was in her pajamas, her hair was half out of the braid she wore, and she had on Joshua's sandals. "What happened to your stash?"

"I ate them all. I had one left last night. Tonight I kept telling myself that I didn't really want them, but I did." Evelyn clung to the cookie jar. "I'm sorry. I feel like a fool, but I knew you had some."

"It's all right. Noel made Tom go out about two hours ago to pick up tacos." Ayden sat at the kitchen table. This was why he was here. Moments like this, when he could actually be a big brother to Evelyn. The woman had been a survivor all her life. She didn't trust men until she met Joshua, and she had been very selective since then. "You can take 'em all."

"Oh I planned to." Evelyn laughed. "Joshua is going to kill me for sneaking down here in the middle of the night."

"I'm glad you did." Ayden tapped his fingers on the table. "So you gave Charlie a job?"

"Yeah, I probably should have talked to you about that first." Evelyn put the lid back on the cookie jar and held it in her lap. She wasn't used to asking anyone for permission. The last year had been quite an adjustment. Marrying Joshua was a huge change, then having Ayden determined to be in her life. For a woman who spent years pushing men away she was effectively drawing them in now.

"No, it's your shop. What will she be doing?" Ayden really wanted to know what Evelyn thought of her, but he was working into that.

"Cut the shit, Wolf." Evelyn looked at him directly and smiled.

"How do you do that?" Ayden leaned forward and crossed his arms on the table.

“Ayden.” Evelyn was getting sleepy again, and everyone was leaving tomorrow. Ayden had a lot on his mind, and he never beat around the bush, until now. Charlie really had an effect on him.

“All right, damn woman.” Ayden put his head face down and muffled his words. “I like her.”

“I know.” Evelyn understood Ayden completely. He had been a loner for so long. Loving family was safe. Loving someone else was dangerous.

“I promised Michael that I would look after her, I would keep her safe.” Ayden felt the tension in his chest. “I can’t risk it.”

“No, you *won’t* risk it. There’s a difference.” Evelyn touched the top of his head. It was a real honor to be privy to Ayden’s trust. “I like her Ayden, a lot. She’s honest and sweet, most of all she adores you. Insufferable ogre that you are.”

“So what happens when I’m not perfect anymore?” Ayden grumbled.

“You’ll always be perfect to her. Just like Joshua will always be perfect to me. He has flaws. He snores, he’s over protective, and even though he knows I can take care of myself he still insists on doing so many things.” Evelyn patted his head. “Let her take care of you, Ayden. You deserve that.”

He lifted his head. “How did you know she was trying to take care of me?”

“She told me the first night. She told us all that she was here to take care of you for as long as you’d let her. If you didn’t let her in, she was going back to Sweden or Switzerland?” Evelyn waved her hand in the air. Was Ayden really this blind?

“She didn’t tell me that.” Ayden felt a new sense of alarm. Charlie was so drastic in her plans, and he didn’t want to think of her leaving him.

“Well I have to admit it sent up a stalker flag for me, so I had her checked out.” Evelyn confessed. “She’s clean, Ayden. There was no reason for her to leave Vegas, except you. Once she told us about the meeting each year and your snazzy hairdos I knew she wasn’t a threat to you.”

“I’ve been tempted to run the check, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it.” Ayden put his head back down. “I’m glad you like her.”

“I need to get home before Joshua comes looking for me in his underwear.” Evelyn stood holding onto the cookie jar. Watching Ayden made her miss Joshua. She needed to run home and tell him how much she loved him. “I’m glad you straightened that whole Malcolm and Stephanie thing out. I really didn’t want to get involved.”

“Do you know everything?” Ayden looked at her with total appreciation.

“I know what I have to know to keep Malcolm alive on this vacation.” Evelyn nodded and then rolled a shoulder admitting the truth. “I overheard Stephanie talking to the guy on the phone by accident. When I went to check to see if they were actually married, they told me about the scam and that they were closing in on the guy.”

“She’s still a virgin.”

“Thank God.” Evelyn sighed in relief. “You know his grandfather married us. I couldn’t look that man in the eye and lie to him.”

“Neither can Malcolm.” Ayden kissed her on the cheek and walked out to the sidewalk. He wouldn’t walk her home because she would take it as an insult, but he would stand there and watch till she got back into her own house.

“You don’t have to watch me walk home.” Evelyn shook her head.

“I could walk you.” Ayden crossed his arms.

“You know damn good and well I’m the most dangerous person out here tonight.” Evelyn propped one hand on her hip looking up at him seriously.

“No, I think he is.” Ayden waved to Joshua who stood on the porch in his underwear fuming. “Night.”

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Ayden laughed and headed back inside. Evelyn could be heard dragging the sandals down the sidewalk back toward her house. Joshua had obviously just woken up and realized she had been gone too long. Ayden locked the door and went back upstairs. He paused at Charlie’s door. He didn’t have a good reason to go in.

He pressed his ear to the door just to see if he could hear her breathing maybe.

“Hear anything?” Charlie asked.

Ayden practically jumped out of his skin. It had been a great many years since anyone had snuck up on him.

“God woman.” Ayden tried to regain his composure.

“I was thirsty.” Charlie shrugged and held out the glass of water. “What’s your excuse?”

“I just. I...never mind.” Ayden opened his door and went in. Charlie followed behind him setting the glass on his dresser.

“Are you spying on me, Ayden?” Charlie crossed her arms and looked down at him.

“No. I...” Ayden didn’t know what he was doing, but he was slipping up. He knew that for sure.

“Then why are you listening to my door at three in the morning?” Charlie really wanted to know. If he was going to spy on her, she would definitely have to get another place. He had to trust her.

Ayden looked up at her, and he felt his face burn hot with embarrassment. He cleared his throat, looked down, then up at her towering over him while he sat on the foot of his bed. He wasn’t about to get all sappy and tell her the truth—he missed her. He wanted to hold her and hear her breathe.

“I was feeling a little, you know. So I thought I would see if you were awake.” Ayden pulled out his best macho tough guy attitude and made no apologies. He knew a way out of this, one she would appreciate.



"I thought you didn't *want* to have sex with me." Charlie threw her arms up. The man was a puzzle. Hot one minute cold the next. If she didn't love him, she'd kick his ass.

Shit. She had him there, but he did make a promise.

"I don't," Ayden said smoothly. "I wanted something else from you."

"Ayden?" Charlie could see that look even through the darkness. The moonlight accented his gaze. His eyes were flaming. All the heat from his face was gone, and he was indeed the big bad Wolf, and she was about to be eaten. His hands reached out and grabbed her hips.

"I promised you, remember?" Ayden pulled her closer. "I always keep my promises."

"I...I...I uh." Charlie was stammering for words quickly losing her senses as his hands slid around and cupped her bottom.

"You want to destroy my good name?" Ayden asked and kissed her silk covered belly.

"No, I..."

"Good." Ayden tapped her on the bottom and hooked the panties pulling them down to her knees. He slowly slid his hands over her thighs and felt her hands on his shoulders. "Do you want me to taste you, Charlie?"

"Yes." Charlie was already breathless. This had taken her completely off guard.

Ayden slid the silk fabric up just enough to expose her. He didn't wait and he didn't touch. He immediately licked.

All she could do was gasp for air as his tongue plunged into her. It was so savage, and he continued to ravage her. The panties had her legs trapped. She couldn't spread them wider though she desperately wanted to. Ayden let the silk gown fall over his head, and he grabbed her ass pulling her closer.

"Ayden." Charlie grabbed his shoulders tightly. This was torture and he knew it.

"Oh, your foot." Ayden had wanted to really wind her up before letting her lay back and enjoy it. Just like, she had done to him, but she did have stitches, and he didn't want her in any discomfort. "I'm sorry, darlin'. I forgot."

"It's okay, just..."

Ayden stood and spun her around so that she was now the one next to the bed.

"I can..."

Ayden silenced her with a kiss. A hot, hungry kiss that shot through her like a bullet, ripping her nerves and making them tingle all over in such a fury she felt faint. He pressed her back onto the bed and moved down her neck with eager kisses. His scent filled her head, and his body overwhelmed her.

Charlie tasted so good everywhere. He wanted to eat her alive. If he got too wrapped up in kissing her breasts, he may forget his goal and just push inside her. He drew on the nipple through the silk gown once more as her hands urged him to stay and her legs still bound together by the panties struggled to separate.

Ayden slid down her stomach leaving the gown on. Charlie wanted to take it off, have no barrier between them, but he pulled it back down when she tried to lift it up. Frustration was not something she was used to dealing with. Ayden had her pent up like a lamb, shivering and ready to fight for survival. She wanted to guide him, make him do what she wanted, but he nixed that plan by holding her hands together in one of his while he lazily licked her thighs.

Charlie was becoming violent with need. She tried to guide him, and she wiggled herself into position over and over. He enjoyed her frustration. It was exactly how he felt when she sat him in that chair.

“Ayden, damn it, are you going to do this or are you going to torture me all night?” Charlie couldn’t believe her own ears, but she was indeed barking demands at the Wolf.

“You call this torture?” Ayden smiled and nipped her inner thigh gently with his teeth. “I call it foreplay.”

“Are you a sadist?”

“Are you?” He lay to the side of her, still holding her hands together with one of his own. With his free hand, he traced her sex gently with his fingertip. There was no hair to play with. She was smooth and silky. “I mean really, Charlie, you didn’t see any problem in torturing *me* the other night.”

“But I didn’t waste any time in taking care of you the next morning.” She sighed a heavy defeated breath. He was really making her crazy with need, and she would only get satisfaction when he felt like giving it to her. She should have taken care of him that night.

“That’s right, but you didn’t give me any options then either.” Ayden let go of her hands and pulled the panties free. “But you did give me directions.”

“Ayden.” Charlie’s breath hitched as she felt his hands pulling her legs apart.

“What was it again? One finger or two, darlin’? I can’t remember.” Ayden slid his thumbs over her and opened her swollen sex. Charlie was so ready he could easily suckle her clit and make her come, but he wanted it to last and last.

“One,” she whispered.

Ayden held her open with one hand appreciating the swollen pink folds that were glistening wet. He slowly teased the tip of his middle finger in and out. She wasn’t lying; she was tight, maybe too tight. Good thing he wasn’t going to take her tonight. Instead, he would see what he needed to do to loosen her up enough that he could fit.

“Please, Ayden.” Charlie slid her own hands down and held herself open to him. “Please.”

On a growl, he pushed the finger deep and heard her moans of pleasure. “You’re so tight, Charlie.”

“I told you...” She gasped as he plunged into her again. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

"I'd probably hurt, honey." Ayden wasn't bragging; he knew how big he was. It had been a problem in the past. He also knew that Jessica had obsessed over his size. He decided later that she loved his cock, not him.

"I'm a big girl." Charlie hoped he was ready to crawl up and take her, but she couldn't be sure with Ayden what he was up to.

Ayden pressed two fingers into her, stretching her.

"See, I want you, Ayden. I want all of you." Charlie was confessing, and she needed to stop before she really told him something.

Ayden licked over her clit and her legs jumped. Charlie was leading him down the wrong path, tempting him to take her before he had a good grip on his feelings. No. He couldn't do it. If he loved her he would, but he wasn't sure she could handle ever after with him. Until he knew for sure he wouldn't.

"More," Charlie pleaded. She lifted into him as he stretched her with a third finger.

Charlie bit her nails into his neck and shoulder as she climaxed. He barely drew on her, and she toppled right over the edge calling his name and crushing him in her thighs. She clamped down on him from inside, and Ayden felt every last pulse. That almost did him in. Once she settled, he slowly removed his fingers and licked over her completely once more. She shivered and her legs twitched.

As her breathing slowed, she tried to pull him back up, but he remained resting between her legs, waiting. She wasn't sure what he was up to.

"Ayden?" Charlie whispered.

"You ready?" Ayden looked up at her. Charlie was ready for sleep, he could tell. She was satisfied; her eyes half closed, her lips parted, and her breaths were slow and heavy.

"For what?" Charlie hummed.

"This." Ayden closed a hot mouth over her and pushed two fingers back inside.

"Oh God." Charlie wasn't ready at all, but she was getting there in rapid fashion.

Ayden sucked on her and circled her clit with his tongue hard and fast, pumping two fingers deep over and over until she was grinding out her release in a full scream. That was what he wanted, for her to let go completely. He let go himself and pressed into the mattress as his own orgasm escaped.

Charlie felt the room spin as she came in a wild fashion. Ayden had taken her totally by surprise, pulled her right back into bliss. Her heart strummed fast, and she could barely catch her breath.

"Better?" Ayden asked, breathless himself.

"Mmmm." Charlie was on cloud nine. "What about you?"

"I handled it, darlin'." He climbed up next to her, removed his boxers and wiped off his mess. "Do you want to stay with me tonight?"

It was a soft whisper. Charlie could have sworn it was borderline insecure, but Ayden wasn't unsure of anything. She was spent, couldn't walk if she tried.

"Can I?" She closed her eyes.

"No need to cross the hall for four hours of sleep." Ayden pulled the blankets down then back over them. "Do you want a pillow for your foot, angel?"

Charlie's eyes snapped open, and her heart jumped. He called her angel, something other than darlin'. What did that mean?

"No." Charlie turned to face him. "Will you hold me, Ayden? Like this morning?"

"Of course, angel, come here." This plan had worked out well. He could get a solid four hours of sleep with Charlie in his arms. He would worry about how to get her in bed tomorrow night, later.

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Down the hall, Noel and Tom lay in bed awake now.

"I guess they are more than friends after all." Noel blinked into the darkness.

"You never know, he could be killing her as we speak." Tom nudged his wife.

"We should all be so lucky to die that way." Noel laughed. "It's so weird. He's different around her. Did you see them in the water?"

"Honey, Charlie loves your brother. And whether you, Evelyn, or Ayden are ready to accept it or not, Ayden loves Charlie." Tom snickered. "He always has. He's just too damn blind to see it."

"How do you know that?" Noel turned to face him though it was pitch black.

"When I went to Vegas to visit, I was the only other person who knew where she was. One of the other agents saw a picture and made a comment. Ayden broke his nose. If she was just another woman he was helping out, he wouldn't have cared." Tom reached out through the darkness and placed his hand on her belly. "You know the only reason I was allowed to date you is because he's known me forever. You know how protective he is of his family. You also know that he can be a cold-hearted bastard, unless he loves you."

"She could have stayed somewhere else then?" Noel asked.

"Honey, we have safe houses all over the place. Ayden locked her in his apartment, and that woman didn't see the light of day for six months. But he went home every night." Tom yawned. "When I saw them together, he smiled. I mean he smiled at her. You remember when he didn't smile. She teased him; he laughed. That little bit of joy she gave him brought balance to his miserable life. Just like you balanced mine."

"I love you, Tom." Noel stroked his face with her hand.

"I love you, too."

Noel vowed then to accept Charlie as one of the family. The woman had her work cut out for her just wooing Ayden. The man could be such a bear.

## Chapter 14

Ethan stretched and growled in the kitchen. Chase carried luggage out the door, and Malcolm ate cereal with the two boys.

"So what do you guys think?" Malcolm asked the two monsters who gave him very serious and grown expressions.

"Why do you want to get married?" Chase Jr. asked him.

"You have to kiss her every day if you do that," Gray informed him.

"I'm aware of the repercussions of my actions. Do you guys want to carry the rings or not?" Malcolm was forever amazed at the wisdom of children.

"Do I have to kiss her?" Chase Jr. looked at him seriously.

"No," Malcolm reassured him.

"Can I wear a Spiderman costume?" Gray raised his brows in thought.

"Yeah, I could be Batman." Chase Jr. nodded

"I'm thinking you'll have to wear a suit. But, if you wear a suit for the wedding, I will take you both, trick or treating on Halloween, and then you can be whoever you want," Malcolm negotiated.

"Who will you be?" Gray asked.

"A fireman?" Malcolm tried.

"The Hulk." Chase Jr. nodded.

"Yeah, the Hulk!" Gray agreed.

"What are they talking about?" Stephanie asked Ethan as she poured a glass of orange juice.

"Negotiations for ring bearers. Apparently they will carry your rings if Malcolm dresses like the Hulk and takes them out on Halloween." Ethan sipped his coffee.

"I thought Grace and Megan already told them they were doing it." Stephanie looked at Malcolm.

"Why do you think they're negotiating?" Ethan smiled.

"You didn't tell him?"

"Hey, I'm not dressing like Hulk now." Ethan patted her on the back and headed upstairs to get his own family's gear.

Stephanie finished her juice and headed to Ayden's house. She wanted to talk to Charlie again before they left. In such a short time, they had become close friends. Charlie didn't treat her like a kid. Charlie had supported her decisions and made Stephanie feel better when the whole marriage thing fell apart.

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At Ayden's house...

Charlie woke up with her face in Ayden's neck, her right leg over his hip, and her right arm around him. Her left hand pressed into his chest, and his left thigh was again between her legs. Ayden's hand held her at the small of her back while his other arm was tucked under both of their heads. She was so close to him. His chest felt warm and his back smooth to the touch. She didn't want to wake up. She wanted to lay there in his arms like that forever.

Ayden felt the hand tickling along his spine and smiled. He didn't open his eyes in case it was just a dream. As he pulled her closer still crushing her against him, he knew she was awake. He inhaled deeply, allowing the warm scent of vanilla and Charlie to fill his lungs.

"Morning, angel." Ayden grumbled over her head. She was tucked into his neck, and he could feel her warm breath and soft lips against his skin.

"Good morning." Charlie nuzzled into his neck. She would crawl right under his skin if he could let her.

"How's your foot?" Ayden still made no effort to move.

"All right." Charlie wiggled it, and aside from where the stitches were, it just felt stiff. She couldn't resist the urge, so she gently kissed his neck. Ayden made a low sound and spread his fingers apart on her back.

"You hungry?" he mumbled.

"For you." Charlie kissed his neck again opening her lips and licking his neck with her tongue.

"Not this morning, sweetheart, we have guests to get rid of." Ayden patted her behind and rolled to his back. Charlie didn't let him loose though. Now her thigh was over his morning erection and her hand was on his chest.

"You want me to take care of that for you?" Charlie circled her fingers in the light patch of chest hair.

*Yes!* "No, honey, he's awake every morning." He laughed. *A man could die of over satisfaction if he woke up every morning to a blow-job.*

"I wouldn't mind taking care of you every morning." Charlie began sliding her fingers down his chest toward his abs.

Ayden gulped.

"Then how about fixing me breakfast?" Ayden stopped her hand before she went too far and he wouldn't be able to refuse her.

"Really?" Charlie gave him a quizzical look. Ayden didn't eat breakfast; he just drank coffee.

"You said you wanted to take care of me. I'm hungry." He pulled her hand to his mouth and nipped gently at her fingers. "Unless you want me to eat you."

*Uh oh.* "No, no. I think eggs and bacon and biscuits sound good." Charlie pushed up and got out of the bed. No way was she going to let him seduce her. That was her tactic, and he wasn't playing fair anymore. Now that he wanted her, she would slam on the brakes and make him want her even more. "Do you have any of that stuff?"

“Yeah. I eat breakfast for dinner sometimes.” Ayden sat up and scrubbed his face with his hands. “Come here a minute.”

“I have to shower and change.” Charlie had to stay out of his reach until she had clothes on.

“So do I. Come here.” Ayden pointed at the space in front of him. “I won’t bite.”

Charlie walked around the foot of the bed and stood in front of him. She felt his eyes all over her. Impatient she called. “Ayden?”

“You’re beautiful, Charlie.” Ayden grabbed the back of her thighs and rubbed up and down.

“You are being very bad.” Charlie stepped back. *Well, he woke up in a mood this morning.*

“Because I said you’re beautiful?” Ayden stood and looked down at her. He slipped his arms around her then nuzzled into her neck. “If I were being bad, I’d have told you how much I enjoyed eating you last night.”

Charlie made a weak sound of protest as he nipped her neck gently. *Damn it.* She pushed back and stumbled for a step. He reached out to grab her, but she blocked his touch. Now she understood why they called him the Wolf. It wasn’t just his last name. He was a vicious predator, and she was his prey. It was supposed to be the other way around. Maybe once he got some food in his stomach he would settle down and remember his lecture about taking it slow. She sure did. Now she figured he wanted to run things at his own leisure, no way. Wanting to spend the rest of her life with a man and wanting to live life on his terms with no compromise were two entirely different things.

“Well you can tell me how much you enjoy eating breakfast this morning.” Charlie straightened her nightgown and held her head high.

“Why can’t I do both?” Ayden pulled on boxers as he followed her across the hall to her bedroom. He closed the door behind them. Stepping behind Charlie, he pulled her hair to the side with one hand and kissed her neck while reaching around to hug her with the other. He felt ravenous, and the more she ran the more he wanted to chase her. “I can’t help it. You’re so damn sexy in these barely there pajamas you wear. I wanted to call out of work and enjoy you for hours the other day.”

“And I would like to enjoy a nice breakfast with your family before they leave today.” Charlie used every bit of strength she could muster to pull away from him. Ayden was quickly convincing her to move at his pace, since his pace meant a lot of touching and tasting apparently.

The doorbell rang.

“Saved by the bell, my little lamb.” Ayden nipped her shoulder and kissed her cheek.

“Are you trying to figure out what to call me?” Charlie crossed her arms and turned to face him. That was it. She had gone from darlin’ to angel then sweetheart, and now little lamb. In over ten years he had only called her darlin’.

“Huh?” Ayden had no idea what she was talking about.

“You know, darlin’, angel, sweetheart, now little lamb.” Charlie waited.

“I made that last comment as a joke, darlin’. When did I call you angel or sweetheart?” Ayden felt a little confused. Was he calling her by other cutesy names?

“Last night.” Charlie looked down. He hadn’t realized. “Do you call other women those names after sex?”

“No, baby.” Ayden stopped short. *Shit!* “I mean, Charlie. It must be from all the people here, different words...they all mean you.”

That was really not something he wanted to face or admit, yet he had blurted it out. Ayden felt a little weird this morning. He was a little too comfortable and a little too free for his own good. Here he had called her several names, all names he knew the men down the street and the one downstairs in his kitchen used to address their wives. That was enough to cool the fire for now.

“Oh. Well, all right then.” That cooled her heels. She didn’t care what he called her as long as he didn’t call any other woman the same thing. He called his sisters darlin’. She knew that. He only called women he cared about darlin’. That’s why she loved it.

The knock sounded on Charlie’s door.

“Charlie, it’s Stephanie. Can I come in?” Stephanie was surprised the door was locked.

“You locked the door?” Charlie smiled. He had really planed to seduce her this morning.

“I...well.” He cleared his throat. “I need to hit the shower.”

“I’ll see you downstairs in a few.” Charlie opened the door and let Ayden out and Stephanie in.

“Good morning, Ayden.” Stephanie put a lot of suggestion in that statement.

Her eyebrows wiggled at him. *Oh hell*, he felt the flush rising, and so he moved quicker across the hall not saying anything to Stephanie. Great, now he was blushing. Once he got to his bathroom, he looked at his reflection in the mirror. Same face, except the smile and the pink tint on his cheeks. His brows drew down into a scorn. “Get your shit together. You’re acting like a teenager, not a grown man.”

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Across the hall, Charlie convinced Stephanie to wait five minutes while she showered. Stephanie browsed through her closet, the most exciting part about waiting. Charlie had the coolest clothes. She picked out two tops to borrow and sat on the bed waiting. Charlie came back with her hair in a towel.

“Take them and keep them.” Charlie searched through the closet. “I need to go shopping.”



“You have the coolest clothes ever.” Stephanie frowned. “Why would you give these up?”

“They’re just shirts. Besides, I need to cover myself up more. Wear looser clothes.” Charlie found a peasant skirt but wanted a bigger shirt.

“Why? Your body is amazing.” Stephanie watched her intently. If Ayden had told her anything other than that, she would kick his ass. “Has he said something about your body?”

“Yes. That I’m making him crazy.” Charlie knew where to find a nice large shirt—in his closet.

“I thought that was the plan.” Stephanie was confused now.

“It was, but now it’s his plan. I love him, but he’s not running the show. It has to be mutual. Ayden wants me to go slow, but he wants to move ahead at his own pace when he feels like it.” Charlie pulled the skirt on. “So if I hide a little, then he won’t be tempted, and maybe I won’t either. He was right. I hate to admit it, but he was. If it’s just about sex, then I will never know if he truly loves me.”

“So you’ve had sex,” Stephanie clarified.

“No.” Charlie held up a finger and slipped across the hall into Ayden’s room. She pulled a Navy logo T-shirt out and crossed back to her room. Ayden was still in the shower. She dropped the robe and pulled the T-shirt on. “How do I look?”

“Actually it looks cute.” Stephanie nodded. The blue shirt had a Navy logo across the bustline, and the white skirt skimmed her calves. Charlie was covered, but she couldn’t hide that body completely. Stephanie imagined she could make a paper bag look good if she wore it. “But you are definitely covered.”

“Good. I don’t want to look bad. I just want to look normal. Does that even make sense?” Charlie sat next to her on the bed.

“Yeah, it does,” Stephanie reassured her. “Tom’s making breakfast downstairs. I didn’t eat at Joshua’s.”

“Shit. I was supposed to make breakfast.” Charlie stood and headed downstairs.

In the kitchen, Tom had just finished the bacon when Charlie accosted him. She took the spatula out of his hand and shooed him away from the stove. Biscuits were in the oven and plates on the countertop. The man had made breakfast leaving Charlie with nothing left to cook but the eggs.

“Charlie, are you all right?” Noel laughed at the woman and took a seat at the table across from Stephanie.

“Yeah, I just hate that Tom was cooking. You two should be enjoying breakfast not making it.” Charlie turned the stove off and pulled the biscuits from the oven.

“Mmmm. Smells good down here.” Ayden stepped into the kitchen, took one look at Charlie, and stopped. She was dressed funny today. All covered up. It still looked good, casual. It just looked different for Charlie. “Is that my shirt?”

“I hope you don’t mind.” Charlie could care less. She went about putting food on the plates, and Stephanie carried them to the table.

Ayden studied her for a few more minutes and then grabbed his plate and sat at the table. They had a long leisurely breakfast chatting and passing Page around. Charlie held on to the little girl and enjoyed Ayden leaning over her shoulder to talk to the child. He really enjoyed children. She felt a whole new surge of emotions. When she originally set out to find Ayden, she just prayed he would accept her and love her. Now she craved a real future with him, marriage, and children.

After breakfast, they headed down to Joshua and Evelyn's house to say good bye to everyone. Ethan and Grace were eager to leave. No sooner than they said goodbye they were on their way. Malcolm and Stephanie climbed in the van with Megan and Chase. Stephanie cried leaving Charlie, but insisted that they stay in the loft when they came to New York for the wedding. Noel and Tom strapped in Page, and Noel reminded Ayden that his mother should meet Charlie and soon. Ayden grumbled but knew she was right.

In the end, there were four people on the sidewalk, Joshua and Evelyn, Ayden and Charlie. Ayden knew that with so many people there over the past week the last thing the couple wanted to do was entertain. Besides, he wanted to go home with Charlie and really spend time with her.

"Charlie, do you want to go to the studio with me?" Evelyn asked.

"I'd love to." Charlie perked up. She knew Evelyn was serious about the offer, and Charlie was eager to have a job. She had all of her money stashed inside her underwear drawer. It was scary to have a job; it meant filing taxes, but that was still months away. Surely, by then everything in Vegas would be cleared up. As it was, she had no accounts, no traceable anything. One bad thing was that she also had to cancel her one credit card. No more online shopping.

"What are you going to do, Wolf?" Joshua looked at Ayden who seemed frozen in time. He shrugged. Joshua shook his head. That man had it bad. "Come on, the game will be on soon."

Ayden and Joshua headed inside while Evelyn and Charlie climbed into Evelyn's Honda civic.

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"Do you think we could go shopping today?" Charlie looked over to Evelyn.

"Yeah, go grab your purse." Evelyn stopped in front of Ayden's house. Charlie ran inside and grabbed her purse. She was beaming when she got back into the car. "You really like shopping, huh?"

"No. I hate it." Charlie smiled widely as she looked at her. "Can you help me?"

"I'm not much for shopping. Megan and Stephanie are the fashionistas." Evelyn shrugged.

“No, I mean I have to get regular clothes. Oh, and plain full coverage pajamas. Don’t let me forget that.” Charlie was so excited. She got to see the studio and go shopping. She hadn’t been in an actual store since Michael died.

“You’re so funny.” Evelyn laughed.

They discussed the types of classes Charlie would teach and set up a date for her to meet with Neal and make a new schedule. Evelyn was excited to expand her options. Charlie had so much potential. She could teach yoga and several dance classes. Evelyn would keep up with other yoga and martial arts classes, and when she got too big to do them anymore, she would let Neal take them over. He had been chomping at the bit to get more classes anyways.

Charlie shopped like a mad woman. Evelyn was a little surprised at her choices because they were conservative. The clothes were still feminine and pretty, but longer skirts, looser shirts, and several pairs of pajamas. Evelyn enjoyed the girl time. No one had asked her opinion on clothes before, and she was surprised that she actually had one. Thanks to Charlie’s influence, however, she picked up a few trendy items. Also a little pajama outfit that she hoped Joshua would enjoy before she outgrew it.

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Ayden and Joshua watched football, and Ayden watched the clock.

“Damn, Wolf, she’s with Evelyn.” Joshua was tired of Ayden’s clock watching. “You’re acting like Ethan.”

“Bullshit.” Ayden grumbled and fought the urge to look at his watch for the hundredth time.

“So what’s the deal, you love her or what?” Joshua tipped up his beer.

“What kind of question is that?” Ayden swirled his beer at the bottom of the bottle.

“Dude, your sister barged into my house at three a.m. and pointed a gun at my head. That was how I met her. On some level even at that moment I knew. She’s been bossing me around ever since.” Joshua stretched and stood. “Which reminds me I’m going to make roast for dinner, you guys going to eat here tonight?”

“No, you two need time alone.” Ayden needed time alone with Charlie.

“Uh-hu.” Joshua shook his head and went into the kitchen. “The sooner you surrender the better off you’ll be.”

“Surrender?” Ayden laughed.

“Yeah. Give it up. She’s the one for you, and you know it. I almost died not telling Evelyn that I loved her.” Joshua pulled a pan out and began preparing the roast. “You’re a smart man. Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m not stupid. I care for her, but unlike you, I also have an obligation to her. She doesn’t know me well enough to know if she loves me. I know that I care for her, but love?” Ayden stood and stretched. “How the fuck do you know you love someone?”

"You know," Joshua said as the door opened. "You just do."

Joshua stopped chopping potatoes and went to greet his wife. Charlie wasn't with her. Ayden watched the two embrace and Joshua fawn over Evelyn. As much as Evelyn grumped about Joshua's fussing, she sure seemed to enjoy it.

"Where's Charlie?" Ayden asked.

"Your house." Evelyn looked him over. Ayden was ready to bolt out the door she could tell. Poor guy. If he would just let go, he could be happy. She knew it was going to be tough for him; it was for her. "You coming back for dinner?"

"No." Ayden shook his head. "You guys need a break."

"Uh-hu." Evelyn smiled and nodded as Ayden left the house.

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Ayden tried not to run up the street, but he moved quickly. Inside Charlie was nowhere to be found. He bounded up the stairs taking them two at a time and found her in her room amongst several shopping bags.

"What the hell did you buy?" Ayden lifted his brow and leaned in her doorway.

"Clothes." Charlie turned and faced him. She could put them away later when he couldn't see.

"What do you want for dinner tonight?" Ayden fought the urge to go to her.

"What do you want?" Charlie locked her knees fighting herself to stay in place.

"Is that a trick question?" He smiled his wolfish grin.

"Ayden." She let out a sigh of exasperation.

"All right, all right." He lifted from the door. "I'll go work on dinner, should be ready in an hour."

"Thank you." Charlie smiled and went back to her shopping bags.

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"I don't think I can eat all of this." Charlie looked at the plate. It was full of steak and potatoes and a corn cob.

"I'll eat what you can't finish, trust me." Ayden knew the steaks were big, but he was usually the only one eating them.

"Do you work tomorrow?" Charlie had to find a way to let him know she was meeting Neal to arrange the schedule.

"Yes. And I have to take Leon's cousin Lacy out for dinner tomorrow night." Ayden grumbled. "I won't be gone long."

"You should take your time. I have plans to meet Neal and go over the schedule." Charlie took a sip of soda from her glass. "Evelyn arranged for him to pick me up tomorrow and take me out for dinner."

"Excuse me?" Ayden leaned toward her.

"I told her you had a date, and she said that Neal would be happy to get out of the barracks." Charlie shrugged. If she didn't know any better, she would think he was jealous.

"Is that right?" Ayden stabbed the steak with his fork and sliced it more forcefully than necessary with his knife.

"I have to meet him. I have to work with him." Charlie tried to fight the smile. He was jealous.

"When is he picking you up?" Ayden forced a calm tone though his shoulders were already growing tight. He would talk to Neal before he took Charlie anywhere.

"Seven."

Ayden remained calm and cool on the outside though inside he was tearing apart with feelings he had never really experienced before. He knew Neal, but it didn't matter. He didn't want to think of any other man sitting across the table from Charlie, enjoying her company, watching her smile, and listening to her talk.

"Did you have a good time today?" He tried for a casual persona that he just didn't have.

"I had a lot of fun with Evelyn. I'm really looking forward to teaching some dance classes. I miss the exercise." Charlie knew he was fuming, but she wasn't going to coddle him right now. She watched him struggle to make peaceful conversation, but the dark side of Ayden was all too familiar to her. When he was an agent and she was locked in that apartment for six months, he did nothing but fume, plan and pace. She would always talk to him and settle him then. Not now.

Ayden stewed in his thoughts through the rest of the meal. He tried to hold a conversation about the house and the yard and what he had planned to do. His thoughts kept coming back to her. Why in the world was she here with him? He didn't deserve her, yet he sure as hell didn't want to see her with another man.

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Charlie sat next to him on the couch in her new pajamas and read as he watched television. Ayden had become distant over dinner. He was always moody, and she had seen him in worse moods, so she continued to ignore it and instead read the book Grace had given her. The one she had written about her mother. It was a touching book, and her eyes filled with tears.

Ayden heard the sniff. He turned to see the single tear stream down her cheek. She wasn't sad though; she was smiling. It still bothered him that she cried. Unable to stop himself he reached out to her and wiped the tear. He knew she didn't expect it by her reaction. She blinked at him and let down her smile.

"Ayden, I miss Michael," Charlie admitted.

"I know you do." Ayden wiped the other cheek as the next tear fell.

"I miss my parents."

"I understand." He scooted closer to her.

"I miss you." Charlie sobbed.

"I'm right here, Charlie." Ayden pulled her into his arms and held her.

"For now." Charlie sniffed. "I know you don't want to hear this, but I missed you so much when you left. I was so glad to keep your apartment. It was as if I still had you in it sometimes. There were days when I swore you would walk back in the door and grump around the kitchen."

"Grump?" Ayden frowned at that. He still held her and stroked her soft blonde hair.

"Yes. For six months you were my life. And then you left and I died. I cried every night. I fought myself every morning to get out of bed and go back to work. I told myself that someday you would come back to stay and not just to visit." Charlie knew she was telling him too much. If she wanted to scare him away, this was a great tactic. Yet all her emotions were there, and she couldn't hide them anymore.

"Charlie, why didn't you tell me this sooner?" Ayden felt like she just stabbed him in the chest with a knife. He was supposed to protect her, and he had been the one to hurt her the most. He wouldn't have given a relationship a chance then; they both knew that, but he would have moved her to New York to Virginia. He would have moved her to be near him.

"You didn't want a relationship. You made that clear. And every year I prayed that you would change your mind." Charlie clutched his shirt now filled with her tears. "I was afraid to scare you away."

"Charlie, I am bound to you for the rest of my life." He pushed her back to face her. He lifted her chin and drew a heavy breath. His chest felt like cinder blocks had replaced his lungs, and he struggled for air. "I never meant to hurt you. I swear to God I didn't know I was hurting you."

"I know." Charlie could see his anguish, and she felt bad. She didn't want him to feel guilty or responsible. She just had to get it off her chest. "You didn't hurt me, Ayden. I just missed you. That's all."

"I don't know what to do here." Ayden felt helpless.

Charlie snickered.

"What?" He looked at her confused.

"You." Charlie smiled. "You said you didn't know what to do, but you're doing exactly what I need you to do."

"What's that?"

"You're holding me." Charlie hugged him tight.

"Oh." Ayden pulled her into his lap and held her while she cried.

Charlie's sobs faded and her breathing slowed. He knew she had finally drifted off to sleep when her grip loosened. Ayden stretched an arm over to the end table and grabbed the remote. He turned off the television and stood with a sleeping Charlie in his arms. He carried her straight to his bedroom and pulled the bedding back. Once he had

her tucked in, he climbed in bed next to her. He pulled her close to him with her back along his chest.

Charlie had given him a lot to think about. He had no idea he meant that much to her. He had no idea he meant that much to anyone. Joshua was right he had to surrender. Charlie was the one for him. She always was. He went to sleep with all the memories of the past years running through his mind.

## Chapter 15

Charlie woke up in Ayden's arms. His nose was pressed into the back of her neck, and his breath tickled. He was breathing hard, and his grip on her arm tightened to a painful grasp. Charlie didn't know what was happening, but for the first time in her life she was afraid of Ayden.

"Ayden?" Charlie said softly.

He mumbled into her neck, and his grip clamped even tighter on the arm he held.

"Ayden?" Charlie tried to pull the arm free.

"I will kill you," Ayden spoke clearly. "If you touch her, I will fucking kill you."

Charlie held her breath and realized he had to be asleep and dreaming an awful dream. Her arm felt like it would snap under the pressure, but now she didn't know what to do. If he didn't wake up, he might break it, but how could she wake him up without startling him? That response could be even scarier. She remembered when he woke up from a noise in the apartment all those years ago. He entered the bedroom with his weapon at the ready insisted that she take the other gun and hide under the bed while he cleared the tiny apartment.

"Please, Ayden, wake up," Charlie spoke in as normal of a tone as she could make it.

"Charlie?" Ayden's eyes opened; he was disoriented and pissed. Last thing he knew he was talking to the asshole that had killed her sister. *Now...Shit!*

"You're hurting me." Charlie held back the tear and touched the hand that still maintained a death grip on her arm.

Ayden was aware then that he didn't have a hold on Preston Bates' throat. He had a hold on Charlie. He let go quickly and pulled the arm up so he could see it as he simultaneously sat up in the bed.

"I'm so sorry." Ayden could see the friction burn and his handprint in red against her pale skin. Never in his life had he hurt a woman, and now he had not only caused her to cry for breaking her heart, but he almost broke her arm. "God I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Charlie tried to hide the tears, but it hurt like hell. If Ayden ever got a hold on whoever, he was dreaming about, no doubt he would kill them. But who was the woman in his dreams? "What were you dreaming about?"

Ayden didn't want to tell her, but under the circumstances he had no choice. "Preston."

"Why?" Charlie gasped. Why in the world was he dreaming of Preston Bates? The man was in prison for life. Had this been the reason he couldn't be with her? She brought all of his demons with her.

"I don't know darlin'." Ayden pulled her arm up and peppered it with baby kisses. "I thought I had a hold on his throat. It was so real, Charlie. I could feel it, smell it. I could see her."



Charlie thought for sure if Ayden cried she would die. His voice caught, and he took a deep breath.

“Ayden, it’s okay. I dream about it too sometimes.” Charlie pulled her arm free and gently rubbed over the area. If Ayden ever had his hands on that man’s throat that tightly, he would have been dead. She was sure of that.

“But I hurt you.” Ayden scrubbed his face with his hands. He wasn’t a weak man. He wasn’t an especially emotional one either, but looking at his prints on Charlie made his gut rip in half. “And I swear it was real, and the place was different. I couldn’t make out the details.”

“It was a dream, Ayden. You didn’t hurt me, see.” Charlie tried to play it off. “At least you didn’t pull a gun on me and force me under the bed.”

He snickered. “Charlie, I’m serious.”

“So am I.” Charlie rubbed her hand over his back. It was wet with sweat. He had really been tormented by that dream. “How often do you dream about it?”

“Usually once a year,” Ayden confessed. “But twice this week.”

“Oh.” Charlie realized she was in fact the cause of the nightmares. Apparently, she haunted him every year. While she was dreaming of making love to Ayden the night before they would meet, he was dreaming of Michael’s murder.

She didn’t have the chance to say anything else before the alarm clock sounded with Elvis singing “Jailhouse Rock.” Ayden stopped the King and turned to Charlie.

“Tell Evelyn you can’t start work until next week.”

“What? Why?” She felt her heart racing. She dumped a lot on him last night. He just dropped a lot on her this morning, and she was still processing the day ahead of them.

“So I can take you home to meet my momma.” Ayden pulled her chin up toward him. “That is if you want to.”

“I...I...” Charlie stammered.

“Good.” He smooched her lips. “I have to sub for Leon today. I’ll be home before five. I could take you to Neal’s...”

“He’s going to pick me up at seven.” Charlie could barely keep up with him this morning. He went from threatening her life to trying to block her dinner with Neal again in no time. “Besides you have your own dinner date to pick up.”

“Where are you going to eat tonight?”

“Ayden.” Charlie moved to get out of the bed but found herself being playfully tackled by the Wolf. “Ayden!”

Ayden covered her with his heavy body and kissed her neck. “We could both go to the same place.” He kissed again. “Then Neal could entertain her and I could have dinner with you.” He kissed again.

“What is it with you and mornings?” Charlie gripped his face with both hands and forced him to look at her.

"I hate mornings." Ayden tried to kiss her lips, but she held his face firm. He was close enough, so he just licked out and caught her top lip with his tongue.

"I can tell." Charlie gave up and let him kiss her.

Once she let go of his face, he nipped her bottom lip lightly and slid his arms around and under her back. His lips moved from a scorching hot kiss to her neck as he lifted her shoulders up and her head dropped back. "Ayden."

"Yes, darlin'." Ayden still licked, kissed and nipped at her neck.

"You have to go to work." Charlie was falling under his spell in rapid fashion.

"I don't have to be there for two hours." Ayden moved farther down as he lifted her higher.

"What?" Charlie stroked his back as her own hands betrayed her and joined him.

"I wanted to make sure I had time to talk to you this morning, so I set it an hour earlier."

Ayden started to cover her nipple with his lips, but Charlie rolled forcing him to his side and then pushed him to his back.

"Now you listen here, Ayden Wolf." Charlie sat straddling him.

"You have my full attention, darlin'." Ayden reached for her breasts, but she swatted his hands. "You want control? Tell me what you want me to do then."

"This isn't about sex." Charlie looked down at him with a serious expression. His baby blue eyes were dark with desire. He pulled his bottom lip in and lifted into her with his hips pressing himself against her. She had changed into pajamas before they settled onto the couch. They were long and loose, apparently not worth the investment. She gasped. "You behave."

"Oww." Ayden grabbed the spot on his chest where she pinched him. "What's that for?"

"Ayden, we agreed not to have sex until we knew each other better. I poured my heart out to you last night..."

"I didn't plan to have sex with you, Charlie." Ayden sat up and looked her eye to eye. He grabbed her neck and the small of her back and repositioned his legs. In one swift motion, he put her on her back again. He hovered over her now facing the foot of his bed. "I just wanted breakfast."

"Ay-den." Charlie bit his shoulder since he was already at her neck again. He didn't flinch; in fact he growled. "Damn it, Wolf."

"What baby?" Ayden let out a long sigh. She was still disgruntled.

"You're moving way too fast." Charlie never thought she would hear those words come out of her mouth, yet there they were.

"Oh." He gently kissed her neck and placed a long slow lick up to her ear. "I can move real slow for you, Charlie."

"That's not what I meant." Her voice was more in a whisper than she wanted it to be.

“Do you want me or don’t you?” Ayden pushed up to his elbows and looked her eye to eye.

Charlie was cornered. Of course, she wanted him, but she was on emotional overdrive. She hadn’t had the chance to process the confessions of last night much less the advances of this morning.

Ayden wasn’t sure what was going on with this woman. Last night she all but told him she was in love with him and now this morning she was pushing him away.

“You’ve never even taken me on a date.” Charlie had to come up with something, and she didn’t want to use her foot or arm as a way out, but she had to process things.

“What?” Ayden leaned on one elbow and propped his head on his fist. His other hand now smoothed her hair. He loved the soft texture and the way it smelled. Having Charlie there in the mornings was the best thing he had felt in years, even if she was cranky as hell.

“A date, Ayden, like the other women you have dated.” She made air quotation marks when she said dated.

“What do you call the other night with the candles and the music and the touching?” Ayden twisted a lock of hair around his finger. She was amusing him now. Was she jealous?

“Dinner.” Charlie drew her brows down. Ayden was obviously amused by her, and that made her even more frustrated.

“No, darlin’, what I made last night was dinner. What you did, well, that was something else.” He winked at her.

“You have never taken me out anywhere.” Charlie knew she sounded ridiculous. They had known each other forever, and she had a fear of crowds, but it was his idea to do things properly.

“You’re right.” Ayden smiled. She was jealous. *Fair enough.* He was jealous, too. “Tomorrow night, dinner and a movie, tell me if there’s anything you want to see and we’ll find out who’s playing it around here.”

“I...” Charlie was silenced by a sweet gentle kiss that lingered. As soon as she slid her arms around him, he pushed up and out of them. *Damn it!*

“So what are you going to do today?” Ayden was out of the bed and pulling clothes from the closet and then the dresser.

“Laundry.” Charlie shrugged. She had no idea what she was going to do with herself today.

“Have you ever been horseback riding?” Ayden pulled on the pants and then the shirt.

“Is that a trick question?” Charlie sat up and crossed her arms.

“No, darlin’. I may be hung like a horse, but I assure you I’m much more enjoyable to ride.” Ayden watched as her face flushed red. Satisfied he had gotten to her, he continued, “I mean real horses. My folks have a horse farm now.”

"No." Charlie wanted to choke him. He had her all mixed up and was clearly enjoying every moment of it.

"No, you don't think I'll be a good ride or no, you have never ridden a horse?" Ayden sat next to her on the bed and pulled his boots on.

"No. I Have Never Been On A Horse." Charlie spoke in all capitals and annunciated each word.

"You look like you want to strangle me, Charlie." Ayden kissed the tip of her nose.

"I feel like biting you." She huffed.

"Now that I'm all dressed for work you want to play?" Ayden stood quickly before she could get a hold on him. She practically lunged for him.

"You are going to get it, Wolf." Charlie was so frustrated with his humor.

"And I can't wait for you to give it to me, darlin'." Ayden licked his lips. "I just love these new pajamas. They make me work more."

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*Well Hell.* Charlie watched him as he left the bedroom. He had never been a morning person. She used to have coffee ready every morning, and it took two cups before he would speak. Now the man was wide awake and horny every morning. In addition to the unexpected attention of a sexual nature, he was also not acting freaked out by her confessions last night. In fact, this morning he was talking about taking her home to see his momma.

Charlie twisted her hand over the mark on her arm where he had squeezed in his sleep. The fact that she brought nightmares with her wasn't stopping him either. She patted her bare feet across the floor and down the hall. Ayden was putting the dishes away. She could hear it.

"I'll do that." Charlie crossed her arms and leaned against the counter.

"It's already done." Ayden put the last plate in the cabinet.

"Damn it, Ayden, you can't keep doing everything around here." Charlie snatched his thermos up as he reached for it. "I'll pour the coffee."

"Yes, ma'am." Ayden stepped back before she really did bite his hand off. "Is this a womanly thing?"

"Excuse me?" Charlie screwed the top onto the thermos and set it on the counter.

"You know. The PMS thing." Ayden shrugged.

"The P-M-S thing?" Charlie was flabbergasted. If anyone acted like they had PMS, it was him.

"I'm a big boy, Charlie. I am aware that women have things to deal with." Ayden shrugged. She had been so moody. He didn't remember her being moody like this. For that matter thinking back he never remembered her having any womanly issues the entire six months they had lived together. Of course, he was only there at night, and they didn't sleep together. Huh.

Charlie was sure her mouth was agape. Here he was advising her on what women had to deal with. Never in her imaginary relationship with Ayden did she have this discussion. Proving his theory true, they really did need to spend more time together and get to know each other better. Maybe she had romanticized him too much in her mind.

“The only *thing* I have to deal with is you. I’m on a new birth control, thank you, and I don’t get periods every month, just four times a year. I just started taking it before I moved here. I have months before you have to *deal* with that!” Charlie informed him.

“You are absolutely adorable like this, just cranky and pouting. I just want to eat you up.” Ayden closed the distance between them and hugged her tightly. Charlie still had her arms crossed, and that suited him fine since she wasn’t able to push him or pinch him, and it gave enough space between them she couldn’t bite him either. “I’ll see you this afternoon, darlin’.”

Ayden kissed her forehead and let her go. Charlie watched him walk out the door. He looked more like he was headed off on some secret mission instead of to class. The pants were like a tactical military uniform but black. His black collared shirt was plain except for the silver lettering above the left pocket. Charlie assumed it was a staff shirt. It looked like a symbol for something. She rolled her eyes at the closed door and went back up the stairs and back to his bed.

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Ayden got one important piece of information from her morning madness. She was on birth control. That meant he could enjoy Charlie anywhere, anyhow and not have to worry about a condom. They had both been inactive for so long that any health issues would have surfaced by now. He was testing the idea of being in love. He wouldn’t tell her though, not until the time was right. She obviously wanted to slow things down, ironic now that he wanted to speed them up.

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Charlie finally woke up a few hours later and felt much better. She cut the little stitches in her foot and pulled them out with tweezers. If they were still there tomorrow, Ayden would no doubt make her go to the hospital to have them removed.

He was such a devil in the mornings. Charlie smiled and wished Stephanie was still there to talk to. Ayden had pulled out so many emotional stops on her at once having an outside view would have been helpful. She would have to call her later.

The doorbell rang.

“Hi.” Evelyn smiled.

“Hey.” Charlie was glad to see a friendly face.

“So the guys are at work today, I thought I would see what you were up to.” Evelyn began searching the countertop.

“Are you looking for something?” Charlie sat at the kitchen table and watched her.

“You don’t have any cookies here, do you?” Evelyn put a hand on her hip. “Funny thing is I tried to make some, and they made me sick. But I still want some cookies.”

“Noel left some in the freezer. I can heat them up for you.” Charlie moved to get the cookies. “Does Joshua ever drive you crazy?”

“Every minute of every day.” Evelyn sat at the table. “It’s tough for women like us. Independent, strong. It’s frustrating to learn that you can’t program a man to understand what you’re trying to say or do.”

“So what do you do?” Charlie turned on the oven and pulled out a cookie sheet.

“I read.” Evelyn rolled her eyes. Then laughing told her something more useful. “Well, I try to remember that we are both headstrong and have our own ideas about how things should be done. Joshua challenged me from the moment I met him. Up until then I had only feared two men, my stepfather and the Wolf.”

“You were afraid of Joshua?”

“Well of course, I mean I spent my whole life hating men. Then I fell in love, and I tell you I didn’t know what hit me. I chased him with such fury I almost chased him away. In the end, I realized it was love. But when you’ve never been in love with anyone, you think it’s infatuation or a phase. He’s my angel.” Evelyn smiled in bliss at the thought before turning her attention back to Charlie. “Ayden driving you crazy?”

“He’s a puzzle all right. Every time I think I know what’s going on in his head he tears off in a new direction.” Charlie went to the stove and pulled out the cookies. “He wants me to go to Tennessee this week.”

“Wow.” Evelyn was honestly surprised. “That’s a really good thing, Charlie.”

“I had a plan. Now everything is so off that plan.” Charlie put the cookies on a plate. “Milk?”

“Nah.” Evelyn took a cookie from the plate. “How is it off plan? I thought your plan was to be with Ayden.”

“It is.” Charlie took a cookie.

“Then what’s the problem?” Evelyn pulled the plate closer.

“I’m scared.” Charlie rubbed the arm again unaware she was doing so, but it still stung.

“What the fuck is that?”

Evelyn was on her feet, and her hand grabbed Charlie’s wrist so fast she didn’t see it coming.

“Uh.” Charlie swallowed hard. She didn’t know what to tell her.

“Did Ayden do this?” Evelyn felt her heart pounding in her ears. There was no way he did this. No, no, no.

“In his sleep, Evelyn, he didn’t mean to do it.” Charlie placed a hand over Evelyn’s and tilted her head to get a better look at the woman. “I brought nightmares, apparently I always have.”

“Explain.” Evelyn was queen of the one word commands.

“When he found Michael, she was dying. Ayden interrogated Preston Bates, the man who did it. I have no idea what he said, but in that dream, Ayden had his hand around his throat and threatened to kill him. I know that because he had a death grip on my arm and spoke out loud to the back of my head.” Charlie watched Evelyn sit calmly and spin the cookie plate around. “You okay?”

“No.” Evelyn shook her head. “But I will be. Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Charlie smiled a soft smile. “I know he would never hurt me on purpose, not emotionally and definitely not physically. He’s bound to me for the rest of his life apparently.”

When that didn’t lighten her mood, Charlie tried another tactic.

“He’s had nightmares before.” Charlie shrugged. She didn’t want to freak Evelyn out.

“When?” Evelyn was mentally sorting things.

“When he was in Vegas.” Charlie thought about it and remembered him complaining about it a couple times over the years. He just never told her it was her case that haunted him the most. “A few other times, and then before the final chapter in the Blade case. He complained about nightmares a lot at that last meeting.”

“Will you tell me if he continues to have them?” Evelyn knew she only had them when something big was about to happen. She didn’t realize that until the confrontation with her stepfather was over and she was safe with Joshua and nightmare free, until last night. Especially now that Charlie said, they would be traveling. “Especially while you’re in Tennessee.”

“Don’t tell him I told you, please,” Charlie pleaded. “He’s very private, and I only told you because, well, I can’t lie about the mark. I will wear a sweater tonight though. I don’t want anyone else to jump to conclusions.”

“I won’t tell him, and please don’t let Neal see it. Like most young men he worships Ayden.” Evelyn picked up her plate of cookies and headed for the door. She had to call Joshua. Something was off, and she didn’t know what, but it centered on Charlie, and she didn’t like it. “You really came here just for Ayden?”

Charlie felt her gut wrench. “Yes.”

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Evelyn nodded and left. Charlie felt sick to her stomach. Evelyn knew. Somehow, somehow she knew. Her nerves began to jump, and she paced the living room floor. She was safe, nothing to worry about. No need to tell Ayden anything. The phone rang, and Charlie almost jumped over the couch.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Hello, darlin'," Ayden replied.

"What's wrong?" Charlie was surprised to hear from him.

"What's right you mean? I don't have to take out Leon's cousin, and Neal called me to reschedule with you. He has duty tonight, found out this morning." Ayden smiled into the phone.

"Did you get that poor guy duty?" Charlie put a hand on her hip.

"Honey, I'm good but I have no influence on the Marine Corps duty assignments." Ayden laughed.

"Well why didn't he call the house and tell me?" Charlie smiled. She was happy Ayden wasn't going out with another woman tonight.

"Because the number next to my name on the studio's roster is my cell number," Ayden answered. "So, you feel like dinner and a movie tonight?"

"Won't you be tired?"

A knock sounded on the door.

"Hang on, someone's at the door." Charlie walked to the door. It was strange that they knocked. Most people used the doorbell.

Charlie opened the door and saw him standing there dripping with mischief. He flipped the phone closed and stepped inside. Her face must have given her surprise and relief away.

"Leon came in. Apparently, he got the date mixed up. His anniversary is next month. After his wife handed him his ass, he decided he'd be safer at work." Ayden pulled her into his arms and inhaled her scent. "I love the way you smell."

"What about his cousin?" Charlie smiled. Did he say love?

"He won't be needing a few hours alone tonight, but I will." Ayden dipped her back and kissed her.

Charlie dropped the phone and surrendered. Evelyn was right. Why was she fighting this? She wanted Ayden. He loved the way she smelled. That was one step closer to loving her completely. Besides, he had his moments, like now, when he could sweep a girl right off her feet.

"You should get out of these clothes," Charlie rasped.

"Excuse me?" Ayden pulled her upright and placed his forehead against hers. "I haven't taken you out on a proper date yet."

"I don't care." Charlie pulled his shirt loose.

"You did this morning." Ayden tucked it back in.

"Well I don't now." Charlie pulled it out again.

"Are you going to kill me, Charlie?" Ayden left the shirt out and smiled a full tooth smile at her.

"What?" She took a step back. *That was a weird question, also a little creepy after this morning, and Evelyn's conversation and reaction to nightmares.*



"It's the only logical reason I've come up with." He patted her behind and stepped into the kitchen. "Did you give Evelyn the rest of my cookies?"

"Uh." Charlie was torn between the conversations. The man had a way of talking about two things at once. "Yes, I gave Evelyn your cookies. No, I'm not here to kill you."

"You sure about that?" Ayden opened the refrigerator and grabbed a can of soda.

"Explain please?" Charlie leaned her hip on the counter.

"Well, when I try to behave, you try to take my clothes off. When I try to take your clothes off, you tell me to behave." Ayden took a sip of the soda. "I plan on taking you out tonight on a proper date. I'll pick you up at your room in a few hours. I need a nap."

"Do you want me to do anything?" Charlie realized that he was just as confused as she was and that she had been throwing out just as many mixed signals. In her head it made sense, seemed like a plan. Obviously, it wasn't a good one.

"Yes. Think about what you want tonight." Ayden headed up the stairs and toward his room. That's when he noticed it. He stepped into her room and looked at the stack of money on the top of her dresser. He didn't touch it, and he wasn't about to count it, but he had a good idea of how much was there.

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"Charlie?" Ayden came back to the kitchen.

"Yes?" Charlie was hopeful he changed his mind about the nap and decided on a little afternoon delight instead.

"Why is there a stack of money on top of your dresser?" Ayden leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. "You going somewhere?"

"I came here." Charlie gulped. She forgot to put the money back in the drawer.

"I'm listening."

"I had an account at a local bank in Vegas. I closed it. I sold off or donated everything I had except what I arrived here with." Charlie wasn't lying to him. He would be able to tell. It's what he did for a living.

"So why haven't you put it in a bank here?" Ayden lifted a brow.

"Because I don't know how long I'll be here." Charlie let him chew on that for a minute.

"Long enough to open a bank account I hope." He sure didn't want to think of her leaving him. Charlie was apparently dead set in her plan to leave if things didn't work out the way she wanted them to. He needed to make a phone call and check out how far she had already planned ahead.

"I'll make you a deal. When you marry me, I'll open an account. As of yet, we haven't even been on a date. Until then, where I keep my money, is *my* business." Charlie pointed at herself. She wasn't about to tell him she didn't want to have any traceable accounts for a while. That would set off alarms.

“Except this is my house, and married or not, *you are* my business.” Ayden lifted off the counter. He wasn’t afraid of marriage, certainly not afraid of marrying Charlie, but she wasn’t pinning him in before everything was solid between them. “I have a small safe you can use. I’m sure your panties are a great distraction, but in the event anyone ever got in here I’d feel better if your valuables were in a safe.”

He opened one of the many kitchen cabinets, pulled a small fire safe out and set it on the counter. Once he punched in the code, he removed the hand gun and bullets and punched more numbers on the key pad.

“Come over here and put your own code in.” Ayden cleared the weapon.

“You keep a gun in the kitchen?” Charlie knew she had no choice, so she punched in a new code.

“Ground level is often the easiest access and the least defended.” Ayden lifted the safe after she stepped away. “Any place in particular you want it?”

“Put it back under the cabinet. If no one would suspect a gun there, they sure as hell won’t look for my life savings there either.” Charlie shrugged. The man was always prepared for anything. “Are you expecting to open the Bed and Breakfast soon?”

“No, as a matter of fact I’m not going to open it at all.” Ayden put the safe back. When he stood up, he could see her face and knew she had a million questions. He still wanted a nap. “It’s too dangerous. I had my business license cancelled and all traces removed. No one’s finding me online so easily again.”

“You’re not opening the business because of me?” Charlie felt horrible. Now she had upset his retirement plan. She wondered what else she was wrecking in his life. It seemed so simple to come to North Carolina, tell him she loved him and move on. The problem was, Ayden didn’t refuse her this time. She didn’t move on. She was there in the middle of his world messing everything up.

“If you wanted to make it up to me, you would come rub my back.” Ayden headed for the stairs. He was shameless in his attempts to keep her close to him, but it worked.

“You’re really not opening it because of me?” Charlie followed him to his room where he promptly sat on the bed and removed the boots.

“Put that in the top drawer, will you?”

“It’s not safe for me to leave money in a drawer, but you can leave a weapon and ammunition in one?” Charlie placed the gun in carefully. She hated guns. The only time she ever held one was that one night in Vegas.

“I’m not going to leave it there, and I’m not going to leave you in this house with strangers. Ever. I didn’t really want to open a bed and breakfast anyways. I wanted to be near Evelyn, and this gave me an excuse.” Ayden pulled his pants off and tossed them in his laundry basket that was now empty. “Did you wash my clothes?”

“Yes.” Charlie watched him and wanted to jump on him, tackle him to the floor, and have her way with him. She would wait until tonight. Then at least it would seem like she thought about what she wanted. The fact that he would change his plans for her made her feel special.

“Thank you.” He fisted his shirt and pulled it over his head. Tossing it in the hamper, he teased her again. “You feel guilty enough to rub my back or what?”

“I am going to rub your back, but not because I feel guilty.” Charlie climbed into the bed and sat on his butt straddling him.

Ayden growled as she pressed her hands along his spine from his lower back to his neck. He exhaled in deep satisfaction. “You should let me do this for you sometime.”

“Shh. You’re supposed to be taking a nap.” Charlie bit her lower lip and rubbed. She enjoyed massaging him as much if not more than he enjoyed getting massaged. She was used to being pampered. Ayden wasn’t. The fact that he asked her to do it meant he truly enjoyed it the first time.

Charlie worked her magic, and in no time, he fell asleep.

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Charlie took the opportunity to call Stephanie in New York. They laughed for at least an hour, and the relief Charlie felt by the time she hung up the phone was comforting. After hearing about how Amelia Young, Stephanie’s mom, had treated Evelyn and Malcolm, Charlie wasn’t worried about meeting Ayden’s mom anymore. She had two hours to get ready, and since this was their first official date, she decided to combine the old style with the new and just hope she could pull it off.

## Chapter 16

Ayden awoke to the sound of his Elvis alarm. He had slept for four hours. Charlie had eased away his restlessness and recharged his spirits. He pushed out of the bed and headed for the shower. He wondered what she had decided on doing tonight.

Charlie looked herself over again in the full length mirror on the bathroom wall. The black peasant skirt was loose and flowing, but the pink T-shirt was fitted. She grabbed a light soft sweater. Since they were going to dinner and a movie, she would need it. Charlie slipped into the black sandals and headed to her room to wait for Ayden.

Funny, he was just stepping across the hall, but he was nervous. Charlie was right. They had never been on a date before. He knew that now. He had never felt so anxious in his life. He tapped on the door. She was really going to make him play this whole thing out.

Charlie felt butterflies when she heard the tap on the door. This was it. An official date. It seemed absurd to be nervous about it, yet here she was, giddy as a school girl and tripping over her own two feet again.

“Hi.” She opened the door.

“Hello.” Ayden tried not to blush. He could feel his entire body burning, and it was headed straight to his face.

“So this is it.” Charlie couldn’t help blushing. He looked so good in his jeans and black T-shirt.

“This is it.” Ayden held a hand out and then led her down the hall. “Where do you want to go?”

“That depends on what you want to see.” Charlie had discovered that the area had scattered theaters and most of them were small. Nothing compared to the huge ones in Vegas, though she hadn’t been out to see a movie since Michael was alive.

“I haven’t been to the movies in years, darlin’.” Ayden stopped in the kitchen. “You’re beautiful, Charlie.”

She tripped. “Oops. Sorry.” She readjusted her shirt and skirt though nothing was out of place. Ayden normally affected her with his touch. Being thrown off balance by his words was new. He didn’t hold back compliments, and he didn’t keep his distance anymore. “Well, they have this one, but it’s a chick flick.”

“Okay. Where’s it at?” Ayden didn’t care what they saw just as long as he got to see it with Charlie.

“Emerald Plantation?” Charlie shrugged.

“On Emerald Isle, come on. we’ll eat in Swansboro.” Ayden led her out the door and locked it. He didn’t even try to fight the smile. He felt like a new man. Not an agent, though he would feel like an agent again soon enough. He pushed that aside for now and opened the door on the truck for her.

Charlie wished she had worn something other than sandals because all her nervousness was showing in her toes. She kept crossing and uncrossing her two big toes over and over again.

“When did you take your stitches out?” Ayden gave her a brief glance and then focused on the road ahead.

“Today. I can’t believe you noticed that.” Charlie twisted a bit to look at him. He didn’t turn on the CD and that was unusual. “You’re not listening to Elvis?”

“I’m listening to you, darlin’.” Ayden gave her a wink.

“Is your home near Graceland?” Charlie asked and slid her fingers along his short hair.

“Close enough.” Ayden had to fight to keep his eyes open. Her touch relaxed him on so many levels.

“Will you take me there when we go?” Charlie continued to stroke his hair.

“Do you really like Elvis?” Ayden had to ask.

“I love the king. Elvis was just as big in Vegas. My parents grew up on Elvis, so did we.” Charlie inched as close as the seatbelt would let her. “What’s your excuse?”

“I remember my dad taking me to Graceland before he left. He explained to me that sometimes people love each other but they have different dreams. He was in the Navy, and when he got out, they moved back to Tennessee. My dad had a job offer in Kentucky at an upstart company providing security, but my mom didn’t want to move anymore.” Ayden gripped the wheel.

“He told me he loved her and me, but he wouldn’t work a farm and just let us get by. He wanted to provide for us and he had to leave in order to do that.”

“He left?” Charlie stopped stroking his hair. She placed her hand over his steel thigh and listened. This was something she never knew about Ayden.

“That’s how Evelyn and Noel got here, darlin’. He left. He always kept in touch though. He sent pictures of Evelyn and her mother pregnant with Noel at the time. That was right before he died.” Ayden loosened his fingers one at a time and re-gripped the wheel. “Their stepfather Martin Blade had known their mother and stalked her for years before she met our father. They said it was an accident, but Martin Blade was the first cop on the scene.”

“Then he beat the girls because they weren’t his.” Charlie gripped his thigh. She remembered how much Ayden wanted to protect his sisters. “God, Ayden.”

“I was in my senior year of high school when Noel came. My dad, my step-dad that is, accepted her just as he accepted me. With open arms and a lot of patience. He can’t have kids, so when the witness protection people showed up, he talked my mom into it.” Ayden smiled. He loved his stepfather. “They told everyone Noel was his daughter by a previous marriage. He’s originally from Texas and moved to Tennessee to help his brother out. He met my momma and the rest is history.”

“He sounds like a good man.” Charlie realized she wasn’t the only one who had a rough life. “Your father sounds like he did what he felt he had to do.”

"I know. He took care of us in life and death. Every letter he sent to me he let me know he still loved me and he still loved my mother." Ayden pulled into the parking space.

"It also said he loved the King. That's why he took me to Graceland because Elvis reminded him of all the good and bad things one man could be. That no matter how much money or success you have it means nothing if you have no one to share it with."

"So that's why you love Elvis." Charlie now understood how a man as tough as Ayden could be so sentimental toward the King.

"Yep." Ayden picked up her hand and kissed it. "I just want to make something clear before we go in, darlin'." Ayden could feel the somber tone in the air. He hadn't planned on spilling his guts to her, but it came out and now she was looking at him with big sad green eyes that wrenched his heart. "I'm paying for dinner. In the last few dates I have been on, the women have made quite a fuss over the check."

Charlie smiled. He was teasing her again. "Then I'll pay for the movie."

"You will not." Ayden laughed.

"If I don't pay for something, how can I make you feel obligated to sleep with me?" Charlie winked.

"That is not what those women...well I'll be damned." Ayden sat back and realized times had changed indeed. "Maybe you should pay for dinner."

Charlie swatted him. "You are shameless."

"I'm just saying we're going to see a chick flick. I'm not going to feel bound by that. Some steak, well, that might at least get you some good foreplay." He jumped out of the truck before she could get her seatbelt unfastened. He grabbed the handle as she was getting out. "I'm just kidding, darlin'. I'm paying, for both, and you're only obligated to listen to me whine about my childhood once."

"Ayden." Charlie stroked his cheek with the back of her hand. He wasn't whining. She didn't think he could whine, but he was talking to her. Conversation was a privilege. He was the king of one word answers and commands. When Tom visited them in Las Vegas, she wasn't sure if they were really friends they spoke so little. It was weird, but she had chatted them both up as much as possible. "You are the most beautiful man I have ever laid eyes on."

"You really haven't been out in a while." Ayden still wasn't used to her compliments, and he sure didn't think the term beautiful applied to him. That was a term reserved for women. He thought he looked rugged, rough, any masculine term would do.

"Watch it, Wolf." Charlie pinched his butt, and he wasn't expecting it. He almost missed a step. *Ha!* She finally threw him off balance.

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Charlie was so full from dinner that the smell of popcorn was making her sick. She only wanted something to drink, but Ayden ordered a large popcorn and a box of candy in addition to the drinks. The theatre was small with only four screens. Charlie was surprised they were able to get in since the line was so long. Once everyone was heading into their respective movie, the crowd didn't seem too large at all.

"Where do you want to sit?" Ayden knew she wouldn't sit too far from the exit.

"Here." Charlie sat the second seat in on the second row from the back.

"You don't want the aisle?" Ayden sat in the aisle seat. "I'm surprised."

"I'm with you, Ayden. I'm not worried about anything happening that you couldn't handle. I only sat this far back, because of how tall we both are. No one could sit behind us and see." Charlie slid her left arm over the back of the seat and played with his hair. It was so short and stubby toward the nape and then got smooth and silky as she moved her fingers upward. "And I only sat here so I could do this."

"Mmm. I like how you think." Ayden kicked up a lazy smile and enjoyed her attention.

Charlie had been unable to keep her hands off, of him since they left the house. Even in the restaurant, she kicked off her sandals and put cold toes under his pant legs and onto his calves claiming he should warm them up since he chose to sit inside. He didn't mind. He sure didn't mind her running her short nails softly along his neck and scalp while waiting for the movie to start.

"What's this supposed to be about?" Ayden tried to stay focused. He wanted to crawl in her lap and go to sleep.

"An older woman meets a younger man. It's supposed to be a romantic comedy." Charlie took in his expression and realized he hadn't moved an inch. He didn't eat the popcorn. He just held it. She saw two people go down the back row and pulled her arm back around to her lap. Ayden moved again. It was as if she had suspended him in time or something.

"When an older man meets a younger woman, they just call it lucky." Ayden started eating the popcorn. Charlie had bewitched him with her touch. She did that a lot lately. He felt like an addict, but instead of needing his cigarettes, he needed her hands. He started smoking as part of a cover when working on a narcotics case. Then he really couldn't stop. He hated thinking he needed anything, and when the final pile of dirt was tossed over Martin Blade's grave, he quit. Cold turkey.

Ayden looked at Charlie.

"Then you're a lucky guy." Charlie smiled. "And in three days you will be seven years older than me."

"For two months." Ayden couldn't believe she remembered his birthday. He knew hers. He also knew her blood type, height, weight, social security number, and other personal details. Anything that was in her file, he had memorized.

The movie started, and Charlie snuggled into his shoulder with her arm linked around his. It was then he remembered he had grabbed her in his sleep. Feelings of guilt and shame washed over him.

“How’s your arm?” he whispered.

“Fine. Shh.” Charlie smiled up at him.

Ayden readjusted and held her hand instead. He set the popcorn on the floor, put his free hand over their linked fingers and gently stroked her knuckles. He wanted to talk to her, but it was too late for that now. The movie was going, and her attention was on the screen.

Charlie felt so cherished. Ayden held her hand in his lap and moved his callused fingers gently over her knuckles. She let out a long satisfied breath and wished they would be this way ten years from now. Sitting in a movie snuggled together in uncomfortable chairs watching a cartoon instead of a chick flick and to the right at least one child, maybe two, maybe three. Ayden wouldn’t leave his babies, and she would never ask him to give up an opportunity like his mother had asked his father.

Ayden enjoyed her laugh when the movie was funny and knew she had tears at the mushy parts. It was the ending he didn’t expect. They went separate ways, and Charlie was not pleased in the least. As they walked back to the truck, she was still pissed.

“You should get your money back.” Charlie hopped into the truck.

Ayden shook his head and walked around. If the producers of that film had ruined his night with Charlie, he may have to go to California and exact revenge.

“It was a lousy ending,” Ayden agreed.

“Why would they do that? There was no good reason for them to separate, none. So she’s older than him, so what. If it was the other way around, no one would flinch. They could make a movie with an eighty-year-old man and an eighteen-year-old girl, and I bet it would have a happy ending.” Charlie still fumed. If she wanted real life, she would have watched the news. It was suppose to be a romance, where the girl gets the guy in the end.

“It’s just a movie, darlin’. In real life they would have stayed together.” Ayden tried his best to rationalize. She was cute angry, but angry wasn’t how he wanted her tonight. “Do you want to stop and get ice cream?”

“That sounds good.” Charlie stopped fuming and realized she was on the verge of ruining his night. He had been so sweet and attentive and didn’t deserve her wrath over a lousy movie ending. “But only if I can pay for it. I still have to tie you down for the night.”

“I had a feeling you were kinky.” He winked. “But I need my hands free tonight.”

“Sounds like you have a plan already laid out.” Charlie traced a nail along his jeans from his knee to his crotch. For several minutes, she did nothing but trace the outline of his erection. They were getting closer to home, but the hotter Ayden felt and



the more he struggled to stay focused the more she wanted him. NOW. "You passed the ice cream."

"I have some in the freezer." Ayden tried to maintain the speed limit, but Charlie was already forcing him to use cruise control. "This isn't the safest place to play, darlin'."

"You have been trained to drive under extreme circumstances." Charlie unfastened his jeans and pulled the zipper down. She removed the seatbelt and slid closer to him. Her lips on his neck and her hand on his cock, Charlie couldn't wait for Ayden any longer.

Ayden pulled off the road and indulged her for a long hot kiss.

"Darlin', we are five minutes from home." Ayden rasped as she pulled his shirt up then over his head trapping his arms.

"I want you now, Ayden." Charlie felt like a mad woman. Consumed by lust she kissed his neck, his chest. She licked, nipped, and sucked on him.

"You want us to get thrown in jail?" Ayden smiled. The lights were reflecting in the rearview mirror.

"No." Charlie was so consumed she still hadn't noticed.

"Then put your seatbelt back on and try to act like you weren't molesting me." He pinched her butt through the skirt and winked.

Charlie barely made it back to her seat when the officer tapped on the window. Ayden had time to get his zipper up, but that was it.

"Wolf?" The young officer questioned.

"Yes, ma'am. How are you?" Ayden tried to fight the smile. He knew all the cops in the area. This would be passed around as an urban legend no doubt.

The young woman cleared her throat. "It's been a slow night for us. Apparently not so much for you."

"No, not so much." Ayden wasn't about to lie to her. She was just as uncomfortable as he was.

"Well, I hope you're done *checking* things out for now. Drive safe." The woman nodded at Charlie and whistled back to her patrol car.

"Charlie?" Ayden smiled and looked over to her. For a woman of Charlie's size he could have sworn she shrunk three inches.

"I'm ready to go home now." Charlie was a little more than embarrassed. She was more like mortified. Ayden had her lipstick on his neck, chest, and face. She refused to look at herself in the mirror, seeing him was embarrassing enough.

"What, you don't think red's my color?" Ayden didn't look at himself, but he knew her lips were bare of color, which meant his body had to have picked it up.

"Aren't you the least embarrassed?" Charlie sat up straight and looked at him in awe as he pulled back onto the road.

"She was one of my students." Ayden smiled. "I'm not embarrassed about the lipstick, and I'm sure as hell not embarrassed about you. Just about being pulled off the road five minutes from home and getting caught."

“I humiliated you in front of a student?” Charlie was striking out all over the place. Ever since she arrived, she had done nothing but flip his world upside down. She was the most unlucky woman in the world.

“No, darlin’.” Ayden put a hand on her thigh. “You may have destroyed the lone wolf theory, but being caught with you in my lap isn’t humiliating.”

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Charlie settled into the seat for the short drive over the bridge and down the street to Ayden’s house. It really was just five minutes away. A long five minutes of silence. Ayden still grinned from ear to ear, and Charlie still sulked in her embarrassment. When they pulled up, she unlatched her seatbelt and reached for the handle on the door.

“Don’t you dare,” Ayden warned her with a shake of his head.

“What?” Charlie looked over her shoulder at him.

“Wait two seconds.” Ayden hopped out of the truck with his shirt in his fist and his top button still undone on his jeans. He jogged around the front of the truck and opened her door. “Painless wasn’t it?”

“Oh.” Charlie took his hand and stepped out of the truck. He was a true gentleman, and she was about to add insult to injury.

“Keep it up and you’re going to find yourself across my knee instead of underneath me.” Ayden swatted her behind. She was so melancholy, and he desperately wanted to treat her to a slow sensual night of lovemaking. That couldn’t happen unless she lightened up.

“You’ll find yourself across my knee,” Charlie retorted then blinked with a bit of shock at her own words.

“I’d rather find myself underneath you.” Ayden unlocked the door and let them in. He wasn’t expecting her to lighten up so quickly, but she did.

Charlie jumped onto his bare back and almost knocked him over. He stumbled then adjusted her legs with his arms and turned back to lock the door.

“Giddy up, cowboy. I’m trying to see how well you ride.” Charlie smacked him on the butt.

“Hold on tight.”

He headed in a hurry for the steps and took them two at a time as though he didn’t have her on his back at all. Once he got to the bedroom, he sat on the edge of the bed and let her loose.

## Chapter 17

Charlie wasted no time pulling him back and climbing on top of him. He was half naked already, and she wanted him fully unclothed. She moved over him like a sex starved lunatic, and she didn't care.

Ayden toed off his shoes and let her strip him. She was so ferocious he couldn't help but enjoy himself a little. He wasn't going to let her keep up this pace though. He had plans, and she wasn't going to change them.

"No." Ayden grabbed her hands when she went to remove her sweater. That was his job, and he planned to take his time.

"I need to catch up here." Charlie was breathless and wanton.

"Oh no, see you had your fun undressing me. Now it's my turn to undress you." Ayden pulled her hands to his lips and kissed each finger in turn.

"You mind working on the clothes, cowboy?" Charlie was so anxious she felt ready to burst.

"Did I boss you?" Ayden flipped her to her back and settled over her. "No, I didn't. You ripped my clothes off in a rage. *I*, however, am going to take my sweet time."

"Can I convince you to cut that time in half?" Charlie lifted her hips into him.

He bit his bottom lip and thought about it. "You can try."

Ayden took her lips slowly, but Charlie was primed and ready to go forcing him to keep her pace. He slicked his tongue down the center of the roof of her mouth, and her eyes opened wide.

"Tickle?" He nipped her bottom lip. Charlie's lips felt so soft it was difficult to tear away from them.

He moved to her neck and ears torturing her with slow long licks and nibbles that had her gripping his back and grinding against his naked body though she was still clothed. Her entire mouth tickled and tingled from that lick. She had no idea her mouth could tickle.

"Ayden, I'm dying for you to be inside me." Charlie gripped his back, crossed her legs around his waist, and lifted herself to him. His scent filled her lungs, her brain, and each inhale was making her drunk with lust.

"You're not ready, Charlie." Ayden unbuttoned the sweater and freed her reluctant arms.

Charlie let him have one arm at a time to pull the sweater off then clamped them back in place on his shoulder blades. Ayden pushed her shirt up and discovered she didn't wear a bra tonight. She hadn't worn *any* underwear. She wanted to be unrestricted in case he tried to tangle her up in them like he had before. The damn skirt was the only barrier, but it was so long it twisted around her legs. As long as he held her in place, she couldn't get exposed to him.

"Yes, Ayden." Charlie arched trying to force his hand farther down.

“Okay,” Ayden whispered as he lifted off, of her and rolled to his side. He pulled the clothes free and appreciated the awesome power of her naked form. Charlie was supermodel quality with girl next door heart. He loved that. When the time was right, he would tell her and show her just how much. Charlie loved him, but he wasn’t sure if it was true love or the kind of love you end up giving friends and family. She couldn’t know any more than he did, and he was still sorting it out.

Charlie was past reason. Looking at Ayden’s naked body was too much for any woman to bear. She slipped her hand around him, and he groaned.

“I wanted to take this slow, darlin’.” Ayden now fought for position as Charlie was trying to topple him.

“I can’t. I need you now.” Charlie spoke in strangled desperation as she pushed harder against his chest with both hands and climbed on top of him. She reached between them to grab him again.

“Let me at least...” Ayden felt the soft wet skin on the tip of his erection and gave up the fight. He wanted to make sure she had come, leaving her more relaxed and open. The woman was tight like a virgin, and he wasn’t a small man by any measure. Charlie seemed determined though as she sank onto him.

Charlie watched his bottom lip disappear and felt his big hands move to her bottom and his fingers sinking into her flesh gripping her tight. She pushed down on him and took a deep breath. If these things could stretch enough for a newborn to come out of it, surely it could let Ayden in.

“Careful, you’ll hurt us both.” Ayden lifted her a little then let her push farther down. “You’re so tight, darlin’.”

“I’m close.” Charlie had been so worked up all afternoon she was surprised she had lasted this long. He could have made her come just by looking at her the right way. Now as she pushed half of him inside, she couldn’t hold it back.

Ayden wasn’t expecting it at all. He wasn’t all the way in, and she was bearing down on him whispering his name in a wave of orgasm. Her nails bit into his forearms, and her head fell back. It was amazing and beautiful, and maybe now, she would calm down enough that he could take her slowly. Charlie was a powder keg. One spark and she just exploded. He hoped she would be this way forever.

Charlie pulled her head down to look at him. His blue eyes should have been flamed with desire. Instead, they were soft and tender and far too calm for what she just experienced. Her chest was rising and falling like she had just stepped off stage and his was calm and even.

“My turn?” Ayden lifted her up and then pushed her down on him completely. His toes curled as Charlie moaned. She was slick and open now, and though he had wanted to get her there a different way, he was satisfied to be inside her.

“Mmmm.” Charlie was spent, but she knew Ayden had plans, and he wasn’t relenting on them. He sat up facing her and adjusted her legs wrapping them around

him. He took her mouth in a slow tender kiss tipping his tongue against hers then sucking on her lower lip letting go with a light nibble.

"You're so beautiful, Charlie," Ayden whispered in her ear. He looked at her and brushed her bangs to the side. He liked being like this, joined with her. "Don't fall asleep on me, darlin'."

"I would never." Charlie opened her eyes. She was so relaxed and so at peace in the moment she was trying to savor the feel of him, the smell. The way he stroked her back with his hands and the way he whispered in her ear. Ayden may not love her, but she felt more loved than she ever knew possible. Sitting there joined with him, his large cock filling her completely, mind body and soul, she knew the connection had to be both ways.

He lifted them both and pressed her back onto the bed. Her head lay on his pillow, and her eyes now stared at him wide and open. Ayden moved slowly. He wanted to savor every single moment with her. He also didn't want her to be sore in the morning when he would be sure to give her the ride of her life.

Charlie stroked his back in one long slow motion with the tips of her nails and that got him moving again. He kissed her deeply and passionately. Slowly he moved in and out creating a rhythm all his own. She lifted into him and surrendered herself, mind, body, and soul. Her heart flooded with emotion, and as she came again, tears escaped down her cheeks.

"Are you okay, baby?" Ayden kissed away the tears and remained still inside her. He could feel her coming and see it in her face, but the tears confused him.

"Yes. Please, don't stop, Ayden." Charlie lifted into him. She wanted to feel him and watch him as he came. She was so overwhelmed by him, so connected to him in this moment. On a whisper she confessed, "I love you."

Ayden smiled a satisfied smile then whispered in her ear, "I know."

He took her lips and rocked into her over and over again until he couldn't hold back any longer.

"God, Charlie," he whispered and bit a small bite on her shoulder to keep from saying the words himself.

Charlie held him tightly and sniffed. Maybe he couldn't say it, but she knew now that he felt it. Maybe he was like Evelyn, scared. That made sense the longer she thought about it. Charlie kissed his neck and decided right then she wouldn't pressure him. She would just keep making love to him until he couldn't bite the words back anymore.

Charlie released him from the bear hug and began playing with his hair again. Ayden nuzzled into her neck and relished the feel, smell, and taste of her. He would miss this. Maybe he could sneak her along. Charlie swatted his naked butt bringing his thoughts back to the moment.

"Hum?" Ayden grunted.

"You're squishing me." Charlie tried to suck in a breath.

“Oh, sorry.” Ayden lifted to his elbows and stared down at her. She was already fighting to keep her eyes open. “Isn’t this supposed to be the other way around?”

“What’s that?” she said around a yawn.

“I’m supposed to be falling asleep, and you’re supposed to be trying to cuddle.” Ayden rocked his hips into her again.

“I’ll cuddle with you, cowboy.” Charlie opened one eye and pushed her hand through his hair.

Ayden smiled and backed out of her slowly. Charlie faced him and snuggled in putting her right leg over him and her arm around his back where she made soft circles with her nails, relaxing him. Ayden couldn’t fight the sleep any longer. He pulled her as close as he possibly could without squishing her, slid his left thigh between her legs again, and closed his eyes.

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The next morning he awoke with Charlie sleeping in his arms, a soft smile on her lips. Ayden couldn’t wait for her to wake up. He kissed her and kissed her again. She grumbled a bit. The woman was apparently not a morning person anymore.

“Charlie. Wake up, darlin’.” Ayden rolled her to her back and circled her neck with his nose.

“What time is it?” Charlie grumbled.

Ayden looked at the clock and decided not to tell her it was five a.m. She would be less likely to indulge him and more likely to kill him instead.

“Time to wake up.” He knew he was being greedy, but he didn’t care. He hadn’t been with a woman in forever. Now he had Charlie, and she was more woman than any man had a right to have. He thumbed over one nipple and drew on the other. She gasped.

“Ayden?” Charlie was waking up now. She should have known he was going to be wired up this morning. Yet somehow, it still seemed too dark in the bedroom.

“God you taste good.” Ayden spoke as he switched breasts.

“What happened to taking it slow?” Charlie could feel the heat pouring off his chest onto her stomach and realized he was very much his wolfish self this morning.

Ayden didn’t answer. He just pushed farther down her stomach.

“Ayden, I need a shower.” Charlie grabbed his head before he moved any farther south.

“Why?” He kissed her navel.

“Ay-den. I need a sho-wer,” Charlie whined.

“F-ine,” he said mocking her. He pushed the blankets off, snatched her up out of the bed and carried her to the bathroom.

“Ayden, put me down.” Charlie squealed.

He sat her down on the sink. “Stay there.”

Charlie watched as he turned the shower on and looked back every few seconds checking to make sure she stayed in place on the sink. He came back and started to kiss her. She blocked him.

"I need to brush my teeth." Charlie smiled deviously. She saw the clock on the way into the bathroom and knew it was five a.m. The Wolf had some nerve to start her day this early, so she wasn't going to make it easy on him.

Ayden grumbled and reached into the drawer and grabbed the toothpaste.

"Open," Ayden commanded.

Charlie went to speak, but as soon as she opened her mouth she got a finger full of toothpaste, and the more she tried to talk the more he successfully worked his index finger around in her mouth along her teeth.

"Spit." Ayden practically snarled at her in jest as he grabbed his toothbrush and lined it with paste.

"Oh no you don't." Charlie looked like a mad dog. She snatched the toothbrush and wiped the paste on her finger. "You open."

Ayden laughed because she obviously swallowed a bit of paste. Her face scrunched, and she almost gave up. He grabbed the finger and closed his lips around it. Charlie wasn't going to deter him this morning. The more ornery she acted the more fired up he became.

Charlie didn't know what to do really. It felt weird having her finger in his mouth and even a little gross to rub it over his teeth like he was doing now.

Ayden spit in the sink behind her and turned on the water. He pulled two paper cups from the dispenser and handed her one. Charlie rinsed her mouth and then covered her face trying to hide the fact she was spitting.

"When you're out in the field for months, you get used to brushing with a finger." Ayden thoroughly enjoyed that Charlie was a lady, and he enjoyed taking her off guard from time to time. "You know it can be dangerous to have mint or any other kind that has a smell to it. Just like smoking, can't smoke in the field. You can see a cigarette burning through a sniper scope miles away."

"I'm not in the field." Charlie crossed her arms.

"No, but your toothbrush isn't in my bathroom, and I wasn't about to huff down the hall to get it." Ayden kissed her lips then thumbed the last spot of toothpaste away.

"You are so..." Charlie tapped her foot in the air.

"I'm an ogre. I know." Ayden uncrossed her arms and pulled her to the shower. "I can't wait to get you all wet."

"You are seriously going to get it, Ayden." Charlie stepped into the shower, and Ayden crowded in behind her. "Can I have some space?"

"No." Ayden dipped his head under the water and reached for the washcloth and soap grabbing it before she could. "You know you keep telling me I'm going to get it, but I think you're all talk, sweetheart."

Charlie was stunned. Was he challenging her? She had one quick orgasm and then he made love to her and that made him the better lover? She looked at him selfishly lathering himself up with the washcloth. She knew it was because he wanted to make love, she however wanted to take a shower, and he was proving a point. He really wanted to claim her like some barbarian. As flattering as it was she was a modern woman not falling for it, at least not without a ring on her finger.

Charlie snatched the washcloth out of his hands and rinsed then re-lathered it. She began washing herself while Ayden tugged the corner of the cloth trying to take it back. "Rinse off and go lay in that bed, Wolf."

"You're not my boss." Ayden stepped back in case she decided to pop him.

"Oh I am. At least for the next hour, if you last that long." Charlie turned away from him and rinsed off. She stepped out, grabbed the only towel on the bar and dried off.

"Will you hand me a towel?" Ayden smiled. He was going to get it, and he was really looking forward to it.

Charlie tossed the towel over her shoulder. "You better be there before I get there."

"Shit." Ayden wrapped the towel around him and had to leap onto the bed to beat her there. "Damn woman."

Charlie wasn't going to let him think he was the master of her domain. Ayden was wonderful and just being around him kept her primed and ready, but it was her desire for him that got her to that point, not his abilities. At least that's what she told herself. She was going to show him just how many skills she had then see if he still felt like the alpha male when she was done with him.

Charlie stripped him of the towel and moved straight for his cock. He was still wet from the shower and even a little soapy here and there, but he didn't care and apparently neither did Charlie. This was the woman he saw that night. She treated him to a private show. This was the woman he'd hoped to find in bed one morning dominating him. He felt like the luckiest man alive. Charlie consumed him with greed. Her nails bit into his thighs, and his fingers tangled in her hair as she twisted her lips over him.

"God I hope you can do that for an hour." Ayden groaned in pleasure, still pushing her buttons. She growled in frustration.

Charlie was hoping to make him come quick and revel in the glory of breaking him in minutes, but her jaw was wearing out, and Ayden wasn't even close. With one final lick, she turned a frustrated eye toward the Wolf who looked more like his name than ever at the moment. She slid up and over him. She started to sit on him, but he began to move.

Ayden pushed her back gently and treated her to the same attention. Charlie was out to prove a point this morning, but so was he.



Ayden parted her lips with his tongue and pulled a pillow under her butt lifting her higher and at an angle. He was wedged between her thighs, and Charlie was urging him away. He wasn't hearing it. She concentrated on not enjoying it, but he made that impossible, so she focused on not having an orgasm instead.

"I hope you can keep that up for an...Oh." Charlie gasped.

Charlie was trying not to come, but he had plans to make her come several times this morning. This was his bed and his domain. If she wanted to rule it, she would have to work harder. Ayden pushed two fingers past the fold and gripped the ridge deep inside her while suckling her clit.

"This is so unfair." Charlie cried out as she came. She tried to hold back, but damn he was good. Ayden nipped the inside of her thighs and licked over her again making her legs jerk and tremble. Charlie was more determined than ever to regain control and make him come.

Ayden flipped her over as soon as she sat up making her lose balance and giving him the edge. He readjusted the pillow and spread her legs apart on either side of him.

"What are you doing?" Charlie was still trying to regain her balance, and he just kept moving her to whatever position he saw fit for her to be in.

"Working a new angle." Ayden nipped her firm butt and slid his fingers over her again, then back inside. "What do you think?"

Charlie couldn't speak, so she just waved a hand.

"I thought you'd like it." He nipped her other cheek then moved on his knees behind her. She was already wet and soft, and he knew he had to maintain or he would lose control here.

Ayden inched inside her and she groaned. Damn but he was taking control. As soon as she heard his breath catch, she thought for sure this may be a way to do him in. Charlie lifted to her hands and pressed back against him taking him in one long thrust. Ayden gripped her thighs, and they both moaned. Charlie wasn't sure she could keep from coming again because hearing him enjoy her was really making her hot. The louder he growled the harder she pushed against him and the faster she tried to go.

"Mmmm." Ayden held her in place as she gripped him from inside again coming on a loud cursing moan. It took all of his self control not to let loose and not to laugh. Charlie was definitely the first woman to be pissed about an orgasm. She was working him over and doing her best to make him lose control. It almost worked. "You're so hot, Charlie."

"You are insatiable." She was out of breath and panting.

"I'm just trying to please the boss." Ayden kissed her neck and pulled out of her. Charlie was like putty in his hands. He could have twisted her into a pretzel if he wanted.

"I'd give you a raise, but you haven't spent your last one." Charlie snickered.

"That was horrible." Ayden flipped her over. "I hope our kids don't get your sense of humor."

Charlie didn't have time to process the words. Ayden was sliding back into her as he hooked her legs with his arms lifting her into him. He hovered over her and lowered enough to kiss her lips.

"Are you ready to admit I'm the boss in the bedroom?" Ayden whispered.

"Like hell you are." Charlie pulled herself away and pushed him on his back. She squatted over him instead of straddling and set herself down on him completely. With a new resolve, she caught her second wind. "Can you see that, Ayden?"

"Yes." Ayden smiled. He knew she would take over. He just had to get her going.

"Do you see how deep you're going?" Charlie lifted to the tip and then slowly lowered down his length again. She strained to speak, but Ayden apparently enjoyed it. He was peaking through one eye, and his muscles were starting to bunch. "God you feel good, Ayden."

"I...Mmmm." Ayden fought himself to keep quiet. If she got him talking, he would confess all, and he wasn't one hundred percent ready for that yet.

"I love the way you feel inside me." Charlie moved a little quicker as his hands gripped her waist and his fingers pressed into her behind. "I love riding you, Ayden. You're so big and thick."

"Charlie." He rasped.

"Are you going to come with me, Ayden?" Charlie was losing it, and she wanted him to also. "I want you to come with me."

"Yes, baby, just like that." Ayden fought to keep his eyes open as he watched her come again. When he felt her walls closing around him, he found his own release. "I love it when you scream my name like that."

Charlie was shocked by how strong the orgasm was. Maybe she had worked her own self up by talking because she screamed his name in wild fashion twisting and plunging on him like she had no control. It seemed to last forever, and she could feel him come inside her. His entire body shook, and his chest was still heaving. She collapsed onto him and listened to his heartbeat strumming. He loved when she screamed his name like that. One more step in the right direction.

"You're a wildcat, Charlie." Ayden pushed her bangs to the side with a trembling hand. He was spent and well sated, at least for the moment.

"And you are a real wolf." Charlie nipped his chest. Apparently, he was going to be the alpha male in and out of the bedroom. "You practically howled at me."

"Mmm. You bring out the animal in me, what can I say?" Ayden stroked her silky hair, twisting it around his fingers enjoying the soft feminine quality of Charlie all around him. "I have to go to Quantico for a couple days. When I get back, we will go to Tennessee."

"Quantic?" Charlie lifted to look at him. "But that's where the FBI...Ayden, are you still working?"

"Not really, they want me to come talk to the BAU about a couple cases I worked on. It's more a lecture." He still twirled her hair. Still felt calm and relaxed.

“The Behavior Analysis Unit? Why would you need to talk to them?” Charlie drew her brows together.

“How did you...?”

“I read all your books while you were out chasing bad guys.” Charlie shrugged.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” Ayden pushed her bangs aside and drew her closer for a kiss.

“I have to stay here, huh?” Charlie frowned.

“It’s work, darlin’.” Ayden hated that he couldn’t make better plans, but the flight was booked, and Charlie probably wouldn’t fly anyways.

“Oh all right. As long as you’re not chasing anyone, I’ll be fine.” Charlie conceded and lay on his chest. “When are you leaving?”

“Couple hours.” Ayden closed his eyes.

“What? When did you find out you were going?” Charlie pushed up and looked at him again.

“Yesterday on my way home from work. I didn’t want to ruin our night by telling you I had to leave today. I’ll be gone two days. That’s all.” This was the part of the job he knew women didn’t understand. This is why he never had a woman in his life while he was working. Charlie was upset over him being gone a couple days, how could she deal with a couple months? Thank God he didn’t work as an agent anymore.

“I’ll miss you.” Charlie snuggled onto his chest relishing the feel of him. “Can I sleep in your bed while you’re gone?”

“Sleep wherever you want, darlin’. This is your home, too.” Ayden thought about Charlie here in his bed while he was gone. If the FBI needed information on anything other than what they had called him for, he wouldn’t go, but they called about Preston. It was too much of a coincidence. “I will try to get back sooner if at all possible, okay?”

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Charlie stood on the porch and kissed him good bye. It seemed like such a natural thing to do now. Ayden was leaving and he was sulking. She tried to pretend it was fine and dandy, but she really hated to see him go. At least he was just going to talk. The lingering fear that a talk would lead to more haunted her. She didn’t want him in the line of fire anymore. She wanted him safe.

When Ayden left, she went to the safe and pulled out the postcard. It was from Preston. The apartment was still in Ayden’s name. He refused to let her change that. Now she understood why. It was a warning.

*Angels don’t always fall from heaven. Someone’s out to clip her wings.*

Charlie had no idea what it meant. Just that it had something to do with her. She knew because it was a postcard from the casino she worked in. More specifically it was a card of the show, and she was on it. Charlie put the postcard back in the safe. What could she do? If she told Ayden now, it would ruin everything.

## Chapter 18

“Wolf.” Jana Mason called across the lobby.

“Mason.” Ayden nodded. Jana was his contact in Nevada. She kept a good eye on Charlie for him. The woman was easily Charlie’s height, a little more muscle than smooth toned flesh. Jana had long brunette hair and blue eyes that lit up as she made her way toward him.

“So they called you here too huh?” Jana smiled and bit her lower lip. Ayden was the epitome of masculine wonder. She’d had one night with him and she’d played a little dirty to get it but it was worth it. Now she had no idea where his little angel was. She would avoid talking about it and say everything was fine if he asked. Charlie was so routine and such a recluse she never understood Ayden’s infatuation with the woman.

“Yep.” Ayden wanted to go to his room and call Charlie not hang out with Jana. She was a nice looking woman and yeah he’d had a moment of weakness a few years back but it was her idea, right after she told him Charlie was seeing someone and he had already had one hell of a day. It was a release for them both. Nothing more than that.

“So...” Jana cocked her head to the side. “You going out to eat?”

“No.” Ayden hefted his duffle bag over his shoulder and waved at another agent.

“Well if you need...”

“I’m good.” Ayden nodded and looked off in a new direction.

“Of course. Well, see you tomorrow.” Jana smiled a genuine smile at the man she desired most. Ayden was known for being reclusive and even the night they shared he barely spoke. It was more about the act and the release than about enjoyment though she had enjoyed it. What woman wouldn’t?

He shrugged and headed to his room. Why did Charlie tell him she had been untouched in over ten years when four years ago Jana said she was with someone? Of course, she didn’t give him details and he didn’t ask. Damn. Charlie affected him just as much then he was just too damn blind to see it.

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Settling into the hotel bed Ayden called home.

“Hello?” Charlie had been waiting all night for his call. She knew the plane was delayed and that he was stuck in Charlotte for hours. Now he had to be there, she hoped.

“Hello, darlin’, I’m here, finally.” Ayden fought the smile creeping across his lips. “I miss you.” Charlie snuggled into a pillow on his bed.

“Hump.” Ayden snorted. That was what he needed to hear.

“What’s wrong with you?” Charlie frowned at that sound. Grumpy, the man did grumpy well.

“Who were you dating four years ago?” Ayden cut right to the chase.

“No one.” Charlie sat up. She hadn’t dated anyone since meeting Ayden.

“You sure about that?” Ayden couldn’t get his head around it. Why would Jana lie unless...well he better back out of this before he gets *himself* in trouble.

“Positive. Why do you ask?” Charlie felt his discomfort now and didn’t want to hear it. She didn’t want to hear about anyone else in his life. “Ayden, if this is about another woman, I don’t want to know.”

“It’s not,” he lied. “I ran into another agent here and they asked about you. The Nevada agent said he saw you a few years back with some guy, that’s all.”

“Oh. Well they must have been mistaken. We get our pictures taken with tourists and do promotional events all over so no telling how many men I have been *seen* with over the years.” Charlie relaxed into the pillow again. A little twitch in her gut said he was a she, but Ayden was on the phone with her *not with* another woman.

“I just got a little...jealous.” Ayden told the truth about that. He was burning from jealousy. Just as he did then, except then he didn’t know what set him off. Just that Jana had offered a release to it. What else had she lied about? “Charlie, you have been all right over the past ten years, right? Nothing out of the ordinary, no troubles?”

Jesus! He was gone less than twenty-four hours on the job, and he was pinning her in fast. “Ayden, you’re making me scared. Is everything okay?”

“Yes, darlin’. Don’t pay me no mind. I’m agitated and tired, and I wish I were home in bed with you instead of here.” That was all true.

“My poor baby. I wish I could make it all better for you. It’s only one day and you’ll be home and we’ll be on our way to Tennessee.” Charlie smiled. He missed her.

Ayden snickered. “I’m never leaving you again.”

“Cause I’m funny?” He laughed; at least he sorta laughed.

“Well you make me smile.” An admission that made his chest feel heavy. “I should get some sleep, darlin’. I’ll call you as soon as I can tomorrow. Maybe I can get out of here early and get back tomorrow night.” Ayden resolved to do just that early or not.

“Sweet dreams.” Charlie bit her lip.

“Good night, darlin.” Ayden heaved a heavy breath.

Charlie disconnected the call. It was all he could do not to punch the number back in and just talk to her for a few more minutes.

Charlie snuggled into the pillow, and after staring into the dark for thirty minutes, she headed downstairs to watch television.

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Ayden entered the classroom and took a seat along the wall with a few other agents. Jana made no hesitation when she entered to sit right beside him.

“Why did you lie to me about Charlie?” Ayden spoke in a whisper.

“What? I haven’t.” Jana’s heart bumped up to marathon speed.

“You said she was seeing someone four years ago.” Ayden looked her directly in the eye.

“I thought she was.” Jana swallowed hard and knew he knew she was lying. He always did. Maybe because everyone knew what a great lie detector he was, so they slipped up and gave him the clues. Like she just did.

“If you wanted to have sex, you could have just asked.” Ayden turned his attention to the stage again.

“Really?” Jana sounded hopeful even to her own ears.

Ayden spared her a dismissive glance and snorted. “Not anymore, I’m taken.”

“Taken?” Jana asked but Ayden stood and took to the stage leaving her no answer. When he finished, he didn’t return to his seat. He left. She couldn’t very well chase after him. She would have to call Tom, get some answers.

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Ayden didn’t call her, and he knew she would be worried, but he wanted to surprise her. It was midnight when he opened the door. The television was on. A bowl of ice cream loaded with toppings sat on the coffee table. Charlie was nowhere in sight. Ayden shut the door and dropped his bag on the floor, removed his jacket and shoes, then took a seat on the couch.

He was just about to take a bite of the ice cream concoction when she yelped. The phone whizzed by his head and hit a photo of Page on the entertainment center shattering it immediately.

“Putting the ice cream down.” Smiling, Ayden set the bowl on the table and held up his hands. He scared her and she reacted all right. She almost took him out with that throw.

“Damn it, Ayden!” Charlie shouted then laughed and then cried and laughed at the same time. He scared the living daylights out of her. She had gone back upstairs to get the phone hoping he would call and instead he had snuck home.

“I didn’t mean to scare you, darlin’.” He laughed. “Come here and let me see you.”

“You scared me to death.” Charlie felt half hysterical and on the verge of passing out, but she laughed now because he did. Really, who breaks in and heads right for the ice cream bowl?

“You almost knocked my brains out.” He reached out and pulled her into his lap. So much stress combined with too many memories, but this piece of his past was worth whatever pain came with it.

“Ground floor is the least defended.” Charlie kissed his lips. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too. I won’t sneak in on you again.” Ayden gripped the back of her neck. “I slept like shit without you.”

“I didn’t go to bed till noon today, and Evelyn came over at four to drag me to dinner.” Charlie exhaled. “I should clean that up.”

“Later.” Ayden leaned over and grabbed the bowl of ice cream.

Charlie started to protest, but he shoveled a spoonful of ice cream in her mouth. Then he licked the whipped topping and chocolate syrup off her lips. When one bite was down, he had another ready.

“Oops.” Ayden missed her mouth by a mile and ice cream slid down the V in her nightgown.

“That’s cold.” Charlie sucked in a breath.

“Here, take this off. You don’t want to get it messy.” Ayden made quick business of undressing her and licking the ice cream, syrup, and whipped topping mixture that was sliding between her beautiful breasts.

“Ayden, this is too messy for the living room.” Charlie pulled the buttons and stripped his shirt off. “Let’s go to the kitchen.”

Ayden smiled. “I can’t wait to cover you in this and eat it all off.”

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Ayden was upstairs and stepping into the shower as she was stepping out of it. Charlie slid into pajamas and into the bed. Ayden followed within moments, groaning and stretching the whole way. He had so many noises to learn. These were obviously satisfied and tired sounds. He pulled her in tight and kissed Charlie’s lips lightly several times slowly with feeling. She felt amazingly cherished as a lazy smile swept across his face.

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The Elvis alarm went off at seven a.m.

“You packed?” Ayden grumbled and turned off the alarm. He slept like a rock last night. He needed it.

“Packed?” Charlie closed her eyes. She could steal a few more hours sleep.

“Yeah, we’re driving to Tennessee in…” Ayden lifted to look at the clock. “T minus two hours and counting.”

Charlie was settling in on his chest. Ayden swatted her butt. She yelped and gave him a scornful eye. “I’m still sleepy.”

“It’s a long drive, darlin’.” Ayden slid his arms around her and pulled her in for a bear hug as he rolled on top of her. “You need me to wake you up another way?”

She laughed. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Whatever you want.” Ayden kissed her neck. He loved waking up in the mornings with Charlie.

“Fifteen hours is a long drive.” Charlie kissed his cheek.

“Yep. Plus Evelyn will be here any minute.” Ayden smiled. They had a long drive ahead, and if he indulged in her flesh this morning, he wouldn’t make it out of the bed much less to Tennessee. He called Evelyn last night to make sure he wouldn’t be tempted.

“Good thing I packed yesterday, huh?” Charlie pushed and he rolled. Straddling him, she considered his expression. He smiled a lot now. He didn’t smile so easily ten years ago, and she had to really work to get a smile out of him every year thereafter. Now, Ayden smiled at her all the time.

“I still have to pack.” Ayden reached for a loose curl and twisted it on his finger.

“Just check over what I packed for you.” Charlie lifted off, of him and headed to his closet. She used two of her rolling suitcases and packed them each one.

“You are just too good to me, woman.” Ayden rolled to his belly and realized he was definitely falling for Charlie. Taking her home should make it all clear. He wouldn’t take her to his house. One of several investments he had made in his life. They would stay with his mother and see how she interacted on the ranch.

She smiled and headed downstairs.

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Charlie watched Evelyn wave as they drove away.

“It’s a fifteen hour drive give or take.” Ayden set the odometer to zero, so he could keep track of the miles.

“I know.” Charlie pulled out the directions.

“What the hell is that?” Ayden snatched the papers from her hands. “Directions? You think I don’t know my way home?”

“No, I don’t think that at all. I wanted to keep track of where we were, so I went online and printed out the directions. It has a cute little map here, too.” Charlie snatched the papers back. She knew Ayden could find his way around anywhere, but he normally traveled by plane. “Why aren’t we flying?”

“I thought you hated flying?” Now she tells him.

“I’ve never flown before, but I would fly with you.” Charlie smiled. He knew her file. Who she was on paper, but that wasn’t going to tell him how much she trusted his judgment in life. She had faced so many fears just getting to North Carolina, then met family and friends. She went to a crowded beach on a holiday and out to dinner and a movie, all because of Ayden. She was getting her life back thanks to him.

Ayden shook his head. He couldn’t make anymore assumptions about what he knew or thought he knew about Charlie.

“I also like to be able to come and go as I please,” he conceded.

“You’re going to be sick of me by the time we get there.” Charlie smiled. They were now trapped in this truck for the next fifteen hours. She could talk him to death. She had so many questions.

“If you become unbearable, I’ll just leave you at a rest stop.” Ayden shrugged. Charlie pouted her bottom lip and crossed her arms. “You know I would never leave you, darlin’.”

“Not and live to tell about it.” She scowled.



Ayden laughed and reached for her hand. He pulled it to his lips and then set it in his lap gently stroking her long slim fingers. He felt so content. There was no way Charlie could talk to him for fifteen hours.

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He thought for sure Interstate 40 would never end. Charlie had asked every question imaginable. She knew everything trivial he knew about his childhood and life right up to why he ordered extra pickles at the last drive thru. For twelve hours, she had asked questions. Finally, her voice gave out.

Charlie pulled the small pillow from the back seat and placed it near his lap. She slid out of the shoulder strap on the seatbelt and lay across the seat resting her head on Ayden's thigh. The pillow supported her neck, and Ayden twisted her hair around his fingers as she drifted off to sleep. She had asked him at least a thousand questions, and he answered every one of them.

Ayden was tired the last few hours of the drive. He didn't realize talking could be so exhausting. Of course, he had probably spoken more words to Charlie on that drive than to any one in his entire life. The woman was insatiable in her quest for knowledge. He couldn't begin to remember what he had told her. A lot of one word answers about colors, food and things no one thinks about, except apparently Charlie.

He looked down at her sleeping a quiet sound sleep in his lap. Her pale hair was a stark contrast to his blue jeans. Charlie's nose had the slightest upturn, and her full and delicious lips drew his touch. As he stroked his thumb over her bottom lip, she pulled her lips together and drew a deep breath. Ayden looked back toward the endless road and wished he had stopped hours ago and started fresh the next day.

A few hours later, he pulled down the long driveway to the house. The dogs were too tired to meet the vehicle. They just waited on the porch with wagging tails. His dad sat in the kitchen at the table reading the paper, and he safely assumed his mom was in bed asleep.

Ben Blythe had been up all night waiting for his son to come home. Ayden wasn't his son by birth, but he loved him just the same. Ayden watched the man hurry to the front door and down the porch steps to his truck.

"Pops." Ayden hugged him.

"I thought you had company with you?" Ben patted him hard on the back and then let him go.

"She's asleep." Ayden moved around the truck and opened the passenger door. Ben was tiptoeing behind him trying to see. Ayden unfastened the seatbelt and pulled Charlie, still sound asleep, into his arms. "Woman could sleep through anything, I swear."

"Where'd you put the wings?" Ben could not believe what Ayden just pulled out of his truck. The woman was beautiful.

“Horns are more like it.” Ayden laughed and made his way for the porch. “She looks like an angel, but, Pops, she’s the devil in disguise.”

“You always have been a lucky S.O.B.” Ben held the door. “You know the way. Your momma tuckered out about four hours ago.”

“You want me to come back down?” Ayden headed up the stairs.

“No. I need to hit the sheets, and so do you. Day starts early around here.” Ben smiled again and walked past the kitchen toward the bedroom behind the stairs.

Ayden climbed the wide wood stairs and carried Charlie into the guest bedroom. Noel’s old room was across the hall. Ayden was well out of the house when they bought the ranch, but Noel lived there until she married Tom. He crossed the carpeted floor and pulled the blankets back. After laying Charlie in the bed, he debated letting her stay in her clothes.

“Charlie.” Ayden shook her. She swatted and growled. “Charlie, help me out here, darlin’.”

Charlie sat up long enough for him to take her shirt off and put his shirt on her. “Gee thanks.” He mumbled at the sleeping woman.

Ayden unfastened her shorts and pulled them free. He was dead tired and still had his own clothes to contend with. He crossed the floor then shut and locked the bedroom door. He removed his shoes and pants as he walked leaving the trail behind him. Finally, it was time to sleep. He snuggled into Charlie turning her to face him and pulled her right leg up to push his left between her legs. He twisted a lock of hair until he fell asleep.

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Evelyn waited until Ayden got out of sight and headed into his house and straight to Charlie’s room. Something was wrong, and the woman wasn’t talking about it. She searched the room completely and found nothing out of the ordinary. That made her feel even more suspicious. Evelyn was going to need help. She had contacted Stix, an old friend from her bounty hunting days. He had checked on Charlie and found nothing. She had closed all accounts, cancelled her credit card, got a passport, and then left Las Vegas. All things in agreement with her plan to leave the country if Ayden rejected her. It was time to call in the Big Dog.

Joshua knew Evelyn was being a little too nice to him. She always treated him good, but tonight she had prepared his favorite meal, made his favorite dessert, and smiled entirely too much for having done all that.

“What are you up to?” Joshua crawled into bed and waited for Evelyn, who was in the bathroom.

“Me?” Evelyn stepped into the bedroom. “Now what makes you think I’m up to something?”

“Damn!” Joshua sat up. Evelyn was wearing lingerie. The woman only wore cotton underwear, and she was dressed to the nines in a silk and lace number that let him know two things. One, she wanted something other than sex. And two, she was probably going to get it from him, whatever it was.

“You like?” Evelyn pulled the silk string loosening her breast line. Charlie had talked her into it, said a man needs to be visually stimulated sometimes. They get used to seeing a woman naked, so they like to see her dressed up. Apparently, she was right.

“Hummina. Hummina.” Joshua wiggled his fingers in anticipation. Evelyn moved slowly as she crossed the floor to the bed. “What’s the occasion, baby?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I just thought you might like it.” Evelyn shrugged. She went to touch him, but he pulled back.

“Hold up.” Joshua slid out of her reach. “Did you do something to my truck?”

“No.” Evelyn waved that thought away.

“Then what?” Joshua crossed his arms and shook his head. He wasn’t stupid.

“Oh, I just thought I could get you to help me snoop a bit at Ayden’s maybe.” Evelyn crawled into the bed and sat on his lap running a finger along his crossed arms.

“Are you nuts, woman?” Joshua could have sworn she just asked him to risk his life and hers. Ayden would kill them both and probably had the place under surveillance anyways.

“No, I’m curious about a woman who now lives with my brother, who I genuinely believe loves him, but I also feel is in trouble.” Evelyn batted her eyes at him and then ran her short nails along his abdomen.

“Will you stop that?” Joshua flipped her to her back and held her arms down. “Don’t think because you come in here all sex personified that I’m going to...”

Evelyn lifted up and took his lips shutting him right up.

“Joshua, you should know better than that. I already had this part planned.” Evelyn kissed his neck, and he let go of her arms. “But if you want, we could do them both at the same time.”

“Excuse me?” Joshua peered down at her with his green eyes aflame.

“Well, he does have a new marble countertop.” Evelyn licked his lips.

“Put your coat on.” Joshua was up and dressing in no time. Evelyn had given up a life of danger and adventure to be with him. There wasn’t anything more dangerous than prying into Ayden’s life, or having sex with his sister in his house. “He is going to kill us, you know that?”

“He’ll never know.” Evelyn smiled. Joshua was indeed a dog. He had taken Evelyn in every space of their house. Now he could mark new territory. It worked like a charm.

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Two hours later, Joshua laid butt naked on his back on Ayden's kitchen floor. Evelyn had worn him out, and now she was getting sleepy, cranky and especially bossy. Sugar was irritating his naked wet flesh.

"Think Joshua. She closed her accounts, got a passport..." Evelyn adjusted so that she remained on his body not touching the cold floor.

"You find the passport?"

"No. No money, nothing. A woman doesn't carry her life savings in a purse." Evelyn frowned.

"It's in one of the safes." Joshua exhaled.

"What?" Evelyn sat up. When her shins touched the floor, she yelped.

"Cold huh? Try putting your ass on it for the last twenty minutes." Joshua sat up and began searching for their clothes. He wiped at the sugar granules then gave up. "You know we have to clean this place up now."

"I didn't mean to knock it over." Evelyn shrugged. She had gotten, a little carried away, and sugar was now everywhere. "Well, where would you keep a safe?"

"Only one safe would be an option." Joshua pulled his shirt on. He had sugar stuck to his back and everywhere else, thanks to Evelyn's kung fu kick.

"How do you know?" Evelyn was annoyed by his arrogance. Joshua had figured out way too much information about her when she was sure to be careful to hide it years ago. Now he was narrowing down options she hadn't even considered.

"Because when you threatened to kill me all those years ago, that was the safe I put your gun in. You would look for my safe, but you wouldn't look here..." Joshua pulled his pants on and started opening cabinets.

"In the kitchen?" Evelyn pulled her lingerie back on and realized it did nothing to cover her or help with the chill in Ayden's house. He kept the air set so cold. She flipped open cabinets, and sure enough in the back of the second, one she looked into was a safe.

"You think you are so damn smart." Evelyn crawled farther into the cabinet to pull out the safe. A big hand landed on her butt cheek, and she really howled. "Oww"

"Be nice to me." Joshua was now on his knees next to her, and he soothed the afflicted area.

"I'm sorry." Evelyn rolled her eyes because he couldn't see her. She still didn't like apologizing.

"So what do you think the combination is there, big bad bounty hunter?" Joshua laid his head on her back, so he could see into the cabinet. "Birthday, high school graduation..."

"Anniversary." Evelyn punched in the day she understood meant the most to Charlie. The safe cleared. "Like a charm."

"Damn you're good." Joshua sat back and leaned against the cabinet. Hopefully, Evelyn would find a passport, a few bucks, some jewelry, and they could go home and never spy on Charlie again.

“Huh.” Evelyn sat back on her heels. Looking at him, he held out his T-shirt for her. He really was her personal savior. “There’s an envelope of newspaper articles.”

Joshua was not going to be that lucky. He pulled up and got a note pad. They could find the articles online and decide at home what they meant.

## Chapter 19

Charlie woke up in Ayden's arms snuggled into his neck and apparently in a bed somewhere. She had to use the bathroom in the worst way, but it was still dark and she had no idea where they were. Ayden was sleeping, and she hated to wake him up, but under the circumstances, she had no choice.

"Ayden?" Charlie whispered.

"Uh?" He grunted. Ayden had just started to doze off and now Charlie was awake. He was getting too old for all nighters.

"I have to go pee." Charlie spoke softly and felt her way around his body in the dark finally finding his face.

"Bathroom's in the hall, darlin'." Ayden smiled under her palm pressed against his lips.

"You come with me." Charlie didn't like being in a strange place, and the hall could be two feet or two hundred feet away for all she knew.

Ayden growled and let her go. He flipped on the switch to the lamp on the nightstand and rolled out of the bed. "You coming?"

"Ayden, this is such a nice room." Charlie took in the soft colors and the soft carpet as her feet hit the floor. It was warm cozy and country, with cowboy hats lining the top of the wall as a border.

"You can tell my momma in the morning. I need to sleep." Ayden ushered her two feet out the door to the bathroom. Charlie's voice was a little hoarse from all the talking on the drive. "You sound like me, darlin'."

"Wait for me?" Charlie smiled and shut the door. She was wide awake and excited about meeting his family and horseback riding and Graceland. All the things Ayden told her he had planned for them to do.

"Why the hell not?" Ayden stood with his hands on his hips in the hallway waiting for her. In a few more hours, his mother would be awake and then Noel, Tom and the baby would come over. That was the routine. Ayden kept running over the schedule in his mind trying to find time for a nap since two hours would not sustain him anymore. He was getting older and needed sleep.

"Did you know there's a lasso in that bathroom?" Charlie came out of the bathroom with bright eyes and a big smile.

"Did you know that it's real and if you don't let me get some sleep, you're going to find yourself tied up with it?" Ayden huffed.

"Is that a promise, cowboy?" Charlie actually looked as hopeful as she sounded at that prospect.

"Behave." Ayden swatted her on the butt and redirected her to the bedroom. That wasn't the reaction he had wanted, but it almost gave him a second wind, definitely something to dream about.

Ayden crawled into the bed and turned out the lights. Charlie's big blinking eyes were looking at him the whole time. He lay on his back and folded his arms under his head. He closed his eyes and let out a deep breath.

"Ayden, are you asleep?" Charlie whispered.

"Woman," Ayden warned.

"I know. I just wanted to tell you I'm glad we came here." Charlie snuggled into his side. It would take some self restraint to keep from talking. She would try.

Ayden lowered his arms and pulled her on top of him. She had hoped that maybe he was going to kiss her. Instead, he pushed her head to his chest and patted her softly. Charlie tried to be still, but she couldn't help it. Her fingers started to trace his shoulders and neck.

"I'm going to get the lasso." Ayden rolled her to her back.

"What?" Charlie gasped.

"You won't let me sleep." Ayden kissed her neck. He was awake now.

"I'm sorry. I just can't help it." Charlie stroked his back.

"You will have to be quiet." Ayden gently nipped her neck. "Later I'll take you out to the barn and then you can scream."

"Promise?" Charlie adjusted her legs around him. She was still sore from yesterday. Ayden was a large man in all aspects of the word, his personality, his body, his cock. Charlie doubted he could ever date a petite woman without snapping her in half.

He pulled her panties off and then pushed his boxers down. Charlie was already wiggling to reach him. He slicked a hand between them and spread her apart. She surprised him by reaching down and guiding him in.

Ayden rocked into her gently taking her as slow as he could force himself to go. Charlie kissed his neck and urged him on with a husky whisper. All the while, lovingly stroking his back and quietly moaning. Her teeth bit into his shoulder, and his eyes closed on a low guttural moan of sensation.

Nothing in the world was better than making love to Charlie. It cost him sleep, cost him his heart, and would probably cost him his life someday. Ayden shook that thought from his head. He wasn't sure how it got there.

Charlie felt his full weight bearing down on her, and she relished it. He covered her like a hot blanket from head to toe. His breathing grew slow and deep and she knew he was finally asleep. She pushed up a little trying to get more air in her lungs, and he rolled to his side.

After a couple hours, she could see him more clearly, as the first bits of light peaked through the curtains. The downstairs of the house was beginning to move about with noise, doors and the smell of food. Charlie kissed his forehead and slipped out of bed. Ayden needed to sleep, and she needed a shower.

"Where are you going?" He mumbled.

"I need a shower, sleep." Charlie was amazed at how in tune he was to her. Charlie could sleep through anything. It scared her so much she had three bolted locks on her apartment in Las Vegas. With Ayden near, she could sleep sound and not worry about anything. He would protect her should the occasion arise.

"I'll go get your bags." Ayden opened an eye.

"You didn't bring them in last night?"

Charlie sounded surprised, and that struck him the wrong way this morning. "I brought you in last night. Maybe I should have brought in the luggage and let you sleep in the truck. At least then I would have gotten sleep."

There was the morning Ayden she knew. Cranky, maybe he was only cranky all those years ago because he wasn't sleeping. "The bags are in the bathroom. That's why I asked. Go to sleep, Wolf, before *I* really use that lasso."

Ayden huffed and pulled the blanket over his head. Shit. His Pop must have brought them in last night. He thought he heard someone in the hall but assumed it was the dogs. They would have been in his bed had Charlie not been there. He drifted back to sleep, deciding to get up when Charlie came back.

Charlie was finished with her shower and dressed when she heard Noel and Tom's voices downstairs. She didn't need Ayden to meet them the first time. They could introduce her to his parents now.

Charlie entered the kitchen, and Lacy Blythe all but lit up like the sun itself. She wasn't much bigger than Noel, and Charlie was amazed something as big as Ayden had ever been a part of such a tiny woman.

"Hi, I'm Charlie." Charlie realized with the kitchen acoustics she really did sound more manly than not.

"Oh you poor thing. Do you have a sore throat?" Lacy bustled over to her and tiptoed up to feel her forehead. "No fever, come, sit."

"I think I talked too much yesterday." Charlie hugged Noel and waved to Tom. Finally, she sat at the table.

"You have one of those cell phones too, huh?" Lacy made a look of disgust. "I hate it. If I'm off in the woods somewhere, it's because I don't want to talk to ya'll, no offense."

"No." Charlie shook her head. "I don't like them either."

"There is a very real and practical use for a cell phone, especially if you are off in the woods alone. What if you need help?" Tom locked Page into her high chair.

It was then Charlie realized the place was set up for the baby. Gates at the entranceways just need to be pulled to keep her corralled.

"Where's Ayden?" Tom sat one seat over from Charlie.

"He's being a bear this morning, so I let him sleep," Charlie said as she accepted the hot tea from Ayden's mom. "Thank you."

"That boy's never slept in a day in his life." Ben came in the kitchen entrance, kicked off his shoes, and slid slippers on.



“Angel.” He stepped to Charlie and kissed the back of her hand. “Glad to see you’re alive.”

“I’m sorry?” Charlie looked at the man who wasn’t much bigger than his wife.

“When Ayden pulled you out of that truck last night, I wasn’t sure. He smacked your head into the door. You didn’t feel it?” He winked.

“He?” Charlie reached for her head.

“I’m just teasin’.” Ben got a swat from his wife.

“Don’t pay him no mind, Charlie. He plays all the time.” Lacy began pulling plates down from the cabinet, and Noel joined her getting things set up for breakfast.

“Can I do anything?” Charlie asked and began to stand.

“No, no. You’re a guest here.” Lacy waved a hand towel at her. “You like grits?”

“Um?” Charlie looked to Noel, then to Tom who thankfully nodded. “Okay?”

“Where’re you from again?” Ben asked.

“Vegas. My mother was originally from Sweden and my father from Finland. They met at a casino, and well here I am, first generation American.” Charlie smiled and shrugged.

“Scandinavian. Why aren’t you a super model?” Ben lifted his coffee as Lacy set his plate in front of him.

“I was a showgirl.” Charlie nodded. “I had the offer once, but it’s not who I am.”

“So what do you really want to be?” Ben watched her scrutinize the breakfast Lacy now set in front of her.

“I don’t know.” Charlie started with the eggs. It was a plate full of food. No way could she eat it all, but she would make herself at least try all of it.

“What she really wants to be is with Ayden.” Noel sat next to her and nodded. “You have to pull out the pictures, Momma.”

Charlie was stunned, both at Noel’s blatant confession on her behalf, and at the fact that she called Lacy Momma.

“Tell her who you were talking to yesterday that made your voice go out.” Noel nudged her under the table.

“Ayden.” Charlie was quiet. She thought for sure Noel had made peace with her, but she felt like she had just stepped in front of the firing squad now.

“My baby?” Lacy sat down slowly. “You talked to Ayden all the way here from North Carolina, and he didn’t leave you at a rest stop?”

“He likes to talk to me?” Charlie surveyed the table, and all eyes were on her except Noel.

“Told ya,” Noel said with a smile. “That will be fifty bucks each.”

“Hush.” Ben held his hand up. “Now, Charlie, you tell me this, and don’t bullshit me because I’ll know the truth.”

Charlie looked at the man.

“Who is his favorite artist?” Ben crossed his arms and waited.

“Elvis.” Charlie was insulted by the question. Anyone who knew Ayden for five minutes knew that.

“Please, Pop,” Tom chimed in. “What are those two dogs named?”

“Starsky and Lola, Hutch died two years ago, and Lola came from a neighbor.” Charlie turned to look at the dogs patiently waiting on the porch for breakfast to be over. Starsky, a black lab, and Lola, a red Doberman, were quite a pair.

“Well now.” Noel smiled again. “Pay up.”

“One more question.” Lacy Blythe smiled and turned her baby blue eyes to Charlie. “Ayden has dimples. Where are they?”

“Left and right cheeks.” Charlie stretched her neck from side to side.

“He only has a dimple in his left cheek,” Noel conceded.

“No, she’s right. I used to chase that naked ass to get clothes on it.” Lacy nodded. “Welcome to the family, Charlie.”

“We’re not getting married. We’re just trying to see if...” Charlie gulped hard. She wanted to run upstairs and drag Ayden down to manage his crazy family.

“You don’t want to marry my baby?” Lacy propped her head on her fist.

“I didn’t say that. I just...” Charlie was getting flustered.

“Stop. Don’t say another word, darlin’.” Ayden stepped off the bottom stair. Damn his family for drawing her out like that. They would ruin his plans yet. At least he had a good idea she would say yes when the time came. She also seemed reserved about it all. He still had a couple weeks to ease them both into it, no hurry.

“Ayden.” Charlie froze. Great, he heard the part about not getting married and probably thinks she doesn’t want to now. Not like, he wanted to but she could hope.

“Oh, Ayden, we’re just having some fun. Hell, you don’t talk to anyone, and you wore this poor girl out on the drive up here. How could we resist?” Lacy stood and walked to her son.

Ayden stood in the kitchen doorway with a scowl on his face so mean Charlie didn’t know what to expect next. “You give me a kiss. I’m your momma and you’re not too big to get your ass whipped.”

“You see how they treat me, Charlie?” Ayden kissed the woman on the cheek and made his way toward Charlie. He stopped to kiss Page on the cheek, passed Tom smacking him on the back of the neck, kissed Noel on the cheek and moved to Charlie. “I get more love from the dogs than them.”

Ayden pulled her chair out and pulled her up.

“Ayden?” He kissed her full on the lips and took her seat. “Uh, Ayden?”

“What?” He pulled at her, and reluctantly she sat in his lap. He could tell she was uncomfortable, but he didn’t care. He wanted her close, and he wanted his family to see where his loyalties lie. “This is my seat.”

Ayden picked up her fork and began eating her breakfast. Charlie didn’t complain because she had barely touched it. Half a biscuit and two eggs was more than the bowl of

cereal she usually ate. Ayden's mom had pancakes, eggs, bacon, sausage, and biscuits stuffed on the plate.

Ben smiled and nudged his wife. Noel wasn't lying about any of it. Ayden was definitely in love. His voice was just as hoarse as Charlie's meaning they had indeed talked all the way to Tennessee. Now was the real test of questions.

"Whatcha plan on doin' while you're in?" Ben finished his plate and carried it to the kitchen. "Want some coffee?"

"Please." Ayden looked toward the kitchen to talk to him. He was aware that everyone including Charlie was looking at him for the answer. "Take Charlie out on the horses today, and tomorrow I thought I'd take her to Graceland."

"Tomorrow is your birthday." Noel slugged his arm. "We have a surprise party planned."

"Surprise." Ayden shrugged. "I won't be there."

"Ayden, you will be at that party," Lacy informed her son. "Take Charlie to Graceland in the morning and be home by seven tomorrow night."

Charlie was in awe at how the women talked to Ayden. Noel had seemed bossy, but his mother was in control around here. Ayden didn't seem to be fazed in the least. He ate her breakfast and patted her on the thigh. He smiled at Ben who gave a look of commiseration when he handed the coffee to him.

"We'll see." Ayden shrugged. He had planned to take her parking tomorrow night and really enjoy his birthday. Instead, he was no doubt in for cake and ice cream. A man of his age shouldn't have to deal with surprise parties.

"Evelyn and Joshua are flying in, you ogre. What else were you going to do?" Noel faced him.

"I was going to enjoy a nice quiet birthday," Ayden conceded. Why the hell had they made this fuss? Charlie was stunned into silence. It was as if she wasn't there except she was. Her sympathetic touch to the hand he rested on her thigh let him know she wanted a quiet night, too.

"Oh." Noel frowned. "We all thought it would be nice to throw you a party. It's the first time you've been home for a birthday since..."

"Since you were seventeen," his mother said with her hands now on her hips. "I'm not getting any younger, and I barely see you as it is. Don't break my heart, Ayden."

"Noel said you have baby pictures?" Charlie chimed in. They had beaten him into submission she could feel it. Poor Ayden, no wonder he enjoyed her pampering so much. She made a mental note to baby him a lot while they were here, starting now.

"You don't..." Ayden tried to take the plate back, but Charlie stroked her hand across his hair and smiled. He let go of it. He was used to the guilt trips and the fickle ways of his mother, and Noel acted just like her most of the time. Charlie pampered him in the strangest but essential ways. He slept in while she faced his family. They would have roused him at seven no matter what had she not run interference. Now she cleaned up after him like she had lived here all her life. "Thank you, darlin'."

Lacy smiled, Ayden called the woman darlin'. She really liked Charlie. The woman knew how to treat her son. She didn't have the luxury of babying Ayden as a single mother. He had out grown her by the time he was ten, and the only thing she could do was nag him and guilt him and boss him to keep his ass out of trouble. She was grateful when Ben's brother had given him an after school job on the ranch. Grateful that Ben had patience with a teenager when they got married.

When Noel came along, it was the opposite, a nine-year-old girl who was beaten and abused. She taught her all the defensive moves and how to get control of a man. Noel excelled at bossing, yet the child couldn't keep a secret to save her life. Incidentally how she came to be in their custody in the first place.

"Come on, Charlie, let me get you those pictures." Lacy linked Charlie's fingers in her own and guided her to the living room.

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With Charlie out of sight and earshot, Ayden turned to the remaining family. "What the hell are you guys doing? I told you to be nice not put her through an inquisition."

"I bet them fifty bucks each you would bring home Charlie and she would know more about you than anyone," Noel confessed. She smiled a guilty smile at Ayden and shrugged. "She handled things just fine. You think I should split it, seventy-five each? She did do all the work."

Ayden growled. "And a birthday party. Who throws a party for a man my age?"

"We do. Jesus, Ayden, you're not dead, and a birthday party was a nice way for Charlie to get to be a part of the family. It's more for her than for you if you want the truth." Noel unlocked Page from the high chair and held her on her hip. "Did you know she has spent every holiday alone or working for the past ten years?"

"What?" Ayden looked at Noel and then to Tom. Tom threw both hands up in a defensive wave letting Ayden know he was on his own.

"Yeah." Noel scowled at him. "You really should take all this time you're wasting and get to know her." Noel moved toward the hall. Charlie and Lacy were downstairs in the family room with the photo albums. "She just answered trivial questions about your life, but I bet you can't tell me any of those silly things about hers. If it wasn't in a file, you don't know it, do you?"

Ayden gulped hard. He swallowed his sister's words like a brick. It tore his throat and hit his stomach leaving a heavy feeling of remorse. Noel was right. What he knew about Charlie was wrapped around the past and the intimacy of the present. He didn't know her favorite color or her favorite song. Ayden couldn't respond, and Noel burned a hole in him with her gaze.

"That's what I thought," Noel said in a sad whisper and left the room.

"It takes time to know those things," Tom reassured him. "You just started dating, and Charlie could be a private eye she asks so many questions."

"There's no excuse." Ayden heaved a heavy sigh.

"No, there isn't. But it's not too late to do something about it." Ben sat across from Ayden. "Women are talkers by nature. Men have to work at it. That's why your mother and I work so well. She talks. I listen. If I started talking about what I like, she'd probably kick me to the couch."

"I agree." Tom nodded. "Noel always says she wants me to talk to her, but she really only wants me to talk to her about what she's interested in."

"Do you know her favorite color?" Ayden looked at Tom.

"Yeah, yellow." Tom stood. "But that's because she made sure I knew it. She reminds me and tells me all the things I should know about her. Charlie is only interested in knowing about you. If she's not telling you about her..."

"I'd look into it." Ben nodded. "Women like to talk. And they like to talk about what they *like*. If she's not telling you what she likes and doesn't like, I'd look into it."

"Great." Ayden scrubbed his hands over his face. Complicated. His relationship with Charlie was not complicated before. They met every year, and she told him a few things and then picked his brain about the last year of his life. It was easy, familiar and routine. Not complicated.

The men wandered down to the family room one at a time. Page was crawling around on the floor playing with whatever toy held her interest for the moment and then moving on to something else. Ayden watched the child from the bottom of the stairs and decided that women must be born complicated. Tom was laughing with the rest as they passed the pictures around.

"What's so funny?" Ayden moved to stand next to the couch and grabbed the photo from Tom's hand. "Mother."

"What?" Lacy dabbed her tears.

"I'm naked." Ayden handed the photo back to her to put in the pile.

"You're wearing a cowboy hat, honey. That's not naked." Lacy smiled. "He hated wearing clothes." She put the photo back in the box.

"You're only at age three?" He shook his head. "You'll have to finish my humiliation another time."

"Oh, Ayden, lighten up, she's seen your naked ass before." Lacy laughed again.

Ayden shot Charlie a wide-eyed look of confusion. All she could do was shrug.

"I think she's had enough fun today anyways." Lacy gathered the last photos and put them back in the box.

"Are we going riding now?" Charlie asked.

"If you still want to." Ayden pushed his hand through his hair. He didn't want things to be complicated and yet here they were.

He was looking at her not knowing what she really wanted to do, and now afraid she was only doing it because he wanted to. Ayden didn't want her to follow along at all costs just to make him happy.

"Of course I do." Charlie stood. "What should I wear?"

"Jeans, shoes you won't mind getting muddy. I'll give you one of my shirts..."

"Do I get to wear a hat?" Charlie was beaming.

"Sure, honey, you can wear whatever you want." Ben nodded.

"Are you going, too?" Charlie looked at Noel. Of course, she wasn't, she was pregnant, but no one was supposed to know that yet.

"Uh, no." Noel hadn't told anyone about the baby. She knew it was too soon to have another baby, but now that they were looking to move to Charlotte, she may just quit working all together.

"Oh that's right." Charlie smiled. Noel had put her on the spot this morning and though she liked her, she wasn't going to let her think she was as easy to boss or manipulate as Ayden. She also didn't want her to think she could continue to boss or manipulate Ayden, not without getting a little pay back. "I forgot about the baby."

"Baby?" Lacy now looked to Noel. "You have something you want to tell us, young lady?"

"Tom!" Noel squealed.

"It's not like they can't tell." Tom rolled on the floor with Page. "Hell, Ayden thought you were just getting fat. I thought it was better to tell the truth than let people think that."

"Fat?" Noel looked to Ayden then to Lacy. "Momma, you too?"

"Most couples gain a few pounds in the first years. I didn't think you were fat." Lacy glared at Tom. "But he's put on the husband ten. I thought you may have, too."

"I have not gained ten pounds." Tom felt his stomach then looked at Ayden and Ben. He had probably gained fifteen. Ben was older, but he worked the land and kept fit from it. Ayden always looked ready for an Incredible Hulk role to open up again. "Shit."

"Shit." Page spoke clear as day.

Laughter broke out. The child's first clear word besides "mommom" and "dadada" was shit.

"Well, you should all know Evelyn is pregnant, too. She told me last night on the phone," Noel said it to reveal a secret, but no one was surprised. "You already knew. No one tells me anything."

"I'm surprised they let Tom still work after marrying you." Ayden shook his head and reached for Charlie's hand. The woman had balls taking on Noel like that.

"What does that mean?"

"You can't keep a secret, honey, never have been able to, probably never will." Lacy smiled and hugged her. She may not have given birth to Noel, but she was her child. "You are my child, Noel. God sent you to me for a reason. I love you dearly and I'm not mad that this little one is coming so soon. I need all the grandchildren I can get."

Charlie followed Ayden up the stairs and listened to the women talking. She missed that, having her mother and her father around. She missed Michael the most. It was fun to spar with Noel and even more fun to confide in Stephanie. She was stealing Ayden's family one by one and hoping to keep them. Hoping to keep him.

Ayden was already in a well fitted pair of jeans that were soft and worn. His T-shirt fit just as snug, and as he slipped into a pair of hiking boots, Charlie crossed her arms in agitation. "Why aren't you wearing boots?"

"I am." Ayden didn't look up. She had been asking him questions about the horses, probably trying to avoid telling him anything about herself. "You brought tennis shoes, right?"

"Yeah, but you're supposed to wear cowboy boots." Charlie had imagined him in boots and a hat. Her Tennessee cowboy come to life.

"I don't think I even own cowboy boots anymore, darlin'." Ayden shrugged. Why the hell was she wrapped up about what he put on his feet?

Charlie scrutinized him some more but then he stood and walked to the wall pulling down two hats. He plopped one on her head and the other on his. He looked damn good, and she was really excited to get out to the barn and ride the horses.

"Helps with the sun and keeps ticks out of your hair." Ayden made a clicking noise as he winked and headed for the door.

Ticks? Charlie was glad he was wearing those jeans today because otherwise, she may not have been able to follow that ass out the door, but it looked good and she did.

Ticks, she hadn't really considered where they would be riding these horses. She looked down at herself. He had insisted she wear a long sleeve shirt that could breathe. She imagined it was because of the sun, not the woods. Her heart thumped as they approached the barn.

## Chapter 20

“Lady is the easiest and the oldest. She knows what to do and where she’s going, so even if you mess up, she won’t take off on you.” Ayden was glad Charlie seemed genuinely interested in the horses now they were at the barn. Her interrogation techniques were something he wasn’t aware of until today. Innocently enough she had probed into his life and found answers. Yet, he didn’t know much more about her now than he did when he met her over ten years ago.

Charlie wished she and Ayden were the only ones taking the ride. Tom and Ben had saddled up other horses and were already mounted. Ben at least had on cowboy boots. Tom wore tennis shoes. What a disappointment, she thought. Nothing like she imagined it to be, all wild-west like. Ayden waited until she was in the saddle before leaving her to mount his own horse.

Lady, a large brown Tennessee walking horse, followed Ayden’s horse Shadow, a massive black horse, out of the barn. Tom and Ben were already waiting for them discussing the path they would take. The horses clicked down the pavement and onto the road. Charlie was impressed with herself. Lady seemed to do exactly what she asked of her with the reins.

“You all right?” Ayden rode alongside her. She looked so adorable in a hat and frumpy clothes. His T-shirt was too big on her, concealing some of her curves, but it was impossible to hide them all.

“Yes, she’s magnificent.” Charlie smiled. She felt a sense of adventure and fun.

“She’s a lady,” Ayden agreed.

They pulled off the road and onto a trail. Charlie realized then there was more to it than sitting and holding reins. Lady had wonderful balance, and Charlie had to duck branches and lean to the left, right, forward, and back as they navigated the trail. She understood now why Ayden had her wear the long sleeved shirt. He didn’t flinch as tiny branches slashed against his arms, but Charlie knew they would have hurt if she hadn’t worn the shirt. They stung a little through it.

Ayden was impressed that Charlie took to riding so easily, and though he would have chosen a well- worn path to take her on, Ben and Tom chose this one. It wasn’t too bad, and it was still an easy ride. Ben told them how he was trying to wear it down, so he could use it more often for trail rides. The ranch had belonged to Ben’s brother. When his brother passed, he left it to Ben. Ayden was glad his parents moved to the ranch. He loved it here. It kept him out of trouble as a kid and put a few bucks in his pocket.

Charlie could see the barn up ahead. It was still far away, but she knew where she was. They were in the field next to the ranch. As Tom and Ben entered it, their horses took off. That made her nervous. Ayden looked back at her and pulled his hat off tucking it under his arm. Charlie didn’t get a chance to ask him why. Lady had already picked up the pace behind Shadow.



Ayden wouldn't let Shadow open up and run. He couldn't leave Charlie, and Lady wouldn't run any faster with the woman on her back now chanting "ohmygod".

Charlie held on, and the cowboy hat flew off and into the field. She felt bad, but she was too scared to do anything but try not to squeeze the horse because Ayden told her that meant she could go faster. After a few minutes Charlie relaxed and Lady picked up the pace a bit more. She had stopped yelling and started smiling. It was fun. The wind whipped her hair lashing it across her face. It was such a sense of freedom, of power. She was riding this great animal, and it was running. As they neared the barn, Ayden took off with Shadow. Charlie wasn't worried. Lady didn't seem to care.

"Oh My God." Charlie was beaming. "That was so much fun."

"Lost your hat, darlin'?" Ayden smiled as he reached for the bridal and hooked Lady in the stall. He held a hand out for Charlie and helped her down. "Careful now."

"Little wobbly." Charlie stood in front of him, close to him. She had been itching to touch the jeans he wore to see if they felt as soft as they looked. With a lick of her lips, she reached behind him and patted his butt.

Ayden wasn't expecting her to cop a feel. It threw him off. "Uh."

Charlie whispered in his ear, "You promised to bring me down here and make me scream remember?"

Good Lord, his dad and brother-in-law were still removing the gear from their horses, and she was trying to lure him into a haystack. "We may have to rain check on that, Charlie. I have to get this tack off these horses."

"Tack?" Charlie kissed his neck.

"The riding gear." Ayden leveled his eyes to hers. Little seductress, this was how she kept him sidetracked. Not today. He pinched her butt.

"Oww." Charlie jumped then blushed as Ben and Tom looked toward them. She wanted to share a moment with Ayden not the whole barn.

"Help me get this unbuckled." Ayden nodded toward Lady and the saddle strap.

Charlie turned and began working with the gear as he explained how to take everything off, just as he had explained how to put everything on. Ayden seemed to know a lot about horses, and he let her know the difference in the Tennessee Walkers they had ridden and the Arabians Tom and Ben had ridden. He made his preference clear, and based on his size it made sense to want a large horse with a trail reputation.

Unfortunately, Charlie could only hear part of it because she was getting lost in his haze. He smelled delicious, and his warm chest brushed against her shoulders as he helped with the gear. She was still high from the excitement of her first horseback ride. Still charged from the feeling of flying across the field. It was a great turn on, and Ayden looked every bit a cowboy on top of a horse. She didn't notice the difference of his footwear once he was in the saddle.

"What ya'll got planned for the rest of the day?" Ben leaned against the barn as Ayden and Charlie walked out of it. "Your momma and I will be heading out in a half

hour to catch a matinee and grab something to eat. You're welcome to come along, but she wants to see some girly movie, and I'm only going along for the grub."

"Charlie?" Ayden wiped his forehead and looked at her.

"I'd like to stay here." She would like to drag Ayden's hot and sweaty body back in the barn and make good on his threats.

"Suit yourself." Ben winked at her and headed back up the driveway to the house.

"Ayden." Charlie grabbed his arm. "Let's take a walk or something."

"All right." He had questions and hopefully a walk would get him some answers.

Ayden followed her back toward the field. He hoped she wasn't looking for that hat because it was long gone, and he doubted they could find it now. The walk gave him an opportunity to question her though. He could start out slow and work his way up to the big stuff.

Charlie was surprised when he started asking her questions. Aside from when they first met and he needed information to help track down her sister's killer, he hadn't asked more than polite conversation would require. Now he asked all sorts of odd things. Things she had asked him, like her favorite color and food. The worst part was she lived such a routine life that nothing was really her favorite anything except when it came to Ayden. He was her favorite everything.

"Are you telling me you don't know what your favorite food is?" Ayden shook his head. Charlie was giving him a headache. He was asking very simple questions, the same ones she had asked of him, and stupid or not he answered. She was holding out on him. "You know you're kinda pissing me off here."

"What?" Charlie stopped dead in her tracks. *He must be out of his mind to talk to me like that.*

"I'm asking you simple questions, and you refuse to answer. How am I supposed to know anything about you if you won't tell me something as simple as what you like to eat?" Ayden slapped his hat against his thigh and looked off into the distant field.

"I told you I don't know." Charlie put her hands on her hips. "Ayden, I haven't had the luxury of a real life the last eleven years. I worked every day, and when I wasn't at work, I was in my apartment. You know I hate crowds. So what, do you want me to tell you that microwave lasagna's my favorite food? It's what I ate the most. Does that mean it's a favorite?"

*Uh-Oh.* "No, of course not. Why didn't you just tell me that?" Ayden looked at her and realized she was now the one pissed off. Charlie had her hands propped on her hips and a scowl on her face. She may have looked intimidating if she didn't look so damn cute like that.

"You want me to tell you about the last ten years?" Charlie double dog dared him to say yes. If he wanted to hear it, she was ready to throw it at him.

"Yes." Ayden nodded.

"Fine. Let's start when you left Vegas." Charlie started walking again but at a quick pace. He followed along without any hesitation. "Let's see. I went back to the

Casino, auditioned, got my job back, and then started the rehearsals. From there it became an endless cycle. Show after show, night after night. Dance all night, sleep in all morning, go to rehearsal, and then dance all night. See the pattern there?”

“Yep.” Ayden knew she was being sarcastic, and he understood how hard life could be. Just because he had a family didn’t mean he wasn’t alone most of the time.

“So. When I didn’t work, I saw my therapist, once a month. She told me to get out there and experience the world.” Charlie shook her head. “I told her the world had eaten my family. If I stepped out into it, then I would be eaten alive, too.”

That was a hell of a statement, and he didn’t know what to say in response. Of course, Charlie didn’t give him a chance to respond. She kept right on, and as she spoke, her breath grew more labored. Of course, she was holding a ground eating pace that wasn’t a challenge for him but seemed to be working up to one for her.

“I had two panic attacks at the supermarket, so I started getting my groceries delivered. I also shopped online. That way I didn’t have to deal with anyone.” Charlie found the hat she was looking for. It was right at the edge of the woods, as she’d suspected. Picking it up, she inspected it, dusted it off, and put it on her head.

Ayden couldn’t believe she found that hat. She wanted it, and she hunted it down, just like she had done to him. Charlie started back toward the barn again.

“The casino was a safe place to be. I knew the girls, enjoyed the dancing and performing. But what kind of life is that to lead?” Charlie stopped. “You lived and I loved hearing about the outside world. I could go to that coffee shop and sit there with you because I knew I would be safe there.”

“But I didn’t show up this year.” Ayden nodded and felt his chest ache. He wanted to ask a real question now but was afraid to. Fear wasn’t something he had felt since he was a child. After his dad left, he vowed not to be afraid of anything. “Did something happen that day?”

“Yeah. You never showed up. You left me in a coffee shop in Las Vegas for hours. No phone call, no post card. Nothing.” Charlie started walking again. “I called your cell, but the line was disconnected.”

Shit. Shit. Shit. Ayden forgot the only number she had was the FBI issued cell phone. Hell it was the number he could be reached at twenty-four seven for years. The best number to have, but they took the phone when he left the field. As a part-time training agent, he didn’t need that kind of access. “I had to turn the phone in.”

“Whatever. It’s in the past now.” Charlie hadn’t brought it up because it was in the past. She was mad, scared, and hurt. She thought she’d let it go, but he pulled it all back to the surface. “As I was saying, I don’t know the answers to some of your questions, so I’m sorry if that *pisses you off*.” She made quotation marks in the air. She really was pissed off at him now. They were back at the barn, and she had half a mind to take off running just like Lady had. Instead, she stormed on. “But it pisses me off that you think I’m holding out on you. Don’t you think when I asked your favorites I would have told you mine if I had any? Or when you would tell me about family dinners or

your mother nagging you over the years I would have related? I have nothing to relate to.”

Damn. Damn. Damn. He wanted to kick his own ass now. What an insensitive jerk. That wasn’t a new development either. No, he had been a real ass to her over the years. Never once did he think she wasn’t out living her life. He always thought she just downplayed it and felt sorry for him enough that she dragged information out of him. Shit!

“I really am a son of a bitch.” Ayden grabbed her by the arm, his tone solemn and low. “I’m sorry, darlin’.”

Charlie frowned at him until she realized he was sincere. He wasn’t a son of a bitch. She could have told him several times when he tried to ask her questions. She didn’t want him to think she was afraid anymore. She thought he would find her more attractive if she were brave and strong, like his sisters. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“Okay, baby.” Ayden removed his hat and hers. He pressed his forehead to hers and looked her eye to eye. “So. What can I do to get out of the dog house here?”

“Well.” Charlie pulled her head back and looked around. “We are alone for a few hours. You did promise.”

Ayden smiled. Making up with Charlie was such a sweet affair. He dropped the hats and pulled her by her hand inside the barn. He hadn’t had a roll in the hay since he was a teenager. What fun.

## Chapter 21

Charlie sat on the porch watching the sunset. Ayden stepped outside with two glasses of peach tea and stood in front of her. He handed her a glass then pushed at one knee motioning for her to spread her legs. Sitting on the step between them, he leaned back settling himself against her.

Charlie could feel his soft hair on her neck and his forehead next to her jaw. His huge arms draped over either leg, and his massive back crushed her breasts. There was no way she could navigate the iced tea to her lips though he seemed to enjoy his just fine. She set the glass down and looped an arm around him. "Ask me about my favorite sunset."

Ayden smiled. "Tell me about your favorite sunset."

"Well, I was sitting on a porch in Tennessee with this enormous man leaning back on me. I felt exhausted and satisfied from the inside out. Of course we had grabbed a blanket and played in the barn that afternoon." Charlie kissed his temple. "Then we showered, had a wonderful dinner and he promised to introduce me to peach flavored ice tea. We sat on the porch and watched the sunset. It became my favorite that instant."

"Sounds like you found yourself a real winner. Porches, barns and tea," Ayden teased. "If you're lucky, he may even take you down by the lake and park for a while."

"No. We have an early start in the morning. Graceland, baby!" Charlie pushed him up with a renewed energy and excitement. "Now get up those stairs and hit the rack."

"Where did you get that from?" Ayden stood and looked at her curiously, as he pulled her up from the stairs.

"You. You said that's what they called the bed in the Navy, right?" Charlie dusted off her shorts and finally tasted the tea. "This is really good. Can you make this at home?"

"Yes." Ayden nodded.

Finally, finally she had him on the end of a double conversation. "Yes, that's what you called it in the Navy or yes you can make this at home?"

"Yes." Ayden shrugged and headed inside.

Damn it! Charlie followed him in. He had one answer for both questions.

"How many women have you taken to Graceland?" Charlie couldn't help herself.

"None." Ayden fisted his shirt and pulled it over his head.

"Not even your mom or Noel?" Charlie pulled her pajamas on as she talked.

"No." Stripped down to just boxers Ayden climbed into the queen size bed.

"So I'm the first woman you have taken to Graceland?" Charlie climbed into bed next to him cuddling close in their usual fashion. She was settling into a comfort zone with Ayden.

“Yes.” Ayden was no longer going to expand on answers for Charlie. If she wanted to probe him for information, she would now be working for it. He closed his eyes and settled into a nice relaxed state of mind.

“We have to be back here by seven, I promised.” Charlie was still awake and looking at his face. The windows were open and a nice breeze had drifted over them. “Do you think it’s going to rain tomorrow?”

“Charlie, darlin’, you need to sleep.” Ayden pulled her even closer in hopes of settling her down.

Charlie exhaled deeply and closed her eyes. Her head was swimming with questions as it normally was. She could talk him to death and just might. He never seemed agitated by her questioning before and now he had become the one word wonder. Ayden’s breathing grew heavy and he even snored. He must really be tired. After a few moments, Charlie pulled away from him and faced the window, so she could enjoy the view of the night sky, open land, and the silver light from the moon illuminating it all.

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*He took the stairs slowly, cautiously, his weapon at the ready. The house was dark and confusing, but he knew where she would be, the same place he found the others. He opened the bathroom door, and there she was. In the bathtub, in a pool of blood and water. All of her hair was shaved from her head. He did that because he collected the hair. Sick son of a bitch.*

*He walked to the bathtub and pulled his phone from his hip. Preston was gone. He couldn’t feel his presence anywhere. The woman’s eyes opened, and he realized they were green not blue. Terrified he realized it was Charlie, not Michael in the tub. Ayden dropped the phone and grabbed her. It had to be Michael. He had been through this before, all of it. Except, he was there, Preston, behind him.*

*Ayden stood to block her from him. In such a panic, he couldn’t react, couldn’t move, scream, fight. He was frozen helpless.*

*“Michael,” he screamed. “It’s Michael.” It can’t be Charlie.*

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Charlie awoke when Ayden called her sister’s name in a gruff mumble in his sleep. Then he called it again. She stared into the darkness toward him. Was this a nightmare or something else? Had Ayden known Michael before? He now called her name, almost moaning it, low and guttural. Charlie’s stomach turned at the thoughts she was having. Surely, Ayden wasn’t dreaming about them both. That would be sick. However, she knew many men who had done it before. When she and Michael worked

together at the casino, they were the stars of the show. Even at seventeen, they were made offers.

“Ayden?” she whispered.

“Don’t you fucking touch her. I’ll Kill You I Swear It!” Ayden growled out through his teeth.

Charlie had her answer right then and there. It was the nightmares again. Not a sexual fantasy. She should have known better. Now she was just glad she was awake. His hand was reaching for her, and she pushed him hard to get away. “Ayden!”

His eyes opened as he lost balance and began slipping off the edge of the bed. Charlie had practically kicked him out of it, and he didn’t know why. Like an animal, he landed on his feet and hands then surveyed the room. Nothing.

“What is it?” he whispered, just in case she could see something he couldn’t. His head was fogged from the nightmare.

“You.” Charlie turned on the light. She jumped at the sight of him. He had a nine millimeter in hand and was crouched at the foot of the bed. “Ayden, you are going to kill me one of these nights.”

He drew his brows together and stood. He hovered over her and popped the magazine from the gun then cleared the round in the chamber. He replaced the magazine and set the weapon on the foot of the bed.

“You?” He gave her a mean look. “You scared the shit out of me. I thought someone was trying to get you.”

“Someone was, you, you tried to choke me again.” Charlie was in awe of him. Here he was ready to kill for her, but at the moment the only one trying to kill her was him. “If I hadn’t pushed you, you would have gotten a hold on me for sure.”

Ayden couldn’t take those words any easier than he had taken Noel’s this morning. He sat facing away from her at the foot of the bed. He had heard about this before. He knew other Seals who had gone through it, knew other agents. Part of the reason he didn’t want a woman at home to possibly flip out on in the middle of the night. Now he was doing exactly that. Had he always acted out when he had nightmares? He had no idea. No one was ever around to tell him.

Charlie cautiously crawled to the foot of the bed and placed her hand on his back. He was again drenched in sweat, and his muscles bunched as though he was in battle. She didn’t mean to yell at him or upset him, but a man of Ayden’s skill was dangerous to sleep with when he had nightmares. The only time he had nightmares apparently was when she was around.

“I’m sorry.” Charlie settled in behind him and stroked his wet hair.

“You can’t sleep with me anymore.” Ayden was definitive in his statement. Here just hours earlier, he was planning a proposal and now he was kicking her out of bed.

“I can’t sleep without you anymore.” Charlie knew he felt bad. She knew he would beat himself with guilt over it, but not sleeping with him was not an option. She would

have to become a light sleeper. She had heard him call Michael's name. That alone was what woke her, and thank God for that.

"No."

"Yes."

"NO."

"Do you want me to choke you?" Charlie shook him at the shoulders.

"What?" Ayden readjusted his shoulder blades not fazed by her shaking at all.

"Ayden Wolf, you listen here. I didn't come all the way to Tennessee to sleep on the couch." Charlie barked like his mother and sister would have. Maybe women had to boss Ayden around.

"You're right." Ayden pulled from her grasp, picked up the gun, and placed it back in the nightstand drawer. He looked at her for a long silent moment then walked out the bedroom door.

Charlie looked at the clock. Six a.m. They had to be up in a couple hours anyways. They planned to be at Graceland by ten. Charlie rolled her head to the left then the right, cracking her neck as though she were about to go into the arena and take on a gladiator. Instead she was about to go into the den and pull out the Wolf.

Ayden had just settled on the couch in the family room on the lower level when Charlie crossed the room and pulled at his blanket. He pulled back. She had a look about her that reminded him of a wild animal. She looped the little bit of blanket she had around her fist and pulled again. The tug of war ensued.

Charlie wasn't giving up and neither was Ayden. He stared at her speechless, almost amused as she fought to get the blanket from him. She wanted him to get back up those stairs and back into bed with her. Instead, he had pulled her and the blanket back to the couch.

"What are you doing, darlin'?" All of his ill temperament had left him, mainly because Charlie was infused with it. She was strong. He gave her credit for that, but still no match for him.

"Losing." Charlie let go of the blanket and started to walk off.

"Giving up so easy?" Ayden asked the question, but they both knew he wasn't talking about the blanket.

"No." Charlie went to the old wooden chest and pulled out her own blanket. If she had to sleep in the Wolf's den, she would. Returning to the couch, she squeezed herself onto it. They were lying in opposite directions, both of their bodies too long to be sleeping on the couch.

Ayden bit her foot and then released it. Charlie didn't know what to make of that reaction, but he didn't leave and he didn't kick her off the couch. Sleep would be impossible. Conversation was out of the question. She was aggravated and he seemed happy.

"You wanna watch T.V.?" Ayden reached for the remote and turned it on not waiting for her answer. She was still wiggling to get comfortable.



"Guess so." She huffed.

"Anything particular?" Ayden shrugged as he flipped through the channels.

"OH. Go back." If he wanted to play it like this, that was fine by her. "There. Yes."

"What the hell is this?" Ayden sat up, and Charlie just stretched her feet to his lap. He looked at her and then returned the favor. She gave him a glare that let him know she was not happy about that. He wiggled his big toes in delight.

"*Sex and the City*." Charlie tilted her head with a forced smile.

"They don't show adult movies on TBS, try again." Ayden smirked.

"It's a series, originally on HBO, not porn." Charlie was affronted on her own behalf.

"Oh God, her clothes hurt my eyes." Ayden physically drew his head back and winced.

"Ayden." Charlie said the name at the same time Carrie, the character on the screen did. He looked at her then to the screen then back again. Charlie shrugged. It was a coincidence this was the season of the show they were showing, nothing more. "This is my favorite show."

"Because they end up together?" Ayden smiled. Charlie was such a romantic. He really loved that about her. The fact that she could withstand his stubbornness and push through his walls was a little frightening.

"Uh." Charlie reached for the remote.

"They don't?" He shook his head. "And here I thought you were all about the girl getting the guy in the end."

"She does get her guy in the end." Charlie fidgeted with the blanket. "But her man's not Ayden."

"So who is?" Ayden felt a pang in his gut that wrenched at him. Was she going to tell him he was second on her list? After all, she had done to chase him down? Had she really left someone in Vegas?

"Big," Charlie whispered. Ayden had pulled his feet from her lap and settled a serious look on her that chilled her blood. Did he know she was running now? Her last attempt to get his attention had backfired. She had set everything up counting on Ayden to be there that day.

"So who am I, Charlie?" Ayden spoke through his teeth. Graceland was out of the question if she gave him any response other than what he wanted to hear.

"The only man I have ever loved. I'm not going to lie to you, Ayden. I did try to date someone this year." Charlie swallowed hard. "But only to get to you. I thought if he showed up at the coffee shop and you saw me with him, you would snap out of it."

Ayden muted the television and snarled at her. It felt like she had kicked him in the chest. Just thinking of another man near her made him twitch with anger.

"It was stupid. I know. I didn't do anything with him, I swear." Charlie felt like she was drowning in a sea of lies and deceit. She should have told him. She should have

told him everything. Now, he was starting to love her, starting to trust her, and she was hurting him.

“You were going to use him to get to me though?” Angel, ha! Charlie was no angel, and she wasn’t who he thought her to be either. A fragile and wounded woman, she was a predator, and he was her prey. He knew exactly how ruthless he could be. Never in a million years did he think she was capable of it.

“Yes.” Charlie lifted a shoulder. “I’m a classic stalker case actually.”

“A what?” Ayden crossed his arms. He couldn’t wait to hear this one. If Charlie was a stalker, what did that make him? He still had her file in his office at home. He had the Nevada agents checking up on her regularly. Of course, he wasn’t going to tell her that.

“I fit the profile.” Charlie looked at her hands in disgust. Should she tell him the rest?

“You...” Ayden scanned it through his head quickly. “Hold up, how do you know what profile you fit into?”

“What do you think I did all that time I was trapped in your apartment? I read all your books.” Charlie took a breath. “That’s how I knew how to get to you untraced. Only the FBI agents in Nevada have an idea of where I may be. But I was careful not to tell them I was coming after you. I just told them we were friends and you solved my sister’s case, and if they could contact you, I would appreciate it.”

Ayden sat there in wide-eyed wonder. “So what exactly did you do to get to me?”

“Nothing illegal.” Charlie didn’t want him to get the total wrong idea. He held his hands up and leaned back on the couch. “Well, first I sold or donated everything I didn’t bring. I told you that. I destroyed my computer, so nothing could be retrieved from it even if it was found...in the seven different trash cans I scattered the remains in.”

Charlie knew it sounded paranoid, but she was paranoid. Ayden rolled his hand as if urging her on. Leaning forward on his knees he was soaking in every word.

“Okay. I drove my car most of the ways, sold it for cash to a college student, bought a clunker that I drove until it gave out, and used a fake ID to get on the bus.” Charlie chewed her bottom lip.

“I made sure to visit my doctor before I left. That’s how I got the birth control, but I had used the fake ID there, too. The casino is the only place that may be worried about me.” Here was the real truth. “But, a few girls have dropped out suddenly over the past few months, and the new management doesn’t seem to care.”

“What are you running from?” Ayden knew now. She couldn’t hide it anymore. He was impressed as hell, yet somewhat unsettled by her abilities. Noel was right. Charlie was nothing like her file. She was strong and powerful when she set her mind to it.

“I don’t know,” Charlie said honestly. “I looked at it more as running to. I was running to you.”

“So this guy you had set up to make me jealous...” It worked like a charm, but he wasn’t going to admit that.

“He never showed either. I had only known him a couple days.” Charlie shrugged.

“So you were left completely alone that day.” Ayden realized the full impact. Neither of the men she had planned to show had been there. Leaving her confused, alone and afraid. She nodded. “Charlie.”

She looked up at him with unsure eyes.

“You ready?” Ayden kept his poker face.

She shrugged.

“Graceland, baby.” He kicked up a smile.

“Oh God.” It was then she remembered it was his birthday. Great she had confessed to stalking him on his birthday. “Ayden.”

“What?” He was unsure of her new mood.

“It’s your birthday.” Charlie covered her face with both hands. She had pushed him out of bed, chased him downstairs, and fought with him over the blankets. All of that before she confessed to stalking him and using another man to get his attention. Shit.

“Yeah so.” He hated birthday attention. It was just another day, nothing special. Charlie, now she was special. Just as sick and twisted, as he was, that he could deal with. The nightmares, he would work on. He never wanted to hurt her. Maybe he could prevent himself from falling into a sound sleep. Maybe once they were married, he wouldn’t be afraid of losing her. He wrapped his head around it. Yes, he was afraid of losing her. That’s it. She wasn’t going anywhere.

“What do you want for your birthday, Ayden?” Charlie slid close to him. “I’ve been terrible this morning, and I’ll do anything to make it up to you.”

“You...wait, anything?” Ayden wasn’t stupid. The woman said anything, and though he felt better now she had talked to him about everything that led her to his door that day he wasn’t going to turn down that offer.

“Yes.” Charlie nodded. “Breakfast in bed, a massage, you name it.”

Ayden bit his lower lip and guided her hand to his lap. “A massage would be nice.”

Charlie gripped him under the blanket. His cock was already standing at attention through the boxer hole. “My, my, you do seem tense.”

“I’m under a terrible amount of stress these days.” Ayden groaned as she stroked him. His head fell back on the couch and all worries faded with her touch. She belonged to him, and no one else. That was all he really wanted anymore, her.

“I think I may need a closer look at this.” Charlie lifted the blanket and ducked under it. Ayden slid his hand down her back, and she knew the morning spat was over. Funny how they had to get so riled up to talk to each other about important things.

Ayden stroked her long back with his right hand until she parted her lips over him and consumed him whole. He felt his cock slide past her tongue and down her throat. Impossible, yet there he was. Charlie continued to amaze him.

Charlie was determined this time. She was going to get it all in if it was the last thing she did. Luckily, she had relaxed her throat enough to take it. Ayden moaned, groaned and flexed his fingers in her hair. She knew he was fighting the urge to push her head and control it. Then he grabbed her face and jerked her up and away from him, hard.

“Ayden, what the...?”

“Shh.” He covered her lips with his fingers.

Charlie now heard the footsteps on the floor upstairs. His parents were up. Charlie looked at Ayden. His face was pained and his breaths labored. He looked miserable, and she understood why.

“Come with me,” he whispered.

Charlie followed him to the bathroom, and once inside he shut the door, dropped the blanket, and grabbed her pajama bottoms pulling them to her ankles. Ayden had her bent over the sink the next instant.

“No, I don’t think so.” Charlie turned before he could gain entry. “I wasn’t finished.”

“Darlin’, this way will be faster.” Ayden rasped hooking her knees and pulling her legs apart.

“But it’s your birthday, Ayden.” Charlie was giving up the fight now that he was pressed against her entry. She was liquid fire at his touch, especially when he took control.

“And this is what I want.” He pushed past the folds into her. “Tell me this is mine, Charlie. All mine.”

“It’s yours, Ayden.” Charlie sucked in a breath. He was claiming her. She loved that. “I’m yours.”

“Yes, you are.” Ayden pulled her closer and lifted her from the sink with each thrust. Charlie surprised him again by looping her leg up over his shoulder giving him extremely deep access to her. “God, Charlie.”

“Come for me, Ayden. I love to watch you come.” Charlie rested her weight on her hands and looped her other leg over his other shoulder. His hands now held her ass suspended in air and swung her like a pendulum as he pounded into her.

Ayden silenced her with a kiss. If he didn’t stop her from talking, he would end up howling. The woman was flexible beyond his wildest dreams, and she could get him going with words enough to forget he was in the downstairs bathroom and stealing precious moments before they would be sought out. He pulled her onto him over and over then growled into her mouth as he came in long shuddering bursts.

“Damn it,” he cursed as Charlie unhooked her legs letting them wrap around him.

“What?” She kissed his lips and played with his hair since it was all mussed up anyways. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“I hoped you would...” Ayden was silenced this time by her lips.

“We have to get ready to go soon.” Charlie squeezed him from the inside and out.

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Ayden sat at the breakfast table, and Charlie sat next to him. Lacy had made his favorites again. A plate full of pancakes, eggs and bacon, biscuits, and hash browns was placed in front of him. Ben sat across the table and nodded an acknowledgement as his own plate was placed in front of him. Lacy returned with Charlie’s plate and then her own. It was a traditional thing to feed the man first. Besides, she gave them hell regularly, the least she could do was feed them first.

“So, Charlie, is this your first trip to Graceland?” Lacy had to admit she was a little jealous that the first person Ayden decided to take to Graceland was someone other than his momma.

“Yes, ma’am.” Charlie nodded. “I’m really excited. Have you ever been there?”

“Ben and I have gone a few times.” She glared at Ayden. He smiled back at her. He was definitely her child, defiant and stubborn. “I wouldn’t mind going again.”

Ayden ignored the gesture. She wasn’t going to guilt him today. He was taking Charlie, and that was it. “Charlie said we had to be back by seven for the party.”

“Yes. Do try to get back by then, before seven would be better.” Lacy dropped it. Ayden was telling her something he already knew. That meant if she pushed the Graceland issue they would be throwing a party with no birthday boy. “I have so much to do today to get ready.”

Ben rolled his eyes. He knew all Lacy would do was direct him as to where everything needed to go. Noel had arranged for it to be catered. Ben looked at Ayden and felt bad. He didn’t know so many people were invited until this morning. He thought about telling him, but then Lacy would be devastated if he didn’t show up.

“You ready, darlin’?” Ayden winked at Charlie. She nodded.

Lacy watched them leave. Charlie was the first girl he had ever brought home. Even his high school sweetheart, Jessica, had managed to escape a family visit. She had heard them talk on the phone a few times, or rather Ayden make a few grunts and then hang up. He sure didn’t call her darlin’, and he never lit up at her name. Charlie wasn’t what she expected, but she was certainly what he deserved.

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“Come take a look at this.” Ayden pulled her already tired body in a new direction.

Charlie followed the man and reminded herself this was his birthday. Ayden was like a kid in a candy store all wired up and bounding with energy. They had been there for hours, and Charlie was getting hungry. Since Ayden had dressed in slacks and a shirt and tie, she wore a nice dress and heels. Charlie could handle dancing in heels for hours, but chasing Ayden was a challenge.

“Shoot.” He snapped his fingers. “There’s a wedding.”

“A wedding?” Charlie caught up to him and stood facing the Chapel in the Woods.

“You must be here for the wedding, please come on in.” A woman grabbed his arm and escorted him to the party. Charlie followed. “Bride or groom’s side? No matter really, I’m late myself.”

Ayden looked back at Charlie for help, but they were already in the church. The woman hustled them to a seat and then to Charlie’s delight let her slide in next to Ayden. They sat on the bride’s side and realized there were probably fifty people including them in the place. Surely, someone would realize they didn’t belong.

It was too late to move once the music started. Ayden said a quiet prayer. He hadn’t meant to get caught in a wedding today. He just wanted her opinion about the place for future reference. It was bad enough they had Stephanie and Malcolm’s event next weekend.

“Oh Ayden,” Charlie whispered into his shoulder. Everyone had passed except the bride. She now stood at the entrance in a full princess like gown. Her chestnut hair was pulled back with ringlets falling down the back. She was so beautiful.

Ayden put his hand over Charlie’s that had grabbed onto his arm. She was such a girl, all teary eyed and emotional for a woman she didn’t even know. As the bride passed, he slid Charlie’s hand into his own, kissed the back of it, and patted it with his other hand. Now they would have a real good idea as to how a wedding at Graceland would be.

Charlie dabbed at her eyes through the vows. The ceremony ended, and it was time for the reception, time for them to get out of there, but they didn’t have any luck with that. Apparently, the bride and groom weren’t hanging around after the wedding.

“Oh get over there.” The same woman that had dragged them into the church was now pushing Charlie into the small group of single women ready to catch the bouquet.

The bride counted off and sure enough, Charlie caught it. Well hell. Ayden shook his head. She rushed back to him with a flushed red face and a look of uncertainty.

“I feel terrible.” Charlie whispered, “We aren’t supposed to be here. Look at this.”

“I see it.” Ayden agreed. A young man approached and urged him to the floor. Ayden declined. The guy shrugged and went on. Of course, the groom decided to shoot the bride’s garter like a rubber band hitting Ayden square in the chest anyways. “Shit.”

“We are crashing this wedding, Ayden.” Charlie pulled the garter that had bounced off, of him and onto her bouquet of flowers, off of the bouquet.

“This is ridiculous.” Ayden propped his hands on his hips. “I just wanted to show you the damn chapel.”

“It’s beautiful don’t you think?” Charlie was lost in all the stimulus of the wedding and the fun she was having. No one seemed to notice or care that they didn’t belong there. “If years from now you want to marry me, we should do it here.”

“Years from now?” Ayden was glad she liked the chapel, but years from now, oh no. He wanted kids in the next couple of years, not a wedding.

“You two kids get over here.” The bossy biddy was back. “Sit with us.”

They complied; it was the least they could do at this point. They had the bouquet and the garter. How could they skip out on the toast and first dance? Ayden pulled Charlie’s chair and sat next to her. His mind was reeling as to what she wanted from their relationship. He assumed that by tracking him down and telling him she loved him that meant marriage and kids. Maybe not.

Charlie sat at the table and fidgeted with the flowers in her hand. She wasn’t giving them up, invited guest or not. She wanted nothing more than to marry Ayden and have a family with him, but she knew Ayden. He was private and reclusive, and he took his time deciding on everything. He would no doubt want a long courtship and then a decent engagement before an actual wedding would take place. The fact he didn’t cringe when she mentioned marriage gave her hopes it may actually happen someday.

The bride and groom said their final good byes and thanked everyone for coming. They were leaving for Hawaii in a few hours and wanted their guests to stay and enjoy the party. It was a fine time to leave.

Ayden pulled out her chair and began escorting Charlie out of there, but Elvis stopped them. Not the man himself, or even an impersonator, but the music. Charlie turned into him as the words *wise men say* started in the background.

“I can’t dance, darlin’.” Ayden had plans to work that out soon as well.

“You’re an amazing lover, Ayden. You can surely dance.” Charlie wrapped herself around him and began swaying her hips.

“Say that again.” He followed her motions and held her tight. If dancing with Charlie meant being this close to her and feeling her hips move slowly against his own, then yes, he could definitely dance. “The amazing part, not the dancing.”

“You’re an amazing lover,” she whispered into his neck. Ayden rewarded her by pulling her impossibly closer and singing low and on tune in her ear. He couldn’t tell her he loved her, but Elvis was saying it for him.

Once the music picked up, they really did have to go. Charlie had held him on the dance floor for two more slow songs. Time was escaping them, and a birthday party was waiting.

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“I think we’re a little late.” Evelyn shut the door on the truck as she got out. Joshua, poor thing, had bought plane tickets, but she hated to fly. It was Ayden’s birthday, and she promised Noel they would be there.

“Well we made a few stops along the way.” Joshua stretched as he walked. Good thing he found out she wouldn’t fly yesterday, or they wouldn’t have made it at all.

“I didn’t hear any complaints then.” Evelyn smiled.

“And you won’t on the way back either.” Joshua opened the door to the house, and they stepped inside.

The birthday party was just getting started, which surprised Evelyn since Noel had been insistent they get there by six. Ayden headed over to her followed by Charlie. Evelyn had a new list of questions for Charlie. The newspaper clippings made no sense. They had spent hours trying to figure something out but came up with nothing.

“Birthday boy!” Evelyn hugged her monster of a brother. “Charlie.” She smiled and hugged Charlie, too.

“Hey, we thought you two were flying in?” Ayden asked Joshua.

“Could have told me she didn’t fly.” Joshua shot him a look.

“I’m over assuming I know anything about anyone anymore.” Ayden gave him a look of commiseration.

“Charlie wearing you down, Wolf?” Joshua lifted a brow.

Ayden looked off into the kitchen where Charlie talked with the other women. Wearing him down, winding him up. Was there a difference? “I’m a Wolf, not a dog. I don’t get led around on a leash thank you.”

“Neither do I.” Joshua nudged him.

“Joshua, go get Ayden’s gift from the truck please.” Evelyn smiled widely at her husband.

“Eye. Eye. Ma’am.” Joshua saluted and felt the nudge from Ayden. They headed back out to the truck. “Just because I do what she asks when she says please doesn’t mean she leads me around on a leash.”

“Lie to yourself, big dog, but don’t lie to me.” Ayden leaned against the truck. “Women. Shit I can’t say anything about it really. My life as a wild man is over. I almost told her I loved her today.”

“What?” Joshua turned. “Since when did you grow a heart, and please tell me since when did you start talking about emotions and shit?”

“Fuck you. You’re such a pussy when it comes to my little sister. I’m surprised you’re not wearing a thong right now.”

“Actually I’m not wearing any underwear because your little sister wants emergency access at all times. Call me a bitch if you want, but I’m rewarded well for being a good boy.” Joshua threw the package at Ayden before he could tackle him. “I suggest you warm up to the idea partner. Once they get a hold on you, it’s all over. You live in her world now.”

“She lives in my world.” Ayden barked and followed Joshua back into the house.

“Ayden, you can’t open that now.” Charlie took the box from him and headed to the table of gifts.

“I see that clearly.” Joshua laughed.



The party roared on, and so many drinks were passed around that, Charlie was amazed Ayden wasn't drunk. She wasn't sure how he would be after a few since he never drank more than a beer in front of her. The gifts were opened and cake was served. All in all it was a lot of fun. The guests left, and his mother, Evelyn, and Noel cleaned up and stored leftovers from the caterers.

"Well, you ready for bed, birthday boy?" Charlie slid her hands over his shoulders and massaged.

"No." Ayden let out a long satisfying groan of pleasure. "I'm ready to take you down to the lake though."

"You've been drinking and are in no shape to drive, cowboy." Charlie continued to rub his shoulders and neck.

"I haven't had anything to drink." Ayden nodded toward Ben who was passed out. "Every drink I got I passed on to him. When he passed out, I dumped them in the plant. I have big plans tonight, darlin'. I still owe you for this morning."

"Don't be silly. You don't owe me for anything." Charlie rubbed his temples. Like always, massaging Ayden was turning her on. The fact he was threatening to take her parking was really working her up. "But I never got to finish this morning, so I suppose..."

"Let's go." Ayden stood in one fluid motion and headed through the dining room out the front door.

## Chapter 22

"It's really beautiful out here." Charlie looked through the truck windows and took in the night sky. "Do you miss it?"

"Not really." Ayden shrugged. It was home, but he had been gone so long that no place felt like home anymore.

Charlie looked across the seat at the man behind the steering wheel. His brown hair had grown out some, and he wasn't cutting it. That seemed strange since he normally kept it military short unless he was working on a case that called for a less stark hairdo. His baby blue eyes were dancing with flecks of light from the moon. He gripped the wheel with both large hands and sat almost rigid in his seat. Maybe he was just always a rugged and hard bodied man. He may never relax.

"You look so tense. Didn't you have fun today?" Charlie slid across the seat and pushed one hand into his hair while the other pulled at his hands on the wheel.

"I don't like crowds and fuss." Ayden closed his eyes at her touch.

"Me either, but you deserve a big fuss. And the crowds at both the wedding and the house were small." Charlie continued to play with his hair and rub his scalp.

"I like this crowd the best though." He sighed, finally starting to relax. Charlie had a way of touching him that settled him down. It calmed him and soothed all the stress away. The burdens of life seemed to lift away when she touched him.

"Mmm. I like this crowd best, too." Charlie pulled at his T-shirt. "Tell me your wildest fantasy."

"You first." Ayden wasn't telling her anything. She knew enough about him. He was really eager to learn this about her.

"You are my wildest fantasy." Charlie blinked at him confused.

"That's not a fantasy. I'm here. Tell me something you always wanted to do, like skinny dip or have sex in an airplane." Ayden opened an eye to let her know he wasn't giving up. "It's my birthday and what I want is to know your wildest fantasy. Unless it has more than one guy in it. That, you can keep to yourself."

"I doubt I could handle more than you, and I really doubt any other man would measure up next to you." Charlie bit her lip. "But if you want to know."

"I do." Ayden opened both eyes and faced her. "And if it's something we can do tonight, we'll do it."

"Oh I can do it." Charlie closed the distance between them and slid her fingers across his lap. He started to protest, but she engaged his lips with her own.

Ayden didn't get a chance to coax any secrets from her. Not that he minded now. Charlie was like a wild woman feverishly kissing and groping him. He could barely keep up with her pace. She had his pants undone and shirt off in no time.

"Jesus." Ayden gasped for air.

“How do you get this seat back?” Charlie began pushing buttons and feeling around for levers. Ayden adjusted the seat, and as it laid back, Charlie watched as he reclined underneath her. “Better?”

“No, you still have clothes on.” Ayden reached for her top, but Charlie swatted his hand. “That’s not fair.”

“It’s not supposed to be fair.” Charlie pulled the offended hand to her lips. She licked over two fingers then took them in her mouth, sucking on them. Ayden groaned and bit into his bottom lip, an expression she was now familiar with when he was really turned on. She pulled his fingers from her lips and kissed them each in turn. “I love tasting you, Ayden. I wish I could just stuff you in my mouth and swallow you whole.”

“Cannibal.” He groaned out. Charlie was kissing his wrist licking and sucking her way up his arm.

“Yes. And I’m going to eat you alive.” Charlie trailed her way across his chest and down his other arm.

“Paybacks are hell, darlin’,” he warned her.

Charlie smiled at that. She moved down the ripple of abs avoiding his erection, flexing and straining for attention. She moved beside him so that she could give his muscled thighs the same treatment. Ayden swatted her butt and she yelped. “What was that for?”

“You’re killing me here.” He ground out through closed teeth. Charlie hadn’t so much as breathed on his cock.

“Oh poor baby. You want this?” Charlie softly gripped the steel erection with her fingers. Ayden’s breath hitched, and he gripped her butt cheek with his right hand. “I see. Well tell me what else you want.”

“You know what I want.” He lifted his hips trying to get any friction possible from the feather light grip she held.

“No, you have to tell me.” Charlie loosened her grip even more. “I told you everything I wanted you to do. Now, I want to hear it. I love your voice, Ayden. Just listening to you talk makes me wet.”

The appearance of pre-cum on the tip of his penis let Charlie know he felt the same. “Tell me what you want, Ayden, please.”

“I want you. I want you to tighten your grip, and I want you to suck on me. I want you to put all of me in your mouth and swallow me whole, just like you said.” Ayden successfully pushed his hand from her butt to under her shirt. Maybe he could talk her into taking her clothes off. He wanted that, too.

Charlie’s breath hitched as she did exactly what he asked of her. She was aware his hand was up the back of her shirt and even more aware when he unfastened the bra clasp. Charlie deep throat him taking every inch of Ayden she could stuff inside her mouth. When his fingers found her nipples, she worked harder and faster, moaning as her stomach clenched and desire panged inside her.

“Charlie. Take this shirt off.” Ayden growled. He could barely speak as she sucked him off in a frantic manner that made him wonder who was enjoying it more.

Charlie removed her lips from his cock with a pop. She stared at him a moment then lifted her arms as he pulled the shirt over her head. She was getting lost at his touch, and the more he had touched her, the more she worked to please him.

“Come here.” Ayden pulled her closer to him. “Look at these beautiful nipples, just crying out to be touched.”

Charlie surprised him by touching them herself. “You like to watch me, don’t you?”

“Yes. But not as much as I like to suck on those nubs myself.” Ayden covered her hands and pushed her breasts together. He then took both nipples into his mouth at the same time sucking and licking. Charlie’s head fell back on a moan, and her hips wiggled against him. “You like that?”

“Mmm.” She couldn’t answer in full words. Ayden was sucking one nipple and tweaking the other. Amazing how much more sensitive her breasts seemed to be at his touch. Each suck pulled at her uterus sending shocks of pleasure like lightning within.

“Take your shorts off, Charlie.” Ayden stopped everything and lay back on the seat again. The truck wasn’t the ideal place to do any of this, but they were there now and no way in hell was he turning back. He briefly thought of just getting out all together, but then the July mosquitoes would really eat them both alive. “Now lay back.”

“I don’t see how this is going to work.” Charlie obeyed and tried to lie back on the seat.

“On me silly.” Ayden laughed. “We are both way too tall to attempt that, darlin’.”

“Oh.” Charlie smiled then readjusted herself. Straddling him backward she laid back against him with her back to his chest, her head next to his. Ayden’s fingers slid between her legs finding her already slick folds swollen and ready. His other hand settled on the left breast and tugged at her nipple rolling his fingers over it. “Oohh.”

“You’re so wet, Charlie.” Ayden lightly touched her, just as she had done to him. The scent of their heat filled the truck. His nostrils flared as he inhaled at her neck. He had to stop playing with her nipple and grab her hands, securing them in one of his. “I bet you taste so good.”

“Stop torturing me, Ayden.” Charlie lifted her hips in an attempt to sit on his cock again, but he still wouldn’t let her.

“I want you to come for me, Charlie. I want to dip my fingers in like so...”

“Let me ride you, Ayden.” Charlie whimpered as he slid a finger deep inside her.

“And I want to stroke your clit like this...” Ayden circled her clit with his thumb.

“Ayden, please.”

“Please what, darlin’?” Ayden nibbled on her shoulder and neck placing little love bites up to her ear.

“Fuck me,” she whispered.

“Mmmm. I don’t think I heard you.” Ayden curled his toes at the words. Hell yes he heard her, and that’s exactly what he wanted to do.

“I want you to fuck me, Ayden. I swear I want you to let me sit on that huge cock of yours, and I want you to pound into me until I scream...”

Charlie got what she wanted immediately, and so did he. Ayden wanted her to share a fantasy and up until now, he had let her take the lead. She wanted him to tell her what he wanted, so instead he made her tell him what she wanted.

With one fluid move, Ayden had her impaled. With his hands on her hips, he lifted into her over and over again pulling her down to meet his thrusts and pushing her up as he pulled back. The angle made for deep penetration, and Charlie felt the mix of pleasure and pain as he slammed into her womb. “God you feel good.”

“I love...Mmmm...I love the way your pussy feels wrapped around my cock.” Ayden felt her clenching down from within. “That’s it, baby. Come for me, Charlie. I want to feel you come.”

Charlie came with a violent scream. Her hips gyrated and pushed back onto him milking him of his own orgasm as he burst inside her. She slowed and lay back against his sweaty chest breathing hard and fast. “I love when you come like that.”

“Mmmm.” Charlie adjusted her legs so they draped over his. She squeezed him from inside.

“I could probably work another one out for you if you’d like.” Ayden stroked over her clit with his finger. Her legs jumped and her breath caught.

“No. I can’t take another one right now.” Charlie pulled his hand away and then wrapped his arms around her. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt like that before.”

“Like what?” Ayden relaxed. It was the only time in his life he really relaxed, when she touched him, or after they had mind blowing sex.

“Free.” Charlie closed her eyes. “I’ve never been free in my life.”

*Shit!* “How’s that?” Ayden feared her next words. If Charlie wanted freedom, then marriage could be jumping the gun a bit.

“Well, since I was a kid, I have been performing, no freedom in that. Then Preston came into my life, killed my sister, and I was hidden for six months. And when I had the chance to be free after that, I went right back to the stage. I’ve never been anything other than a performer.” Charlie yawned. “Your folks asked me what I wanted to be. I didn’t know what to tell them. But today, just now, I think I know.”

“And what’s that?” Ayden kissed her temple. He relished moments like this. Just the two of them, joined together, not a care in the world.

“A therapist.”

“Not a sex therapist?” Ayden squeezed her letting her know he was just teasing.

“No. A regular one.” Charlie bit her lip. “Do you think I’m smart enough for something like that?”

“Hell yes.” Ayden sat them both up in one move. “You can be anything you want to be, Charlie. My only question is where does that put me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Will you leave me to go to school? What about a family? Do you see yourself having kids in the next few years?” Ayden lifted her from his lap. “I want at least one kid before I turn forty. I’m not as young as you are.”

Charlie watched him dress in a rough manner. She slowly began putting her own clothes back on. Of course she wanted to be with Ayden and have a family, but he brought up a good point, when? His age theory made more sense now, but she didn’t see why she couldn’t have both. Women do both all the time.

“Are you asking or telling me?” Charlie crossed her arms. She shouldn’t have to choose.

“I’m telling you I want kids before I turn forty. I’m asking you if you think you’ll be ready to have one by then.” What he was doing was playing all of his cards in one hand, and he knew it. The answer to this question could destroy all his plans, but it was necessary to know what she wanted. Freedom generally didn’t include a husband and kids.

“I don’t know. I imagined I would be married before I started having kids, and I had wanted to spend time just me and you before that.” Charlie shrugged. He was talking as if she would be having his kids, so she responded with her plans as well. “I don’t even know if you love me, Ayden. How can I possibly answer that without setting myself up?”

“You don’t...I can’t believe you just said that.” Ayden was offended. No, he hadn’t outright said the words, but damn how could she not know he felt it. He started the truck and pulled out of the secluded spot.

“What is the...?” Charlie started to ask what the problem was but got cut off.

“What the fuck?” Ayden turned to see the vehicle behind him. “Charlie, put your seatbelt on.”

Charlie frantically plugged the belt together and held on. “Ayden, what’s happening?”

“Hold on, baby.” Ayden braced for the impact, and the truck went sliding back toward the lake and over the short cliff. He could hear her scream next to him. A loud terrifying sound that in a million years he would remember. Who had done this? Why?

The airbags deployed as the front of his truck impacted with the water. The vinyl covering hit Charlie directly in the forehead, and she passed out. Ayden didn’t know if it was from the airbag or the shock. She passed out whenever she panicked. At any rate, it made things more difficult. He unbuckled her seatbelt, pulled her close to him with one hand and unbuckled his own with the other. The water was filling up fast because the truck was heavy.

The automatic windows were stuck. Opening the door would be near impossible with the water pressure against it. Ayden shifted them both to the other side of the truck and busted the window with his feet. The water spilled in. Ayden took a deep breath as

the front of the cab submerged. He moved through the window pulling Charlie out. She was still passed out and no doubt would drown if he didn't get her above water soon.

Ayden took a deep breath reaching the surface and pulled Charlie above water. He had no idea what was awaiting them, but he had no choice.

"Give her to me." A woman dressed in black with a black mask stood on the bank. "Hurry, she needs air."

Ayden wasn't stupid, and he wasn't handing Charlie over to anyone willingly. He looked around to see if there was another option for land in hopes, he could pull out of the water elsewhere. No such luck. "Get back!"

"I'll help you."

"Get back!" he demanded as he carried her out of the water. The woman looked vaguely familiar to him. "If you want to help, call 911."

Ayden laid Charlie on the ground and began the steps of first aid. Look, listen, and feel. He gave two breaths, and she responded vomiting water as he turned her. She was breathing. She was okay. That's when he felt it.

Charlie awoke coughing and vomiting water. Ayden was over her; then he was falling into her. She reached for him trying to figure out what was going on. Then a woman threw down the board and snatched her by the arm.

"Come with me or I will kill him now." She wielded a hand gun at his head.

"He's hurt. You have to help him," Charlie pleaded.

"No, you have to help him. You come with me now, he lives. You say one more word, I kill him."

The woman in black stood just as tall as Charlie. She pulled off the mask revealing chestnut brown hair and fierce blue eyes. Charlie nodded and followed her down the bank to another truck. She knew this was it, what she had run from. She didn't know it was a woman; it made no sense. Preston was a man. He had taken the girls, raped them, and then made it look like a suicide. He had also shaved them bald, keeping their hair as a trophy.

The woman opened the driver side door. "Get in and slide over, Charlie."

"Who are you?" Charlie felt the panic rising. She had to stay awake, conscious at least until they were away from Ayden.

"Of course you don't know me. I'm sure he's never mentioned me, has he?" Her blue gaze burned into Charlie. "You, you think you're smart. I tried to get him back to Vegas and you ran away."

"Are you a showgirl?" Charlie asked quietly. The woman was very pretty though she oozed of homicidal maniac at the moment. She started the truck, and Charlie glanced at the door. No handle, no lock, she was trapped. The woman started up the truck and peeled out.

"Ha! That's funny, fucking hilarious actually." She peered at Charlie then back to the road. "You figure he'd realize how good we'd be together. We work so well together. I kept up with your ass the last ten years."

"I don't understand." Charlie's mind was twisting with the situation. Everything she had learned she was putting it to use trying not to panic.

"Shouldn't you be passed out by now, angel? I mean really, this is a stressful situation. You don't know me, and if you did, you would have known I could never hurt Ayden. I love him. I have for years. And you, every fucking year all he wanted to know about was you." Jana Mason looked at her rival in disgust. Charlie had left Vegas, and she had no idea where she went. Then Tom called and invited her to Ayden's birthday party. When she explained her situation, he laughed and told her Charlie was safe, with Ayden. "So you see when I learned you were with him, naturally I had to do something."

"What are you going to do to me?" Charlie took a breath and mustered some courage.

"You know exactly what I'm going to do." Jana pulled up the driveway and parked inside a garage. "This is his house. Did he tell you that? That lake you were parked at, it's on his property. If all goes as planned, he'll come here to call for help."

"He saw you. He knows you did this. He won't fall in love with you." Charlie pleaded with the woman.

"Once you're out of the picture, he'll have no choice. As far as he knows, some woman was there. Now I'm here, trying to help you. He didn't trust me. Of course he hasn't seen me in years, but when he gets here, he'll find me trying to save you." Jana smiled. "Too bad for you it will be too late. Now get out and don't try anything. I'm a trained agent not a bimbo like you."

"Of course you are." Charlie realized she had to stall for time if she was going to live through the night. "You know I bet if you had told him, things may have been different."

"I did tell him." Jana snarled. "We slept together once, just once. He wouldn't even stay the night. I obviously don't have to tell you what that man is capable of."

Charlie felt sick. Ayden had been intimate with this woman, and this woman was going to kill her because of it. Charlie walked as Jana held the gun in her ribs. She started up the stairs. "When?"

"When what?" Jana asked.

"When did you sleep with him?" Charlie whispered. The question may get her killed immediately, but at this rate, she was going to die anyways.

"Four years ago at a conference, he was his normal grim self that night. I told him the last I had seen of you was with your new man, and you seemed happy." Jana swallowed hard. "Then I made an offer. He didn't refuse. You know how cautious he is. I would have liked to of conceived that night, but of course he insisted we use a condom."

"Did you kill the others?" Charlie still spoke low and soft. A threat was building all around them, and she could feel it.

"Others?" Jana snorted. "No. An old friend of ours made me a deal."

"But you said you were trying to lure him back to Vegas." Charlie didn't want to walk up one more step.



“Yeah with you stupid. You’re the only one I want to kill.” Jana poked her in the ribs with the nine millimeter once again.

“And she’s the one I’ve been waiting for, Jana. Good work.” Preston Bates Jr. stood at the top of the stairs. “My angel.”

“How, how did you get here?” Jana stepped back two steps pulling Charlie with her. “You’re supposed to be in Vegas.”

“Well, I’m not. And thanks to you I’m right where I want to be.” Preston took two steps down toward them.

Charlie was in between two people who wanted to kill her. Her heart rate was up; the tension was growing. Everything began spinning and blurring. Then it all went black.

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Ayden pushed to his feet. He could have sworn a woman knocked him out. He grabbed the back of his neck rubbing the spot. He took in the scene around him. Here he was on his own property and someone had pushed his truck into the lake. Someone who assumed he would get out, and apparently that someone only wanted Charlie. Two sets of footprints led to tire tracks. Large wheels, the same truck.

Staggering a bit Ayden headed toward his home. He often came there without telling anyone. It was the only solitude he had. The truck tires were leading the same direction. That he wasn’t expecting. As he regained his strength and equilibrium, he began running toward the house. Three miles in twenty-two minutes, he was getting old and slow. In his younger days, he could have made it in eighteen minutes flat. Now here he was, at the edge of his driveway.

A vehicle made its way up the drive behind him. He turned and ran back to it.

“Joshua.” Ayden reached into the window and turned out the truck lights. “You have to help me.”

“Fuck, Ayden, what the hell’s going on?” Joshua went on full alert. Evelyn unbuckled her seat belt and slid closer.

“I don’t know. I got rammed into the lake. I pulled her out; then she took her. I know she’s in there. Call Tom. Get help. But don’t come up this driveway.” Ayden looked at Evelyn. He didn’t want his baby sister involved in whatever was going on in that house.

“I’m coming with you.” Evelyn went to get out of the truck.

“The hell you are.” Joshua grabbed her by the arm. “I know you’re itching to fight, but you have our child to think of. You call Tom, take the truck down the road, and wait for us. Anyone else comes out...”

“Fine. You go with him.” Evelyn opened the cell phone and made the call while Joshua got out of the truck.

Ayden was already on his way back up the drive. Evelyn put the truck in reverse and headed back to the end of the road. Joshua took the hand gun, but no matter, her baby was in the back. Nothing like a crossbow, she brought it just to take Joshua out and let him play with it. Now she got to do what she used to do best. Wait for the bad guy.

Joshua crept low and slowly behind Ayden. Damn he wasn't expecting this night to turn out like this. When Ayden slipped him the key, he was prepared to spend a nice quiet night with his wife. Now, here he was following the Wolf, who for the first time ever seemed shaken. Joshua understood the situation all too well. He was a mess when Evelyn was at risk. Whoever was in that house had better hope Charlie was okay.

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Charlie awoke with a slice across her wrist. "Oww."

"Lie still, angel." Preston Bates Jr. smoothed a hand over her bald head. "I waited years for this. Jana was so kind to lead me right to you. She had been to see my dad a few times. I was so proud of my little girl, but when she told me she was after you, well, you, angel, are all mine." Preston set her arm into the water, and Charlie watched the blood slowly mix.

"He did this to Michael?" Charlie accepted her fate. Her only regret, that she had doubted Ayden's love. She would die, and he would think she didn't know.

"Yes. Unlike Michael, you are pure. I didn't seed you. My father would break out and kill me if I touched the angel, his angel. Besides, Jana was awake." Preston reached for the other arm. "It takes a while to bleed to death this way. I could make it easier, cut long ways here." He pointed to her wrist and slid his soft finger up her arm. Preston was such a soft feminine man. No woman would suspect him.

"You said she was your little girl?" Charlie kept him talking hoping to prolong his next cut. Preston Sr. cared about his victims, or so he had claimed. Maybe she could delay him, maybe talk him out of it.

"They were all my little girls, just like my father's, but you, Charlie, are his angel." Preston Jr. sighed. "You came to me in a dream and told me I would be saved. You know my dad is a changed man. He won't see me anymore because of what I do. He said killing angels was a sin! Can you believe that?"

"Couldn't I save you alive?" Charlie felt the tears streaming down her cheek.

"What's that?" Preston shifted his attention to the door and the noise.

Charlie closed her eyes and silently prayed.

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Ayden entered the kitchen and found Jana's body on his floor. She had been raped, her wrists were slit, and she was bald. His gut wrenched with the nightmare. Opening a cupboard, he punched the numbers in the small safe and pulled out his gun.

Joshua was securing the perimeter trying to determine what they were up against. At this moment, he knew. He knew everything. The call to visit the behavior analyst unit was to help them track down a copycat. He knew that now. How they ended up in his house in Tennessee was still a mystery.

Ayden took the stairs just like in the dream. At the bathroom door he prayed he wouldn't see what he knew was on the other side. Pushing it open, he was thunderstruck. His heart broke into a million pieces as he saw the woman he loved in the bathtub, bald with blood all around her.

"Show yourself you son of a bitch!" Ayden knew this part of the dream, and he wasn't giving in to it.

"Ayden?" Charlie's eyes opened, and she fought against the restraints.

"Charlie?" Ayden stepped into the room running to her and leaving himself open.

"He's in the bedroom," Charlie told him. She saw Preston in the doorway taking aim at him. She splashed and struggled. "He has a gun, Ayden."

Ayden turned and faced the little man in the doorway. Preston Bates Jr. was nineteen years old, dressed in nice clothes, holding a gun on him.

"Drop it, Preston. It's over." Ayden growled.

"She's mine, Wolf, my angel," Preston spit out in a panic.

"I will fucking kill you. Do you hear me? I will fucking kill you if you touch her." Ayden took aim at the man with no regard to his own safety. All he could think about was Charlie.

Preston heard the front door open. Ayden wasn't alone. He ran knowing Ayden wouldn't leave Charlie. He was right.

Ayden lowered his weapon and turned back to Charlie. She was passing out as he reached for her. Preston had tied her in the tub with sheets. He pulled the plug and began untying her. Only one wrist was slit. He pulled her from the tub and carried her to the bed. Tearing sheets, he tied her wrist. That's when he heard footsteps at the door.

"Holy shit!" Joshua stood frozen in time. Ayden was a wreck, covered in blood and trying hard to be gentle as he wrapped her body in a sheet. Joshua wasn't sure if Charlie was alive.

"Joshua. He ran. He's in the house." Ayden broke into a sob. "Look what he did to my baby."

"Fuck." Joshua ran out of the bedroom door. If the man was still loose, then he was leaving. If he was leaving, he was headed toward Evelyn.

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Joshua ran as fast as his legs would carry him down the long driveway and then the road. Damn Ayden for living so secluded. As he closed the distance between himself and the truck, he slowed. He watched as the man ahead of him dropped to his knees in the darkness. Evelyn. Joshua knew in an instant that she had gotten him.

Picking up the pace again, he stopped beside the man. He was dead. Joshua searched the area. Where the hell was she?

“Baby?” Joshua called out. “Evelyn, where are you?”

“Up here.” Evelyn climbed down from the tree, landing on her feet like a cat. “Is she alive?”

Joshua again stood in awe of his wife. The ambulance followed Tom’s car up the road now. Tom pulled over when he realized a body was in the road.

“He’s dead. Take them to Charlie,” Evelyn directed then stepped to her husband who stood as still as a Greek statue. “Joshua, are you okay?”

“You never cease to scare the shit out of me, woman.” Joshua looked down at her then wrapped her in his arms checking her over from head to toe.

“He shot at me. It was self defense.” Evelyn looked up at him then checked him over to make sure he wasn’t hurt. “What about you? What about Charlie?”

“I don’t know about Charlie.” Joshua shook his head. He followed Evelyn as she ran to the next car headed up the driveway. It stopped and let them in.

## Chapter 23

Ayden held her limp body in his arms and sobbed. Her pulse was faint, and he knew she was dying. He lived so far out that the ambulance would have to be led in. He found Michael the same way except Preston Sr. had slit both of Michael's wrists, and she had lost too much blood to do anything. Ayden wanted to carry her downstairs, take her to Joshua's truck and to the hospital, but he was crippled by fear. Fear of losing her forever.

Footsteps thundered toward the bedroom, and Tom was there.

"Jesus!" Tom tried to pull Charlie from Ayden's arms, but Ayden hovered over her holding on ready to kill anything that touched her. "Wolf. Come on, we have to get her to a hospital."

Ayden nodded and pushed back the tears. He stood and carried her down the stairs, past the kitchen and out the front door. Ayden couldn't hear anything. He could barely see what was in front of him. He climbed into the back of the ambulance and felt another body climb in next to him.

"Ayden, he's dead." Evelyn touched her brother's head as the doors closed and the EMT's tried to assess Charlie in Ayden's lap. "Let them look at her."

"She's dead. I can't feel a pulse." Ayden lowered his head.

Evelyn looked at the EMT who had his finger on Charlie's neck. "She has a pulse. His hands are shaking. It's there."

"Ayden Wolf, let her go." Evelyn smacked him hard across the face.

Ayden blinked twice then turned to Evelyn. He sucked in a deep breath and realized he was in the ambulance, Charlie was in his arms, the EMT's were pulling at her, and Evelyn had just smacked him, reluctantly, across the face. Not hard enough to hurt but hard enough to sting and hopefully snap him out of his funk. He let go of Charlie and watched the two men begin to work on her.

"He's dead, Ayden. I scared him, threw a rock at him. He took a shot in the dark, so I took a shot, too." Evelyn reached for his hand. "Joshua and I have been trying to figure out what she was running from. It makes sense now."

"What?" Ayden seemed confused and dazed.

"The articles she kept were of the suicides of three Vegas Showgirls. No details about how they died except they had done it themselves." Evelyn squeezed his hand tight. "She didn't know if it was a repeat or a coincidence, but it was the motivation to break the chain. She ran and made her own fate. She ran to you."

"I love her, Evelyn. If she dies..."

"She won't."

"She's right. She won't die." The EMT looked up. "Just need to put a little blood back in, but other than that, she's fine."

"You have to do a rape kit." Ayden strained to speak, the thoughts tearing him to shreds.

"We'll let the E.R. know." The EMT nodded.

The ambulance pulled up to the hospital, and the doors swung open. Ayden waited with Evelyn as they pulled Charlie out and rushed her inside.

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Charlie opened her eyes and realized she was in a hospital. Well hell had every fear she imagined decided to come to life? Then she saw Ayden, his head on her bed and his body slumped over from the chair he was in. His hand held onto hers. Charlie remembered the events leading up to this point.

Her wrist reminded her it was all real. Slowly she raised her hand to her head. Yes, she was bald. She knew exactly what she looked like because she had seen Michael this way. She pulled her hand free of his, and he rustled awake.

"Charlie?" Ayden smiled. She was alive. The panic attack had actually saved her life.

"I'm bald," Charlie whispered.

"You're beautiful, darlin'." Ayden climbed into bed with her and hugged her tight. "God I was scared I had lost you forever."

"I love you, Ayden." Charlie sobbed into his shoulder. "I was so afraid I would die and you wouldn't know how much I loved you. That's why I left Las Vegas. That's why I had to find you."

"Shhhh, darlin', I know. It's okay." Ayden brushed away her tears. "I love you so much, Charlie."

"I know you do." Charlie smiled and sniffed. "Can we go home now?"

"Yes." Ayden nodded.

"What happened to Preston? Did you catch him?" Charlie sat up and pulled her hospital gown off.

"No. Evelyn killed him." Ayden hung his head low. "I hate she had to do that."

Charlie gasped. "My God, is she all right? Is the baby okay?"

"She's fine. Joshua's a mess though, tending to her like a mother hen." Ayden handed her clothes. "I'll tell the doc you're ready."

Charlie put her clothes on and went to the bathroom. She took a deep breath and walked inside. There she stood in the mirror her reflection foreign. Charlie didn't consider herself a vain woman, but she took care of herself and that included her hair. How in the world could Ayden say she was beautiful? She was bald.

"Charlie, darlin'?" Ayden stepped back into the room behind the doctor.

"I'm in here," she squeaked out.

Shit. Ayden's gut twisted with the reality that she was seeing herself for the first time. "Charlie, let me in." He tapped on the door. The knob twisted and the door opened.

Ayden stepped into the bathroom and found Charlie standing there with tears steadily streaming down her cheeks. “You’ve been through a lot, baby. Let’s talk to the doc, and I’ll take you home.”

Charlie nodded as Ayden pulled her into his arms. He instinctively reached to caress her hair, but it wasn’t there, so he stroked her back instead. She felt the motion and knew he was going to caress her head but didn’t. Charlie took a deep breath and pushed herself away from him. She held her head high and straightened her clothes.

Ayden gritted his teeth as he walked behind her. Damn he wanted a cigarette.

“Agent Wolf, if you’ll wait outside, Ms. Mann will be right out.” The doctor nodded and gestured for Charlie to sit at the foot of the bed.

“I’ll be right outside.” Ayden left the room and paced outside the door.

Inside the doctor gave Charlie her discharge instructions and directions to care for the laceration at her wrist. She explained she had been given a pint of blood and if she suffered any emotional trauma, she could call the hotline.

Charlie pondered emotional trauma. It seemed almost funny in a sick way. Here she was bald with a slit wrist, sitting on a hospital bed after almost being murdered by a serial killer. No, no trauma here. Not that the situation prior to being pushed into a lake was any better. Ayden was talking about families and kids, and though he told her moments ago, he loved her she couldn’t help think it was out of duty he said it.

Of course, the doctor kept rambling on directions and information, and Charlie could barely absorb it all. Then she was telling her that her rape kit only found semen associated with Ayden and that they tested her for other things. “I’m on birth control.”

“Well, if you think the test is incorrect, I would test again when you get back to North Carolina,” the doctor said.

“Look can I go now? I hate hospitals.” Charlie’s head was buzzing with too much information to process. She gathered the paperwork and started for the door. “Ayden?”

“You ready?” Ayden wrapped an arm around her waist. Charlie nodded, and he escorted her out of the hospital. He couldn’t take his hands off of her; he couldn’t. The only time he had left her side was to shower and change *at* the hospital. Joshua had left him his truck to bring her home in, and they would drive back to North Carolina with them in the morning. “Joshua left me his truck.”

Once outside the hospital Charlie began processing everything the doctor had said. Turning it over and over in her head she kept coming back to the last part. She really needed to look through the papers but not until she was alone.

“I must look like a cancer patient now.” Charlie looked at her lap. How could she go to Stephanie’s wedding now?

“You remind me more of Demi Moore in *GI Jane*.” Ayden wanted to soften the impact of her appearance any way possible. “Your hair isn’t what makes you beautiful, Charlie.”

“No?” Charlie set her hand on his hand. Ayden hadn’t let her go except to walk around the truck to get in. Once it was started and they were driving, he had his hand on her thigh.

“No.” He shook his head. “Ask me what my favorite feature is on you.”

“What?” Charlie made a slight laugh. Usually she had to keep him talking. Now he wouldn’t shut up.

“All time favorite is your heart. You’re probably the kindest most loving person I know. Of course you’d have to be to put up with an idiot like me.” Ayden sighed. “Second would be your lips, then your eyes.”

“Really?” Charlie gripped his hand. He was trying. She had to give him credit for that.

“Yes, really, what did you think I was after your ta-ta’s and kitty?” Ayden attempted a joke. He never thought himself a funny man, but Charlie was down in the dumps, and he would do anything for a smile right now. Anything.

“Did you just say ta-ta’s? How old are you now anyways?” Charlie smiled.

Ayden chuckled. He wanted to pull her across the seat and into his lap. He never wanted to be farther than arm’s reach from her again.

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Back at the ranch, Charlie prepared for the shock and awe treatment when she walked in the door, but it wasn’t there. The family was acting as if nothing had happened. Of course then she remembered how much Evelyn and Noel had been through as kids. How they had almost died last year at the hands of their stepfather. In reality Charlie was already a part of this family, another link in the chain of extreme events and circumstance.

“Charlie.” Lacy squeezed her face between two small hands and kissed her several times all over. “I’m so glad you’re home now, dear.”

“Let her go, Lace. You’re gonna smother the child.” Ben pulled at Lacy then drew Charlie’s un-bandaged hand to his lips and kissed it. “Welcome home.”

“Thanks.” Charlie smiled graciously. Evelyn and Joshua approached.

Joshua sniffed her. “You smell like hospital. Go change into cookies.”

“Jerk.” Charlie laughed.

“I’m glad you’re okay.” Evelyn hugged her. “You ready to go home now?”

“Yes.” Charlie nodded. She was ready to go back to North Carolina. “Can I talk to you upstairs?”

“Yeah, let’s go upstairs and get you settled in.” Ayden touched her back.

“Just Evelyn,” Charlie whispered.

“Oh.”

“Sure, come on.” Evelyn headed toward the stairs, and Charlie followed.



In the guest room, Charlie stood in front of the mirror. "I don't think I can go to Stephanie's wedding. I don't think I can stay in North Carolina." She turned to look at Evelyn. "I don't know what's happening to me."

"I do." Evelyn sat on the bed. "You're scared. Your worst nightmare came true, and so did your best dream. The man you feared most in your life is now dead. The man you wanted most in your life now wants you."

"You make that seem so..."

"Simple, but it's not. Look, Charlie, when I was looking for Noel, I swore when I found her, I would never leave her, but Joshua is the love of my life. I never in a million years thought I could love anyone the way I love Joshua. But here I am." Evelyn smiled and threw up her hands. "Ayden loves you, and to be loved by that man in particular is a rare and special gift. Don't run from it."

"I'm ugly now. You don't know how he looked at me before." Charlie pulled trembling fingers over her head then over the bruises on her face.

"Honey, it will take more than a haircut and a couple bruises to make you ugly." Evelyn wasn't cutting the supermodel any slack. "But even if he had sliced your face instead of your wrists, Ayden would look at you the same. Trust me. I know my brother."

"You're right." Charlie nodded.

"I'm always right. Ask anyone." Evelyn stood. "Now I'm going to send him up here. Don't break his heart, Charlie. He has a plan in action. Be patient and trust him."

"I don't understand." Charlie looked down at Evelyn. If she ever needed anyone to talk some sense into her, that woman was the one to do it.

"And I can't tell you." Evelyn shrugged.

Charlie watched her leave with a huge smile on her face. Evelyn had the inside scoop on something. That she was sure of. Charlie sat on the bed and filed through the papers. She had just realized what the doctor was telling her when Ayden walked in.

"Hi." Charlie folded the papers and set them aside. "What time do you think we'll be leaving tomorrow?"

"Early. You hungry?" Ayden tucked his hands into his front pockets.

"No." Charlie swallowed hard. This was hard; it was complicated. "I want you to know I wasn't raped or anything."

"I know." Ayden nodded. "That and Joshua's blood was the only thing they would talk to me about. I had to pull out the old FBI routine to get that much. It was frustrating as hell. Damn privacy act."

"Did you sleep with her?" Charlie felt the strain in her chest.

"She told you that?" Ayden looked at the floor. He shouldn't have to feel guilty about it. He wasn't with Charlie then, but in a way he had only been with Charlie all the while.

"Yes." Charlie looked at him. "I never had any other man. I didn't lie about that. Why was she watching me?"

“She worked on the case with me. I thought it would be easier to have a woman keep tabs on you than a man. I didn’t want a man looking at you to be honest.” Ayden ground his teeth together. “I ran into her four years ago. She gave me an update on you, told me some sob story, and hell it had been a while so.”

“So you slept with her?” Charlie stared at him, her green eyes intent on him.

“No. I fucked her and then I left and slept in my own room.” Ayden lifted his head and met her emerald eyes. He would take that night back now if he could. If he knew, it would have led to all of this.

“She was obsessed with you, Ayden.” Charlie saw the regret in his baby blue eyes. “I understand that. I was obsessed with you, too.”

“Charlie, I swear I didn’t know how you felt then. I didn’t know how I felt then. It was years ago. Don’t hold me to that fire now. I would never cheat on you. I felt guilty enough sleeping with her then.” Ayden pulled his hands from his pockets and scrubbed over his face.

“Why?” Charlie wanted to know.

“Because she wasn’t you! Shit.” Ayden was yelling at her, but it was real and raw, and it was the truth. He put his hands on his hips, took a short quick breath and spoke softer. “Look. I can’t explain it other than the fact you have been the only woman in my life for the past eleven years that wasn’t related to me. On some level, I have always wanted you. I just couldn’t, or wouldn’t, do anything about it. But now...”

“I believe you.” Charlie had heard enough. This wasn’t his plan, and she was sure Jana was just a one night stand. He didn’t care for her, and that’s all she wanted to hear about the woman who was going to kill her. “I just had to know how you felt about her.”

“I need you to know how I feel about you.” Ayden stepped toward her.

“I know how you feel about me.” Charlie closed the space between them and wrapped her arms around him. Life was too complicated these days. Once they got back to North Carolina, things would slow down and then they could process everything. Evelyn was right. The dream of Ayden and the reality were two different things, but she still wanted him. Knowing he wanted her made the thought of losing him unbearable.

The entire family had dinner together in the large country kitchen. Lacy had outdone herself. The baby played, the women chatted, and the men watched television and grunted. Joshua and Evelyn stayed in Noel’s room across the hall. Ayden had arranged to have his house there cleaned. It was as much planning as he could manage with the incident still fresh in his mind.

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Ayden awoke with Charlie in his arms in their usual fashion only reversed so her bandaged wrist would be elevated. He looked her over slowly. Sleeping peacefully in his arms she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on. The bruising from the crash would go away in a few days. Her hair would grow back, but Charlie would be

there in his arms from this day forward. It would be a while before he could let her out of his reach.

Charlie opened her eyes at his kiss. Ayden pulled her in tight and continued to sip slow kisses from her lips. He slid his rough fingers up her bald head and rolled her to her back.

“It’s very soft and fuzzy.” Ayden nipped her ear.

“You *can’t* possibly be attracted to me right now,” Charlie whispered, though the man’s body was telling her otherwise.

“Why? Your girlie parts not working?” Ayden brushed a hand over her breast.

Charlie giggled. She loved Ayden in the morning. It didn’t matter if she was bald, if she was bruised. He was pure heat, and as long as her *girlie parts* were working, he didn’t care about anything else. “You’re such an animal in the mornings.”

“Is this too soon for you?” Ayden looked at her seriously. He didn’t want to rush her. He just wanted to make love to her again. To feel their bodies as one, to know she was his and his alone, to know she was safe. After Evelyn told him last night she felt ugly, he wanted her to know she was the most amazing thing he had seen in his life.

“Oh I think it’s way too late for me, cowboy.” Charlie pulled him back to her lips. He had that look in his eye, her look. The look that told her he thought she was beautiful and not because of her face, hair or body, but because she was his.

“I love you,” Ayden whispered against her cheek. He regretted not telling her sooner.

“I know.” Charlie held back the tears. Evelyn was right. Having his heart was a gift.

A knock rapped on the door. “Wolf, you ready to hit the road?”

“Joshua.” Charlie giggled.

“Damn Dog.” Ayden growled into her neck then to the door, “Thirty minutes.”

“No. You get up. We can do this at home.” Charlie pushed at his chest with her good hand. “We’ll be right there, Joshua.”

“Fifteen minutes.” Ayden licked her neck.

“Bad Wolf.” Charlie scowled in jest.

“Five?” He slipped down her body and drew on a nipple through her top.

Charlie licked her lips. “You think he’s still at the door?”

“Thirty minutes, Big Dog.” Ayden shouted toward the door.

“You’re so bad.” Charlie ran her hands through his hair. God she missed her hair, but it would grow back.

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It was a very long drive back to North Carolina. Joshua and Ayden rotated driving shifts. Evelyn slept through most of the trip and stopped every five miles it seemed for a bathroom break when she was awake. Ayden squeezed into the back seat to be next to

Charlie rather than sitting up front like Evelyn had offered him. He made constant effort to look at her wrist and check her bandages. It was silly really. Both of the men fretted like mothers over the women.

Finally, they were home. Ayden kissed Evelyn on the cheek and thanked Joshua for the ride home. At the door, Charlie felt exhausted and relieved, like she was finally home.

"I can't wait to get my new truck." Ayden opened the door to his home. "God it's good to be home."

"You can say that again." Charlie stepped in behind him. "You hungry, baby?"

"Baby?" Ayden shot up a brow. She was calling him baby?

"Sweetheart?" Charlie opened the refrigerator.

"Hmmm." Ayden contemplated it. "You can call me whatever you want to."

"Good. So you want something to eat or not?" Charlie looked over the refrigerator door at the huge mountain of man she would now call baby in addition to cowboy on a regular basis. "Baby?"

"Do we have any tea in there?" Ayden smiled and grabbed their bags heading for the stairs.

"No, but I'll make some." Charlie stood and headed to the cupboards. She gathered the supplies and noticed the sugar canister was practically empty. "Ayden?"

Coming back to the kitchen, he wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled her neck. "Yes, darlin'?"

"Where's the sugar?" Charlie smiled. She was exhausted and so was he, but he still cuddled her sensually, kissing her neck.

"I bought some before we left." Ayden reached for the sugar making Charlie look like she had four arms from his position. "That's strange. Come on."

Ayden headed for the stairs with Charlie right behind him. "Where are we going?"

"To see who took our sugar." Ayden unlocked the office door. This was a huge secret, and he didn't want to hide anything from Charlie anymore. She needed unlimited access to his life. To know she was safe in this house. He hadn't modified the house in Tennessee because no one knew it existed, other than family.

Charlie walked into the room and stopped short. It was more than an office. It was like the bat cave, a secret place where a security guard or spy would feel at home. She didn't have a chance to ask questions. He began explaining immediately.

"I have a security system set up so when I'm gone the cameras activate on motion sensors recording when someone is in the kitchen, living room, dining room, and so on. No bedrooms though, fear not." Ayden took a seat at the desk and pulled up something on the monitor then motioned for her to come sit with him. Charlie stumbled over and stood. He pulled her into his lap. "Now, let's see about our sugar."

They watched Evelyn come into the house, disappear upstairs, and then come back down an hour later. Ayden knew she was snooping, assumed she was checking into Charlie. He shook his head. A break in the time then Evelyn and Joshua returned. Ayden

almost vomited when he saw his little sister and her husband no doubt making out on his counter.

Charlie covered his eyes and watched with her jaw dropped. Ayden pulled her hand down and hit keys with lightning speed to stop the recording. He was so upset that it just fast forwarded, and Charlie consumed by the sight realized what happened to the sugar before he stopped the tape.

“WOW,” she said in amazement.

“I might be sick.” Ayden grabbed his stomach.

“Oh, Ayden, they were just having some fun.” Charlie gulped and knew she was blushing. She knew he was traumatized, but she wasn’t related to either of them and hell aside from her and Ayden she hadn’t seen sex since her senior year in high school. Joshua was impressive, not as impressive as Ayden, but impressive nonetheless. “At least we know what happened to the sugar.”

“We do?” His face was green with sickness.

“Evelyn kicked it over.” Charlie bit her top lip holding back a laugh.

“I’m going to kill Joshua. I can’t believe he came into my home and had sex with my little sister in my kitchen.” He tone was rough and violent.

“I hate to burst your sister’s innocent bubble, baby, but she led him here. You can tell because she’s wearing...”

“Lalalalalala.” Ayden stuffed his fingers in his ears and tuned her out.

Charlie began laughing. “Okay. Okay.” She pulled his hands away. “This is a very interesting space you got here.”

“I know. It took me a long time to set it up.” Ayden relaxed in the chair again. “I’ll show you how to use everything, so if you leave after me for work or something, you can set the tapes. I don’t like traditional alarm systems because someone has to come in and set it up. That means they know where everything is.”

“And that means they know how to get past it. I understand.” Charlie stroked his hair.

“I can shave it all off if you want me to. I thought about it anyways, but I didn’t want you to think I did it out of sympathy.” He closed his eyes and enjoyed her touches. “You’re too strong for sympathy, and I didn’t want you to kick my ass or unleash your vehemence on me.”

“No, I don’t want you to shave it off. I like playing with it. I’ll get a good wig for the wedding.”

“You don’t have to. You’re beautiful just the way you are.” He spoke in a sleepy relaxed voice.

“Let’s go to bed, cowboy. We have a long weekend ahead of us still.” Charlie kissed his nose and stood.

Ayden followed her lead and was grateful for the sanctuary of his own bed, his own room, and Charlie in it with him. The week had been too full of revelations and scary situations. “Everything locked up downstairs?”

“Yes.” Charlie liked that he trusted her completely now. “But the light’s on. I’ll...”  
“I got it.” Ayden headed for the kitchen.

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Charlie slipped into the bathroom and started a bath. She crossed the hall to grab a pair of pajamas. Next week she would go to the doctor and make sure, everything was all right. The test had to be an error. Ayden was at the top of the stairs when she started back to his room.

“You’ll have to help me,” Charlie announced and disappeared into the bedroom.

Ayden slowly walked down the hall, into his room and into his bathroom. The image of her lying in the tub froze him. Flashbacks poured in, and he was helpless against them.

“Ayden?” Charlie realized he was in the doorway. He looked...scared? “What is it?”

“Sit up, Charlie, please.” Ayden strangled out. She sat up and he relaxed an ounce. He felt the sweat roll down his back. It was that simple, that easy to fear again. Nothing had shaken him like this since he was a child. It was the fear of being helpless, unable to save his dad, unable to save Charlie, yet he had.

“Ayden, are you all right?” Charlie sat up and reached out to him. “Come here.”

His feet pushed forward, and he took her hand. “I’m sorry I just...”

“Get in here with me.” Charlie pulled him closer. “Come on, we’ll both fit.”

“I don’t...”

“Ayden Wolf, get your ass in here now!” Charlie’s hands were trembling. He was freaked out by her, and she knew why. He had that same look in his eye that he had when she was tied into the tub in Tennessee.

Ayden jumped at her demand. He didn’t take his shorts or shirt off. He just stepped into the tub with her.

“Now sit down here and hold me,” Charlie demanded.

Ayden sat in the tub and realized he had all of his clothes on. It was just so unlike Charlie to lose her temper and she seemed scared, so he wanted to comfort her immediately.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. I was trying to relax.” Charlie slid to his lap. “I hate to see that look in your eye. It scares me.”

Ayden could have taken the macho road and played it off. Instead, he took the man’s road and told her the truth. “I was scared to death when I saw you. It was just like the dream only in the dream you were just like Michael. And I was too late.”

“But you weren’t too late, Ayden. You saved me.”

“I didn’t think you were alive. I couldn’t move. I didn’t take you downstairs. I could have killed you by not...”

“Shhhh.” Charlie placed her hand over his mouth. “I’m alive, and I’m safe. We can always look back and see what we should have done. The challenge is to look at what we can do now.”

“What can I do now?” Ayden kissed her temple.

“You can start by getting undressed. Then you can wash my hair.” Charlie hugged him tight. Then remembered she didn’t have any hair to wash. “Well, my back or something.”

“I keep reaching out for ghost curls, but they’ll be back soon enough.” Ayden palmed her head.

Her big bad Wolf had quite a soft spot for her. She felt just as responsible for her fate due to her inability to stay conscious. Her doctor in Vegas just medicated her. Charlie wanted to face her demons and conquer them. She had faced her demon all right, and now he was dead. She had passed out of course, but she could forgive herself for that. Ayden had to forgive himself for being so in love with her that it crippled him. Her one moment of lucidity was seeing his fear and feeling his pain.

“Ayden, you’re not responsible for what happened to me.” Charlie turned to face him placing both of her legs on either side of his and sitting on his lap. He scooted them to the center of the tub so both sets of long legs were more comfortable. “Ayden?”

“I need time with that,” he said quietly.

“Okay.” She hugged him tight and rested her head on his shoulder. She could accept he needed time. She needed time.

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Charlie let Ayden sleep in this morning. He was snoring and drooling. She knew he needed the sound sleep, and he didn’t get it often. In the office, she figured out how to record Evelyn and Joshua’s little rendezvous onto a tape. She imagined they would want it for future reference, especially if they ever house sit again. Charlie tucked the tape in her bag. She had plans to present it at an opportune time.

The flight to New York would be leaving in four hours, and though Evelyn hated flying, Charlie had talked her into it by pointing out it would be her first time on a plane, and she had an anxiety disorder. The mere prospect of looking like a chicken had Evelyn agreeing in no time. Evelyn had reminded everyone she was a Marine and had spent three years in Okinawa, and she didn’t get there by boat. She just didn’t like flying.

The four arrived in New York and were greeted by Ethan. He took them directly to the rehearsal. Stephanie ran to Charlie on sight leaving Malcolm and his grandfather standing at the altar. They were late for rehearsal, but how hard could it be to walk down an aisle?

“Charlie!” Stephanie almost knocked her over with the bear hug.

“Hey. Um, you may want to finish...”

“Oh, I know what I’m doing up there.” Stephanie waved it away. She was just so glad Charlie was safe and at her wedding, like she promised. It meant so much that she still came after everything that had happened to her. Besides, she knew what Ethan had done to her apartment. “Okay, everyone let’s wrap this up and go eat.”

Stephanie held onto Charlie’s arm and realized she had a man to contend with. “Ayden, you’ve had her all week. Can I have a moment?”

“No.” Ayden hovered over them.

“Baby, why don’t you give this to Malcolm? Tell him to read the inscription to the guys and the guys only.” Charlie pulled the tape from her purse and kissed Ayden. He reluctantly took the wrapped gift and headed toward the circle of men. “He’s a little over protective right now.”

“I don’t blame him.” Stephanie went serious in the moment. “I am so glad you’re here. It means so much to us.”

“Don’t get all mushy. I’m out of waterproof mascara.” Charlie hugged her again. “You’re going to be such a beautiful bride.”

“Did you cut your hair?” Stephanie smiled and looked at her. She didn’t know all the details of the Tennessee disaster. She didn’t want to know. Charlie just looked different.

“It’s a wig. I’m bald underneath.” Charlie feigned a smile.

“What?” Stephanie’s face twisted and she looked pained. “They said you weren’t hurt. Joshua said you were...”

“I’m fine. Look, don’t worry about me, honey. I’m fine. Hair grows back.” Charlie held onto her hand. For so long she had been alone in the world. Now she had friends. Now she had a family. They all cared about her. This story could wait until after Stephanie’s wedding; that was for sure. Stephanie smiled a weak smile but accepted it.

Across the church Ayden handed Malcolm the package. “This is from Charlie. She wants you to read what she wrote out loud to us.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet of her,” Malcolm said sincerely. Opening the card, he read aloud, “Malcolm, I know now how insufferable older siblings can be. This gift is a piece of insurance. Tell Joshua if you ever decide to have sex with his little sister in his kitchen while he’s out of town, you will...”

“What the?” Joshua snatched the gift from his hand and mumbled the rest of the note to him self. “Son of a bitch. You have it on tape?”

Malcolm smacked Joshua on the arm. “You’re in a church. Have what on tape?”

“Joshua and Evelyn.” Ayden smiled. The Big Dog was as red as his wife’s hair. Charlie had no qualms in vindicating him and in a big way.

“Yes!” Ethan snatched the tape. “Now it’s my turn.”

“No.” Ayden snatched the tape and handed it back to Joshua before he killed Ethan in the church.

“You don’t understand, Wolf. Evelyn found the tape of me and Grace...”

“Jesus, are you all on tape?” Malcolm looked wide-eyed in shock.



“No.” Ayden and Chase sounded off.

“I wasn’t.” Joshua mumbled through clenched teeth.

“Yeah, we film it from time to time.” Ethan shrugged. “So what.”

“Kinky bastard.” Ayden shook his head and left the group heading back to Charlie. The men followed with Joshua frozen in place. Evelyn passed on her way down the aisle, and Ayden grabbed her arm. “Hey, you owe me a bag of sugar.”

“Excuse me?”

Evelyn’s eyes widened as Ayden dropped her arm with a huge smile and walked away. He could hear her trot toward Joshua behind him. Charlie smiled deviously as she met him at the door. That woman was no angel; that was for sure.

“You’re such a devil,” Ayden whispered as they walked out the doors.

“Say that again. I don’t ever want to be called angel again.” Charlie cuddled into his massive arm.

“Devil in disguise.” Ayden kissed her forehead as they left the church.

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The rehearsal dinner dragged on for hours and finally ended. Joshua and Evelyn were the quietest couple there. Both of them were modest and private people and now they had been exposed in a very public way. Charlie felt a little bad about what she had done, but once she saw they had found the safe and somehow got it open most guilt had gone.

## Chapter 24

Smiling her devious smile Charlie remained lost in her thoughts and snuggled into Ayden's side the entire cab ride to the loft. Ethan had the luggage sent over earlier.

"We're here, darlin'." Ayden opened the cab door and held a hand out for Charlie.

"It's an art gallery." Charlie looked at the building.

"The loft is on top of the gallery." Ayden tugged her along as he walked around to the stairs leading up to the loft. His hands trembled a bit when he put the key in the door.

As they stepped inside, Charlie lost her breath. The loft was lit up with candles. A small table set for two in the center of the room had dessert and a bottle of champagne on ice. "Ayden?"

"Huh, wonder how all this got here?" He winked and escorted her to the center of the room. He picked up the remote and pushed play on the CD player. Elvis began to sing "Fools Rush In." "Dance with me?"

"Oh Ayden." Charlie stepped close to him and wrapped her arms around him. Ayden surprised her by tugging her wig off. "What are you doing?"

"I like you better in your own skin." Ayden kissed her cheek and did his best to follow her lead again. "I'll need you to teach me how to dance for real before we get married, you know that right?"

Charlie's heart flip flopped with nerves and excitement. "I like how you dance now."

The song ended after a few moments, and Ayden could feel the tension in his gut. He was prepared to offer her everything, and he planned to do just that. "What's that?"

"What's what?" Charlie turned as he stepped away and grabbed something off a nearby table. Ayden turned to her and went to his knee. His arm outstretched. Charlie felt her chest clenching and her heart thumping. She was so excited and overwhelmed. She would not pass out at a proposal. "Ayden?"

"Darlin', I love you. If you don't want to have kids for a while, that's okay. I can wait. We can get an apartment close to UNC-W or East Carolina University while you go to school. Or if you want to go to college somewhere else, I'll move. I have enough money to retire completely..."

"Ayden."

"I'm just saying." He was preparing her to say yes. "If you marry me, Charlie, we can really have a new start, together. It doesn't have to be my way..."

"Shh." Charlie stepped close and pinched his lips. For years she had to pry information out of him, and at the most important moment of her life, he wouldn't shut up. "Yes, Ayden."

“Yes?” He rose to his feet. “Yes, you’ll marry me or...”

“YES!” Charlie hugged him. He still held the box in his hand unopened. She didn’t care what was in it. He wanted to marry her. “And Ayden, you don’t have to move. I can get my degree online. So many universities are moving into the computer age.”

“But if you want...”

“I want you.”

“Then let’s celebrate.” Ayden kissed her lips and then grabbed the champagne bottle.

“Uh. Ayden.”

“Yes, darlin’?”

“You know when I was in the hospital.”

“Yes?” He stopped and turned his heart thumping.

“She wanted to talk to me alone because they ran a lot of tests on me.” Charlie swallowed the lump in her throat.

“Are you okay, darlin’?” Ayden began to fear the worst. He set the bottle on the table and started toward her.

“She said I’m pregnant.”

“Pregnant? But you said you were on birth control.” Ayden had to breathe a moment and regroup.

“I was. Guess it didn’t work.” Charlie drew her brows down. “I thought you would be happy. You said you wanted kids right away.”

“I am happy. I was afraid to be too happy because you said you didn’t.” Ayden took a step closer.

“Ayden, I am so happy!” Charlie smiled and leaped onto him.

“Thank God!” Ayden hugged her tight.

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July one year later.

Ayden watched as the vans behind him struggled to get organized. Joshua and Evelyn had a little boy, black hair and green eyes just like his daddy. Tom and Noel had another little girl. Ayden figured Noel was massing an army of women against the man. Stephanie and Megan sported the first signs of baby bellies, and Grace had a full round gut. Ethan was determined to get four kids. He looked in the backseat of his own truck. Two babies were in their car seats, one boy, one girl. Charlie had twins. They named the little boy Michael and the little girl Hanna, a real girly name. One happy woman sat beside him. Life was good. Real good.

“I love you, darlin’.” Ayden smiled at his wife.

“I love you, too.”