



BLUE JEANS

By

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PROLOGUE
IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, IN THE NAME OF THE SON

His black watery eyes stared at the fire raging in the fireplace with barely leashed control. He did not see the thick, red flames that licked at the ancient stones. He did not feel the heat that struck at his skin with wilting intensity. He was too consumed with his thoughts to see what was before him.

Years of fury and pain filled his chest to the boiling point. But he was without the strength to be angry. Vengeful, yes, but angry no. Fat tears leaked from his cold eyes. He wanted to die; he was even ready to die, but not yet. No, not quite yet. He still had things to do. Wrongs to right. The anger within him had consumed his whole life, and he had nothing to show for it.

A chill broke out along his pale skin. He had nothing but anger in his life. Beautiful, titillating, hot rage. He did not even have his children. They had deserted him. The flaming anger brewing in his heart had frozen his soul. He was unable to love. No, he had been unwilling to love. He could only hate. It was all that he had wanted. Soon they had come to realize he was not like other fathers. They had known something was wrong with their father even though they couldn't quite name it, and so they had left. They had left him with nothing but his all consuming rage.

Watching the blackened shadows drift across the darkness in which he shrouded himself was the only thing he had energy for. Yes, he was depleted, but he was not quite done.

Years of painful diligence had taught him that his death would not be without reason. In death he would be avenged. When his curtain fell the real show would begin. He only wished he could see her face when the final act closed.

Visions of her beautiful face contorted with rage filled his blackened soul with glee. A sharp bark of grim laughter cut through the darkness.

I shouldn't have done that, he thought, as a dry whimpering cough broke through the silence of the night.

His heart skipped and stumbled. He took a deep breath and found himself lacking air.

The dark man had come for him.

He took another deep breath, but all he heard was a wet wheezing sound leak through his clenched lips.

The man in black had come for him. He could feel his long fingers reaching out to grasp him.

Large fleshy hands reached out and behind to connect with his spine. Three heavy whacks dislodged the congestion that had clogged his chest.

He had no time for anything else. He could not fathom waiting to take a decongestion to relieve the ache in his chest. The best he could do was try to ease his pain, the pain of death. He had no time.

He only had a month to live.

One month. He had known he wasn't feeling up to par, but death had not seemed around

the corner.

Just goes to show you old man, he thought as he lifted the legal pad from the desk drawer, you know nothing. The cherry desk groaned as he slammed it shut. The force of his action vibrated throughout the heavy wood desk. Apparently he still had some strength in him. Maybe he could fight off the imminent.

Maybe you could get two months instead of one.

He laughed at himself. He always was a greedy bastard. He couldn't ask for six weeks. No, he had to request double what was expected.

He knew his request had been denied. He had never been a choirboy. He doubted God had even opened his ears to his pitiful, selfish plea. With his past transgressions, he would probably have better luck if he prayed to the devil. Now there's the being who owned him.

No time for foolish thoughts he thought. He could feel old man Reaper coming to visit. He had precious few moments. Moments he shouldn't be wasting making stupid jokes and foolish wishes.

He picked up the ink pen that sat upon the cherry finished desk top without realizing it. He looked down at the item that had caught his attention and felt his fingers clench in anger. *Maxwell Phillips* it read. That was his name. That was who he had once been, but Maxwell Phillips was a man dying slowly, crawling to the edge of his grave.

One month.

He had little time to ponder his life. He had to write. Many letters had to go out tomorrow. The sooner, the better. He wasn't even sure if he would have the full month. God had a habit of working on his own time.

One Month.

He had so many things to do. He had to make sure that his son never forgot the man his father was. He had to make sure that he would always be remembered. He had to make that bitch, his wife, regret the day she had married him.

He had to take away the one thing she loved.

Chapter One
DREAMS, BETTER THAN THE REAL THING?

Him

He sprinted down the white marble library stairs desperate to get out of there as soon as possible. The steps were perilous, unwilling to let him pass in speed. He slipped, caught himself, and thought only of getting home. The sooner he got home the better. He had not decided if it was a smart or foolish idea to stop at the library before rushing home, until he held the copies of the stories in his hand. Only then did he feel secure. The uneasy feeling in his stomach had finally subsided so that it was now only a slight burning sensation. It was no longer the chest consuming ache it had been that first time. That first time he had read the book. The stories had agitated him, igniting the feeling of restless loneliness he had tried so hard to deny.

For the first time since reading the first story he felt content.

No one could take them away. Even if he was forced to give up the original, he had the copies and with them he could survive.

They were his addiction. They held him in their vicious grip, content to hold him prisoner, a voyeur living through them. The stories, they were to blame for his agitation, for his restlessness, for his lust. Each one was different. The characters were all unique, well developed, human, and he hated every last one as much as he loved them. They had something he did not have, a companion, a lover, someone to turn to late at night when the feeling of isolation grew too heavy.

He slowed his pace once he passed through the glass doors of the library. Quickly, he walked to his apartment. Intent on his goal, he passed students he knew and waved to them, never stopping to talk. He couldn't. He had to get the copies somewhere safe. Now.

Once he closed his apartment door behind him, his breathing began to slowly regulate itself. He was finally able to take fat gulps of air to appease his starving lungs. He could breathe now that the copies were in his apartment. He never once attempted to figure out why the stories meant so much to him. He only knew that they did. From the first read they had become his everything.

He couldn't go one night without reading them. They were his obsession, his addiction, and like any good fiend he had no intention of curing himself of his dependency. He instead loved it, relished it, and spent every waking moment figuring out a way to stretch out the intoxicating feeling his infatuation gave him.

He walked through the living room to his bedroom, passing the kitchen. As he passed it his stomach rumbled, protesting the lack of food. For a second he paused in the kitchen. But only for a second did he waver, for he remembered the notebook in his hand.

The click of the bedroom door lock was reassuring to him. It was just him and her. He and her words could finally be alone. He would not be interrupted.

Immediately his ritual began. He slowly walked over to the CD stand and pulled out the compact disc. He waited to hear the first few notes of the song before moving. Though the CD changed, the artist was always the same. Never did he waver from the blues singer. She had the soft throaty voice he needed to lead him down his amorous path.

Suddenly he remembered the copies he had made in the library. He took them from his

notebook and held them to his chest, savoring the moment, the knowledge that no matter what he would have these stories. They would always be his. He placed them in the drawer of his desk for safe keeping. Later he would wonder why it never even occurred to him to read the copy. He automatically picked up the original. Though his mind would wonder, his heart knew, the copy had not been held by her. Her hands, her skin, her breath had run across the original. The copies were without her touch, her spirit. She was the one he was tied to, it wasn't so much the stories as it was the author. The woman knew him, his dreams and fantasies.

He laid on his bed and read the first of the short stories. *Irish Cream* was the title of the short erotic story.

All the while he read, he kept having to change his positioning. The visions the stories produced in his brain always ignited his passions.

Reading her stories always produced the same effect, he was hard as a stone and angry. The latter emotion he never tried to analyze, the first, well the first he could deal with.

First thing was first. He grabbed the clear lubricant gel and squirted a little into his hand. It was warm and scented. It smelled like strawberry shortcake. He didn't know why he had chosen that scent, but it had called to him. For some reason as he walked through the isles choosing a gel when he tried to pass this one he couldn't. He so clearly saw the notebook and her that he hadn't been able to walk away. Hell, he hadn't even considered making any other purchase. He had walked from the store with that single item.

He wrapped the base of his cock with his left hand and pumped up and down with his right indulging in the feel of the warm liquid against his skin.

He closed his eyes to savor the feel and imagined it was her wrapped around him, not his hand. He felt her. She was hot and wet, welcoming. He could almost smell her arousal, the musky sweet scent of her heated sex.

He could feel her excitement pouring from her weeping vagina. She wanted him like she had never wanted another man before. He was different, someone special to her, just as she was someone special to him.

She was so tangible to him that he could feel her vaginal muscles clenching around him, tightening, stroking and milking him.

He flicked his thumb across the sensitive head of his cock and groaned, imagined it was her clenching pussy muscles that rubbed the top of his cock. She straddled him, and pumped her hips up and down in excitement. He loved the full honest smile on her face as she rode him. She didn't try to hide her attraction, her arousal, or the satisfaction she felt when they were together. Suddenly on the down take her eyes shut and she groaned. The dissented tips of her full beautiful breasts lightly scrapped against his chest as she moved. He knew that she liked the added friction. Her fat nipples grew larger, more sensitive until she couldn't ignore the sensations coursing through her body that started at her highly responsive nipples. She twisted the engorged buds between her fingers and they both felt her vaginal muscles contract around him.

She whispered breathy loving words into his ears before nipping at his left ear, giving it a light scrapping with her teeth. She told him how good it was to be with him, to have him inside of her. She told him how she loved him, all of him. She gave to him as much as he gave to her. The fingers of one hand held her hip, guided her, giving her support as she rode him. His other hand was nestled in the curls at the apex of her thighs. He found the slick fat nubbin he sought and pressed his thumb against it. Flicked it. And then pinched it.

Suddenly her body stilled and then began bucking. "I'm coming. Oh shit I'm coming", she screamed as her orgasm ripped through her.

Hold on sweetheart. I'm coming with you. Oh God. Oh God I'm coming.
He muffled his groan as he found his release, still feeling her around him.
He opened his eyes to an empty room and felt his solitude. It weighed a ton.
He wiped the white sticky liquid off his chest before fully undressing for a shower.
Unshed tears burned in his eyes as he walked to the bathroom. Tomorrow, tomorrow he was going to meet her, his author. She wasn't just in his dreams, and tomorrow he would face the reality.

* * *

Her

She had seen him today. Again. Today was just another day in an endless cycle of days spent watching him from afar.

She knew every inch of his perfectly sculpted body, from his chestnut locks to his large feet. She knew his voice, could pick it out in a crowd. Whenever she was privileged enough to be near him, when he spoke the deep rough edge of his voice was a balm on her aching soul. She soaked up any and every sight of him simply because she craved him. After all this time he still was her addiction.

Silently she asked herself how long she could go on watching him, wanting him, needing him when it hurt her so very much. Even though every glimpse was a balm it was a double edged word that hurt as much as it soothed for the quick glances only highlighted her loneliness. They made her realize how much and how long she had sought companionship in vain.

She willed herself not to shed the tears, but they were determined to be set free. Only after hearing the click of the lock did she let them fall. Only then did she let the fat silver droplets fall.

Another year, another day, and nothing has changed.

She wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand, as she walked towards her library. She needed comfort and the only arms she saw were the words of the novels that kept the loneliness at bay.

The opulent mahogany bookshelves gleamed in the sunlight. In their shelves sat hundreds of books, but only one caught her eye, her favorite book.

Maybe that's what I need, a magic spell to transport me to a beautiful body, maybe then.

She immediately flipped to her favorite part, sat upon her bed, and read. Halfway through the love scene she stood up from the bed and flipped down the covers before walking to the entertainment system that sat in the corner of bedroom. She pulled out a CD, her favorite R&B singer, knowing fully well he would comfort her like no other.

The singer's soothing vocals would caress her like she dreamed HE would caress her. Her R&B songbird would whisper in her ears the words she longed to hear him say. The soothing singer would be the lover she dreamed he would be.

She turned from the CD player as the music began to return to her bed. The comfort it promised her aching heart beckoned to her. In response, she smiled at it even as the tears fell from her eyes. It whispered loving words, promising to weave a beautiful dream to keep the pain away.

Her movements were smooth and slow, the breath of a striptease. She undressed for her dream weaver, and stood naked and proud before him. She reveled in the feel of the sheets against her bare skin. Black satin, beautiful and luxurious, it cooled her hot skin. Not once had she regretted the costly purchase. The sheets had come to be a souvenir, a reminder of her sensuality. Their presence put her at ease and allowed her to "Just Be", especially at moments

like these when she just needed to dream.

She closed her eyes and let herself float away. Her destiny was not determined, it never was. A whisper, a mist and suddenly she was there, a thousand miles away and in the presence of her fantasy lover.

He walked towards her with long confident strides. His long strong legs ate up the space between them. With every step he took the tingling sensation on her skin intensified. She was feeling warm from the heat and lust that poured off him. The air surrounding them surged with his energy. He stopped less than a foot away from her. The black Stetson he wore masked his face from her view, but she wore no hat to hamper his perusal. A fact that pleased him greatly, she could see the proof in his burning gaze.

He took a slow long drink of her. From head to toe, he admired her. Her cheeks warmed, and her blush deepened when he studied the places in between; he took in the ample breasts, small waist, and wide hips. She fully understood and appreciated her nickname. She had been nicknamed Cola, because her figure resembled that of the classic soda bottle. She was all woman, all his woman, or she would be his by the end of the night.

He took a step and closed the distance between them. She was immediately surrounded by his scent. It was a mixture of sweet hay and clean masculinity. It was pure and unadulterated. It was more arousing than any cologne she had ever come across.

She stared at the kerchief that was tied around his neck. It was moist with his sweat. Idly she wondered if a kiss against his neck, right where his pulse ticked so earnestly would leave a salty taste on her lips and tongue. She ached to find out. She needed to find out. She wanted to drag her tongue against the sensitive flesh of his neck, tasting him, drinking him in, licking every inch of his salty skin. She admitted to herself that she was envious of the kerchief, it was what she wanted to be -- drenched by him, soaked in his essence.

She continued her upward appraisal, waiting to see the face beneath the hat. Her eyes settled on his firm sensual lips, lips that she desired to kiss, lips that were tilted up with amusement. She lifted her hand to his face brushing lightly over the firm soft lips. A swift pink tongue darted out to lick her questing fingertips. His tongue was followed by his teeth, giving her finger a slight nipping. The sharp clasp of teeth against skin rebounded in her pussy. Desire coursed through her, a steady hot stream she felt flow from between her legs. She felt her nipples and vagina respond to his lip action. They tightened in anticipation and need.

He saw the lust in her eyes, the same desire that was mirrored in his and responded. He had never been the kind of man to ask for what he wanted, he simply took what he wanted, and right now he wanted one thing, HER.

His hand snaked out and wrapped around her waist. There would be no more games, no more coy attempts at flirting. He was in the mood for the taking.

He drew her up against him. She fell against him with the full momentum of his force allowing her to feel the hard strength of his chest, the muscular chest that flattened her breasts so that he felt her nipples through the thin fabric of her blouse. She was aroused. He pictured the raised blackberry tips in his mind and groaned. Soon, very soon he would have her firm nipples in his mouth. He would taste them, lick them, suck them until she screamed "No more" and then he would continue until she screamed for more.

He nonchalantly wondered if she could feel the evidence of his arousal through his jeans and chaps. No matter, before the end of the night she would know exactly how he felt. Before the end of the night she would feel every inch of him. A promise he planned to make as pleasurable

as possible for both of them.

He dipped his head to capture her lips. His lips were hot and demanding, intent upon conquering hers. She moaned into his mouth and he felt desire rush into his veins. He had waited so long and it felt so good to feel her lips beneath his. His mouth slanted over her lips and his tongue took advantage of the situation to dart through her open lips.

One large tanned hand slipped beneath the serviceable cotton skirt she wore grazing her thighs as it sought its goal. She parted her legs for him, giving him access to her, to the hot bubbling well that was her core.

She wasn't wearing any panties. He groaned against her lips as his fertile mind pictured her naked beneath her skirt.

Slowly one finger slid into her, measuring the depth of her eagerness. She was wet and tight. He didn't think he could last much longer. He had planned to take her slow, make her crazy with lust, but he wasn't so sure he could accomplish his goal. He was getting burned just touching. His index finger was joined by a second and together they slid in and out of her tight sheath. Closer and closer they brought her to that ledge, that precipice that would bring her release.

She kept her eyes closed even as she let her hands wander down her body. Her legs parted of their own volition and one hand slipped between them. She needed to touch and be touched, but unable to do the former she took consolation in the latter. She would ease her need, her pain, the feeling of loneliness that swam in her veins.

She parted the thick folds of her heated sex. She was wet with desire. The feel of her hand against her nether lips started to tear at the fabric of her reverie, but she steadfastly held on to one thing, his face. The sharp planes of his cheekbones, the long ridge of his nose, the opulence of his firm sensual lips, and the tormented green of his eyes, these were the things she held on to.

As long as she saw his face, she could dream, she could revel in the fantasy.

She ran her forefinger around the tight nub that demanded her attention, and felt her vaginal walls tighten and clench in response. Even the slight touch brought her extreme pleasure. *I'm close, so close.* With the dreams it was always like this. With her reveries in one hand, her other hand worked to bring on that delicious moment of fulfillment. Her finger traveled farther down and rimmed the tight red portal. Surprised by the sensations, the act caused her breath to catch.

She knew even before she touched her clit, milked it, that she would come from the touch. She was standing right at the ledge-- the simple touch would push her over the edge. What surprised her was the intensity of the orgasm. It ripped through her like a raging inferno leaving nothing in its wake untouched. Once again she had been burned, burned by her need.

As soon as her breathing returned to normal, the tears started to fall. The orgasm was great, like all the others it had released some of her sexual tension, but once it had faded it was just one more lonely orgasm at the end of a very long line, and this time, this time she had seen his face even while she came.

Silently she cried herself to sleep accepting the pain that seeing his face brought her, knowing that he never even once saw hers. And he never would, because girls like her only get with guys like him in her stories. Never in real life.

Chapter Two KNOCK, KNOCK

She looked at the blue notebook and willed herself not to kick it from where it lay on the floor. It boldly stared up at her, daring her to pick it up, daring her to acknowledge its presence and what it wasn't. Its blue color was a sharp contrast to the blood red carpet of her bedroom. She had thrown it on the floor in a fit of rage after she had remembered she needed to type up her novella *Sugar Mama*.

Sugar Mama, her latest story, was in her old fabric covered notebook, her precious notebook which the blue, disgustingly plain cardboard covered one was replacing, because she had been stupid enough to lose her story notebook. She had lost the most important, precious item she owned.

The single book held at least a dozen of her short stories, stories that meant everything to her, stories that had emotional and financial implications. She tried not to think about the financial implications of losing the notebook. The royalties she received from her stories paid off her loans and helped finance her graduate education. Without them, well, she only hoped she had enough notes to write her last story, otherwise

Sinclair reached for the blue notebook and then took a quick step back. She was still a little too angry at herself for losing her story book to pick up the replacement. There were only two ways Sinclair knew to release her frustrations. The first method involved a fit or tantrum, and usually by the end an object is broken. The second required a creative process.

Writing was what she normally did when she needed to relieve some tension, but unfortunately, the creative process typically employed was not an option. Anything that involved her picking up the notebook could only end one way, with the notebook more than a little maimed. A little of both option 1 and 2 she thought. Lately her creative process had involved baking or cooking. After taking another step back from the blue notebook Sinclair pivoted, walked out of her bedroom and into the kitchen.

She reached on her tiptoes to pull the recipe binder she had titled "Death by Chocolate" to help her decide what to bake. Immediately she felt a rush of guilt, frustration, and foolishness. Maxine, her editor/agent/friend had asked Sinclair to let her publish "Death by Chocolate" as a cookbook. Sinclair had kindly declined. Maxine had called her a fool. Maxine had also told Sinclair she was foolish for carrying her stories, her bread and butter, in a notebook around with

her. Maxine, her senior by a few years, had lived an exciting life, and had learned a few things. She was therefore smarter than Sinclair and often right when it came to certain things. Sinclair hated it when she was proven right. It meant that she was wrong and the perfectionist in her just couldn't accept that.

Within the pink character flannel covered book she wrote her award winning erotic tales. In her storybook she wrote the short stories. The novel length stories had their own notebooks, only the short stories shared. And now they were gone. Her only hope was that who ever found the notebook simply discarded it.

The thought of anyone reading her stories oddly enough made her uncomfortable. They were meant to be read once published, but not before. Not before her personal stamp had been wiped off the stories. The published texts didn't have her handwritten, fingerprints, breath all over them. But her notebook did. The thought of anyone reading her stories, the ones she had personally written, had her so uncomfortable she actually felt the urge to throw up.

Even before Maxine had voiced the concern, Sinclair knew that she was going to lose the book simply because it was that damn important. It made sense. Of course she would lose the only thing she couldn't lose. It was only a matter of when she would lose the book, and she had hoped that would occur long after she had sent in her drafts to Maxine. It had already been a week since she last saw the book, and since she wasn't counting on it showing up at her doorstep, she considered it gone forever. Gone, along with all of her short stories. Thankfully she kept hand written rough drafts of everything she wrote. Rewriting the stories would simply be a tedious exercise. One she wasn't up to doing quite yet.

Sinclair figured she would begin rewriting "Tied and Tempting" after she finished baking her secret recipe triple chocolate cake. Definitely not before, the cake was simply a must. Even though the cake was a must she simply didn't need. It hadn't escaped her that her always luscious figure was becoming a little too well endowed.

Her hips were getting wider and her breasts, well, they were straining to fill in her 36DD bras. It was either bra shopping or running. Something had to give.

It was hard enough finding pretty bras in her size. She couldn't afford to go up a size. Tomorrow, tomorrow she would go running. She simply had to.

* * *

He lifted his hand to knock and then dropped it. Repeated the procedure, and when he got the same result he began to pace in a small, tight circle. He simply couldn't knock. What the hell. Did it make sense that even knocking seemed difficult? He couldn't even bring his knuckles to rasp against the wooden frame of her door.

What if after he got himself to knock she wasn't there? And what if she was? How the hell was he supposed to talk to her and what the hell would he say? Hey I found your book and am now infatuated with you. So how bout Friday night, are you free? We could go to dinner, catch a movie, and maybe if I behave well you'll let me get between your sheets so I could make all my erotic fantasies a reality.

He could just see how well that would go over. She would definitely label him a stalker, which he was. His family would die of shame when they found out he had a restraining order against him. That thought brought a smile to his face.

Jackson was so preoccupied with his pacing that he collided with a man trying to vigorously avoid him. He almost laughed out loud. If the noticeable sweat that was dripping from the man's bald head by the gallon was any indication, the short, stout man was deathly

afraid of him. *As he should be, I am losing my mind. And it's all HER fault.* At that moment Jackson admitted to himself what the reason was that he couldn't bring himself to knock. He was afraid. He was plain old scared shitless.

The author of the stories he'd read in the notebook was the woman of his dreams and he was about to meet her. She appeared to be everything he wanted in a woman. She was intelligent, artistic, and incredible sensual, not to mention sexual. But that was on paper. What if

God, don't let her be ugly.

Sinclair almost dropped the mixing bowl at the sound of the persistent, loud knocking. She strolled to the door wondering if she had enough baking cocoa for the recipe. So preoccupied was she that she didn't bother to check to see who it was through the peep hole. An act she was notorious for.

She couldn't help herself. She simply stared at the man before her.

At first thought she figured she imagined him. She continued to think he was a figment of her imagination when he gave her his infamous slow sexy smile. The same smile she had coveted from afar. He looked her up and down ... twice and then his smile grew wider. Definitely a dream she thought. Only when he opened his mouth to say, "Hi I'm Jackson. I found your notebook ... and I uh, wanted to return it to you," did she stop to consider the fact that she wasn't daydreaming. She spent a lot of her time dreaming. Dreams and fantasies were what made up her short stories and novels.

She was used to reveries. She wasn't used to this. She didn't know the name of her fantasy man and in none of her dreams did he ever bring her a book, let alone her erotic storybook.

Jackson had to remind himself to close his mouth. His author was someone he knew. Actually he didn't really know her, but he had seen her on campus numerous times. He suspected that she was even in a few of his classes.

He had never really thought of her. She wasn't in his circle of people, but he wouldn't mind being a part of her circle. He wouldn't mind being in her circle, and that thought brought to mind being inside her circle, sliding into her wet, tight circle. He stifled a groan as the image entered his mind. If he wasn't careful he was going to embarrass himself all over her doorstep.

The woman in front of him was on the short side at about five foot three. She was all curves with large high breasts and wide hips. She had a slight belly, a pouch that he actually found kind of attractive, but the most attractive part of her was her face. Her eyes were a cup of sweet warm chocolate rimmed by jet black long lashes and tilted upwards slightly, giving them an exotic quality. She had a small, cute, almost button like nose. Tinted with the softest red, her lips were a lush cupid's bow that promised endless erotic kisses.

For one heart stopping moment Jackson thought she was going to slam the door in his face. She was going to either do that or become ill. If he had asked her what she wanted to do, Sinclair's response would have been both. She had imagined so many things about the man before her. She had imagined him as a knight, a rancher, hell, even a modern day prince charming charging her doorstep and begging her forgiveness for ignoring her. Never in her life had she imagined Blue Jeans finding her story book. The only way the situation could get worse was if he had actually read any part of the story book. That thought was a notion Sinclair could not handle. She turned and ran straight for the porcelain god, the toilet.

"Are you ok?" he called from the doorway. *Oh God I didn't lock the door.* She tried to

push down the nausea she was feeling. She had to face him. *I can't let him see me like this.*

The image of Blue Jeans holding back her hair as she threw up kept her stomach in check. NO way was that happening. Her breakfast suddenly didn't want to present itself all over her bathroom floor.

"I'm fine," Sinclair said as she walked out the bathroom. Jackson had backed out of the doorway to give her room when he saw Sinclair coming out. He can't even stand to be near me she thought as he moved from the bathroom. She ignored the pain that lashed though her chest and instead focused on the issue at hand--her book had been found. She ignored the thought that pointed out who had found the notebook.

"Are you sure you're fine?" he asked unable to ignore the discomfort and anguish plainly written across her face.

She looked up to find him, Jackson, looking at her with the full depth of his sea green eyes. *Oh God they're green.* Sinclair had never been close enough to him to find out his eye color. She had always admired Blue Jeans from afar. The distance kept her safe. This, him here, beside her was definitely not safe. Not safe at all. He was more akin to a ticking bomb. He was going to blow her carefully constructed façade to pieces. His presence made her burn, and the loneliness she felt every time she saw him all the more acute. She had to get him out of there as soon as possible.

"Do you really have my notebook?" she asked unwilling to believe it was true.

When he continued to look at her, look her up and down, Sinclair wondered if she had actually spoken the question. Then without speaking he reached into the book bag he had on his back and pulled out her notebook, character fabric and all.

Damn! She had hoped against hope that he would pull out the wrong book. But that was definitely hers. Bloody book.

He stretched out his hand to give her the book. *Such big beautiful hands, manly hands. Capable hands.* Her treacherous mind immediately imagined the pleasure those hands could give her. She imagined them on her breasts, dancing along her skin, entering her body, teasing the sensitive flesh of her vagina, and on her clit ... Oh what they could do to her clit. *Damn his hands.* When she didn't immediately take the notebook from him, Jackson cocked his head to the side. It was at that moment that Sinclair realized she was standing in front of him, daydreaming like an idiot.

She snatched the notebook out of his hand and slammed her door shut.

Jackson blinked at the sight of her running away from him. At least she's active, he thought. He took a step to go after her, and then stopped himself. The last place he needed to be was with her inside of her bedroom. Jackson knew exactly how he was feeling. The same way he had been feeling for the past week, the week he had her notebook. He was as randy as a Billy goat and built like a stallion. No good could come of him following her into her bedroom.

His hands itched to reach out and touch her, to grab her, and act out every last love scene she had written in the notebook. He could spend hours on her breasts alone, and hell, he wasn't even a breast man. He *had* been a leg man.

He knew that it wouldn't be rape if he followed her into her bedroom, and that was simply because he wouldn't stop kissing, licking, biting, or sucking until she begged for it. The hardness of his cock attested to this. Ian Jackson Phillips had every intention of fucking the shit out of the petite author, but first he had to find out her name.

Chapter Three HELLO BLUE JEANS

“Hey, what’s your name? I don’t think you gave it to me,” he called from the living room, before walking into the adjacent kitchen. Sinclair knew where he stood because she could hear every one of his loud clear footsteps.

All Sinclair heard was muffled speech. She could hear his steps but she couldn’t hear his words. She was so acutely aware of where he stood because she didn’t want to face him, and she feared he was headed straight for her bedroom.

She bit her lip, thinking of all the things that could go wrong if he opened her door.

Oh Lord ...

The last place she expected to find Blue Jeans was outside her bedroom door, and if he opened that door and entered her room. Well she couldn’t be held responsible for what happened. She was human after all and no woman would pass up the chance to get that man in her bed.

He definitely needed to stay outside her bedroom, away from her. She didn’t think an attempted rape would go down well. Hell, who was she kidding, knowing how much she wanted him, she suspected that the rape would be successful despite his obvious physical strength. She wanted him that badly and that was not a good thing.

She definitely didn’t need him here. Not now ... hell to be honest, not ever ... *As a matter of fact I don’t want to be here. At this point Pluto seems like a nice place or a hole deep beneath the earth’s surface.* All I need is a hole, she thought as she looked up at the ceiling seeking some kind of guidance. “Damn him,” she said softly, afraid he might be able to hear her, even though she couldn’t hear him.

Right now, in her apartment, wondering God knows what about her sanity was Blue Jeans, the man she had based every male lover’s character she had created on. He was her blueprint for the perfect man. BLUE JEANS was in her apartment. Sinclair had written each character to have a different name, face, and attitude, but when she pictured them, each and every last one, she saw him, Blue Jeans. When it came down to it they were all Blue.

According to him, his name was Jackson. A fact she hadn’t known until he told her. One of the reasons Sinclair had named him Blue Jeans was because she hadn’t been willing to draw attention to herself by asking someone what his name was. The other reason was that whenever she saw him, he was wearing a sexy, butt hugging pair of blue jeans that seemed made for him. She felt sorry for every other man who had bought the same pair of jeans he wore, because none of them could compare to him. The man had an incredible walk. You couldn’t help but notice his luscious ass.

As she sat on her bed Sinclair wondered how many times she had dreamed of reaching out, grabbing his beautiful ass, and giving it a good firm squeeze. The perfect ass in question was in her living room. With her left hand, she reached out and pinched herself. There was no helping it. She had to figure out if she was dreaming. She pinched herself again just for good measure. Some dreams were very realistic and she didn't want to wake up in the middle of a really good scene.

Turns out I'm awake, she thought when nothing changed after the second pinch.

Deciding to deal with the issue at hand Sinclair walked out of her room and almost collided into the six foot two inch wall of flesh named Jackson.

For a few seconds she simply stared at the chest before her, unable to comprehend what had stopped her movement. She was absolutely dumbstruck by the firmness of his body. So many visions went through her brain that she felt like her mind was the back room of a sleazy sex shop. It had an endless array of sex scenes playing. Once she realized she was staring at his feet, large feet, she looked up to find him watching her.

Oh hell, she thought, the bastard knows exactly what I'm thinking and then he smiled at her. Jackson gave her a slow, heated smile that promised so many sensual nights that Sinclair lost her thinking abilities.

She blinked up at him just a little confused. That smile definitely said 'Any time'. He was giving her The Look and damn it if he kept looking at her like that she was either going to rip out his eyes or drag him to her bed where she would handcuff him and enact her every fantasy. Either way she was going to jail, but the latter ... she definitely preferred the latter as the basis for her sentencing. She could handle jail knowing she'd had her way with him.

"You bake," Jackson asked. The heat in his eyes made her gasp. She was so shocked by the sight of arousal in his emerald gaze that it took her a moment to process his words.

"Yes, it calms me down," she muttered in response.

"Really?"

She nodded in acknowledgment as she walked to the kitchen.

"Call me next time you're feeling ... frustrated. I just found out I love chocolate. I love the way it tastes on my tongue and goes down smooth. I have to admit that when I get a really good piece of it I can eat for hours."

He dramatically sniffed the fragrant air. "That smells delicious. What is it?" he asked as he followed her to the oven.

Sinclair didn't know what to think. He couldn't possibly mean sexually frustrated, and when he said chocolate, well he sure as hell didn't mean me, Sinclair thought as she looked down at the mocha skin on the back of her arm.

"Triple Chocolate Cake," she said nonchalantly over her shoulder as she grabbed her oven mitts from the drawer before her. Well, it was as nonchalant as she could do under the circumstances. Blue Jeans, the man of her dreams, was standing behind her.

"What's your name author?"

She ignored the author comment, and replied, "Sinclair Adams."

"Sinclair. It suits you. It's pretty," he said, his rich baritone voice thickening.

Suddenly her name did sound pretty, at least when he said it, and what the hell did Mr. Beautiful mean by its suits you.

"So Sinclair, you're a student at Hopkins."

"Yes," she said as she poured the batter out the mixing pan into the brownie pan. Got to keep my hands busy she thought. That way they won't reach out and grab ... something.

Sinclair figured that as long as she focused on baking she wouldn't make an ass out of herself by speaking-- or to be more precise by asking him to fuck her. Hard and deep. *Dear God ... he is definitely going to need a restraining order if he doesn't leave soon. No, soon is too late. Now.*

"What year are you?"

"I'm a grad student," she said automatically trying to think of anything but the man standing next to her and what she wanted him to do with her, to her.

"I'm a senior," he responded.

I know that, I've been watching you for four years, ever since I got here. I finished a Masters and am now working on my Ph.D. Wow, stalker!

"So how do you like Hopkins," he asked when she didn't say anything.

"Why are you still here?" she asked unable to stand the tension his presence was creating. The strain was running through her veins, bubbling up through her pores, and making her want to scream. Instead she said, "Thank you for dropping off the book, but don't feel obligated to stay. I understand that you've got more important things to do. You know things to do, people to meet," she said over her shoulder before she placed the batter in the heated oven.

His voice was taut when he spoke. "I don't know why I am here. Maybe I want to get to know you, see what you're about. This is a small school and yet I've never really met you."

He wants to get acquainted with the smutty author. Once again the thought occurred to her that he had read her storybook, so she asked "Did you go through my notebook?"

"No," he said emphatically. Sinclair knew he was lying.

"What's your focus of study?"

"Creative Writing and English."

"I'm Pre-Law."

The questions stopped just as randomly as they had begun. The silence dragged on between them. Once Sinclair placed the pan in the oven, she had nothing to occupy herself with, so she stared at the oven, while he stood against the fridge watching her.

"Who is Blue Jeans?"

The question was low and soft and yet it had boomed through the room. Jackson could not have shocked her more if he had slapped her.

"You," she thought and then hesitated, waiting for a response, afraid she had spoken out loud.

When the needles on her skin prickled to the point of actual physical discomfort, she turned to him and broke the silence that left her tense. "I thought you said you didn't read it?"

Instead of answering her, Jackson looked at her sheepishly. He knew he had violated her privacy and he wasn't exactly sorry for his actions. Sinclair was able to picture him as a little child caught doing something improper. Her picture was completed when his cheeks turned pink. He was blushing.

"So does your boyfriend like your vivid imagination?"

Sinclair heated at the word 'vivid'. He had definitely read her storybook.

"I don't have a boyfriend," she said. Her words were a whisper that barely breached her full lips.

"Now ain't that a shame." His words were wry and lit with amusement and arousal. At least her mind was processing it as arousal. It was probably just wishful thinking.

"This guy that you're seeing, the one who inspires you, does he kiss you like your lips are the only lips he wants to taste."

“No,” she whispered.

He took a step forward.

“Does he touch your hips, your tits, your clit like your body is the only body he wants?”

“No,” she breathed out.

He took another step forward.

“Does he make your body ache? Does he make your pussy ache? Does he make you wish he could fill you with every inch that he’s got? Does he make you wet?”

“Yes.” Her mouth was dry and she felt like she swallowed sand. Tears burned beneath her lids. She wasn’t even sure when she had closed them. She just knew that she could not watch the man of her dreams rip her reality, her emotions, and her dreams about. It was terrifying hearing the words spoken from his lips.

“Does he satisfy you? Has he ever touched you?”

“No.” The solitary word was leaden and cruel. It was the truth. Blue Jeans had never touched her, never even noticed her, and here he was standing before her.

He took another step. “Why not?” his growled out, anger and disdain for the man in question laced his voice, deepened his tone.

Pain and rejection burned in her chest. They were a thundering heated ball of emotion. *Why not?* Because he doesn’t know I exist. Because he doesn’t care that I care. Because he doesn’t know that I love him with all that I am.

Suddenly her eyelids sprung open, giving him a glimpse of the pain and anger that filled her soul. “I don’t have a boyfriend, and I know what you’re thinking and no, I don’t sleep around. I am not a slut. As a matter of fact I am proud to say I’m a virgin. People, and yes that includes women, are naturally sexual and I’m not going to deny my nature.” There she thought as she crossed her arms over her breast. Let him say something nasty about that.

“Why?” The word came out of his mouth without his realization. Sinclair could tell from his face that the question had caught Jackson off guard.

“Is your question why am I still a virgin or why don’t I sleep around? Never mind, same question, right?”

Jackson nodded his head in agreement. Sinclair looked Jackson right in his oceanic eyes when she answered his question. *I don’t understand why he wants to know, but . . .* “I suppose it’s because I haven’t found someone willing to do anything about it. My virginity is what I mean.”

“Are you waiting for Mr. Blue Jeans?”

Blue Jeans? Am I waiting for you? Sinclair thought about lying to him and saying no, but the thought occurred to her that she didn’t have the right to. Besides it wasn’t like he really cared she thought.

“Yes, I’m waiting for someone special,” she said. The word caught in her throat. She was forced to cough it out, admit her need.

Slowly, oh so slowly he unbuttoned his oxford shirt. Sinclair watched with wide eyes. She watched the first button slide through its buttonhole. It seemed to take forever for it to reach the other side. Next came the second and then the third.

She dug her nails into the palm of her fist hoping the pain would wake her from her daydream. It didn’t work. Instead her dream progressed. Jackson was not only now standing in front of her without his oxford shirt, he was trying to pull his singlet over his head.

Dear God in heaven. They were going to have to lock her in a padded room for this fantasy. Her mind had definitely gone overboard.

There was no doubt about it. She was going to start drooling if she didn't get her runaway mind back on track right now. The man was probably staring at her right now wondering how she had gone to La La land in the middle of the conversation. She needed help. She needed it now otherwise she was going to have a long list of regrets.

She pinched herself. She dug her nails into the sensitive skin of her upper arms and clamped down as she prayed that the pain would wake her from her reverie. Nothing happened. He was still standing in front of her without a shirt, totally beautifully bare-chested.

Unable to comprehend what was going on Sinclair looked at Jackson's face seeking an explanation. She found none. Instead she saw just how beautiful Blue Jeans really was up close and personal.

He was too beautiful for words, too beautiful for reality to be exact, which could be explained by the fact that this ... this gorgeous man was not undressing in front of her eyes. She just thought he was.

His gold lashes fluttered at her as he blinked. The hard planes of his face were accompanied by a strong firm chin. The little dent in his chin seemed to highlight the strength of the man. But of all his features, it was his full lips that caught her attention. They were just short of pouty and tinted pink. They were shaped for kisses, long, slow, wet kisses and right now ... right now they were shaping words.

"Sweetheart, say something?"

What was he talking about? When had he said something? And when the hell did this fantasy become reality?

"Huh?" Oh God, she thought as she let out a full groan. One that started out at the soles of her feet so deep was her embarrassment. It was either hi or huh. Those were the only two words her brain could form in the presence of a bare-chested Greek god.

It was official. She was an idiot.

"I don't ... don't ... suppose I could ... I could be a poor substitute for Mr. Blue Jeans." He stuttered out. "What I'm asking you is can I be your fantasy man?"

Chapter Four COLDEST DISH SERVED

In the middle of London's most exclusive neighborhood, Madeline Phillips stared at the man who was both her confidant and employee. Her first thought was that she had misunderstood her butler. He couldn't have said what he said. Then Madeline looked into his eyes and saw the apprehension and disgust there.

She had definitely heard him right. Only one woman could put that look in Luis's eyes. Her butler rarely showed any emotion. Only his old employer Daniela could cause him to show

that strong flash of acrid emotion.

Daniela Davenport, tall, lithe, young and blonde, was her husband's latest mistress. *Your dead husband's latest mistress*, she thought correcting herself.

The question was what did she want?

Madeline walked into her library and flashed her most serene smile. It took much effort to keep the plastic smile plastered to her face. The sight of Daniela always made her stomach heave with the intense effort to dislodge its contents. The woman made her sick to her stomach. She always had, even before Madeline realized she was sleeping with her husband Maxwell.

Where Madeline was cool, Daniela was fire. Pretty and petite many didn't quite notice the inferno of emotion that her tight, little body enclosed.

Daniela was on a good day dangerous, and judging by the malicious smile she flashed Madeline as she stood from her seat, today was not a good day. Her collagen perfected red lips turned up into a greater parody of the greeting when Madeline stared at her in cool indifference to her presence.

Apparently Daniela had expected a tornado of emotion from the wife of the man she had been sleeping with. But then again being the southern debutante she was, Madeline always was a model of cool perfection.

"What can I do for you Mrs. Davenport?" Madeline purposely asked knowing that the use of her married name would remind them both that only one woman in the room had violated her marriage vows. Adultery was not among the many wrongs Madeline had committed.

She almost smiled at the irony of her situation. Almost.

Maxwell had been too self conscious to believe that she had been faithful to him during their marriage. In retaliation of her assumed transgressions, he had gone out and slept with every single woman he could find.

And so now three months after his death she had to deal with his latest whore. His latest in a very long line of whores.

She almost felt sorry for Daniela. Her relationship with Maxwell had been borne out of vengeance and jealousy. Daniela thought Maxwell had loved her. She believed the proof lay in the fact that he had died in her arms, in her bed. But the truth was her whole relationship with the older man had been a malicious attempt to hurt Madeline. He knew that Madeline disliked Daniela strongly and so he had pursued her. Maxwell had always acted under his rule of "putting salt in the wound."

Unfortunately, Daniela had been foolish enough to believe that she had won the upper hand against her nemesis. She had fallen hook, line, and sinker for Maxwell's lies.

Life took one on funny twists and turns. There was a time when Maxwell had loved her.

My look how far the mighty fall, she thought as she picked up the phone. It seemed that Maxwell had sent his little mistress to deliver his message.

She had plans to make. The first of which was a flight. She needed to book a flight to Baltimore.

Later that night Madeline reread Maxwell's letter and was surprised to see that she had missed a very important fact.

He had hated her for many years. His revenge was the coldest dish ever served.

The letter had been written ten years ago.

Chapter Five
A FLAME IN THE KITCHEN

Sinclair couldn't help it. She couldn't contain her amusement, and so she laughed. The bubble started deep in her chest and rumbled out her mouth spilling forth, hot and pungent like the lava from a volcano. It was not a happy laugh. It was bitter and laced with so much pain it would have been reasonable for tears to accompany it.

She couldn't have written it better, here was the man of the dreams, literally asking her if he could make love to her. He was asking her if he could be the one. Of course he wasn't serious, real life just doesn't happen that way. When was the last time anyone had heard of a real life Cinderella. It would be a cold day in hell before gorgeous Blue Jeans actually wanted her.

"You, buddy, have a sick sense of humor. If you expect me to believe you would actually find me," Sinclair said as she waved both her hands in front of her, bringing attention to her voluptuous curves, "attractive you have me pegged for a dumb-ass," she told Jackson as she walked towards him.

She jabbed her index finger into his hard chest to emphasize her point. "You read my storybook. You know how I feel. You know damn well that you are Blue Jeans and the fact that you are pulling this cruel joke on me just shows how depraved a human being you are. You are not the kind of man I thought you were. I thought you were something special. I thought you were something great. I thought you...."

Before she knew it Sinclair felt the cold plastic of the refrigerator door against her back and the hot warmth of Jackson's muscular chest against hers. She was pinned between the two equally hard surfaces. Above her head Jackson held her hands together in one large fist.

She stared up at him wondering when the hell that happened and how was it possible that he held both her wrists in his palm. His palms couldn't be that large, could they? And then she pictured them, she pictured his large hands, palming her equally large breasts, pinching the turgid nipples.

She stifled the moan that dared to escape.

"I'm Blue Jeans?" he asked from above her, afraid to believe what he had heard, afraid to believe his luck. He didn't have to compete with the seemingly perfect Blue Jeans for her affection. He was Blue Jeans?

"Yes," she mumbled, ashamed of her anger, her need, her desire for him, and how vulnerable it made her. Just hearing him speak, feeling his moist breath rain down on her from where he towered above her set her skin on fire. She was doomed. There was no help for it.

He was Blue Jeans. He needed it to be true so badly he couldn't believe his ears. He needed it to be true so badly he might have just imagined her response.

"Say it louder."

"Yes, damn it," she screamed. "Are you satisfied?"

He released her and took a small step back placing just enough room between their hot

bodies that he could put his hands between them. His calloused palms grazed her tense shoulders relaxing them with their innate heat, before circling her fragile neck to ease out the anxiety there, and then finally they reached her stubborn chin that did not want to acknowledge her apprehension. Jackson tipped her head up so that Sinclair was looking him in the eyes when he responded. "Not yet," he said his sea green eyes darkened to jade by lust.

Oh God, he was serious. Hope the Devil's got a winter coat, she thought before his lips descended to hers.

His lips were petal soft against hers. The kiss was a whisper of lips dancing. Still he could taste the texture of her lips, the soft ridges and plump contours of her succulent mouth. He slid his lips against hers experimentally liking the fission of sensation that the friction created. Looking to deepen the sensation for them both he tentatively touched her lips with his hot moist tongue.

Kissing her was like kissing spring. She tasted fresh and sweet, she was devoid of bitterness and left a pleasing taste on his tongue, a taste he wanted more of. There was sweet nectar buried deep within her and he was determined to find it.

Jackson had promised himself only the briefest touch of lips against lips. He did not want to overwhelm his beautiful author. He had no desire to scare her off, but he found himself unable to pull away from her. Her taste was too intoxicating, her touch too inviting to ignore.

Even with the delicate touch she knew he was filled with desire, but he was holding it at bay, afraid to scare her with his need, afraid that the lust that threatened to madden him would leave her cowering in fear. That knowledge, the cautious needy care with which he approached her, drove Sinclair crazy. She raised her hand to his head to pull off the baseball cap he wore. She ran her fingers through his chestnut locks and then moaned. His hair was silkier than she had ever dreamed it could be. He was perfection. Her perfection.

Jackson pulled back from Sinclair to look at her face. Her eyes were low lidded, heavy with desire.

"You look good enough to eat," he spoke against her lips before sealing the words with a kiss. Jackson found her lips open upon impact. His tongue darted between her luscious lips to lick the roof of her mouth. He felt the hard ridges and sweet softness of her mouth. Her hands tightened in his hair. She was pleased. Sinclair shifted her head to deepen the kiss, and sucked Jackson's tongue deep into her mouth, where she suckled it.

At the feel of Sinclair's suckling mouth on his tongue, the leash Jackson held around his lust snapped. He lowered his hands to raise her to his level. Sinclair felt Jackson's hands cupping her ass and shivered at the intimate touch.

They were so close to that spot, that spot were she needed him the most. If he moved his fingers just a little The delicious thought was enough to start another quiver in her.

"Wrap your legs around my waist."

She dimly heard his words from behind the lusty haze his lips had spun. She crossed her legs at the ankles against Jackson's lower back and was instantly aware of how close the change in position brought them. They were now groin to groin, chest to chest, mouth to mouth. The sensation had her feeling delirious with its intensity.

She tentatively rubbed her body against his and moaned into his mouth as the delicious feeling of friction brought pleasure to all of her erogenous zones that touched him. From head to toe she felt the tingle of pure sexual bliss running against her skin, bursting in her nipples and along her vaginal walls.

"Do it again," he groaned into her mouth. The words were hot and moist as they entered

her.

She complied and this time they groaned in unison.

Jackson walked them to the island that stood in the middle of the room with slow, steady steps. He stood before the kitchen island and shifted until he was able to place Sinclair atop the table. Two steps and he stood between her open legs.

Jackson ran his fingers through Sinclair's thick ebony hair. He wrapped the wispy silken strands in his hands, before looking at her face. Before watching the emotions play across her face. First he saw shock, then fear, and finally need.

"I need you too. I want you so badly it hurts physically and emotionally," Jackson whispered into her ear. To emphasize his point he rubbed his bulging erection against her. Her mound quivered in response.

"Raise your arms," Jackson told her before lifting her tank top above her head. He stared hungrily at her breasts. The full ripeness of her breasts peaked out of her white demi style bra cups.

"White looks so beautiful on your skin."

"My skin?" she said, bewildered by the intensity in his voice.

"Yes your skin. I love your skin and its deep mahogany tones."

She snorted at the statement before she thought about it. Jackson tipped her face up so that Sinclair was looking him in the eye, before he spoke. "You are perfect."

The intensity of his gaze struck her deeply. She wanted to believe him. She wanted to believe him with all of her soul, but it was so hard to trust, to fall that quickly, that deeply for someone who was suddenly all too very real and human, and humans hurt. They disappointed you or worse you disappointed them.

"It took you long enough to notice," Sinclair said laughing off the moment, hoping that amusement would cool his heated penetrating gaze.

Jackson unsnapped Sinclair's bra to free her breasts to his gaze. "I have every intention of making up for lost time," he whispered across her breasts as he lowered his head.

He blew against her breasts and watched Sinclair's chocolate nipples tighten in reaction. He lightly licked the tip of her left nipple. The touch was light, barely there. It was a whisper of a lick just strong enough for her to acknowledge her need for more. Something harder. Something stronger. Something deeper.

"Tease," she said accusingly.

He gave her a wicked smile that made her heart stop. Then he took her right nipple into his mouth. She watched as the dark nubbin disappeared into the hot moist enclave that was his mouth. Sinclair almost passed out from the exquisite feel of his mouth.

She watched Jackson suckle her breast. She watched her sensitive nipple escape into the suckling pressure of his lips and the pleasure she saw on his face had her gasping for breath. He was close, so very close to her, physically and emotionally.

He closed his eyes to relish the moment and moaned against her breast. The sound vibrated across her sensitized skin. Her fantasy man, Blue Jeans, was suckling her nipple like he was hungry.

"Oh God."

As Jackson sucked on her right nipple, he played with her left, pinching, pulling, and teasing. She felt her vagina react to his mouth. With each pull of his lips the coil of desire between her legs tightened more. Each pinch, each pull, each teasing movement of his fingers was felt in her vagina. Sinclair's sheath contracted hungrily in response, grasping for something

that was not there, something that it wanted and needed desperately.

Jackson's mouth disengaged from Sinclair's nipple with a popping sound that sounded oddly pleasant to her. He ran his hand over her legs from knee to upper thigh, and then further. Jackson pulled down her matching bikini style panties and then widened her legs farther apart. Jackson took a step back and marveled at the scene before him.

Sinclair sat atop her kitchen island naked except for a deliciously demure yellow skirt with her legs spread far apart, open for him.

She watched as the bikini panty he held disappeared in the back pockets of his jeans. "What are you doing?" she lazily asked, the haze of lust too much for truly penetrate.

"A souvenir to remember our first time together," he said.

"Our first time?"

"Oh yeah I plan on sticking around until you're done with me. I'm not leaving a moment sooner."

"Never ... I'll never be done with you," she said before a chuckle escaped. Oh the things she wanted to do with this perfect man.

"I want to touch you," she said. It was oddly stimulating to know that he was clothed while she was naked except for her deceptively demure skirt.

Slowly he unbuttoned his denims drawing out the movement, before slowly pulling down his zipper, loving the fact that with each moment her eyes grew darker and darker. She was falling deeper in the passionate whirlpool he was spinning. Finally his jeans were unzipped. She only had to wait for him to take them off.

Please God let my heart be strong. Just let me survive long enough to see him naked.

Unable to stand Jackson's tortuous love play, Sinclair grabbed the waist of his jeans and boxer briefs and pulled them down in one fast move. Finally her eyes were able to feast on the bounty that was his chiseled body.

She dipped her head to lick at the flat head of his slumbering nipple. It immediately responded, waking beneath her flicking tongue. Jackson groaned and tightened his hold on Sinclair's ebony strands, silently imploring her to do it again. Never one to deny anyone their wish her tongue snaked out to touch the swollen nub before lavishing the same attention to his other nipple.

She tasted the salty sheen of his skin as she took nibbling bits of his sculpted chest.

Wanting, needing to taste her mouth again, Jackson pulled Sinclair's face from his chest to capture her lips in a bruising, heated, open mouthed kiss.

As she lifted her head for his kiss, her hands drifted down, running through the line of tawny hairs that narrowed to that magnificent cock she had glimpsed earlier. Finally after what felt like forever her small delicate hands reached their goal and wrapped around the thick base of his hard shaft.

"Shit," he groaned into her neck as he braced his forehead against hers, seeking support.

Damn her hands felt so good on him, like he knew they would. They were delicate and thorough. Her little thumb ran across the head of his penis stopping at the little slit and rubbed the bead of pre-cum that had gathered there around the full head.

He almost passed out at the feeling of her touching him so intimately. He felt like he stood between heaven and hell knowing he wanted her to continue, knowing he wanted her to stop because if she didn't there wouldn't be much of this game to play.

"Sinclair, sweetheart, have mercy on me," he gasped against her lips.

Moist breath hit moist breath. They were breathing the same air, living on the same

sustenance. The closeness of the movement, the closeness of their physical union was more than sexual.

"But I haven't tasted you," she responded and watched amazed at his body, his cock further augmented before leaking out another drop of pre-cum. She wanted to taste it so badly her chest hurt.

Her words hit him like blows to the chest. Immediately he imagined her perfect lips wrapped around him, taking him deep in her throat, swallowing his cum, taking every last drop and he promised himself that the moment would come.

"Later sweetheart, I promise, but I can't wait much longer if you keep it up."

"Fine," she said and more than just a hint of insolence tinged her voice. She was a child who had been denied a great toy.

Jackson stared into Sinclair's eyes as he played his hand over her dark mound. Her ebony curls were wet. She wanted him, she wanted him almost as much as he wanted her. Immediately she dropped her eyes at the feel of his touch. "Look at me, Sin." Shaky eyes met his, and widened when he ran one finger down the seam of her nether lips.

"You're not wet."

"Like hell I'm not," she said heated.

He gave a hoarse chuckle at her statement. "You're not wet enough. I want you so wet that you ... moisten those beautiful lips of yours, and then I'm going to make out with you, then and only then."

Jackson said the words so calmly, uttered the words so smoothly that she wondered if he understood what he was saying, or better yet what he was doing to her. Even as he spoke to her, Sinclair felt herself getting wetter, and thanked God. The sooner she got soaked, the sooner she could 'make out' with Jackson and she desperately wanted to feel those firm lips on her, against her, his tongue inside of her.

He tightly gripped her thighs and flexed his hands, almost massaging the smooth skin beneath his fingers. He marveled at the strength and thickness of the muscles. Jackson replaced his admiring hands with his more enamored mouth, kissing the inside of her right thigh from knee to upper thigh, stopping just short of Sinclair's vulva. Before moving on to her other thigh he lightly kissed her quivering mound. Uncontrollable shivers broke out across Sinclair's body. She felt like she was dying a most beautiful, exquisite death that would leave her reborn.

"Dear God," she moaned as he lightly licked at her thigh. The feel of Jackson sucking on the ultra sensitive skin of her upper thigh was driving her insane. Sinclair wanted Jackson and she wanted him now.

As difficult as the task was, Sinclair found herself focused enough to pull Jackson's hungry face from between her thighs. He lifted his head ready to question her. The look on Jackson's face left her speechless. Sinclair felt her heart explode with joy. His lips were red and wet from the moist kisses he had given her thighs, but it was the sight of the desire and hunger she saw in his eyes that left her without words. He wanted her with as much force as she wanted him.

Finally she spoke. "I don't know how long I can wait. I'm not a naturally patient woman."

"I can't wait either," he said before dipping his head to oblige them both.

He licked the seam of her nether lips before parting the slick folds. One index finger lightly pressed against her slick nub. Sinclair shivered and moaned in response. Jackson's tongue darted out then to admire her flesh. Ardently, he licked at her clitoris bringing her closer to the

release she sought.

Jackson shifted and lowered his face. He had a new objective, with his tongue he rimmed her shiny red portal. Thick cream leaked out of her pussy, thick cream he couldn't stop tasting. She was tangy and sweet. Pure perfection.

"Oh God. Yes."

Round and round he licked, sending electric messages that traveled through her vaginal walls. Sinclair knew she was close. She could feel the tension in every inch of her body. Even her feet were arched in anticipation.

"More. I need more," she said breathless.

Jackson inserted one finger into her tight channel, slowly, so he could savor the feeling. "Shit." She was hot and wet. *God, she feels good.* At an even slower pace than he had entered the finger, he withdrew it, and then sank it in deeper. Jackson felt her vaginal muscles clenching to hold him. They tightened around his finger in furious need.

He wrapped his lips around the engorged bud and sucked on her clit as he pumped his finger in and out of her, imagining it was his cock plunging her depths. He increased or slowed his rhythm, adjusting his pace to bring Sinclair the greatest amount of pleasure. He felt her pour her delicious nectar from her core and he knew he had to have more. He lapped at the juice coming from her, wanting and needing to lick every last drop. The taste of her pussy intoxicated him. Round and round he licked her clit before lapping at the juices that came pouring out of her channel. She was so fucking wet, so deliciously wet for him.

"Oh God. Don't Stop. Don't fucking stop," she screamed. He was eating her pussy, eating her as if he had never had a meal. As if he couldn't get enough of her quivering mound, and he couldn't. He wanted her with a potency he couldn't understand and wouldn't deny.

Jackson gave her a second finger and increased the amount of pressure his suckling mouth placed against her clitoris. Sinclair screamed out his name as she came in a blinding orgasm. Her vaginal muscles tightened and clenched with such a force that she felt as if she was closing in on herself even as she felt herself explode from within. The blinding light behind her closed eyes confirmed the fireworks that had gone on in her body.

When she opened her eyes she realized she actually had to uncurl her toes.

His lips were wet, covered with her cream. As she watched him he licked her from his lips and closed his eyes to savor the taste. He watched her watch him as he licked each and every one of his fingers, the fingers that had been inside her. He was telling her without words that he loved the taste of her pussy.

He leaned in, close enough that they shared the same breath, so close that she could smell herself on his breath, so close that she could see the little flecks of blue in his sea eyes. "I believe your cake is ready," he said.

Chapter Six BOUND BY LUST

“Open your eyes,” Jackson said to her as he lifted Sinclair from the rosewood island counter.

“No,” she said before smiling. There was no way she was going to do anything that required any sort of movement. She had just discovered heaven in his hands. She wasn’t going anywhere. She wanted to bask in her completion, in the knowledge that she had just experienced the most mind shattering orgasm ever. It was better than any fantasy she had ever dreamed. Who would have known?

Out of nowhere came the man of the hour. Sinclair had been so deep in thought she hadn’t realized he stood above her, towering her with his solid presence.

“Then you won’t be able to see what I’m doing,” he whispered into her ear before nipping the sensitive flesh of her lobe. Tingling shocks of need coursed from her lobe to the wet folds between her legs. She was shocked that she was even able to feel anything after what he had done to her, but her body proved her mind was foolish. She not only felt the nip of his teeth, the sensations ran rampant through her body and condensed in her womb. Instantly she felt her still wet, sated mound moisten further.

She heard him moving around her kitchen, still she didn’t open her eyes, not even to take a peak at what he was doing. Then the distinctive sound of the oven opening drifted through the air. She smiled. He had taken out her cake. Her grin got wider when the oven chimed to say it was going off.

Sinclair could definitely appreciate a man wise enough to know his way around the kitchen.

And the bedroom.

His strong arms wrapped around her plump body and lifted her so easily she couldn’t help but wonder how often he lifted weights. She hadn’t been a light load since the fifth grade. In the sixth she hit puberty and discovered cookie dough ice cream.

Jackson easily carried her from the island top to her bedroom. When she felt herself being moved she questioned the unquestioned trust she had in him to keep her safe. She didn’t once think he would drop her. She should have thought better.

“What are you doing?” she asked before Jackson un-ceremonially dumped her on her bed. Her eyes popped open when she left the safety of Jackson’s hands. Sinclair landed on the mattress with a loud thump and slight bounce. She couldn’t figure out who groaned louder when she landed, her or the mattress.

“Where are you going?” Sinclair asked Jackson’s retreating back.

Silence. He didn’t even turn around to acknowledge her question and Sinclair felt anger stirring beneath her skin. Just because he had given her the most mind blowing orgasm ever didn’t mean he had the right to ignore her. Hell she was a partner in this affair. She had every right to know where and why he was walking away.

She got her answer moments later.

When Jackson walked back into her bedroom in his hands he held two red scarves and a pair of matching red furry handcuffs.

“Do you have any idea how I felt reading *Red Scarf*. From the first word I knew you were perfect. I felt like you had reached into my head and pulled out every one of my erotic thoughts

to put them on paper.”

If her two arched eyebrows were any indication of what she was feeling she was shocked to the core that he actually wanted to re-enact a scene from her book with her and more than just a little apprehensive.

“What exactly do you think you’re doing?” she asked him as she scooted to the edge of the bed that was the farthest away from him. Fantasies were fantasies because they never became a reality and to be honest she wasn’t sure she was ready to take that step.

“Exactly what you’re thinking,” he said calmly as if placating a scared animal.

With deliberate slowness, he placed the three items on the night stand closest to him, and then with a speed she would have thought him incapable of he grabbed Sinclair’s ankle and pulled. Under her breath she mumbled curses at her satin sheets. She slid right into his arms.

“I don’t know if I want to be tied,” she and winced when she heard the slight shrill in her voice. Her fear was definitely starting to show.

“I don’t believe you. I think you want to be dominated almost as much as I want to dominate you, but we’ll get to that later, much later. Right now I’m just going to use the handcuffs,” he said to her. As if he wasn’t asking her for much, as if giving up her free will wasn’t a very trusting thing for her to do. And then she saw it in his eyes. He wanted, no needed, her to trust him. He needed her to trust that he would never do anything to hurt her, never do anything against her will.

She knew that domination was a trust issue and she wanted to trust him enough to let him in and leave him in control. Plus, he had promised to use only the handcuffs and as the author of *Red Scarf* she knew what it meant that he wasn’t using the scarves. He was compromising.

He wants me that badly. The realization of the depth of his desire stilled the breath in her chest. *He wants me ... anyway he can have me.*

“I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do,” he whispered into her ears as he handcuffed her hands to her metal headboard. Sinclair’s immediate reaction was to pull away. When her arms didn’t budge she realized just how in control of her body Jackson was. He held in his hands her pleasure and pain, her ultimate satisfaction. He could do what ever he wanted to her and she couldn’t stop him.

He finished tying her spread eagle to the bed and then sat beside her. Jackson looked into her stormy brown eyes, mischief and lust darkened his, before asking her “Ready?”

She swallowed the lump in her throat before answering. Fear and curiosity ran rampant through her body running a course that burnt her to the soul.

“No.”

Fear won the race. Even as she spoke the word she knew it was not the entire truth. Fear could be a powerful aphrodisiac. They were both there due to the emotion. They feared losing out on one another, on that one person guaranteed to make them happy. Neither of them expected to find that someone in one another, but the chance that the obscure would occur held them there. Her pussy clenched and wept with the promise an erotic fantasy coming true with the man who had spurned that fantasy.

“Liar,” Jackson whispered into her right ear before he slowly rimmed the outer edge with his tongue. More than her ear burnt from his touch. More than it felt the hot wet rasp of a slick intrusion. She was hopeless, a slave to his ministrations.

Sinclair closed her eyes to savor the feel of Jackson’s tongue. When nothing happened after long moments she found herself opening them in confusion. She was alone.

She closed them again shocked that he had left her there naked and tied to her bed. It was

the quiet padded steps of someone entering her carpeted room that made her open her eyes. When she opened them she saw that Jackson was walking back into her room. Before she got the chance to ask him where he had been, what he had been doing, she noticed his hands. In his left hand he held a small clear bowl filled with ice, in his right he held an ocean blue gel filled dildo.

Neither was a prop from her story. He was rewriting the play and she felt as one of the leads she deserved more of a warning in regards to the change in script. And she wasn't sure she was comfortable with where this departure would leave her.

It was one thing to be at someone's mercy when you knew the path they were taking. This was not that kind of situation.

"What do you expect to do with that," she said, her voice was strained with apprehension. She could not stop eying the dildo.

"Why do you ask questions you know the answer to, Sin?" His voice was cinnamon and cayenne, exotic, flavorful, and hot. She felt the honeyed promise that his tone spoke of all the way to the soles of her feet. She was going to die of a sex overdose, but what a way to go.

With him by her side, controlling her body, her emotions, she felt things she had never given herself to.

Her mind told her to tell him to stop. It demanded that she be un-cuffed. Her body told her she was a damned fool as she passed up on the opportunity to be pleased by the man of her dreams. Bound and pleased.

Sinclair's body laughed at her mind. It knew fully well that Sinclair was imprisoned by the strength of her desire. Even now as Jackson approached her, her vagina clenched and moistened in anticipation. She wanted this almost as badly as her mind tried to deny it.

The mattress creaked loudly in protest as Jackson settled himself between her splayed legs. He reached into the plastic bowl and pulled out one glistening ice cube.

Sinclair couldn't take her eyes off the block of ice or the long, wide fingers that held it. Light reflected off the cube's sharp angles. Oddly enough it looked warmed by the midday sun that seemed to bask inside it.

She watched his large fingers grasp the frigid cube and then slowly descend. It never occurred to her that he was headed for her until the cold block touched her heated skin.

He lightly ran it down the lips of her sex. Up and down he ran the cube, setting a burning trail that ran through her vagina to her heart. Instinctively Sinclair tried to distance herself from the frigid block. Jackson had handcuffed her well. The stale metal did not allow her any room for movement.

"Please," she told him, begging for release, sexual or physical, she did not know. All she knew was that she had to express her confusion and need for release.

The heat of her body quickly melted the block of ice. Jackson lifted her hips and placed a towel beneath her. He smiled at her, his gaze full of heat as he stared at the glistening lips of her vagina. "I don't know if the towel is for you or the melted ice."

He parted the slick folds of her labia, before reaching for another piece of ice.

"Don't," she said to him. He stalled for a second and then proceeded to ignore her. Rhythmically he rubbed the frozen cube against her clitoris all the while his eyes never left hers.

He wanted her to remember whose touch she felt, whose hands, lips, cock set her aflame. He wanted to be that man that she never forgot, because he already knew that she would haunt him to the end of his days. She would always be that woman who had captured him.

"Damn you," she groaned as she gritted her teeth against the intense pleasure she felt. Jackson removed the ice cube and bent over her to caress her lips with his own. The kiss was

gentle and light, a whisper of lips that burnt both to the core. Quickly he pulled away, fear prevented him from deepening the kiss, but not before Sinclair's pretty pink tongue darted out to lick his bottom lip. Her mouth was soft, sweet, and very inviting. His mouth grew hungrier. The breath of touch was not enough, and yet he knew he could not abandon his mission. He wanted to make her scream his name.

"Jesus Christ," he groaned "You make me want to drop this cube and ..."

The smile she gave him was full of sour mischief. "Now you know how I feel," she breathed against his open mouth before he lifted his head away from her.

He knew he needed to distance himself and rein in his lust. She was too tempting, too inviting to his fevered senses.

Sinclair lifted herself up, or at least as high as one could get spread eagle and tied to a bed. "You do want me, don't you?" she asked him hesitantly, before biting her lip in anticipation, waiting for his answer.

"Yes."

"Then why aren't we ... you know."

"Because I like hearing you scream my name," he said before placing the frigid blocks in her warm passage.

"Jackson," she screamed, partly from pain, partly from pleasure. She felt her body widening to accommodate the two ice cubes he had placed within her, but more than that she felt the shock of the foreign frozen blocks within her heated pussy.

Jackson continued his tortuous love play, and grabbed another ice cube from the bowl. He slowly rubbed the ice around her areola. Measure by measure he decreased the size of the circle until he rubbed the cube against her nipple.

"Mmmmm. Oh God. Oh God."

"You like that don't you?" He asked before lowering his head.

He continued to torture her one nipple with the ice cube, as the other received attention from his hot suckling mouth. Hot and cold. Hot and cold, the two temperatures were driving her insane. She couldn't focus on either, not the hot mouth latched to her breast, nor the frozen cubes inside of her or the ice rimming her other nipple. Her body was in the midst of a sensual onslaught.

She shifted her hips in an attempt to find a comfort zone, and immediately moaned. "Oh God." Her body did not adjust as easily to the ice cubes as it did to Jackson's fingers. The subtle movement had shifted the ice cubes so that now Sinclair felt every dimension, every angle of the cubes. All four sides lightly scraped against her vaginal walls sending a stirring that echoed in her breasts.

The heat between her legs became very clear and arousing. The cold ice cubes had heightened her senses.

Her vaginal walls hungrily closed around the ice cubes, even as the cubes melted. Sinclair felt the first stirring of loss at the thought of the blocks eminent demise.

Jackson dipped his head to lap at the liquid that breached her vaginal lips. Sinclair threw her head back in ecstasy as the wet, rough texture of his tongue rubbed against her lips, her clitoris to a rhythm that complimented her heart beat.

"I'm coming. Oh God I'm coming," she proudly announced before the orgasm overtook her senses. Sinclair felt the orgasm like she had never felt anything before, it was better than the one she'd had on the kitchen counter. This one started in her vagina and spread all over her body.

Sinclair opened her eyes and looked down her body at Jackson.

"You can untie me now."

He shook his head no, waited a few seconds, and then spoke.

"That's one for the ice cube. Now all we need is a few more for the dildo and then ... well, we can start playing."

Sinclair opened her mouth to speak, and found she couldn't. Her mouth was dry and a lump currently occupied her throat. She was speechless and dumbfounded.

"I didn't think you actually planned on using it," she finally said.

"Yup," he said as he pulled it from atop the dresser. An ecstatic smile was plastered across his face. She couldn't believe him or the situation. He was acting like this was a normal every day occurrence.

"Do you do this a lot?"

"Do what?"

"Tie helpless women to beds and have your way with them?"

"No," he said cautiously, sensing the rising tide of anger.

"Not an every day occurrence for you, huh? So, it only happens every other day."

Sinclair grimaced at the statement. Even to her ears she sounded angry and jealous. She hated the thought of Jackson having the same experience with another woman.

"Look at me," he said and waited until she was looking him in the eyes before continuing. He wanted her undivided attention for what he had to say.

"I've been with other women. I've had my share of one night stands, but this thing with you is different. This is not a one-night stand. This is my fantasy, and the only woman I am sharing it with is you, Sinclair. No one else. The only two people who matter are you and I, got it?"

Sinclair nodded her head in agreement. *Please God let him be the one. At least for a little while.*

Jackson waited a few moments before he spoke. He wanted to give her time to think, time to speak.

"The vibrator isn't an intricate part of my fantasy," he said, finally.

"No?"

"No. All I need is you."

Sinclair found herself unable to think of anything worthy of a response to that. She simply stared at him with eyes wide with shock.

All I need is you.

"You're not comfortable with it, are you?"

After long moments her tongue unglued itself from the roof of her mouth. "I'd prefer you to be first, the vibrator can come later."

"Later," Jackson said as he set it far away from her. Silently he removed the handcuffs. He wasn't going to ask her exactly what she meant when she said she'd prefer him to be first. A small part of him was afraid of the answer. He simply relished the knowledge that she wanted him to be the first thing to penetrate her. He would forever be a part of her, her first lover, the first man to teach about passion and the exquisite inferno it ignited within one's soul.

At the thought of penetrating Sinclair, his eyes drifted down to the wet mound before him. She had the sweetest, most delicious looking pussy he had ever seen and for the next few hours she was all his. The cream her body leaked forth was the nectar of the gods. Unable to help himself he brushed his fingers against her until he found the engorged bud at the top of her slit. He gazed into her eyes all the while he pressed and pinched at her clitoris. He didn't stop until

her mouth opened on a throaty groan and her body jerked beneath him finding completion. He loved the fact that she responded to his touch like no other woman had. She was perfection.

She was beautiful, wet and tight and he knew without a doubt he would enjoy every last second he was between her legs. He would also make sure that she enjoyed it.

“Are you ready?” he asked her before settling himself between her splayed legs.

“Yes,” she said hesitantly.

“Are you sure?” he said, unwilling to give her an out, but knowing that it was what she deserved.

Jackson’s heart was in his chest. He didn’t think he could handle her saying no, and yet he had to ask her, he had to be sure. They both knew this was a moment that neither could walk away from. The act would mean more to her than to him, because it was her first time having sex, but then again for him, it was his first time making love.

Jackson watched as Sinclair licked those lips he had quickly come to love and lust before opening her mouth to speak.

Chapter Seven

NOT ONCE, NOT TWICE, BUT THRICE

“Yes,” she said her voice thick with desire.

Jackson almost passed out at the happiness he felt. The sound of her voice husky with desire only spurred the need within him, heightening his anticipation.

He felt like he had been waiting all his twenty three years to hear that single word. It meant that much to him that she was giving him this chance to satisfy her, satisfy her every need, make her dreams a carnal reality.

Sinclair couldn’t help but stare open mouthed at the man before her. He was more than a fantasy come true. He was a god, beautifully made with just the right amount of muscle and tone. He wasn’t too broad like a weightlifter and he wasn’t gangly like so many of the college boys on campus.

No he was perfect. He was built like the athlete he was. His arms and chest were strong and defined. The wide planes of his chest caught her eyes and she couldn’t help the tell-tale pitter patter of lust that stomped through her lower regions. Her eyes hungry for any sight of him continued their descent. His stomach was tapered and ridged with musculature. Sinclair counted a two, four, six pack. Oh my god he’s got a six pack, Sinclair thought. She immediately envisioned herself licking ice cream from the sculpted ridges of his stomach. Maybe next time she thought.

She wanted to get to know every last inch of his body with such a strong desire that she felt the yearning burning from within to coat her skin with sweet hot licks of need.

Starting from the bottom she noticed that his feet were large and wide. *You know what they say about men with big feet*, flashed across her mind before she continued her perusal.

Her eyes followed up to the strong muscles of his defined calves. Even his knees looked strong to her. And his thighs ... they were incomparable to anything Sinclair had ever seen before, even the models in the magazines didn’t look as good. Jackson Phillips was one well put together man.

She desperately wanted to find out just how well built he was but she couldn’t bring her

eyes to look past his thighs. When she tried for the third time and got the same results she realized she didn't want to be disappointed. She didn't want the fantasy to become a reality, so far everything was absolutely perfect.

Sinclair watched his lovely muscled ass bend over as he rummaged through his recently discarded jeans.

She damn near crammed her fist into her mouth to stifle the moan that threatened to escape when she was presented with the luscious view of his incredible backside bending over. She had to rein in the impulse to get on her knees and bite him right where that delicious beauty mark of his sat on his left cheek.

He took a small foil package from his back pocket and opened it with his teeth. She watched his mouth open to bare his porcelain white straight teeth. She watched the foil's demise as he ripped it open spilling its contents. She watched the quick smile that spread across his face when he realized she was watching him with hungry eyes.

Ashamed that she had been caught staring, she looked up from his mouth to catch his eyes. What she saw there made her breath stop. He wanted her with an intensity that mirrored hers.

Quick steady steps brought him to the foot of the bed and before Sinclair knew it he was in the bed with her, towering above her, smiling that disarming smile of his.

He lifted and adjusted Sinclair so that he was settled between her thighs. She glanced down unable to help herself and gasped. There was no disappointment there.

Yes, he was sheathed in a condom, and no, she couldn't quite remember him putting it on, but that was not what stunned her. Blue Jeans was loaded. He was at least nine inches long and hard, hard and wide for her, she thought and felt the moisture between her legs increase. The man was gifted with a porn star cock. He was more than capable of fulfilling her every fantasy. *Dear God I can't wait!*

Blood pounded between Jackson's ears, drumming out the sound, thoughts in his brain, as he positioned his cock at the mouth of her weeping vagina. She was ready for him and he couldn't wait another moment to be inside of his beautiful author.

The last few tortuous days he had spent reading her stories, getting into her head, cumulated to this moment, and for the first time in a long time Jackson felt like he could breathe.

He lowered his head to capture her lips in a sweet, soft kiss and immediately felt her lips soften beneath his. Even though she wet and ready, he wanted to draw out the moment, draw out her pleasure until she was as consumed by it as he was. He placed a series of teasing kisses against her lips and seduced them to part.

She sighed softly into his mouth before parting her lips and giving him access. The rough edge of his tongue darted past the plump lips of her mouth, intent on augmenting the flame of her desire with teasing thrusts that mimicked what his body was doing to hers.

With shallow thrusts he entered the moist cavern of her womb just as the hungry pressure of his mouth increased, gradually the thrusts of his tongue went deeper, demanding more from her. He wanted to sink himself inside of her, but knew better, he knew of the pain such action would cause her. So instead he slanted his mouth over hers and thrust his tongue back into her mouth with a ferocity that sent her mound quivering with increased anticipation. His stubble rubbed over the soft skin of her face as his lips continued their assault, tasting, nipping, devastating her mouth.

All the while he plundered her mouth his cock continued to invade her pussy. Slowly he

entered her, drawing out the moment of full penetration, heightening her anticipation. Her body was hot and moist and opened to welcome him. The back of his mind, the only part that was willing to have coherent thoughts at the moment, thought *I'm coming home*.

He felt the slick walls of her vagina tighten around him and he almost passed out from the exquisite feel of her sheathing him. He had only gone in the first few inches of her passage and yet he knew she was the most incredible lover he could ever find. She was perfect. She was built for him.

"You feel so right, so good," he whispered across her lips before taking her mouth in another plundering kiss. The dark rasp of his voice against her lips sent chills down her spine.

As his head lowered to capture her lips she responded with an answering need. Hunger twisted through her body at his dominant possession of her mouth.

He stretched her to the point where the pleasure burned pain. She couldn't decipher where one ended and the other began. She just knew she wanted him to continue. She couldn't envision him stopping his assault on her senses.

After what felt like an endless amount of time he continued to move inside her, going deeper inside her. Every little thrust of his hips brought her untold pleasure and she found herself begging him for something she couldn't name and yet she didn't want whatever she sought.

He felt her squirm a little beneath him. Sinclair was as uncomfortable with the invasion of her body as she was with the thought of him not being inside of her. Slowly he entered her aching body even though the slow, exquisite journey into her hot, wet body was torturing him. Inch by steady inch he progressed. He watched her, watched as the emotions played across her beautiful face. Without words she told him when the coil of desire that sat in her womb was tightening or loosening, when she was crawling higher and when she was falling down.

She felt the muscles of his arms tighten with intent before he surged into her, past her membrane of innocence.

She jack-knifed into his chest, her head hitting him just below the collarbone. Small determined hands pushed at his chest. Hell no! Her mind bellowed. She wanted him out. Now!

"Abort, abort," she chanted, as she shifted beneath him.

Damn, he thought as he felt the fury of lust surge through his veins at the feel of her silken walls contracting around him with a force that was powered by her anxious movements.

"Sweetheart," he whispered into her ear. It was only one word, but it was the voice that held her. It was soft and strong. Her treacherous body responded to the voice too delicious to resist. She forgot to breathe, so attentive was she to him.

"Feels better doesn't it?" he asked after a few moments.

This was his last and only chance for redemption. She knew the first time was supposed to hurt, but damn it, that felt like he had literally drilled through her with a nine inch nail. Still, she drew within herself to examine the feelings coursing through her sensitized body. None of them were pain.

She moved her hips slightly just to test how far she was stretched around his cock. She gasped at the delicious sensations that shot up from her vaginal walls. She was so tightly clasped around him that she wondered how he would dislodge himself from her. He felt at least one size too big. She moved again rotating her hips and was pleased that the action heightened the exquisite sensations that sprang from her quivering mound.

Above her Jackson groaned, and whispered "Forgive me," before thrusting into her hot, wet body the last few inches. Her breath jumped and then stalled when she felt him at the mouth of her womb. Jackson was balls deep inside of her.

“Oh God,” she breathed out on a rush as she exhaled.

“No shit,” he said in response.

He braced his arms on either side of her head as he leaned above her, positioning himself so that his penis rubbed against her clitoris and vaginal lips as he thrust in and out of her pussy. His movements were slow, purposeful. He was determined to make her scream his name again if it was the last thing that he did.

Slowly he withdrew from her body giving Sinclair just enough that she had no choice but to meow out a protest. And just as slowly he re-entered her wet pussy. He gave her time to adjust to the feel of him. In. Out. In. Out. He thrust into her slowly, purposely, lengthening the act.

Sinclair felt her vaginal walls contracting and expanding around him. She felt each thrust and retraction. More than that, she felt his heartbeat within his chest. It pounded to the same rhythm as hers.

He dipped his head to capture her lips in a bruising kiss, stealing all resistance from her. She felt her mouth open for him and allow entrance to his plundering tongue. His tongue swept the soft walls of her moist cavern at the same rhythm that his cock pillaged her pussy. She felt herself being invaded and reveled in the feeling. He was taking over every inch of her body and demanding she take her satisfaction.

His movements forced his cock to rub against that infamous sensitive button on her vaginal walls. They contracted in pleasure, in anticipation. Again, she thought, please do it again. Sinclair felt the beginnings of the tingling sensation she had come to love. She was going to climax soon.

“Again,” she whispered into his ear, desperate to feel that delicious feeling again. She needed him to touch her there again.

He looked down at her and flashed a smile so wicked and lascivious her vaginal walls fluttered in anticipation. He was going to give in to her request and make her scream out loud her pleasure.

“Oh God,” she screamed when she felt him touch her G-spot with the broad head of his cock. He didn’t pull back and give her time to acknowledge the feelings assaulting her. He simply shifted his hips so that his cock rubbed against that spot for long seconds, moments that made her whimper and cry out in need.

She was dying inside.

“Please,” she begged. Oh god, he was killing her.

He changed his rhythm, adding a rolling motion to his hips. In. Out. Around. In. Out. Around. The new movement allowed him to touch something new, something deep, something that sent Sinclair over the edge.

Her orgasm caught her off guard. It had been building slowly, and then suddenly it erupted and just like a volcano hot molten lava spilled from her core, soaking both her and Jackson.

“Jackson,” she called out as she came. The word was slightly tinged with wonder, because this orgasm didn’t feel like the others. It wasn’t like the many she had conjured with her lonely hands--it wasn’t even like the ones Jackson had given her with patient hands. It was something entirely new. She felt this orgasm in her vagina, on her clitoris, all along her body. From her feet to her head, her every nerve ending tingled with this release.

He had taken over her very soul with her release.

“Oh God.” She struggled for breath, for air, for sustenance.

She needed a moment. She needed to ground herself, but he never stopped his

movements.

In. Out. In. Out. His breath was her breath. Her breath was his. They were so intertwined they shared the same breath.

They were close, so very close.

Sinclair looked up at Jackson for guidance.

No one told her sex was supposed to be this way, that it could be this way. Two bodies sweating together seeking release, that was what she understood sex to be. But it was more, much more.

She didn't expect sex to involve so many needs that weren't physical. She needed him to give her emotional as well as physical satisfaction.

As much as she didn't want to admit it, she needed him to give her sustenance, for right now at this very moment he was her everything.

Sweat poured down his forehead and still she tried to catch his eye to convey her appreciation, her needs ... her desires. She looked into his eyes and noticed that his eyes were focused and rimmed by golden lashes. How odd, he's a brunette she thought. Just as suddenly as the thought had entered her head it left, pushed out by the insistent movements of his hips.

Jackson increased his pace, and Sinclair was suddenly gripped by another orgasm. This one came without warning, catching her so off guard she did not have enough time to gasp for air. Her lungs burned with the intensity of the pleasure gripping her. Her lips puckered together into the most remarkable sensual smile Jackson had ever seen before she closed her eyes to relish the orgasm.

He grunted with pure masculine satisfaction as pleasure washed over her face. He clenched his teeth trying to hold back the satisfied laugh that threatened to break through. He wasn't sure how much longer he could last, she felt so good, but he at least knew he had given her two orgasms. He was trying very hard to fight off his orgasm, but she wasn't making it easy. Her pussy kept clenching around him in the aftermath of her two strong orgasms and every thrust seemed to send it aflutter.

She opened her eyes and started to smile at him, but her breath caught when she felt Jackson's hand cup her breast. He lightly plucked the ebony nipple, before twisting it between his long fingers. Strong sensations ran from Sinclair's breast to her heart and vagina. Both her heart and vagina muscles contracted to the pace he set. They followed the rhythm of the tugging, twisting ministrations his hand subjected her breast to.

And when she thought she couldn't take anymore without having a cardiac arrest she looked up into his eyes and saw the most heart warming sight she had ever feasted her eyes upon. Her heart beat impossibly increased when she caught the look of tenderness and lust in Jackson's eyes as he looked down at her.

In. Out. In. Out. He gave her short, quick thrusts. She grabbed at the bed rail trying to steady herself. Readyng herself for that moment when Jackson would find fulfillment. She knew it was coming soon and she was sure that when he did, he was going to blow her back out.

Slow in.

Quick out.

Slow in.

Quick out.

Suddenly his pace changed returning to short, quick thrusts. He was close. Although he wanted to draw the moment out, he was close to coming.

He grabbed her hips and pulled her closer to him. So close that even the slightest

movement of his hips rubbed against her clitoris, creating a contraction of her vaginal walls.

He gritted his teeth against the feel of her clenching around him. He reached between their intertwined bodies and found the turgid flesh he sought. Once, twice, he pumped her clit. Hard and then soft, he pressed the sensitive flesh. He wanted her beside him when he went over the edge. He wanted her to come with him.

"Now," he said as he rammed into her body full of force, full of intensity, full of need. More than anything, at that moment, with that breath he needed her to come with him.

The orgasm that shook them both was silent with its intensity. Sinclair watched as pleasure rippled over him, the same pleasure that ran through her.

Her mouth opened on a breathless scream as her body exploded with the intensity and heat of an atomic bomb. Jackson grunted a response that did not attempt to convey information. He simply held onto her hips with bruising force as he felt himself fly over the edge towards the most mind blowing orgasm he had ever felt. His only thought was, he was keeping this one. Whether she liked it or not, she was going to be his.

With one final jerk he spurted the last of his seed. The motion took what was left of Jackson's energy. Depleted, he slumped on top of her, his every muscle slack with his sexual contentment.

The small hands that pushed at him reminded him that he was lying on a living, breathing, currently suffocating person.

Jackson rolled over taking Sinclair with him so that she lay on top of him. Together they fell asleep intertwined.

Chapter Eight THE PATH OF WISE MEN

He had just had a fight with his first real girlfriend. Well, they hadn't actually had a fight. He had just stood there stone cold and silent as she lamented his many misgivings. He hadn't known until that moment how long a list he owned. He apparently had many bad qualities. At the top of her list was his inability to feel.

She had accused him of being selfish. Apparently, he did not share enough of his feelings with her.

She told him that she understood that guys weren't as emotional as women, but he was something different. When she had confided in her mother, her mother had agreed. Ian Jackson Phillips was different than any other boy she had met and she knew quite a few. He was to say the very least, unique.

His father had come in shortly after she left his room, slamming the door behind her. She had not liked his response to her request that he share more of his emotions with her.

He had told her to do something that was anatomically impossible, but only after he had told her to mind her bloody business.

"From now on I'll get to second base with someone else. Someone who doesn't want me to talk about my bloody fucking emotions."

Those were the words his father heard as he walked past Jackson's door and tried

unsuccessfully to avoid a sobbing fifteen year old girl.

After a few kinds words from Maxwell, a steaming cup of rich hot chocolate, and about a dozen chocolate chip cookies Emma felt calm enough to go home, in the family's chauffeured limousine, of course.

Once she had departed, Maxwell went to go have a long conversation with his son.

He stepped into his son's room, noticing the fact that it was immaculate as usual. For a teenager, the boy was unusually clean.

"Want to talk about it," he asked as he took his customary seat at the boy's desk. He couldn't help the smile that came across his face. He and the boy had a routine. Whenever they had their little father son talks he sat at the desk while Jackson sat on the floor.

But this time was different. Ian was in bed.

"No," the young man said before turning his back to his father. "The last thing I want to talk about is how I feel," he said and there was such a sneer in his voice that Maxwell wondered if his lips would ever be the same.

He understood. He understood all too well. There was nothing quite like a woman to ruin a man's good relationship. Hell, there was nothing quite like a woman to ruin a man's good mood.

"So let's talk about how I feel," he said after long moments. Jackson barely moved at the sound of his voice. He just continued his silent treatment. But he was listening. Maxwell could tell by the set of his shoulders. The boy was interested to what his father had to say about his feelings and women.

"I know I shouldn't be telling you this but I will, because well, you deserve to know what it has taken me years to learn. Men are no less emotional than women. We just don't talk about our every bloody feeling like they do."

"Really?" he asked from beneath the covers.

"I don't feel any less emotion than your mother and I don't think you feel any less than Emma."

'Really?'

"Yes, really. We just don't dissect our emotions."

"Huh?"

For long moments Maxwell did not say anything. He just stared off into the distance.

"After many years of courting women I learned one thing."

"What? What did you learn?"

"That those of us who are the most sensitive are those that can not afford to let a woman dissect our emotions. We are the ones that must guard our hearts carefully."

"How?"

"Follow their rules. Take what you want, take what you need and then leave."

"Leave?" he asked on a whisper.

"Fuck them and leave. It's the only way men like us survive. You can't give them the chance to break you, so just fuck and leave."

Jackson turned to watch his father depart, but not before his father final words echoed in his head. He had understood all too well what his father spoke of.

"Don't let them hurt you. Walk away before they get that power. Walk away. Imagine how scarred I'd be if I gave your mother that kind of power."

Chapter Nine
AND HIS NAME IS...FUCK AND CHUCK

Light filtered in through the slots in the blinds. Gracefully it ran across her dark lashes a second before the onyx fans fluttered open. For the first time in Sinclair's life she woke up disoriented. She wasn't quite sure where she was, but she knew she was imprisoned, and then she realized that the weight that kept her imprisoned was Jackson's arms. She was wrapped in his arms and held snug against his body, chest to back.

She turned around to face him. Her movements were painfully slow. She took her time making sure not to wake him. She wanted to watch his face as he slept. She couldn't help but notice that he looked so peaceful, so happy, even in his sleep there was a slight grin on his face. Just because last night was absolutely incredible did not mean he had to look so happy with himself. For one second Sinclair contemplated shaking him awake, just so she could have the satisfaction of seeing that smug contented look wiped off his gorgeous face.

And it was such a gorgeous face. Nothing she had ever seen rivaled it. It wasn't that it was so well put together that made it perfection. It was perfect because it belonged to him.

She looked closer at his face and wished his eyes were open. They were such a beautiful sparkling color. They were not quite blue, not quite green, they were an intense sea green. Nothing was quite as disarming as his beautiful eyes, especially when filled with passion. She blushed at the thought of the reasons why his eyes had filled with lust. Sinclair immediately pictured many more ways she could incite his passion, so many positions, so many sexual acts. Quickly she put a lid on her sinful thoughts.

Morning sex wasn't really where she wanted to head. She wanted to talk to him about

last night, but now that she thought about it morning sex sounded great. Sex before breakfast. Mmmm.

She shifted a little so that she could press her body against his and reap the benefits of his body heat and gasped in shock. Morning sex might not even be a possibility she thought. The man had done an incredible job pounding her soft pussy into an empty cavern of sore muscles. And she had enjoyed every second. Damn! The man was fabulous at what he did. He had given her three orgasms during sex, one when he tied her up, and one when he went down on her.

She felt her face flush with the last memory. She'd always wanted a man to taste her and well Jackson ... Jackson ate her pussy like a starving man at a buffet. Like he couldn't get enough. And she couldn't wait to repay him. Cock sucking before breakfast? Mmmmm.

She brushed her fingertips against his face, straightening out his eyebrows. They were perfect just like the rest of him. His eyebrows were naturally groomed and a dirty blonde color, a shade deeper than the fine hairs that rimmed his eyes. She looked down at his naked chest, not a single hair could be found. Her boy was waxed. Her boy, what a thought. The strength that held her drew her attention. The corded muscles of his arms moved to tighten their grip on her. Sinclair was pulled closer to Jackson's heat. She looked up to see if he was awake, but his eyes didn't even flutter. He was still deep in dreamland.

Sinclair watched him sleep for a full minute marveling at the beauty that was this man, Jackson ...? She came up short when she realized she didn't know his last name. *Exactly when did I become a huge slut, was it when I woke up or when I saw him?* When you saw him, her mind screamed.

His eyes opened less than a second later. She silently chided herself for her anger. He had probably been woken up by the hard angles of her body. He must have felt her body tighten in self disgust at the knowledge that she did not know the name of the man she had slept with, her first lover.

Jackson dipped his head to brush a gentle kiss against her lips. "Good Morning," he said after tucking her head beneath his chin.

"Morning," she responded grumpily. He immediately stilled.

"Is everything ok?"

"Yes. No. Yes. I don't know." Sinclair took a deep breath before continuing. She breathed in the scents-- the scent of Jackson's skin, her scent, and the scent of their sexual union, it all smelled good. *It's not his fault you don't know who he is, so don't take it out on him.*

Jackson had backed away from her, giving her room, as she took her time managing her thoughts.

"I have two questions, ok?"

He nodded his head in agreement. When she didn't speak, he nudged her. When she still didn't speak, Jackson damn near yelled "Ask!" his voice was so thick and commanding.

"Fine. First are you a natural blonde? Second, what is your last name?"

"That's what you wanted to ask?" he said before laughing. "I thought you were going to say ... ask something ... I don't know ... just something else." He ran an unsteady hand through his hair.

He'd only just gotten her and he was determined not to lose her. She was his to keep. She just didn't know it yet.

"Well not knowing the last name of the man who popped your cherry might not be an issue for you, but for me it's not exactly a nice feeling knowing that I am a slut."

She jumped out of the bed intent on getting as far away from Jackson as possible, but was only able to take two steps. Jackson grabbed her from behind and hauled her up so that they were on the same level.

"Number one you're not a slut. You're gorgeous, sweet, and generous. That's all. There's nothing promiscuous about you. You were just generous enough to let me share this momentous occasion with you, and let me just say I couldn't be any prouder or happier with your decision."

He saw that his words had a softening effect on her self hatred. He kept speaking.

"Yes I am a natural blonde. I dye my hair. I'm not particularly fond of blonde jokes, and two my last name is Phillips. Ian Jackson Phillips is the name of the man who made love to you last night. See that was not too bad, now was it?" he asked as he unceremoniously dropped her on the bed. She landed in a heap.

"Ian Jackson Phillips," she emphasized through clenched teeth. The minute she said his name Jackson knew he was in trouble. "Ian Jackson Phillips. At least I can add the adjective stupid to my description, stupid slut. It has a nice ring to it doesn't it, Ian Jackson Phillips?"

He stared at her from beneath his lashes. He didn't respond. He honestly wasn't even sure how to respond, or if he was even expected to respond to her ranting. He assumed she heard about him from the way she was looking at him, like he was a poisonous snake she had suddenly found in her bed. He knew the rumors about his sex life that circulated around campus. Most of them were based on fact. Ian Jackson Phillips was, to put it lightly, a lady's man.

Jackson continued to remain stone-faced until she headed for the bedroom door. Then and only then did he react.

"Sinclair come back here. You can not run from me."

"I can't now, can I? I can't exactly pull a Jax as you've already woken up."

He grimaced at her words. He knew exactly what a Jax was, one pulled a Jax when he left the girl he'd fucked before she woke, and didn't bother to call until two days or more later ... to tell her thanks. Sometimes, but not often, a Jax involved a 'thank you, but I'm sorry' note.

He watched her frantically walk around her bedroom looking for something. Jackson ran his hand through his hair, unable to think of something to say to her, to let her know that he wasn't going to treat her the same way he had treated the others. For God's sake she was his author.

Rapidly, she was shoving things into his hands. When he looked down Jackson saw that he was holding his clothes. She was kicking him out.

Sinclair walked to her dresser and grabbed a pair of shorts and an old oversized tee shirt. She quickly dressed, covering up all the luscious curves he had admired last night and this early morning. One of his sneakers had wedged itself between her dresser and desk. She grabbed it and then turned to hand it to him.

Jackson could hear her mumbling as she walked towards him.

"Here you go 'Fuck and Chuck Jax.' I don't care where you get dressed, just please leave my room." The smile she gave him was icy and devoid of all emotion, well almost all, she couldn't quite hide her disgust. Was she disgusted with him or herself, he wondered.

"All these years ... fuck and chuck ... good job, Sinclair," she mumbled to herself loud enough for him to overhear. "It might have done you a little good to find out the man's name before you spread your legs."

Suddenly he was angry. She wasn't like the rest, how dare she think ...

"I'm not leaving," he said and then placed his clothes on her bed before folding his arms against his chest.

Sinclair looked up from where she was standing. She had been holding the door open expecting him to walk through the door and out of her life.

She looked at him and then looked away. He was naked, totally butt naked, and unfortunately his butt was not the part she noticed. "Just in case you forgot, this is the part where you chuck. Part one was accomplished, we fucked."

"We didn't fuck."

"No? Exactly what would you call what happened there?" she said pointing in the direction of the bed.

"We made love. I made love to you."

"Get dressed and leave."

"NO!"

"Fine, don't get dressed, just leave."

"I'm not going anywhere, Sin."

"Great on top of everything you're insane. Just FUCKING great."

"Number one you're not supposed to tell the insane that they are insane, it drives them crazy. Number two I'm not insane, just determined."

"If you're not insane what the hell does it matter what I call you."

"I'm staying."

"You got what you wanted, now please leave."

Her eyes pleaded with him to go.

Damn it. "I didn't get what I came here for."

With fear in her eyes she asked, "What did you come here for?"

"I want more than just one night with you."

"Yeah?" One black eyebrow raised in disbelief.

"Yeah."

"Call within the next two days and I'll believe you," she said. The sarcasm was heavy and thick like cream in her voice.

She gave him more than he deserved and they both knew it. "Ok," he consented as he started to pull on his clothes. Jackson walked out of the bedroom, and then quickly turned back. He pulled Sinclair into his arms to give her a deep kiss before he whispered, "I will call, Sin. You can't kick me out of here," he said, before touching the space between her breasts.

"Please do. God knows I hope you do Jackson," she whispered to herself after he closed the apartment door behind him.

She laid there on her bed long moments after he left staring up the ceiling trying to figure out where it all went wrong. When exactly had her tragic taste in men gone from bad to "Have you lost your mind?" When had she decided that she liked having her heart stomped on by size thirteen feet, picked off the bottom of the shoe, and thrown into shark infested water?

Of all the people on campus to have a crush on for three years she had picked the worst. Even the STD ridden quarterback of the football team would have been a better choice. So what if he would have left her with a present in the morning. He would have also left her with some of her dignity in the morning, but no she had to choose the king of all assholes, Prince Fuck and Chuck. A small chuckle escaped her lips before the sob she had been holding back exploded from her chest. She sure as hell knew how to pick them.

Chapter Ten SHOE THERAPY

Jackson didn't call the next day. As heart wrenching as it was, she had to admit it. She had been played. She was just another notch on the o' bedpost. Sinclair was sure of this because she spent the whole day cursing first Jackson and then herself, as she paced in her living room. She didn't fail to acknowledge that she managed to stay conveniently next to the phone the whole time. During a moment of honesty she admitted to herself that she was screwed. The man had dumped her like a hot potato.

Sinclair truly knew she was in trouble when she picked up the phone in an attempt to call *him*. The only thing that saved her from the ultimately humiliating and devastating act of calling him just so she could feel the anguish and demoralizing pain that came when he said, 'Look, Sinclair, we have to talk about last night. I really had a great time with you. You're a great girl, but I'm not looking for that kind of relationship right now. At this point in my life all I'm looking to build are strong friendships,' was the fact that she did not know his phone number. And now that she took the time to think of it, he didn't have hers. She never gave it to him, and he hadn't bothered to ask for it.

The painful thought occurred to her that it made sense, why ask for a girl's number when you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you're not going to call her.

She placed the receiver down after the loud buzzing of the dead phone line broke through the haziness caused by her melancholy thoughts. Sinclair picked up the phone a second time and dialed.

"Hello," the receiver said. The voice was husky and deep due to fatigue.

"Damn, Max, I'm sorry I woke you. I'll call you back later."

Although Max's grogginess did not allow her to hear the pain and hesitation in Sinclair's

voice, the words came through clearly.

“Don’t be stupid. Besides it’s ... three o’clock in the afternoon. Oh. My. God.”

“Did you miss an appointment?”

“On Sunday, Sinclair what the hell are you thinking? I am not that big of a workaholic, am I?”

“No ... I ... I’m sorry,” She said, her voice laced with pain and anger.

“Sinclair, is everything ok?”

“Yeah I just wanted to ... Oh God no. No, everything is not ok. Maxine I’m so fucked.” Sinclair started to laugh at her final statement and then said “Literally.”

“What? Claire you’re not making any sense. Speak again, and this time remember that I just woke up, and that none of the languages I speak are gibberish.”

“Promise you won’t yell?” Anyone who spent five minutes with Max quickly realized that she was sarcastic and enjoyed screaming, really enjoyed screaming.

“Hell no,” she said passionately, “There is no way in hell I’m going to agree to that, so just talk.”

“Maxine Boswell.”

“Fine, I promise.”

“Remember Blue Jeans?”

“How could I forget? The man is helping me pay my rent.”

“Well I met him. He found my notebook.”

“A notebook or The Notebook?” Max asked cautiously.

“The Notebook.”

At the end of the conversation, after Sinclair had told Max what had occurred between her and Jackson, they both agreed that “Fuck and Chuck” was just like every other male, he was an immature, childish, stupid, selfish slut.

“You know what you need Sinclair?”

“Yeah, I’ll meet you there.”

The tall slim caramel skinned brunette was waiting outside the building. In her hand she held a pint of Sinclair’s favorite flavor, Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough. In the other hand was her favorite Chunky Monkey. Together they were unstoppable. Maxine could not count how many times cookie dough ice cream had been her life saving companion on those truly devastating lonely nights. Nothing like good ice cream to cure the pangs of hungry solitude.

“Max,” Sinclair exclaimed as she ran the rest of the way into her outstretched hands. “I can’t believe I was so stupid.”

The hug she enveloped Sinclair in was warm and full of understanding. Maxine understood the pain Sinclair was feeling. She had fallen way too often for Mr. Wrong and Mr. Never Right.

“First thing first, here take this,” Maxine said as she handed Sinclair the carton of ice cream. “First rule of shoe therapy is that no discussion of the situation in question can be addressed before the consumption of ice cream. Remember ice cream is an imperative part of the therapy session.”

Sinclair happily took the pint of cookie dough along with one of the spoons Maxine whipped out of her purse. She immediately began eating. She felt the ice cream cooling down the wisps of angry fire that had settled in her chest when she had realized that she was just another victim of the Chuck.

How could you be so stupid? Couldn't you have chosen any other man to fall madly in love with on sight other than 'Fuck and Chuck'?

Sinclair tried to bat the self disgust infused thoughts away, but found it too hard not to dwell on the situation at hand. Luckily for her Max was armed and ready.

"So I think we should scope out the boots first while we talk about your feelings before the incident, then we can move on to what brought on the incident, i.e. how you meet him while we check out the sandals, can't wait to see Steve Madden's new line, and then finally I say we go for the heels last and what you're going to do to that tiny dick bastard. What do you think?" she said and then turned to peer into Sinclair's eyes.

"Are you going to take those damn things off anytime soon?"

Sinclair had expressive eyes. Everyone and their mother had told her this, which was why she was wearing the glasses to begin with.

"No," Sinclair answered sulkily. She couldn't help it, and didn't care if she sounded like an insolent child. She felt like an insolent child. Her favorite toy had been snatched right out of her hands. She admitted it to herself, she was pouting, but wasn't that to be expected when the man of your dreams walks into your life, gives you an amazing night of sex, and then walks away without calling you. I mean talk about shitty days. Bad sex you can handle, but good sex is cruel. You can't get over good sex. The tantalizing moments keep playing in your head.

She followed Maxine into the shoe store, a.k.a. her Temple. Sinclair was a Christian, a very devout one at that, but if idolatry was allowed, a sling back patent leather heel would be her idol. So it only made sense that the first thing she would do when feeling down would be shoe shopping. Pain was instantly obliterated in the midst of a cloth patterned designer wedge.

Maxine stood in front of a display that held a pair of black and beige open back heels. They positively screamed 'Sexy, Intelligent, and maybe just a little dominating'. Maxine turned to Sinclair and asked "What about these? How do you think they'll look with the black skirt I bought last month?"

A delicate shrug and "they're nice" was Sinclair only statement. She started to turn and walk to another pair of shoes, these shoes would match a purse she had perfectly. She had only taken two steps when Maxine spoke. "What color?"

"Black and white."

"Damn it Sinclair do you have every pair of shoes in the world in your closet?"

Sinclair thought of her bursting at the waist 'shoe closet' and honestly considered the question. She did seem to have an endless supply of shoes, except when she wanted to get dressed. For some reason at those moments she could never find a pair of shoes that went well with her ensemble.

"No I don't. I do not have those," she said and pointed to the red heels across from her. "Yet, and by the way his dick is not small, not at all" she said before turning away in anger.

"Good job Juliet," Max called after her.

"Too bad Jax isn't Romeo," she mumbled to herself.

She couldn't explain her mood. She was angry and frustrated, but worst of all she felt stupid. She felt foolish for every one of her dreams, for every one of her thoughts that had revolved around that stupid, selfish bastard.

She picked up the heels. Immediately an associate showed up.

"Hello Sinclair."

"Hi Frank. Can I get this in a size seven?" she said and then turned to Maxine. "You know what the worst part is? I actually dreamed about him. Hell, I wrote best-selling books

about him.”

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of Sinclair. We all have fantasies and even though you don’t see it right now, you’re going to be very happy you had this experience.”

“I doubt that. All I feel is this overwhelming self disgust. Shame is the only thing I feel. Well, that and stupidity”

“Stop it right this moment. You should accept the experience and be happy, not ashamed and certainly not stupid.”

“No, so I shouldn’t feel this urge to burn down a bookstore.”

“I wouldn’t suggest burning down any bookstore. They’ve probably got the devil’s spawn for attorneys. I once went on a date with a guy who turned out to be one of their attorneys. He looked great in and out of a suit, but he was definitely an angel from hell, one of Satan’s favored workers I believe. If you’re going to burn down a building why don’t you set fire to my library? They sent me another notice saying I was missing three books.”

“Did you return the three books they say you owe?”

“Yes?” Maxine said hesitantly, as she tried to rack her brain. They had this conversation before. Maxine couldn’t actually remember if she had turned in the books. She only knew that she didn’t have them. She had been looking everywhere for them for a week and they had yet to show up in her apartment. As far as she was concerned that meant they were with the library.

“Your library, huh? Do they have any of my books?”

“If I say no will you burn it down anyway?”

“Maxine!”

“What if I donate some of your books, what about then?”

“Maxine!”

“Well, I had to try,” she said before scooping a spoonful of ice cream into her mouth.

“What about this one?” Sinclair said, pointing to a pair of hot pink four inch heels.

“One of us has it. Normally I’d guess it was you, but since you’re asking me, it must be Lena.”

“Damn ... why can’t it be Helena?” she asked absently. Helena was the newest recruit to the Closet Club, the all female’s club of authors.

“You’re kidding about Helena, right? Helena’s more a librarian than a sexpot.”

“Are you forgetting that she’s written some of the hottest, sexiest erotic stories either of us have read.”

“She’s still a librarian.”

“Are you forgetting that most librarians are sexpots? P.S. what do you have against librarians?”

Maxine ignored the latter question and focused on the first. She picked up a metallic deep purple wedge that somehow appeared chic and classy as she responded to Sinclair. “Are you forgetting that’s only according to the male brain and ... hey, no changing of the subject. Are you going to burn down my library or what?”

Sinclair couldn’t help it, the laugh started off deep in her belly and kept on bubbling until it reached her throat. When it finally came out it was loud and fueled by pure joy. That was the thing about Max, with her one couldn’t be too serious.

“Seriously, now” In response to Sinclair’s quirked eyebrow she repeated herself, but this time more sincerely, and without the giggle that had accompanied the first statement.

She took a seat on one of the benches provided for trying on shoes, placed her empty ice cream carton on the floor beside her feet, and looked at Sinclair with eerily serious eyes.

“Let’s recap. You slept with him yesterday. He didn’t call today, plus asshole boy has a record of not calling so he probably won’t call, asshole boy just happens to be the man of your dreams so whether you want to admit it or not you’re doubly hurt, and he was your first time, and ...,” She took a big breath “you refuse to release any of your pent up anger at my library just because they don’t have any of your books. Are you sure you won’t do it if I donate a book, how about the whole set, what then?”

“No.”

“Look sweetheart I know it’s got to hurt like hell knowing this guy is an asshole, but lets face it, all men are jerks, but to be fair we women aren’t all we put ourselves up to be. That’s life. Humanity is imperfect, especially when you add sex to the equation.”

“You know you’re a really shitty feminist.”

“Exactly, I’m a realist.”

“So Ms. Real, am I screwed?”

“Hell I know you were screwed”

“Hey!”

“But were you screwed properly?”

When Sinclair didn’t say anything Maxine simply nodded her head. “That good huh.”

“Better than any novel, but enough of that. You didn’t answer my question.”

Maxine shook her head no before placing her hand in the air to stop Sinclair’s flow of speech.

“I have two questions. First, did he give you any and if so how many? Just because you’re heartbroken, it doesn’t mean you don’t have to give up the goods? Friends gossip, especially about big dick sex.”

Sinclair was falling more in debt with Maxine every moment. The woman had an uncanny ability to keep her on her toes and her mind away from the pain that threatened her sanity. She stood before Sinclair shaking her head in affirmation as she tried not to laugh out loud.

“So how many?”

“Five.”

“Five orgasms. Fuck and Chuck gave you five orgasms and you’re complaining because he didn’t call. Consider yourself lucky he left you such a great gift. Damn, you think you could pass on my number?”

“Maxine Boswell!”

“Fine, back to your question.”

Maxine propped her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands. With her eyes closed she responded. “Whether or not you are screwed depends on how you look at the situation and how you react. If you look at it as an adventure, an experience then you are fine, but if you dwell on it and let it eat you up, well then sweetheart, you are screwed.”

“Sounds like something Lena would say.”

“That’s exactly what Lena told me when Richard left me for his secretary. Now what do you think about those shoes over there?”

Sinclair tipped her head and studied the shoes as if they were an exam question requiring an answer, before flashing Max a mischievous smile. “I don’t have them ... yet?” she threw over her shoulder as she ran towards the simple yet sexy black silk and crocodile leather shoes.

“Oh no you don’t,” Max yelled as she chased her. “Those shoes are mine.”

Chapter Eleven

MOMMY DEAREST

The early morning sun filtered through the sky staining it gold. But despite the sun's presence, he still slept content to wrap himself in his reverie.

Three loud persistent knocks woke him from his peaceful sleep. The sharp sounds snatched him from his erotic reverie with such cruel haste that he felt the muscles of his jaw clench in anger.

He had been so close, he was there.

Tonight had been the first night he had been able to see her face. Her vision came to him so clearly that he could count the endless lashes that rimmed her midnight almond eyes. They were perfectly framed by the cocoa shade of her skin and the twinkle in her eyes that drew him was more astounding, more breathtaking than ever. She was more beautiful than he had ever dreamed she could be.

She was perfection.

Her eyes had been dilated, wide with astonishment at the feelings assaulting her. They were something new, unknown and completely fulfilling. She had just reached completion. The orgasm had rocked through her body leaving her shuddering in ecstasy. Her body quivered and pulsed in relief from the flame of exquisite sexual tension he had stroked. He had felt the silken walls of her pussy contracting around his cock, begging him to join her in ecstasy. His body had responded with an affirmation. He was getting close, so close. Any moment now, just a few more thrusts and he would blow his load into the sweet, wet heat of her pussy.

"Umm ... Jax," Skip, Jackson's roommate said from the doorway, hesitant to approach the slumbering giant.

He simply rolled over in response trying frantically to recapture the dream, her face, which had so easily slipped through his fingers, as if it was wind born. He couldn't, wouldn't lose her face, the intensity of the happiness in her eyes was emblazoned in his mind. She was his to keep.

"Ian Jackson Wellington Phillips wake up right this minute."

He felt the wispy fingers of the nebulous dream move far out of his reach. As if it had never been.

Jackson's eyes popped right open at the sound of the voice. No lingering sleepiness for him, she had made sure of that. Her voice curled around him and stung like ice cold water. It was an unmistakable voice, cultured, elegant, and husky in nature, almost as unforgettable as its owner.

The loud clicking of her heels hitting the uncarpeted floor of the hallway told him he still had time. She had yet to reach his room. She had spoken from beyond the hallway. It was the only thing that separated them. He only had mere seconds until she was upon him.

A chill broke out across his body at the thought of being in her midst again. It had been years since he had to subject himself to the lethal potency of her presence. Unwilling to indulge in the anxiety she triggered, he pushed the feelings aside and psyched himself up for the meeting he could not avoid.

He fleetingly wondered if he would make it to the dresser before she walked into the room, then he disregarded the idea. He, instead, wrapped a sheet around his nude body and

waited for her to approach him. It was always best to be prepared and focused when in her midst, because whenever he lost focus around her, he found himself without a jugular.

She stepped into the room and Jackson was once again reminded of why few people ever recognized the soulless beast in her. She was beautiful on the outside. Even the sun seemed to bask in her glory. Its golden rays highlighted the blonde beauty that stood before him.

Jackson stared into sea green eyes identical to his own.

"Hello," he said once she entered the room.

The coldness of the solitary word caught her off guard in mid-stride. There was a flash of emotion across her face--pain, regret, and then finally shame. All went unnoticed by her son. Jackson simply watched as she took a step back.

Self preservation. *You always were an intelligent snake. Guarding yourself first, others second, even if those others were your children.*

"Is that all you have to say to your mother, Ian?" she asked. Her accented voice was soft and tinged with something that was almost nostalgia, but he knew that couldn't be it.

His mind latched onto the accent and instantly remembered why she had the accent that had been his birthright. He almost laughed out loud at the irony of an American woman with a British accent while he, a Brit, sported a perfect New York City accent.

No, she had denied him too much to be wistful. She had nothing to be nostalgic about. He had his memories, the ones that haunted him late at night, when he was alone and could not escape the coldness of a solitary night. No, his mother could not be remembering 'the good times'.

Jackson shook his head to rid himself of the painful memories. There was no point dwelling on the past, he told himself. He had to deal with the present and the woman that had invaded his sanctuary. He ground his teeth to prevent himself from speaking. *Ian*. She knew he hated the name and yet she persisted in calling him by it. Simply because it was the name she had given him. It was just like Madeline. Everything was always about her. Hell, she probably found fault with Newton because the sun must revolve around the earth. Damn it, she lived here.

"Hello mother," he said in response to her statement. It was the best he could do. She couldn't really be expecting anything more from him. Certainly not affection. No matter her actions, his mother was a very smart woman, a cunning woman, but a smart one, nonetheless.

She arched one perfectly sculpted blonde eyebrow at him.

He simply shrugged before pretending his attention had been riveted by his cuticles. He did not want to deal with her.

"Jackson," she said with such outrage that he felt his control snap.

"Remember mother, you're the one who wanted our relationship to be proper. I'm just giving you what you want."

Madeline flinched as if she had been struck across the face and she had. She could remember all too well what lesson Jackson spoke of. It was a lesson she would never forget. It had been emblazoned on her mind. It had shattered her heart. But she kept the affliction to herself, or so she thought. She was one in a very long line of mothers who had hurt their children in order to save them. When she had been a child watching her mother's actions, she had told herself that she would never be one of those mothers who hurt their children. Then again, she had also told herself that she would one day be Miss America.

Neither dream had panned out.

Jackson looked up at his mother in time to see her blink away unshed tears. *Always acting the part Madeline. Bravo.*

She took steps towards him with outstretched arms. As he watched her approach he felt the first stirring of panic rise in his throat. He suddenly understood the utter terror that mice felt when they saw the ferocious hawk descend upon them. Jax realized that he was more afraid of her than of any line backer he would ever have the unfortunate pleasure of meeting on the football field. There was no denying it. His mother's hugs scared the shit out of him. The price one paid for his mother's affection was always too high.

"Give Mum a hug, will you now?" she said before she wrapped her slim steely arms around his waist. She spent hours at the local gym wielding her body into the ultimate fashion essential--the perfect size two figure. Her strength was a testament to years of aerobics, Taebo, Pilates, yoga, and whatever else was in vogue at the moment. The one thing you could count on with her was that she was in style. Madeline was always in vogue.

"It's been a long time since we've seen each other. My how you've grown," she said without looking at him as she walked to the futon across from where his bed sat, across from where he stood.

Jackson watched as Madeline readjusted her position so that she gave him her best side. With her it was almost her best side. Madeline never gave anything but the best chilling impression. He wondered if now after years of performing the act, was it a habit or was Madeline still performing, like always.

Her mouth suddenly dropped open, in disbelief. "Ian what did you do to your hair? Your gorgeous blonde hair is gone. It was so perfect, an exceptional color. Most people would kill for your blonde locks and you ... you"

"Dyed," was all he said as he ran a hand through the chestnut strands in question, before sitting on the bed. He looked at the woman before him and saw that she was still astonished by the color of his hair. What he couldn't figure out was why? What did she care what he looked like? The way he figured, it was plenty too late for her to playing the adoring mother role.

Madeline couldn't bring herself to admit that he had changed. He no longer resembled her, she thought, and had to stifle the burning pain in her chest. He no longer looked like her little boy. He was no longer her little boy, not that he had been for many years, but she had indulged in the fantasy that he was still her little Ian, the child that had loved her before his father had tainted the purity of their affection.

He took a seat directly across from her. I might as well get comfortable he thought, seeing as today is going to be a long day.

Madeline's visits were sporadic catastrophes. Someone, never Madeline, was always left in a disastrous situation totally unsure of who they were and what exactly had happened. Out of habit Jackson's eyes swept the room quickly. He was searching for the eyes of his aide, but even before he found the room empty except for Madeline and himself, his mind reminded him that he would never look upon the eyes of the man who steadfastly protected him from his mother. He had removed himself from his life in a way that was so totally irrevocable that it had shocked Jackson to his core.

As if hearing his thoughts she spoke. "I got a message from your father yesterday."

"That's not possible. Father is dead, Madeline."

The cosmetic blush on her cheeks deepened. He had offended her. Twice. She was not foolish enough to believe her husband, Maxwell, was speaking from the grave. And he had called her Madeline, not even the disgust laced 'mother' that she typically received.

Over the years she had taught herself to swallow the bitter pill of regret. She had come to accept her fate. Her son did not exactly hate her. They just had issues. She had even begun to

convince herself that the word was laced with something purer than hatred. One day she actually thought she heard affection in his voice. A few seconds later she realized it was the static on the international phone line. Turns out a phone call to London from Accra, Ghana is not all that clear.

“I’m not stupid, Ian. I was at the funeral too. I know he’s dead, and no, he’s not speaking to me from the grave,” she said voicing her pain. “The message was from his attorney. Apparently he left us both a little something before his departure.”

After speaking she turned her face away from him and stared down at her hands for a few seconds before looking back at him. The emotion on her face was palpable. For the first time in his life Jackson saw fear in his mother’s eyes and he had never seen her show any kind of weakness, not even when her back was to the wall. That was a fact that scared him enough to wonder if he wanted to hear what message his father had sent her.

“The message is more for you than me.”

A chill ran down his spine. Immediately Jackson knew something was wrong. It was in the air, loud and yet silent like the proverbial white elephant. The anxiety coursing through the atmosphere was rough, thick, and enveloping like a steel cocoon. Something was definitely wrong. The question was what.

Jackson stared at Madeline totally confused. If the message was for him why did she look so damn scared, and why did he suddenly feel as though nothing would ever be the same?

Knowing he was going to regret the words, he still asked, “What exactly did my father say?”

A tiger can not change its stripes. People never change. They only cover their nature with masks, hiding their words and actions behind a polite façade. Even at his young age he had learned that lesson and it seemed it was being taught again. He tried to stop relying on her, but it was hard battling instinct. He should have been able to call on her no matter what. She was supposed to be the one he could depend on. But she wasn't. It was a lesson he didn't want to learn, but it was one his father had refused to let him forget. The old man kept pushing and pulling at him, reminding him that she was not the one he could trust.

The sun shone in his eyes blinding him to what was before him. Blind, he tripped, stumbled a few steps and then fell. His skinned knees stung, blinding him to where he was. The only thing he could think about was the pain. He wanted to cry out, but knew better. Crying was never allowed. It simply wasn't an option.

Instead he focused on escaping his solitude. He couldn't stand to be alone. He was scared and needed to get to her, but the ground made it impossible. The sinking characteristic of the earth made it all the more difficult for him to keep his balance. He was used to solid ground. He couldn't handle himself on the uneven earth.

He picked himself up from the ground and looked around him, seeking aid. But there was no one to be found. He was alone. She had left him ... again.

Fear took hold of him and refused to let go. He tried to shrug it off, but it held on, clawing its ragged nails into the fragile shell of his body, breaking through his skin to poison his blood.

He stumbled through the sand searching with sightless eyes for anyone who looked familiar. A few people looked at him concerned, but most just turned their backs on him. Gone, he thought, as he started to scream, but he didn't make sense. The sounds falling from his mouth were a jumble of consonants and vowels that weren't comprehensible. Only she could understand him when he spoke this way and she wasn't there.

Blind and mute, anger weaseled its way into his heart and clung to him. All he could think was that he was going to be left here alone with all these strangers.

Suddenly the sounds formed to make a word, a single word that he hoped would be enough. "Mummy," he screamed over and over again as he struggled through the sand, desperate to find his mother.

His short, fat legs pumped up and down, covering little space despite their full effort. His legs were not long enough, but they would do. They had to. They had to take him where he needed to be. They had to take him to her.

It seemed as though he ran forever. He sought for so long he didn't remember what had initiated the search. All he knew was that he had to find her or else he would be lost, lost to all.

Strong arms lurched out of the sky and latched onto his waist. He was bodily lifted from the ground, thrown into the air.

The sound came from his throat and lunged through the air. He had felt it come up, been unable to repress it, had actually reveled in it, until he saw the face of the one who held him, then ... then he regretted it.

The little boy's scream pierced the air, drawing attention to him and the young woman who held him. All around them individuals shifted with apprehension and turned to gaze at them curiously, wondering if they were witnessing something sinister. Is that young woman kidnapping that boy, they thought? They turned away uneasy, unsure of what they were seeing, but the resemblance between the golden haired boy and the blonde woman holding him eased

their conscience just enough for them to turn away. All around them individuals told themselves that they had no business assuming things, it was their duty to mind their business. She had to be his mother, they thought, and then were relieved when they heard him laugh.

"Mummy," he said, a giggle rising up with the word.

"I told you not to walk away, Ian," she said. The words were hard, but the tone was light and just a little playful. He immediately knew he wasn't really in trouble. If he was really in trouble he'd know from her voice and face. He always knew when a punishment was coming. His mother was like a book, easy to read. He could always tell when it was bad and his toys were to be taken from him for a period of time or when all he would receive as punishment was a light scolding.

Her emotions were always plainly written on her face and there was no anger or anguish for him to see. She hadn't been worried and therefore he hadn't been lost. It was like she said, "His little body didn't let him see as far as hers."

She pulled his small body close to her so that they were chest to chest. She needed to feel his heartbeat next to hers. She needed to relish this moment before anger tainted the simple act of a mother loving her child.

She put him down waiting until his feet adjusted to the unstable nature of the sand. She didn't think she could bear it if he fell.

She was always this way around him, unbelievably cautious to the point of paranoid. It probably had something to do with his conception and birth. He was a miracle, one she had to fight for.

She held her fear from him, determined to make this outing joyous. She projected enthusiasm into her voice. "Did you have fun?" she said as she knelt before him. She was now at his eye level. At this position she could gaze into his lovely sea green eyes. She loved his eyes, his mother's eyes, like she had never loved her own.

He nodded his head in agreement. Up and down he threw his head, his movements were the jerky movements of a child still getting used to his body.

"I was having fun," he said. A shadow passed across his young face. He features scrunched in unease before he spoke, "And then"

"And then you lost mummy," she said finishing his statement.

He nodded his head in silent agreement and then continued to speak, "I fell and then I got scared because I couldn't find you, mummy," he said with a sob.

Her heart had skipped a beat when he told her he had fallen, but none of this showed on her face. The few years of motherhood had taught her that mothers didn't let their children see them in distress, at least not good mothers.

"Well," she said, "you found mummy, and you're never going to lose mummy again, right?"

"Yes, mummy," he said, tears welling in his eyes.

She looked over her son knowing she had to ask the question-- afraid of the answer. The sun glistened on his golden locks. To her he looked like an angel, a gift from God. If only ... she let her thoughts trail off, unwilling to even think the words. Instead she asked the question that had plagued her moments before.

"Did you hurt yourself when you fell?"

Her mother, his grandmother, had told her over the phone yesterday that her fears of hurting Ian were not irrational, especially when one considered the house she lived in, but there was nothing she could do about the house. It had been as it was before her and would remain the

same long after she was gone. The house had seen centuries-- it wasn't going to change and neither was the man who resided in it. He couldn't conceive of placing his antiques in storage simply for a child, even if that child was his first born and heir.

Ian looked up at his mother and saw the emotions pass over her face. He didn't exactly know what she was thinking or feeling but he knew she wasn't ... happy.

"Mummy sad?" he asked wanting to make her smile. He did the only thing his juvenile mind told him to do. He kissed her. "Smile, mummy, smile," he said voicing his needs.

She indulged him and flashed a bright set of even white teeth.

"Yay," he giggled as he jumped up and down, pleased by her actions. She had smiled for him, simply because he had requested it. His mother had become his puppet, his lovely beautiful puppet. Even at his young age he knew this was something special.

Suddenly he looked up and saw that the sun wasn't shining down in his eyes blinding him like it had before. His father was standing above his mother, still unnoticed by her.

"Daddy," he cried before he broke his mother's grasp, throwing himself at his father's shins. From behind his sunglasses the man peered down at the little child that clung to him. A cool smile broke across the man's face and Ian felt himself shiver. Confusion and goose bumps broke along his skin.

He wasn't afraid so why did he feel ... scared. He was too young to process the feeling. He only knew that his father's face wasn't making him happy, and so he started to cry.

"What the hell did you do to the boy?" the man barked down at the woman who knelt before him. She looked up at him ready to answer, but couldn't. The words caught in her throat as unusual. Fear made her mute and immobile. She couldn't move away from his anger. She couldn't tell him that it was his cold, angry demeanor that was scaring the child, so instead she stared at him from where she sat with her hands in front of her face shielding her eyes from the harsh sun and him.

From her belly she felt bile and self disgust rise. She felt so scared, so afraid, and so helpless. She couldn't ignore his cold black gaze.

She was going to be ill if he didn't stop looking at her like that. She had received the look enough in their five years of marriage that she didn't need to see his eyes to know how they appeared. Eyes that had once heated with passion for her were now only able to burn with a rage that had her crouching. One day he was going to hit her and that would be the day it would be all over, that would be the day he would kill her in rage.

Suddenly the child in his arms started to struggle and cry in earnest. Ian wanted to escape the steel cage of the man's arms. The man's cold demeanor made him uneasy and he wanted comfort.

He wanted the soft loving arms of his mother.

The soft sobs escalated into a shrill scream that pierced the sky. Once again, those who sought comfort at the beach were looking at the child wondering if he was being harmed. Some even began to point and whisper unsure if they should intervene.

The man paid no attention to those around him. He never noticed that the child's actions had garnered unwanted attention. He simply lifted the child higher in the air, ignoring his pleas. He waited until Ian noticed he was on level with his father before he spoke. "Why are you crying?" he asked. Even to the child's ears the words were cold, silently demanding submission.

Ian couldn't voice his apprehension, he didn't even understand that he was uncomfortable with his father's cold anger, so he said the only thing he could think of. "I fell, Daddy," he said. It was the only thing he could think of that warranted his discomfort and

unhappiness.

Unwittingly the child had given him the ammunition he had coveted. Finally his gun had the bullet it needed to strike at the bitch that was his selfish wife.

His lips spread into a quick cold smile that the woman almost missed. "That's because of that shit mother of yours. From now on you stay with your father. That way you won't get hurt by her negligence," he said all the while gazing into the shocked eyes of the woman in question.

The icy nature of the words burned a raging hole in his mother's breast and she knew that her greatest fear had come true. He had his revenge on her. The man she had promised to love and honor had finally struck her where he knew it would hurt her the most and she mourned for her loss, because she knew without a doubt that today would be the last day Ian was her child. From now on she would simply be his mother.

Chapter Thirteen

STRAIGHT TO HELL WITH WEDDING BELLS

Sweat poured down his back to puddle at the bottom of his spine. His skin itched and burned where his perspiration slicked skin stuck to his bed sheets. He could feel his heartbeat increasing, racing to keep up with the chilling thoughts running through his brain.

He blinked once, twice, and then simply shut his eyes hoping that when he opened them the nightmare would be gone. He pinched himself and then opened his eyes only to stare into eyes identical to his, eyes that he had hoped would not be there.

He could feel her fear and anger in the air. They permeated his skin. They were so strong they were palpable and ... tainted with just a hint of insecurity.

In her eyes Jackson had seen the hard glint of terror. Madeline had no fear so this had to be bad and it was.

The reason for the fear he saw in Madeline's eyes made itself so clear now. She had every reason to be afraid. They both knew that he would never get married. He would rather be quartered before being sent to hell. Hell, he would rather be castrated and quartered before being sent to hell, and considering how much he loved his dick that meant he was not getting married. Never, ever happening.

He had sworn off the ceremony and deemed the whole thing as unfitting for him. He knew better than to put himself through that kind of pain. He wasn't a masochist. He did not get off on pain, especially his own pain. And that was exactly what marriage would be to him, an endless amount of excruciating pain. He had made his ideas concerning marriage very clear to Madeline and his father, the same father that was trying to force his hand into marriage.

It didn't make sense. Why was his father trying to make sure that he made the same mistakes he did. Growing up he had watched his father stifle himself in order to endure a family composed of a wife he hated and children he could barely tolerate.

So why would he ask him to get married to a woman he didn't even know. None of it made sense.

"No," the word was ripped from his mouth by the anger coursing inside him. The single word was harsh and as bendable as steel. It caught Madeline short. She tripped and stumbled before righting herself. She was so shocked that he would actually disagree that she had forgotten to breathe.

She could see it in his cold green eyes. Jackson wasn't going to change his mind, he wasn't going to get married and yet he had to. He had to get married or else she lost everything, every last damn thing she had worked hard for. And she had worked her whole life for this score and she wasn't about to let it slip through her manicured fingers. Hell, she was so ready to get what she deserved that her palms actually itched and burned.

When her attorney had read Madeline her husband's will she had thought only one thing. If that bastard Maxwell wasn't already dead she would have shot him her damn self.

Jackson watched his mother go pale in the wake of his answer and felt a savage satisfaction that should have made him sick, but it didn't, instead he relished it, enjoyed the fact that Madeline couldn't force his hand, for once. He was old enough to make his own decisions and he knew better than to side with Madeline, especially regarding *his* marriage, a marriage that was not going to happen.

Jackson knew Madeline, he knew her well. Madeline needed his father's money like humanity required water and air, she couldn't survive without it. It was her sustenance. Without it, the dry heartless bitch he knew, would surface. Without his father's funds she couldn't hide her acrid nature.

She walked back to the futon she had vacated and took a seat. Her words were cool and calm, a testimony to the ice coursing through her veins. "You have to get married. I know how you feel about this, but this is not about you."

"If I get married it will be my decision, and regardless of what you think Madeline, this is

all about me, not you. It will be my name and signature on the certificate.”

“Look I know we haven’t always seen eye to eye, but”

His short bark of cold laughter caught her off guard and for a few precious moments she simply stared at the man she had given birth to, the man who was supposed to love her, but he was making it very clear to her that it was not the case. She felt his hate washing over her like a tsunami. She was tossing and rolling in a sea of pain. He had cast her overboard in the flight of his rage. She was drowning in it and he had just thrown away the only lifesaver on board.

Angry and hurt she yelled at him. “You’d lose your family inheritance just to spite me. I knew you hated me, but I didn’t know you hated me this much.”

For a second Jackson’s face was lit with shock. He hadn’t expected her to respond in such a manner. Madeline never showed emotion unless there was a reason for it.

Coolly, he composed himself as he ran a hand through his hair. “Madeline, not everything is about you. As hard as this may be for you to believe, my desire to stay a bachelor is not about you.”

“Like hell it isn’t.” Jackson looked up in shock at her. Madeline never cursed, she considered it unladylike. Another action betraying the emotion driving through her.

“Don’t give me that bullshit. Don’t think I don’t know about the stories your father told you. I’m not a fool, Ian. I know you hate me,” the alien shrillness of her voice grated on his skin, making his head pound.

He could not deny what she felt. Jackson watched the emotions on her face. She was angry and in pain, and for the first time he saw the humanity in his mother. Now she decides to have emotions?

“I want you to know that I didn’t marry Maxwell for money, despite what he told you. I loved your father. I still do. When we were younger he was carefree, so enthusiastic about life, he was ... beautiful. I thought he was beautiful, but then he became bitter, consumed by the notion that I married him for his money, just because he wasn’t physically beautiful.”

He watched her in shock, the woman he had known his whole life, his mother was showing another side of herself, one that wasn’t cold, calculating, and devoid of emotion. Suddenly he could see the heart beating beneath her breast. Apparently it wasn’t as dried and shriveled as he had thought. He wondered if a twenty three year old could die from shock, because that was the way he was going to go if his mother kept this up. But then just as quickly as the emotions came they disappeared. The old Madeline was back and in style.

“You can’t do this to us,” she screamed before breaking off in heartfelt sob.

‘Us?’ he thought and then comprehension dawned on him. All the regret and shame he had felt pooling in his stomach dissipated. Madeline was back and up to her old tricks. “You’re really pulling out the big guns aren’t you mother?”

She ignored his comment and continued to speak. “How do you expect to pay for college, this college, without your father’s money? Don’t jeopardize your future just so you can be stubborn.”

“Jeopardize my future? You don’t think marrying some woman I don’t care about for money will jeopardize my future?”

“Nobody said you couldn’t care about the woman. I understand that you may not love her, but you should be able to tolerate her. Isn’t there some woman out there you’d be willing to wed? Someone you’re dating right now?”

He ruthlessly pushed back the vision of the face that immediately entered his mind. He could not and would not go there. In that field lay mines that he would do best to ignore.

Damn it, what the hell was going on in the world? Had everyone lost their mind?

He'd always known that Madeline had issues with reality but how she had infected Father with her affliction, he would never know. The man had to have been insane to do this to him.

"No," he said before walking towards his dresser to grab a pair of jeans. Uh uh. No way. There wasn't a chance in hell. He was not getting married. Frustrated Jackson shed the sheet that hid his naked body and quickly stepped into the jeans. He pretended to be focused on buttoning closed his pants and prayed to God that Madeline got the point. He was not marrying for money. Apparently God wasn't listening because she continued to speak.

"There's not a single woman you'd be willing to marry?" She sounded so shocked and exasperated he almost chuckled in response.

"The answer is no. It's just a plain and simple no," he said shaking his head in the negative to cement his position. He was never getting married.

She shrugged a shoulder before taking a step towards him. She placed his hand on top of hers in an attempt to stabilize him. "Maybe if you spent a few days thinking it over"

He looked into her sea green eyes and told her the truth. "The answer will still be no. I'm not going to change my mind. Marriage will never be an option"

"Damn it Jackson you have to be mature and consider more than just yourself when making your decision."

He spun around to face her, his face livid with anger, his body tight with emotion. "I am thinking of more than myself. I'm thinking of her and any children that could result from the union. Do you think I'd stay married to a woman for even five years and not have at least one child with her, let alone my life? How many kids do you think I'd have with her? Three, four? How many lives do you think would be affected by my actions?" He didn't need to add that he didn't want to make the same mistakes his father had made.

"What about Josephine, Jackson?" She couldn't have cut him more deeply if she'd been holding a knife in her hands.

"What about her," he said through clenched teeth. He knew exactly where she was headed and he knew he would not enjoy a single second of the bumpy, jarring ride.

"Damn it, how do you expect her to survive without an inheritance?"

"Like every other child who wasn't born with a silver spoon in her mouth."

"She's too delicate to be penniless."

When he heard the word delicate he pictured his sister, Isabelle Josephine. snowboarding, it was her favorite pastime.

"She's not delicate. She's the total opposite of delicate."

Again she ignored him. "How do you expect her to enjoy her youth without the money she is accustomed to? She has desires, expensive loves."

Immediately Jackson pictured Isabelle's baby, her car. She loved the car almost as much as she loved him and it would break her heart to sell it, which is what she would have to do if he didn't marry. He then considered the fact that if he did marry, Isabelle's heart wouldn't be the only one broken. The lesser of two evils, she would have to sell the damned car.

"Aren't you going to ask why Isabelle isn't here with me?" Something about the softness of her voice as she spoke sent chills up and down his spine setting his teeth on edge.

"She wanted to see you, but the doctors told her it wouldn't be wise to travel."

Madeline waited a few moments hoping he would ask, but she knew him. She knew he cared too much to ask. He was too afraid of what he would hear.

“It’s her heart, Ian. Luckily her doctors found it early, but its bad Ian. She’s going to need surgery. We’ve already gone to see a couple of doctors. The surgeries needed to correct the hole in her heart could be as much as a million dollars. A million we don’t have unless you marry before your next birthday.”

For the first time in his twenty three years Jackson watched as his mother shed tears. He wrapped one arm around her thin frame in an effort to console her. A gasp of surprise could be heard from him when she nestled into his embrace, seeking comfort, seeking assurance that all would be well. He could feel the hot, wet moisture of her salty tears against his bare chest as she cried.

He was not marrying for money. He was marrying for Isabelle he told himself before he gave his mother the answer she sought.

Chapter Fourteen THERE SHE BLOWS

She bent to take a sip from the water fountain and then she immediately straightened.

Note to self--invest in pants that keep unmentionables unseen or in unmentionables that desire to remain unseen she thought as she readjusted her lace thong cut panties.

She had opted to wear her super low riders today. She had felt sexy this morning or at least she had wanted to feel sexy this morning. Unfortunately she was quickly beginning to regret her choice in clothing. The damn jeans had been riding just a little too low the whole day.

"And I was just beginning to enjoy the view," came a thick, deep voice from right behind her. She was definitely going to die of embarrassment, but not before she killed him.

She turned around so quickly at the sound of his voice she almost knocked them both off their feet. The only thing that kept them steady was the hands he placed on her waist to hold her still.

"Don't touch me," she said. Her voice was clipped and cold. It belied the heat she felt spreading through her body from his palms. Her body was an idiot. Those magnificently large hands of his had set her body on fire a little too easily.

Determined to free herself from his hot grip, she swatted at his palms and was pleased by the loud sound of skin hitting skin. Still he didn't budge. He didn't even flinch.

"Go to hell," she said just loud enough for him to hear. He wondered if he should back away from her. He felt as if he was going to get burnt by the flames of her rage. But then he remembered the happiness he had felt in her arms and that was before they had made love. No, there was no backing away from this.

"Good thing you're not angry with me," he said before his beautiful lips quirked into an amused smile. His hands remained at her waist. He wasn't letting her go.

Suddenly her fist came out of nowhere and was aimed straight for his nose. Only a quick maneuver kept his nose intact. His chin took the brunt of the hit. And it hurt like hell. Damn, she was not only pretty, she was dangerous. He might be in love, or at the very least, in lust.

He took one hand from around her waist to test his chin. It was bad, but not too bad. Hopefully it wouldn't start bruising for some time ... if he prayed.

Sinclair saw her opportunity for escape and took it. "Too little, too late, Jax," she spat at him as she turned. Instinctively his hands snaked out and grasped her thick waist.

She took a step to walk away from him and was shocked and angry at the strength she felt in his gentle hold. He was not letting go.

"Don't call me that." Although his voice was calm when he spoke, it froze her. Once the oxygen returned to her beating heart, Sinclair realized that her heart had actually skipped a beat in fear, need, and compassion. She had made him angry, but more than that, she had hurt him. She felt her words slice through his thick skin to settle in his chest.

"Why not?" she asked on a whisper, almost afraid of the answer.

He shook his head at her. *Why was it that he cared what she said or thought? Why was it that she could penetrate the façade that he presented to everyone?*

"I know what you mean when you say that, and I'm not that person. I'm not that way, not with you. I've never been that person with you. I'll never be that way with you. You're different. You've always been different. Long before I met you, I knew you were different."

Her heart wanted to believe he was telling the truth, but her mind reminded her of what she had gone through this past weekend. Forty eight hours of insanity was hard to forget.

"You didn't call. I'm not so sure you're not that person Jackson."

Emotions he tried to hide shone in his eyes, but only for a second before he closed those gorgeous eyes on her, masking his pain. Curiosity and something in his eyes made her ask, "Is something wrong?"

He began to shake his head to deny anything was amiss and then decided to let her in. He needed someone in his court, someone on his side, someone he could be himself with and that someone was her. "Yes, well no. Right now I'm just confused. I just need good company right now."

"I understand. I'll leave you alone then." This was the speech she thought, the speech she

had dreaded all weekend, but knew she couldn't avoid it.

"You are the good company I was talking about," he said with a smile.

"Oh," she said unable to respond with anything better. Her brain was out of order. There was definitely a vacant sign up there. The man certainly had the ability to make her speechless, and not in a good way. She always felt mute around him.

He looked down at his watch, muttered something incomprehensible, and then placed a hasty kiss on her cheek.

The kiss was a simple brush of lips against skin and yet it left her tingling with something that required more than just a simple kiss to appease. He had lit her fire so quickly she heard herself gasp in astonishment.

Sinclair stared up at him in shock. The kiss had been the kind of kiss a man gave a woman he was comfortable with. It wasn't a two day kiss. She wasn't even sure it was a two month kiss.

"Here's my address," he said as he handed her a sheet of paper. "Meet me there at two. I know you don't have any classes then, so there are no excuses. P.S. technically I'm not too late to call. You told me within the next two days on Saturday. That gives me to Monday, which is today, and the way I figure, an 'in person appearance' is much better than a phone call. Two o'clock, sweetheart, and don't be late" he said as he backed away from her.

"Later, we're going to talk about your propensity for violence. We don't have time to talk about that right now because we're both going to be late sweetheart. And I don't want you to be late because of me, so chop chop," he said before turning away from her.

Sinclair remained where he had left her. There she stood by the water fountain with heat coursing through her veins. She was still in a daze from the kiss and then to top it off he knew when she had her classes. She knew when his classes some of his classes were because she was in one of his classes and she had the uncanny ability to notice him in a crowd, and so she had of course, noticed when he entered and left class. She wasn't stalking him, she just noticed him. The fact that he knew her schedule was throwing her for a loop. Did he notice her too?

The thought that he did kept a smile on her face the whole day.

Chapter Fifteen

ONE BRAWL, A BALL, AND A BASEBALL

She knocked three times and waited. Sweat climbed down her back as the apprehension in her stomach heated to a boil. It was her greatest fear. No one came to the door.

She took one step back and turned, headed for the stairs. She was a coward and did not have the spine to find out if he had not really meant what he said.

Her eyes slammed shut of their own volition before she took a deep breath steadying herself. She turned back around to face the door. It could not be that hard to knock again.

She counted to thirty and then knocked three more times. This time the sounds ran loudly in the hall, no fearful timid knocks this time.

When no one came to the door by the time Sinclair reached sixty, she turned and started down the hallway.

Sinclair was halfway down the stairs when a door opened. The creak of wood giving under pressure told her that whoever had opened the door was standing in the hall. Still she didn't turn.

She did not dare look back for fear that his door hadn't opened. Instead she took a soft step and descended down the stairs.

"Sinclair?" he called.

She stopped at her name, but the voice was different, raspier. Just a little harder than the one she knew.

She turned and found him before her. He must move like a cat she thought. She had not heard a single sound.

The man in front of her was fairer, thicker around the shoulders, and a few inches shorter than Jackson. He gave her a friendly smile, and she instantly knew she could trust him. He had that open beguiling face that screamed Boy Scout, although she had to admit with his spiked blond hair he looked more the California surfer Boy Scout.

"Hey, my name is Skip Steele," he said before brandishing her with a bright, open smile.

She grasped his extended hand and responded. "Sinclair James."

"Nice to meet you," he said before he gave her a warm smile.

Skip turned and walked back to the apartment, leaving Sinclair to follow him. When she didn't take a step towards him, he turned around to cock one blonde eyebrow at her. Yup, he and Jackson were definitely friends. They had that arrogance thing in common.

Once he closed the door behind her, he turned to her. "Jax is running a little late, so he told me to let you in, he didn't want you think he blew you off."

Finally an explanation and one that didn't start off with "Although you're a nice girl ..."

Suddenly there was a tingling at the top of her spine. Something about the way he spoke made her think he considered it an oddity that Jax cared what Sinclair thought regarding the way he treated her, she was after all just a conquest. To the rest of the world she was simply another woman "Fuck and Chuck" had fucked and the man before her was the infamous one's roommate. She didn't even want to think about what he had witnessed.

He walked her to Jackson's room and then started to close the door. "For privacy, I'm sure you want to be alone," he said as he shut the door.

For the second time within Skip's presence she was thankful he couldn't see her embarrassment as she felt her cheeks heat. Thank God for melanin.

She walked around the room noticing the little odds and ends within it. His personality was evident throughout the whole room.

The room was clean, which was a shock. Boys weren't clean. At least none of the boys she knew. She wondered if it was always clean or if he had cleaned it because she was coming by. She felt more comfortable with the thought that it was always clean, because to assume he cleaned it because she was coming led her to believe that he cared what she thought of him, and that was an uncomfortable thought.

She picked up a toy figurine. She held it in her hands and pictured a younger Jackson playing with it. It was so old and worn that she knew he played with it often as a young child. Who would have thought that Jax was sentimental enough to have kept the used toy?

She pictured a little blonde boy brandishing his plastic hero around a comfortable living room. Sinclair could not help the smile that spread across her face at the thought of a young

Jackson.

She reached up to pick up a signed baseball on the highest wall shelf, and almost screamed in fear, as strong arms wrapped around her waist. But then he spoke. Right into her suddenly sensitive ears he whispered, "It's signed by Johnny Lee." He placed her on the ground before he removed his hands from around her waist. Her body still burned from the heat of his fingertips. She turned slowly afraid to run into him, he hadn't stepped back from where he stood.

He grasped her wrist and placed the baseball in her open palm. She stared down at the ball before her. It really did say Johnny Lee.

"Johnny Lee doesn't play baseball," she said before placing the ball back on the mantle. The man was a rock star well known for his ability on the drums and his wild life.

There was mischief in his eyes when he spoke. "You don't know that, actually I'm pretty sure he's played baseball before. Even rock stars play little league." He took a step towards her.

"That is not what I meant ... he isn't a baseball player," she said as she backed up a step. She could feel him caging her in. Any moment now he would surround her.

He gave an indelicate shrug. She watched his muscles ripple in reaction. She longed to be the air surrounding that shoulder.

"How did you ... why did he ...?" His closeness was affecting her brain. It seemed that nothing up there was working.

"It was all I had on me when I ran into him." He took another step, eating up the space that had separated the two bodies.

They were so close that only a few inches separated them--so close were they that they breathed the same breath. She could taste him in the air. She felt him along her skin.

She needed space.

Sinclair took a step back and found herself against the wall.

He moved with her, taking a step forward. She was still in his midst. There would be no escape. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. He was there on her tongue.

"What name are you published under?" he asked. His voice was smooth and fine, gliding over her skin like the softest silk.

Her mouth opened on a breathless sigh. She heard his voice before she heard the words. The sound stroked over her erogenous zones waking her sleeping desire.

Suddenly the words penetrated her lusty haze. *What name are you published under?* The question caught her off guard. She wasn't sure what she had been expecting him to say, but that was the last thing on her mind. It took her a moment to remember what her pen name was, his presence was definitely scrambling her brain.

"Amber Sinclair."

"Amber Sinclair?" he asked and once again there was that raised eyebrow that she was coming to fall for.

"My name, my full name is Sinclair Amber James."

"That explains a lot," he said as he played with a strand of her hair that had escaped her bun. "I went to the bookstore yesterday, and couldn't find you."

She couldn't help it, she had to know. "Why were you looking for me?"

He gave her a sly devilish grin that was almost shy. "I missed you," he whispered into the crook of her neck before placing a hot open mouthed kiss against the exposed skin. Fire licked the blessed skin.

"You missed me," she moaned. It was a breathless plea. His mouth had found the extremely sensitive skin right behind her ear. And he was tonguing it.

“Couldn’t stop thinking about you,” he breathed against her breasts, and then he lightly blew at them. Even though Sinclair was still clothed, she could feel the heat against her skin. Her nipples puckered in response.

But you didn’t call. Apparently she had said the words out loud for Jackson responded.

“I’ll explain why I didn’t later, much later,” he said.

His hands found the hem of her shirt and obediently she raised her hands.

“Pink this time,” he said as his forefinger lightly rimmed the bra. “Dare I dream of matching panties?” the smile on his face was evident in his words. She did not need to check.

“Hurry up and see,” she said and found her voice husky with lust. She was standing on the edge of the abyss and any moment now she would plunge head in, but she wanted him there with her.

He lowered his head and brushed a light kiss against her right eye lid.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered. “I want you to feel, not see, what I’m doing.”

She obeyed and waited, anticipating what he would do, do for her, do to her.

Sinclair could hear the rasp of cloth on cloth. She couldn’t see that he was lowering the sheets.

She heard the light tread of his feet against the rug as he walked to the bedroom door. He closed it before locking it. She felt rather than heard the click deep in her bones. The truth echoed through her veins. They were utterly alone. There would be nothing to interrupt them.

Jackson took a few steps toward Sinclair, and then stopped. He was more than twelve inches from her and yet she felt as though he was so close, so close he was inside of her. She felt the heat of his lust as his eyes roamed over her body. “Take off your pants,” he whispered. His voice was rough with need.

The loud rasp of the zipper teeth opening sounded oddly enough sensuous. It soothed and stimulated, for it proved that there would be one less barrier between her and Jackson. He hadn’t kissed her, had barely even touched her and already she could feel the moisture pooling between her legs.

Her determination to keep her eyes closed and her preoccupation with what he was doing made it difficult for her to concentrate on undressing. Somehow she got so tangled up, she stumbled and almost fell. When it came time to remove the pants, Jackson helped Sinclair untangle them from her ankles. His touch was butterfly light, leaving patches of skin scorched by desire.

Jackson slid his hands from her calves up to her buttocks, touching everything along the way until his hands settled on her ass, cupping the round cheeks. “Delicious,” he growled as he squeezed and cupped the firm globes before nipping her upper left thigh.

The feel of his teeth against her flesh left Sinclair shuddering in surrender. She lifted her hands and plunged head first into the ocean of desire.

He removed her two remaining articles of clothing and then stepped back from her. “You’re so beautiful, actually if I was a poetic man I would say you were exquisitely made,” he said and then smiled to himself. For her, he could become a poet.

Jackson looked up and caught her gaze. “Cheat,” he said without any heat.

“Like I was going to miss that look,” she said un-apologetically. “It isn’t everyday that Zeus looks at a mortal like she’s Aphrodite.”

“Zeus?” he asked.

She shrugged in response and all thoughts of gods and mortals left his head. The movement had drawn his eyes to her chest. Those beautiful mounds of luscious cocoa skin had

swayed with the movement. Zeus had become a mortal, a licentious mortal.

He lifted his hand to fondle those large beautiful breasts of hers. His thumbs flicked back and forth over her nipples coaxing them into diamond hard points. The rough moisture of his tongue snaked out to lick one engorged bud while the other nipple was pulled and teased by his long, strong fingers.

He came to her, his intention clearly written on his face. He was going to take her some place different today. He squatted down and then wrapped his hands around her thighs. Slowly, he widened her stance.

He parted the already thick lips of her labia, and watched as right before his eyes her sexual bud bloomed as the nectar her body poured out thickened. Jackson's eyes darted between Sinclair's face and her clitoris. He watched as the sexual tension within her body brought her to a feverish pitch, and he hadn't even touched her. Only his Sin responded to him this way.

His Sin, he thought as he dipped his head to lick the engorged nub.

She jerked and then shivered beneath his touch. A slow satisfactory smile spread across his face. Every time they touched, Sinclair proved without a doubt that she was real, that the satisfaction she received from his hands was never feigned.

It took all his willpower not to suck the fat bud between his lips, but somehow he maintained his composure. This sexual escapade was not for him. He wanted her to shiver in his arms, against his tongue.

Jackson had known from the moment he saw Sinclair on campus that she needed more. She deserved more from him and today, today he intended to begin giving her more.

Jackson's large pink tongue darted out with intention, taking its time to stroke her clitoris with intensity, not force, slow and steady. He watched her face as his tongue stroked back and forth across Sinclair's sexual button. He looked up as her soft lips parted on a soundless exclamation. Thoughts of beauty drifted through his brain as he watched her.

With a new objective, the position of his head shifted, along with his method. Quick, short rasps of his tongue grazed against her sensitive flesh. Beneath the onslaught of his lips and tongue he found her flesh moistened more. His tongue found the sensitive right side of her clitoris and immediately Sinclair's breathing changed. It became more labored. Soft throaty sounds escaped her parted lips. They were failed attempts at forming words.

His tongue gave one quick flick, a second quick, and then a third before Sinclair's muscles tightened in reaction. Beneath his hands he felt the muscles of her thighs contract as Sinclair's orgasm gripped her.

"Oh God. Oh my fucking God," she kept moaning as her body found release.

Jackson continued to lick and lick, drawing out Sinclair's orgasm. A few minutes later he lifted his head to find Sinclair's gaze still low lidded and heavy. A shy smile played across her face. Jackson had duped it the 'satisfaction smile' two nights ago. Thoroughly pleased with himself he stood before her.

It took her a few seconds to realize Jackson wasn't grabbing for her. He was in no way attempting to make love to her. As a matter of a fact, he had backed away from her and placed about four feet of space between them.

She took a step towards him. Unconsciously he backed up in reaction. Okay, not a good sign, she thought immediately, and then silenced the painful thought. Sinclair knew Jackson wanted her, at least physically. The proof was before her eyes. He was not attempting to hide the large bulge between his thighs.

"Jackson," she asked hesitantly, "Are you hungry?"

"I just ate," he responded. He could still taste her on his tongue. Nothing compared to the thick nectar her body produced for him. It was better than any ambrosia the gods had ever tasted.

Her smile was shy and hesitant. "That was the appetizer, aren't you ready for the main course?" she asked with arms open wide.

"If you're not satisfied I can take another bite," he said before his face broke into a lazy, sexy smile that threatened to take her breath away.

Sinclair looked into Jackson's eyes and saw shadows. In his eyes laid mists that shifted and swirled, absorbing light and providing darkness in return. Jackson's eyes showed her the truth. He was hiding. *From what? From me?*

Anger flared so suddenly beneath her skin with so much force that she wondered if she would burst into flames due to the intensity of her emotions. He had brought her here, not only physically but emotionally. He had forced her hand so that she had nothing to hide behind and he wouldn't even give in to his desire for her.

Jackson watched her body tighten and coil, and thought of a black panther. His mind immediately conjured up an image of a wounded one ready to strike in defense. It was an unnerving thought. She was hurt and ready, and willing to hurt. As a precaution, he took a hesitant step back, and then stopped short.

Sinclair was hastily walking around his room retrieving her discarded clothing.

"Is this going to be our pattern?" he asked her naked back. Oddly enough she had turned from him to put on her bra. He smiled at her action until he realized that she didn't respond to his question. She was ignoring him, pretending that what happened did not occur.

The only indication he received that she heard him was a slight tensing of her shoulders.

After long tense moments she spoke. "This is not going to be how it is, because this is not going to happen again," Sinclair said before jerking her shirt on. Quickly she stepped into her jeans and then thanked God she had opted for slip on shoes. *The sooner I am out of here the better.*

"Why the hell not?" he asked her on a soft, cold whisper.

Though she had known him, let's be honest, a few hours in total she had come to understand that the quiet voice was the no nonsense voice. Well too bad, I don't care, she thought as she headed for the bedroom door.

She never made it to the door. Jackson's arm snaked out, latched onto her by her elbow, and jerked her around almost painfully to face him. Almost immediately the iron grip loosened.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why aren't you inside me," she retorted in anger, without thought, and then immediately regretted the statement. It told of all the emotion she had been trying to hide until she was out of his presence.

He caressed her left cheek and stared at the woman before him. You're definitely a big cat, most likely a panther, he thought as the image of the wounded dark feline flashed through his mind once again.

"Are you a Leo?" he asked on a whim, barely registering that the words had left his mouth.

"Yes."

Thought so.

"Today was an apology. I wanted to make up for yesterday. I wanted to call. I really wanted to call, but I couldn't. I didn't get a single free moment. I know how I felt knowing I couldn't speak to you after it took me so long to find you. I can't image what I put you through.

That's all it was. I'm not trying to distance myself from you."

She wanted nothing more than to reach up and slap that look off his face. Whether he knew it or not, he was toying with her emotions and she didn't appreciate being anybody's blow up doll.

Sinclair looked into his clear green eyes and knew he was lying and telling the truth at the same time. What he had done for her was his way of apologizing for leaving her worried about his intentions, but he was definitely trying to distance himself from her. Ironically his honest eyes told her Jackson didn't know of its existence. He didn't know he was lying. He didn't know he was trying to place as much distance as possible between them. Sinclair wondered why he was distancing himself, but more than that she was worried about why he wasn't conscious of the act.

Sinclair took a few seconds looking deep in Jackson's eyes hoping that she would see something different, hoping that she was wrong. Unfortunately neither pair of eyes lied.

"Believe what you want Jax, but I know the truth," she said to him. *And I'm going to act according to that truth.*

"The truth is that was all about you and nothing else," he said before he placed a swift kiss on her lips. He turned and walked towards to the standing fridge that took up one corner of his bedroom. "Thirsty?" he asked. She watched him and wondered at his nervous mannerisms. *Definitely not a good sign.* Jackson kept putting his hands in his back pockets and then pulling them out. She watched him do this three times before she responded. "What do you have?"

"Cola? Water? Tea?, "he called out each as he went through the refrigerator. He turned from the fridge quickly and stood before her. "Want something else? I've got other stuff. Hold on a second," he said in a rush and before she knew it he was opening and closing cupboards. The only sounds to be heard were the slamming of the cupboard doors punctuated by inaudible sounds that she guessed were curses.

Sinclair strolled out of the bedroom to meet Jax in the kitchen. "Just give it to me straight. Whatever it is, I can handle it."

Jackson stood before her, legs braced apart, prepared. Prepared for what Sinclair thought, and then the reality of the situation hit her like a fist in the gut. She realized he was going to give her the speech. It made sense really when she thought about it. First you soften her up and then you break it to her softly. Eyes wild, she looked around wondering where he placed the box of facial tissues. Her brothers had warned her about them. They had to be close enough so that he could come to the aid of the unsuspectingly, suddenly distressed female.

Bingo. Sinclair spotted the box of tissues on top of one of Jackson's night stands.

"I'm not sure how to do this, so forgive me if I mess up. Usually ... actually I've never done this before. Usually I just don't bother. It's understood that I fly solo," he called over his shoulder as he went back to searching for the sodas.

"You could have just ignored me and I would have gotten the message. You didn't have to do all of this," Sinclair said spreading her arms wide to take in the entire bedroom. "I could have taken the fall without the padding."

"What message?" he asked cautiously. Damn the panther is back he thought. Tread lightly or she will rip out your jugular.

"Oh fuck you, Fuck and Chuck," she screamed at him as she headed for the bedroom door. He stepped into her path blocking off her exit route. As he looked into her eyes he wondered if it had been a smart move to stand in her way, but then again he had no intention of letting her get away. As far as he was concerned Sinclair was his to keep.

“Somehow we got our signals crossed, but breaking up wasn’t what I was about to do.”

“Can’t break up with someone you’re not dating.”

No response to that, huh? I thought so, she smirked inward, on the outside she crossed her arms against her chest, ready for battle.

“Look I don’t know what I said wrong, but I apparently said something wrong, something that led you to think that I was”

“Oh that you were going to chuck me out on my ass like last weeks trash.”

He continued speaking, deciding to ignore her comment. It didn’t seem worth a rebuttal. “I can’t exactly walk away from you.”

“You can’t?” she asked. The disbelief was evident in not only her voice. It was plainly written on her face.

Jackson took a step towards her and then held his arms out at his sides. “Sweetheart, I hate to break it to you, but I’m yours, whether you like it or not.”

“Oh.” Her mind wasn’t able to process anything beyond *oh*. For a few seconds she simply stared at him with wide eyes.

“Really?” she cautiously asked.

“Yes, really.”

He wrapped one arm around her, encasing her in a hug. “Now do you want to hear what I was going to say before you forced me to spill out my guts?”

Sinclair had the decency to look sheepish when she spoke. “I don’t know how to respond to that. Hell, I’m not sure if I should respond to that.”

“Better to pretend it didn’t happen.”

“Hmm, I like that option.”

“Since we’re pretending it didn’t happen, I can get back to asking you out.”

“You want to ask *me* out?”

“Yes, Aphrodite.”

“Do you realize that we’re doing things backwards? Normal people date and then well ...?” Sinclair looked pointedly at his bed.

“I guess I have to offer something better than the typical dinner and a movie.”

“What do you have to offer?” Her stance was all about the cocky attitude that her question was liberally laced with. Sinclair stood before Jackson with her legs braced apart and her left hand on her cocked hip.

“I’m offering you a ball, specifically the St. Valentine’s Ball.”

Sinclair sat Indian-style upon a luxurious carpet with a carton of sweet and sour chicken between her legs wondering how she had gotten herself in this position.

It wasn't that she wasn't used to sitting Indian fashion in the middle of another's bedroom. Even the Chinese food accompanied by Asian movie stars doing gravity defying leaps was not a novelty. No, this was nothing new, but the person sitting across from her was definitely new. This whole situation was not an everyday occurrence.

Across from her sat Jackson Phillips. The Jackson Phillips that was currently the most prized possession of both the football and lacrosse team. His position mirrored hers, Indian style, but unlike her he was not gazing around trying in vain to situate himself. He had obviously been in this position before, Sinclair thought, as she watched him deftly maneuver his chopsticks.

Chopsticks? Her mind screamed before she looked down to stare at the fork clasped in her short, plump, brown fingers. She was on a date with a man who used chopsticks. While he was an expert at chopsticks she could barely wield a fork. She was in way over her head.

Jackson was a pro while she ... she was at best a novice. Dating was a new experience for her, brand spanking new. Today was a matter of fact her first real date. Hell, it was her first anything date.

A heavy frown hung on her lips. She had always pictured her first date as a momentous occasion. The Prince Charming-esque man would walk up her door and nervously ring her doorbell. One of her siblings would open the door and then give him a good natured hard time before letting him in. Her date would then anxiously wait at the end of the staircase for her with his heart in his throat. Finally, she would descend the stairs ready to meet him. At the end of the stairs she would find her date dumbstruck and speechless by her beauty. When he, at last, regained his composure he would 'invite' her to dinner and dancing before waving goodbye and providing last minute assurances to her brothers that he would take proper care of her.

That was the ultimate teenage girl's fantasy, but it was her fantasy, her dream of what it should have been like, not that this wasn't satisfactory ... it just wasn't what she had dreamed of.

Determined to deal with the reality at hand Sinclair spoke to the man across from her.

"So Chinese food and Chinese actors?" she asked with a slight smile on her full lips.

"No, Chinese and Jackie," he said before placing a quick kiss against the lips he found himself drawn to.

"Jackie?" she asked with one lovely arched midnight eyebrow.

"Jackie Chan," he said before succumbing to laughter. She looked so beautiful and confused ... and lovely.

Thank God she's smiling Jackson thought. Pretending to be blind had nearly killed him. He had wanted to ask her what was making her so unhappy, but he had been unable to bring himself to utter the words. He was too afraid he was the reason for her unhappiness. He knew that today hadn't been a good day. Nothing about the day had gone as planned. The scene in his bedroom had been an utter catastrophe that he had barely salvaged.

And this ... this date wasn't even planned so he couldn't stop himself from imaging all the ways it could go wrong. And so he began to talk about nothing and everything. He didn't realize what he was saying until she asked him a direct question.

"So what were you thinking when you saw your little dainty sister snowboarding off that mountain?"

"Honestly?" he asked before piercing her with his blue green gaze. She shook her head in affirmation. "I wasn't thinking. I couldn't think of a single thing for about five minutes. I was

in shock. My heart was in my chest and then when my brain finally did make coherent thoughts all I could think was OH MY GOD over and over again.”

“Like any big brother you were scared, afraid of what could happen to her,” she said, her voice soft with sympathy and understanding.

“I wasn’t just scared. I so afraid, I was embarrassing. You should have seen her face when she got to the bottom of the mountain and met me. She wanted to pretend she didn’t know me, but couldn’t. We look alike. There I was, her older brother and I acted worse than any mother.”

“Oh, I don’t know. If your mother was there she probably would have done the same thing, but only worse. Mothers never seem to understand that life isn’t some obstacle course wanting to take out your legs.”

“Isn’t it?” he asked.

“What makes you say that?”

“Nothing,” he said before he turned his head, pretending to be immersed in the television, anything to avoid her gaze.

Never one to back down from a fight, Sinclair whispered as she settled herself beside him. “I just want you to know that you were the one who started it Mr. Melancholy.”

He turned to her and gifted her with a smile. “I’m sorry. It’s just that when I think about my life, about some of the things that have happened to me, I can’t help but wonder if it is all one big, cruel joke.”

Her finger tips ghosted along his face, comforting and warming him down to his soul, before clasping his angular jaw in the palm of her two hands. She braced her forehead against his and smiled as his eyes widened in surprise. As she spoke she stared deep into the sea green eyes that continued to memorize her.

“Never forget that what you’ve been through has made you who you are, and you are an incredible man. Never forget that when you need someone to talk to about anything, I am here for you. I am your friend and will always be your friend.”

“You’re more than my friend,” he whispered against her lips before brushing them with a butterfly kiss.

“So here’s a question you’ve probably heard a million times, but not lately. What do you want to be when you grow up? Where do you see yourself in ... let’s say five years?” she asked, desperate to know something, anything about him.

“Married,” he said without bothering to look up and Sinclair felt her heart flutter despite his obvious distaste of the word. He appeared to be the perfect example of a disillusioned young man and yet ... he saw himself married in five years.

“So marriage is definitely part of your future?” she asked hoping to get a more joyous explanation.

“Unfortunately,” he mumbled out. His attention was still fully fixed on his sweet and sour chicken. He didn’t even look up to see if she was still sitting there which was a good thing. Otherwise he would have seen the stark reflection of the affect his single word had on her.

It was the word heard across every single cell in her body. It hit the pumping muscles of her heart like a bullet shot in the dark. Its aim was deadly, precise, and she never saw it coming.

And yet her mind told her heart that it didn’t matter. It wasn’t like she had illusions of grandeur. She wasn’t exactly picturing him waiting down the aisle for her. She had never once thought he meant he would marry her so what did it matter that marriage was simply an obligation he had to fulfill, an obligation he seemed to be dreading like a man on death row.

Together they sat in silence. While Sinclair tried to collect her thoughts and the shattered pieces of her heart, Jackson tried to do anything but think clearly, for all he could envision was the wedding he would give hundreds of millions of dollars to avoid.

Hoping to dissipate the tension that hung in the air as thick as smoke, Jackson turned to Sinclair and settled himself closer to her so that they now touched shoulder to shoulder.

With a quickness that was surprising to Sinclair considering the lazy way he seemed to move around her, his hand darted out to capture the cardboard canister that held her Chinese food.

"Exactly what did you order?" he said right before his hand clasped around the container.

"Oh, no you don't!" Sinclair yelled at him and punctuated her statement with a quick slap of her fork against the sensitive flesh of his wrist. He immediately pulled his hand back in reaction.

As Sinclair reached down to grab her food her eyes caught his. The sad puppy dog eyes he presented had her heart lurching in her chest. Even though she knew he wasn't really hurt by her actions, she felt guilt nonetheless rise up in her chest. The man was cruel to play on her emotions like that she thought as she handed him the cartoon of food.

Jackson took one look at her face and burst into laughter. As he handed her back her meal he pressed soft lips against her neck. Her mouth opened to gift him with a throaty moan.

"You like that don't you?" he asked before pushing her against the futon behind them so that her shoulders were braced by it. She was between a rock and a hard place. She suddenly found herself pinned between his arms and he had no intention of letting her go.

"Feed me," he whispered to her. His baritone had taken on a husky note that made her nipples tingle with anticipation. "I'm hungry and I want to taste what you have."

She almost choked on the piece of sweet and sour chicken that suddenly had no desire to leave the confining space of her throat. She was parched and could barely think with his smoldering gaze. It kept her thinking things that she really should not have been thinking, carnal thoughts that she would give anything to be a reality.

"Feed me," he whispered against her parted lips. She tasted his breath, felt his need and obliged them both. She leaned into him placing a fork full of sweet and sour chicken against his lips. Sinclair watched as his full lips parted to allow the food access to the hot cavern of his mouth. As she watched she felt a hot white burst of lust explode along her erogenous regions. Her nipples tingled and she could already feel her vaginal muscles clenching in anticipation of holding that magnificent cock of his.

He opened his mouth and chewed, but his eyes never left hers. He never even made an acknowledgment that he had tasted the food she gave him.

"Feed me," he said a third time.

"But I just ...," she said, but stopped short when he shook his head in disagreement. "What do you want?" she asked so softly she was afraid he didn't hear her. She was sure he hadn't heard her when he didn't answer for long moments, moments that seemed to stretch on forever.

When she had given up on a response, he spoke. "I want a buffet ... a buffet of you."

A buffet of you. She couldn't think past those words enough to even make a response let alone move.

"Lie down sweetheart. I'm hungry." The voice was a rough parody of his normal speech. It reverberated along her nerves making her body pulse and ache with potent desire.

Sinclair settled herself along the floor beside him. She held her breath as she laid there

with her eyes closed trying to regulate her breathing. She knew he could tell by the rise and fall of her chest that she was beyond excited. She was scared and nervous. This time would be different than the first. This time she was more aware of what was going to happen, and she could not deny her fear of the sophomore slump.

He sat beside her towering over her supine body. Slowly with deft hands and her help, he removed her shirt before laying her back down on the carpet. She stared up at the ceiling as he moved down her body to remove her skirt. She wore her bra, panties, and heels and yet she felt more naked than a newborn.

He was staring down at her body laid out before him like the buffet he had dreamed of. The only sound in the room was the rasp of his labored breathing. With gentle hands he massaged both breasts and felt her nipples harden beneath his ministrations. He drew out the act, pinching and pulling both nipples, imitating milking motions.

Suddenly he was straddling her. Those few spots where his jean clad thighs touched hers left her in a state of pure arousal. Every inch of her body that touched his burned.

Sinclair stared up at the man above her with eyes wide with shock. He had pinched and pulled both nipples to the point where intense pleasure blurred with pain. The slight pain had her nipples hardening and getting more engorged. Her mouth opened on a sigh of pleasure.

His lips, soft as velvet, pressed against hers. She instinctively parted her lips for his kiss. Then his tongue, warm and moist, entered her mouth and leisurely explored, capturing the flavor and essence that was Sinclair. Quickly the strokes became faster, the thrusts went deeper, his mouth grew hungrier, heating her blood to a fevered pitch. It was a kiss that ravished and plundered, sending a surging rush of desire through him. He needed more.

With quick hands he removed her front clasp bra to expose her breasts to his gaze. His head descended to capture one pert nipple between his lips. The engorged bud was encased in the heat of his mouth and Sinclair couldn't stop the involuntary moan that escaped through her lips.

He lifted his head to gaze into her eyes. The heat she saw there stopped her for a moment. She had always wished that someone would look at her like that. Knowing he had her attention he licked his lips, and Sinclair could not help the way her eyes followed the movement of the slick hot muscle. "Now that's the meal I was talking about," he said before going back to pay homage to her breasts. Her nipples were delectable morsels too delicious to resist. He groaned around her nipple enjoying the taste and feel of the fat bud in his mouth. He moved his head to the neglected nipple, lavishing it with the same attention, all the while he pulled and pinched the other nipple.

Hot bolts of sensation coursed from both nipples to join the answering ripples of desire that converged between her legs. She rubbed her thighs against one another hoping to ease the ache between her legs. She needed relief, and she needed it now.

As if understanding her unspoken request Jackson lifted her hips to remove her black cotton panties. He stopped for a moment to hold her underwear against his nose so that he could drink in the scent of her arousal. His body clenched with the fragrance of her lust strong in his nostrils.

His strong hands wrapped around her thighs, spreading her before him. One index finger reached out to run along her slit. She was hot and wet just like he liked her. Her distended lips jerked beneath his touch.

He spread her lips so that she was open and naked before him. A platter he couldn't wait to taste. His head dipped down to blow a gust of air against her distended clitoris.

“Play with your nipples sweetheart. Tease me,” he said on a growl.

It was a command that she could not turn down.

From between her legs, he watched as she pleased herself pulling the full buds between her fingers.

His thumb pushed against the hard extension of her clitoris. Her immediate response was a shocked gasp. A fury of lust snaked out from her clitoris to wind around her heart. And then before she could get over his touch his mouth was there licking and sipping at her body, pulling it taut with desire. Very gently, he circled the engorged bud with the rough pad of his tongue. He licked at her, tasting her, eating her until she thrashed against the carpet, until she thought she couldn't take anymore.

“Jackson, please.” Her plea was a breathless moan that he felt. It tingled and tantalized the nerve endings along the head of his cock. He felt himself jerk in response.

Her hips lifted off the carpet of their own volition seeking the ecstasy of his mouth. Sinclair delighted in the hungry pressure of his mouth.

With one finger he probed the entrance of her vagina. She was moist and more than ready, but he wanted her drenched. His lips spread into a mischievous smile. With an orgasm she would be able to more than soak him. Intent upon that goal he slipped his finger between the heated lips of her sex.

“More,” she said as a thousand fires licked at her womb.

He immediately added a second finger. His broad fingers stretched the contracted muscles of her vagina, filled her with tension and desire. Sweat beaded down his forehead as he watched his fingers disappear between the lips of her pussy. His cock ached to the point of pain. Watching himself finger fuck her was driving him crazy. He felt her excitement, her passion, the sensations coursing through her body. He had to bite the inside of his cheek to stem off his orgasm.

He wanted to be in her when he came.

“I'm sorry, sweetheart,” he whispered against her heated flesh before he pulled his fingers from her soaked body. With shaky hands, Jackson managed to pull a slim foil wrapper from his back pocket and tear it open. He quickly fitted the protection over the long, thick length of his erection.

The moment Jackson pulled his fingers from her wetness, Sinclair felt bereft and empty, but he had something better for her. She felt the broad head of his cock poised at the entrance of her pussy and couldn't help the exclamation that slipped through her lips.

“Yes, oh god, yes!”

With one thrust Jackson seated himself to the hilt inside of her and knocked all the air out of Sinclair's lungs. He barely gave her a moment to adjust to the feel of his thick cock inside her before he began thrusting into her with an intensity that had not been there before. His movements were rougher, less controlled, fueled by the fire of his desire and something more, something she could not name. It was almost as if he was desperate to prove something.

Her breath caught in her throat when he grasped her hips and drove his cock deep inside her, touching that special place inside her and dragging against her clitoris on the down stroke. The hot excitement of her slick pussy, the claspings muscles, the intensity of her moans, all drove him to the edge. With his hands on her hips he held her imprisoned so that she could do no more than receive the hard, full thrusts of his hips.

His orgasm slammed into him drawing hers along. He jerked once, twice, and then a third time. The milking motions of her pussy drew out the orgasm until he felt she had ripped every

last seed from him.

“Oh god, what was that?” Sinclair asked once breath had returned to her.

“I don’t know,” he said “I don’t know,” before drawing her against his body.

There was something about the tone of his voice that frightened Sinclair. He sounded dejected and alone. Unsure of what else to do Sinclair wrapped her arms around him and drew his head down so that he rested against her breast.

After long moments he spoke. “I love the sound of your beating heart.”

He never noticed the single tear that fell from her eye.

Chapter Seventeen THE FIVE FALLEN

The room was cast in shades of silver and gold. It was romantically decorated so that all who walked into the room fell under the spell of amour. Sinclair found herself helpless to do anything else. Overstuffed couches were strategically placed to give privacy without alienating. Fat gold candles with intricate platinum designs were placed at each of the dinner tables and on the artfully illustrated shelves around the room that seemed to appear out of nowhere. Above each table swayed a candelabrum with silver candles that cast the room in soft lights. Candlelight glowed against everything in the room created the illusion of intimate grandeur. The only electric light within the room was an incredible chandelier with light teardrops that appeared to shine like only the tears of the moon could glow.

Sinclair took a step into the room and then stopped. So overpowered was she by the beauty of the room that she stood still and speechless drinking in the décor until Jackson reminded her that she was holding up the line to get in. Even then she needed his guiding hands to pull her into the room. It was an absolute reverie, something only seen in dreams or Hollywood.

Jackson placed his palm against the small of her back and led her to a corner table, iridescent with a candlelight glow. Palm against back. The touch was simple and yet for reasons he couldn’t explain, it meant so much to him. He was only able to admit that he relished the savage satisfaction he felt knowing she was there beside him. She was his.

The table the couple stood before was one of the smaller tables that occupied the dining hall. Immediately Sinclair noticed why. The table was meant to hold fewer people than the others. On their table there were only placements for six people. The rest of the tables were larger and were set to seat at least eight individuals.

They settled into the table’s intimate booth-like setting.

Sinclair tried to focus on what was around her, but found the task difficult with Jackson so close to her, touching her. The heat from his hands set her skin on fire. They had found a pattern. His hands would place a small, but direct amount of pressure on the small of her back, but then his hand would dip dangerously lower. Almost as if realizing it, the offending hand would tread back to the safe but sensitive area of her lower back.

Red hot bolts of desire shot out from the spot where his fingers met her sensitive skin. She felt herself shiver as goose bumps broke out along the trail his fingers marked.

She counted to five, and then realized that he had no intention of ending her torture. Hell, she wasn't even sure that he knew what he was doing. As a matter of fact, guessing from the placid look on his face he didn't even know she was sitting next to him.

Sinclair tugged on one of his lapels to get his attention. "If you don't stop touching me, we will be providing your whole frat with a show."

The shock on his face told her that he hadn't realized what he was doing. Jackson's eyes darted from her face to his hands and back again to her face before that slow, heated smile she had come to love showed up on his face.

Although he wasn't aware of the fact that he was touching her so privately, he knew now without a doubt that his little hellcat was turned on. There was a slight flush to her skin and her eyes were glowing.

"Horny?" he asked in a deep voice that sent chills down her spine.

She shook her head no. "That's not the kind of scene I meant," she said before a teasing smile crept across her face.

"Liar," he hissed at her as she dipped her head to hide her smile.

He moved her chair so that she was closer to him, so close that they were hip to hip before dipping his head and grasping her earlobe between his teeth. He gave it a slight tug and was rewarded with a gasp. Into her ear he whispered, "Lift your dress." Even as Sinclair contemplated the act she shook her head no. Even though their table was secluded in the deepest corner of the room, even though they sat in the back middle of the circular table so that their backs faced the wall Sinclair couldn't imagine doing what he wanted her to do without the fantasy ending with them getting caught naked in the middle of a delicious sex act.

"I can't ... I just can't," she whispered against his lips a second before they descended on hers. A surging rush of desire swept through him at the feel of her luscious lips softening beneath his, opening for him. His tongue thrust between her lips, intent on finding the sweetness he craved. His tongue warm and wet leisurely explored her mouth delighting in the intricate textures and tastes that were Sinclair.

He broke off the kiss, needing more, wanting more, but unable to claim what was his in public.

"Meet me in the bathroom," he demanded. His smoky baritone was little more a growl that brooked no protests. His eyes were a different thing. They pleaded with her. His cock was stiff and ready to burst out of his tailored pants and into her tight pussy.

"I can't walk into the men's bathroom without anyone knowing."

He gave her a devilish smile before responding, "It's a unisex bathroom."

"Hurry up" he whispered against her lips before giving her a quick kiss on the mouth. Jackson was only able to take two steps from the table before he was stopped short. Before him stood four tall blondes, the four men along with Jackson were better known as the Five Fallen.

A scorned young woman had given them the title in love and then in anger. She had taken one look at them and believed them to be angels. She had looked with awe in her eyes at them all and because every one of the five men had a face so beautifully created that it seemed as though Michelangelo himself had created the masterpieces, she had nicknamed them the Five Fallen Angels. She couldn't conceive that their creation had not been a deliberate, hands-on act of God.

But hatred soon burned in her chest when she realized that none of her angels, none of

the heavenly beings she had fallen for, had ever looked at her as more than a body, a woman never to be let in. She had felt betrayed by their lack of attention, affection, love. It was a day of dawning for them and day of awakening for her, that was the day she screamed from the top of her lungs, that like the one that fell before them they were devils, inhumane beasts occupying human skins. And so the Five Fallen had been born.

Ireland, the tallest of the men at six feet six, darted a quick look at Sinclair before focusing on Jackson. The question in his eyes was loud and clear. *Sharing?*

The last woman to find herself surrounded by the Five Fallen had been with all five of the Fallen ... at the same time. It had been a joyous occasion for all involved. It had been Hadden's twenty first birthday. The night had not gone as planned. It had ended much better than any of them expected. The five men had pounded the woman's pussy so hard and wrung so many orgasms from her body that she hadn't been able to walk for at least one full day. She had sent a thank you to tell them of her joy and inability to move.

Jackson took a step and found himself in the midst of the four men. Perfect he thought, let them all hear. He looked into the eyes of all four men before making the clear statement. "Don't even think about it. She is off limits," he said before turning to Sinclair. "One minute" was all he said to Sinclair before walking out of the room.

WITH HER BACK AGAINST THE WALL

Sinclair took a look around at the scene Jackson had left behind him, took a deep breath, and then admitted she didn't have the spine for it. She had glimpsed the glittery jaded eyes of the tallest blonde and she had felt fear, fear that she knew made no sense, but she could not deny its existence. She simply couldn't wait a full minute. There was no way in hell she was going to spend sixty seconds at the table that the four blonde giants were headed straight for, the table that the four menacing giants were going to be sitting at, alone with her for sixty whole seconds.

She found herself less than a step behind Jackson as he entered the bathroom. Lord knows how her short legs carried her so quickly. At five foot two she didn't have the length of limbs that speed walking required. Fear she admitted was the honest to God reason she was able to move so quickly. Those men scared the shit out of her. The way they had looked at her like she was a poisonous but fragile snake had been frightening. She had felt their eyes on her wishing their strong fingers were wrapped around her neck. She had been implicitly warned. She did not need a psychic to tell her that it would take much to win their trust.

Sinclair was so consumed with the thoughts of the terrifying blondes that she hadn't noticed that Jackson had backed her into a bathroom stall until she felt the cold metal door against her back. Hot versus cold, that seemed to be the game they played. Hot emotions and cold denials.

Silently she wondered how long he would play with her. How long would he keep her tottering on the edge of an abyss filled with sweltering needs, but unable to move, unwilling to move past their cold denials of need, of want, of love. How long before he tired of her and what would she do then. She told herself that her feelings were just infatuation at the most, but when the infatuation bubble burst it was going to hurt like hell. It was a fact that she couldn't deny.

As he watched her, the woman who had come to mean more than he was willing to admit, a surging rush of desire swept through him. His muscles clenched with gut churning need. He pressed his lips against hers unable to resist the haze of desire and need coursing through his veins. The velvety contours of her mouth enticed him, filling him with the need to breach their barriers. His tongue flicked across the seam of her lips coaxing them open. The feather light licks and teasing nips were tinged with an irresistible tenderness that seduced her to surrender. She opened herself to him and his tongue dove deep into silky sweetness of her mouth. The velvet warmth of his tongue sent hunger twisting through her body, rendering her completely vulnerable to the burning heat of his tongue.

He broke off the kiss with a tortured groan. She sighed softly into his mouth. It was an announcement of her budding passion.

"Lift your dress," he said as he lowered his zipper to free his aching cock. She complied lifting the chiffon layers before she lifted her leg to rest in the notch between his abdomen and hip. With one hand he gripped her thigh, holding her high and open, with the other he tested her. He slid his forefinger down the slick folds of her nether lips.

Sinclair flinched slightly, so slight was it that Jackson did not notice the act, but she did. Her body was sore. Its aching tenderness was a reminder of the things they had done together, the acts, the memories they hoped to build upon. The pain was a price she would gladly pay as long as he kept giving her satisfaction.

"I knew it" he whispered against her lips, barely giving the words time to register before he captured her lips in a hungry breathtaking kiss.

He slowly slid two fingers into her as she gasped for air trying to steady herself. Even

before his fingers had gotten first knuckle deep, his digits of delight had produced a white hot bolt of lust that had shook her from the core, from vagina out. In and out he slid before circling her clitoris with the full pad of his thumb. The orgasm that rocked her was almost immediate.

"And you said you weren't horny," he growled as he sheathed himself with the latex condom.

"I never said I wasn't wet," she responded with a wink.

Her saucy attitude sent a blinding bolt of desire through him. The way she smiled at him left him panting in need. She was so open, so honest, so full of life, and he loved that fact, but he didn't like the need coursing through his veins. He didn't like thinking he was the only one feeling this deep, pulling need to be with her, to be complete. He wanted her with him, as unsure, unsteady as he was.

Jackson placed a kiss against the sweet spot on her neck. She shivered in response before her mouth opened on a breathless sigh. Encouraged, he nipped the sensitive flesh with his teeth before soothing the infliction with a swipe of his tongue.

Sinclair's eyes slammed shut and her arms snaked out to wrap around his neck.

"You make me feel so good."

"Consider it payback," he chuckled against her lips before pulling down the spaghetti straps that held her dress. He let out a groan at the sight of her breasts, full and firm, fully exposed to his glittering gaze. He lowered his head to grasp the fat head of her nipple between his teeth. He let her feel his teeth, know the danger in his touch. She simply looked down at him and smiled. Her smile was one of innocent acceptance and understanding. She would give him whatever he needed, even if that meant physical pain to her.

He shuttered his eyes unwilling to see the truth shining in her eyes. He was a goner.

His teeth rasped against her nipple. The sweet sting left her in peril, balancing on the precipice of dark satisfaction.

"Harder," she groaned.

His teeth clamped around her nipple and Sinclair felt herself fall over the edge. Through the haze of delicious sensation she felt his answering smile against her flesh before he complied. The hard rasp of his teeth against the sensitive flesh of her budding nipple sent sweltering fires of need to her pussy. The sweet suction of his lips was a sharp contrast to the hard edge of his teeth. His contrasting ministrations sent Sinclair a strong pulse of pleasure that dampened her panties and made her knees go weak.

Jackson lifted his head from her breast to gaze at the woman before him. Unsure of just how much longer he could last, he guided his cock to her quivering flesh. "Look at me," he said before he breached her portal. With his eyes locked on hers, he spoke as he entered her.

Her eyes were dilating. The passion was overtaking her too. He smiled a harsh satisfied smile. It was a quick flash of blinding white.

"You're incredible," he said unable to hold the words back, not wanting to hold them back. With her he wanted to be someone different, someone free without obligations. With one thrust he embedded himself in her and knocked the air out of her lungs.

His pace was slow, almost tortuous in its intensity. He slid in filling her. So full was she that she could actually feel his balls slapping against her anus. He filled her completely, stretched her to the limit. Slowly he slid out waiting, withdrawing so far that only the head of his bulbous cock remained, until it seemed that he would leave the moist haven of her pussy completely. He continued the pace for long moments throwing in a hip swerve that never failed to hit her sensitive spots every few thrusts. He waited for the moment when her eyes fully dilated

and then closed unable to focus on him. He waited until she was right on the precipice of her orgasm and then stopped all movement.

Her eyes popped open almost immediately, the lack of movement had been so jarring. The smile he gave her seemed cruel and harsh at her sensitive state. "Whose pussy it this?" he whispered against her ear, following the statement with a thrust.

"Mine," she responded automatically. Her protective nature required that she deny him any control of her. She would was no one's property. No man's woman. And she wanted to stay that way. He had taught her that. He had already taken too much from her, and when he left she would need something to hold onto.

As if sensing that her denial was due to self preservation his eyes softened slightly, but only for a moment. "Not the right answer," he taunted, and proceeded to withdraw. Her vaginal walls tightened in response, attempting to keep him there inside her and for one second he wanted to relent. He wanted to give in and sink back into her hot wetness.

Her pussy was screaming at him but he ignored the call. He was determined to make her acknowledge him, he wanted her to admit that this was different, special, and so he continued his withdraw. Her hands gripped his buttocks stalling his departure. The feel of her nails against his sensitive skin tugged at the leash he had binding his lust.

"When I'm with you, I'm the only one with you," he growled at her desperate for agreement.

She started to deny him. He could see it in her eyes and he felt his heart getting ready to burst.

She gasped drawing air into her oxygen starved lungs. "When I'm with you, I'm the only one with you," she responded. "NO sharing."

He began to move with deep, powerful strokes that rubbed against every inch of her vaginal walls. She felt him deep, deeper than ever before. He was penetrating her defenses, leaving her a slave to her needs, and she needed to come now. As if sensing her aggravation, he grabbed her ass and lifted her so that she was unable to do anything but accept his hard, powerful thrusts.

He came at her with a vengeance. He wanted her to come, but on his terms. He wanted her to feel the dark unleashed hunger he felt. He wanted her to feel the intensity of the emotions he felt when around her.

"Agreed ... Now come for me," he said before slamming into her with enough force to send them both over the edge.

Chapter Nineteen
LOVERS AND FRIENDS

Together they walked back into the room. She stood behind, using Jackson as a shield. She still couldn't explain the uncomfortable feeling the four men provoked in her. All she knew was that if Jackson ever left her alone with them she would kill him. Without mercy. With a blunt object.

As she got closer she noticed they were all watching the two of them approach. She instinctively reached out and grasped his hand, she needed the encouragement.

Neither of them noticed the raised eyebrows in reaction to the act.

Touching in public was something none of the Fallen did. It was considered a sin too heinous to commit. The five men had all agreed that public signs of affection led the woman in question down the wrong path. It led them to believe in dreams that never could come true. With the Fallen there was never any affection involved. It was always just sex, simply a physical act of release. They knew it and they went through pains to let the girls know it.

PDA's were inexcusable.

And yet Jackson was touching, sending out signals that he was more than physically involved with the curvaceous black woman beside him. They watched the couple come towards them, watched their clasped hands, and noticed that Jackson never once attempted to shake Sinclair's grip. As a matter of fact he seemed to relish her touch.

The four men darted one another quick glances to see if any one else saw what they were seeing. When each man's eyes glanced off a pair that acknowledged that what was before them was no jest, they admitted the unbelievable.

An angel had fallen.

As if to cement the truth right before the couple reached the table Jackson leaned over and placed a quick kiss against Sinclair's lips to reassure her. He could feel the tension that was strung through her body, making her movements stiff. She was more than nervous, she was scared.

Sinclair looked up at the man beside her and knew she had nothing to fear. She knew without being told that he wouldn't let any harm come to her.

The blond sea parted and allowed them entrance to the circle seating. Two of the blonde stood to permit them access to their seats.

Long moments stretched on while the four men openly looked at her, trying to find out what it was about her that made her different from the rest, different from the many women Jackson had bedded, and there was no doubt in their minds that she was different. They could

feel her uniqueness, it permeated the air around them.

The blonde across from her spoke first. "You do realize you are one of the few women to ever be surrounded by all five of the Fallen," he said. His voice was thick and husky. She wondered how many women had called him just to hear his voice. The dirty thought occurred to her that he would make a killing as a phone sex operator. His voice was like honey, thick and sweet, with every chance of being naughty.

She quirked an eyebrow, "The fallen?" she asked.

"The Five Fallen," the one next to the first blonde said, correcting her. "There are capital letters on both Fs."

The Five Fallen, huh? She took a sip of water as she looked at the men before her. Lucky me in the midst of all these sexy blondes. Plus one of them belongs to me she thought, before she realized she wasn't going to be able to keep them apart, especially since

She elbowed Jackson in his side and was pleased to see that the act caused him to choke on the wine he had been nonchalantly sipping. Now he was trying to prevent himself from spitting it out all over the table.

She leaned across the table and extended her hand. "Hi I'm Sinclair," she said looking anxiously at the blonde across from her.

"Mackenzie ... Mackenzie Maitland," he said, before a slight smile tugged at the stern edges of his firm lips.

She turned to the second blonde who had spoken to her. "

One by one the blondes introduced themselves. They were all gorgeous, beautiful, tall blonde men, and initially she had not been able to tell them apart. She wasn't exactly used to being surrounded by "the beautiful people" as Maxine liked to identify the exquisitely made, but slowly she began to notice the differences. Ireland was the tallest and lightest of the blondes. The man provoked images of Thor, the Nordic god.

Beside him sat Hadden, Hadden Kaiser, the German poet. Soft spoken with a raspy melodic voice, his accent only heightened the effect of his sensual words mixed with those lips ... well she didn't pity any of the women he chose.

Between her and Mackenzie sat Knight Langston. She immediately knew he was the one that provided the group with humor. He was the good natured, easy going clown of the ensemble. A comedic smile lit his lips as he told her his name. He waited a few seconds waiting for her reaction, and when he saw the smile that tugged at her lips, he laughed out loud. "I know" he said "my name is backwards ... Knight isn't exactly a first name. It's more a last name. But trust me I lucked out. My mother was fascinated with everything King Arthur and she had to choose between Knight, King, or Arthur."

"I'm glad she chose Knight. Arthur doesn't suite you."

"I concur milady." She laughed at his imitation of a medieval knight. He even included a little bow. She definitely liked this one.

From there conversations flowed naturally and easily. There were no more uncomfortable silences. She was able to get to know a little more about every one of the young men before her. Sinclair was even able to find out some of their dreams.

Ireland wanted to be an architect. His dream was to renovate Southern plantation style mansions. The beauty of the old and the chance to incorporate the new intrigued him greatly. When he spoke there was passion in his voice and eyes.

Hadden's dream was to be a doctor. "Specifically an obstetrician/gynecologist."

"You, young man, are a dirty one aren't you?" she said, before bursting into a throaty

laugh.

Hadden felt a blush creep across his face at her words. The men around him stared at him dumbfounded. Hadden was one the coolest men they knew. Nothing and no one could make him the least uncomfortable, let alone blush, except, apparently, for the woman amongst them.

Embarrassed, he laughed and then shook his head no. "It's not that I like ... well you know that much ... its just I think the most incredible thing in this world are women. Their ability to give birth is ... well a gift, and I'd be honored to be there to help the child enter this world. And I can't exactly help women give birth if I don't understand what makes them women."

Sinclair leaned forward and stared into Hadden's turquoise blue eyes and whispered in her huskiest voice. "I think I love you," she said before laughing. She reached down beside her and placed her purse on her lap. Out of it she pulled her cellular phone. Sinclair pressed a few buttons and then handed it to Hadden.

"I want you to put your number in there, and the minute I find out I'm pregnant I will call you and you will be my doctor. Be prepared, I might be calling you twenty years from now, but I'll be calling you. You sir, you will be my ob/gyn."

Finally Jackson spoke up. All night he'd been silent, brooding, watching Sinclair and his friends interact. Although he had been pleased with how easily they accepted her, he was not happy with how easily his friends flirted with her. Not at all.

"There is no way in hell he is going to be your obstetrician," he said as he grabbed her cell phone right out of Hadden's hand.

"Why the hell not?" she said as she snatched her cell phone out of his hand. She quickly handed it back to Hadden.

"Don't you dare," Jackson said to Hadden in a soft voice that they all knew signaled deadly anger. "You will not be the one to help her give birth."

"Why the hell not?" Sinclair asked, determined to pretend she had no clue what that voice meant.

"Why not?" Hadden asked with mischief in his eyes.

Damn him. Jackson knew he was poking fun at him at his expense. Hadden knew why he was livid. Sinclair was a woman, she didn't understand these things. "You know why."

"Am I not here? Hello? Am I invisible? You answer him, but not me," Sinclair said and to her amazement Jackson still acted like she wasn't sitting right next to him. Well then, maybe she shouldn't be sitting next to him.

"Trade seats with me," she said to Knight. "Apparently I'm not here, so I might as well not be here."

"I noticed you were gone too. I was actually wondering how long it would take you to notice your absence," Knight responded with a smirk.

As she was attempting to leave the scene Jackson grabbed her arm. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"We're trading seats," Knight said.

"Don't encourage her, Knight."

"Screw you," Sinclair said as she snatched her arm from his grasp.

"What's wrong with you?"

"You are officially retarded Jackson." Sinclair had been thinking the thought, although her words had been much more explicit. The one who spoke wasn't Sinclair. It was Ireland. To be perfectly honest she was a little shocked that he had spoken at all. He had barely spoken the

night, and only when directly asked a question. The man had been giving off 'I don't like you' vibes the whole night and now ... now he was speaking up for her.

Just goes to show you, you never know. Maybe she could get Maxine to hate him for her. The woman enjoyed hating people. It was her hobby. It should be no problem getting Max to hate him. He was beautiful, white, single, and male. He was one of the truly privileged. Maxine was going to have a blast hating him.

"You ignore her the whole night and when you do finally speak it's to butt into her business. Good job, I couldn't have irritated my date more."

"Number one, you don't have a date, and two, you know why I said what I said."

"Could somebody stop speaking in code? Hello, I'd like to know what's going on here. Why the hell can't Hadden be my doctor?"

Silence. If a pin dropped she would be able to hear it.

Men, the bastards couldn't speak about anything but sports.

Finally someone spoke. "Jackson doesn't want me to see your pu ... womanly parts," Hadden said, and once again that gorgeous blush of his crept into place.

"Oh you've got to be kidding me. That's stupid," she yelled, truly exasperated. Of all the stupid reasons not to do something, that had to be stupidest.

"What's so stupid about it?" Jackson's baritone was a growl that dared to answer him. What is stupid about the way I feel, he thought.

"Oh don't you start talking to me now. Remember I'm invisible," she said before sitting down in the seat Knight had vacated for her.

"Sinclair?" he yelled from his seat, shocked that she would actually distance herself from him simply because he didn't want Hadden anywhere near her.

She turned to Mackenzie who was now on her right. "When do you think they'll serve dinner?" The poor thing, judging by the look on Mackenzie's face, he didn't know whether to answer her or laugh.

He turned from her to look across the table. "Here comes the food," he said, as he tried to stifle his laughter. Apparently he chose both.

"Thank God," Jackson mumbled under his breath.

"I heard that," Sinclair said from her side of the table.

"So you only ignore me when it's convenient?"

Silence.

"Guess that answers my question." He turned to the man beside him. "Knight switch seats with me."

"Oh no you don't," she said and then grabbed the end of Knight's jacket.

"Knight move ... now," Jackson said through clenched teeth.

"I kind of like this jacket, and just in case you haven't noticed, she isn't exactly letting go."

"Something that isn't there can't be holding you, now can it?" Jackson responded. To Sinclair, he said "Please talk to me."

"No!" she said, but less than three seconds later she was addressing him. "Fine, since you are finally willing to speak to me, you can tell me why Hadden can't be my obstetrician?"

"I don't want him getting anywhere near your ... pretty parts."

At his statement someone at the table gave a loud snort.

"I repeat that's stupid. Plus they are not going to be your pretty parts long before I give birth."

“What’s that supposed mean?”

“You expect me to believe you’re going to be around that long?” Silence dragged on answering her questions without words. *I thought so.*

“Love, please let go of Knight’s coat.”

“Or what?” she asked. The challenge on her face was evident in her voice.

He walked around Knight to stand beside Sinclair. Jackson leaned down and whispered in her ear in a voice too delicious to resist. “Little girls who don’t behave deserve spankings. Then again, maybe I won’t spank you and that will be your punishment.”

She let go immediately. The eyes she turned on him were so full of dark heat that Jackson felt his cock twitch and stir despite the fact that he had come sheathed inside her pussy less than ten minutes ago. He was rock hard, ready to go, and full of regret that they had to stay until the end of the formal.

Knight turned to Jackson. “Do I even want to know what you said to make her let go?”

“No,” both Jackson and Sinclair said in unison and then burst into laughter.

Across the table Ireland tapped his fork against his glass. “To lovers and friends,” he said as he raised the crystal goblet for a toast.

“To lovers and friends,” the table said in unison.

Chapter Twenty

DRUNKITTY DRUNK DRUNK

He walked into the black candle lit room and felt something alien course through his veins. He was unsure and uneasy. Something was wrong. He felt the truth of it run up his spine to settle at the back of his neck at the spot where his hair stood at attention.

Quickly his eyes adjusted to the dark room. He almost laughed out loud at his body’s

intelligence. It should have been more capable at seeing in the dark. He was, after all, always cloaked in darkness. It seemed to him that he had never stepped in sunlight and yet he was barely able to discern the two people within the room from the shadows that danced to a slow rhythm along the wall.

He stood in the doorway, silence cloaking him like a great black coat. As he watched the two of them he felt a dark emotion stirring beneath his skin. If he was willing to name it, he would call it jealousy. He stood on the outside of more than just the black candle lit room. He was her lover and yet he was an outsider. There she sat with a stranger and yet she felt comfortable, comfort that laced at his soul.

Though he hadn't spoken, hadn't even made a sound she knew he was here. Sinclair could feel it in her bones. Through the hazy fog of alcohol she could feel the presence of his churning emotions. He was there and he was angry.

Her ebony eyes searched the room, searched for him. She never wondered how it was that she felt his presence whenever he was near. She was not sure she even wanted to know how deeply they were connected. The truth might be the last straw, the one thing she couldn't handle. Finally her midnight eyes spotted the shadowy figure that stood at the doorway.

"Hey, Jackson," she said tripping over her slurred words, "I was looking for you, when I ran into Skip," she said pointing to the young man that sat beside her. They were close, too close as far as Jackson was concerned, and the minute he got Sinclair away from Skip he was going to let his roommate know just how upset he felt. His fists could be very explicit when conveying his feelings.

Jackson looked from Sinclair to the man in question. The insolent look on his face did not make him feel anymore comfortable about their precarious position. He looked upset. He looked like someone had just rained on his parade.

"You, young man, have been a very bad boy," Sinclair said, as she disentangled herself from the geometric sofa that was just as pleasing to the eyes as it was to the body. It encompassed one with warmth and softness that reminded you of a mother's hug. It was utterly dangerous to those as inebriated as she.

She took shaky steps to get to him. Jackson was shocked she could even make it across the room considering the state she was in. She was drunk and she had not been drunk when he last saw her. That left the question of when did she get drunk.

Sinclair was so inebriated she could barely comprehend what was going on. She was totally unaware of the tension that filled the room. She looked from Jackson to Skip expecting them to acknowledge one another. They were roommates after all. And yet neither man said a thing. They just continued to look each other over with hard eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked, sensing the black, churning waves of his discomfort sweep across her skin. Something was wrong. Something was definitely wrong. The question was what?

"How long have you been here?" he asked on a whisper so soft it seemed to float down her spine.

Sinclair shuddered in reaction unable to stop the fear from swimming through her veins. He was making her nervous to say the least.

Skip opened his mouth to answer, but what he saw on Jackson's face stopped him cold. Interesting he thought, Adam has found his Eve.

The Eve in question answered. "I don't know and I don't care," she said her words slurring.

“How much did you give her to drink?” The harsh words were a parody of his normally deep melodic baritone.

Even to Sinclair’s alcohol soaked brain the words sounded menacing. They had a razor edge to them that was meant to cut deep. She turned to Skip hoping he would not answer Jackson. She knew without a doubt that anything he said would be heard as an insult and an opening to a fight.

Skip flinched beneath Jackson’s harsh gaze and toxic words.

She turned back to the man before her, hoping she could appease the fire that raged beneath his skin. Jackson was definitely displeased. She reached out and grasped him by the upper portion of his arm. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again, whatever it was. Let’s go home where we can fuck.”

“Sinclair, sweetheart” he said on a groan.

“I know ... I know we don’t fuck, we make love, but tonight I want to fuck ok?” she sighed into his ear before running the velvety rough pad of her tongue along the shell.

“Sunshine” he said between gasping breathes. She had made him so hard so quickly he wasn’t sure he could keep himself from spilling his seed all over his pants.

“Sunshine?”

“Yes, Sunshine.”

“I think I like Sunshine and not just because I’m wearing a yellow dress.”

“That’s nice sweetheart, and you’re right, it’s not just because you’re wearing a yellow dress.”

“Sunshine,” she said before sliding her hands down his body, over his chiseled stomach, to grasp the quickly growing bulge in his pants.

His smoky baritone was pitched just above a growl. “Damn it, Sunshine,” he rasped out through clenched teeth. He was surprised he was able to speak. Even though his pants served as a barrier Jackson felt the heat of her touch burn deep. The pad of her thumb circled the head of his cock spreading the pre-come that had leaked through his slit over the highly sensitive flesh.

He grasped her wrist and pulled her away from him. “Damn it, Sinclair,” he growled at her, his anger leaking through the midst of lust she created. He was not about to provide Skip with an XXX show, and that was exactly where they were headed if she did not stop touching him.

“Sunshine,” she said before pulling herself from his hold.

“Yes I meant Sunshine. That’s nice, Sunshine. Now, Sunshine, tell me how much did you have to drink?”

“Why?”

“So I can figure out how drunk you are?”

“Why?”

“So I can know if I need to do something special.”

“Special like handcuffs and whipped cream, because that’s special. I think I’d like to do that with you, but this time you get cuffed. Ok?” she said as she gave his tie a little tug to emphasize her point. “You get handcuffed to the bed this time. Last time it was me, but this time it’s you.”

Behind them Skip tried to shrink beneath the shadows as he stifled his laughter with his hand.

“Jesus, Sinclair we’re not the only people in the room.”

She shrugged her shoulders in response. “By the way I’m not drunk.”

"You're not?"

"Nope I'm not. I'm drunkitty drunk drunk. There is a difference."

"Ok, Sunshine, I am definitely taking you home now."

"Can we pick up whipped cream on the way because I've got handcuffs?"

"Sweetheart, you're killing me."

"No I'm not ... not yet anyway. Let's go home so I can murder you."

Even through her foggy double vision she could see his arched eyebrow, his damned arched eyebrow. "What are you eyebrowing me for? What did I do this time?"

"Eyebrowing?"

She shook her head yes, and then she decided it wasn't a good idea. She could actually hear her brain swimming in alcohol, banging against her skull. And damn if it didn't cause the funniest visions.

At that moment she stumbled and started to fall. Jackson put out a hand stopped her from connecting with the floor.

Chapter Twenty-One WHY DOES IT HURT SO BAD

He shouldn't feel a damned thing. The searing thought shot through Jackson's mind as he carried Sinclair to her bed. It didn't give him rest, plaguing Jackson as he gave his Sunshine glass after endless glass of water, determined to sober her up. He was terribly afraid that she had drank way past her body's limit. But it was the pain that caught him and held him in its tenacious grip.

Just the simple thought of Sinclair and Skip shouldn't have hurt so damn bad.

But it did.

And the pain was forcing his deepest emotions to the surface. Emotions that Jackson had never been willing to acknowledge. The need. The hunger. The relentless desire to consume and be consumed.

Burrowed beneath the endless amount of soft sheets, thick comforters, and plush feather pillows Sinclair looked entirely too delectable. He had moved closer to the end of the bed hoping the distance would quell the desire coursing through him like a herd of wild stallions. Unbridled. Untamed. Full of passion. He was angry and hurt and feared that in her current state she wouldn't understand the need coursing through him to conquer her, to prove that she was his woman and his alone.

Distance was what he needed, but he didn't find it. No, Sinclair seemed to weave a web around him that he was too foolish to want to escape from. From the midst of fabric came Sinclair's outstretched arms, silently asking for a hug he dare not deny her. He leaned into her embrace enveloping himself in her vibrant warmth. Her touch seemed to melt the shards of cold anger that coursed through his veins.

"Sunshine, don't do this to me," he said unwilling to forsake his rage, needing it to keep the thoughts he couldn't stop thinking at bay.

"I won't then," she said before tightening her grip, pulling him closer to her so that he now lay atop her small lush body. She was a pillow to his hardness and he immediately felt himself being comforted by her despite his desire to stay angry.

“I like this,” she said and felt his body relax against hers.

“Minx,” he growled into her neck before nipping the delicate flesh.

He felt her shudder beneath him and repeated the act. Her mouth opened on a broken gasp, silently begging him for more, to continue the torture she relished.

“I refuse to take advantage of you, so don’t tempt me,” he said before kissing her full on the lips. Her tongue thrust out between her parted lips, asking him to give her access to the sweet warm cavern that was his mouth. He granted it, unable to do anything but abide to her wish. Her tongue was slow but sure, taking its time to taste him, to sweep into his mouth with languid curiosity. She was exploring him, getting to know his texture and taste. And oh how she loved the taste. He tasted of sweet wine and something that she could not name, but knew was infinitely Jackson. She moaned deep in her throat and tightened her hold on him pulling him closer to her so that she could deepen the kiss, taste more of him, and indulge herself in the pleasures that were Jackson Phillips.

His tongue thrust in and out of her mouth telling her without words what he wanted to do to her body. If he took her tonight they would not be making love. Tonight was all about the torrid fuck. His need to hear her scream his name, acknowledge her desire for him was too strong for him to suppress. And he was deathly afraid that in his desperate need he would hurt her, physically and emotionally.

He lifted himself from her and looked down at her. “Sinclair I don’t think you know what you’re asking for,” he said. The remote coolness of his voice was a warning she couldn’t deny.

She looked into his eyes and saw the heat he tried to mask. He wanted her too. He just was unwilling and afraid to admit it. She too was uncertain. It was a fact she could silently admit. She didn’t know if provoking him was the best option, but then again watching him walk out of the room didn’t appear to be an option at all.

She needed him whether she liked it or not. She needed him tonight.

They stared into one another’s eyes waiting for the other to make the decision neither dared to make. Finally Sinclair spoke. “Move,” she said and then attempted to dislodge herself from beneath him. He rolled away, relieved she had made the decision he had been too weak to make. He wouldn’t touch her tonight. He put his head in hands and took calming breathes. He had to get his arousal under control.

From beneath the covers she came to stand beside the bed. He looked up to find her naked except for the pale gold heels she had not removed, her dress was a pool of golden chiffon at her feet.

“You can’t turn me away Jackson. I have needs too. You’re not the only one in this relationship,” she said before crawling atop of him. She smiled at the tell tale sign of his desire.

“You have needs too,” she whispered against his fragrant flesh as he dipped his head, unable to refuse the gift she presented him.

He would take her body, her affection, anything she wanted to give him and worry about the consequences tomorrow. And tomorrow was a long way off.

He kissed that spot on her neck that always provoked a response and got his desire. Her moan was long and deep, telling of all the things she wanted and needed from him. His tongue grazed that insatiable inch of skin licking all of her nerves into a frenzied response. He felt her gyrate her hips against the swollen flesh between his legs. The blood that had been pounding in his head made its way to that same space between his legs. “Again,” she said, and he was helpless to anything but obey and nip the sensitive flesh of her neck.

Suddenly he moved twisting his body so that she landed on the bed beneath him. Her cry of dismay was muffled by the starched cotton of his oxford. With strong hands he parted her thighs, opening them to his view. He smiled at her naked mound. She was, as usual, lovely. One hand trailed up her body to grasp the large firm mound that was her breast. He massaged her full tit, encompassing it in his large palm, feeling the hardened tip grazing his callused hands. The other moved in the opposite direction trailing the short strip of brush that highlighted his destination. She got a wax for the formal, for me, he thought with satisfaction.

He parted the lips of her heated sex, hungry to feel the moist evidence of her desire. Her hips jerked in response as one long broad finger dipped into her aching body. She felt her body tighten around him, already she was close to finding release. He pulled the solitary finger from her body and she immediately felt bereft.

She needed him.

Now.

She was appeased when his finger rubbed the heat of his body against her engorged clitoris. A lightening bolt of sensations coursed through her vagina, spreading along her body. "Jackson," she moaned unable to take the torture. He was alternating between firm and soft strokes against her swollen clit, drawing out the delectable sensations coursing through her womb.

He dipped his head to replace his mouth with his finger. The rough pad of his tongue lashed her swollen flesh into a heightened state of sensitivity. Every lick pulled the coil of desire between her legs tighter, tighter and tighter until she felt like she would snap under the pressure of her desire. He slid two fingers into her moist mound and she gasped out loud. She lifted her hips giving him better access to her wet body. His broad fingers slid in and out of her body as his tongue lashed her sensitive clit. The coil was wound tighter and tighter and then he grasped her clit between his lips and sucked ... hard. The engorged bud swelled impossibly more and then jerked.

Her orgasm ripped through her body leaving her breathless. Jackson lay beside her taking comfort in her sexual release. He waited until her breathing had returned to normal. He waited until she fell asleep, and only then did he go out into the night.

Chapter Twenty-Two COLD SEDUCTION

A grey fog lay thick against the ground preventing any light including the structured illumination of the lamp post from permeating it. The restless night was infused with a coldness that permeated down into his bones. Feeling the chill of the night air he pulled his coat around him to his frigid skin.

It seemed fit that the night was cased in an unforgiving mist. The fog seemed to permeate his skin to sink into his soul, freezing the emotions he kept beneath the surface. The menacing haze was all around him. It cloaked him, keeping him hidden from others. It protected him, and yet it left him vulnerable. He could not see beyond it and that made him uneasy. He feared what was beyond it, the unknown.

He looked up at the black sky streaked with purple and illuminated with a few stars. He could see in the night sky that the mist would soon be gone. He had precious, few moments.

It wasn't yet dawn. The sun had not fully awakened. It was slow to move across the

blackened sky.

She moved with a peaceful languid speed that he admired. He wished he could take his time as she did. But time was one thing he did not have.

The sun's beautiful rays infiltrated the dark sky with lit purpose. She was determined to illuminate the dark night, make it a bright day, a newborn day that he had not started, for last night had yet to end. Many things still had to be done.

Like the sun his movements had purpose. He walked through the grey night with silent steps and an innate animal grace that labeled him a predator. He was on the hunt seeking the blood of an injured animal. His human mind recognized that he had been wronged, but the animal beneath the surface, the heart that beat beneath his breast saw only one solution, vengeance.

He approached the door with cold seduction in mind, the seduction that the other man had attempted.

Contrasts.

Hot. Cold.

Soft. Hard.

Woman. Man.

Truth. Lies.

They ran a marathon in his mind. The thoughts he couldn't elude were of differences he couldn't deny and similarities he couldn't ignore.

He thought of the woman with the smoldering midnight eyes and wondered why she didn't flinch at his icy jade smile. How could she feel what she felt when beside a man who was so obviously unwilling to feel, unable to feel beyond what he gave, which was never enough. When would those smoldering eyes of hers cool with cold disdain, and when would she realize she deserved more than he could ever give?

Would the time come when she was in need and he could not give her what she required? Would she then realize that she had been cheated? Would she then realize he was not enough?

He pushed the thoughts away as he opened the door because he knew he was selfish enough to take what she did not give, he would take what he had no right to ever hold.

The skin along the back of his neck told him he was in the room. His prey. A quick glance around the room told him nothing. Then like a phantom from the mist, from the empty chair that sat in the corner of the room he rose.

A single lamp shone in the middle of the ebony room. It outlined the other man with jagged, harsh lines.

His cold white welcoming smile was in direct contrast to the dark damp heat of the room. The warmth of the southern spring nights had invaded the room. Odd how he hadn't felt the heat when on the outside.

"Hello, Jackson," said the shadow man.

His response was a simple nod. So much had been spoken with so few words. Former friends now on formal terms, how had things come to be? Why had he let a woman come between them?

"I wasn't sure you would stop by. I thought you would be a little preoccupied," he continued. His words held just a faint residue of harsh laughter on them.

Jackson had an idea of what the other thought he would be doing, but the sun didn't come up for a few hours. He could wait till then for Sunshine.

"You were worth fitting in my schedule." The words were cold and heavy like the steel

fog he had just vacated.

A short almost jerky nod of his blonde head was his response. "Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," was his cool reply as he looked around at the room that was so familiar to him. He had lived in this room. This man had been one of his closest friends and so his betrayal cut deep.

He waited for the ghost man to speak. The silence stretched on like light passing through the night, blinding those in the room.

"No desire to end this dance, Jackson," he said. His voice was a deep rumble that seemed to be straining to tumble out.

"I was just wondering if you knew what you were doing," Jackson asked on a cold whisper.

The other man cocked his head in contemplation before looking Jackson in the eyes as he responded. "No action is a mistake ... even the mistakes." He mumbled the last three words under his breath. He wasn't sure if Jackson had heard the end, but he had definitely heard the beginning of his statement.

"You couldn't just take the out," Jackson said with exasperation and something close to regret tinting his voice.

"And what good would that do either of us. Then you would have been plagued by thoughts of infidelity and distrust. I did you a favor."

A favor? He had done the unthinkable. Calling it by another name did not change the facts. With caged anger radiating off him, Jackson took a menacing step towards his friend. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

The other man simply shook his head and turned away. He walked to the little refrigerator that stood in the corner of the room. "Would you like something to drink?"

Jackson was more than a little stunned by Skip's behavior. He was acting as if nothing was wrong and so he had to ask, "Am I supposed to assume tonight was a mistake?" It was the only thing that made sense if the other man thought tonight was a heinous mistake, then he could forgive and forget.

The other man wondered if he should grab onto the lifeline provided. If he admitted that his actions were calculated he could very well lose a friend, but if he didn't admit his transgressions his friend could lose so much more. Talk about the proverbial rock and hard place he thought before making his decision.

"No action is a mistake Jackson. I don't make mistakes." He made sure his voice was cold and laced with steel. He did not want his regret and unease leaking through.

"Damn it," Jackson swore, his voice was a rough pad of steel against silk. "How can you just stand there pretending like you did nothing?"

Skip could tell by the anger that radiated off of him that Jackson was hanging on by a fine thread, but he wanted him to let go and plunge into the abyss that waited for both of them.

"I'm not pretending Jackson," Skip said with a cold calmness that lit the flames of Jackson's anger. "What have I done to make you so mad?"

"So I just imagined what I saw," he spat out, his words were brittle and charred.

"Imagined what?" Skip said. His confusion so tangible Jackson doubted himself, but only for a second. The sharp glint in Skip's eyes gave him away.

"You were trying to get with Sinclair. At least have the decency to admit what you were doing," he said, exasperated and annoyed. Once he admitted what he had done, Jackson would know where he stood and could work from there. Now, as it was, he was in limbo.

Finally Skip spoke, cutting the leash that held Jackson's rage at bay.

"Was I to assume she was hands off? You know what they say about those who assume."

"You bastard," Jackson yelled before he lunged at Skip.

He grasped Skip's collar and pulled. He felt the cloth tighten around the other man's neck. Tendons bunched and struggled fighting the restriction of Jackson's death grip. Skip's coloring deepened as his airway was cut off.

Skip struggled to free himself from Jackson's tight grip. Back and forth they touselled, each seeking dominance.

After a few moments of struggle Skip was able to jerk away from Jackson's clenched fists.

"Pussy is pussy. If you want her, you can have her," he said calmly as he straightened his jacket. "Never thought you were one for dark meat though. I have to admit I was intrigued and figured, what the hell," he said as he turned away from him.

"Don't talk about her that way."

"Afraid to admit the truth, are we? Afraid she'll move onto greener pastures. Look at you man. Really look at yourself. Never get emotional. You are the one who taught me that. The rule is there for a reason. Is she worth breaking your own rule?"

"I'm going to warn you once and only once. Don't talk about her and don't talk to her. STAY AWAY from her."

"And if I don't ... or better yet, we could do her at the same time, think she'll"

Jackson's fist sliced through the air with bone crushing accuracy. Bone to bone. Fist to nose. He felt as well as heard the other man's nose break beneath the angry pressure of his knuckles.

He already regretted it. Before impact, as his fist sliced through the air, he began to regret the punch. Neither euphoria nor savage satisfaction was the first emotion he felt. Immediately following the punch, Jackson felt regret.

But it was too late. Skip, angry and hurt, reacted. He ran head first into Jackson, ramming Jax into the wall.

Upon impact Jackson's breath was knocked out of his lungs. Blow after blow he took to the stomach. Skip had turned into a wounded animal. Nothing but drawn blood would appease him.

Jackson grasped Skip's shoulders and pushed with all his might.

Skip's anger had been depleted suddenly and immediately before Jackson's shove. The sudden lack of opposition forced Jackson against Skip with such force that both men fell to the floor.

"Bastard, did you have to break my fucking nose."

"Well, watch your fucking mouth."

"You dumb shit. Think about it. I only said what I said for a reason."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Think about it. She's not even my type."

"Since when has that bloody fact stopped you?"

"Since you fell in love with her."

Jackson recoiled as if he had been shot. "Bullshit," he responded with a savage growl. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"So I've got a broken nose for no goddamn reason," Skip spat at him as he cradled his nose. Jackson looked at the man before him as steady, thick streams of blood ran from his nose,

down his arm, to spill on the carpeted floor. That was definitely going to be one hell of a stain.

“Motherfucker,” Skip screamed as he attempted to snap his nasal bone back in place.

Jackson watched him in silence from where he was across the room and instinctively cringed at the sound of bone moving.

Skip stood and wore an eerily serene look on his face. Suddenly he turned and calmly walked towards his bedroom door. “Grab your keys,” Skip said over his shoulder before he walked out the room.

Together they headed out to Jackson’s car. The ride to Union Memorial Hospital was uncomfortably silent. Even the radio that played sang at such a low volume that it appeared that it too did not want to break the stifling silence.

Skip waited until right after the nurse had called him in to see the ER doctor before he turned to Jackson.

He spoke not a word. He simply gave Jackson a quick, but heavy right that hit him square in the eye.

“Son of a bitch,” Skip said as he cradled his fist in his left hand. “I think your face broke my hand.”

“I think we both deserved that,” Jackson said, as he gingerly touched his quickly swelling eye.

Chapter Twenty-Three PANDORA’S BOX

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

He groaned and then rolled over, away from the pounding noise.

“Damn it, answer me.”

Her voice resounded with the kind of anger that the man knew was barely leashed. H was not about to provoke her, and answering her truthfully was definitely going to provoke her.

The thought occurred to him that lately, almost every day since he’d met her had been one of those days, the days you would rather sleep through, than wake up. Although he had to admit Sinclair wasn’t entirely the one to blame. He rolled over again, this time to face her.

“What are you yelling about?” he whispered. He knew his head could not take the noise. He was just a little hung over. After the fight with Skip he had tossed back a few drinks. He was not up to an argument.

She stared at him for a few seconds contemplating the intelligence in hitting him square across the face.

He opened one eye, the other was a disgusting shade of purple and swollen shut. With the working eye he looked her over. She was mad. There was no doubt about it. Her stance was

rigid, and there was fire in her eyes. She kept clenching and unclenching her hands. The thought occurred to him that she was trying not to make a fist. The beginning of the conversation didn't look like it would bode well for him. Now that he thought about it, she hadn't really spoken in a few seconds. She just looked at him and if looks could kill ... well, he didn't really want to go there.

He figured he might as well admit it. A flashback of the night before played through his mind. Last night had been one of those nights, definitely a regrettable night, and the whole situation had definitely been his fault entirely.

"I know you're mad at me, and yes I know I'm in trouble, but could you take pity on me and wait to talk about this when I can see out of both eyes?"

His voice was laced with exhaustion, pain, and something more. Even though Sinclair was consumed with rage, she heard what he wasn't telling her and yet she ignored the message. She would deal with him later, right now she had a mission. She started to approach him, then stopped suddenly. He had turned away from her. She was once again staring at his broad muscled back.

Sinclair's mouth opened and closed a few times but no words came out. She couldn't think of anything to say to him. Actually to be perfectly honest, she could, but unfortunately nothing that came to mind was foul enough to express her anger.

"If I give you a black eye today, we won't have to talk later," she spat at him as she stomped over to where he lay.

"What the hell did you do to Skip's face? He's all black and blue. Every inch of his body is covered in bruises."

"And how the hell do you know what his body looks like," he roared as he came from his bed.

"What the hell happened to your face?" she screamed after she noticed the ugly bruises that marred his face.

"Three seconds ago you were griping about Skip, and only now do you notice that your boyfriend's face is broken."

"Your face is not broken, it's just a little bruised."

Jackson tried not to notice her lack of comment on his choice of words. He tried to pretend that he didn't care, that boyfriend had been a simple meaningless slip of the tongue, but the truth was, it mattered. He cared, and he wanted Sinclair to know he cared. He wanted her as more than just a bed mate, a fuck buddy. Fuck and Chuck wanted her as his girlfriend.

The words stuck in his throat. He could not get them past the worm in his heart no matter how he tried. They died in his chest, words barely tasted.

"Are you ok?" she asked for he suddenly looked sick and broken. The light that had always shined in his eyes had gone out.

"I'm fine," he said with no feeling.

"Don't worry, love. You and Skip will patch things up before you know it. From what he told me it was all a misunderstanding. He said something about a game gone too far."

He nodded his head and muttered something in agreement. She had misunderstood his melancholy, mistaken its source as a lost friend ... not a denied love.

"Take a seat," she said. The lack of change in his mood worried her.

"Tell me what's wrong," she said.

He turned from her, from the seat she offered, from the comfort she offered.

"There's nothing wrong," he said, and then looked into the mirror, "Nothing that an ice

pack won't help."

She sat confused, afraid and more than a little angry. She didn't know whether to keep questioning him, but she knew that she deserved an answer, a real answer, not a denial.

"If you don't want to tell me for whatever reason, I wish you would just say that. I would prefer your honesty to the standard, back off, bullshit 'nothing's wrong'."

"I don't know what you want from me. What do you want me to say? Just tell me and I'll say it."

"Forget it."

"Forget what? No we're not forgetting this. Since you want to ask questions, doesn't that mean I get to ask questions?"

"What do you want to know?" she asked cautiously. She could see the anger boiling beneath the surface of his skin, but he was more than angry, he was hurt and confused. Those three emotions were volatile enough alone, but when combined ... well, she wasn't about to provoke him.

"What the hell is going on between you and Skip?"

"Skip who?"

"Oh don't play dumb with me, you and my fucking roommate had something going on last night, explain that?"

"Have you lost your mind?"

"No just my fucking heart," he mumbled underneath his breath, low enough that she could not hear what he said. To Sinclair he said, "I just don't trust him."

"He's your roommate. He would never do anything like that to you."

"I don't trust him," he said.

There was something about his calm words that provoked her. She found herself asking the one question she knew she had no right to ask.

"Well, do you trust me?" she asked. The soft words were heavy in the air.

"I don't trust easily."

"Neither do I, but I took a chance on you ... are you telling me you're not willing to take the same chance on me?"

"I don't trust easily Sinclair. It's not about you, it's about me. I just can't ..." He stopped short, afraid to say the words he couldn't take back.

"Trust me," she said, saying what he wouldn't say. "Whatever the reasoning, we reach the same conclusion. You don't trust me. You don't even trust me to stay faithful to you and we've only been ... together for a few days."

"Sinclair ... it's not like that"

"Forget it," she said.

She walked out his bedroom, only to return a few seconds later with a bag of frozen peas.

"This should help," she said as she pressed against the eye that was purple and swollen. It reminded her of a bursting eggplant.

As she held the bag to his eye, neither said a word. The room was pregnant with a silence both tried to ignore. Neither could pretend that things hadn't changed. Words had been said, words that cut like broken glass. Their sharp edges had a history, a past, a vision that neither wanted to acknowledge, but could not deny.

Chapter Twenty-Four EXPIRATION DATING

The sound of unrestrained laughter rang out loud and clear throughout the air. Its sound was so shocking with its vibrancy that both men and women halted their conversations and paused their actions just so they could crane their necks and see what all the joy was about. Unfortunately many found themselves incredibly displeased for the décor they had once loved had suddenly become an enemy, preventing them from glimpsing the four beautiful women who dined together in overwhelming happiness.

“You’ve all got to picture this. I didn’t even want to walk into the shop. It was daunting. I felt like I wasn’t even worthy of its socks, and here she is striding into the boutique as if she owns it,” Helena said as she looked around the table at her three closest girlfriends. The faces that greeted her were livid with varying emotions. One was lit with enthusiasm, while another was filled with curiosity, and the final face was filled with reluctant curiosity with just a tinge of discomfort.

The last face belonged to the woman Helena spoke of. Lena wanted to pretend that the story was not making her uncomfortable, but she was no actress. She could not hide her feelings. She was afraid this story would leave her with the title diva, something she didn’t exactly need.

“So anyway as we’re walking through the store entrance the sales girl at the cash register, who is by the way on the phone, simply looks over her shoulder at the two of us and gives us the look that screams ‘you are not worth my time.’ The minute I see her face I am headed for the door. If they don’t want me, they don’t want my hard earned cash. “

Helena then gives Lena a pointed look that starts out with an arched eyebrow and ends with a smile before she continued speaking. “But Lena had a better idea. She continues walking around the store looking through the store, picking up items, putting them down, and looking thoroughly confused. All of a sudden she walks away from the display of cashmere sweaters she was looking at and makes, what looks to me, like a mad dash for the sales girl, and then she simply stands there for a few seconds and says nothing, and does nothing. Then quick as a switch she reaches over and presses the disconnect button on the phone.”

“I don’t even think the girl realized she had been standing there the whole time. We were not only sub-human to her, we were invisible. So anyways, the girl turns to Lena and she is livid, but before she can open her mouth, Lena says as calm as can be, “I need some aid.” The girl attempts to tell India off, and begins ranting and raving about being on the phone when India calmly states, “I’ve been waiting for you for thirty minutes and twenty grand says your employment contract requires that you help your customers, not talk on the phone with your

boyfriend.”

“The girl opens her mouth to make some sort of a rebuttal, but before she says a word she slams it shut. On her face is pure fright and at first I couldn’t figure out why until I saw Lena’s face.”

She had raised an eyebrow, a glacially snobby eyebrow that screamed ‘You are not fit to lick my shoes’, which the girl wasn’t because Lena was wearing a pair of her Choos at the time. Anyways, the girl is so stunned and scared she doesn’t know what to say or do. It takes her a few seconds to come up with a response, all the while the eyebrow is mid-forehead. Finally she speaks. “Can I help you?” she asks. I’m already cringing inside because I know exactly what is going to happen, and I feel bad. It’s like watching a lion attack a wounded gazelle. It’s just not fair. Lena is armed and ready and way too smart for this girl.”

“She lowers her eyebrow and plastered a smile on her face disarming the girl a second before she goes in for the kill. In the softest, smoothest voice I have ever heard India calmly says to the salesgirl, “Hopefully you can. I would like to know why I’ve been waiting over there for at least twenty minutes for help while you chatted away on the phone with boyfriend about what he should pick up for dinner? Better yet, because you’re obviously busy, could you get the manager to explain that to me?”

“The salesgirl is nearly in tears as walks away to get the on duty manager, who happens to recognize Lena. At this point the cashier is not only in tears she is openly sobbing, and that was before Lena told the manager that because of the rude actions of the store’s personnel she would never shop in any of its stores again.”

As soon as Sinclair could contain her laughter she turned to India. “So that’s why they keep sending you clothes.”

India nodded. Yes.

“That’s also why I keep sending them back.”

Finally Maxine spoke. “You handled that much better than I would. My ass would have ranted and raved until they kicked me out and banned me from their stores for life.”

At that the room vibrated with laughter, for they all knew it was true. Maxine’s temper was notorious.

“You, my dear, have a time limit,” the slim butterscotch toned woman said to her as she handed Sinclair an apple martini.

“A time limit?” Sinclair asked before taking a sip of the sparkling green liquid.

“Yes, a time limit, my dear,” the other woman said as she sagely nodded her head in agreement.

“Oh cut the crap, Lena, I’m not drunk enough for this,” Maxine said before downing her shot of Grey Goose vodka.

“Lena, please explain,” said Helena, her soft tone blaring through the haze of loud drunken voices filling the nightclub. Finished with her simple statement the diminutive Hispanic woman went back to her drink, a cola. Helena never drank liqueur.

“Fine,” Lena said, exasperated with all her friends. Today was Thursday night, Ladies Night and she had chosen the new trendy bar known as Mystique as their destination.

The bar was located in New York City, which was roughly a four hour drive from Baltimore. Not a problem. Lena’s success in her profession as a singer/songwriter had allowed her to acquire a driver who drove Maxine and Sinclair to the front steps of Mystique.

As with every Thursday night, the conversation dealt with men. But this night was

different, very different from every other Ladies Night. The difference was the conversation was not about their lack of men. It was about the trouble with acquired men. This time it was actually about a man, a particular man named Jackson.

"Every relationship," Lena continued, "has an expiration date. Regardless of whether the relationship in question is a friendship or a sexual relationship, it has a deadline. It has a day when it will cease to exist. Some relationships last only a few seconds, some last years, and some last till the day you die, but they all end."

"I get it, but ... I don't get it," Sinclair said before taking another sip of her apple martini. She then wondered if the martini could be the reason for her confusion, and if so, should she continue drinking? Hell yeah. Men and alcohol went well together. Better yet assholes and alcohol were an even better mix.

"Thank God, I thought I was the only one confused," Helena said.

"Guess it's not the alcohol," Sinclair said before drinking the rest of her apple martini in three fast gulps.

"Ok, so far I got 'all things come to an end'." Maxine shook her head in confusion and frowned.

"Let me break it down for you ladies. Our girl here has a two week expiration date on her relationship ... Wait let me finish," Lena said as formerly groggy and confused eyes found hers with pert attention. "And if we don't do something about it, meaning get her head straight, Sinclair is going to end up with a shattered heart in fourteen days."

"And one hell of a sex tale," Maxine muttered to herself.

Helena perked at that. "So you're having great sex with Mr. American Beauty. Way to go girl."

Sinclair gave Helena, the resident "freak", it was always the quiet ones, a shy smile before turning on Max.

"Where did you hear that?"

Maxine looked up from her vodka, and into Sinclair's onyx eyes. "From you. You let it slip during our therapy session that he was better than your characters, actually you said he was better than any of your characters, and considering how well I know your characters I can rightfully say he has to be pretty damn good."

Lena, always the peacemaker, grasped Sinclair's chin by her fingers and turned her head until she locked eyes with Lena. "Look sweetie you have two weeks and two weeks only to do whatever you want to Mr. Hot and Sexy, after that you've got to walk away?"

"Do I really Lena?"

"Yes sweetie. Any longer than that and you're putting your heart and soul in jeopardy. Now you don't want to risk that do you?"

"No ... no, I don't." Especially when nothing can come out of it, she thought. The man doesn't even trust me.

"Sweetie you told us yourself he's a playboy. Love 'em and leave 'em is his motto. It would be foolish of you to forget that."

"I know, I know ... two weeks ... that's all he gets and then this relationship is officially dead. Two weeks until expiration and then I walk away," she said before drinking bottoms up the new martini the waitress had placed in front of her. The problem was that she honestly thought she would be crawling away at the time of expiration, no proud walk for her. No sirree the man had brought her to her knees.

"Let's face it ladies, I'm knee deep in shit," she said before she ordered another martini.

Might as well get drunk as fuck, right?

Chapter Twenty-Five THE GIGOLO

The knock at his apartment door alerted him to her presence a few moments before she appeared. He was hoping she would give him a chance to explain himself. He had quickly realized that she was the only person he trusted. Now all he had to do was convince her that he not only trusted her, but wanted her, he wanted her to be with him for as long as she was willing.

He couldn't wait to see her, so he met her halfway. He walked to the hallway only to find it wasn't her. It wasn't Sinclair that stood before him, but Madeline.

"Hey, sweetheart," she said.

Jackson took a cautious step back. The ecstatic look on Madeline's face made him nervous. Madeline's happiness was always preceded by another's downfall. He just hoped he wasn't the one falling.

"Hello, Mother," he said.

For one quick second the smile on her face slipped. There was a ghost of pain and regret that he barely registered. She righted herself so quickly that Jackson doubted he had seen the emotion run across her face.

But it was the knowledge that he could not deny what he had seen that had his skin prickling and the hair on the back of his neck standing up. Things were not always what they seemed, and yet how could he deny the fact that his heartless mother was battling her emotions, emotions she wasn't even supposed to own, but at the moment he was unwilling to consider what that meant for him. There was just too many things on his plate right now and he wasn't about to ask for a second helping of heartache.

"So," she said drawing out the word till it grazed the sensitive flesh of his arms. He felt

the hair on his arms stand up in the wake of its presence. "How much progress have we made?" she finished.

"What besides making the decision to get married and keep the family fortune in the family? None," he said wrapping the single word in the desperation and alienation he felt. Having come to the decision that he was going to marry had been the easy part. Battling with the anxiety and uneasiness that the decision had brought on had been almost more than he could handle. Trying to decide on who, and if he should ask some woman for her hand had been too much. And it didn't help that every woman he pictured himself married to seem to make his stomach do acrobatic flips and twists and the best candidates had his stomach performing yoga contortions. Every woman left him feeling anxious, the only differing characteristic was the degree of his apprehension. Some women made him so violently sick that he actually felt the contents of his stomach rising, and then there was the woman who only made him nervous.

"Have you chosen a bride," Madeline said ripping him from his thoughts with the question he didn't dare ask himself.

"No," he admitted. "I've tried not to think about it."

"You're wasting time Jackson." With his mahogany bookcase behind her and her arms folded, she appeared a formidable foe, one he did not want to provoke.

"Deciding who I am going to spend the rest of my life with is not an easy decision, Madeline."

"I know its not, but it's a choice you have to make." It was the softening of her voice that had him grinding his back teeth. He didn't need or want her pity.

"It's not exactly a choice I want to make. Hell, it's not a choice I'm ready to make," he said, admitting the truth before he turned from her pretending to inspect a novel that sat upon the ominous bookshelf. Shakespeare, he thought. Romeo and Juliet didn't know how good they had it.

Madeline walked from the bookcase and took a seat amongst the plush leather sofas across from him. She was less than five feet from where he stood and yet Jackson felt the gulf between them. She had no idea how tortured he was, how ashamed he felt every time he thought about marrying some unknown woman just to ensure his economic future. It seemed that every loving married couple he had passed on the street since that fateful day of decision had looked at him with revulsion. Every wedding band had mocked him. Inside every wife's eyes he had seen himself, the prostituting gigolo willing to fuck for cash. He was no better than a whore and that was a fact that bothered him more and more every minute he sat contemplating his future.

He was losing his soul, but not fast enough. Madeline wanted a bride and she wanted her yesterday. Suddenly the anger and pain within him came bursting out of his throat. The hot flames licked at his chest cavity before coming out his mouth to spill lava at her feet. He turned to her, on her. "Why don't you just pick the bitch," he yelled at her.

Shame poured over him as he watched Madeline attempt to crawl into the leather seats of the couch. Self preservation had her backing away from the burning rage that radiated off his skin.

He took a hesitant step to the sofa and cringed inside when he saw his mother's eyes darken with fear.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You didn't deserve that. I was out of line. It's just" his voice broke off unwilling to voice his pain.

Jackson watched as his mother took a cautious stand and left behind the safe comforts of her seat. "No, its ok," she said waving away his apology along with her fear. She stood before

him and took his two large hands in her much smaller ones. He was her son and though he didn't want to acknowledge it, she cared about him, it hurt her to see him hurting, and this whole marriage situation was definitely hurting her little boy. Suddenly she looked up at him, forgetting the hands that had her momentarily riveted, her eyes were alight with thought.

"Maybe that's what we should do. Maybe I should choose her."

"Choose who?"

"Your wife, maybe I should choose your bride. That way you don't have to worry."

He shook his head in disagreement. As much as he would like to pass the burden, he knew he couldn't. Finding a wife was his responsibility. Although he didn't know how in hell he was going to find one. His philandering ways hadn't exactly led him down the path of respectable women you wanted to bring home to Ma, let alone marry.

Suddenly her cool hands grasped his heated face so that he had no choice but to look into the sea green eyes that mirrored his. "Jackson, listen to me. For once in your life, listen to your mother," she said when it looked like he was going to shake his head no again. "Trust me on this. I can find you an acceptable woman and I'll make sure that she understands what she's getting herself into. That way there are no assumptions on either party's side."

When he simply stared at her afraid to believe her, she whispered "I can do this. Please let me do this. I promise to make it all better."

For the first time in many years Jackson felt comfort and peace when his mother's arms wrapped around his broad shoulders. The burden had been lifted off his shoulders to more capable ones. The sigh of relief he let out was heard by both of them.

The porcelain urn was old and aged enough to have seen several centuries. The piece of pottery had been created by the hands of a man seeking to honor his ancestors. From generation to generation it had been passed down, leaving the hands of the old to grace those of the youth, only to sit on the carved mahogany shelf freezing in the confining coldness of the air conditioner office where it sat. It had been acquired by a man who himself had long become a heirloom.

The flowers the vase contained were brand new. Young, freshly cut, they had seen the sun rise in the east from their dirt domains. They mocked both of the men that sat within the stifling room. They laughed at the older one illustrating his salt and pepper strands and the tell tale lines of dreams dreamt, found, and lost that ran from his wise dim eyes.

He sat across from him, this man that shared his genes and was astounded by how much separated them. The three feet from the seat behind the desk to the seat in front of the desk might as well have been the span of the Red Sea, and neither of them were Moses.

Cool brittle moments passed and still neither of them spoke. The silence stretched on, passing the uncomfortable stage until the quietness of the room was unbearable. The simple tick of the grandfather clock that stood in one corner of the room echoed through the room and their heads. The harsh sound barreled down the corridor of their empty skulls.

Neither of them could think of a word to say and yet had so many questions. There was one question both men sought the answer to.

"Jackson, why are you here?"

Such a simple question and yet it had so many convoluted answers. Thoughts of the last night he'd been with Sinclair floated through his mind.

He couldn't think about why he was here without remembering Sinclair. He feared her reaction when he left, but more than that he feared that there would be no reaction when he told her goodbye. That was why he was here. He wanted to see if there was a way he could stay.

He wanted to know that there could be repeats of Friday.

Jackson carried Sinclair from the Ball never letting her know how hurt and angry he was. He wasn't even sure if the emotions were directed at her actions or Skip's. All he knew was that he felt betrayed by those he trusted.

He'd been through so much that week. He had discovered Sinclair's notebook a few weeks earlier and hadn't been able to stop reading her stories. After he had admitted that the stories hadn't just amplified the sexual tension within, they had created them, he had decided to find out who the author was. Lucky for him his beautiful Sinclair had opened the door. He couldn't have pictured a lovelier woman. The next day he found his mother at his door informing him of the fact that his father had written a will that required him to be married before his next birthday or else he and his family would be disinherited. And then his fraternity formal ... His emotions were strained to the breaking point.

Finally he spoke. The discomfort and uncertainty had eaten enough of his soul. He needed to know what was in store for him. "I need to see the papers. I need to know that there is no other option."

The man across from him shifted in his seat. The leather seat creaked and moaned beneath him. His discomfort was plainly written on his face. What he was about to say would pain him greatly.

"I can't show you the papers Jackson."

"Pardon me?" he said automatically not willing to believe his ears, hoping he'd received a mixed signal because the response he had gotten was simply not an option.

"I can't show you the papers Jackson. Its one of the stipulations in his will. If you see the papers before your next birthday you automatically forsake everything."

"What the hell is going on here? I can't see the papers before I wed. In other words I'm making blind decisions. I need to know what I'm dealing with What the hell was he thinking?"

"To be perfectly honest son, I'm not even sure," he said before rubbing his hands over his face in bewilderment. "I don't think your father was sane when he wrote that titanium will of his."

Titanium, it was the word his mind latched onto. "So it can't be annulled."

"No. I've been trying to do that since he died. You're either rich and married or single and broke. Those are your only two options."

"That's all you can tell me. I'm your bloody nephew. Don't you think you could help me out a little more?"

The other man stood from behind the desk and walked to the tall mahogany bookshelf that lined the right wall. He feigned interest in the endless supply of legal books that filled the shelves to breaking point. With his back to Jackson he spoke. He was afraid to witness the pain and anger in his eyes. The pain and anger his own brother had created and nurtured.

"You have a right to know that your mother must approve of your bride, otherwise you lose everything."

"That son of a bitch."

"My thoughts exactly."

Chapter Twenty-Six
UPSTAGED IN HER OWN SHOES

It was a menace, an evil, bright, yellow menace. Oh yeah, sure it was cheery and uplifted the average person, but she was no average person. She was slightly drunk and more than slightly hung over.

Not that that made any sense, you either were drunk or hung over. You technically couldn't be both, but tell that to her body because it sure as hell didn't get a damn about technical.

Getting rip roaring drunk with the girls seemed like a great idea last night.

"Stupid fucking asshole," she muttered, referring to herself. The words weren't even a whisper, more a ghost of a sound that was heard more in her head than by her ears.

Why was it she thought, that the worst idea on the planet only becomes the worst idea always after the idea had been executed? Stupid, useless, good for nothing tunnel vision.

And then the big yellow thing was back. It was relentless in its pursuit. Its glittering rays stung her eyes, refusing to stop shining even after it had achieved its goal and tears fell from her blood shot eyes.

Sinclair wanted to kill the sun. If only she had a butcher knife and a space shuttle. Not that she would be able to drive the space shuttle in her condition, but a girl could dream.

Sinclair slowly rolled out of bed, literally. Slow rolling was the only movement she could manage that didn't cause the pounding in her head to increase to a screeching roar.

With her eyes closed she staggered towards her bedroom door. Groping hands lead the way.

"Vodka is evil," Sinclair silently chanted to herself as she fought her way to her restroom through the maze that was her bedroom.

She was naked, a fact she realized when her legs got tangled in the bra she had been wearing last night. When the hell did a blood red lace 36D bra become a deadly weapon? She thought as she tried to brace her fall.

As luck would have it her heels broke her fall. Fortunately she had been wearing wedges. Sinclair didn't even want to think about what her ass would look like if she had been wearing her sky high 'might as well be an angel' stilettos the night before.

It would probably look like cheese, holy cheese.

So what if it looked like her clothes were going to win the battle? She, Sinclair Amber James was going to win the war. God as her witness, she would not be defeated by a halter top and some four inch shoes. Even with a hangover and eyes closed I still have an advantage, right? Sinclair thought.

"Open your eyes, you goddamn drunken fool," she mumbled to herself. And yet they didn't bulge an inch. Hell, at this point in time with her drunken condition an inch was a lot to ask for. A centimeter, a damn millimeter and she would have been happy.

Somehow, someway she was able to pry her eyes open. She regretted it immediately. That nasty bitch called Sun was back. It had to be noon. The sun could only be that bright, that cruel at noon. It was like *She* didn't realize *She* was dealing with someone who was more than a little fucking hung over.

"Vodka is evil. Vodka is evil. Vodka is evil. Vodka is evil, even if it's in an apple martini," she muttered to herself, hoping that she would never make the mistake of trusting liquor ever again.

"Scratch that," she said and then attempted to shake her head. She quickly realized that shaking any part of her body was a bad idea, a very bad idea. "Vodka is especially evil when it's in a martini."

Finally she was out of her heinous bedroom and in the hall that ran straight to her bathroom.

A few more steps and she would be there. *I am a fairly intelligent woman. I can make it. I made it through the maze of clothes and the evil blinding sun. I can make it.* A few more steps and she ... ran straight into the bathroom door.

At that moment the telephone rang.

Today is officially a bad day.

She wasn't sure she could do this. She knew she had to do it. SHE had sent her a message, a request really that she had been unable, unwilling to refuse.

The fear that coursed through her veins was a drug tainting her heart, changing its rhythm so that she now gasped for the little puffs of oxygen that entered her lungs. She was hyperventilating and took some perverse pleasure in the fact. She could feel. She was alive. She was not the cold hearted bitch everyone thought she was. She was beyond scared. She was terrified and loved it, loved the fact that she felt, even if that emotion was fear. It had been so long since she felt. She had actually begun to believe it wasn't possible.

She let her head fall against the door seeking support needing something, even if it was wood, to give her a little aid.

"Breathe," she chanted to herself, waiting for her pulse to slow down, waiting for the moment she could clear her debts.

If only the other woman hadn't asked her to do this one thing. Anything else and she might have been able to survive the act intact, but this, this request was going to kill her. It was going to break what was left of her spine and crush it into a fine dust. She was definitely going to wake up tomorrow morning and be unable to look at herself in the mirror. But at least she would have a face to be ashamed of tomorrow. If she didn't do this favor, well

She took a deep breath and prepared herself. Today she was going to kill someone she loved.

The woman that stood in front of her was beautiful and cultured. Sinclair couldn't help it, looking at the young blonde woman before her she was reminded of a designer ad. The woman was obviously lost. There was no other reason why someone who looked so All American she could model any number of clothing designers was standing at her door.

The beauty opened her mouth to speak and Sinclair was momentarily shocked. Her alcohol soaked brain wasn't exactly working properly and all she could think was why the hell had God given her beauty and brains. That's it. It's true she thought, God is a man.

The beauty finally got the words past her throat. "Hello there. My name is Imogen and I came here to talk to you about Jackson, my fiancé."

The only two thoughts rolled through Sinclair's head at the beauty, Imogen's statement:

a) The American beauty was foreign, British actually, her accent attested to that fact. How ironic!

b) Jackson, HER Jackson, was not only engaged, but before her stood his fiancé.

She was going to send him to hell in a hand basket, a flaming hand basket filled with grenades.

Imogen took a step forward and almost collided into Sinclair, who was so dumbfounded she couldn't move. The only thing that alerted her to the fact that she was standing outside her apartment door with her mouth wide open was the delicate little cough Imogen made.

Damn her and her petite cough, Sinclair thought, before taking a step back so Imogen could enter her lovely abode.

For one heart stopping moment Sinclair thought she was going to throw up right on Imogen. She could picture the statuesque beauty covered in vomit. Sinclair couldn't help the little smile that plastered itself to her face. That would probably wipe off that regal look she wore so well.

Instead of coughing up her dinner, she asked Imogen to "Please take a seat." Sinclair ignored Imogen's second delicate little cough, the cough that let her know without words that she was being a negligent rude host. Not that she had any desire to host Jackson's fiancé, but the strict Southern upbringing her grandmother had instilled in her refused to slam the door on the little princess's face. Plus misery likes company, and this miserable woman needed know when she had become a home wrecker.

"Would you like something to drink?" The words popped out of her mouth. Damn Breeding.

The look on Imogen's face was one of apprehension and confusion. She wasn't quite sure if she should accept the drink. Sinclair watched the woman before her and saw as she struggled to come to a decision. None of the training or upbringing Imogen had been given had taught her how to deal with this situation. At Miss Phoebe's Academy for young girls there definitely was not a section titled "How to deal with your fiancé's girlfriend, The first meeting".

"I'm not going to poison you if that's what you're worried about. I don't kill over a man, clothes, shoes, well really just shoes, now that's another issue."

Imogen looked at the stacked Mary-janes she had put on this morning. The black and white tweed fabric of her shoes matched the tweed detail on her wool skirt suit jacket perfectly. Yes, she understood the feminine draw to shoes. She couldn't walk past a shoe store without peeking in to see the latest shipment.

Sinclair watched the slow smile that lit up Imogen's face. Impossibly the smile made her lovelier. Son of a bitch, Sinclair thought before looking down at what had brought on Imogen's smile.

Son of a bitch, she thought again. *She's wearing my new shoes, shoes I haven't even worn yet. Of all the injustices in the world, why did the bitch have to be wearing my shoes? My lovely fucking shoes.*

"Excuse me," Sinclair said before she walked into her bedroom. Quickly she grabbed the cardboard box she had discarded last night and placed her brand new designer shoes back in the box. She was so intent on finding those shoes she had spent weeks looking for them. They were going back to the store and she had barely tried them on.

"Where the hell did I put the receipt," she muttered to herself as she scattered the papers atop her desk. "There you are," she said before placing the slip of paper on top of the shoebox. As soon as she finished her little meeting with Imogen she was returning those damned shoes. And to think she'd searched all over town for those shoes only to have them walk in to her apartment on Jackson's fiancé's feet.

I hate my life. I truly hate my life.

"So," Sinclair said as she entered the living room, "How about that drink?" startling Imogen. She had been clouded in the silence, content to think her thoughts without interruption.

Sinclair stood before her, Imogen's reluctant maid bound by manners, and to be perfectly honest self preservation to offer and serve this woman, the other woman, a drink. There was no doubt about it, Sinclair had to be hospitable.

Sinclair wanted to hate Imogen. She wanted to let the anger and betrayal shine from her eyes like a lighthouse in the night calling to weary sailors, calling to broken women. But to let the pain show was to admit pain, and she would rather die a gruesome death than let Impeccable Imogen know she had killed some of her dreams when she had announced herself. And so Sinclair stood before Imogen hiding her fatal wounds while offering her tea.

Funny Sinclair thought how less than an hour ago my biggest problem was the residual headache I had from the hangover and now ... well now

"I would like that," Imogen said. "It was a bit nippy outside."

"Do you have a preference," Sinclair said as she walked into the blue and yellow kitchen that she loved.

"Actually yes, if you have oolong tea, I would prefer it."

A reluctant burst of admiration flowed from Sinclair's heart. The woman knew her teas. Good taste, she thought, and then was reminded that Imogen's good taste had led her to Jackson. And still she couldn't hate her. She wanted to hate her, but she couldn't bring herself to do such a disservice to them both. She had learned first hand that Jackson was a man any and every woman would find difficult to turn down.

She placed her favorite teapot on the counter, a fine porcelain she had found at a garage sale, then put the kettle on the front stove burner and waited for it to sing. Thoughts floated in and out of her head, memories that she would have been better repressing. She only had a week of memories and yet they haunted her, ghosts that refused to be exorcised, and oh how desperately she wanted a priest beside her, guiding her way through this treacherous battlefield of emotions. With a string she held on, clinging to it desperately, as the past ran rampant through her brain.

How could it seem so long ago that he'd spoken those words? "You're incredible," he'd said, and meant it. That was the part that lashed at her broken heart with the deep biting sting of

a whip. He had meant it, and still he had betrayed her.

"When I'm with you, I'm the only one with you." He'd wanted her exclusively and yet he hadn't been able to abide by his own rules.

Sinclair placed the teapot on the coffee table that sat between herself and Imogen. She leaned forward and poured the oolong tea for Imogen and thanked her grandmother. Not a single drop was spilled. Her pride would be her savior, she told herself. Even though she was broken, she refused to let the fault lines show.

For herself she had quickly made an espresso. Due to her haste it wasn't the best, but it was the best she could do. The hangover she had battled until the last dregs of the morning took it away, made its resilient self known. To conquer her hangover and the fiancé situation she found herself in she would need more than coffee ... a sedative thrown back with whiskey would be more adequate, but the coffee would have to do. Plus she could just picture Imogen's face if she started popping pills. Her china doll like face might actually crack.

Across from one another they sat, avoiding eye contact, looking at every inch of the sitting room, except those they occupied. The silence filled up the room as their thoughts ran amuck with the words they wanted to say.

Both women tested their words imagining the delivery, and then corrected the mistakes before discarding the statements as useless. That's not what I wanted to say, or that's not what I wanted to know, they thought before disposing of their words.

And then out of the silence came the words. Startled Sinclair looked at the woman before her and knew she had not imagined it. The words she had disposed of had been thrown out her mouth. Four words. Four hard, brittle, soft words. Four words that had been barely a whisper and yet they hung in the air with the ease of an anvil.

"When is the wedding?"

The look the other woman sent her way before she responded was so full of sympathy that Sinclair had the irrational urge to throw her coffee right in her face. *Don't pity me, damn you.*

"We haven't picked a date yet. So many details have yet to be worked out."

Sinclair had no real response to that. "Oh," she said before staring down at the dark brew she held. She needed it bitter to get her through this meeting.

Suddenly she truly noticed the coffee cup in her hand. She was clenching the cup so hard her fingers were starting to cramp. She took a deep breath before loosening her grip.

Imogen glanced around Sinclair's apartment before taking a sip of her oolong tea. She inhaled the fragrant as the flavors settled on her tongue. The woman knew how to make tea.

"You have a lovely home," she said hoping to ease some of the tension evident in the woman's rigid shoulders.

"How long have you two known each other," Sinclair's mouth asked without taking notice of her shattered soul.

Imogen's respect for Sinclair went up a notch. The other woman was not backing down. She was proving to be a strong individual. Imogen knew that the pain she felt must have been sharp and shocking in intensity. After all Sinclair had just found out that her boyfriend was engaged, but she kept herself together. She was cool and calm.

"We've known each other since we were children, and so I wasn't really all that surprised when I was asked to be his Mrs.," Imogen responded.

The hooded look on Sinclair's face couldn't quite mask the thought that had gone through her head at Imogen's statement. *At least one of us wasn't surprised.*

“Enough about me,” Imogen said as she straightened herself and leaned forward so that she now looked directly at Sinclair. Any attempts from Sinclair to avoid her would have been painfully obvious.

“I will be the first one to admit that Jackson is what we in England would call a rake. His sexual appetite is never satisfied. He considers himself, along with that group of his, a connoisseur of women. Frankly he’s had us in all shapes and sizes, and I must admit that I understand the attraction, but that’s all it must be-- attraction.”

Sinclair stared at her dumbfounded. She couldn’t quite wrap her brain around what the woman was telling her and couldn’t for the life of her figure out why she would be telling her such a thing. If she was trying to scare her away from Jackson she had accomplished that feat when she uttered the word fiancé.

“This affair you and Jackson are having can not continue past the day of our wedding.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you have *no* objections to Jackson and I ... until your wedding day?”

“Right.”

“I’ve got two questions for you. Are you out of your mind and what kind of woman do you think I am to continue to see a man who is engaged to someone other than myself?”

“Look,” she said as she crossed her arms against her chest. “Both of us know that Jackson is not the kind of man who maintains a faithful relationship. To be blunt he fucks everything with a pussy.”

Her words lashed at her already torn pride. *Everything with a pussy ...* she was just another notch on the old bedpost.

“Once Jackson and I get married he is not going to be able to go outside of the marriage bed. That makes every moment before the wedding incredibly important to him. He’s going to look to enjoy himself as much as possible. You and whoever else he’s sleeping with are going to be providing that enjoyment. I’m just here to make sure that you know the relationship has a limited period, an expiration date I could say. Although Jackson’s intelligence is one thing I have always admired about him, I’m sitting here in front of you to make sure that should his dick be his guide you step in and show him the right way. I don’t want him to mess up both our futures just for a quick fuck.”

Something Imogen had said had caught Sinclair and never let go. “What do you mean he’s not going to be able to go outside the marriage bed? Besides the obvious points what does it matter if he cheats during your marriage?”

A slow cold smile crept along Imogen’s face and Sinclair felt her skin chill.

“Jackson’s father is dead and Jackson is the sole heir. One of the stipulations in Maxwell’s will is that should Jackson ever cheat he will lose everything. Guess the old man knew his son and had a thing against bastards.”

“Is that even legal?”

Her laugh was brittle and coarse. “The nobility can do whatever they want.”

“Nobility?”

“Oh sweetheart, he didn’t tell you. Jackson is a Duke.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven
THE INSANE TRAIN

The phone rang almost as soon as Imogen stepped outside of her door. The shrill sound of the ring made her jump. Walking to the phone reminded Sinclair of an out of body experience. She was too caught up in her thoughts about Jackson, his fiancé and the fact that he hadn't bothered to tell her he was engaged to really notice that she was picking up the phone. All of a sudden the phone was in her hand. She couldn't remember walking to it, let alone picking it up, but then again she could remember walking. It just hadn't been her walking.

"Hello," she said automatically. Her voice was hollow. It lacked depth and intention. She didn't really care who was on the other line. She didn't even know why she had bothered to pick up the phone. She was coming to the conclusion that she couldn't even begin to handle a conversation at this point when he spoke. She had already pulled the receiver from her ear. She was that close to terminating the call.

"Hello," he said. When she didn't answer, he spoke again. "Hello, Sinclair, baby, are you there?" Still there was no response.

At the sound of his deep voice the emptiness she had been feeling was filled to the brim with potent anger. Her mind couldn't wrap itself around the fact that he had dared to call. Knowing what she knew about him she would have expected someone with a heart and soul, maybe not a heart that might be asking for too much from him, but someone with a soul would have left her alone to wallow in her intoxicating misery. She needed time away from him and here he was calling her less than a minute after his fiancé had vacated her apartment. He was plunging the knife deeper into her delicate heart.

She slammed down the receiver with enough force to crack both the receiver and phone. The fault lines that ran through the plastic reminded her of her heart. She wondered if the deep grooves that ran through it would ever be filled. She knew that eventually the ache in her chest would subside. She wouldn't always feel like she was having a heart attack, but there was no denying that this last bit of information had left her broken. One simply couldn't forget that the man of her dreams, a man she had infatuated over for three years, had used her so cruelly.

As quickly as the anger had formed it dissipated, only to leave behind bitter pity. She could admit it to herself -- there was no one around-- Sinclair actually pitied herself. There were no if, ands, or buts about it, she had created the situation she was now in. She had let herself fall

so deeply in the dream that only pain could wake her up. She had fallen for him long before he showed up at her door, and Jackson, like any sensible asshole, had taken advantage of her, yes, but she had given him that advantage. Her actions had pretty much screamed "Use me. I'm a hopeless masochist."

The whole situation had seemed perfect. Girl falls for boy long before he sees her. Girl dreams about boy loving her and then suddenly he is there, at her door step, ready to profess his love. The story should have ended with boy and girl falling madly in love and having two wonderful children, but unfortunately for her the story didn't end there. She laughed at herself. She had to, she was going insane and she knew it. She was dreaming, pretending that real life was like her romance novels. She had to face it. She had fallen flat on her face with this one and she couldn't deny that her on the side occupation had something to do with her failure at love. She had written so many novels, provided so many happy endings, and it had seemed that this would be her happily ever after. It had looked like for once she would be living and not writing the great love story. She had taken one look at Jackson at her door and thought, finally MY prince charming. She had simply expected too much from him. She let her need dictate her actions. Her brain hadn't been working since she had seen Jackson across the courtyard three years ago.

Well her brain was working now and it was screaming, "Get the hell out of Dodge." Distance was what she needed, Sinclair thought. She needed to distance herself from Jackson. He was like an addiction she had acquired, and now she needed to place herself in rehab. It was for her own good.

The phone rang dragging her from her thoughts. She reached out to pick up the receiver, but stopped short. She drew her hand back and clasped them together behind her back. It's probably him, she thought, and the last thing she needed was to speak to him. She wasn't even sure what she would say. All she knew was that she couldn't speak to Ian Jackson Phillips ever again. Her sanity depended on it.

He was going insane. Jackson had called Sinclair close to ten times in the last hour and not once had she picked up. He had thought he had called the right number the first time, but when no one answered when he said, "Hello," he admitted that he must have dialed the wrong number. Sinclair would have responded for obvious reasons. When he still couldn't reach Sinclair an hour later he left a message on her answering machine.

She was in the middle of putting her hair in a bun when she heard his voice. It stopped her, pausing her actions for long seconds. Only the pain in her outstretched hands reminded her that she was in the middle of something. Only then did she finish putting her long ebony strands in a chic bun at her nape.

The voice was husky with something close to desperation. She immediately dismissed the thought as wild speculation. She simply wanted him to miss her. And then she actually heard what he was saying.

"Hey sweetheart, this is Jackson. I called because I really wanted to talk to you. I was hoping we could have dinner together. If you get home before dinner time please call me so we can meet ... I ... I miss you sweetheart. Bye. Oh by the way my number is 212-555-0973."

The loud sharp knocks against the carved mahogany wood stunned him and alerted him to the fact that he was standing outside Sinclair's door. He waited ten seconds for her to answer the door and when there was no response he knocked again, but louder this time. His gut told him he needed to see her as soon as possible. He didn't believe in hunches, but damn it

something wasn't sitting right with him.

"Sinclair," he yelled as he knocked for the third time. "Open the door, sweetheart. I know you're in there."

The voice from down the hall was wispy yet husky, aged to perfection. It belonged to a sixty-something year old woman with white blonde hair. "Look here, you young whippersnapper, don't you think you should leave that little thing alone," she said. Her demeanor spoke volumes. She was amused by his discomfort. She leaned against her doorframe watching him as if she had all the time in the world. "You're entertaining. I admit it," she said when he simply watched her watching him. "You look smart enough to know that stalking is not legal in any state," she said when he didn't respond.

"I'm not stalking her. She's my girlfriend," he finally said. The look she gave him told him she didn't believe a word of what he had said, and she was right to disbelieve him. Jackson was lying. Sinclair wasn't exactly his girlfriend and that was a thought that made him intensely uncomfortable. The words had rolled off his tongue easily but they weren't true. He wanted to make them true. Jackson wanted to make Sinclair his girlfriend, but first he had to reach her.

He turned to the woman down the hall. "To be honest Sinclair isn't my girlfriend, not yet anyways. That's one of the reasons I came to see her. You wouldn't happen to know where I could reach her, would you?"

The elderly woman shrugged one delicate shoulder before responding. "Don't know where she is, Gorgeous, I only know where she isn't, which is home. I saw her leave less than ten minutes ago."

The statement hit him like a knee in the groin winding him and leaving him speechless. Sinclair had just left. She had been home listening to the phone ring over and over again. She had heard him leave that desperate message and hadn't bothered to pick up the phone or call him back.

Jackson called Saturday. He called Sunday. He even called Monday and still she didn't speak to him. She didn't dare pick up the phone. Sinclair knew she was taking the coward's way out, but speaking to Jackson, even if to tell him to fuck off was not an option. Hell she had gone as far as to unplug her telephone so she wouldn't have to listen to the messages he left.

She had developed a late night habit of reading her first short story which was an erotica where the male character was Jackson, pure and simple. The only thing she hadn't placed on paper was his real name and that was simply because she hadn't known it. On paper he was perfect. In the flesh ... well ... in the flesh he left beautiful heartfelt messages that begged Sinclair to pick up the phone, messages that she played over and over again late at night right before she burst into a fit of tears. "Distance," she said as she wiped her eyes, distance and time were all she needed to get over her poisonous affection.

Sinclair rolled over and shut off her alarm. It took mere seconds for her to realize where she was and what day it was. She retold herself for the hundredth time in twenty four hours that today was a day like any other day. She would take a shower, get dressed, go to class, and deal with her lectures like she did any other school day. Just because it was Tuesday didn't mean today would be any different.

She knew she would see Jackson Tuesday. She had been avoiding him all week, but she couldn't avoid him this Tuesday, and so Jackson didn't see Sinclair until Tuesday and that was because she didn't have a choice. They had a class together, Labor Economics to be precise, and unless she feigned an illness and skipped class she was going to have to confront him. Just the

thought of confronting Jackson made her stomach realize it was gymnastically inclined. It did flips, flops, cartwheels, and handstands.

Simply put Sinclair did not want to confront Jackson, she wanted to avoid him like the plague, but the fact that they were having a quiz in class that day meant she had to show up.

She was sitting in the middle of the back of the class when he walked in. She cringed in her seat hoping to shrink herself so she could avoid his unsettling eyes.

Jackson stood at the front of the class, searching amongst the students for someone, someone she knew was herself. Suddenly his eyes lighted on hers and he smiled. His lips spread so that his white teeth flashed against his tanned face, but that was as close as his 'smile' came to a smile. It was cold and cruel promising retribution for the grief she had caused him.

And she knew she deserved retribution. He deserved more, she had taken the coward's way out by not answering his calls, by not telling him that it was over. She had denied herself the satisfaction of throwing the relationship in his face because she was afraid she wouldn't be able to do it. She knew she wanted to walk away from him, but she wanted to do and what she would do ... well those were two very different things.

Jackson took steady purposeful steps towards her. Eighteen, that was the number of steps she counted, the number of steps he took to get to her row. She was unable to do anything but watch.

Absently Sinclair wiped her increasingly sweaty palms on her jeans as she watched him move. He passed seven seats, three of them occupied, to get to her. He took the seat to her left and turned to her. He opened his mouth to speak and ... dropped it in astonishment. His audience was gone. Next to him was an empty seat. He had taken his eyes off Sinclair for one second and that was because he couldn't have passed that last seat without stepping on the young woman who sat there if he hadn't watched where he was going. That was all it took and she was gone.

He looked up and silently watched her walk away from him.

Sinclair's steps were rushed and unsteady as she walked down the row, looking behind her every few steps, hoping he wasn't following her.

For one harsh second Jackson sat in his seat, watching her run to the farthest corner of the lecture hall, thinking he had lost her. She had simply walked away from him.

Suddenly he stood from his seat, deciding he was not going to let her take the easy way out. She was not going to simply walk away from him.

"Excuse me ... pardon me ... sorry," he said as he wove in and out of rows, trying to place himself next to Sinclair, but every time he got close to her, she simply moved. Another seat, another row, and she was gone.

"Excuse me Excuse me ... I'm so sorry," Sinclair said as she squeezed past a couple that sat in the middle of the row she was currently trying to sit in. Behind her she could hear the same words in the deep baritone she had become accustomed to. Jackson was a few steps behind her and gaining ground.

She gritted her teeth and pushed down the unease she felt knowing that he wasn't going to let her simply walk away and pretend that nothing had occurred between them.

She was near the end of the row when she realized that their actions, the up and down merry go round chase that she and Jackson had run, had caught the attention of the lecturer.

Ms. Jamison was a tall emaciated looking woman with greasy brown hair and large horn shell glasses that she liked to pull down her nose when she was thoroughly displeased with you. She was not the kind of woman one liked to irritate. When annoyed she would lift one thick heavily arched eyebrow in a silent question that no one dared answering before curling her lips

into a sneer that made you feel as though you were sour milk she had accidentally tasted. And then she would speak. Her voice was gritty almost sandy, the kind of voice that some men would have considered sexy if it hadn't been her voice, but the gritty quality of Ms Jamison's voice was too harsh and was only exacerbated by the thoroughly chilling words she said when incensed, which was always.

Sinclair turned when she reached the end of the row, ready to placate a thoroughly displeased Ms. Jamison and found that Jamison wasn't even looking at her, as a matter of fact Ms. Jamison hadn't even noticed she was there. If Sinclair had to guess, she would say that Ms. Jamison hadn't noticed anyone was in the room, anyone except for Jackson.

Sinclair watched as Ms. Jamison's cloudy blue eyes heated up and felt chills run down her spine. She was expecting Jamison's eyebrow to lift up in anger any moment, but after a few seconds she realized it wasn't going to go sky high.

Jamison wasn't angry.

As a matter of fact she looked oddly enough pleased. At that moment Sinclair realized that Jamison's eyes hadn't heated up, they had warmed up. She was looking at Jackson with affection.

Son of a bitch, Sinclair thought, he's even charmed the professors, at least the female ones, the bitchy stick up her ass female ones.

"Mr. Phillips," she said, "I don't approve of you interrupting my class to take a brisk jog," she said her gritty voice was husky and soft, almost personal, and for one wild second Sinclair believed that she, Ms. Jamison, was another notch on Fuck and Chuck's bedpost. Even as the thought entered her head she dismissed it. Jamison might want to be a conquest of Jackson's, but she couldn't see him sleeping with her, but then again how well did she know him. She hadn't known about his fiancé, now had she?

"I apologize," he said his voice soft and soothing.

Sinclair watched, bile rising from her stomach, as Jackson smoothed Jamison's ruffled feathers. With Jamison's alert eyes on him, Jackson took the seat he stood before. It was in the second row. Sinclair almost laughed at the justice.

Jackson Phillips hadn't ever sat anywhere but in the back section of a lecture hall, and now because of her he was forced to sit in the front, the second row to be precise. It was shallow and childish, but Sinclair was nonetheless pleased that Jackson was going to have to suffer through Jamison's lecture up and close and personal.

She started to walk away from the row when she felt his eyes boring into her back. She turned and found him staring at her with vigilante cold eyes. They promised her that he would find her and they would have the conversation she was so steadfastly trying to avoid.

She couldn't avoid him any longer. Jackson made sure of it.

He had even gone so far as to enlist aid to make sure that Sinclair didn't evade him again.

As usual Sinclair was early and Jackson was late getting to class. This meant that he had the upper hand. His predicament was further improved when he realized that because the doors to the class were in the rear he saw Sinclair long before she saw him. This allowed him to easily station his accomplices so that escape was not an option.

Sinclair realized with dismay that she was surrounded. To her left stood Jackson and to her right stood Skip. Unwilling to face Jackson and hoping to prolong the moment when she would have to, she turned to Skip.

"Why are you helping him? You know," she said with conspiring whisper, "You could

just get up and move out of my way to get back at him for your face.”

His chuckle was honest and didn't bode well for her. “Although I'd like to help, I owe the guy, and I get the feeling that you are going to provide the payback I can't get myself, plus it wouldn't be just me who had to move,” he said before sitting back in his chair and providing Sinclair the clear view that not only did Skip and Jackson block her escape, on both sides of either men sat a Fallen.

“Oh fuck,” she said in a vehement whisper.

“Don't say a word. Not until class is over. I have no intention of repeating what happened last time you tried to corner me. Your persuasion may work on the ladies, but I doubt it will work on Minster. Or are you that good that you can charm a man, plus I'd actually like to get something out of this lecture,” Sinclair said without ever turning her head. As a matter of fact she looked straight ahead at the board, hardly acknowledging Jackson's presence.

“I can wait an hour to have this conversation, especially since I've been waiting days,” he said. His voice was calm, belying the seething anger coursing through his veins. Her ignorance had caused him so much grief he had actually felt a pain in his chest stronger than heartburn, but less than a heart attack.

When he had confided in Skip that his heart was literally breaking the other man had responded with, “You're losing it Jax. Both you and Sinclair are on the same train to Crazyville.” The young man had turned from Jackson to enter his bedroom but stopped at the doorway. “You've got to talk to her,” he said. “You need to assuage your mind.”

Exactly. He needed to ease his mind and only she could provide the answers to quiet the questions that his heart had been screaming.

Once class was over they vacated the room. Over her shoulder Sinclair saw Myra, one of her closest friends, give her a look that spoke volumes. The poor woman's face silently asked Sinclair if she would be ok with the infamous group, and how she had come to find herself in such a predicament, because as far as Myra was concerned Sinclair did not even know of the Fallens' existence.

Sinclair hadn't told Myra about Jackson and Myra was enough of a gossip to know about Jackson “Fuck and Chuck” Phillips and the Five Fallen, which could be why Sinclair never asked her who Blue Jeans was. Ignorance truly is bliss.

Only when the group had moved away from the crowd that gathered outside the building entrance waiting to discuss their last lecture and their next did Jackson turn to her.

“Sinclair sweetheart,” he said tenderly. “Why haven't you picked up your phone? Why have you been avoiding me?”

It was too much and yet too little. She was beginning to come to grips with the fact that she had been lied to and used. She had brought it on, but the tenderness, that was too much for her. She couldn't handle knowing, remembering his kind words and acts when she knew without a doubt that it was all a sham. Engaged dukes don't fall for girls like her. And so she lashed out at him wanting him to feel some smidgen of the pain she felt because of him.

She turned around to face him, eyes full of fire, and he immediately stepped back. The anger she felt created heat waves around him that charred his senses.

“Why?” she yelled at him, “Because I deserve better than you. I deserve someone who doesn't lie and cheat. I deserve someone who's faithful and caring and I'm not going to get that someone in you.”

“What the hell are you talking about? I haven't cheated on you. I haven't even looked at another woman since I touched you.”

She gave an indelicate snort at that and turned away from him. Quickly she turned back around to face him. "It's all a dream Jackson. A fantasy, and reality is intruding. You and I don't make sense. I've finally woken up and realized that the stories I write don't come true. Real life doesn't end happily ever after. Only the truly lucky women get a real, live knight in shining armor. And although you may be a noble, you, my dear, are no knight."

He didn't want to ask, but the question burned a hole in his chest and so he said it as nonchalantly as he could manage. "What makes you think I'm a noble?" he asked.

"I know you're a duke. Your fiancé told me."

"I don't have a bloody fiancé. What the hell are you talking about?" he yelled at her, frustrated because he knew that even though she stood before him, he had lost her. He'd lost something very special. Her eyes only shined with the hard light of pain.

"How can you stand there and tell me that. I saw her damn it. She showed up on my doorstep just last Friday. How can you stand there and tell me that you're not engaged, that you're not getting married."

"I'm not engaged, damn it."

"So you're not getting married?" she asked confused. Why would Imogen go through all that trouble to track her down if it was all just a ruse?

"I am getting married, but"

Sinclair turned from him before he finished speaking.

"I've had enough Jackson. I've got enough scars from this week alone. I don't need anymore."

She took two steps and then turned to him. He stood in the same spot unable to do anything but watch her walk away from him. Again.

Her sob of dismay caught in her throat. This was the moment she had been waiting her whole life for, that moment when you find someone who is so perfect for you that you can't imagine another individual every satisfying you. She had found that person in Jackson or so she had thought, but that wasn't the truth. And now she had to go on knowing that she'd given her everything to the wrong man, a man who never even appreciated her, a liar and a cheater who she had given permission to take advantage of her.

"It was beautiful while it lasted Jackson," she said as she walked backwards, "But I can't put my heart on the line anymore. You're engaged. You've got a fiancé. I can't and won't compete with her."

Chapter Twenty-Eight IRISH COFFEE

The man stood against the door shrouded in darkness. The black moonless sky of the night masked his face. But Jackson didn't need to see his face to know who he was. Only one person could enter his room without his notice. Only one man walked like a cat in the silence of a cold dark night.

The night in question shivered through his bones setting his teeth on edge.

"Explain yourself," he said to the shadow that concealed the man. The black mask rippled and shifted around the unmoving man.

The movement was slight, barely a whisper of action and yet Jackson noticed it. He felt it before he saw it. He knew the other man's answer. The other man shook his head. *No*. Jackson saw the soft strands of his hair flow around his face in a circle. Long moments passed and then finally the other man spoke.

"Explain."

"No," Jackson said automatically, denying that this man had any right to be told anything. He would rather keep his private struggles to himself. His pain, his insecurities, and the ache that was quickly consuming him were all his alone. Aide was not something he sought. Not even if it came from the only man he trusted.

"Explain," the other man said again. And even though his tone had not changed Jackson knew that the second man spoke with a heightened intensity. He was not going to let him deny his pain.

And he suddenly didn't want to deny his pain. He wanted someone to know that this time he felt and maybe, just maybe if God was listening, this man could provide him with the answer he couldn't find.

Jackson took a deep breath and opened his mouth ready and willing to let him in, he needed to tell someone what he had been going through, he desperately wanted to explain his actions, but none of that came out.

Instead he said, "There is nothing to explain."

"Explain," the other man said in response. He wasn't leaving till he got the information he came for. If it took all night, that was fine with him. Many claimed ice ran through his veins. He could out wait anybody. He had been born patient. Plus, he did not have anything more important to do. Jackson had clogged up his mind so that no other thought entered. He wasn't leaving until Jackson let him in.

"One word, three times, you never were much of a talker were you, Ireland? Do you want the synopsis or the novel?" Jackson asked exasperated. His tone was harsh, telling of cruel amusement, the cruel amusement his life was providing others, particularly his father who was cold in his grave.

"The novel, I want to hear it all."

Jackson shrugged in response and leaned back in his chair. "I hope you've got all night," he called over his shoulder to the man that stood at his door.

He thought about putting on the light, but thought better of it. He liked the fact that both he and the other man were masked by the night. He didn't think he could tell him everything with the light on. With the light on the other man would be able to see the anguish and pain he was feeling. He knew it would be clearly etched on his face. There would be no denying the misery his father's will had brought in his life. So Jackson kept the light off and basked in concealment.

Finally Ireland moved from the doorway and walked to Jackson's futon. He took a seat on it and faced Jackson giving him his attention. He knew that what Jax had to say was beyond important. As friends they had been through many trials, many obstacles, and neither of them had ever shown emotion. Ireland did not need to see Jackson's face to know that this situation was different. This obstacle would be unlike anything either of them had ever faced before. He could feel it in his bones that the convoluted situation was life altering. He just hoped only a few

aspects of Jax's life were altered, but most of all he hoped that together they could get through it.

Long moments passed. The tension surrounding them thickened. Neither of them said a word. The silence was dead, all consuming in its monotony and yet they basked in it. They relished the silence, allowing their thoughts to run free.

Finally Jackson stood. He took a step towards the other man and then decided against it.

The heavy silence was pierced by a soft rumble drawing both men's attentions. Both men darted quick glances at the offender in question. Jackson held a hand over his starved stomach. "Guess I should go get a late night snack," Jackson said before turning and leaving the room. At the doorway he stopped and turned back to the other man. "Would you like something to drink," he asked the other man as he squinted into the dark cavern of this room. He had not heard Ireland leave, but then again with his agile, graceful moves he would not have heard him. Jackson honestly could not be sure if the other man was still in the room since he could not see him. He only knew that he had not left.

When he received no answer he turned away. He hadn't expected one and would have been shocked to receive one. No, Ireland would not have answered his question.

He flipped the switch and allowed the kitchen to be bathed in light. Here, while alone, he could handle the light. There was no one to see the pain etched across his face.

At least there hadn't been.

Even though the man made no sound Jackson knew he had followed him into the room.

He didn't turn around and acknowledge his presence. Instead he continued to do what he had been doing. He walked to the fridge and pulled it open before taking the items he wanted from it. Only when he was done making his chicken breast sandwich did he turn to Ireland.

"I'm making coffee. I think we're both going to need it. When I said novel I meant hardback six hundred page novel. Plus I could use a drink."

Ireland simply lifted an eyebrow. It was an acknowledgment along with a silent question. He had heard Jackson, but more than that he had heard what the other man did not say. Neither of the men drank much and yet he knew without being told that Jackson truly needed a drink and that was what scared him, knowing Jackson's pain was that deep.

From the doorway he watched Jackson's fluid movements as he made the espressos. He was impressed. Ireland knew Jackson's love for coffee was almost obsessive but he had never thought the man would actually have an espresso/cappuccino machine in his kitchen.

After dumping the ground beans in the machine Jackson took a step back and allowed the machine to do its work. He leaned against the refrigerator and crossed his arms against his chest, his sandwich forgotten. Only the busy hum of the espresso machine could be heard in the cold stainless steel kitchen. The sound was soothing, calming, almost medicinal in nature.

Out of the stillness in the kitchen came his voice. It was calm, smooth, and filled with hesitant emotion. "My mother bought me the espresso machine. She said I needed it for college. She didn't expect me to survive without it. She was right. It's my lifeline. It's the only gift she's given me since I was thirteen that I've actually kept. For the first six months after my birthday I threw it away every night and every morning I would take it out of the trash can and make myself an espresso. I couldn't let it go. She was here the other day and didn't even notice it. Hell, I'm not even sure if she remembers buying it," he said as he stared at stainless steel contraption he had come to depend on.

He looked up to see Ireland's deep blue eyes on him. He had his attention. He was listening.

Ireland couldn't have turned away from Jackson if his life depended upon it. He was

riveted to the floor, drawn by Jackson's pain and his need to ease it.

Jackson stepped away from the fridge, passed Ireland against the kitchen door, and walked to the other side of the kitchen. From one of the cabinets he pulled a large bottle.

Ireland couldn't tell what the contents were but he guessed it to be flavoring. As long as it wasn't Irish Crème he would be ok. It was ironic, funny, and never ceased to amaze people that he did not like Irish Crème flavored anything.

Suddenly the smooth bubbling sound stopped coming from the espresso machine. Their drinks were ready.

Jackson took down the two large coffee mugs and placed them on the counter.

"Tell me that's not"

"No," Jackson said cutting him off. He already knew what he was going to ask. "It's whiskey. When I was young, really young my mother made this for my father. She called it Irish Gaelic Coffee. Apparently her grandmother had taught her how to make it. When we were a little older she passed on the knowledge. Espresso, whiskey, and lots of cream was all there was to it and yet I loved it the first time I tasted it. Have been loving it ever since."

Ireland's demeanor did not change but every word Jackson had spoken had dropped like a bomb in his brain. Never in all the years Ireland had known Jackson, had the other man ever spoken of his mother. It was a subject neither of them broached. Neither man spoke of their family. Never once in all the years they had known each other had they ever talked of their families. And that was saying a lot since Ireland and Jackson had been friends since they were children, young children. He had even met the infamous Madeline, but this was the first and only time Ireland could remember Jackson speaking of his mother.

The uneasy feeling in his stomach just escalated to the point where he wondered if he should get an antacid. Things did not look good.

At the end of the conversation Ireland knew he had been right. Things were not good. As a matter of fact they looked so bad he wasn't sure Jackson would ever land on his feet. Finally he spoke.

"Can I ask you a question?"

He simply nodded. Yes.

"Why don't you go over there and yell at her? Simply tell her off."

"What am I supposed to say to her? Why did you do that? Why couldn't you have waited till the day before my wedding to spring her on me?" You know how I agreed to let her pick my bride.

"Point taken."

"Can I ask another question?"

"Yes."

"Why not Sinclair, you have to get married and you like her, so why not marry her?"

Jackson opened his mouth to respond and then slammed it shut. Again he opened his mouth but nothing came out. After long moments he admitted the truth. "Because there is a difference between a marriage based on convenience and one of affection. With convenience I know neither of us will get hurt by the other's actions and our own assumptions."

Ireland ran his fingers through his long, thick blonde locks in exasperation. He knew all too well what Jackson spoke of.

"You know I used to wish for the good old days of arranged marriages. You're making me change my mind very quickly. I've just come to the conclusion that any way you look at it marriage is hell. My best bet is to avoid it indefinitely."

"I wish I could ... I wish I could."

"You lied to him," he said from the doorway, upon which he leaned. His build and the arms crossed over his chest reminded her of someone. The voice was so deep, so calm and so close it snatched her from her reverie.

For one heart stopping moment she thought it was HIM. She thought he had finally come for her. He had promised her that before he left. He had promised to make every one of her nightmares come true. One shaky hand reached up to protect the fragile bones of her neck. He had once promised to snap her neck. Apparently he had made good on his threat despite his death.

It couldn't be him. He couldn't be back. She couldn't even conceive of the thought, because then all of her plans would have been ruined, and never again would she get the chance to enact her revenge. She wanted the bastard to turn in his rotting grave and if he was back, well, he would ruin everything.

The misty fragmented dreams she had at night were coming to her during the day, plaguing her with doubt and insecurity. The only thing she had been sure of lately was that her nightmares were beginning to haunt her during the day.

"He never speaks of you and then suddenly you are all he can talk about, but it's what he's not saying that is telling me so much. It's what he hasn't said that told me to check up on you. And you know what, my inclination was right. You weren't giving him the whole story."

Suddenly it occurred to her that the voice was not coming from the grave. It wasn't him. And then she placed it, she now knew who she was speaking to.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," she said as she stood from the chaise she had lounged on, never once daring to look him in the face, afraid the face might change right before her eyes.

"Don't I? I had my attorney check up on you. Jackson may not be able to see the will, but my attorney and I are fair game. The old man didn't say that none could see the will, just him."

"You had no right," she hissed, as she ran at him. Unable to cage her anger she struck out at him. Blow after blow struck his chest and he did nothing, he simply waited until she had exhausted herself.

"Why didn't you tell him?"

"Because if I did, he would ruin all my plans, and I am not willing to lose my son. Not again."

"Well then, I suggest you and I talk."

She glared at him. "I've never had a partner before."

He took the empty seat next to her before speaking. "There's a first time for everything."

Chapter Twenty-Nine THE LOST BOY

He was running, running so hard, so fast, his muscles ached and begged for rest and still he kept running. Nothing and no one could stop him. He had to keep running. He had to get away. It was the only thing he could think of doing, the only way to ease the pain, and so he ran.

“Master Phillips, please stop,” he heard and still he ran for no other reason than the fact that he could do nothing else. The shrill, frightened cry had been delivered to his ears by the angry wind that whipped by. The wind, reminded him of himself, it, too, could not stay still. The need to run pumped through his blood, an intoxicating drug.

He shook his head no, aware that the voice could not see his actions from where he stood, but it was all he could muster in his weakened condition. All of his quickly depleting energy was required to run.

He looked around him and suddenly realized that he did not know where he was. The tall stone buildings surrounding him looked mysterious and uncharted. Even the park in which he stood looked harshly alien. The bright harsh light of the golden sun only seemed to further illustrate the point. He was somewhere new, somewhere he had never been before, somewhere he wanted to be because anywhere was better than where he had come from.

He had run far. He had succeeded, but with the awareness of his surroundings came an awareness of his physical state. He was exhausted. Great puffs of air were haggardly drawn into his starved lungs. Too quickly, too much, he thought, as the last breath entered his body. Immediately he started to cough. He was choking on air.

The thought made him laugh. Only he, in his foolishness, would be stupid enough to suffocate on air. The complex of the genius. It was the title his mother had given the stupidity of the intelligent. Geniuses could do things the masses could never do, but they could never survive the life the masses survived. They were too smart to live. Harshly he pushed away the thoughts of the lesson his mother had taught him when he had confided in her that he couldn't tie his shoelaces. She had simply smiled and said, “Neither could Einstein, sweetheart, so it's a good thing.”

Finally the gasping stopped and he was allowed to breathe, truly breathe in the pungent hostile air of an Australian summer. The carefully sculptured garden around him awed him with its novelty. All around there were sweet scented flowers, trees with fruits that gave off citrus scents, and even a few trees themselves, such as the evergreens, provided a calming aroma that was nature.

Alone and in the midst of natural beauty, the young boy allowed his prolonged gaze to linger on the gum trees before him. They were beautiful in their simplicity. Their long limbs seemed to reach up for the sky and he couldn't help but wonder if they too were hoping someone, anyone would help them, save them from the harsh elements that plagued this world.

“And would your savior save me,” he whispered to the Eucalyptus beside him. Would there ever be someone to fight back the debilitating feelings of loneliness that seemed to continuously assault him.

He took a seat on the lush green that beckoned to him, called his name. Jackson was drawn to it, attracted to the eerily effortless comfort it promised him, and comfort was alien to him, something that he continuously sought, but never found. But there amongst nature he found what his house could not provide, and for the first time in a very long time Jackson felt a sense of contentment, an emotion his young mind was able to process due to the lack of anxiety ridden adrenaline coursing through his veins. For once his flight or fight instincts slumbered as the sun settled down for a cool Australian summer night.

He was still staring at the unusual gum trees when they came upon him.

The moonlight he had been employing to examine the bush suddenly disappeared behind a fat cloud. He groaned to himself and waited. He would wait the cloud out. It would simply have to move he thought for he needed the moon's light to continue. And so he waited, but when

nothing happened after what felt like hours to his young mind, he looked up at the sky and silently pleaded his case to both God and the cloud. He asked the Lord first and then asked the cloud to listen. He was getting desperate.

When he looked up, truly looked, he noticed that there were no clouds in the sky before him. Just my luck he thought, the one cloud in the sky is behind me blocking my light.

He turned to gaze up at the black night hoping to convince the cloud to move. Or better yet, maybe if he moved, since the clouds were not being cooperative, his vacant spot would allow enough moonlight into the little enclave the bushes and trees made that he would be able to continue his investigation.

"Smart boy," he said to himself imitating his American tutor. The young lecturer always responded in kind when Jackson said or did something intelligent.

"Ian," he heard whispered through the trees. He looked up at the sky and wondered if he was losing his mind. They did say insanity was an issue in the nobles because of all that interbreeding. He wondered if he was finally going crazy as his great grandfather had, or so the story goes.

"Ian," he heard again, but this time there was a greater urgency and simply hearing the pain in the hushed voice made his heart lurch. Someone was worried about him.

"Dear God, Ian where are you? If you hear me, please answer me."

He sat there in the dirt amongst the bushes contemplating whether or not he should answer. If he answered there would be no telling how much trouble he would get into for running away, but if he didn't respond he could be stuck in the garden all night. He wasn't exactly scared of the garden so that might not be so bad But what if no one came for him tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that. Then he would be stuck in garden ... forever.

"Over here," he called softly. He didn't exactly want to be found. He just wanted to know that going home was an option.

The next thing he heard was someone stumbling in the bushes behind him, all the while damning the shrubbery for its existence. No doubt it was Mr. Winters. Even if Ian had not recognized the voice he would have known it was him because of his words. No one ever hated nature more than Winters. And suddenly Mr. Winters was behind him. He could hear his harsh breathing and awkward tense movements. It was as if Winters wanted to reach out for him, but held himself back.

"Never touch," the young man thought. Never touch. That had been the one thing his mother had been adamant about when giving Mr. Winters instructions on teaching Ian. The boy was not to be touched in any way, shape, or form. Anyone who had violated the rule had found themselves out of a job, at the very least. One employee had even ... well, no point going there. Winters had always held true to the rule for Ian's sake, and now he couldn't even console himself by giving Ian a hug to reaffirm that the young boy was ok. So instead he yelled.

"Young man, how could you just run away like that?" If the hard lines of Mr. Winters face were any indication of how much trouble he was in, Ian figured he might as well prepare himself for a long lonely summer. He was going to be grounded until he was twenty one.

"I just wanted to ... be alone," he admitted to his tutor. His statement seemed to have burnt out all the anger that raged within the young man's chest. John Winters knew exactly what his young pupil was saying and not saying. The young man had few he could trust, none in the home he resided. He could see why being alone would be so required for such an emotional and strong child such as Ian. Especially when one realized that he found none of the love he needed

at home.

Any and all individuals who tried to show Ian warmth were warned and then fired for getting too close to the young heir. Even his mother wasn't allowed to show him affection. His father had seen to that. Winters had watched with wide eyes as Maxwell effectively cut Madeline from her son's life. He couldn't understand how a father could hate his own child so much.

Winters draped his coat over Ian's frail shoulders. At thirteen he was large for his age, but he was still just a child when Winters glanced at him, a shivering child who was not properly dressed.

"You should have at least dressed properly for this little excursion of yours Master Phillips. What have I told you about planning ahead," Winters said before draping his hand around Ian so that the young boy was warmed with his body warmth.

"Winters, what park is this?" Ian asked right before they walked through the steel gates of the entrance.

"It's not a park Master Phillips. You were in the Sydney Botanical Gardens."

"It was really nice. They had a wide variety of plants. Some of them were ... cool," the young boy said testing the alien word on his tongue. He had just learned it recently and understood that it applied to his 'little excursion'.

"Well if you behave and are good with your lessons. I might be persuaded to teach a biology lesson here."

"Really?" the young man asked. Nothing on his face belied the excitement coursing through his veins. He desperately wanted to come back and explore the Sydney Botanical Gardens.

"Really," said the older man before allowing his face to settle into a warm smile.

Although the boy was a pro at schooling his features, Winters knew Ian enough to know that he had just presented the young man with a boon.

Together they walked the few blocks that took them back to the hotel that was their home for the family's vacation.

The ride in the elevator was endless but finally the cold metal transport chimed their arrival. Suddenly Ian found himself lingering in the waiting area of the family's presidential suite waiting for the verdict to be handed down.

He heard him long before he saw him. His steps were loud, commanding, landing against the marble floor with such presence, and with each one he held his breath. He waited, waited so long he wasn't sure he was coming and then suddenly he was there before him. Blue eyes bright with anger and sharp lips pursed in such displeasure that they left no doubt in his mind that he was the lemon the man had swallowed. He was in so much trouble.

He simply stared at the young man before him while his frail shoulders shook with fear. He didn't dare say anything knowing that if he opened his mouth a sharp bark of laughter would come out. Not exactly the thing a scared father would do when his son was found, so he kept his lips pursed together with diligence.

For thirteen years he waited for this moment. He had waited a very long time to break her and the young man before him had provided him with the ammunition.

"I'm so glad you're home Ian," he said with such satisfaction that Ian figured he had imagined the unholy light he had seen in his eyes seconds earlier.

At that moment Ian noticed that his mother stood a few feet behind his father. So much had happened between them and still he felt sympathy for her. Every once in a while her kindness would creep through her cool façade to shine on him. It was rare, but it was more than

he got from his father. Those few moments of gentleness were what kept him together, they were the reason for his sanity.

She stood back wringing her hands, trying to do any and every thing but touch her son. She didn't dare move forward. Her actions would only be rewarded with cool indifference or worse yet, pain, so she kept her anxiety to herself.

All she could say was "Ian, how could you run away like that? I was so ... afraid ... you wouldn't be found."

Ian heard his mother's words and found comfort in her fear. She had been worried about him. She cared about him. The thought lightened his heart.

He watched her watch his father and wondered why there was naked fear and apprehension on her face whenever she looked at him. Although she tried, she could never hide the terror that coursed through her blood at the sight of his father. What was it about him that made her so scared? He never understood why there was always a hushed quality to the silence that overtook a room his father walked into. He never quite comprehended why whenever his mother entered a room his father was in, there was a pungent odor of fear in the air that was never expelled until his father vacated the room. And it had always been that way since he could remember. It wasn't until that moment when he wondered how they had even gotten together. Their marriage was supposed to be one of love. They had apparently been in love when they had wed. His question was when? When did they love and when did love turn into fear?

Suddenly his fathers' voice broke the mist of his thoughts. He knew the old man was speaking to him, yet it was his mother his father looked at. And there was something in the old man's manner that made him apprehensive and sick at the same time. For one second he thought he glimpsed glee in his father's eyes, but that made no sense. Odd he thought, but then thought nothing of it when his words and their meaning penetrated his mind.

"Son, you're growing up so fast and although I don't want to admit it, you're no longer my little boy. You're now a young man. A man who needs more than this household can provide. Your mother has put her foot down and although I'm not happy about it I must agree with her, you need better training. This whole running away situation has illustrated that. She's been thinking about it for some time now and has searched high and low for the perfect school for you, and I believe she has found one that is more than acceptable. Exeter is a very respectable school. One that I'm sure you will excel in and this fall will be your first semester."

And like that, his little world shattered. They were sending him away. It was the worst punishment conceived, and he had reaped it. All those times she had pretended to love him when she obviously never gave a damn about him. She had simply been waiting for the reason to send him away from the only family he knew, the only home he had.

He looked up at the woman who was at fault and knew without a doubt that he would never feel the same for her again. She was no mother to him. Barely able to breathe Ian was surprised he could shuffle out the words, but they came.

"Thank you, mother. You are more than kind. I would like to go to my room and rest now. Today has been a long day. Can I be excused?"

Madeline stared at her son unable to contemplate what had happened. She had never once mentioned boarding school to Maxwell, would rather die than send either of her children away.

Only one thought ran through her mind. She was being punished for loving her son with all her heart. Maxwell had finally succeeded in taking her son away from her. She could see in those sea greens eyes she loved. They stared back at her with so much hatred she could feel the

*revulsion resonating on her skin. Her son, her little boy, was gone.
And then he was gone. With wooden footsteps, Ian left the room.
He hates me. That was her last thought.
Ian never even looked back to see his mother hit the floor.*

Chapter Thirty HOMICIDE IN AISLE THREE

Never one to deny her frivolous feminine insanity, once again Sinclair found herself seeking consolation in a department store. Actually she was in a designer boutique. The department stores came later, much later. First she had to conquer the boutiques, this particular boutique to be specific.

It was the kind of lavish costly boutiques that never had no more than three customers within its doors at any one time and its arrangement of clothing never seemed to be enough to occupy the shelves and artfully arranged displays. It was the kind of store most women shunned like the plague, knowing that the beautiful lavender silk cardigan hanging in the window would cost them a month's pay, but not Sinclair, she couldn't avoid it. Hell, she sought it out like the heat seeking missile she was.

Sore, aching muscles always felt better after a combination of some stretching and a light workout and that was exactly what shopping was to her. It was the prescription her bruised heart needed. So, Sinclair stood in the midst of the boutique brandishing her credit card like a weapon.

Her aching heart could only find balm when she purchased each and every accessory and article of clothing that caught her fancy. Purses, shoes, blouses, skirts, and slacks all made it onto the counter in a dizzying array of colors, texture, and fabrics. She was a rip roaring shopping mess. Crying all over everything and throwing her credit and bank cards at the sales girls who happened to cross her path believing she actually needed help spending her money. They soon found out they were sadly mistaken and walked away thoroughly confused, hating men, clothes, and itsy bitsy gorgeous blondes named Imogen.

The store currently had more than its typical solitary tastefully dressed shopper. There were four women and one man in the store. A shock that had the two saleswomen running around the store as confused as two chickens with their heads cut off. Imagine that, two whole groups of people in their little boutique. One was a couple and the other was three women, two following the hurried steps and jerky excited movements of the other woman.

The Jilted Shopper, the salesgirls secretly called her. They didn't dare speak the words out loud for obvious financial reasons, but the real reason they didn't say anything was because they knew exactly how she felt. They too had once been on the receiving end of 'the speech'.

The girls ran back and forth helping the 'Jilted Shopper' find a pair of shoes to complete an ensemble that they couldn't even conceive of paying for, but she had it in her head, and that was more than enough reason for her continue shopping. She needed the perfect outfit. Something so spectacular that the cheating bastard's jaw would drop open the minute he saw her and he would regret hurting her, but she would simply walk away, too cool and remote to care. That was exactly how she pictured her next run in with Jackson, and even though her brain told her heart that would only occur in La La Land she clung to it.

Suddenly Sinclair grabbed the outrageous amount of shopping bags she had accumulated and headed for the door. Behind her stood Maxine and Helena holding those the petite woman could not carry and the looks on their faces was pure amazement. They had never seen anything like it. Sinclair was more than a shopping mess. She was a shopping catastrophe on the scale of a tsunami and earthquake happening to the same unfortunate city.

As Helena walked through the French boutique's doors she looked back and saw the store looked like it had been ... attacked. That was the only word to describe the condition it was in. The little boutique looked like it had barely survived a nature disaster, a hurricane to be specific, one named Sinclair, and the two employees ... the once stylishly composed salesgirls looked like they had been right in the middle of the hurricane. Their shirts were crooked and looked as though they hadn't bothered to check the mirror when they were dressing and their hair. Well, that in itself looked like a disaster. Both women had strands of hair sticking up in maddening arrangements that made them resemble young female Einsteins.

"Finally home," Maxine exclaimed when she noticed that Sinclair was headed for the mall's exit.

"Home," Sinclair said, "But we just got started. You're not ready to leave are you?" she turned and asked the woman behind her, never noticing that Maxine was barely able to follow her, she was so exhausted by the whirlwind shopping expedition.

"Have you seen anything like it?" Helena whispered to the shocked woman who stood beside her.

"Never. I can't even imagine anyone shopping more in such little time. I think she just outdid all of the Hilton women," Maxine responded. To Sinclair she called, "If we're not going home, why are we headed to the exits?"

"To drop off the bags. I want empty hands when I enter the department store."

"Of course," Maxine sarcastically responded, but her sourness went unnoticed by Sinclair.

"It's a miracle she doesn't already have an empty account," Helena whispered with a giggle.

"She will by the end of the day. Maybe then she will have something else to think about instead of her empty heart."

The department store in the mall was a mess. It was of course having a sale so there was an endless supply of cunning shoppers searching for that ultimate purchase. Hence the orderly disorder that greeted the three women when they stepped through the store's hauntingly simple glass doors.

All around them were designer clothes in disarray waiting for that particular patient shopper that was willing to sift through the rumble for that perfect blouse or skirt.

Both Maxine and Helena stared at the woman before them wondering if she was even remotely human, her actions were so alien to them. Sinclair currently rummaged through a messy shelf filled to the brink with a dizzying amount of high quality cosmetic jewelry.

"What do you think about this?" Sinclair asked as she held up a large pink brooch styled in the form of an exquisitely beautiful dragonfly. Before either woman could respond she placed the dragonfly brooch back upon the table, picked up another beautiful brooch, and presented it to them for their inspection.

"How about this one?" she said.

Once again she did not wait for an answer. She simply plowed on and picked up another brooch. After the third question that did not expect an answer Maxine stepped to Sinclair grabbed her hand and pulled her along.

"What the hell?" Sinclair gasped in a harsh whisper. "If you don't want to help me shop just say so. I can make purchases without your input."

"It's not that I don't want to help you, it's just that I think we'd be both have more fun checking out the shoes first," Maxine said with such sweetness that she actually felt her teeth rotting.

She looked down at the petite woman beside her and found that her only response was a grim frown.

"Did I forget to mention they are having a fifteen to fifty percent off sale?"

For the first time that day a smile crossed Sinclair's beautiful face.

She stood in the middle of the first aisle that held the size seven shoes, aisle three, with two different shoes, one in each hand. There was nothing unusual about the situation and yet as Helena watched Sinclair stare at the two shoes in her hands she felt a chill run down her spine.

The look of concentration on Sinclair's face was unlike any she had ever seen before. Even the three months they had spent writing the romantic thriller *A is for Absolution* hadn't produced such a look of utter concentration, and Sinclair had struggled with that novel as she was not used to writing about death and the anticipation that characterizes a thrilling novel.

So as much as Helena would like to ignore the uneasiness that made her stomach rumble and roll she couldn't, she knew better. Determined to face the issue at hand and help Sinclair face her demons, Helena stepped to Sinclair and placed a consoling hand on her shoulder.

"What is it sweetie? Can't decide on which to buy?" she asked even though she knew that was not the problem that had placed the heartbreak that was easily read on her face.

Sinclair turned to her with wide watery eyes and for one second Helena felt as though she was an empath. She not only saw, but felt the pain Sinclair was living with and it damn near blinded her with its intensity. Everything Sinclair did, every action was committed with the desire to abolish Jackson from her memories, from her soul, because he had become everything. Somehow she had lost herself in him, in the emotions he made her feel, and now she was dying inside, slowly trying to kill him off, prune his memory away, just enough so that she could survive.

"I'm just feeling the pain of my credit card. I know I shouldn't buy either of these shoes,

but I'm going to get both anyway, and then I'm going to buy some more. I figure I'm due for a make over, right?" Sinclair said before flashing Helena a bright, but watery smile.

Helena forced herself to say with just a hint of self-teasing, "Everyday of every woman's life is a make over, every time I stand in front of my closet I embark on a journey," because she knew just how much normalcy meant to Sinclair right now and normal between the girls was full of light, playful, self-depreciating comments.

"Exactly," Sinclair said before turning from Helena to sit upon the bench beside her. "Now take these shoes," she said before pointing to the ballet style pump on her left foot. "These are definitely for those 'sexy librarian/collegiate' days.

"I'm a librarian and I'm no where near sexy so I suggest you go with collegiate," Helena said with a self depreciating chuckle.

An un-ladylike snort was Sinclair's only response.

"These," Sinclair said before picking up the black calf length boots before her, "scream 'classiest hooker ever'. They are all about sex, hot, sticky sex."

And she was right. The boots in Sinclair's hands were the kinds of boots Helena would never wear. She wasn't brave enough to display her sexuality to the world like that. Even her friends didn't know her, how deep her needs, her passions flowed.

The only thing to penetrate Helena's deep thoughts was the soft alto of Sinclair's voice.

"You know what I just realized Helena?"

Almost afraid to ask Helena whispered the single word, "What?"

"I just realized men are like shoes," she said before giving a fragile smile. "They are great from far away. Some of them even look great up close. Just like shoes. And just like a great pair of shoes, the beautiful ones always hurt. So it just figures being the shoe addict that I am that I go for the most beautiful man I can find, Ian Jackson Phillips."

Helena watched dumbfounded as a single glittery tear fell from Sinclair's eyes, but even before she could react, the tear was gone. Sinclair had wiped it away almost nonchalantly and placed large black opaque sun glasses on.

The beautiful eyes that Helena had always envied were suddenly gone, hidden by a pair of sunglasses and Helena couldn't help but smile at the woman before her. She was poised and dignified, and despite her chaotic shopping spree, Sinclair was handling her break up pretty well, at least much better than she would have handled it.

Suddenly Sinclair froze as if ice ran through her vein and then as if in anticipation, the store itself quieted, and the word rang loud and clear.

The voice was calm yet forceful. "Sinclair!" the voice yelled and instinctively Helena knew two things 1) it wasn't Maxine 2) Whoever it was, was someone Sinclair had no desire to see.

The blonde woman who was steadily approaching them with fast steps reminded Helena of a cheetah. She was quick, graceful, and golden. Helena instinctively knew that the black pantsuit that the woman wore was as much a camouflage as the spots the African cat wore. It was her shield, her armor.

The question was what was she shielding herself from, who was she going to wage war against?

From beside her came an answer as Sinclair let out a heartfelt expletive.

The universe was definitely messing with her. Up there was a crowd of exuberant people in all white laughing at her and the impossibility of human existence. It just did not make sense

that when she was trying her damned hardest to forget the whole Jackson fiasco by drying her tears on a shit load of shoes, clothes, and accessories, in walks his fiancé. And to top it off the woman not only looked like a living breathing doll, she's polite as hell.

Sinclair clenched her teeth at the realization that her life sucked. It just plain old sucked.

"Son of a motherfucking bitch," she said loud enough and angry enough that several women shot her a fear-filled glance before skirting around the obviously irate woman.

"I take it you know her?" Helena asked with just a hint of humor without truly expecting a response and so wasn't surprised when she didn't get one.

"I hate my life. I hate my goddamn life."

Sounds like an affirmative.

Sinclair stood from the bench just before Imogen reached the couple. The least she could do was situate herself for the encounter and as she saw it staring up or into the belly of her nemesis didn't exactly provide her with the outlook she wanted.

"Hi Sinclair," Imogen said with such cheerfulness that Sinclair felt her teeth rotting.

"Imogen how nice to ... bloody hell, I can't even fake it," Sinclair said to no one in particular.

"Of all the department stores in the country, what the hell are you doing in mine, and don't tell me you just happened to be here."

"Imogen simply shrugged one shoulder in response and Sinclair felt the beginnings of mind-blowing rage boiling just beneath her skin. To protect her sanity and Imogen she took a step back. She needed unnecessary distance between herself and the blonde.

She must be a natural blonde was the only thought Helena could come up with as she watched the woman, Imogen, bend over and pick up the boot Sinclair had discarded before moving closer to the heated woman.

There was no other excuse for it. She had to be an idiot not to sense the danger she placed herself in with such a stupid act.

Hoping to stave off the inevitable Helena stepped between the two women and then darted Sinclair a look that screamed 'Keep it together,' before presenting Imogen with an outstretched hand.

"Hi I'm Helena, Sinclair's friend," she said as politely as she could muster, knowing very well that any rudeness on her part would be taken as a green light by Sinclair.

"Hi I'm Imogen Carlton-West, Jackson's fiancé."

Helena felt as if she had just been sucker punched. Damn, she hadn't been expecting that, and suddenly everything made sense. Sinclair's leashed anger and her under tide of seeming reluctance to set it free.

Helena presented Imogen with her best smile. It was sugary and chock full of white teeth before leaning towards the statuesque blonde.

"Look sweetheart," she whispered in what sounded like a conspiracy voice, "You look like a really nice girl, so I'm going to give you some advice. Walk away now while you can. I really like these shoes and blood would ruin them."

From behind Helena, Sinclair spoke. "I'm not going to kill her ... yet. First I want to find out why she finds pleasure in my pain." The words were short and clipped, without emotion, and Imogen couldn't help the involuntary step back she took. She wasn't suicidal.

"I'm not here to hurt you."

Sinclair's only response was a raised eyebrow. Yeah, and the devil wears a fur coat.

“Honestly!” Imogen said with such emotion that both of Sinclair’s eyebrows rose in response.

Sinclair bent over to pick up the pair of burnt yellow stiletto heels she had discarded when she saw Imogen headed her way, before straightening and tossing her long black locks over her shoulder. All around her people stopped to watch those glorious strands fly through the air.

“So let me get this straight, you just keep showing up wherever your fiancé’s ex is to ... make her happy?”

Imogen eyed the pair of shoes Sinclair held with a cautious eye. The way the woman was holding them reminded Imogen that heels, especially stiletto came with very sharp points, points that could easily be driven through her heart if the individual holding them was angry enough. And Sinclair was in a rage.

Imogen took another wary step back before speaking. “Look I’m not stupid. I knew it would be uncomfortable, but I didn’t think you would be homicidal.”

“How the hell did you expect me to react? How the hell do you expect me to feel?” Sinclair screamed at the woman before her. The woman who had walked through her door, and in the process had stomped on her fragile heart, effectively breaking the tenuous hold Sinclair had on her self respect.

“I don’t know what I was thinking, but I know now that I was wrong.”

“Damn right, you were wrong, bloody fucking wrong,” Sinclair said before turning away from the woman before her. She needed space like a whole new state. She was going back home. Her little shopping spree had been effectively ruined.

Helena rushed up to catch the woman who was walking away so quickly she seemed to be running. She wanted to put her arms around Sinclair, console her and hopefully ease some of her pain, but knew better. Sinclair would kill her if she showed the world and especially Imogen her vulnerability.

“Sinclair wait!” Imogen screamed at the two women who were quickly approaching the exit.

“Damn it woman, do you want to die?” Sinclair yelled before turning around to face the blonde.

“I want you to know that I know how you feel.”

“How the hell can you know what I’m feeling? You’re the one getting married to the man of my fucking dreams, so don’t tell me you know how I feel.”

“I know how you’re feeling. You’re not alone. This marriage will not be my happily ever after.”

So much separated them and yet the two women were connected by an answering pain. They both felt regret and the pain of an unacknowledged love. Much as she’d like to deny it Sinclair saw it in her eyes. Her unshed tears spoke volumes. Imogen wanted another, just as she wanted another. Sinclair could not help but wonder if Imogen’s lover had thrown away her love like Jackson had disregarded hers. Did she too feel the blight of unrequited love?

“I want you to know that he doesn’t love me,” she whispered from across the room, the words carried by curiosity.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better or worse?” Sinclair responded with a heartbroken whisper.

“I don’t know. I only know that it is the truth. I’m not the woman he loves.”

“Neither am I,” Sinclair wanted to scream but the words got stuck in her throat.

Chapter Thirty-One
LETTERS FROM ZEUS

April 13, 2005

Dear Sinclair,

I've tried every way possible to reach you, but you've effectively denied me access to you. I've tried to speak to you, but you refuse to pick up your phone, at least whenever I call. I've stopped by your place a few times and still I can't seem to get an audience. The only thing keeping me from banging down your door (cause I know you're in there) is the threat of a restraining order. There is no doubt in my mind that you would sic the cops on me and the truth is I deserve anything and everything you dish out.

I should have told you as soon as I found out that I had certain obligations to my family. I know that you're thinking a fiancé is not an obligation, but for me that is exactly what Imogen is, nothing more, nothing less. Imogen and I have never been romantically involved. The most our relationship has ever been is friendship, and we haven't really spoken since high school. Imogen is not my lover, and she has never been my lover. You are the only lover I have, the only lover I have ever had. I haven't been with a woman since I read your stories. No one has touched me to the degree you have, and even though you hate me right now, I want you to know that I do not feel the same about you as you do about me. I will forever thank you for giving me the precious gift of your love.

As I sit here and write you this letter I can not help but think of how funny life is. The best part of this whole situation is that for once in my life I was faithful to a woman. Unfortunately, I was at the same time unfaithful to her. I know you're confused. So am I. But the truth is I wasn't lying when I said I didn't have a fiancé. See I didn't know I had a fiancé. Seems that my mother "proposed" to Imogen for me. See, the thing is, I'm an heir. At least I was an heir. My father was a Duke, a duke in a long line of dukes, and upon his death I inherited the title. Unfortunately for me my father's will stipulated that I must marry before my next birthday or else the family loses everything including the title.

I wanted to tell you in person so I could better explain the issues I have to deal with. I wish you were here so I could tell you how I felt when my mother, who I see about once every

five years, walked into my room and told me that I, who had never considered marriage, had to get married by my next birthday. I felt like more than the wind had been knocked out of me. I couldn't think past the feeling of betrayal, let alone decide who was to be my bride. So I just focused on the one good thing in my life, which was you. And even though I'm sorry for what I did, I'm not sorry about that. So please let's meet somewhere, anywhere I can talk to you, because I really need to talk to you.

*Sincerely yours,
Zeus*

April 15, 2005

Dear Sinclair,

I didn't go to class today. I couldn't. I didn't really feel up to it. I think I'm coming down with something, nothing bad, just something. I really hope I'm not going to get sick. I hate being sick. It makes me feel helpless and weak, but most of all it makes me feel alone. I can't explain it, but it does, and I don't particularly enjoy any of those feelings so I try to avoid getting sick. For the most I'm very successful at it, I hardly ever get sick, but this week is not my week. Not that you care. I don't know why I'm telling you this. I really shouldn't be telling you this, but I feel like I can talk to you about anything. Well, anything that doesn't have to do with my current situation a/k/a fiancé. I know that right now you and your friends are probably thinking of innovative ways to make castration more painful. If I was in your position I would be doing, at the very least, the same damn thing.

Anyways, I'm way off topic. I'm feeling just a little under the weather and have been quarantined in my room. Luckily I stopped by the bookstore last night and picked up a few books, your books, every last one. I've been reading ever since.

I have to admit I haven't gotten much sleep since I started reading. Once one book is finished I pick up another. I touch each cover, painstakingly analyze each word, and memorize the story until it's a part of me, simply because I know it's a part of you. I know that you've put your heart and soul into your books. You've poured out just a little bit of yourself into them and I therefore can not put them down. They remind me of you, of the beauty I once held. I'm addicted. I'll readily admit that I'm a fiend for you, anything that reminds me of you, and your books are like looking into your soul. What I see there is so clear and beautiful and those qualities just reaffirm my belief that you are something special, someone too precious for me to taint. You deserve better than me. You know it. I know it. Hell even my friends know it.

And yet I still want you and I know I shouldn't. But I can't help the way I feel and to be perfectly honest I don't know if I would alter my feelings if I could. I'm quite happy in my misery and I'm only miserable because I know I can't have you.

*Sincerely yours,
Zeus*

April 22, 2005

Dear Sinclair,

Today was not a good day. It was not even close to a good day. I finally managed to get out of bed and go to class. Turns out I had the flu, which is the only reason I haven't written to you in a while, if you're wondering. Anyways, everything went down hill from there. Going to class was a horrible idea. I never even should have woken up. Professor Johnson actually

showed up for class. The Teaching Assistant sat there in shock and did nothing, but hand out the pop quiz that the professor himself had created. The man had not showed up for class for about six weeks. He had no idea what was going on in class which was apparent during the quiz. I couldn't find a single person who felt remotely comfortable with their grade. After the exam/quiz (it was of course worth a decent amount of our grade) I got a migraine that steadily increased in intensity and no amount of ibuprofen got rid of it.

Then when I thought things couldn't get any worse they did. I spotted you from across the hall. You were standing by the door of some nondescript classroom. You looked so happy and content that I felt anger rising up in me. I am ashamed to admit that because I was not having a good day, I did not want anyone else to have a good day. And then to see you having a pleasant time in the midst of a large group that was mostly male made me angry. Only much later did I realize that I was jealous and ashamed. You had moved on, but I couldn't forget what I had found in your arms. Thoughts of you haunt me late at night. I can not forget your face even though I have tried. I've tried drinking you out of my mind, but that was an incredible failure. The liqueur just made me surlier. I then attempted to exhaust myself so thoroughly that I could not think at all, let alone think about you. I spent hours at the gym. I only found that after a few hours I could not even lift my hand let alone throw a punch at the punching bag, but I could conjure up a vision of your lovely face. It seems I can not seem to forget you no matter what I do. And to be honest I'm not sure I want to forget you. You've provided me with something to hang onto-- an incredible memory, one I will cherish for many years.

*Sincerely yours,
Zeus*

ONE FOOT IN

The cold spring night seemed to soak into the marrow of his bones. Even the fur lined wool coat he wore could not stop the cold from sinking into his soul. He clenched his teeth and tightened his jaw, fortifying his resolve, for he had to remain. Although he desperately wanted to return to the comfort of a warm bed, he knew he could not move. No matter how much the cold irritated him.

As soon as the thought entered his mind he acknowledged it for the lie it was. It was not the frigid night that made his blood run cold. It was the icy fingers of loneliness and betrayal that kept grasping at his sanity that had him uncomfortable.

Although it was cold, it was spring and in no way compared to a cold winter night. It was spring. The thought thundered through his brain with the burning intensity of a firestorm.

It was spring and summer was just around the corner. This summer he would graduate college, turn twenty-three and get married. This summer would be one hell of a summer.

Just as soon as he started to seek comfort in the vision of the one who kept him warm at night, reality intruded. The crisp sound of heels hitting the pavement woke him from his reverie. He looked before him seeking for the one person he desperately wanted to avoid.

From among the darkness she came to stand a few feet in front of him. Yet he felt like they were worlds apart.

The velvet and silk white coat she wore combined with the silver beam of the fluorescent lighting bathed her in holiness so that she stood like a ghost during the midnight hour. And he felt like a man who had never lived.

On his face there was no evidence of the seething anger and pain rolling through him, just the tightening of his fingers into fists, fists she never saw as they were in the pockets of his wool coat. Slowly he pulled his hands from his pockets. Her cold blue eyes immediately latched onto them. With a slow tug on each finger he removed his leather gloves.

The cool midnight breeze carried the sound of her alarmed gasp. Something about the sight of the man who had every reason to hate her wearing leather gloves during a midnight rendezvous made a frigid shiver run down her spine. Luckily he had taken the gloves off.

Backlit as she was by the street lamp, he had an excellent view of her silhouette. Long and lithe, she was the epitome of the new millennium woman. She had small, high breasts, a narrow waist and legs a man can wrap around his waist.

He was a little surprised that his cock did not jump at the sight of her feminine body outlined in all its glory. She held no appeal to him. She had very little curves. And he had come to find he loved a woman with curves.

A wry smile touched Jackson's lips. "Long time no see."

"It has been a long time," the cool blonde calmly responded despite the pounding rhythm of her heart.

"You've grown into quite a startling young man Jackson," she said. Her voice was tinged with just the right amount of wonder and appreciation. It was as if she had gotten more than she had bargained for with him.

Lady, you have no idea.

She took a step forward and found herself shrouded in the shadows of the night that seemed to cloak around him like a midnight coat.

He wears darkness well.

He felt the corners of his mouth tug up into a petulant smile. The darkening shadows

seemed to only enhance her allure, highlighting the purity of her ivory skin and white blonde hair and accentuated the hollows beneath her cheekbones.

She stood a light among darkness, an angel in the valley of shadows. But he knew better. She was in reality an angel of death, for with her coming she had brought his end. Because of her he already had one foot in the grave.

“Imagine my surprise to find that you are my bride to be.”

The words were blunt, cold, hard as steel and precise. Immediately Imogen felt the guilt and remorse she refused to acknowledge surface. Ruthlessly, she pushed them down.

A vision of the face of the woman she had wronged flashed in her mind. She took another step towards him, determined to deny her emotions.

With each click of her heels hitting the pavement his mind conjured up a vision of a hammer hitting the head of a nail.

He blinked trying to stall his mind from taking him to that place of no return. When that didn't work he closed them shut and counted to ten. When he opened them Imogen stood before him.

“Ready to dine with the devil,” she said before giving him a steel and honey smile.

Jackson snorted in disgust before taking a mocking bow. With his head bent he could not see the smile she gave him at his foolish gesture. Breakfast will definitely be interesting she thought as she entered the twenty four hour diner.

Jackson held the door to the Off Moon diner open for Imogen. He tried to hide his smile at her pause as she stepped over the threshold. She looked up at the bell that had rung when the door was opened. Its distinctive jingle had startled her robbing her of her melancholy absorption.

Jackson placed his hand against Imogen's shoulder blades to guide her through the restaurant and was surprised and disappointed by his lack of emotion. He felt nothing. There was no tell-tale desire coursing through his system. He wasn't even anxious about the dinner meeting. The only thing he felt was resignation. Jackson had accepted his fate and could only hope for the best.

Despite Imogen's coldness, Jackson knew that she would at the very least provide him with children, a family, a home of his own.

A home of his own. The words shimmered with reluctant expectation.

A home of his own was something Jackson had never really owned. It would be his own house and he would therefore belong. Never again would he be the emotionally bastard child of his mother or the obligation of his father. Finally he would find a place where he was welcomed, not just tolerated. He would finally find that place where his comfort and happiness mattered.

Jackson led Imogen to the vacant corner booth. He waited beside the booth for her to settle herself before he sat.

And who said chivalry was dead? He thought before smirking. Off course now his gentleman instincts would kick in.

He found himself facing the large open windows that served as a background to Imogen's cool beauty. Unwilling to look at the woman before him Jackson stared out into the night.

Lately the night had become his enemy, as much of an enemy as the day. He had once hid himself in the shadows of the night, but lately even midnight did not provide him cover.

“How is your mother?”

Imogen jerked. The question had startled her from her morose thoughts on the silence that gripped the table with sharpened claws.

She was almost as startled as the interrogator.

Jackson did not know what prompted him to ask about Mrs. Carlton-West. He only knew that a vision of the plump, bubbly brunette was on his mind.

"She's fine," Imogen whispered across the scratched plastic table.

The smile Jackson gave her was white, bright, and lacking in warmth. The heat did not reach his cool eyes.

"She must be really excited about your marriage."

"She was a little shocked, but" Imogen shrugged before glancing down and absorbing herself in the words carved into the table top. After endless seconds she looked up at the Jackson. Something in her blue eyes made him uneasy. "My father is very excited about the merger."

He smirked at that. Her father would be pleased with 'the merger.' Mr. West was a business man through and through, and as such thought of everything in business terms, therefore a marriage was a merger.

"You ready?" The question seemed to come from beyond the grave or at the very least the cloud of depression that gripped the booth.

"Excuse me?" Imogen asked. Bred nobility came to Imogen's rescue. The coolness in her voice masked the flash of misery shining in her eyes. The flash that Jackson had missed.

"I asked if you were ready to order."

"Oh."

Words failed Imogen. She was too shocked by the sight of her waitress to speak. The woman before her was at least six foot tall and sturdy. She wasn't fat and she wasn't thin. She was just ... sturdy. Imogen placed her age at anything between forty and sixty years of age. Her face had that worn edge to it that comes after countless disappointments and diligence. She had fought to survive every day of her life.

Her amethyst eyes, that were no doubt the product of contacts, stared down at Imogen and glittered with raw intelligence. Her dark blue hair was a stark contrast to her porcelain white skin. The nose ring in her left nostril was incredibly large and Imogen found herself trying not to stare at it. But it was bright green and probably glowed in the dark. She couldn't draw her eyes from it. Imogen felt herself swallow hard despite her attempts to remain calm. She had never seen anything like the woman before her. She was no normal waitress.

Imogen darted a quick glance at the name tag on the woman's breast. Her name was Chanel. Imogen felt herself send an apology to on behalf of her namesake. She had to be turning in her grave to know that this woman went by her name.

The only thing on Chanel's person that reminded Imogen of where she sat was the pale pink fifties style waitress dress with the white heavily stained apron spread across her middle that she wore.

"Chanel could you give us a few minutes. We haven't exactly looked at the menus."

The full flash of white teeth that Jackson gave Chanel was at once shy and mischievous.

The woman grabbed the two menus that sat at the corner of the table and opened one. She pointed to something before flashing Jackson a warm smile. "Try this," she said. Her voice was full, deep, and throaty. It was sex wrapped in hot chocolate and it definitely did not belong on Chanel.

"I just might."

"You just better Jax," she responded before walking away to go take the orders of a foursome that entered the diner.

Imogen watched as the woman descended down the aisle. Chanel's hips switched to a

rhythm only she understood. Beneath her light pink waitress dress, bright orange fishnet stockings blazed before disappearing beneath rainbow striped socks. The ensemble was completed with sturdy white tennis shoes that squeaked as she walked.

Imogen shook her head before turning her attention back to Jackson. He couldn't quite hide the smirk that lifted his face with pleasant lines.

"You brought me here on purpose didn't you?"

He shook his head no before responding. "At this time of the day no one serves better food than Off Moon."

"That doesn't exactly say much for the food," she grumbled before crossing her hands beneath her chest. She darted a quick glance around the room and took everything in.

The restaurant was decorated with a theme. Unfortunately the theme was a shipwrecked vessel. From Imogen's quick glance she could tell the ship had fallen to the whims of the sea during the time of the Romans. All around her were ancient sailors, nymphs, and various Roman gods and goddesses. It was the sight of the barely clothed nymphs that set her teeth on edge. How the hell could Jackson eat here?

If possible her face was even grimmer when she turned to him. "I don't want to die of food poisoning. Can we go somewhere else, anywhere else to eat?"

He simply shook his head no.

Imogen felt her back teeth clench in anger. Still she picked up the remaining menu and looked through it. Seeing as he was not going to change his mind, she figured she might as well get comfortable, and hope that the kitchen was more sanitary than the décor led one to believe.

Neither of them said a word until after Chanel had taken their orders and left. But the silence wasn't tense. It was cool and easy.

Finally Jackson spoke. "You'll thank me when you get your food."

"You better hope I don't put you in a casket." She said before gifting him with a naughty smile.

It wasn't long before Chanel came back carrying two platters brimming with food. Immediately Jackson and Imogen began digging into their food. Imogen was surprised by the entrée she ordered. It was hot, tasty, and perfectly spiced. The flavors melting on her tongue brought a sigh of pleasure from her lips.

"Told you."

She shook her head yes in acknowledgment before swallowing.

"I'm sorry."

Jackson stilled at the words and lifted his head to look into Imogen's blue eyes. What he saw there made his gut clench. He knew beyond a doubt that she was not talking about her behavior at the diner.

"Are you sorry?" All traces of the calm camaraderie between them were gone.

The sympathy in her eyes stabbed at the bruised flesh inside his chest.

"I am sorry. I never wanted to hurt you. Hell, I never wanted to marry you."

"Then why are you?"

"Because I have to." Jackson could see in her eyes that she didn't have any other choice and for some reason that comforted him. Misery truly does like company.

"I have a lover, someone who will be devastated by this marriage, so if there is someone who understands what you are going through, I am that person."

"Do you?" his face was as cold and calm as the words. If she didn't know exactly what he was going through, what he felt, then she would assume that he felt nothing.

"I do. I know it hurts you." she watched him shift uncomfortably. He did not like acknowledging his humanity.

"But I'm doing what I have to do. I'm here to help you."

"Hate to break it to you, but you're not helping me with a damn thing."

"So if I was to walk away right now, you would be able to find another bride? Tell me the truth Jax, could you find another woman willing to fill my shoes."

He stared into the black night behind her pretending to be interested in the golden glow of the streetlight.

"Thought so," she said before squelching the regret she had felt at his silence. She had desperately wanted him to name someone, anyone so she would not be obligated to marry him.

She picked up her fork and proceeded to eat with quiet elegance. The silence stretched on between them for long minutes. Neither of them wanted to end the silence. Both were pleased with the chance to muddle through their murky thoughts. The future held so many surprises and so many things they feared. Neither could tell where the path would end.

"Why don't you ask her?"

Jackson jerked at the words. They were whispered into the calm of his storm. The thoughts running through his head had bombarded his brain with the strength of a tsunami.

"And what exactly am I supposed to tell her?" his whisper was a harsh melody of misery.

"The truth."

"Oh I'm sure that will go over well. 'Hey Sunshine, do you think you can schedule in a quickie wedding to me, a man you barely know so that I don't lose my \$200 million dollars inheritance. Really? Thanks sweetheart. How does Friday sound? '"

Imogen diverted her attention to her food. He was right. She would never agree to marry him simply so he wouldn't lose his inheritance. She would never agree to a marriage that wasn't based on love. And love was something Jackson could not give her.

Imogen wasn't sure how long the silence stretched on, but she knew the moment his gruff baritone pierced it.

"What is his name?"

"Who is he?"

One blonde arched eyebrow was his only response.

"Bobby. My lover's name is Bobby."

"I want you to know that Bobby is free to visit after the wedding. I would not mind if you continued to see Bobby after we are wed."

"Why not? Why won't you mind?" she asked. She was curious. Not many men would give their brides a get 'out of jail free card'.

"There's no point in two people being inconvenienced by this marriage. One ruined life is enough, don't you think."

"You realize that you can't cheat on me."

"Yes, I know. I can't go outside the marriage bed, but you can. I am totally aware of the stipulations of my father's will."

"Oh."

"I also want you to know that any children you have regardless of who their biological father is will be mine as far as I and the rest of the world is concerned."

Imogen gasped. That was going above and beyond the call of duty. He was willing to father another man's child.

"Damn you. Ask her. If you don't, you'll be cold and lonely in this marriage."

The stark emotion on her face was as refreshing as a blast of cool air on a southern summer day. She felt. Heartless Imogen felt. Whether she felt for herself or Jackson was not the issue. Heartless Imogen felt empathy, pity, and regret.

“Damn it. Ask her. I want out of this marriage too.”

“Damn, and here I was worrying about breaking your heart.” The bitter sarcasm rolled off his tongue a little too easily.

The look of displeasure she gave him had him squirming in his seat for a second or two. At least until he remembered that he was not seven and she was not his second grade teacher. Besides he had a reason to make jokes. His life was going up in flames. What else was he to do?

“If you want out, get out. I’m not holding you to it.”

“I can’t, and you know that.”

“Jackson,” she said as she clasped one of his hands between both of hers. “You have to do something, otherwise this marriage will kill both of us. Neither of us could retain our humanity long enough to suit. The pain would be too unbearable.”

Jackson took a deep breath and admitted the truth. “I think that is exactly what my father planned.”

Chapter Thirty-Three LITTLE ONE MINUS ONE

She did not want the other woman to be able to properly recall her face. Not that she expected her to repeat what was said at the meeting. If she acknowledged her digression she would lose everything. She could very well lose her life.

Still caution was required. She knew that her face was to stay the least memorable. Luckily the blinding light of the bright day provided her with the perfect reason for her black

opaque sunglasses.

The woman across from her squinted in the rays of bright light. She had not been prepared for the uncommonly bright day. Her dull blue eyes watered and leaked. The small stream of water disappeared against her pale white skin. Unlike Ms. James, she had no shield. She watched the cool African American woman across from her and envied her big bold sunglasses. The golden rays of the sun made her blinder than a bat.

There was another reason Katherine would have loved a pair of sunglasses. Behind onyx lenses she would have been able to discreetly observe the woman before her. Her face was carved with the kind of craftsmanship that made Michelangelo famous. She was sharp, striking angles and soft, flowing curves. Despite the oversize glasses Katherine recognized her beauty. Still there was something about the cool, calm woman across from her that made Katherine nervous. It did not help that she could not see Ms. James' eyes.

"I'm not exactly sure what this is about?" Katherine asked. She squirmed when she heard the curiosity and discomfort in her own voice. She was showing her cards.

Then again she had shown them from the beginning. Ms. James would not take no for an answer regardless of how much Katherine pleaded exhaustion. She was very uncomfortable with the idea of meeting with a client's mother, especially when said patient is nowhere to be seen. But her discomfort could not be avoided. When she had gotten Ms. James' invitation to lunch she had immediately known it was an order. Her tone of voice did not allow one to imagine the summons as a request.

"What do you mean Katherine? This is about lunch," Ms. James responded quickly, almost too quickly. The smooth way the words rolled off her tongue made Katherine all the more nervous. She was not used to conversing with a patient's parent.

"Now do you have any idea what you want, because I can't seem to make a decision," she said as she looked through the restaurant menu. Katherine glanced down at the menu and made a quick decision. She often ate there. She knew what was good and what to avoid.

Stretched between them, an abyss neither ever wanted to cross, until oddly enough the food arrived. Only when their mouths were full did either woman feel content to speak.

"I just wanted you to know how much I appreciate what you've done for my little girl."

Shocked Katherine responded with a simple but heartfelt "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said as she unfolded her napkin. "I know how much you have helped my daughter. I know that she has come to see you numerous times and I just wanted to thank you for giving her the information to make a responsible decision."

"Sinclair made the decision on her own. She just came to me to clarify information."

"Yes, but you provided the information so thank you."

"Both you and Sinclair are welcome."

Thirty minutes later Mrs. James walked away from Diablo Diner with a full smile across her face. The meeting had been productive. She had gleaned the information she needed. Now she had to do something about what she had learned.

Mrs. James opened her crocodile leather bag and pulled a slip of paper thin metal that doubled as a cell phone. Quickly she flipped it open and dialed. Three minutes later she walked to her car. She now knew what to do.

Chapter Thirty-Four
KARMA'S BETRAYAL

A single candle glittered in the darkness shrouding the room in ghosts and shadows. They fluttered across the black room draping it in gloom. He was home. Amongst the darkness he sat biding his time and strengthening his determination.

His strong wide fingers wrapped around the tall, glass neck of the whiskey bottle that sat upon the table. He wanted something stronger, but he was all out of the concussion producing stuff. It would have to do. He was not in the right frame of mind to go looking for the good stuff.

When the glass nozzle touched his lips he threw his head back and gulped down four full swallows of liqueur.

That should fortify my resolve, he thought, before placing the bottle back on the littered wooden desk.

His stomach clenched in protest reminding of the burning hole eating through his stomach. He gritted his teeth against the pain and reminded himself of his beautiful future. He had it all planned. He just had to do this one thing. This one act and he would be set. For life.

If only his emotions would wither. He just had to shake this uneasiness that plagued him. He was doing the right thing. His tanned fingers shoved the several antacid pills he had taken from the clear bottle into his mouth before he swallowed it down with the remaining contents of the liqueur bottle.

Shaky fingers reached out and grasped the telephone that sat at the end of the desk. He dared not call from his cellular phone. The room phone was unlisted and would not show up on caller ID, and he needed to remain anonymous for what he wanted to do. It was bad enough that he knew who he was and what he was capable of doing. He did not need others to know how depraved he truly was.

He dialed the seven digits and waited for the other line to connect.

"Hello?" the man at the other end said. His voice was gruff and yet refined. It spoke of innate culture.

"He's going to ask her," he said in a jumble of words. He wanted to get off the phone as quickly as possible. He was afraid he was going to embarrass himself by being sick right then and there. He didn't have the strength for betrayal.

"Are you sure?" he asked. His voice held something more than curiosity in it. Uneasiness slid down his spine only to settle in his lower abdomen. It was definitely holding him by the balls.

He ignored the slimy feeling sliding down his spine and took a fat gulp of air, inhaling strength. "Yes I'm sure. He told me so himself."

"Good."

"Be there tomorrow at eight."

"Wouldn't dream of being anywhere else."

The silence that stretched between them was thick with his apprehension.

"The money will be deposited in your account nine a.m., your time," the other man said. He had decided that he had wasted enough time on this conversation.

An incomprehensible grunt was his only response. He couldn't bring himself to acknowledge the sale.

"It's been nice doing business with you," the other man said before hanging up the phone. But his hand had not reached the cradle before the sound of his harsh laughter reached his ears.

He had sold his soul to the devil and the devil himself was going to be in town tomorrow.

"I'm doing the right thing," he whispered to the ghosts and shadows that moved through the room. "I'm doing the right thing."

Dear Jackson,

How are you doing? I hope class and practice is going well. Things are going pretty well for me over here. I just finished another story. I've been very busy lately. I know you've been trying to reach me. I'm sorry I have not been picking up my phone, but I felt it prudent not to speak to you. I don't think there would have been much of a conversation. You have a fiancé and her existence means the end of whatever relationship we had. I have never been one of those women who believe that men are innate cheaters. Men need women to cheat and I have no desired to be that other woman. I might not like your fiancé (for obvious reasons), but I respect her relationship with you. I think she deserves the right to a faithful husband. That is something I can give her. Consider it a wedding present. Even though I care about you I'm not willing to jeopardize my self respect to be with you. I have laid up many nights wondering if I should call you back. For you I have considered being that other woman. Because the truth is if I let you back into my life I would no longer be able to look at myself the same way. I would have become that woman I always promised myself I would never be. To be honest you're not worth losing myself.

I know that you're aware of the fact that I have met Imogen, your fiancé. I believe she is an incredible, beautiful woman with innate poise and grace. She will make you a beautiful wife and the two of you will have gorgeous blonde children together. Together you two will build a home, a family. I would never take that away from you. That's why I don't think it would be smart if we saw each other before the wedding. So please stop calling and stopping by. You're not breaking me down. You're only hardening my resolve. 'We' can not happen. Not again.

We have known each other for only a short period of time, but I feel more connected to you than I do to any other person. I feel as though I know you and I believe you feel the same way. This is why we can not truly forget one another even though we know we must. Even though it will be a difficult goal to accomplish I know that I will one day get the job done. One day you will be no more than a distant memory. The same truth will be yours. Soon after you are married you will look back on this affair and see it as just that, an affair, nothing more, and probably plenty more less. You'll get married. I'll get married. We'll both have children and move on. That is the way of life. We both just need time to make the adjustment. In a few years you will see that all is well that ends well. When you've got your child on your knee you'll see that I'm right. We never could have been.

P.s. I hope your wedding is beautiful. I hope you and your fiancé realize how lucky you are to have each other. So on your wedding, shed tears of happiness instead tears of misery.

*Sincerely Yours,
Sinclair*

The sheet of paper was thin enough that the water ink from the written words bled through the paper. It never stood a chance against his anger. In his rage his agile fingers crumbled its edges.

“Jax?”

He heard his name, but did not turn around to acknowledge him. He couldn’t seem to tear his eyes away from her letter.

“Are you ok?” Skip asked from the hallway.

Jackson darted a quick look at the man, only to notice that he still stood in the middle of the hallway. He had been so engrossed with her letter he hadn’t moved in many long minutes. He shook his head no before turning to enter his room. He needed to be alone.

He reread the letter three times before he admitted that the words weren’t going to disappear. He was engaged and she was moving on. He was going to be a husband, but not hers. She would mother some man’s children and he wouldn’t even be fortunate enough to speak to her. Something about seeing her thoughts in ink made everything concrete and he did not like the way things stood.

Jackson felt rather than heard the door slam behind him. At the sound Skip’s head appeared in the open doorway of his bedroom.

“Where are you going?”

“To ask the question I should have asked from the beginning.”

The light tread of leather on wood alerted her to the fact that someone stood outside her door. That and the prickling feeling at the back of her neck. She wasn’t sure she wasn’t being unnaturally paranoid until she heard the four sharp knocks against the door. The sounds reverberated through her soul.

Pain shot through her chest at the thought of opening the door to find him standing there, staring at her with doleful eyes. Although she couldn’t really imagine him with sorrowful eyes. No, he would probably mask it behind his anger and resentment.

She took a fat gulp of air and ran her hands down her thighs to dry her palms and smooth out any wrinkles in an effort to psyche herself up for the meeting.

She had already acknowledged that after he read her letter he would respond to her, in one way or another. It was the other that she was afraid of. She had prayed for a week before sending out the letter. She had feared that he would not respond in person, that he wouldn’t even bother to read her letter, but her greatest fear was that he wouldn’t stay away. And she had been right.

He was here at her door waiting to confront her.

Even though she feared speaking to him, she knew she had to do it. She could not go on pretending. Plus she was tired of being a recluse. For weeks now her pain had cocooned her, allowing Sinclair to close up on herself. She needed to open herself up. She needed to talk to him.

A quick glance in the peephole confirmed her fear. There was definitely a tall man with thick blonde hair at her door.

Her fingers shook as she twisted the metal doorknob.

Sinclair’s mouth dropped open in shock and bewilderment. Yes, the man standing at the

door was tall. Yes, he was blonde. She was even lucid and honest enough to admit that he was incredibly good looking.

But he was not her tall, blonde lover.

Fortunately or unfortunately he was not Jackson.

For a second or two her mind struggled to comprehend exactly what was going on. She had been somewhat prepared for Jackson. Although this man was close, he was not quite Jackson. It was the realization of how similar the two men were that sent icy pine needles of unease through her body. Immediately she shoved the feeling aside.

She smiled up at the blonde man before her expecting him to state his purpose. All she got was a smile full of blinding white teeth.

Two golden gods in less than two months, I am definitely on a roll.

He finally opened his mouth when she had begun to wonder about a speech impediment.

His words were whispered across the doorway. "I'm here to talk about your abortion."

"You greedy, little slut," he hissed under his breath, but not so low that they didn't hear him.

The two spun around, caught in the act. On his face was a look of haughty triumph, she on the hand looked every bit the haunted one. As if you're the one being betrayed, he thought as he stood in the doorway, an outsider where he had once thrived.

"It's not what you think," she said as she ran to him.

"I suppose you slipped and landed on his cock," he spat at her before stepping out of her reach.

She shirked at his obvious disgust. He couldn't stand the sight of her let alone her touch.

"I didn't sleep with him. You're the only man I've ever been with. I haven't ever touched him," she yelled at him.

For one instant Jackson believed her. The look in her eyes made him want to believe that she was telling the truth. He was willing to believe that he had witnessed something different, that his eyes were traitorous, and then He spoke. "Not yet at least. You interrupted perfectly good foreplay."

His words were sharp and hit their aim right on the mark. Jackson's head snapped back as though he had been struck. He felt the blow hit him in the gut winding him. He could stand there and act the fool, pretend he hadn't seen what he saw. He could act like all was well, he could stay by her side and pretend that she hadn't cheated on him. He could pretend that he hadn't given her everything, just for her to throw it back in his face.

Jackson spun on his heels. He had had enough, enough lies, enough secrets, and enough betrayals.

Whether she knew it or not she had thrown it all away. He had placed his trust in her. He had been sure she was the one person who would not betray him, but he had been wrong.

Painfully wrong.

"I'm begging you, don't," she whispered behind his retreating back. "Don't leave me. You've got to believe me. Whatever you do, please believe me."

He wondered if he was strong enough to stay, or would he run like a coward with his tattered pride barely intact.

"If you care at all, you'll trust me."

He cared, but he wasn't strong enough to trust. He had given her his heart and she had betrayed him. No he couldn't trust her.

His steps didn't even falter at her words. They bounced off the shield he had erected. He didn't even turn to acknowledge her words. He simply continued to walk out the door and out her life.

Chapter Thirty-Five SHE LIKES IT ROUGH

She stood there staring at the empty doorway for what seemed like seconds before she realized that minutes had actually passed. He left her. He didn't care enough to trust her, trust that she wouldn't cheat on him.

Men. Selfish, good for nothing, spineless ... conniving bastards. He was the one with the fiancé and yet he couldn't believe that she hadn't cheated on him, the hypocritical bastard. Here she was dying from a broken heart thinking he felt like she did. Broken.

Obviously she was wrong.

Suddenly Sinclair remembered that she was not alone. There was a conniving bastard in her presence. "You good for nothing piece of shit," she screamed at the top of her lungs as she spun around to face him. Too bad he wasn't facing her-- the bastard was walking around her room admiring her décor, as if he hadn't just broken her heart.

She watched him, chest heaving, breathing shallows breathes, trying to calm herself, for she had an overwhelming urge to throw herself at him. Intelligence prevailed. He was at the very least a six foot four two hundred and fifty pound man and granted she wasn't a lightweight. He could easily kill her without breaking a sweat. *And no one would care, at least not Jax.*

And so since physical violence was not an option, she did the next best thing. She threw her lamp at his head. She watched as the lamp sailed through the air.

Unfortunately she missed him. The lamp shattered against the wall less than an inch from his left ear. Close but not quite right. She was thoroughly upset that she hadn't been a pitcher when she played softball.

The gilded monster did not even flinch when the glass shattered all over him. He didn't even dust the glass shards off his shoulders. He simply continued walking around her room as though nothing had occurred.

She watched as he walked around the room, a thug casing a joint. He barely took notice of what was before him. He was just noticing things until he reached her small bookshelf.

He picked one text from its blood red shelves and held it in the palm of his hand. Her eyes could not help but take notice of the act. She could not help but notice how large and powerful his hands appeared. She did not need anyone to tell her that he was a dangerous man.

"You've been a naughty, little girl haven't you Ms. James ... Ms. Sinclair Amber James," he said without taking his eyes off of the book he held. As a matter of fact he seemed to be reading the book cover. And then she realized that it was her book he held. He knew exactly who she was.

She stared at him dazed, unwilling to believe her ears. There was no way he could know who she was. Very few people knew what she did in her spare time. Even fewer knew that she was the famed author Amber Sinclair.

“Did Jackson tell you?” she said even though her throat burned at having to ask the question.

His bitter laughter was coarse, masking the room in angry resentment. “That bastard wouldn’t tell me shit if I was on fire to save my life.”

She sighed in relief pleased to hear that at least in that Jackson had not betrayed her. Then she truly heard what he said. He and Jackson were not friends, bitter enemies if she had to guess.

Jackson had walked in to find her in the arms of his nemesis.

“You fucking bastard,” she yelled as the implications hit her.

He turned around his eyes alight with fire. “Damn you,” he barely breathed out the audibly whisper. “He almost believed you. The bastard has so much faith in his little fuck buddy,” he spat at her, “he almost believed you.”

Sinclair gave him a dark look. She did not like to think of herself as nothing more than Jackson’s temporary fuck buddy. She definitely did not like him throwing around his assumption as if she meant nothing more than that to Jackson.

He took a menacing step towards her, “That would have fucked up our plans royally?”

“Ours?” she stared at him dumbfounded. “What the hell is going on?”

He took another step towards her. “Nothing you need to know about you little bitch.”

She stepped back in apprehension. He watched her move back in fear, and an unholy light entered his eyes.

He liked the fear in her eyes.

Her throat threatened to close up on her. She knew that if he cornered her there would be hell to pay for her mistake. He was not only a dangerous man. He was a dangerous man excited about her precarious position.

Sinclair took another step towards the door. He followed her, stalking his prey. His words were little more than a whisper. “What is it about you that has him so enamored?” Granted you have a great rack, but I’d never considered myself a breast man, then again I’m not a leg man either. I prefer my whores to have a bit of fire.”

His word slid against her skin inflaming her with mock strength. She could not and would not let him get to her. She could not let him get near her.

She gasped. *I prefer my whores to have a bit of fire.* He had every intention of ...

Sinclair took a deep breath and stilled herself. She had to remain calm and think. She grasped behind her looking for anything heavy to defend herself. She found the sturdy standing lamp. Its cool weight felt good in her palms.

Sinclair watched with wide eyes as his beautiful face was splintered by his chilling smile. He was silently laughing at her attempt at self defense.

Sinclair felt the icy tentacles of his confidence reach into her. She gritted her teeth and sent up a silent prayer. Today had been a bad enough day. She did not need it or any other day to end as he planned.

“Come on sweetheart. We both know you’re not hard to get, so stop playing,” he said as he followed her movements. He was watching her. Sinclair knew that his careful movements stalked hers. He was trying to corner her and unless she did something now he would reach his goal.

And she did not want to think about what he would do to her when she was in his grasp. A shudder went through her body at the picture her mind conjured up.

She would be at his mercy and if his eyes were any indication of his character, he had

none.

The realization should have frightened her, but it didn't. Her grandmother's words rang true and loud and clear in her head. "*The best weapon a woman can use against her enemy is the enemy himself.*"

Michel was so sure about where he stood that she could easily take advantage of his assumption. She waited, taking small steps until she got him in the right position, and then she hefted the lamp with all her might.

She managed to hit him squarely across the left arm with enough force to knock him right out of her bedroom. He landed with a loud thump on his ass. She followed him out of the room wielding the lamp like a medieval jousting stick. The conical glass top of the lamp hit him squarely in the forehead. She saw his eyes cross and knew she had dazed him.

Now she just had to get him out of her apartment.

She had betrayed him.

The hot anger that rose from him stung and burnt every inch of his flesh. His nostrils flared as he took thick gulping breaths of air in an attempt to cool the inferno raging inside his soul.

She had betrayed him.

There was no denying that he had found her in the hands of another man. He felt the wound she had lacerated against his chest deepen. He had found her in the arms of a man he deeply despised. The memory of the two of them in a sweet embrace rose in his brain. A hardened fist of pain clenched around his heart. His fingers tightened into a fist so tight that the blood in his veins ran for cover leaving his knuckles snow white.

Pure as snow.

He groaned out loud. Before he had come into her life, Sinclair had been as pure as snow, at least when compared to him. He had tainted her. He had brought her his lust, his need, and had not even been able to guarantee her a future.

A soft vibration jarred him from his morose thoughts. Someone was trying to call him. He snatched the cell phone from his pocket in an angry gesture.

"What?" he roared into the phone. He was not in the mood to converse with anybody.

"Take it the meeting did not go well."

That was the understatement of the year he thought, but no words passed the barrier of his pursed lips.

"Could you at least tell me what went right?" the other man asked.

There was a long drawn out pause before he answered. "She was there."

The cold statement told him the severity of the situation. "So she wasn't alone."

"No."

Silence. The other man's muteness ate at him. He needed to hide behind words. The silence seemed to strip him naked.

"How the hell did you know I would be here, Haddon," he yelled into the cool metal.

He felt rather than heard the other man's discomfort. "We all knew you would be there. We weren't exactly sure what time so we just made an educated guess. After last night we knew you would ask her."

After last night ... he sighed as understanding registered. Last night the boys had gone out as a group. They had all had a good time. After a little while at the bar even Jackson had found himself enjoying the night. That was until two gorgeous bisexual girlfriends had decided

they wanted to play with one of the infamous Fallen Angels, specifically the one known as Fuck and Chuck.

The problem had been that Jackson wasn't in the mood to fuck anyone but the one woman he couldn't have. After he had turned down the girls' generous offer he had called it an early night. Something he had never done before.

His short bark of laughter was coarse and brittle. "I suppose every one but me could see the writing on the wall."

"Who was she with," Haddon asked.

"Michel."

The other man swore profusely for long moments before he remembered someone was on the line. "What the hell was he doing there?" he yelled at the top of his lungs, grimaced, and then repeated the question at a much lower decimal.

"Do you want me to go into great detail?"

It wasn't so much his words, but the monotone nature of their delivery that made him regret asking the question.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I not only lost the fucking battle. The war has gone to hell in a hand basket. I'm walking away. She's made her choice."

"Has she?" Haddon asked on something akin to a whisper.

The soft words pierced him where hard yelled words could not have even touched him.

"You're engaged. She knows that. Michel is not her choice. He's just the man who took advantage of her precarious position. You can't let him get away with that."

"Damn it, Haddon. You weren't there. You don't know what I saw. She made her decision, just like I made my decision."

"And what exactly is your decision?"

"I'm walking away while I still can."

"Are you happy with that decision?"

Silence.

"Before you take another step answer a question for me."

"What?" he barked at him as he ripped his car door open. He could feel his temper was flaying out of control.

"How does she make you feel?"

Like a fucking fool he thought and was therefore surprised at the words that left his mouth. "Like I am walking on air. Even cloud nine couldn't get where I am."

She had grossly miscalculated. He hadn't been quite down and out. He had just been faking it. Sinclair realized this when she reached down to pull him out of her apartment and his steely fingers wrapped around her waist.

I was so close she thought as she watched her doorway turn upside down.

With unrestrained strength he threw her to the ground.

She felt her pulse spike as fear and sawdust took up residence in her mouth. She couldn't speak beyond the fear that clawed to get out of her throat.

Suddenly he was above her with his legs bracing each of hers, holding her down as his long fingers grabbed at her dress. At the sound of her clothing ripping Sinclair realized that any chance of her escaping had slipped through her fingers. He pulled at her dress further widening the rip. A chill settled at the back of her neck at the feel of cool air against her exposed skin.

His nostrils flared and the sound of his ragged breathing scissored through the sense of comfort she had owned less than a minute ago. He was staring down at the exposed full mounds of her breasts. Her only clear thought was thank God she had worn her simple serviceable cotton bra. It covered much of her bountiful breasts.

The unholy light she had seen in his eyes moments ago changed in degree. It's burning intensity spiking and coalescing into something different, something, something much harder than the angry inferno she had witnessed.

Sinclair felt whatever breath she had left in her chest swoosh out of her in a great big gasp. Sinclair closed her eyes and prayed to the one above. In that one moment that she shut her eyes, a large heavily muscled tanned hand reached down and grabbed Michel around his collar and lifted him off of Sinclair. It was at that moment that she recognized the loud sound of booming heartbeat had actually been Jackson's footsteps hitting the dark mahogany wood that lined her building's hallway.

His booming voice vibrated along her skin. "This pussy belongs to me and I don't believe I've given you permission to touch it," he said as he dragged Michel out the hall.

From Sinclair's spot on the floor she took gasping, sawing breathes of air into her starved lungs. He had come back for me, she thought as she closed her eyes in relief.

As if to punctuate her beliefs Jackson growled out the words, "Don't ever touch what belongs to me again. Don't ever touch her."

Chapter Thirty-Six CAIN AND ABEL

The letter arrived in the dead of the night. It was of course a cold, dark night. It was the kind of night that shadows and ghosts woke from their deep sleep to come out and enjoy.

A night when nightmares didn't quite haunt -- they became a living reality breathing down the back of your neck as they demanded vengeance.

She stared into the blaring red inferno of the fire that burned in her antique fireplace wondering when the day would come that she would stop seeing shadows every where she went.

She had thought the deliverer was such a shadow. She had been sadly mistaken.

From the cavern of darkness his gruff voice, hardened from years of smoking broke

through the barrier of her thoughts.

"I have something for you," he said as he entered her living room.

She had not heard him enter. She had not heard Luis announce him. When she commented on the fact she got the distinct impression that he was smiling at her. She couldn't be sure of how the lines of his face were set. She couldn't exactly see him. The large black coat he wore came with a very thick, deep hood. It was wrapped around his head like a shield.

And then she realized that Luis would not have been able to announce him as he did not know the deliverer was here.

For some reason she could not name she did not feel fear, just cold, detached acceptance. Whatever he came for he would see it through. She had no say in the matter.

She looked up at the tall man, trying to see his eyes. She couldn't see past the dark, cold fathomless eyes that looked at her with wiry curiosity in them. She felt her mouth go dry. Something about those eyes set the fine hairs on the back of her neck standing tall.

Quick, sure footsteps brought him close to her, just close enough that she could smell the wintergreen scent that clung to him. It reminded her of winters spent in Colorado. She had loved those vacations. Those memories brought a quick smile to her face.

"I doubt you will be smiling at this," he said before a sliver of white flashed before her eyes. She couldn't help the involuntary shudder that went through her body.

When her eyes opened she was staring down at the thin white envelope that lay against her thighs. She whipped her head around trying to figure out where he was, but he was gone.

She stared down at the envelope before wondering if she should dare open it, even as her fingers grasped it. Her heart beat at a staccato rhythm as she opened the letter. It was definitely from him. She could feel him on the thin sheets of paper.

Dear Madeline,

I know these are trying times. You are probably distressed by my death, but be pleased that something good will come of this. Remember May 19, 1983. Of course you do. I doubt you will ever forget that day. It has haunted you for years.

I know you've searched for years to find the answers to the questions that burn in your chest. Does he really hate you enough to do it? Is he really that callous, that heartless and how could he do it to one of his own?

One mother goes in, two children are birthed, but only one comes out. The question is where is Cain, or is it Abel?

I know you're dying to know and so here it goes

Hours later when she emerged from the bathroom she truly understood that she had miscalculated. She had grossly underestimated how deep his caldron of putrid hatred ran for her. He had done the unthinkable and for the first time in her life Madeline wondered if she could ever possibly correct the wrong.

Chapter Thirty-Seven
MISTRESS OF THE NIGHT

She heard the angry tread of his feet a few seconds before he walked through her doorway. Just by the set of her tense shoulders she knew that something primitive and coarse vibrated through his clenched muscles.

A quick dart of chocolate brown eyes confirmed the fact that his knuckles were red and bruised.

This should be interesting, she thought, when she was drawn to the hard light that glittered in his sea green eyes. Half hazardedly, she drew a hand through her still wet locks. The moment she'd gotten the chance, Sinclair had jumped into the shower, determined to cleanse herself of Michel's touch. She got the distinct impression that Jackson had been prowling her apartment looking for something to take his rage out on.

And he'd found her.

"What the hell were you thinking allowing a total stranger into your home? Do you like it rough?"

She had gone into her living room waiting for him. She had expected his surly anger. She was prepared for anything he threw at her.

"I let you into my apartment, didn't I?" she asked with a deceptive shrug. Although she was boiling inside, she was determined to play it cool.

"And look how well that turned out," he replied. He hadn't wanted her to hear his comment, but the second the words were out of his mouth, he realized that he had miscalculated. Sinclair had definitely heard him.

"Trust me I learned my lesson. I don't do blonde delivery men anymore. Just in case you hadn't noticed I wasn't exactly giving him the green light."

Delivery men? Immediately he conjured up an image of himself bearing gifts, specifically her missing notebook. The question was what did Michel give her?

The question burned like acid in his brain. His jaw clenched in frustration. He hadn't meant to say the things he had said. When he had walked through the door to see her being attacked in her own home by a man that he had left her alone with a powerful rage unlike anything he had ever known before had come over him. He had taken out some of that anger on Michel, but it was not all gone. When he had walked through her door he had simmered with a need to release the pent up frustration seething in his soul. He had wanted to comfort her, but one look at her face and he had known she wouldn't let him anywhere near her. Her body language was screaming, 'don't you fucking touch me'.

And he desperately wanted to touch her.

He stepped further into the room ignoring Sinclair's blatant body language.

Sinclair watched as his long legged stride brought him closer to her. He stopped a few feet before her. He was far enough that she felt comfortable, but close enough to stir prickling sensations beneath her skin.

She glanced into his eyes and saw the predator beneath his cultured façade and shivered. Instinctively she stepped back. Good ol' self preservation was back in full swing.

Immediately he stepped forward. She was the gazelle to his panther. He had no intention

of letting her run free.

She felt the black heat curling low in her belly. And was immediately disgusted.

With a nonchalance she did not feel, she spoke. "I've already fended off one rape today. I don't want to have to deal with another," she said before taking a step forward. She had planned to bypass him, but he was not allowing it. His hand snaked out and grabbed her wrist. Before she knew it she was plastered between her living room's cool back wall and Jackson's incredibly warm chest.

His breath was moist and warm against her sensitive ear lobe. His words were coarse and crude. The dichotomy threw her off for a second and then she heard what he said.

"When a young fuckable woman lets a random man into her home after dark for no apparent reason, the only reason is because she desperately wants to be fucked. Hard."

Sinclair stared up at the man who held her bound and at his mercy with pure shock on her face. The tension that vibrated along his body, his clenched jaw, and the pulse that beat widely at his neck frightened her. He could not really think that she had wanted what Michel had in mind, did he?

Without warning he kissed her with a fierceness that shook her soul. His lips were hot, slick, and demanding. They required complete submission.

"I could take you by force," he said against her lips as he stood above her, towering her, his presence daring her to deny the truth. The hard twist of his smiling lips attested to the fact. He could take her by force. He was angry enough and strong enough to do it.

His hand reached out and caressed her cheek, a simple gentle act, a sharp contrast to his words. "I could tie you up, rough you up, fuck you until you beg for mercy and then fuck you until you beg me not to stop. I know you. I know you'll like it. You're tight little pussy is creaming at the thought," he said with a sneer. His eyes glittered with a hard light. He was full of anger, lust, and need.

She gaped up at him in shock. Had he lost his mind? She had never seen this side of him. And as much as she didn't want to admit it, he was right. She was getting excited by the thought of being tied and fucked without mercy. His large cock would burrow into her creaming pussy without restraint, ruthlessly.

"I could take you by force," he said as he looked deep into her eyes and noticed the hard glittering light. She was angry ... and disgusted ... with herself. "And you would not only let me, you would enjoy it."

Rage at his words and his audacity quickly consumed her. She couldn't think beyond the anger he had ignited.

"You arrogant bastard," she yelled at him before her hand lashed out and connected with his face. She heard the sharp flat sound of her flesh striking his and was immediately appalled at herself. He always brought out the worst in her.

He immediately grabbed her wrists, twisted them so that they crossed before he raised them high, so high she felt her arms were going to come out of their sockets.

"Oh sweetheart picture it. You bound and helpless with your legs spread and me taking my time to taste you, please you, eat your pussy like you've never been eaten before."

Sinclair felt her nipples tighten with the husky pull of his heated words. She was immediately disgusted with herself, with her body's eagerness to be his plaything.

And even though he held her, even though she was at his mercy, her common sense refused to make its presence known. Only the hot red flame of anger and pain burning in her chest registered. "You arrogant bastard what makes you think every woman will just bow at your

feet.”

“It’s not every woman I’m worried about, it’s not even most women, it’s only you that matters, and let’s face it. You want me almost as much as I want you.”

“Let’s face it, the only woman who matters is your fiancé,” she said. Her words and tone were mocking, goading him to hurt her, more than she was already hurting. She couldn’t want or need a man that lashed out at her. She needed him to do something, anything worthy of her hatred.

“No,” he said, breathing the word against her face. “Imogen doesn’t matter until my wedding day ... and even after that she will not matter ... not like you matter.”

“You bastard,” she screamed, her earlier anger paling in the wake of the current inferno that was her rage. “Of all the careless things to say to me. Why?” she moaned, as she fell limp in his hands unable to handle the thought that he too cared, that he cared for her.

“Why what? It’s the truth and there is no point in denying it. Neither of us has that luxury,” he said softly.

He too understood her anger, her rage, her pain. Neither of them was being given the chance to enjoy what they had found in one another’s arms. His father had guaranteed that.

“I’m sorry sweetheart, but I want to be a part of your world. I can’t and won’t give you up, not until I have too.”

“You’re a part of it alright. You’re tearing it apart. Don’t you get it? You’re tearing me apart.”

“I won’t deny that this is the most selfish thing that I’ve done. It is, but I need you too much to let you go.”

“I won’t do it. Damn it I won’t be your fucking whore. You can’t use me like this.”

“I’m a selfish bastard for this, but please sweetheart. It’s cold out there and I need your warmth. Just for tonight ... just for tonight ... be mine ... just for tonight ... be mine” he said before pressing his lips against hers.

He felt her groan in the soles of his feet long before he heard it. It had been too long since he had touched her, felt her silky smooth skin beneath his, felt her beneath him.

She accepted his touch, his lust, his need and opened her mouth for him.

Sinclair was not surprised by the dark curl of heat that started low in her belly. Her pussy was throbbing, getting ready for his entrance. It seemed he would always have that affect on her.

There was an angry desperation to his touch. His hands were rough. Their touch ignited dark fires within her soul. It was exactly what she needed to appease her raging passion. She responded to him on a primal level. She too needed to know that she was still alive. She understood that the anger coursing through his veins was not directed at her, but at both of their precarious positions. Both had come close to losing what could never be theirs.

“Tell me no Sunshine,” he whispered against her open lips. His moist breath was a scented caress against the sensitive flesh. “Tell me to go to hell,” he said. His growling baritone made a mockery of the insistent tone of the plea.

She shook her head in denial before pressing her lips against his. She wanted him. She needed him. She didn’t know if he needed her, but he wanted her. At least for now. The insistent bulge that pressed against her belly attested to the fact and she would take him. She would not allow him to take that from her.

He released her hands just long enough for him to loosen his tie. The minute he was done he used the piece of fabric to bind her hands in front of her. His hands were a blur of movements, so quick that she did not know what happened until he was done.

Her bound hands forced her breasts together, placing the full mounds on prominent display. Her position and semi-sheer shirt made it blatantly obvious that her nipples were hard. They peeked through the thin cotton seeking attention. Jackson's fingers stroked first one and then the second nubbin into a diamond pointed kernel. Fire streaked from the hard tips of her breasts to settle low in her abdomen.

Bloody, fucking hell. "Release me now," she yelled.

His smile was at once chilling and hotter than lava.

Suddenly his hands reached out to grasp the thin material that covered. The sound of the ripping material seemed loud in the still room. She hadn't bothered to wear a bra so she was bare to his heated gaze.

"What the hell ...?" she said before his lips claimed hers in a bruising open mouthed kiss. His tongue darted between her lips to stroke hers, the inner contours of her mouth, the fragile tasty flesh of the hot, wet cavern.

Sinclair moaned with need and the dominating possession of her mouth. Relentless hunger twisted through her body.

He was relentless with his sexual assault. Sinclair's senses never got a moment to adjust to him. He simply kept spinning a whirlpool of pleasure that her body eagerly sung to. Jackson's skilled fingers pinched and pulled her nipples into such sensitive, frenzied points she wondered if they would explode with the sensations he caused.

Suddenly he stepped away from her and threw her over the arm of her couch. She was bent over and open, helpless to do anything more than squirm. Her position and bound hands did not allow for anything more.

She felt him brush his fingers against the backs of her thighs. His deft hands moved between her and the couch to lie against the fly of her corduroy pants. They lay there for silent seconds. The only sounds in the room were their harsh breathing.

Finally he spoke. "I'm going to enjoy fucking you senseless," he said. His voice was a heated rasp against her neck before his hard teeth grasped the sensitive skin, giving it a tingling nip.

She was bound, naked, and at his mercy. Her knees threatened to buck from the thick, intense arousal swimming through her veins.

Strong fingers grasped her thighs and spread them ... wide. Sinclair was immediately embarrassed. She was wide open and there was nothing he couldn't see at this angle. Her ass was sticking up in the cool air and her naked pussy was bared before him.

At the sight of her exposed before him a surging rush of desire swept through him. His long fingers slid along her swollen, moist labia teasing her with the deceptively leisurely exploration.

"You're so fucking wet for me sweetheart," he growled down to her. His voice was husky with desire. His fingers left her pussy long enough to enter his mouth. "All this cream for me," he said before the smacking sounds of his lips licking his fingers clean registered.

Oh my God, Sinclair thought, before those delicious digits of his found her clit. His thumb simply just rested against the swollen nub and though it did nothing he felt the bud double in size. When he felt her squirm against the couch hoping to move his thumb he allowed himself to touch her, really touch her. Lazily he stroked her clit. Not enough to make her come, but enough to draw out the sexual tension that hummed through her body.

He listened to the rhythm of her heavy breathing and took notice of the way her constrained hands clenched. When he knew she was close, he stopped all movement.

Sinclair had to stifle back a sob at the loss of his touch. She had been so close and he knew it. He was driving her crazy and she was enjoying it. The heightened anticipation made the arousal streaming through her veins thicker.

Without warning, he shoved one thick, blunt finger into her soaked channel. Her senses jerked at the invasion, but her body immediately accepted him. Her climax was immediate and intense. Fireworks that could have done a century's worth of Fourth of July's exploded in her body knocking the breath from her. She could only groan in completion.

Her eyes sprang open at the wet rasp of his tongue against her clit. The muscle twitched with eagerness. Lusty slut, she thought, before the sweep of his tongue wiped all conscious thought from her brain. He licked and licked and licked her clit until she was sure he was going to lick it right off her pussy.

Unfortunately he did not lick her long enough to bring her to completion. Her body was tightly strung on a sexual tightrope that she could not possibly stay on.

"Damn it, stop," she screamed at him, unwilling to allow him to dominate her so completely. She was losing her mind thanks to his sexual raid on her senses.

"Please," she moaned at the feel of his tongue sliding into her creaming pussy. Her body went slack at the vision of him tongue fucking her pussy. She suddenly wished she was freaky enough to go out and buy a mirror. She really would have appreciated one now.

Even as her body creamed around his insistent tongue she repeated her plea. She felt his smile against the swollen lips of her sex. "Your pussy is creaming so hard I could live off you for a week, and yet you think you want me to stop," he said before continuing his assault. His tongue dug deeper, seeking more of the salty sweetness that was her arousal.

He lapped up her cream like a cat in heat. Suddenly his fingers were there too, torturing her sensitive flesh. His fingers worked her clit and labia, massaging the muscles with a ruthlessness that made her body buck with pleasure as his tongue glided with mind numbing accuracy around the entrance to her quivering channel.

The fact that he wasn't entering her was driving her crazy and he knew it. He knew exactly what he was doing to her. Under any other circumstance she would have been angry at the manipulation of her body, but Sinclair was too far gone to care.

"Finger me damn it," she screamed into the leather sofa.

"Say it Sinclair and I'll give it to you," he said. His voice reminded her of gravel sliding over broken glass. He was hanging on by a thread, but she had already snapped.

"Finger my pussy damn it," she yelled at the top of her lungs, not caring who heard her plea for mercy. She desperately wanted, no needed him to fuck her.

Suddenly his hands and tongue were gone.

"Fuck my pussy," Sinclair screamed.

His finger slid in inch by inch, slow to enter her. He purposely took his time wanting to increase her anticipation and shred any of her reservation.

She was so hot he felt the burn deep in his loins. His cock further hardened and swelled beneath his soft cotton slacks. He tested her, twisting his fingers on the slide out. She body immediately drew tighter with unreleased tension. Her pussy clenched around his finger, milking it. She needed more. He needed more.

He pulled his finger out of her and drove in two. Her body slammed with the force of his possession. His fingers ruthlessly thrust in and out of her soaked pussy. There was no mercy. There was nothing she could do but accept his touch and the curling heat of need it created low in her abdomen. Suddenly the heat spiraled out of control.

Jackson felt her pussy muscles clench in gripping contraction a second before the scream was ripped from her throat. The heat that spiraled from between Sinclair's thighs was all consuming in intensity. She felt herself going up in bright flames.

He did not give her time to bask in the glow of completion. The relentless thrust of his fingers allowed for no brokerage. His fingers continued to thrust in and out of her creaming pussy, carrying her down from her high only to lift her up again. The sound and feel of skin slapping against skin had her leaking out more arousal. She was so turned on she didn't know how she didn't just combust.

"Come on sweetheart, come for me. Scream my name," he whispered against her neck a second before he added a third finger to her pussy. This one was determined to coax her clit in compliance. With one finger he worked her clit into a frenzy, the other two slid in and out of her soaked channel. Suddenly her body splintered into a million pieces and she felt herself consumed by a delicious burning heat.

She was coming down, slowly coming down when he breathed in her ear, "Not good enough sweetheart. I told you to scream my name. Now you're going to have to be punished for your disobedience."

Her satiated pussy instantly became a burning channel of need. She groaned into the couch surprised by her body's enduring hunger. Then he was there sliding into her body's slick passage. She was so wet, so hot, so ready her body easily accepted his incredible girth. She felt her body opening to allow him entrance and smiled at the knowledge that she would fit him tighter than a glove.

She gloved him like no other woman. Every time Jackson entered her he understood what his grandfather had meant when he said for every lock there is only one true key. And Sinclair was definitely the lock to his key.

He entered her with one long, shuddering sigh of contentment. She was pure bliss. She was any and everything he could ever need. Suddenly he felt the dark hunger he had struggled with burning out of control. He could not lose her.

One large tanned palm collided with one plump brown ass cheek. A smile full of passion lit his face at the sight of her ass cheek rippling in reaction to the spanking. He couldn't help himself. He spanked the other cheek just a bit harder and watched as her ass clenched and jiggled in reaction.

Even though her pussy was so wet she was soaking them both, he felt it cream in reaction.

"You like that, don't you, Sunshine?"

The devil had never asked a more dangerous question. Sinclair nodded her reply afraid to open her mouth to speak. There was no telling what might come out of there. She just might ask him to spank her harder.

As if hearing her thoughts his hand hit her curvy behind with enough force to stir her flame of desire into a raging inferno.

"Shit," he groaned as he felt her contract around his burrowing cock. Even as his hand connected with her ass, he continued to move with deep, powerful surging strokes that drove her crazy. The feel of his large veined cock sliding against the fragile flesh of her womb and the sharp stinging sensations of her spanking were too much for Sinclair to handle. Her orgasm was so strong and acute her mouth opened with shock and surprise. "Jackson," she screamed as she went down in flames.

He felt his testicles drawing close to his body and the tell tale tingling at the bottom of his

spine that told him he was close. And even though he tried to stave it off, he had no choice but to comply to the clenching, milking muscles of her pussy. They gripped his surging cock in a hot, wet velvet warmth that brokered no argument.

His thrusts became short, hard, and determined. He felt her shudder one last time in surrender before his orgasm was upon him. His agonizing groan was loud in the silence of the room.

He reached down, loosed the tie that had kept her at his mercy, and carried her into her bedroom. Satisfaction radiated from him. The satiated sensation was so mind numbing she couldn't do anything but moan in completion. She had never felt anything like she had felt at his hands.

He was right. He could tie her up, rough her up, fuck her until she begged for mercy and then fuck her until she begged him not to stop. Her pussy had not only creamed, it had poured at his crude, forceful behavior. She had loved every minute of it. He knew her.

He knew her.

The call came in the midst of the dark cold night. The shrill sound of the telephone's scream started her, snatching her from the black nightmare she never acknowledged.

"Hello?"

Skin tingling silence greeted her. Her immediate reaction was to hang up the phone, but she felt the premonition in her bones. She could not hang up.

"Hello," she called again, silently begging him not to speak.

"Push the wedding back to five." The deep baritone voice was pitched low, allowing the soft undertones to come through. They did not reassure her. The soft monotone voice only made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up more.

"But I can't"

She was immediately cut off by the sound of the dial tone. There would be no excuses made. He expected absolute submission. He was a man used to getting his way.

Another trickle of unease slithered down her spine. She was adept at handling and maneuvering strong men. Life had taught her the gift. But this man ... this man was different.

But this man was establishing all the rules. She would have to be especially careful with him least she find herself being the one managed.

Awkward did not even begin to describe the day after.

Daylight peeked through the cool ivory shutters that were hung over the window. A quick glance at her clock confirmed her fear. It was past noon.

Sinclair rose from her bed with a long suffering sigh. She had stayed in bed long enough. She had tried desperately to avoid him and it looked like she had succeeded. The main reason she was even daring to venture out of her bed was that her bladder was protesting her lack of movement. The second was because she hadn't heard him for at least an hour. He was therefore long gone.

Quickly she wrapped her naked body in her thick terry cotton robe. After she freshened up in her bathroom she strode to her kitchen. As she padded barefoot through her hallway something occurred to her. The air was warm and fragrant. It carried just the right hint of bacon and eggs. Funny, she thought, at the scent she had pictured her grandmother cooking. Probably because the last time your apartment smelled like breakfast, Nana cooked it.

Although Sinclair loved to cook she never had time for breakfast. It was usually a cup of

steaming French vanilla flavored coffee. She was of course imagining the scent. It was past noon and she was starving. But as she neared the kitchen the smell of bacon cooking was thicker.

Suddenly she jerked to a stop. The bacon was real and Jackson was cooking it.

He had dressed. He was wearing the same dress shirt, tie, and slacks he had worn yesterday. The tie disappeared beneath the apron he wore. Her eyes flitted down to his Italian leather covered feet. She couldn't focus on his tie without remembering what he had used it for. Three times. Three glorious times.

He had finished making breakfast. She watched as he searched her cabinets for plates. She couldn't bring her lips to move enough to tell him where they were. Bingo, he found them.

Jackson strode past her to set two plates on her little dinette set. She could do nothing more than stare at the two steaming plates of food from the kitchen doorway.

"We need to talk," he said as he stepped away from the dinette.

All the moisture in Sinclair's mouth leaked out to settle on her palms. She couldn't help the reactionary groan that passed through her lips.

The booming sound of someone knocking on her front door echoed in the silent room. Sinclair pinched herself, wondering when she would wake from this nightmare. She already knew who was at the door so she wasn't surprised to hear "knock, knock" from beyond the door.

"Might as well rip the Band-Aid off quickly," Sinclair mumbled to herself as she pulled the front door open.

"Hello gorgeous," Maxine said before striding in the apartment. Maxine took two steps into the living room before she stopped short. From where she stood she could clearly see that she wasn't Sinclair's only visitor, and judging by his rumpled appearance her visitor had slept over.

"Hi," he said, clearly uncomfortable with the situation. He desperately wanted to talk to Sinclair and that was not going to happen.

"Hi. My name is Maxine," Max said before walking over to shake his hand.

He darted a quick look at Sinclair before he turned back to Maxine. "Nice to meet you," he said, "My name is Jackson."

"The pleasure is all mine." Something about the smile she gave him reminded him of the mischievous orange and black cat in the movie.

"Seeing as how you have company, I'll talk to you later Sinclair," Jackson said as he headed out the door. The door had barely closed behind him before Maxine turned to Sinclair. The full grin on her face told Sinclair exactly what she was thinking.

Definitely X-rated thoughts.

"Umm girl he looks so good I'd find a cherry for him to pop."

"Maxine Boswell!"

She simply grinned wider and pulled something out of her purse with her free hand.

"Here, found your lipstick in my car," she said when she noticed the way Sinclair watched her with hooded eyes. She was definitely hiding something. She was sure when she took notice of the way Sinclair gingerly accepted the tube.

"So girl tell me the good news"

"There is nothing to tell," she said as she walked to the kitchen.

"What do you mean there is nothing to tell. Girl, when is the wedding?" What are you going to name the baby? How excited is Jackson to be the father?" Maxine asked as she set her donuts order upon the cherry red coffee table.

"I did not tell him."

“What the hell do you mean you didn’t tell him?” Maxine asked incredulously. “How the hell did you forget to tell him?”

“I didn’t forget to tell him. I purposely didn’t tell him.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell him?” Maxine yelled.

“It did not feel right,” Sinclair said in such a calm tone that Maxine’s nerves went on edge.

“What the hell do feelings have to do with letting a man know you are pregnant with his child?”

Sinclair simply shrugged as she pulled a can of soda from the refrigerator.

Exasperated Maxine said, “He has a right to know.”

The disgust in Sinclair’s voice heated the room with a rising current of betrayal. “A man with a fiancé has no rights where his mistress is concerned.”

“Do not call yourself that.”

“Why not? Because the word conjures up sleazy motel rooms, rendezvous, and thirty minute fucks?”

“Sinclair”

“Don’t you Sinclair me. The shoe fits and I am more than willing to wear it.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell him? If you told him”

“Because I do not want to go from mistress to Madame because of some damn obligation. Because I want him to come to me on his own, not because I’m pregnant. Because it’s bad enough being the sex doll. I will not add wedlock bride to my resume. I will not trade one heartache in just to get back in line for another. He has to make his choice on his own.”

At the feel of Maxine’s arms around her, the dam that had brokered Sinclair’s emotions broke. Fat, hot tears of heartache slid down her cheeks. After long minutes her wrenching sobs became a painful hiccup. When she felt steady enough to move, she disentangled herself from Maxine’s cocoon to grab one of the now lukewarm cups of coffee. She was going to need more caffeine than a soda could give her.

Before she pressed the Styrofoam to her lips she looked Maxine in the eyes and said, “I just want him to want me for me.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight REGRETS FOR BREAKFAST

The shit had hit the fan. And it had splattered all over her fucking life.

The thought occurred to Sinclair as she closed her front door. Maxine had just left. She had tried unsuccessfully to get Sinclair to tell Jackson about her pregnancy.

Sinclair had held steadfastly to her decision. Come hell or high water she was not telling Jackson about her child.

Her child.

The thought didn't even allow him the right to know about her pregnancy.

My child.

And she didn't dare tell him. She knew what he would do. He could never know.

I'm alone and pregnant.

She felt her body go lax and was relieved to find the wooden door behind her. It provided the shoulder she did not dare cry upon. She blinked once, twice, trying to stop the current of emotion that threatened to overflow. They flew. Fat silver drops slid down her cheeks to hit her burning chest. The cool drips should have sizzled considering how much hot, angry pain beat in her breast.

She was alone and pregnant. The thought kept running through her brain. She was alone and pregnant. There was nothing she could do about being pregnant. She had decided against that. She was all for the right to choose, and her choice had been to keep her baby. She knew she would regret it the minute the operation was over.

Just because she couldn't do anything about being pregnant didn't mean she couldn't fix the alone problem. Just because Jackson was taken didn't mean she had to shoulder this child on her own. She had friends and family. She had a good source of income. It was not the end of the world.

She just had to be honest about this and think things through.

Sinclair opened her watery eyes very cautiously. She was vastly relieved to find herself alone. She had been the center of attention for too many people. First Michel, then Jackson, and then Maxine had shown up at her door unannounced. It was really too much for one woman to handle.

A vision of Maxine's face before she turned to leave entered Sinclair's mind. Her mouth involuntarily twisted into a grimace. To say that Maxine had been disappointed in her would have been down playing the woman's emotions.

Just because you're a selfish coward does not mean he doesn't have the right to know he is about to become a father.

Max had been livid ... and disappointed.

And as much as Sinclair did not want to admit it, Max was right. She was too scared and too selfish to tell Jax that she was pregnant. She was afraid that he would marry her because she was pregnant. She was afraid he wouldn't marry her even though she was pregnant. And she didn't want him to have access to her child without wanting access to her. He couldn't have one without the other. Mother and child were a package deal.

And Jackson wanted neither.

She didn't need to ask him to know the answer to the question. He wasn't exactly a family oriented man. Hell what kind of twenty something male was a family man.

The truth haunted her.

The kind who didn't have a choice.

Very few men with children his age had planned them. And just as many didn't want them.

Last night had been a big mistake. She shouldn't have let Jackson make love to her. Not that she had much choice in the matter. When it came to him she couldn't seem to get her lips to form the word No.

"No," she said trying to get used to the taste of the word on her tongue. She had to make it a part of her vocabulary.

“No,” she said again reminding herself of the promise she had made to herself this morning. She was going to push Jackson and all his issues out of her life. She couldn’t allow him to take up any more room.

She tried to shake off the feeling of unease and insecurity that lay between her shoulder blades. She had no luck. It was regret. It consumed her and hung in the air permeating her every thought.

Things had been better before she had met him. Although the fantasy had hurt, it had kept her going. There was something about the dream that had kept her hopeful. She had nothing to dream about. She was broken and alone. And yet she wasn’t smart enough to regret him. But she did regret all that had come from meeting him. The dream had been one thing, but the reality was not turning out to be happily ever after. It was a nightmare.

I’m alone and pregnant.

Uncertainty clung to her like the frightening tendrils of a spider web. She couldn’t quite relieve herself of the feeling.

She was alone and pregnant.

There was no getting around it. Things had not gone as planned. When Sinclair had started this relationship with Jackson she had figured that the worst that could come out of it was a broken heart. That had been her idea of worst case scenario. She hadn’t once considered the possibility that she would get pregnant while on the pill, when her boyfriend had forgotten to use a condom.

It had seemed like an inconceivable possibility. She took her pills religiously and except for that time in the bathroom she always demanded he wear protection. He knew better than to not wear a condom.

It only takes one time.

Her grandmother’s words rang in her head.

Sinclair groaned. She was going to have to tell her Nana and her brothers ... soon.

She was not looking forward to making those calls.

As she laid down on her bed she found herself wishing it was all a dream, a terrible nightmare.

Things were not going well. You have definitely bludgeoned the situation to death he thought. After your performance last night there is no way that Sinclair will ... Will what? Well love you, accept you, understand that you want her as more than just an inheritance guard?

Oh she might readily believe that you aren’t willing to marry her for the money. As it happens she is very aware of the fact that you are currently engaged to a woman you barely know for that reason. But will she believe that you want her, and not just that mind blowing, gut clenching, tight as a fist pussy of hers.

Especially after last night.

Especially after last night, and earlier this morning, and a little later this morning.

His chest clenched tight with frustration. It was ridiculous how she made him feel-- whole yet incomplete. It was that sense of un-fulfillment that had driven him to act so ruthlessly last night.

Something about seeing her at Michel’s mercy had driven him over the edge. He only wished he had not fallen so deep into the abyss.

If only Sinclair was willing to pull me out.

But considering the way his luck was going, she would more likely dump a heaping pile

of shit on top of him.

He doubted she believed in him enough to help him out.

If only she was like the others. Jackson chuckled to himself at his luck. For years he had found himself the center of every woman's attention for one reason or another. Some wanted him because of his impending title. Some wanted him because of his good looks. A few more wanted him because of his notorious reputation with the ladies. Some wanted him because of his cultured ways. Others wanted to get on the good side of one of his many, powerful relatives. But the vast majority wanted him because he was filthy, stinking rich.

It therefore made sense that he picked the only woman in the world who didn't want him for any of the above reasons.

If only she was like the others. If only she chased him for all the wrong reasons. But she didn't chase him at all. She had vacated the field.

She didn't want him at all. The look in her eyes this morning had told him that as clear as words.

She wanted nothing to do with him.

Not that he could really blame her. Regardless of what people thought he was not a prime catch. He was not the kind of man mothers hoped their daughters would bring home. Oh yeah, he looked good on paper, but he had spent too many mornings looking into soulless eyes to not know the truth.

He was a walking, living breathing corpse.

But somehow Sinclair, with her words, her gentle touch, her sweet loving ways had resurrected him.

And as much as he would have liked to keep her, he knew he couldn't. She wouldn't survive the marriage. His inability to love would slowly kill every living, breathing piece of her. She, too, would become a corpse.

His gut clenched as a vision of Sinclair's face in the throes of ecstasy drifted in his mind. He already missed her. He glanced down at this watch. He hadn't been away from her for more than forty-five minutes and he missed her.

He had it bad.

And even though last night had been the most mind blowing night of his life, he had regrets. He wasn't sure if he regretted seeing, or if he regretted leaving her. Probably both.

Last night had not turned out the way he wanted. He had planned to ask Sinclair to marry him. That had not happened. He had instead spent the night fucking her senseless. Making love was not the right euphemism to describe what had occurred between them. He had been ruthless in his need to prove that he could make her feel emotions that others could never provoke.

And even though last night had not been right. It hadn't been wrong. He couldn't say that he actually regretted what had happened. It just wasn't what he had planned. It had changed things.

He was perceptive enough to understand that being with her one night, he had turned Sinclair's life upside down. The weeks they had spent apart had allowed her to distance herself. Last night had changed that. He had felt it in her touch.

Chapter Thirty-Nine LUNCHEON WITH THE ENEMY

She was crazy to be here.

She hadn't told anyone what she planning because she knew what they all would say. She was crazy to be there.

It was not only foolish, it was dangerous. The woman she was meeting had no reason to trust her. She was more likely going to hurt her. And still she waited.

She would be waiting many more minutes, she thought, as she darted a quick glance at the watch on her thin wrist. She was forty minutes early.

She was paranoid about being late. She hadn't slept a wink because thoughts of arriving five seconds too late kept popping into her brain. This meeting was too important for her to mess up.

The first indication she got that things were not going to go as planned came when she stepped out of the cab and was swiped by another bright yellow twinkie vehicle. As it passed her it splashed a thick brown liquid on her feet. She stared down at her lovely feet with their new pedicure and green silk heels wondering how she was going to fix her ghastly looking feet. She couldn't walk into the restaurant looking as she did.

She had to put her best foot forward, literally and figuratively. She could not walk in there looking like she had walked all the way over here. Wry amusement lit her eyes. Her feet looked like they belonged to Bigfoot's cousin.

Her long anticipated night of reconciliation flashed before her eyes. It was not going to happen. This was definitely not a good sign, she thought, as she shook off what she hoped was just mud. Her delicate nose sniffed the air. The gook that marred her shoes smelled suspiciously like something that she would expect in a bathroom.

She walked through the building's gilded doors and turned left. Ten minutes and a pound of toilet paper later she turned right and entered a candle lit waiting room. The gold foil lettering on the glass door announced that visitors were about to enter culinary paradise. Reynaldo's Reverie was a contemporary palace of food.

Pungent air thick with the scent of marinates, creamy sauces, and decadent desserts wafted up her nose as she entered the waiting area. Even if everything else went wrong she knew that dinner would be perfect. Every meal at Reynaldo's was an eye opening experience.

His smile was warm and honest. As he kissed each of her cheeks she got a whiff of clean masculinity. He was, if nothing, a classic man.

He reminded her of a beautifully crafted china doll. There was something about Jean Luc's pristine white skin that made her think of a carefully crafted angel. And at that moment there was a slight tint of red coloring his cheeks. He was happy to see her.

When she had made her reservation, she had let it slip that she might not show for the meeting. His smile was warm and assuring. I can do this she thought as she took his outstretched hand. Her cheeks burned at the sign of her obvious discomfort. Her hands shook as the maitre de led her to her table.

As she took her seat she blew him a kiss. His smile was indulgent. He was, of course, like all good men, gay and totally unavailable. He had quickly become her friend over the few weeks she had been in residence.

A quick glance at her watch told her that she had twenty five minutes. She shifted in her seat trying to figure out what to do to bide her time.

Get drunk, her mind screamed, and even though she knew it was probably the worst idea she had in a long time, she found herself ordering the best bottle of red wine in the house.

Long moments later and after half the bottle, frightened eyes looked up and darted a quick look around the room. The woman was coming down the aisle. Her classic platform shoes clicked as she glided down the hall.

She could feel the tension in the air the minute the other woman sat down.

She too did not want to be there, but like her she felt compelled to show up.

She was well dressed. Her couture outfit was a perfect match for the upscale restaurant.

She was cool and poised.

This was not going to be an easy going meeting.

"What do you want, Imogen?" she asked. Her voice was all ice and contempt. The warm smile on Imogen's face froze solid. She could barely keep her teeth from gnashing in frustration.

Sinclair pretended not to notice the cooling atmosphere. She was in no mood to play the role of the fool. She had not enjoyed the subtle threat that had underlaid the woman's words when she had requested her presence tonight. The note Sinclair had found in her mailbox that morning had been cryptic and frightening. She had complied, arriving promptly, despite the fact that both Maxine and Helena had called her a fool to meet with Imogen so soon after spending the night with Jackson.

There could only be one thing that the other woman wanted, and she was not in the mood to get into a brawl regarding that disastrous night. Jackson never should have cheated on his fiancé with her. He never should have shown up at her place. Then again, if he hadn't she would be a rape victim.

When there's a silver lining, don't complain about the cloud.

Funny how her grandmother's words kept getting her through this tough time dealing with the many issues that kept complicating her already complex life.

For the first time in many days Sinclair smiled. The woman across from her immediately relaxed.

"I know you're wondering why I asked you to meet me here," Imogen said and was surprised by the fact that her voice did not waver. She actually sounded in control of the situation. At the sight of Sinclair's wry smile Imogen jerked. "You did mention that already," she said before a blush stained her cheeks.

"I wanted you to talk to you about Jackson," she said.

Even though Sinclair hadn't expected anything else she still felt her heart jump at the sound of his name rolling off her tongue. For reasons she didn't want to explore it did not feel

right hearing her say his name.

"I wanted to say thank you."

Sinclair smiled, shook her head, and waited for the real speech, sure she had imagined the statement. When Imogen continued staring back at her without any indication that she was going to continue speaking, reality hit Sinclair in the face. She had heard her right. Imogen had said all that she wanted to say.

"Tell me you're kidding," Sinclair said on a gasp.

"Nope. Not at all," she said before her lips broke into a mischievous smile that was at the same time an embodiment of contentment.

"What the hell do you mean, not at all? Where the hell in etiquette books does it say that one must apologize to the other woman before the wedding?"

Imogen's face scrunched up in confusion. Several seconds later her face lit with a megawatt smile. "You are ingenious," she said before letting forth a surprisingly joyful laugh.

Sinclair felt tiny pricks of uneasy travel down her spine. She darted a quick glance at the room around her. She was surrounded by the rich and cultured. Reynaldo's was located in downtown Baltimore in the midst of the designer section. Only the best dined there. And although the best paid acute attention to those around them, they weren't looking at the table she shared with Imogen, which meant that when Imogen went berserk and killed her, they would get to her too late to perform CPR.

At the panicked look on Sinclair's face Imogen started to giggle. She took a deep breath, and forced air into her lungs.

"I'm not crazy, just realistic."

"Uh huh," Sinclair said as she scooted her chair back a few inches. Even though it didn't seem like much in close quarters an inch or two was plenty. It could mean the difference between life, death, or maimed.

It was mid day. The sun was out and its rays shown down brightly. It was a beautiful day in Baltimore. Sinclair fleetingly wondered when the skies were going to open and allow the torrential rains to pour down on her. Hell, when it rains, it pours and at this rate it was going to pour for real.

Out of the corner of her eyes she caught sight of a cloud. It reminded her of a grandiose marshmallow. In it she saw the face of a smiling bird.

Maybe today will not be so bad.

She shifted in her seat before speaking. This was definitely an uncomfortable topic. "I'm not sure what you think I did, regarding Jackson, but don't feel obligated to thank me."

"I do have to thank you. You keep Jackson happy, and I know what that means."

"Because you have someone who makes you happy."

"Yes." The word was heavy with acceptance.

"So why don't you marry him."

"I have my obligations."

"Obligations" Sinclair screamed. When she realized she was yelling she hissed the word across the table. "Obligations?"

"Are you ready to order." The waiter seemed to appear beside the table from out of nowhere. Once the waiter took their orders and walked away Imogen turned to Sinclair and clasped the hand atop the table in between hers.

Her hands were warm to the touch and her eyes were insistent.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for loving him."

“What makes you think I love him?”

Her smile was warm and indulgent. It was like she was placating an insolent child, one who did not want to acknowledge that her wrong had been right. She wanted to be wrong.

“Fine,” Sinclair said as she pulled her hand from between Imogen’s. At least she attempted to retract her palm. Imogen was holding onto it like it was a lifesaver.

“I know you love him. There’s no point in denying it.”

“Uh huh.”

“Thank you.”

“Number one could you stop saying that. Number two why are you saying that.”

“Maybe. That’s the best I can do for the first one. The second, I say because it’s true. I’m thankful for what your love has done. It’s made him a better person. He understands ... that he is worth something.”

Damn. Her eyes were getting watery and her chest was filled with a warm tingling feeling that felt suspiciously like love tinged with appreciation. The Bitch understood. And suddenly it didn’t seem right to call her The Bitch.

“But that’s not what I asked you here to tell you.”

Sinclair felt like ice cold water had been dashed on her back. She was back to good old Bitch.

“I want you and I to get along. I feel that would be best for Jackson. I want us to be friends.”

“Uh huh.” It was the best her mind could come up with at the moment. This wasn’t exactly the conversation she had been practicing for before she left for this meeting.

“You mean something to him, you’re someone special. You love him, and although he won’t admit it, you’re probably the only person in this world that has actually shown him what true love is. His family has always placed stipulations on their affection. ‘If you do this, then I’ll love you’ has become a way of life for him. You’ve shown both him and I that love doesn’t come with rules and requirements. It just is. It doesn’t bind you. It liberates you. It understands that sometime love is not enough.”

Salty streams ran down Sinclair’s milk chocolate skin as she spoke. “That’s why you’re here isn’t it? To tell me that you understand that my love is not enough. You just want me to know that you appreciate the fact that I actually love that bastard for what he isn’t, and despite the things he is. Well you can take your appreciation, your thank you, and shove it up your ass. I don’t need your pity.”

“Sinclair.”

The single softly spoken word stopped her attempt at retreat.

“I don’t pity you. I admire you. You have the strength to love foolishly. Not many women are willing to take the chance on love. And even though you don’t want to admit it, you hit the lottery. You found a man who loves you.”

“He’s never once said the L word,” she said with a bitter laugh. She would have remembered such an occurrence.

“Do you really have to hear the word before you believe that’s how he feels.”

Sinclair suddenly found that she could not keep eye contact with Imogen, her eyes knew too much, and so she pretended to be absorbed with the gorgeous crocheted cloth napkins the restaurant provided. Five seconds later she couldn’t remember if it had been made from cotton or paper.

“I understand. I am ,after all, a woman. They say actions speak louder than words, but

there is nothing quite like having one's actions verified by words."

When Sinclair looked up she saw that Imogen wore a shy smile of understanding. She was thinking of somewhere else, someone else, and Sinclair didn't need her female intuition to know that she was thinking of someone very special and when that person had told her she was loved.

Suddenly Imogen blinked and the emotion in her eyes was gone. She was back and ready for business.

"I want us to be friends."

"Look you seem like a really nice girl, but don't you think that would be awkward to say the least."

"No," she said before her lips spread into a mischievous smile. "I haven't even asked you the truly awkward question."

Sinclair felt the little trembles of unease erupt into an earthquake of discomfort. She was not going to get out of this meeting unscathed.

Chapter Forty THE FASHIONABLY UNDERFED

Sinclair felt sick to her stomach and the screaming coming from the other end of the phone wasn't exactly helping the pounding tension going on in her head. Any second now she was going to hurl and something told her morning sickness wasn't entirely the one to blame.

"Excuse me? Please tell me I heard you wrong," she said. Her voice was a shrill scream that seemed to echo against the walls. The words were even more terrifying the second time

around.

"No," Sinclair said. The word was a pitiful whisper. She couldn't seem to make her voice hard and strong. It didn't feel the conviction her mind did.

"No? What the hell do you mean no? And so calmly as if you haven't lost your fucking mind."

Calmly, Sinclair thought before the rest of her statement sunk in. "I haven't lost my mind."

"NO! So explain to me why you're going to his wedding ... as a friend of the bride's. Are you suicidal?"

"No."

"No? Is that all you have to say. Is that all you're going to say. No. Are you fucking crazy? No. Do you like getting your heart stepped on? No. Are you a masochist? No."

"No. You just won't let me get another word in."

Sinclair could feel the other woman seething on the opposite end of the line. She had opted to tell her the 'good' news over the phone knowing what her reaction would be. Maxine when angry was at best volatile. And right now she was not at her best.

"Fine speak now, I'm listening. Say whatever you have to say and when you're done I'm going to tell you again. You have lost your freaking mind."

"Thanks for the support."

"I am giving you my support. All I've got is support. You're the one I care about. I could not give a flying fuck about Jackson and Imogen."

After a few seconds and several deep breaths, she spoke. "Ok explain. Give it to me straight up, no chaser."

"She invited me to lunch."

"And you went."

"Yes, it was at Reynaldo's. I couldn't exactly pass that up. Do you know how long I've been trying save up enough to afford a meal there? Just because I'm a famous author doesn't mean I can spend money like its water."

Both Maxine and Sinclair were surprised at the giggle that escaped from her lips. Maxine could understand why Sinclair had met with Imogen. Nobody passed on Reynaldo's, even if the devil himself invited you.

"Honestly I wasn't planning on saying yes. Hell, I actually thought I said no until she said thanks and gave me a time."

"I thought you said there was a note."

"There was. I had to call and give her an honest answer."

"And that's when you accidentally said yes."

"Yes."

"And then what?"

"We started talking. I mean honestly talking about everything that has happened to the both of us."

"Uh huh."

"Get this, she's in love with a guy named Bobby. She doesn't want to marry Jackson, but she has to. Something about obligations and things owed."

"Uh huh."

"Max, she actually sounded scared for a second there. As if she didn't exactly have a choice because the other choice wasn't really a choice."

“Uh huh.”

“I mean it.”

“Sweetheart don’t you think you’re overreacting. You’re life is beginning to look like”

“Don’t say it. I know it. And I don’t like it.”

“But it’s true.”

“She said she’s sorry and thank you.”

“That never happens in the movies. She’s supposed to be the wicked witch. The wicked witch does not apologize. What the hell is going on here?” Maxine yelled.

“Told you this was different. This is real life.”

“Huh.”

“And then we both went out and got drunk.”

“Both of you?”

“No. You know I can’t drink. She got drunk, but that was after we went to dinner and dancing.”

“So you went to lunch, dinner, and dancing.”

“Yeah.”

“And then you went out and she got drunk.”

“Yeah.”

“I think I’m jealous.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I think I’m jealous. You spent the whole damn day with the wicked witch, and you can barely make time for me your best friend.”

“Maxine”

“Between the time you spend with wonder boy, crying over wonder boy, and having clandestine meetings with his fiancé, its amazing that you even have time to speak to me.”

“Maxine!”

“Forget it. We don’t have time for that now.”

“We don’t?”

“No, we don’t. We need to figure out what the hell is going on here,” she said on a shrill scream.

“Uh huh.”

“Don’t you dare use my word against me. I’m the only one uh huh-ing anybody here.”

“Fine.”

“Damn right I’m fine. I’m right.”

“And then we came back here and passed out on my couch.”

“What?” Maxine’s voice had been rising in octaves the whole conversation, and apparently Sinclair’s statement had broke the camel’s back, because she suddenly hit a Mariah note with that singular word.

And at that precise moment the doorbell rang. “Of course. Of bloody course,” Sinclair mumbled as she headed for the door.

“What the hell is going on over there? Thought I heard something.”

“You did hear something. Someone is at my door.”

“Who the hell is at your fucking door. We are having a very important conversation here. Who thinks they have the right to interrupt?”

Sinclair threw the door open with angry twist of her wrist. Her conversation with Maxine

had heated her blood. She was not in the mood to deal with another twist of fate. The last couple of weeks had been harrowing enough.

“Hello, my dear. I’m Mrs. Madeline Thompson Phillips. Jackson’s Mother.”

“What?” Maxine screamed. Sinclair had forgotten about Maxine the minute she had opened the door and seen that an older, cooler version of Imogen was on the other side of her door. She had totally forgotten that Maxine was on speaker phone and therefore hearing every word Mrs. Phillips had said. That was until Maxine’s shrill scream of disbelief resonated through the air.

“And I apparently think I have the right to interrupt.”

Sinclair took a cautious step back unable to believe her eyes. Things were definitely not looking up for her.

“Close your mouth Sinclair. You’re not trying to catch flies or are you?”

It was the sound of the amusement and understanding in her voice that had Sinclair snapping her mouth closed. There was just enough of a hint of a mother, that she was reminded of her grandmother. She could easily picture her grandmother saying the very same words to her.

“I’m not sure what to say or do. I’m not exactly prepared for this meeting,” Sinclair said as she took a step back, allowing the other woman to enter her lovely abode.

“You could start by asking what the hell she is doing there?” Maxine’s voice vibrated with shocking intensity.

“Maxine I’ll call you back,” Sinclair said hastily before disconnecting the line.

“She’s right you know. You should start by asking me what the hell I’m doing standing here in your foyer like I have a right to be here.”

“Ok. What are you doing here in my apartment?”

“Because I have a right to be here.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh you heard me. You just don’t believe I had the audacity to say what I did, but I do. I want to know who exactly is the woman that has my son’s emotions tangled up in a knot.”

“In a knot,” Sinclair mumbled to herself. Jackson’s emotions were in a knot because of little old me.

“Yes,” Madeline said. “It’s amazing isn’t it?” Her voice was full of bitter amusement. She couldn’t believe that her son had fallen for the woman before her.

Sinclair stood in the foyer with her one hand against her open front door and stared at Madeline in shock. She hadn’t missed the caustic amusement in her voice.

“You’re supposed to offer me a seat, Sinclair,” she said before seating herself on Sinclair’s plush white sofa.

“I’m sorry I’m not as hospitable as you would like. You could always come back when hell freezes over. I’m sure I’ll be ready and willing to cater to your every comfort then.”

Madeline’s smile in response to Sinclair’s scorching remark was an ice cold smile. The depth of the smile never reached her cool sea green eyes.

Sinclair felt little tingles of unease run down her spine at the sight of Madeline’s frigid smile. There was something about it that left her feeling distinctly uncomfortable. It wasn’t nearly as obvious as a nasty remark, and yet it cut just as deep. The woman before her was disgusted by her.

“Can I help you?” Sinclair asked. Her tone left nothing to the imagination. She was very displeased by the fact that Jackson’s mother had taken it upon her self to insult her in person.

“You know I never would have picked you as his type,” she said before crossing her

shapely legs and reclining into the deep sofa.

"People change."

"Do they?" she asked. Her words were soft, and yet so hard to ignore. Sinclair ignored the feeling that Madeline would know whether or not Jackson had changed. Had Jackson left 'Fuck and Chuck' behind?

"He's free to do whatever he wants, be with whoever he wants to be with?"

"Is he?"

"Yes."

"And he's made his choice, sweetheart."

Sinclair wasn't sure if the statement was meant to hurt her or give her hope. Jackson hadn't exactly told her he didn't want to be with her. He had for the most part played the part of a man who desperately wanted to get back with her, but then again she hadn't seen him in days.

"Yes, he's made his choice," she said unsure how the thick words got past her dry throat.

"It's definitely a good thing that he's not marrying you."

"Excuse me?"

"You've got way too much fire to be his wife."

"Uh huh," Sinclair said unable to figure out what else to say. She couldn't think of a single intelligent come back. The lady in blue had her dumbfounded.

"You've definitely got a back bone. It would be impossible for me to control you. You're way too strong of a person."

"Thank you ... I think."

"You're welcome and yes it is a compliment, but you're strength would make you a horrible wife for Jackson as far I'm concerned."

"Good thing he's not marrying me," Sinclair said with a deceptive shrug. Her insides were burning with the pain Madeline's callous words kept inflicting.

"Yes, it's a damn good thing he's not marrying you, not that he could really."

Stupidity made her ask the question, "Why couldn't he?"

"Because this mother knows best."

Sinclair stared at the woman before her trying to comprehend what her statement actually meant. Madeline simply smiled at Sinclair's dumbfounded expression. She wasn't ready to show her hand.

"You know you would never make a good duchess."

"I consider that a compliment."

"Do you?"

"Yes I do. From what I've heard of nobility they are callous, absurd, rude, crude, conceited and cruel. They only care about themselves. They even consider their children obstacles in their path of life."

"They're not all like that. Only the truly successful ones," Madeline said. There was a smile in her words.

"Then I wouldn't make a very good duchess."

"No, I suppose not."

"You'd be so uncomfortable around the family. Jackson's grandmother for instance could never learn to accept you."

"No?"

"Why of course not. You're fat and black."

"Fat!" Sinclair screamed outraged. "I am not fat. Just because I understand that food is

not an enemy does not mean I'm fat. I am healthy."

"Uh huh," Madeline said. She obviously did not believe a word Sinclair had said.

"And what the hell was that crack about me being black?"

"Have you ever heard of a black duchess?"

"No, but"

"See," Madeline said as if the discussion was over.

"That doesn't mean there can't be a duchess of African descent. She'd probably teach you snobby, stuck in the mud bitches a few things."

"Like how to back that thang up."

"You really are one hell of a bitch and racist."

"You know Sinclair if it wasn't for this whole situation, I would very much like to get to know you."

"Huh," Sinclair said before darting a quick glance around the room. Maybe it was in the British accent. Apparently both Madeline and Imogen were losing their minds and she needed an escape plan just in case Madeline turned on her.

"Even if your race wasn't a problem, there is still the fact that you're fat."

"Just because I have no desire to be part of the fashionably underfed, it doesn't mean that I am fat. I am a full figured woman and ... fuck this, I don't have to explain myself to you."

"And then there's that temper of yours." Madeline continued as if Sinclair hadn't spoken a single word.

"What temper?" Sinclair yelled.

"And then there's the fact that you don't take orders very well."

Defensively, Sinclair crossed her arms across her chest and prepared to wait Mrs. Phillips out. She quickly realized that it was her best bet to keep her mouth closed. Madeline wasn't listening to a word she was saying. The woman was in a world of her own.

"Imogen would be such a better daughter in law. She does whatever I say. That's the reason I chose her to be his bride."

Sinclair's head snapped around at that. Even as she voiced the question she prayed that she had misheard Madeline. "You asked Imogen to marry Jackson?"

"Yes, and for a good reason. Unlike you she would provide me with an open doorway to my son. She wouldn't stand in my way. She does any and everything I ask of her. The woman has no backbone where I am concerned. Unlike you she would be no competition.

"You want your son's wife to be a doormat."

Madeline shrugged one sculpted shoulder as she uttered the words, "It works for me."

"Don't you care that Imogen doesn't love him?"

"Love is a fleeting emotion. One moment its there, the next you're wondering how could everything have gone so wrong."

Sinclair ignored the stark emotion that scattered across the woman's face. Madeline had loved and lost, and now she was bitter enough to make her son pay for her mistakes.

"I hate to be rude, but you are one heartless bitch. You don't even love your son. He's nothing more than a commodity to you."

"That's a goddamn lie. To his father he was worse than a commodity, he was a pawn."

Sinclair simply arched an eyebrow in disbelief.

"What would you have me do? Leave now when this is my only chance to get to know my son. Before this will surfaced I couldn't even get him to speak to me, now he confides in me. You expect me to walk away from that. Do you really expect me to let you take my place?"

“You don’t have to lose your son. You just need to help him find a wife that actually loves him, him, not his money.”

Suddenly the angry light in Madeline’s eyes was gone.

“Ah, but he’s already found a woman who loves him.” Sinclair felt like the other woman had stabbed a knife in her heart, twisted it, and then threw a grenade in the hole it made. Her words hurt that much.

“Well why doesn’t he marry her instead?”

“Seems my son has performance anxiety. He can’t seem to ask her.”

“Why don’t you ask her? You asked Imogen.”

“With Imogen it was more a negotiation than a proposal. No this woman deserves a proposal. Plus there’s the issue of my approval.”

“Excuse me.”

“Jackson will lose everything if I don’t approve of his bride. I get final say.”

“Excuse me?”

“The will stipulates that unless I approve he loses everything. Like I said, I have final say.”

“And you don’t approve of this other woman.”

“No. You would never do as a duchess.”

“Uh huh.” It was all Sinclair could think of saying. Her mind was rolling with the thought that Jackson’s bride had to have an official stamp from his mother. Standing before her was every Mother-in-Law nightmare come true. Suddenly Sinclair didn’t care about this woman or Jackson. She just wanted this woman, Madeline, Jackson’s mother, gone.

“You’ve stated your business. I’m not good enough for your son. All three of us know it. You got your point across, so please feel free to leave.”

“You’re wrong, I have yet to say all I came to say. You have to speak to him, if for no other reason than for him to say goodbye.”

“Thought you’d be asking me to keep my fat, black ass as far away as possible,” Sinclair said. Her voice was thick with pain and sarcasm.

“He needs to hear you say goodbye. Jackson needs to move on with his life.”

“I can’t and I won’t.”

“You need to. You both need to move on with your lives.”

Silence greeted her statement. As far as Sinclair was concerned she had already said her goodbyes. There was nothing more she wanted to say to Jackson.

“Would you be so cruel as to deny a man on his way to the guillotine his last request? How can you say you love him and then do this?”

“I never once said I loved him.”

The smile Madeline gave Sinclair was so warm, so full of honest heartfelt emotion that she blinked in confusion. The sight was so shocking in light of the cold aloofness that had permeated every one of the woman’s actions. And just when Sinclair began to wonder if she was hallucinating the smile got brighter, warmer and then Madeline opened her mouth and uttered the words, “Your eyes, love, they say it all.”

Chapter Forty-One LAST REQUESTS

Her ice cream was melting. She had apparently been holding it for too long. The combination of the warm Baltimore spring and her body heat was melting the frigid confection. She could feel the cool thick liquid sliding down her heated skin. It was making her sticky and uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as his presence.

“Hi,” he said before flashing her that devastatingly devilish smile of his.

She wondered how long she had been standing there wondering how fucked up her luck was. It had to have been a few moments. Last time she checked her ice-cream hadn’t even been mildly defrosted and now it was chocolate chip, triple fudge, ice cream soup. He couldn’t be there. He couldn’t be standing right before her eyes as if this meeting was a simple chance occurrence.

“Hi,” she said, coughing out the simple word. Her mind was stuttering and all she could come up with was, “What are you doing here?”

“Eggs,” he said as he held up the dozen and a half carton. “I woke up this morning craving omelets. Figured I might as well stock up while I’m at it.”

“Omelets?”

“Yup. I Had to get eggs and milk.”

“Milk?”

“Yup,” he said as he held up the half gallon carton.

She stared at it dumbfounded. There was no way this was happening.

If only she’d gone to the major grocery instead of the corner store. The thought kept running through her head. If only she’d gone to the grocery store, she wouldn’t be standing here pretending she wasn’t dying inside.

“You’ve saved me a trip,” he said before his mouth broke into a teasing smile.

“I have.”

“I was going to stop by your place after brunch.”

She simply stared at him. After a few moments she realized he was staring right back at

her waiting for her reaction.

“Why?”

“Because we have to talk. I know Sinclair.”

He knew. It was the only thought that ran through her head. It was all her traumatized mind could make out. He knew.

And he wanted to talk to her about it.

It was the reason why they were both standing inside her living room. Somehow her mind had managed to conjure up the words to invite him to cook his breakfast in her kitchen.

Maybe her mind was smarter than the rest of her. It had figured it was best to rip the bandage right off. Her heart on the other hand wanted to put on another bandage on top of the one that was currently there. There was no point in opening the wound, even if it was to put on a disinfectant.

Her heart beat an angry staccato rhythm in her chest. She was afraid he was going to ask her to marry him. She was also afraid he was going to tell her that her pregnancy changes nothing. Either way in the end she would be brokenhearted. Either ending left her with the acute knowledge that he didn't want her. He would either be marrying her because she was pregnant or worse telling her that even a child couldn't get him to commit to her.

“What do you want on yours?” he said as he walked to her kitchen. He obviously knew his way around her apartment. She winced when she remembered why.

“Cheese, tomatoes, and jalapeños.”

“Jalapeños?” he said as he stuck his head around the nook that separated the kitchen from the living room. His grin was hot and naughty and his voice was gruff, reminding her of the last time he had been in her apartment. “I like a girl who likes it spicy.”

“I'll bet you do,” she mumbled under her breath. Apparently she didn't mumble the words low enough. He heard her.

“You know I do,” he called from the kitchen.

She heard him break eggs and then he was chopping things. Probably the tomatoes and jalapeños. Might as well get comfortable, she thought, as she settled herself in her plush cream couch. The same couch that had given her nightmares last weekend. She had found herself waking up late one night to scrub the couch clean. She had woken from a dream where her Nana asked her what exactly was the stain on the arm of the couch. The same arm where Jackson had fucked her senseless.

“It doesn't look like a food stain. Plus, I know you don't usually eat in your living room.”

The elderly woman was bending over to sniff the fabric when Sinclair woke up in a cold sweat. She had used every cleaning fluid and detergent she could find to scrub the whole couch sparkling clean.

“Why did you go,” he said, his voice rising to be heard over the humming of the gas stove.

“I wasn't planning on doing anything. I just went to check my choices.”

“Your choices?”

“Yes, my choices. I”

“Just couldn't leave well enough alone. You know I damn near had a heart attack when I found out you went to see her.”

“You did.”

“Yes I did. You had no business going to see Imogen. The girl is dangerous.”

Imogen. He was talking about Imogen. He was angry that she had gone to see his fiancé. He didn't know.

He didn't know.

"She is your fiancé."

"And you had no reason to talk to her."

"She wanted to talk to me. What was I supposed to do?"

"Ignore her."

"Why?"

"Why!" he yelled over the sizzling of the omelet cooking.

"Yes, why? I'm an adult. I'm free to do what I want, and what I wanted was to talk to Imogen."

"You're not free to talk to Imogen," he said as he walked out of the kitchen. He was carrying two steaming plates. Her omelet smelled delicious.

"I'm not your woman. You can't tell me what to do," she said before padding barefoot into the kitchen to get two forks. He had obviously been very occupied when he was cooking. Plus she needed her hot sauce.

"I don't want you seeing her again," he said when she re-entered the living room.

She waited until she was seated before she responded. She wanted to see his face when she said what she had to tell him.

"You can not tell me what to you. I don't belong to you. You don't belong to me. You have no rights over me. I'm my own woman."

His smile was indulgent. "You belong to me more than you want to acknowledge. That's the only thing I'm hearing right now."

"Uh huh."

"See you know I'm right. That's why you're not saying anything."

"Wrong. I know you're wrong that's why I'm not saying anything. There's nothing to say."

"Liar."

The smile she gave him before turning her head away was shy. They both knew the truth. Only he was willing to admit it. Even though the truth burnt like hell. She belonged to, but she would never be his.

"I missed you," he said right before she forked a sizzling piece of cheesy omelet in her mouth. She immediately started coughing. The food had apparently gone down the wrong pipe.

"What?" she said after she had coughed out the food lodged in her throat.

"I missed you. I know it's only been two weeks, but I missed you. I missed you like I've never missed anyone before. And it just makes me realize"

"What?"

"It makes me realize just how much I'm going to miss you when I'm married."

"Oh," she said. She suddenly couldn't breathe. The air lodged in her throat was thick and suffocating. Unconsciously she stood and walked away. She knew that she needed to not only emotionally, but physically distance herself from Jackson.

"Sinclair, don't you walk away. Don't shut down on what we have."

"Don't you dare. Don't you dare do this to me. Not again."

"Don't do this to you? Don't you think I'm suffering too. You're not the only one here in pain."

"But it was your choice. It was your choice damn it. Not mine," she yelled at him.

"A choice means you have options. I didn't have any options."

"Yes, you did. You just didn't want to take the chance"

"What chance? What chance did I have? None. And that's the reality we both have to live with."

"Liar," she screamed at him, suddenly uncaring if it made her look emotional. The truth was she was emotional. Emotions seemed to be all she had lately.

"I couldn't risk losing my inheritance. It isn't mine to lose."

"It's all about the money."

"Don't you dare," He said as stood from the sofa. "You know damn well it's not about money. It's about my responsibility to my family."

"No," she sobbed as she shook her head in denial. "You could have chosen another woman, someone you cared about."

"No, I couldn't," he said as he wrapped his arms around her. "The only woman in the world I care about my mother would never have approved of, and if she doesn't approve I lose everything."

He was right and that was what hurt the most. His mother had told her right to her face that she wasn't good enough for her son. She wasn't the kind of woman his mother would ever approve of.

"It'll be ok, Sunshine. I promise. Somehow I will make it ok," he said as he placed butterfly kisses against her closed eyelids. He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, even kissed the path of her tears. "I promise," he said with every kiss.

"How?" she said on a giggle. The spot beneath her jawbone tickled when he pressed his lips against the sensitive skin.

"I don't know, but I'll figure out a way."

"Promise?"

"Look at me Sunshine." When her wide midnight eyes were staring back into his green ones he continued to speak. "I promise you we will both be ok. Somehow I will make it happen."

"I love you."

The only indication that he heard was the tightening of the grip that held her shoulders. He was staring at her trying to figure out if his mind was playing a cruel joke on him. In his need, had he conjured up the words in his starved mind?

She could tell by his heavy breathing that he was thinking very hard.

He's probably wondering if you lost your mind. The man is engaged and the day before his wedding you decide to tell him you love him. Why don't you just tag on "I'm pregnant" to the bomb delivery.

"Did I hear you right?" he whispered as though he was afraid of her answer and suddenly she was afraid to tell him the truth. He must have seen the fear on her face because he started shaking her.

"Say it again. Please say it again." His voice was rough and thick with emotion. There was doubt in her mind that he needed to hear it more than she needed to say it.

"I love you. I love you. I love you more than I have a right to love you."

"You have every right sweetheart," he said as he placed kisses over her face, against her lips.

"No, I don't," she said before he crushed her lips in a hot, wet kiss.

Against her lips he whispered, "Yes, you do, because I love you too. I don't know how it happened, but it's true. I love you," he said before barking a laugh. "It's so true."

Suddenly his shoulders slumped and he pulled away from her.

"You've made me the happiest and saddest man on the planet."

"What?"

"It just figures that I finally find the impossible, a woman who loves me for me and I can't marry her and am instead forced to marry a woman I haven't spoken to since I hit puberty."

"Remember somehow it'll all be ok. Remember you promised me."

"Yes I did," he said but his smile was weak. It was all good and well to tell her that all would be ok, but as far as he was concerned it was best to face reality. He wanted to be prepared when the bubble burst.

"I have no right to ask you this, but I'm here anyway begging and pleading. Tomorrow everything changes. Tomorrow I give up my life. I give up my freedom. It's my choice I know that, but it wasn't made happily. I haven't really smiled since I made the choice at least ... unless I'm with you. You make me happy. You make me feel like today is a day I can get through ... with you. And suddenly tomorrow is a day I can look forward to seeing because I know it's another chance to see you, be with you. But tomorrow ... I can't look forward to tomorrow because I know I won't be able to see you ... be with you.

"Tonight is the last night I will ever hold you, be with you, love you. I know you hate me. You have every right to hate me, but I'm standing here because I believe you don't hate me enough to deny us both this last chance. I know this means more to me than it does you ... but please don't let me go without some memories, something to hold onto when you're gone."

"You don't have to ask this of me. I love you."

"I love you too."

"Don't ever forget that. Don't let your father take that away."

"I won't sweetheart. I promise to always remember that."

Her mouth was very ripe and inviting. Her lips automatically softened beneath his firm lips, opening up beneath his determined kiss. His velvet tongue was hot and nimble as it slid between her lips to touch and tease the sweet cavern of her succulent mouth.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her plump body against his until they were sharing the same body heat, breathing the same, feeling one another's heartbeat.

"You taste so good," he said before seducing her lips to part beneath his. His smoky baritone was pitched just above a lion's growl. His lips were firm and demanding, coaxing into submission, daring her to resist his lips that ravished and plundered.

His hands coasted down her shoulders, over her chest to settle at her breasts. Through her thin clothing, the heat of his palm seared her sensitive skin. Beneath his palms her breasts felt heavy and firm. Their nipples were demanding his attention.

With two fingers from each hand he pinched and pulled her nipples into hard points. She gasped into his mouth and arched into his touch. His heated hands felt so good on her skin. Made her feel such delicious sensations that started in her breasts and tightened in her lower abdomen. She could feel her pussy walls clenching in anticipation. She was getting moist and ready.

Her small eager hands drifted down his body to settle on his lower abdomen. His cock immediately lunged for his zipper. Apparently the big boy wanted out and Sinclair didn't have the heart to deny him. With deft hands she unzipped his jeans and reached into his boxer briefs to caress his naked, heated flesh. Soft fingers wrapped around the base of his base of his shaft, tightened slightly before moving up in an enticing, leisurely stroke.

Quick hands grasped her blouse, pulled it over her head, and removed her bra. His hot, open lips were against her chest pushing her body back and down so that Sinclair had no choice

but to lie on the carpeted floor.

His lips were ardent, insistent, requiring absolute submission as they suckled and nibbled the full mounds of her breasts. Growls of pleasure sounded all around the room. They were coming from him, from her, from the need that coursed through both of them. He wasn't pleased until the flesh surrounding her nipples had crinkled and her nipples were swollen points of need.

Quickly he removed the remainder of her clothing so that she laid before him naked in all her dark beauty.

"My god you're gorgeous," he said as he palmed the warm flesh between her legs. He could feel the wet heat of her arousal.

He dipped one thick finger between the swollen lips of her pussy and smiled at her immediate response. Her back arched and her body bowed trying to drive his finger deeper.

"You don't need to tell me twice, Sunshine," he said against her right breast before wrapping his lips around the succulent mound. At the same time he thrust two fingers in the weeping mouth of her vagina while his thumb pressured her clitoris. Her body immediately exploded in a white hot burst of lust. Bright lights full of color exploded behind her closed lids. She was going up in flames and the slick feel of his tongue against her clitoris was bringing her back down.

She came awake at velvet heat of his tongue gliding against her swollen clit. Sinclair ground her pussy against his face desperate to ease the tingling, tightening sensation in her lower abdomen. He growled into her pussy and tongued her harder as his fingers fucked her deeper, harder.

"Oh god yes. That's it," she growled as she bucked her hips against his face.

The salty taste of her arousal was driving Jackson crazy and even though he wanted to keep on eating her pussy until the sun came up he knew she needed a release and so he wrapped his lips around the swollen head of her clitoris and sucked deep and hard.

The bud further blossomed and then jerked in his mouth. At the same moment Sinclair's beautiful full lips parted and let forth a scream that started in her soul as her body exploded into a million glittering pieces that all seemed to be on fire.

Once again he licked her back down to earth.

"No more," she mumbled. Her words were hoarse and thick with the lethargic lust coursing through her veins.

"Just one more time," he said as he fitted his cock to the mouth of her vagina. With one thrust he fitted himself to the hilt.

"God, you feel good," he said as he lifted her leg so that her body took him deeper. They groaned in unison at the full and complete feeling. "You feel so damn tight," he groaned into her ear before his nimble tongue caressed it. She knew. She could feel the tight walls of her pussy stroking him, widening to accept his width. He was stretching her to the brink.

"Oh my," she cried out as he pulled out. His thick cock slid against the sensitive walls of her vagina, caressing it into a reaction. It rippled and clenched around him setting off tidal waves of delicious heat coursing from her womb through her body only to settle back in her pussy.

"Damn," he groaned as he slid in to her wet heat. "Your naked pussy feels like heaven."

Her reaction was a throaty sigh. He made her feel like heaven, like she was special.

"You are special," he said before placing a kiss beneath her right ear. Apparently she had said the words out loud.

"So are you. So are you," she said before gasping into his opened mouth. He had thrust the rigid length of his erection into her with so much force it had knocked the air out of her

lungs. His lips captured her sighs of excitement as he increased the rhythm of his thrusts.

“Deeper,” she breathed against his lips before raising her other leg so that both were positioned against his shoulder. She was open and helpless to do anything but accept every lovely hard thrust of his pelvis into her open waiting body.

She was trembling and moaning, begging for release beneath his hot slick body. Jackson knew she was close. He could feel the walls of her pussy trembling around his cock, kissing it, begging it to give her exactly what she needed to go over the edge.

His movements were sure and steady as he rocked his hips against her weeping pussy, making sure that with every thrust he hit that upraised button on the inside of her pussy, making sure that with every thrust his pubic bone brushed her clitoris sending her body humming with unrestricted desire.

“Please,” she moaned begging him to let her go. She wanted to fly off to that place where completion was everything.

She watched his hair fly around his face as he shook his head in denial. “Not yet,” he said before thrusting back into her body.

“Bastard,” she groaned as she raked her fingers down the slick skin of his back.

“No, selfish,” he said before his face broke into a devilish smile. He wanted this moment to last as long as possible. Nothing had ever felt as good as Sinclair’s naked pussy wrapped around the thick, long length of his cock. Nothing.

He felt like an alchemist who had just figured out how to turn lead into gold. He had discovered something generations of men had searched long and hard for, something they would have gladly sold their soul to touch-- their perfect woman.

She groaned when he nudged her legs just a little so he could slide into her just a little deeper. He took his time entering her, drawing out the moment so he could savor it. She was hot, slick, and tighter than a fist. “Shit,” he groaned when he was fully seated inside of her. In this position she was taking more of him than she had ever taken before. All nine and a half inches of his cock were deep in her slick pussy.

“You are heaven,” he said before pulling out of her only to thrust right back in.

His balls tightened, drawing close to his body. He was getting ready to come. He could feel the tingling sensation at the bottom of his spine. She was making him lose his head.

“Ready Sunshine?” he whispered against her lips before sliding out of her.

Her eyes drifted open to look at him. “Damn,” he said before slamming back into her clenching pussy. He felt like a god. Quick slide out. The heady look of drugged lust on her face made him feel like he had one thing right in his life. He had loved her properly and he was about to up the game.

Her lips opened on a soundless gasp when he slammed back into her with the force of a hurricane. Long fingers gripped her hips and held her down and in place as his cock slid in and out of her pussy, penetrating and withdrawing at a delicious pace that left her writhing beneath.

The sounds of her throaty moans drove him on. She was getting ready to come. He could feel it in the rhythmic clenching of her pussy. But he needed more.

A quick glance down showed the ruddy base of his white cock sliding out of her chocolate pink pussy. He clenched his teeth at the desire the sight sent spiraling through his body. He had never really thought about their difference in colors. At least not in that way. They were beautiful together. His thick white cock plowing through her chocolate pussy was a sight to behold. Impulsively he slapped the firm cheeks of her ass.

It jiggled in reaction, but it was the reactionary gut-retching clenching of her pussy that

drove him over the edge. "Fuck," he groaned as he pistoned into her cunt spurting load after load of cum inside her naked pussy. Beneath him Sinclair convulsed, coming further apart with the force of each of his thrusts.

They were in her bed. That was Sinclair's first thought. The second was this is my last night. Tomorrow he was getting married. Tomorrow it would all end. Tomorrow she would watch his bride walk down the aisle to him and know that he would always be Imogen's husband. He would never again belong to her.

This was her last night. She would therefore make it a night to remember. She needed him for that. A quick jab and he was awake. "Evening, gorgeous." His voice was thick with sleep or was it arousal?

A quick glance down told her it was both. He was already semi-hard and she hadn't done or said a thing. She smiled into the night. He was in for a shock.

"I want you to be the first," she said. Her voice was thick too. But she knew there was no sleep in her eyes. Sinclair could feel herself getting wet. She was getting excited just thinking about what they were going to do, what he was going to do to her.

Thanks to the shards of moonlight that peeked through the blinds she could see his silvery smile in the dark as he remembered their first time. "I was your first." Blatant ownership shone on his face. He was more than pleased that he had been the man to pierce her hymen.

She shook her head no as she threw her leg over his hips, straddling him. He had misunderstood her. "I want you to be all of my firsts," she said.

She knew the exact moment he understood what she meant. His hands stopped suddenly on their course to fondle her breasts.

He stared into her midnight eyes wondering if he dared to take her up on her offer. He desperately wanted to be not only the first, but the only man who knew her in a carnal way, but he knew better. Just because someone offered you something, didn't mean you had the right to take it. And as much as he hated to admit it, she didn't belong to him. She couldn't when he wasn't free to give himself to her.

Sinclair could feel his answer in the air. He was going to say no and she didn't think she could survive such a rejection. Hoping to stave off his words she placed his hands on her breasts.

His vivid sea green eyes drifted down to them. They were large, milk chocolate, and beautiful.

"They are lovely," he said as he fondled them, pinching the nipples until they doubled in size.

"Absolutely breathtaking."

"Mmmm," she moaned as she threw her head back so that her breasts were lifted against the palms of his calloused hands.

"They taste good too," she whispered into the darkness.

"Mmmm chocolate, my favorite," he breathed on her breast before wrapping firm lips around the engorged tip.

This, this was something she would always remember, could never forget. The way her body felt when he suckled her tit like it would at any moment provide the life essence he craved was forever emblazoned in her mind.

"Touch me," she begged as she widened her stance giving him access to her weeping womb.

His long fingers immediately complied, stroking in and out of her pussy. Within seconds

she was coming around his two long, tanned fingers.

"I love you," she said as her emotions overflowed. Tears poured from her eyes, down her cheeks, to settle on her breasts.

His wet, hot tongue licked a path from her breasts to her cheeks. When he reached her face he placed wet kisses against her closed eyelids. He wanted no evidence of her tears.

"Are you sure?" he asked, even though the question hurt like hell to say, but she had to be sure. He had to be sure. He didn't want her waking up with regrets. He didn't want her to regret a single moment she spent with him.

She bent her head and brushed her lips against his. It was all the answer he needed.

"Come here Sunshine," he said, as he stood and walked away from the bed. She followed him until she realized where he was going.

She stood in the middle of the room and shook her head no. She was not willing to go there.

He simply arched an eyebrow at her. When she still didn't move, he spoke. "I want you to come here now Sinclair."

The gruff unbending sound of his voice did funny things to her abdomen, made her feel a little tingle down there. Sinclair found herself complying to his command.

Apparently she liked being told what to do.

She turned her head when she found herself staring into her full length dressing mirror. He stood behind her. "Look at yourself," he said as he tilted her head so that she had no choice but to do what he said.

"You're gorgeous, an absolute beauty."

"You're certifiable, you know," she said as she tried to move her head. His strong fingers denied her.

"If you're asking am I crazy about you? Yes, then I'm certifiable, but I know women, and you Sunshine are one incredible specimen of the fairer sex."

Her face broke into a wide smile. She was beautiful, at least in his eyes, and his eyes were the only ones that mattered.

"Thank you," she said.

"Nothing to thank me about," he said before taking a step forward so that they were touching, back to chest, thigh to thigh, skin to skin.

"You're the most incredible woman I've ever met," he said as he palmed her ass. The full globes tingled with his every touch. With every stroke of his fingers her body heated sending intense feelings coursing through her veins.

"I don't think I'll fit back here. At least not yet," he said as he spread the firm cheeks of her ass to reveal her rosette.

"I didn't mean there," she said before dipping her head in a shy movement.

His hands stilled on her hips. He looked into the mirror and caught her wide eyes.

"You've never given ...?" he asked.

Her ebony strands flew around her head as she shook her head no.

His smile was instant. "I never thought to ask you. I assumed you didn't like to ... I know that some girls don't."

"Get on your knees Sinclair," he said before turning away. She immediately complied and watched from her submissive position as he reached deep into her delicates drawer and pulled something out. Sinclair could tell it was small for it fit in the palm of his hand.

"Do you remember the night of the formal when we came back here?"

“Yes,” she said. The word was thick and heavy. It felt like cream coming off her tongue. “I brought you a gift that night, but neither of us were up to opening it.”

Unable to say anything she simply stared at his beautiful, naked body as it made its way over to her. His long muscled legs quickly ate up the room that separated them and before she knew it he was standing before her and she was staring straight at the ruddy head of his penis.

“I want you to use this,” he said as he opened his palm.

It took her a second to process what he was saying. She had been staring so hard at his cock wondering how it would taste she hadn’t really heard a word he said. His cock looked delicious.

“What?” she said as she accepted what was in his hand.

“Use it.”

“What is it,” she said before she opened her palm to reveal the metal instrument. Instant recognition slammed through her.

“It’s a bullet,” he said. She could hear the smile in his voice.

He was definitely going to enjoy this.

She felt distinct tendrils of unease sliding down her spine. It was one thing to use a vibrator when she was alone, it was one thing for him to know that she masturbated, it was another thing to use one he had purchased for her while he was watched. The whole concept was incredible intimate.

She started to shake her head in denial.

“You’re going to use it now, Sunshine.” His tone was deceptively soft.

Her nipples pebbled into hard peaks. Damn it she thought as she felt the walls of her vagina contracting at the harsh sound of his voice.

She immediately shifted her stance and spread the lips of her pussy. She was already wet. She could feel her arousal coating the walls of her vagina, sliding down her inner thighs, she was soaking herself. His domination and rough tone were turning her on.

She flicked the bullet on, placed it against the engorged head of her clitoris and shivered.

Jackson watched her, stroking his cock, and when he knew her body was humming with pleasure, ready to boil over, he brushed his cock against her closed lips. They immediately opened.

His eyes slammed shut and rolled into his head at the feel of her hot mouth on his cock. With a slight thrust of his hips he went deeper down her throat. He could feel her moans and groans vibrating along his cock. The bullet was working.

“Suck it baby. Suck my cock,” he gritted out as he buried both his hands in her hair and guided her, teaching her the rhythm that he liked the most.

Sinclair felt him grow larger as she licked and sucked at the firm flesh between her lips. Quickly she found her own rhythm, one that had him groaning and tightening his hands in her hair.

She watched him as he faced her. His expression was one of intense concentration. She needed him to come soon. She could feel the beginning of her orgasm. She was going to come any second now and she wanted him with her.

Sinclair pressed the bullet harder against her clit and with her free hand she fondled his balls. She followed them as they tightened and drew up, pressing closer to his body. Tentatively she squeezed the two sacks. Jackson immediately let forth a husky groan. She then ran her nail against the sensitive underside of the two sacks. He let forth a curse before jerking her head and immobilizing her so that he could fuck her mouth at his pace.

The feel of Jackson pistoning between her lips sent Sinclair over the edge. Her groan vibrated around his cock as she came against the bullet.

"Shit," he groaned before spurting his warm seed down her throat. She immediately swallowed enjoying the salty taste of his lust.

Long seconds later, when he got his senses back, he lifted her from her knees.

"Fuck. We should have done that from the beginning," he said before placing a wet open kiss against her lips. She thrust her tongue into his mouth to caress the inner walls of his mouth. His tongue darted out to caress hers and he could taste himself.

He tasted like salty joy.

One large, powerful forearm swept beneath her thighs lifting her into Jackson's arms. He deposited her on the bed and then stood before her.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She could see that this would be the last time he would ask. The need to bury himself inside her burned brightly in his green eyes.

"Yes," she said. The word was feather light, gliding on the air.

"Where is it?"

She pointed to her left side night stand.

He reached across the bed, pulled the top drawer open and pulled a small bottle out.

"On your stomach," he said before opening the small red bottle. Sinclair turned and laid on her stomach as requested. The position left her feeling uncomfortable and exposed. She gasped at the feel of his strong fingers on her hips. Deftly he lifted her as if she weighed nothing and positioned her so that her head was down and her ass was in the air and her thighs were spread. In that position she felt more naked, more exposed than she ever had before. In that position she was totally bare.

One warm finger pressed against the exposed rosette.

The sound of need drifted through the air. Sinclair was surprised to find that she had moaned at the feel of Jackson's finger against her sensitive flesh. She was just as sensitive there as she was behind her ear.

"I have to admit I don't think you're going to fit," she said into the feather pillow that she held. She couldn't help her actions. Nature dictated that she distance herself from the unknown and the pleasure to be found in the act as something new. She squirmed, digging herself deeper into the plush bedding. She knew what was coming. She could feel his moist breath against her skin.

"Don't worry Sunshine. We'll take it slow, one inch at a time," he said before strong fingers darted out to grasp her hips and hold her down.

She wasn't going anywhere and was unable to do anything but accept the kiss he placed against her tight rosette. His lips felt feather light, soft, and hot against her skin.

"God that feels good," she moaned unable to stop the words from passing her lips.

She felt rather than heard him spreading the lubricant over his penis. She was that attuned to him that his every action, every movement was registered by her starved brain. She could clearly picture how he looked and the sight was turning her on. She felt the walls of her pussy further moisten before clenching in anticipation of the orgasm that was eminent.

The soft, wet rasp of his tongue had her laughing into the pillow. Quickly, the soft strokes molded her laughter into pleas for more.

"Nice and easy sweetheart," he said as he placed the cream over the little rosette.

Sinclair found herself holding her breath as his finger parted her and slid into the tight

hole. Its entry was smooth for it was slick with the sweet smelling lube. She immediately felt a warm tingling sensation where his finger rubbed against her skin. Quickly the warmth deepened until Sinclair felt like her whole body was being consumed by the deep fire that burnt inside her loins, the flame that was spreading from her anus. Before she knew it she was arching up into his touch, deepening the penetration with her need to get closer to that itch that she desperately wanted him to scratch. Her body was burning and only his touch to ease the ache.

Jackson knew without a doubt that every time he smelled the sweet scent of cherries in bloom he would think of Sinclair. He would forever associate her with the red bursting fruit.

He pressed his finger in deeper, stretching her, and found her body open to him. Once he pushed through the initial resistance he was able to finger her until he was first knuckle deep. The sight of her muscles contracting and tensing around his knuckles had pre-cum dripping from the swollen head of his cock.

Suddenly his finger was reversing its actions. It was making its withdrawal and sliding along the sensitive flesh of her rectum igniting exquisite fires that threatened to heat out of control.

“Jackson.”

The word was enough to tell Jackson how far along she had gone. She needed more and she needed him to give it to her. He spread more cream against her anus before lubricating his fingers.

The itch that burned just spread, traveling the same path of the cream. It too went deeper than before.

“Jackson,” she moaned into the pillow, not knowing what else to say. She needed to do something, but she was unsure of whether she wanted him to stop or continue. All she knew was that her body burned.

“I need to stretch you Sunshine,” he said before pressing two fingers against the rosette. She squirmed beneath him as her body accepted his two fingers. Her muscles contracted and burned around the digits. The pain this time was more intense, less of an itch and more of an ache.

“It hurts Jackson,” she said through clenched teeth.

“I need to stretch you sweetheart otherwise I’m going to hurt you more,” he said before twisting his fingers so they moved against the inner muscles of her ass sending delicious sensations vibrating through her lower body. The pleasure echoed from her ass to settle in her vagina before bouncing back.

“Shit,” she groaned before placing the bullet against her clitoris.

Jackson knew by the set of her shoulders that the bite of pain that had her gritting her teeth was gone. Slowly he began to fuck her ass, sliding his fingers in and out of her rectum, stretching it, rubbing it, and increasing the burn of the itch that threatened to become a full blown irritation.

“Fuck me. Yes, just like that,” she groaned as she set her hips to a rhythm that allowed his fingers the deepest penetration on the down thrust.

“Fuck Sinclair,” he groaned. He could feel her ass muscles spasming around his fingers. She was driving herself crazy fucking his fingers as she fingered her own pussy. Any second now she was going to come and he wanted to be deep inside her ass when she found her release.

“Shit,” he groaned as he pulled his fingers from the exquisite slick heat of her ass.

“No,” she screamed when she realized what he was doing.

“What?” he asked. He had ceased all movement. His whole body was listening to what she had to say. He didn’t want to hurt her and yet he heard pain in her voice.

"Don't leave me," she breathed out on a whisper.

"I can't and won't. You're a part of me."

"You will." The words were so drawn and full of bitter acceptance that Jackson felt his heart breaking. Even though he knew that he would be forced to physically leave her nothing could take the his heart, the heart she held, from her hands. He would always be with her whether she liked it or not. They were forever connected.

"No."

Sinclair let free a deep sigh at the sound of that singular strong word. There was so much steel behind the word that she couldn't believe anything, but that the fact that he would never leave her.

Jackson responded to the silent softening of her body and placed the head of his cock against her puckered anus.

"Do I please you like the others?" she asked into the silent night.

Sinclair was immediately mortified. She couldn't believe that she had voiced the question that had plagued her countless nights. She had often wondered if she was enough, why was he amusing himself with her when there were much more beautiful women all across the globe ready and willing to bed him. And yet here he was between her spread ass cheeks willing to give her a night she would remember long after he was gone.

"There will be no other woman for me," he said as he pressed his cock against the reddened rosette. He eased his hips forward, his cock sliding easily into the opening left behind from the lack of pressure exerted by his fingers.

"You are the only one for me," he gritted out when he felt her body opening to take him several more inches. With a slight thrust of his hips he was as deep inside her as he was willing to go. He knew that he was large enough, wide enough, thick enough to hurt her this first time if he went any deeper and she was sweet enough to keep her mouth closed even if he was hurting her.

"You are all there is for me. Only you," he said as he slid from between the warm pleasurable muscles of her body. She was burning him alive.

"Only," he said on the downward stroke as his shaft parted through the tense muscles of her anus.

"You," he gritted out as he slid out, slipping, stretching the sensitive walls of her ass.

"Only you," he groaned as he pushed at her control demanding her acquisition. The chant echoed off the wall of her bedroom as he thrust in and out of the slick walls of her body.

Suddenly her orgasm was upon her, raging with the strength and intensity of an inferno. She was going up in flames and she was taking him with her. His shout of satisfaction was a harsh parody of his voice. He slumped over her slick body and smiled against the relaxed muscles of her back. His cock was still spurting load after load of his seed into the sleek heat that was her ass.

He felt like a beast marking its territory.

She was his whether she liked it or not and no other woman on this globe compared to her. She was perfection personified. She was his woman. The only woman he would ever love.

Chapter Forty-Two
SOMETHING BORROWED, SOMETHING BLUE

Cold, clammy hands lifted the dress from the pure white box, careful to sweep away any and all tissue paper. The hands immediately started to shake with the tension and apprehension running through her veins.

She wasn't going to make it.

She wasn't going to make it. The words ran a staccato rhythm marathon through her fragile brain. She wasn't going to make it through her own wedding. There would be no wedding.

The last thought seemed to have restricted her airflow, for Imogen found herself gasping for air. Blindly, she wondered if she would die on her wedding day. She had requested that everyone leave so that she could dress in peace and now she would die in peace, die all alone. With no one by her side.

Stars danced before her eyes blurring her vision.

"Imogen."

Her name was a flash of darkness in the background. She couldn't really hear or see it. She could just feel it. She felt the presence of another, an individual calling her name, calling out to her.

"Imogen."

She turned around seeking the sound.

"Jesus Christ. Are you all right?"

She was stumbling, then falling to the ground in a haphazard tumble of long limbs when a pair of steady hands reached out to halt her descent.

"You're as white as a sheet," the voice said before lifting her from her crouched position.

"Imogen, say something," the voice said. The tone was soft, light, delicate, and intrinsically female.

"Sinclair," was all her parched mouth was able to say.

"I'm here," she heard from behind her.

Thank God. It was her first and only thought at the sound of those two reassuring words. Silently she laughed at her predicament. Here she was relying on the one person in the world everyone had told her to avoid. The other woman.

"Don't worry I'll take care of her," Sinclair told the other woman before leading her out of the room.

"I think I'm having a panic attack," Imogen said the moment Sinclair's footsteps entered the little dressing room.

"That's understandable and ok. I would be drinking a bottle of tequila if I was in your position," she said before settling herself beside Imogen upon the little French settee.

"I thought I could do it, but now I'm not so sure. I don't think I can marry him."

"Clear your mind, breathe, and think of nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"I can't ..."

"Shh," Sinclair said as she placed one fingertip against Imogen's lips. "Just breathe."

Imogen immediately complied and took great, fat gulps of air into her starved lungs. Slowly her breathing returned to normal. There was no longer an echo of fear coursing through

her mind.

Trembling hands reached out to snatch the glass of water Sinclair held out to her. She felt like a drowning man finding a lifesaver. Unfortunately for her, Sinclair, her lifesaver could not stop this catastrophe of a wedding.

"You know, growing up, I was the only one of the group who wasn't in love with him, and here I am marrying him."

"Life is funny that way," Sinclair said before running a sympathetic hand through Imogen's frosty blonde curls. "I never thought I'd meet a duke, let alone"

"If it wasn't for that foolish stipulation, you'd be the one in this dress," Imogen said before lifting the hand-embroidered gown.

She immediately regretted her words at the sight of the stark pain etched along Sinclair's face.

"I'm sorry."

"So am I."

In that moment Sinclair realized why she was there. She needed this, this reality, to help her get over the fact that he was gone. Both Helena and Maxine had told her, she would need at least two bottles of tequila to drown out the memories. But the thing was, she didn't want to drown out the memories. She wanted to remember the good times she had with Jackson, and accept, truly accept the fact that he was never going to truly be hers.

"Let's get you into that damn dress," she said. Her voice was hoarse with unshed tears and unacknowledged emotions. She could see the truth in Imogen's cool blue eyes, but the blonde was wise enough not to say anything. She simply nodded before standing and giving Sinclair her back.

Sinclair slowly buttoned up the gown. All the while thoughts and visions of what could never be filtered through her mind.

"I'm pregnant."

Her hands stilled on the final button as the words registered. The pearl button was almost ripped from her fingers when Imogen spun around to confront her.

"Did I hear you right?"

"I'm sorry I didn't mean to say that," Sinclair said before turning to pick up the discarded veil.

"Put that damn thing down and face me."

Slowly Sinclair turned around afraid of what she would see. She had been right to fear. There was pain, anger, and sympathy etched along Imogen's face. Her perfect features were pulled tight and white lines of tension rimmed her pale pink lips.

"Are you pregnant?"

"Yes."

Long seconds ticked by before Imogen spoke.

"Is it Jackson's child?"

"Yes." For one splint second she had been angered by the question. Of course it was Jackson's baby. She's wasn't a whore. But then she had realized that Imogen needed to hear her say the words. It was her wedding day and she was getting prepared to marry the man that had fathered Sinclair's child.

"I can't marry him. There's no way I'm going to marry him. You're freaking pregnant ... with his goddamn child for Christ's sake."

Sinclair stared in horror as Imogen reached behind her and started unbuttoning her gown.

She was getting undressed. She really wasn't going to marry him. Jackson would never forgive either of them.

"Wait!"

"Wait for what ... wait for you to give birth. Give me one reason to go through with this."

"Because you have to."

That seemed to stop Imogen in her tracks.

"He doesn't know, does he?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"What does it matter? It doesn't change anything."

"Doesn't it? He's going through this sham of a marriage because he has obligations to his family, but now you're carrying his family. He has obligations to you."

Sinclair's ignored Imogen's statement. She did not want or need to hear those words. She needed to stand firm with her decision. Nothing had changed. She was still an unacceptable bride.

"Why are you going through with it?" she asked instead. Imogen knew all of her secrets, and she knew none of hers.

"Yes, why are you a part of this charade, Genie." The voice was warm, sensual, and smooth. Coupled with the accent that tinged it, Sinclair found herself turning, hoping to glimpse whatever goddess had spoken the words from the doorway.

And she was not disappointed. The voice belonged to a six foot queen. Her rich, chestnut locks glowed beneath the chandeliers glistening lights. Her deep locks were a perfect match for her creamy skin tone and deep mahogany eyes. She was breathtakingly beautiful.

"Genie, I'm waiting for an answer."

Sinclair's head swung around to face Imogen. She was unable to ignore the tension flowing between the two women. She too waited for an answer.

"Bobby, what are you doing here?"

Bobby? Imogen's Bobby wasn't a young man, but a beautiful woman.

"I asked first," Bobby said.

"Because I have to."

"Do you, Genie?" she said before settling herself into one of the room's delicate French chairs. Sinclair found herself wondering if Bobby had taught Imogen how to move because her actions were even more graceful than the cool blonde's.

"Yes, I do. I have obligations, obligations to my family as well as his."

"So, it isn't about the money."

It wasn't a question, but a statement. And yet Imogen found herself answering.

"No, its not about money. Its about family."

"I was once your family, Genie. What happened to your obligations to me?"

"I have to do this."

"Yes, I know. I heard you the first time. But I have a question for you. How are you going to lie beneath Jackson? We both know how you feel about men." She darted a cruel, snide look at Sinclair before finishing. "We all know how you feel about men."

"I'll do what I must. He knows this is a marriage of convenience."

"I don't know if convenience is the right word."

"Yes, you're right. Convenience is not the right word."

"This little situation gives a whole new meaning to the words 'something borrowed' and

‘something blue’.

“Excuse me?”

Bobby simply ignored Imogen’s question. She took slow, sensual steps towards her. Sinclair watched the slow by play between them. She had known they were lovers from the moment the stark look of pain and fear entered Imogen’s eyes at the sound of Bobby voice, but the sight of the waves rolling off of the two cemented the belief. Bobby was a woman scorned.

“I think we all know what or rather who was borrowed, but the something blue, well that” she said before lifting one shoulder in a delicate shrug.

“Say what you want to say Bobby. There’s no point in drawing this out.”

Bobby’s face immediately changed. The lines tightening and her face was marked with such burning fury that Sinclair began wishing she wasn’t there to witness whatever she was about to say.

“Your heart is the little something blue, you cold, cruel, selfish bitch. We were together for years and you didn’t even have the decency to tell me you were getting married for money.”

“You don’t understand, I”

“Of course I don’t understand. I have morals and a soul. I have beliefs. I would never marry for money. I would never marry something I hated for money. And I would have told you, if I had to, but you, you don’t give a damn.”

With that crushing statement, she turned and walked out of the room, but not before stopping before Sinclair. “How can you stand there and help her get into the dress you should be wearing?”

“Nobody in this room is where they want to stand. We all have to live with this. Might as well all try not to put any more salt in life’s wounds.”

Bobby lifted one perfectly arched mahogany eyebrow before walking out the room. Sinclair watched the woman leave until she couldn’t watch her anymore. She then turned to Imogen.

Imogen turned and gave her back to Sinclair, gifting her with the view of the wedding gown’s spectacularly crafted train, turning her back on the pain that had just walked out of her life.

“Button me up. We haven’t got much time.”

Sinclair shed a single, silent tear for her. It was one thing to be in pain. It was another thing to witness another woman’s pain. Quickly she buttoned her up.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” she finally said when Imogen turned to her.

“Because nothing would have changed. The end would still be the same. I would still be getting married in less than an hour.”

Blindly, Imogen wondered how many truths she would have to reveal before she hid behind her sham of a marriage.

That infamous tune was playing. Everyone was seated and beside him stood Ireland, his best man. He was getting married. There was no turning back now.

Here comes the bride. All dressed in white.

There was no turning back now.

Jackson found himself repeating the words like a mantra. Thoughts of his last night with Sinclair had him wondering if he doing the right thing. Lately the thought of losing his inheritance and even his family's respect paled in comparison to the thought of losing Sinclair.

But there was no turning back now. He looked around the room. There were friends and family all around. His eye instinctively settled upon Isabella. She looked splendid in her pale green gown.

There was no turning back now. Isabella needed him to do this, to sacrifice his life in exchange for hers.

Jackson blindly stared down the red aisle before him waiting for Imogen to appear. Unconsciously, he registered the sound of a door opening. A late comer had arrived.

Beside him Ireland gasped before coughing on the dry heaving air he took in. Jackson turned to Ireland to make sure he was fine. He appeared to be having some difficulty breathing.

One large palm came down to land against Ireland's back. "I'm fine," he said between coughs.

At the same moment that Jackson realized Ireland was fine, he noticed that the room around him had become uncomfortably silent. He darted a quick glance around to figure out what was wrong. His eyes bounced off his mother's to settle on his sister's. Identical green eyes found one another. One was filled with confusion, the other was filled with fear and unease. He found himself looking to his mother for an explanation. Her mouth was strung in a tight line and her eyes were filled with worry. She was worried about him.

Uneasiness slithered down his skin. Something was wrong. His mother, who never worried, was worried about him.

Sweat beaded on her palms. She was waiting for Jackson to notice her. She knew that his family and friends had noticed her late arrival. She hadn't had the courage to tell him she would be at his wedding last night. Yes, she was a coward, a coward that needed to tie up loose ends.

One one-thousand. Two-one-thousand. Three one-thousand. She counted the seconds until he noticed her. Even though she wasn't looking at him, she knew the exact moment that Jackson noticed that she was sitting in one of the pews. His heart felt curse floated through the air to land on her.

It seemed like it took her forever to look him in the face. When she finally did, she was still shielding her gaze. She was hiding, but then again, so was he. He was standing before her, waiting for a bride he didn't know because he had been afraid of what marriage to her would entail.

Happiness.

The word burst through him like an eagle's first flight, bold, beautiful, and uncharted. Now that he stood on the precipice, waiting to step into the unknown, he could look back and see what he had abandoned. He had left behind all chances of happiness with Sinclair, because he had been too afraid that she would make him unhappy or even worse, that he would make her miserable. The extent of the pleasure to be found in Sinclair's arms had been too uncharted and unknown to pass up the painful, security of a life with an unwanted bride.

Imogen had finally reached him. He had to turn from Sinclair and look his bride in the

face. Still he couldn't resist pleading with his eyes for her forgiveness. Maybe in time she would forgive the wrong he had inflicted upon them all.

Before she knew it, Imogen was standing beside Jackson before the Reverend. The silver haired man with the sympathetic eyes immediately started speaking. "We are gathered here"

The words bounced through Imogen's head like ping-pong balls in a maze. There was nowhere for them to go and none of it made sense to her glazed mind. She felt high, and she hadn't taken any drugs. And there had been plenty of temptation to take something to take off the edge, but she wanted to be sober on her wedding day. Even if it was the wedding of her nightmares.

"Do you, Ian Jackson Phillips, take Imogen Elizabeth Westford to be your lawfully wedding wife. To honor and protect, in sickness and health"

Lawfully. Wedded. Wife.

The words hit Sinclair like an avalanche. It was blinding, consuming, and suffocating. She quickly found herself gasping for air. She had stopped breathing all together.

"I do."

Two little words were all it took to seal his fate. To Jackson, it seemed an almost anti-climatic end to the confusion and pain that had marked his few weeks of engagement.

"Repeat after me. Do you, Imogen Elizabeth Westford, take Ian Jackson Phillips to be your lawfully wedding husband?"

Lawfully. Wedded. Husband.

A fresh wave of fear engulfed Imogen and threatened to drown out any and all sanity. And to think moments earlier, she had been praising herself on her fortitude. Now, Imogen prayed that the fog would roll back and leave her mind clear. She kept her eyes on the holy man's collar, unwilling to glimpse the stark confusion in his eyes. She took one, two deep breathes and lifted her eyes. Imogen, stared at the Reverend, her heart in her throat, and tried, desperately to understand his words.

The shock and confusion she had been prepared for wasn't there. Instead, Imogen found warm brown eyes looking down on her with joy. Belatedly, Imogen realized that she had said the words. Two words and she was forever bound in unholy matrimony to a man she could only befriend, at best.

"Let him speak now or forever hold your peace."

He was sliding into home run and he had yet to throw up or throw a fit. Things were going well. As he crawled from Sinclair's bed that morning, he hadn't been sure he would make it through his own wedding.

He heard the collective gasp go through the crowd. Thick coils of panic bounced through the room. Jackson found himself finally looking at Imogen. She was staring at him with a look that matched his. Her eyes were wide with confusion.

He looked to the reverend for some sort of clarification. The elderly man was turning a ghostly shade of white. And all of his attention was directed to the left of Jackson.

There was a cough, a conscious clearing of the throat, and then the perfectly cultured voice of Madeline floated through the air.

"Excuse me."

"Madeline, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Well, the man said speak now or forever hold your peace, so I'm speaking."

"What the hell kind of game do you think you're playing? You agreed."

"Yes, I know, but I don't think Imogen is the right woman for you. You can't marry a

woman that loves women. Might make things a little difficult. Plus, I'd prefer it if you married the mother of your children. Can't have Phillips bastards running around, now can we?"

"I do not have any ... children."

"Not yet, you don't."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he said on a harsh whisper that cut through the tense silence shrouding the church.

"Why don't you ask Sinclair?"

All four hundred and fifty seven pairs of eyes turned around to settle on Sinclair.

"I'm sure she'll be able to explain everything."

Chapter Forty-Four FROM THE GRAVE

He was hurting her. Jackson's grip on her arm was bruising. Yet, she found herself unable to voice the words to get him to loosen his crushing hold. His tight grip was a testament to the emotions swirling inside of him. He was angry.

And she was ashamed to admit that he had every right to be angry with her. She had purposely withheld the truth from him. To save herself nonetheless, but that didn't change the facts. She had misled him.

She had badly miscalculated under the assumption that she knew what was best for both of them.

A cautious glance at his face proved her wrong. She didn't know what was right for him. She had denied him his right and he wasn't angry about that fact. He was livid. The pulse at his neck was jumping higher than a cheerleader and the tick in his jaw was back and in full effect.

He swung her into the dressing room before slamming the door shut behind him. The sound seemed to vibrate through her sternum. She felt her heart jump and bounce at the sound. She felt like someone had just closed the lid on her casket. She immediately cringed at the words and imagery. Trust a writer to be melodramatic she thought before looking into his stormy sea green eyes. Judging by the look in his eyes, on his face, someone would be slamming the lid on her casket very soon. VERY soon.

“Damn,” she muttered to herself. She was in for it now. And less than an hour ago she had been thinking it was a great idea to come to his wedding and get the healing started.

What was that age old saying? Rip the bandage off in one swell swoop. Well, look where that had gotten her. Here! Her hindsight always was 20/20.

“Do you want to explain what the hell my mother is talking about?” he growled at her.

“Not really,” she said insolently as she stared at a point to the left of his head. She didn’t trust herself to look into his eyes. She just might start bawling and let him know everything.

He took one step, two steps stalking her, an injured animal needing to take down easy prey for survival. She instinctively took a step back.

“Explain, Sinclair,” he said. Sinclair stared, amazed as his long fingers clenched and unclenched, a sure sign of the emotions thundering through him.

“I can’t,” she said, unwilling to voice the fear she knew crawled just beneath his skin. He didn’t even want to get married. There was no way ‘Fuck and Chuck’ Phillips was ready for kids. No, it was her secret and she was going to take it to her grave.

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Won’t.”

Sinclair was just getting truly comfortable with the idea of keeping her secret a secret when the door burst open. A heartfelt groan passed through her lips at the sight of the quartet that entered. Madeline, Ireland, Imogen, and a yet unknown man stepped into the room and immediately altered the atmosphere. Sinclair watched as Jackson mentally and physically braced himself for battle. He instinctively took a step into the shadows provided by the large, flowing curtains.

Ireland immediately separated himself from the group and took one of the delicate French chairs occupying the tea corner. Sinclair got the distinct feeling that he was fully prepared to simply watch whatever amusing show they were all going to put on. And in that moment she realized she could hate someone.

They all started talking at once.

“So are you excited to be a father?”

“Does this mean we don’t have to get married?”

“So you’re going to marry her instead?” the unknown man asked.

Sinclair flinched as if she had been slapped. She wasn’t the only one jarred by the last statement. All sound had stopped as everyone waited for Jackson’s answer.

He turned those green eyes of his to her, keeping her gaze, while he spoke. “I can’t make any decisions until I get all the facts.”

“You already know all the facts. You know all you need to know to make a decision. Do you want Sinclair? Yes or no?”

The words had come from Ireland. They had been nonchalantly delivered, but that didn’t change the fact that they were true. All he needed to know was right there in her eyes.

“Yes.”

“It’s about damn time,” Madeline said before turning to Imogen. “Turn around,” she said to the young blonde. “Let’s get you out of that damn dress.”

“I don’t understand,” Jackson said when he noticed his mother’s obvious joy. None of this made sense. Madeline wasn’t supposed to be happy. She should have been livid that he wasn’t going to marry the bride she chose, but then again

He turned to confront the laughing pair.

“What the hell happens if I marry someone you don’t approve of?, Madeline.”

"Don't worry," she said as she lifted one hand to brush away the doubt clinging to his mind.

"What happens?" he gritted out through his teeth.

Madeline's hands paused halfway down Imogen's back. There was no denying or ignoring the tension swirling through the air. Jackson had been tethered on hook, after hook, after hook, and he didn't like the feeling of being dragged according to someone else's whim. The game stopped now.

"What happens if I marry someone you don't approve of?"

"Right on time," Ireland said as he crossed the room to collect the large envelope a gorgeous redheaded man held out to him. No one else had noticed the young man in the devilish black satin suit standing outside the room. Belatedly, Sinclair wondered just how much of the conversation he had heard.

"You knew about this, didn't you?" Madeline asked, turning to the young blonde man who stood in the doorway.

"I suspected as much."

"What the hell are you two talking about? Can somebody explain something to me?"

All eyes turned to the groom.

"What the hell is going on here?"

"He pushed back the wedding."

"I suspected that you're father would have his gift delivered once he thought you were bound in unholy matrimony," Ireland said as he strode to Jackson. He simply held out the large package.

When Jackson accepted the package, he felt a slither of unease slide down his skin. "Did you know about this?" he asked the unknown man.

"No. He must have used another attorney for that. There was no indication of ... that in the will," he said as he eyed the parcel dubiously.

"He really hated me, didn't he?"

"No. He really hated me. He couldn't handle my love for you. He was ... jealous," Madeline whispered into the silent room.

"Why would a man hate his child? How can a man hate his child?"

"You were never his child. He never thought of you as his child."

Jackson immediately turned to the man that had spoken.

"Uncle Malcolm what do you mean I was never his child and save the lies. I need the truth."

Madeline stepped forward to stand before him, a young man breaking down inside, while showing the world his strength, a young man who hated her more than any other person in the world, a young man whom she loved with her whole heart and soul.

"After your father and I got married, we realized that he was infertile. He knew how much I wanted children, so he made a proposal. He didn't want his son's father to be unknown to him."

"But I have his lips and his build and ... Izzie has his lips too"

"You have the Phillips lips and build."

The soft spoken words landed like an atom bomb scattering across the room, impacting everyone in its wake.

"You provided the sperm, didn't you?"

"Through in-vitro insemination, yes. He never forgave either of us."

“No, he never did,” Jackson said before walking out the room and leaving them all behind. He knew what he had to do.

He had to hear the dead man speak for himself. Belatedly, he wondered how long the man would haunt him, just how long would *his* actions and hatred govern his life.

Chapter Forty-Five OPEN CASKET

He could feel him talking from the grave.

My only passion was hate.

That was the only thought that came to mind after watching the twenty minute monologue the man had left behind.

His only passion was hate. He had relished the dark, volatile emotions that coursed through him with an intensity that had fueled a lifetime of hate and cruelty.

Jackson watched the man who had raised him, listened to every word he said, and realized that he did not know the man he had called "Father". It was a disarming thought.

It left him feeling hollow and hurt, bludgeoned by the depth of distrust and hatred that marked the man's every actions. And at the heart of every vile word and action was the naked vehemence the other man had for himself. Before his death, his father had hated himself almost as much as he had hated his mother and her children.

He had hated the fact that Madeline loved something other than him. Regardless, of the fact that the objects of her affection were her own children.

Enough so that he had done everything in his power to separate a mother from her children.

His father had finally given him the answers to the questions that had plagued him. He had never understood the uneasy distance that separated him and Madeline. The distance his father had breached.

“You can come in. There is no point in standing in the doorway.”

“I didn’t want to bother you,” he said as he softly closed the door behind him.

“I suspected that you would get a tape as well.”

“Yes.”

“So” he said before turning to the young man that awkwardly stood in front of the closed door.

“It explains a lot, doesn’t it?”

Jackson could feel the tension radiating off of the other man. He was angry, hurt, confused, and disillusioned. He too had just found out that his whole life had been a carefully, crafted lie.

“Does it?” Jackson asked, knowing he needed someone to answer the question that stumbled through his head. *Was it enough? Would it ever be enough?*

“No, but it’s all we have had, not that it says much.”

The young man turned from him, strode across the room, and stood before the large bay window. Morosely, he stared down at the throngs of guests leaving the wedding that hadn’t occurred.

“So we’re brothers.”

Jackson could feel the question in the three simple words. “Yes. Twin brothers.”

“And Madeline, your ... our mother never knew.”

“No,” he said, feeling the need to defend the mother he had never defended before. “My heart beat covered yours. According to ... him the doctor didn’t know until he delivered the first child.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “How does one not notice a second birth?”

“It was a c-section. She was knocked out.”

He stared at Jackson incredulously. He could not seem to find the words to voice the shock in his brain.

“I didn’t know they could do that,” he said, his voice full of awe and confusion.

“Maxwell made sure it was done. Apparently he suspected it. Twins run in the Phillips family.”

“He was one sick bastard.”

“Yes, yes, he was.”

“No offense, but I’m glad he’s dead.”

“Yes, saves me from having to kill him.”

That brought a wry smile to the other man’s full lips. Lips that were not unlike his own lips.

“Have you talked to your mother?”

“Yes, I spoke to Jessica the moment I finished watching the tape. I didn’t believe a word he said. I was expecting her to tell me they were all the rambling of sick man.”

“Yes, I can see how the news would have been somewhat of a shock.”

“To say the least,” the other said before running his long fingers through his hair. “It explains why I was bred to hate you.”

“Yes, the animosity. He really wanted to hurt Madeline.”

“I played right into his hands.”

“We both did.”

“Look, I just wanted to say”

“Don’t. There’s no need for that.”

“Thanks. I just wanted to say”

“Have you seen Madeline yet?”

“Yes, I just came from talking to her. We’re going to get together and ... talk.”

“Good,” he said before taking a seat at the breakfast table that stood adjacent to the bay window.

“If you’re not busy”

“I’d love to come. I’ll make sure that Isabella and I are both there.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate it,” the other man said as he stretched out one large palm.

He didn’t take the hand he offered. Instead, Jackson stood and clasped the other man in a large bear hug. “We’re brothers, Michel. Family does not shake, they hug.”

Tears threatened to spill from the other man’s eyes. He had finally found his home.

“You don’t have to worry about me not approving of her.”

He didn’t dare pretend he didn’t know who she was talking about. There was no point in pretending. They all knew how he felt.

“Why not? Why don’t I have to worry.”

“Because I approve of her. She’s the woman I’ve been hoping you’d one day bring home. So, you have to bring her home a little earlier than you wanted.”

“If I don’t marry, you get everything. The money stays in the family.”

“Yes.”

“You knew about this, about that?”

“Yes.”

“And still, you forced me to choose a bride, a woman”

“I knew that if you married to spite me, you would hate me no matter what I said. I did the best I could with what I had. You’re father didn’t give me much choice.”

“He’s not my father, now is he?”

“He raised you.”

“Yes, he taught me to hate you and everything you represented, including myself. And he did it on purpose. How am I supposed to forgive him? Hell, how am I supposed to accept those facts? He was supposed to be my father!”

“I’m sorry.” Her softly spoken words cut through the dense air filling the room. “That’s what I came here to say. I came to say I’m sorry. I’m sorry for not protecting you. All those years”

“It wasn’t your fault. There is no need to apologize.”

“No. I need to get this off of my chest. There were so many years, so many times I tried to leave, to take you and your sister away from him and his malicious ways, but he always threatened to disown you and I thought, I thought I was doing the right thing to stay. Now I know”

Madeline couldn’t finish speaking her thoughts. The memories, the tears that had been threatening to fall throughout the evening finally made their appearance, cascading down her high cheekbones.

He strode across the room, hoping to console Madeline, and ease some of the distress wracking her slim body, when her words stopped him in his tracks.

“Promise me you will marry her. Promise me you will marry Sinclair.”

“I can’t.”

“But I did this, all of this, for you. I just wanted to make sure you did not marry a woman you did not love, but I have ruined everything.”

“You didn’t ruin anything Mummy. You protected me,” he said as he wrapped her in his arms.

“But you are not going to marry Sinclair, are you?”

“How can I knowing what I know about my history, about my family?”

Chapter Forty-Six

DO US PART

The sound of heels hitting the uncarpeted, wooden floor woke him. He wasn't alone. There was someone else in the apartment.

His initial thought brought to mind visions of his roommate, but the past quickly intruded. He remembered that he no longer had a roommate. He and Skip had both graduated college and moved on, securing their own bachelor pads. He lived alone now.

He should have been alone, but someone was in his apartment.

He jerked up, attempting to slowly slide out of the bed. Shock and anger flowed through his veins when he realized he couldn't move. He was handcuffed to the bed. Both arms were bound to the wrought iron headboard. He was a prisoner in his own home.

The intruder was getting closer. The sound of her heels hitting the hardwood floor were getting louder, bolder. Jackson had the distinct feeling that her steps were purposeful. She wanted him to hear her. She wanted him to know that she had invaded his sanctuary.

Finally, her heeled feet touched the carpeted floor. She was standing in the doorway of his bedroom. He turned his head to catch a glimpse of the midnight woman.

She was masked in darkness. The ebony cloud hanging within the room prevented sight. He could barely make out the outline of her body. It was silhouetted by the hallway lighting, but that was all he needed. Instant recognition slammed through him. He should have known. He should have read the writing on the wall sooner.

"Son of a bitch," he cursed as he jerked at the cuffs that held him bound. He could not be alone with her. Alone at her mercy.

"Those are police issue. I borrowed them from my brother. There's no point in struggling," she said before sliding into the room.

"Un-cuff me, damn it," he snarled at her as she approached him.

She shook her head at him and Jackson watched, helpless to do anything else but admire the way her ebony locks flowed around her sweet, beautiful face, a face drawn into the tight lines of a very determined woman.

"You've be a very, very naughty boy, Ian Jackson Phillips. Why if I didn't know better I'd say you were asking for a spanking."

His body was instantly drawn taught into the lines of the prey watching the predator. There was something in her hot tone that alluded to the fact that things had changed. He was obviously no longer the aggressor. No, tonight Sinclair held the reins. Still, he was a man and a man had his pride.

"If you un-cuff me now, we can forget about this whole thing. I won't even inform the police."

"And what sweetheart would you tell them?" she said after taking a step closer. The way his bed sat he was on par with her pelvis. His table light allowed just enough illumination for him to see her clearly. When he turned his head to the side he found himself looking straight at her crotch. Her naked crotch.

In the faint light, he could see that she was wearing garters and stockings minus the panties. And this close he could see everything he had been trying to pretend he didn't need. Jackson felt the walls he had constructed around himself being infiltrated by her overt sexuality. He instinctively struck out.

"I know you can't find better, but I'm sure you'll be able to find a substitute. There are a couple of guys out there that would fuck you and you won't even have to handcuff them to get it."

She smiled in retaliation at his barb. She had been expecting his malicious anger.

"Yes, you know what, in the six weeks we haven't seen each other, I've found that I'm one sexy woman. Apparently there are more than a couple of guys willing to satisfy me. And the best part is, they are willing to try oh so very hard for my affection, unlike some people."

He turned his head to the other side, away from her, but not before she saw that her words had cut him deeply. He wasn't the only one with a sharp tongue.

She ran one finger down his naked chest. "You're a very lucky man, Jackson. I've decided to have some mercy on you and forgive you for all the wrongs you've committed against me."

He jerked against the cuffs. But Sinclair wasn't sure if it was the words she had spoken or the fact that her finger had reached its destination. She was cupping Jackson in the palm of her hand. Neither was quite sure if he was trying to get away from or closer to the pleasure she reaped upon his body.

"Don't do something you'll regret, Sunshine," he said through gritted teeth.

"Too late," she said before smiling at him and pressing a soft kiss to his lips. He was angry as hell, but he had called her Sunshine. There was hope.

"You walked away from that wedding and me."

"I did not walk away from you," he growled at her.

"If by that you mean the check I receive every month for child support for your unborn child, I want you to know I appreciate it, but you can shove your act of responsibility right up your tight ass," she said. Her tone and the stark pain across her face reminding him of how much he had hurt them both with his actions.

"What do you want from me, Sinclair?"

Her grip tightened around him, almost painfully. He felt himself begin to sweat. There was nothing as unstable as a woman scorned, and there was no doubt in his mind that he had hurt Sinclair.

"You know what I want."

"I can't give you that."

"Oh, yes you can and you will," she said before releasing her hold and walking away from him. It was then that he noticed where she was headed. In the middle of the room, directly across from him sat a plush brocade chair. It had not come from within his apartment.

"Let it go, Sinclair."

"Unlike you, I have no intention of walking away from you because it's what's best for both of us. I have to say I like the pleasure and pain that comes from being with someone you love."

He watched with bated breath as she took her seat and positioned her body to the best of his disadvantage. The golden light highlighted and shadowed her body in voluptuous folds of darkness. He watched her slowly, oh so slowly, spread her legs and hook each one over the arm of the luxurious seating. The light and shadows played with just enough of her figure to get him

wishing he wasn't cuffed to the wrought iron bed.

Her small, delicate hands skirted up her abdomen to settle on the valley between her breasts. He had been desperately trying to ignore the bounty before him, but he found himself unable to look away from the blinding white lace cups that pushed and revealed her bountiful breasts. He loved her in white. He had always been a sucker for a great rack and hers was perfect. Big, beautiful and black just like he liked them, just like he liked her.

"They're hard, you know?"

His gaze jerked up to meet hers. There was a ghost of a smile on her full lips, lips painted a dark blood red, lips that he desperately wanted to kiss.

Damn, she was fucking with his resolve. He had make a decision and he was going to stick by it.

"My nipples are hard," she said before lifting both hands to cup the overflowing mounds of white lace. He couldn't seem to take his eyes from her, from the small, graceful hands holding her breasts. He watched her pinch the firm crowns through the cloth and felt his resolve weaken. A quick glance at her face and he knew she had noticed the weakening of his resolve, or better yet, the hardening of his flesh. He could feel his cock getting hard.

Her hands drifted away from her breasts to settle on her lower abdomen. Jackson felt himself swallow the thick lump lodged in his throat as he watched her fingers dance around the delicate flesh surrounding her pelvic region.

She was teasing him.

They both knew it, but he was unable to do anything about it, but lie there and watch her perform. Her fingers skirted down the small bulge that was her stomach.

He felt his eyes stop at the bump. He couldn't get past it, not even to glimpse the wet heat between her legs. He couldn't take his eyes away from the proof of their affection.

"I hope I have a boy."

His eyes latched onto hers. "I hope he looks like you," she said.

"You're going to"

"Yes."

He felt his heart jump and stall. For the six weeks they had been apart, he had secretly feared the notion that she was contemplating putting his child up for adoption or worse, aborting it, especially now that he wasn't in the picture. But she was keeping it. She was keeping his child.

"I love this child."

"So do I," he whispered. He was almost afraid that she had heard him, almost as much as he was scared that she hadn't heard.

"I hope our next child is a girl."

"Sinclair"

He found himself without a voice when he saw her hands drift down her body to settle against the moist lips of her pussy. She slowly parted the lips, giving him a glance at the treasure he had gone weeks without. Her clit was fat and swollen, slick with the moisture of her arousal. She was excited, almost as excited as he was.

"Sinclair."

"Yes, Jackson."

Her index finger slowly rimmed the swollen bud of her affection. He had to remind himself to breathe.

"It won't work."

He felt his cock further harden and thicken at the sound of her breath deepening. She too was getting more aroused.

“What won’t work?”

“A marriage between us. It wouldn’t work. You wouldn’t survive it.”

“I know,” she said so calmly he felt his heart stutter.

“You know?” he whispered, unable to recognize his own voice. It was devoid of emotion and full of all the loneliness aching within him.

She knew.

“Yes, I know. A marriage with the new Jackson wouldn’t work. See, he’s too full of guilt and shame to love me. I want the old Jackson, the man I fell in love with.”

“He’s gone Sinclair.”

“Uh huh,” she said as she slid one finger into the wet depths of her pussy. He watched hypnotized as she fingered herself. He lurched against the cold steel handcuff and was partly relieved by the fact that he was bound. He knew that if it was not for the restriction, he would be there, next to her, pleasuring her, touching what he could never truly own.

“I masturbated before you, I masturbated while we were together, I masturbated when we were apart, but I’ve never felt anything like this,” she said as she pinched her clit between her index finger and thumb.

Jackson watched the emotions rush through her as her orgasm thundered through her body. She was so beautiful in the throngs of her passion. Lips parted, body bowed, she was a sight to behold.

After long moments she opened her eyes to look at him. He couldn’t ignore the soft glitter of satisfaction that shone in her eyes. At least one of them had found satisfaction.

“Did you miss me?”

“Sinclair!”

“Did you miss me, Jackson?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” she said before disentangling her limbs from the plush seating. He watched her switch her hips as she strode to him. He was mesmerized by the allure and satisfaction he could find between her lovely, plump thighs.

Sinclair slowly slid herself atop Jackson until she was sitting just below his pelvis. He could feel the hot, wet, heat of her recent climax against his thighs. It was pure torture. And she knew it judging from the devilish smile she gave him.

“I started another story. Apparently six weeks of pain and loneliness is all that is required to make a very prolific writer out of me.”

“Sinclair, I”

“Don’t you want to know what the story is about? You seemed so damned interested in my stories before.”

He watched her long moments, taking in the way her deep brown eyes shone down on his with the hard glitter of determination, the taut lines around her plump, red lips, and the tense, lifted angle of her jaw. She wanted, no-needed, to tell him about her latest story. And he was willing to listen to anything, well almost anything, to ease her pain.

“Please continue.”

The smile she gave him had him flinching inside. It was warm and hot, reminding him of all the times they had spent together.

“You always were the gentleman. Guess I should have known there was something noble

about you, but I digress. The story starts three years ago when, Samantha, that's the main characters name, first saw Jason.

"The main male character."

"Yes, so Samantha fancies herself in love with Jason. He's smart, beautiful, sexy, beautiful, tall, beautiful, blonde, beautiful, athletic"

"Beautiful?"

"Yes, so she's enamored with him, but she knows exactly who she is, and she is neither tall nor sexy"

"But she is beautiful, incredibly beautiful."

"To him, yes, but we haven't gotten to that part of the story."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"If you say that damn word to me one more time, I will castrate you and then we'll both be sorry, now won't we?"

Shock permeated his system at her words. Surprised, his wide gaze collided with hers. He wasn't expecting to find her eyes wet with unshed tears.

"Now, let me finish my damn story. So Samantha watches Jason from afar for three whole years. None of her friends know that she is infatuated with this man. She doesn't even bother to find out his name because she's afraid to ask someone lest her affection show. So she called him Blue Jeans and based all of the heroes of her novels on Blue Jeans, on who she wanted him to be."

"Why?"

"Why Blue Jeans? Because in a simple old pair of blue jeans he had the best ass she had ever seen on any man. Anyways, Samantha had decided that she had finally had enough of Blue Jeans."

Jackson was ashamed to find himself blushing. "That's not what I meant, Sinclair."

"Too bad. That's the question I'm answering. Like I was saying, she'd had enough. Blue Jeans was wracking havoc on her social life and emotions. He had too much power, so she decided to find a real man and give up on the fantasy. During this time she lost the notebook she wrote all her short stories inside of. Turns out he found it."

"It was fate."

"Wonder if you'll be saying that when you hear the ending, at least so far."

"He returned the notebook to her and got to meet the author he had been fantasizing about."

"Well ... you can imagine how shocked and scared Samantha was to find her dream man on her doorstep, but she wasn't a fool."

"So she took what he was offering."

Sinclair leaned forward and lifted herself, just enough to reach down and grasp the firm length of Jackson's cock.

"Sinclair!"

She simply smiled at him in response to his outrage before sliding down the long, hard length of his cock, until all nine and a half inches were fully embedded in her warm, wet, cunt.

"Dear God," he groaned when he was fully seated to the hilt.

"Yes, thinking it would be a temporary thing, but she wants it to be permanent and he's too scared to make them both happy."

"You're forgetting a major part of the story. He was engaged to someone else to fulfill an obligation that his hateful father had stipulated and he put her through hell during this time. He

even managed to get her pregnant while he was engaged to another woman. ”

“I didn’t forget anything,” she said before leaning toward him. She placed her hands on the side of his face and held his gaze while she spoke. “It’s just that those facts aren’t important. I could tell you about the struggles that they both had to endure, but none of that matters.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“No, it doesn’t. All that matters is that he made a promise to her to make everything right, but he’s not keeping his promise. He’s letting his fears get the best of both of them.”

“Sinclair,” he growled at her as he attempting to buck her off him, but all he succeeded in doing was thrust against the firm button inside of her.

“Oh yes,” she moaned as she lifted herself before sliding back down his rigid length.

“Where was I? Oh yeah, so the problem is he’s scared and now she must be the domineering character.”

“So you thought it would be a good idea for the heroine to tie the hero up in his own bed?”

“Well it was either that or accept one of the many marriage proposals that she has received the last six weeks.”

That got his attention. “Who the hell asked you to marry him?”

“By the way he’s not the hero. Not yet anyway. You can’t call him a hero because he broke his promise to Samantha, but she’s gonna rectify that. She’s gonna save him from himself. I’ve decided she’s gonna marry him and make him one very happy man on Saturday.”

“Saturday! What the hell are you talking about? We are not getting married. We are not getting married on Saturday.”

“Ian Jackson Phillips, I have given you six weeks to get over whatever the hell you are dealing with. I have dealt with morning sickness, your mother, your ex-fiancé, your sister Isabelle, your brother Michel, your notorious friends, and my two very angry brothers.”

“What the hell was my brother doing bothering you and what do you mean by brothers? I thought you said you’re brother was a cop.”

“I have two brothers, both are cops and very angry with the fact that I’m pregnant and unwed and yes, they are very large black men.”

“How large?”

“Large enough to make you marry me!”

“Sinclair”

“I know they can’t make you marry me, but you are going to marry me on Saturday, or else!”

“Or else what?”

Sinclair quickly slid off of him before repositioning herself on his thighs.

“You will marry me and make an honest woman out of me or I will make one hell of a woman out of you,” she said before grasping his balls in her hand and tightening her grip.

“Sinclair Amber James!”

“Your choice.”

“Sinclair!”

She held his gaze. Her face softened. “Make a decision Jackson. You can either let him destroy us or you can let me spend the rest of my life by your side.”

“Are you sure about this?” he asked, voice gruff with emotion. He’d never wanted anything, anyone more, but he had to make sure she was sure she understood what she was getting.

“Do you love me?” she asked on a whisper.

“I’ve loved you from the moment I read your first story.”

She smiled down at him before leaning forward and placing a soft kiss against his lips. Her smile was so full of promise that Jackson found himself forced to close his eyes against unshed tears.

“Then I’m very sure. I want to be your wife. I want you to be my husband. I want to have children with you.”

“And I want you.”

From between her bra cups she pulled out a slim silver key and promptly unlocked his handcuffs. When they fell away from Jackson’s wrist, he immediately wrapped his arms around Sinclair and pulled her down in a crushing embrace.

He stared into her eyes for long seconds before placing his lips against hers. Sinclair waited with bated breath for him to say or do anything. Because now that he was free and she was no longer gripping his manhood he could change his mind ... and break her heart.

His fingers fisted in her hair and brought her head down until her lips touched his. His tongue immediately slid through her open lips to caress the hot, wet cavern of her mouth. He groaned into her mouth before breaking off the kiss.

There was something that he wanted to say to her.

“I promise to make you happy,” he said.

“You already have.”

He reached down and readjusted her until her opening was bare to him. One blunt finger slid up to caress her swollen clit. She groaned immediately.

“God I missed that sound,” he said before lifting her hips and sliding her onto his long, hard length.

“Now, Sunshine, I want you to make me ecstatic.”

THE END