



Forever Jade

*by
Shara Azod*



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I must admit that it was only recently that I read the Chevalier series. I know I know, I've been kicking myself for not reading it sooner. But once I started, I couldn't stop until I read every single word. In about a day and a half I was done. Luckily I was at home recovering from surgery so I could afford to stay up all night reading.

Shara Azod has created a family of hot ass southern men that have inspired so many erotic fantasies and if you're like me, strategizing to go to New Orleans to find your very own Chevalier man. I have re-read the series numerous times biding my time for Jade. In a way I was lucky that I just finished the other stories, because as soon as I finished reading about Thierry and Angelique, Remy and Regina, Katrina and Aubrey, I needed to know more about Jade and Rance. And now finally, we have Forever Jade.

This story sucked me in completely. Shara totally delivered on the latest chapter of the Chevaliers. Rance, love his dominance, and Jade, who I absolutely love, overcome so much to be together. Once Rance decided to make Jades his, there was no stopping him from making it happen. Not Jade, his family, or his former mistress. Rance will not be stopped and Jade cannot resist.

The only complaint I have is that once again Shara keeps us wanting more of this family. I want to learn more about Didier and the Canadian Chevalier family. Shara already has my request for more and more and more. One last thing before you read all about Rance and Jade. I would like to stake my claim on Rance. Seriously, I will hurt anyone who tries to take him away. I have learned all kinds of deadly methods from our beloved despot. That sexy man is all mine. Well except when I have to share him with Jade. Thank you

~Laura Guevara



DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Ms. Vaughn who will have it known to all that Didier belongs to her. Thank you for all your help and support chick, you have no idea how much you helped.

~Shara



Jade Jessups- Lawyer
Rance Chevalier -lawyer/ex-military
Thierry Chevalier-Cousin
Angelique Marie Dubois(bff)-Socialite, Thierry's wife
Remy Chevalier -Twin brother of Rance
Regina Booker (bff)-Psychiatrist, Remy's wife
Aubrey Chevalier -professor(cousin)
Arienne Chevalier (Grandmother-Lady Rienne)Katrina Smith (bff)-
Lawyer, Aubrey's woman
Piers Chevalier -politician(cousin of Rance)
General Boden Chevalier (Father of Rance & Remy)
Senator Beaumont Chevalier (Father of Thierry)
Didier DeCapêt (cousin)- Eldest son of Therese
Therese Chevalier de Capêt-Arienne & Baptiste'd daughter
Baptiste Chevalier- Patriach, Lady Rienne's ex
Lila Jessups_Jade's mother
Jasper Jessups, Sr.-Jade's father
Jasper Jessups Jr.-Jade's oldest brother
Dante Jessups-Jade's 2nd oldest brother
Junious Jessups-Jade's 3rd oldest brother
Solange Dubois-(cousin) Boutique Owner , Angelique's cousin

Anton DeCapêt (cousin)- 2nd son of Therese
Pascal DeCapêt (cousin)- 3rd son of Therese

Laurent DeCapêt (cousin)- 4th son of Therese and

Gabriella Moriano-Rance's former mistress

Sorrel Chevalier (Father of Piers)-deceased
Noel Chevalier (Father of Aubrey-deceased)

Catin - doll.

Sorcière -witch.

Petit – little one

Bébé- baby

Cher- dear (Cajun)

Merde- shit

Cherie- dear (Canadian or proper French) (male)

Mon ami- my friend

Je m'occuperai de vous le chéri- I will take care of you sweetheart

J'ai besoin de vous- I need you

Je suis là pour vous. Prenez ce que vous avez besoin- I'm here for you.
Take what you need.

Permettez-moi de te faire l'amour- Allow me to make love to you

Je vais vous donner la fessée, si vous me posiez cette question à nouveau- I am going to give you the spanking, if you ask me this question again

Je t'aime si beaucoup. Je t'aimerai toujours - I love you so much. I always will

Ton corps est mon trésor- Your body is my treasure

Je t'aime et je t'aimerai toujours- I love you, I will always love you

Je suis là pour vous. Prenez ce que vous avez besoin- I here for you.
Take what you need

Before...

Rance turned off his car and sat there, staring at the small cozy cottage with the welcoming light burning in the window. There was something perverse about the homey feel the place gave off. Nothing could be further from the truth. This was no home. It felt wrong just being here. The small box nestled against his chest felt much heavier than the diamond and gold bracelet he knew to be inside. He didn't want to give it to the woman who waited behind the deceptively homey curtains. There was nothing at all remotely homey about the inside of that house. Everything had been carefully selected to enhance the sensual ambiance, including the woman.

Hell, he didn't even want to see the woman inside. The thought of her left a bad taste in his mouth. Once he had found her an adequate substitute for what he really wanted. She was a seasoned professional who wouldn't ask questions, would

never demand any more of his time than he was willing to give, and would never interfere with his life. He had bought this cottage just outside the city for his convenience as much as for her. He had wanted someone outside of the city, away from his normal life.

Far, far away from Jade.

It was ridiculous to feel this way. He owed Jade nothing, he hadn't even let her know his feelings for her. He couldn't. Although he had warned his grandmother, Lady Rienne, against it, she would try to tear Jade apart had he shown the least bit of interest. He was not fooled into thinking just because he had threatened to expose his grandmother for the fraud she was, she would ever leave Jade alone should he even attempt to be with her. Besides, the old woman had as many goods on him as he did on her.

The fates had conspired to make sure they ended up together. First, his cousin Thierry marries one of her best

friends, then his own twin marries another, and with his cousin Aubrey chasing after her law partner, it seemed the universe was demanding he take his woman and make her his.

Who was he to argue with the universe?

First things first; he had to break it off with Gabriella.

A snort of pure amusement escaped as he finally climbed out of the car, his freedom papers in hand. Gabriella Moriano his ass. Her real name was Jane Moore from Newark, New Jersey. A far cry from the Brazilian she claimed to be. Finding out her real name hadn't been hard, nor had it come as a shock. Rance had barely even raised a brow. In the world in which he lived "professional mistresses" came a dime a dozen; most of the women coming from the most mundane backgrounds imaginable. The more resourceful mistress was the more successful mistress; they reinvented themselves often creating exotic backgrounds. It was all part of some obscene play, all the actors aware it wasn't real, but clung to the illusion nonetheless.

No one ever dared to tread on another's fantasy of what their lives were, even if it would have been a kindness. Every person living the rich and powerful life closed their eyes and pretended everything was perfect with their universe, even while it was rotting at the core. It was as pathetic as it was ridiculous, but Rance was in no position to judge.

He was simply tired. Gabriella had long ago stopped being a relief and moved into the realm of being a dirty little secret. His closet was full to bursting with enough skeletons, some with decaying meat still clinging to the bones. The very last thing he needed was to add to his over abundant collection. The affair needed to end, even though he might never be able to claim what he really wanted. This "arrangement" wasn't even a cheap substitute for what he really craved. It didn't matter anymore how much he might suffer or need. This just wasn't cutting it.

“Rance! Sweetheart! I wasn’t expecting you!” Gabriella sprang to her feet, a flimsy negligee floating around her golden curves.

Not nearly curvy enough. Her hips weren’t the right fullness, her breasts far too stingy. At five feet ten inches, he suddenly found her far too tall. Her skin wasn’t the right shade; she simply wasn’t Jade.

It was absurd for her to claim she hadn’t been expecting him. She had been sprawled just so on a velvet chaise, chilled wine and two frosted glasses in ready reach. The lights were dim, soft music playing in the background. It was a scene set for seduction; all planned no doubt due to the message telling her exactly when he would be here tonight. The scene left a sour taste in his mouth. So contrived, so phony. There was nothing the slightest bit romantic to be found in this house. It was nothing short of high priced prostitution. He and every man like him who paid for women like Gabriella were fools to ever

believe it was anything else. It was base, dirty, and he needed to get the hell out of here as soon as possible.

“Sit down, Gabriella,” he told her curtly, trying to cut off any lovey-dovey shit before it began. He had no patience for that tonight. “We need to talk.”

Gabriella didn’t get to where she was today by being stupid, he could clearly see the wariness in her eyes. There couldn’t be an illusion she was anything more to Rance than an outlet. He had been painfully clear of what he expected, leaving no doubt this was a business arrangement. His shoulders tensed, His eyes narrowing. He was finished finding temporary comfort in her arms, she needed to understand that. Any move to become clingy would not be met with tact. He never had a hell of a lot off it anyway. He rarely came here anymore, she should have seen this coming.

It had been weeks since he had visited her last. When a man’s visits became less and less frequent or he started

avoiding her calls, it was time to find a new protector. A pro like Gabriella should have learned this lesson long ago. While her clientele were rarely as young and single as he was, she would find someone. She was good at it.

The ultimate goal for women like her was to find an old, insane, rich fool whose children are all grown up and out of the way and get him to marry you before things started to sag. Rance was too young, too rich, and had far too much common sense to fall into that trap. He was too shrewd to allow for even the possibility of an “accidental” pregnancy. He was not a man to lose control – ever.

“We can talk later,” she purred in the accent it took her years to perfect.

As she moved to try to rub her breasts against his chest, he countered, moving back and took hold of her shoulders to keep her at arm’s length. Damn it! He really didn’t need this. He detested scenes of any type. Women who threw themselves at

him got under his skin. Especially when he knew good and well this wasn't about him at all. Gabriella was enamored with his bank account.

"I didn't come here for that," Rance frowned at her. The growled Looked like it was turning her on. This was going very bad, very fast.

"Maybe just a little of this, no?"

Licking her peach shaded lips, she gracefully sank to her knees, making sure to keep her legs spread open as she gazed up at him through the lashes she paid a small fortune for. It was a stance Rance knew and understood well, one he had formerly rarely passed up on.

Rarely before today. He shot her a sneer of pure disdain. He was not amused. Moreover, he wasn't even a little turned on.

“Get up Gabriella, I told you I’m not here for that. I meant it.” Her stance only made him colder than he already was. Her faux submissive pose was callous at best, at worse... “Have a seat, please.”

He watched dispassionately as she dragged herself to the chaise and into what he supposed she thought was an alluring pose.

“Gabriella, I’m sorry, but this has to end.” He really hated this part. Ultimately, he had no one to blame but himself. This would be the last time he had to endure this distasteful scene. It just wasn’t worth it. In the beginning, Gabriella had helped stem his hunger, but as time went on, the ache had grown too strong to be assuaged by anyone but the woman who inspired it.

Jade. It always came back to Jade.

Compared to her, every other woman was a cheap imitation. She only had to look at him, hell, just being in the

same building and he was harder than granite. He could feel her under his skin. Her scent stayed with him always. The first time he had seen her strolling into the courtroom he had known there wouldn't be a wife other than her, and he couldn't ask her to chain herself to someone as emotionally handicapped as he was.

Rance couldn't afford dragging her into the muck with him.

He had made concessions to his grandmother for his twin at the cost of his very soul. He would have given more just so Remy could be free. Remy still believed the tiny piece of the puzzle he knew about Lady Rienne had bought his freedom; so be it. Remy didn't have a clue as to the depths Lady Rienne would go or the extent of her evil. The woman had no soul, much less a heart. Rance allowed him that delusion. The truth was too ugly.

“But...why?” Gabriella had begun to whine, bringing him back to the present. “Am I not everything you wish? Whatever it is you need, I can be for you!”

That was just it. She could never be what he needed. It didn’t matter how naturally submissive Gabriella was. It didn’t matter how desperate he was becoming. Even the thought of another woman’s touch had become abhorrent, not that he ever allowed any woman to ever touch him.

“As per the contract you signed, the house is yours. I have deposited the agreed upon amount in your account with an additional bonus to be added quarterly as long as you keep up to your part of the contract. You are never to contact me. If you need something before you are settled, you can contact the attorney listed here.” How odd. He sounded like he was closing a business deal. In a way, he guessed he was. It still seemed so mercenary.

“Don’t do this, Rance.” Gabriella’s voice was a soft whisper laced with just a hint of a sob. Her large green eyes shone with a film of unshed tears. Tears that wouldn’t fall because they were pure for affect. Rance had to wonder if she wasn’t perhaps biting the inside of her cheek to get that effect. She must have taken him for a complete fool.

“Don’t try to turn this into something it’s not,” he warned not bothering to mask his impatience. “We aren’t exactly talking about a love connection here.”

“But I have come to...to care for you!”

“We have an agreement.” His voice had gone from cold to icy. He was done with this. “I’ve been overly generous Gabriella, or should I call you Joan? Don’t make me regret it.”

“Please, Rance! What do I need to do?” She slid to her knees again, this time in pure panic. He knew whatever that was going to come out her mouth next would really piss him off, so he tried to brace himself. “If you are getting married I can

wait until you need me again! I will do anything! Anything at all!”

For a second, Rance believed she would. And he also knew why. He really, really hated this! He was done with all of it. The gold diggers, the subterfuge, the whole tawdry thing.

“Stop!” His voice boomed against the walls, echoing in the room. “There is no point in this. Take the house, the money, and be done with it. You don’t love me, I don’t love you. Really Gabriella, have a little pride!” It was low, but really, did she think he was a fool? “Don’t contact me,” he warned ominously. “You will regret it.”

He threw his set of keys on the table and walked away. There was no slamming the door for Rance. No, he was too classy for that.

Chapter One

“Good morning, *petit*. You are looking lovely today.”

Jade flushed, muttering an embarrassed hello in Rance’s general direction. She didn’t believe for a second she looked “lovely”, but Rance Chevalier was too much of a gentleman not to give her a compliment, as he did whenever she saw him. She doubted he ever really looked at her. She was just the awkward friend of two of his cousins’ wives. She could never hope to catch the attention of someone like Rance. Ever since Katrina had been going through this thing with Aubrey, Rance had started showing up at the law office she shared with Katrina. Like she needed him or something. She might be socially

gauche but she was a very good lawyer. It seemed all the Chevaliers had some kind of damsel in distress fantasy thing going on. Who the heck did she need protection from?

Not only did she not understand why he kept coming by the firm, or why he always sidled-up to her at gatherings. It was unnerving. She couldn't help but feel jumpy and unsure around him. Like any second he would see that she was carrying a major torch for him. Man, she would just die if he ever found out she fantasized about him almost every night. Rance was so far out of her league it wasn't even funny. She wasn't sophisticated and genteel like Angelique, nor as self-assured as Regina, and nowhere near as sexy and outgoing as Katrina. No, she was cut out to marry a quiet country lawyer type, someone not so handsome or dashing but steady and placid. In other words, the complete opposite of Rance.

"Lilac really does wonders to your skin, *petit*. You should wear that color more often."

Okay, so he looked at her clothes, but that didn't mean he was looking at her. Every time he made a statement like that she found herself over-analyzing it. She really needed to stop that. Perhaps it would be best to take a step back from the whole clan. Unfortunately, that would mean not seeing her best friends, who were more like sisters. Right now, with Regina expecting and Katrina dealing with the sudden appearance of her evil stepfather, Jade didn't really want to be parted from them.

She could just stick to the twice monthly brunches and phone calls. It would probably be safer. That way she wouldn't have to deal with the Chevalier men. They just had way too much testosterone; in fact, they were a little too virile. Although Jade had three older brothers, she was never comfortable around most men in general. Her brothers loved her, coddled her, protected her. Them, she could deal with. They didn't want

a thing from her. She never knew what guys wanted; be it a friend or a boyfriend.

“Petit?”

Jade jumped, swinging her eyes to his face. Oh man, was that a mistake. Rance wasn't just handsome, he was beautiful. Not in any kind of feminine way. He was undeniably all male. Most people thought Thierry was the most handsome of the Chevalier men, but Jade was convinced it was Rance. His face was harsher than Thierry's, perhaps, thicker, his muscles a little more developed and defined. He was like an older, more mature version of his twin Remy. Remy always looked as if he was on the verge of laughter. Rance looked like he'd forgotten how to smile. Even when he was being all nice to her he had this intense look about him.

“Oh, yes?” Had he said something to her? She had been looking right at him, but her mind had wandered.

“I asked if you would like to go to lunch.” He smiled. It looked kind of painful. His full, sensual lips stretched awkwardly up on one side while the other side stayed down.

Blinking, Jade wished she could tell him he really didn’t have to smile, she was fine with his usual scowl. That was one hundred percent Rance, which was just fine with her.

“Actually, I’m having lunch with Didier.” He was far safer and most of all, not a Chevalier. There was something about him that reminded her of the clan, but he was much easier to get along with. Plus, he was fun to hang out with. “He called this morning.”

The smile was gone in a heartbeat which should have been a relief. Only, what replaced it was beyond a scowl. A fierce predatory light gleamed in his aquamarine eyes, his jaw line becoming hard as granite. There was even a little tick at the bottom of his left cheek. Okay, so Rance didn’t like Didier. That

was a first. She had always thought they got along fine; looks like she was wrong.

“I’ll join you.” It wasn’t a request, it was a command. One Jade didn’t understand.

“Um, well I can call him and ask...”

“Trust me, he won’t mind at all,” Rance cut her off sitting in one of the chairs around the small round conference table in the corner of her office.

Jade had been replacing some of the active case files into the oak cabinet she kept in her office. She had a wild urge to scurry back behind her desk and hide away from his direct gaze, but she didn’t. She had to learn how to deal with this man, especially given that she had agreed to be godmother to Regina’s child. Given that child would be his niece or nephew, she would probably be seeing a lot of Rance in her future.

Then again maybe not. Remy and Rance might be twins, but they weren't close. Sometimes Jade wondered why, but it was really none of her business. That whole family had a wealth of Southern style secrets, which meant they were waist deep and as murky as the swamps. It was always best to know as little as possible so as not to be sucked in. Jade was never particularly fond of the swamps that surrounded her home city. She actually had a deep seated fear of being lost out there and eaten by something, or a lot of little dangerous somethings. One too many people had disappeared over the years.

"Rance? It's only ten o'clock," Jade pointed out, hoping he wasn't really planning on sitting there until lunch time. "Didier is picking me up at twelve."

"Am I bothering you?" His voice had gotten a tad on the husky side, sending chill bumps blossoming across her skin underneath her dress suit. He did that more and more often, which confused the heck out of her. She had known Rance

longer than she'd known any of the other Chevalier men. She had opposed him in court often enough, winning four out of five of the cases against his clients. The only one she hadn't won outright was on appeal. He had always been cordial, overly so sometimes. He had always looked at her like he was trying to figure something out. She wished she knew what he was thinking.

Once upon a time she had imagined he was secretly attracted to her. Before Angelique had married his cousin Thierry. After Thierry and Angelique's marriage came Regina and Remy, the twin, and now Katrina and Aubrey, the other cousin. No matter how hard Katrina was trying to push Aubrey away, that man wasn't going anywhere. Everyone but Katrina knew it. Jade had gotten to know Rance a heck of a lot better, and her daydreams had flown right out the window. He'd never done or said anything either way, but Jade knew when she was swimming upstream. He was way too intense. She

couldn't recall seeing him in a serious relationship. She honestly didn't think he was capable.

For whatever reason he had decided he was going to protect her from the mysterious ghosts or whatever the hell the Chevalier men were always on the lookout for. Yeah, their grandmother was bat shit crazy, but that didn't have a thing to do with her. She wasn't trying to join the family. Plus, Thierry seemed to have Lady Rienne, as everyone called her, on a very short leash. And again, their family issues were none of her business as long as it didn't affect her friends.

"You don't bother me at all." A lie, pure and simple, and she was going to have to go to confession tonight. Seemed like Rance just brought that out in her. If she wasn't thinking those naughty nighttime thoughts about the man, she was lying to him.

"Good, I'll stay here in my little corner and wait."

This wasn't going so well, and Rance knew it. Honestly, in all his thirty-seven years he'd never had a real relationship. He had no idea how to go about it. He couldn't just seduce Jade. It would probably scare the shit out of her. He'd missed out on all the angst of teenage love, first dates or asking a woman out. Sex had always been more of a business deal than anything else. It was mercenary but it had never bothered him before now. There had never been a time in his life when sex wasn't more of an exchange of money or power.

It was senseless to dwell on the whys, so he didn't. He pushed those thoughts so far away they were locked in the back corner of his mind, banished from the light of day. His sole focus was now Jade. Too bad he didn't have a fucking clue how to proceed. To make matters worse, Didier was becoming far too interested in the woman he had marked as his own. He was going to have to have a serious talk with the cocky Canadian.

Family ties aside, he would stomp a hole in his dear, long lost cousin if Didier didn't watch it.

Sitting in her office three out of five days a week was probably not his most inspired idea. For one thing, watching her made his dick so hard he could cut wood. It boggled the mind how a woman with such a delightfully luscious figure could be so completely unaware of her own innate sensuality. She was built like one of those old time soda bottles; large, drool worthy breasts tapering down to a squeezable waist before flaring out to form hips that had a man begging to hang on. He saw her ass in his dreams, full, high and round. His hands literally itched when he watched it. He tried not to, Lord knows he tried. It never worked. It seemed to call out his name. Beyond that, there was some indescribable quality that made him want to pick her and keep her safe. She brought forth every protective instinct known to man, and not just in him. She never noticed the men

in her wake just chomping at the bit to lock her away for their very own.

He was so fucked. It was getting harder and harder to be near her and not touch her. She was just so sweet. Rance knew he wasn't an easy lover; he just hoped he could ease her into it. He was going to have her. There was no doubt about it. He would just have to learn how to court, date, or whatever they called it. Hell, he'd read women's magazines, books, even researched it on the internet, but he still didn't have a clue as to how to broach the subject. And what the hell was the subject anyway? Hey Jade, you wanna get with me and have some babies?

"Hey, good looking. You ready to go?"

Rance started at Didier's entrance. How long had he been staring at her brooding? She never said a word, but he could tell by the obvious relief of Didier's arrival she had been unnerved by his presence. Of course, she would never say anything, and

he probably wouldn't stop coming over to her offices anyway.

He didn't have any other card to play.

"Um, yeah. Rance is going to join us, is that okay?" She cast a wary look in his direction like he would jump on the man right here in her office. Like that would earn him any brownie points. He fully intended to wait until after lunch when he escorted his secret woman-stealing-cousin to an abandoned warehouse somewhere and kick the shit out of him.

"I told you Didier wouldn't mind at all, *petit*. Do you, Didier?"

Ah, but the look the other man gave him brought a true smile to his face. Not one of the ones he tried to force. That's right, Didi. Suck it. At one time, they had been almost close. Not as close as he was to Thierry and Aubrey, but while they were serving in the military under Rance's father they had been something like friends. Didier knew how he felt about Jade.

This little game Didier was playing didn't even begin to amuse him.

"No problem. That scowl of his will keep the undesirables away." Rance wasn't fooled by the easy banter or the bright grin. Didier was irritated. He needed to be, damn it. "Plus, I have something important to ask you."

Rance had a pretty good idea what Didier wanted to ask. Angelique's charity ball was coming up, and there was no way in hell he was letting his cousin get the jump on asking his woman to escort him. Yep, it was a good thing he decided to stop by today.

Chapter Two

Jade bit her lip looking nervously between Didier and Rance. Both men seemed to be bristling with pure male agitation, like both considered the other man stepping on his territory. With three brothers she knew the signs. If only it was really about her. She was in no way fooled that it was. It was just macho energy, which both men had in spades.

“So Rance, what brought you to Jade’s office? Word is she’s a better lawyer than you, so you couldn’t be helping out.”

Didier leaned back in the chair of the small outdoor café, his body supposedly at complete ease.

Jade wasn’t so easily fooled. He was primed, ready to pounce at a moment’s notice. Rance wasn’t any better.

“I like being near Jade.”

That was all he said, his eyes giving Didier an unblinking stare. It was a little frightening actually.

“You’re creeping her out.” Didier certainly wasn’t pulling any punches.

“And you’re-” Whatever Rance was about to say was abruptly cut off as the waitress chose that moment to come take their orders.

Jade was more than grateful for her sudden appearance, even if she was flirting hard with both men and completely dismissing her presence. As much as it irritated her, she understood completely. Both men had dangerously handsome looks, the kind to make a woman shiver. Didier could pour on the French Canadian accent like nobody’s business. And Rance, well, that dark, thick voice of his had hints of the Old Louisiana. French Creole of the original kind; direct lineage from French aristocracy.

She, on the other hand, was the regular African-American. She was proud of her roots, but there was hardly anything mysterious about it. Plus, the waitress wouldn’t have

been impressed unless she was a lesbian, which she obviously was not.

“I’ll just bet y’all are hungry,” the brassy brunette actually winked at Didier, then flashed Rance a coy grin while looking at him through obviously fake lashes. “Can I interest you in today’s special? It’s enough to fill two big boys like you right up.”

Jade wanted to sink into the sidewalk when Rance actually scowled at the woman. He was never one for blatant come-ons. She noticed that about him, though it didn’t stop women from throwing themselves at him. Jade could have sworn it made him uncomfortable. One would think he would be used to it.

“I think you should take the lady’s order first.” Didier pointedly looked down at the menu he had all but ignored before.

The waitress seemed a little taken aback. She probably flirted with male customers a lot. Who could blame her? She was young, pretty with a near perfect figure. She probably made excellent tips and got more than a few offers to boot. Jade felt her face burn when the woman turned surprised eyes in her direction, like she was just noticing her.

“Sure thing. What would you like?” Polite, but just barely. Wow, like she did something to the chick.

“I’ll just have the salmon salad with a water with lemon please.”

The waitress quickly scribbled it down then turned with a bright smile to Didier. “And you, sweetie?”

“*Cherie*, you should eat more than that.” Didier ignored the woman completely, focusing his complete attention on Jade. “A sandwich maybe? We could share the King Louie platter.”

“No, really I’m not all that hungry.” She was starving. Her trainer had her on a protein shake for breakfast which did little to fill her up. She was usually dying by lunchtime. She had to content herself with a mere salad, guaranteeing she would develop a headache by three o’clock every day.

“The lady will have the Oyster Pan Roast to start, two plates. For an entrée she’ll have a Creole Seasoned Petite Filet Mignon, medium. I’ll have the same. We will both have red wine with the meal, chef’s choice. Didier?”

Jade couldn’t look up. She could practically feel the heated daggers the waitress was throwing at her. She didn’t need to see it.

“I’ll have the same, though we’ll all share the starter. That okay with you, *cherie*?” She really, really wished Didier would stop calling her that. It made Rance make this growling sound low in his throat. Plus, she was hardly his anything.

“Fine.”

The conversation lapsed a little when the waitress stalked away, no doubt pissed at the lack of attention. Jade just didn't know what to say or do. She wasn't buying it that this was about her. She had no idea what was going on, but she didn't like being in the middle.

"So, are you going to Angelique's charity ball Saturday? I would love to escort you." Didier shocked her with that one. If she had any inkling he would ask she never would have agreed to go with someone else. Unfortunately she had. She just hadn't wanted to be stuck with Rance or Piers out of pity for her unattached state. Didier was safe, he was nice, but he wasn't really boyfriend material. Jade had no idea how long he'd even be in New Orleans for one thing. He worked for or with Thierry, she wasn't sure which. She knew he watched Rance's evil, crazy grandmother, even lived in her house. What else he did for the Chevaliers was a mystery, and Jade got a feeling it wasn't all above board.

Jade was a simple woman. She liked simple things. Didier was a great friend, sexy as hell, but way too complex. Besides that, her hopeless crush on Rance wouldn't allow her to think of him as more than a friend even though she was a little attracted. She always felt she was being unfaithful to Rance whenever she contemplated anything other than friendship with Didier.

"I already have a date." She might be crazy but she swore Rance relaxed a little. "Sorry, I wish you had asked me sooner, but I already promised." Rance was tense again. He confused the hell out of her.

"Are you sure you don't want to ditch him and go with me? Otherwise, I'll be all by my lonesome." The pathetic look Didier tried to pull off was just too funny not to laugh out loud at.

“Don’t worry you won’t be alone for long. And I’m sure you can find another date,” she laughed at his antics, relaxing just a little.

“Ah, but if I can’t go with you, precious gem, no other woman will do,” Didier lifted her hand to his lips, causing Rance to do that growling thing again.

Jade jerked her hand away before she could catch herself. She wanted to die right there as she looked at Didier in horror. Oh man, that was rude. Thankfully, he laughed, even if the laughter never reached his eyes.

“I understand. Rance is just an old bear, isn’t he?” Like he was daring Rance to do something, Didier lifted an oyster shell to her lips. “Open up, sweetheart.”

There was something about a huskily whispered order that had her opening her mouth before she thought twice about it. Didier’s smoky blue-gray eyes held her captive as he watched with insane intensity as she opened, sliding the baked oyster

into her mouth. Using his finger he softly closed her mouth, watching it as she chewed.

“Good?” Had his voice gotten deeper? Her heart skipped a beat as she nodded weakly. Didier was beyond seductive when he wanted to be.

“Ah, here comes the entrées,” Rance said a little too loudly, snapping Jade’s attention back to him.

He was pissed. A tic formed in his lower jaw as his eyes turned almost pure green instead of their normal turquoise.

The waitress tried her best to snag both men’s attention as she leaned over placing Didier and Rance’s plates in front of them first. She thrust out her breasts, even rubbing it slightly against Rance’s arm. In return, he leaned away, scowling even harder at the woman. There weren’t many people immune to that look, the waitress wasn’t one of them. Maybe that’s why she virtually threw Jade’s plate in front of her before trying to turn away. Trying and failing due to the hand that shot out and

grasped her arm. Rance dropped his hand from her skin as soon as she stilled.

“Pick that plate up and place in front of the lady.”

Now Jade really wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere. That voice was deadly; so icy cold Jade had chills. The woman did exactly as she was told, all the color draining from her face.

“If you value your job, you will treat this woman like a queen whenever she’s here, you understand?”

The waitress nodded in quick jerking movements, almost to the point of tears. Jade felt so bad for her she tried to make it better.

“Rance, I’m sure it was an accident.” It wasn’t, but Rance had scared the woman to death. “I’m sure she didn’t mean anything.”

He didn’t answer her. He just threw her a smile, a genuine one this time, trading plates with her. He even reached

over and started to cut her steak into bite sized chunks, casting a sidelong dismissive glance at the waitress as an afterthought.

“It’d be best if you left now,” Didier supplied, not bothering to look at the terrified woman.

Great, just great. Jade could never come here again. There was just no way she could face anyone who had stopped to stare again.

“Why don’t you let me take you home, *petit*. You’re tired.”

Although Didier had come back to Jade’s office with them, he had long since left. Had Rance any concept of guilt, he would have felt a little bad. Didier was going to babysit Lady Rienne, which by all rights should have been one of the grandsons who actually grew up with the witch. He didn’t feel anything but relief to see the back side of his cousin. Aubrey

had warned him that Didier was becoming close to Jade; too close. He wasn't about to cede a damn thing, even if Didier could possibly be the better man. Unlike his cousin, Rance had a lot of skeletons in the deep recesses of his closet. He should have walked away and left her alone.

It just wasn't possible. Every time he was around Jade he felt her warmth. Sparks of real human emotion lit him up inside. It had been so long since he felt anything at all beyond basic functions. She brought light and color to his otherwise gray world. What man could walk away from that? Didier be damned, she was his.

"Yeah, I think I ate too much."

Rance hid a grin at her confession. Of course, she had eaten too much, he had fed her. If he were honest, he would admit Didier helped, but fuck being honest. If his cousin wanted a war, he got one, and Rance wasn't giving up.

"Come on, *catin*. Let's go." He barely gave her time to have her secretary cancel her appointments and give the three paralegals instructions. He didn't want to give her time to change her mind.

"Why do you speak Cajun?" Jade waited until he had her strapped into the car before she spoke. Of all the things to ask him, that had to be the least on her mind, but he was willing to play along.

"Women like it." He had no idea if that was true or not. It seemed plausible.

Jade didn't come out and call him a liar. She didn't have to. Her frown spoke volumes, her adorable little nose all crinkled as she regarded him with steady silence.

"When I was a kid we had this Cajun groundskeeper out at the old plantation. I used to follow him around a lot. He taught me how to fish and hunt, how to survive in the swamps. I picked it up from him."

It was amazing how easy the confession sprang from his lips. He had never told anyone that. He wasn't one for sharing.

"That's sweet. I can see you as a little boy following a big ole Cajun around all day."

There went another smile. When he wasn't forcing it, it felt kind of nice. "You can, can you, *cher*?" It boggled the mind. People never saw Rance as a child. He sometimes forgot he was ever so young. "Jade, I want you to do something for me."

"Sure, what is it?"

"Promise me you'll do it first." He was about to play dirty, but that was the Chevalier way. He would do whatever he had to.

"Okay, I promise." She said it without missing a beat. Her voice clear and strong, like she trusted him.

An unfamiliar pang pierced his heart. She trusted him. And he was about to manipulate her.

“Call your date for the ball and cancel. I need you to go with me.” He had to hold his breath and pray she would go through with it. Outwardly, he was the picture of cool calm, as always. Inside he was a mess. She would be well within her rights to tell him to go fly a kite.

“Okay, Rance.” Not only did she agree, she did it right there, calling the man in her cell and breaking the date. It was such a little thing, a simple acquiescence to his will, and it made his dick so hard he had to shift in his seat. “Now tell me why.”

Even as he racked his brain for a plausible excuse, the truth seemed to just fall out of his mouth. “Didier saw Lady Rienne leave the home of my former mistress. I am worried she may have some idea of hurting you, and I can’t have that.”

She didn’t ask him anything else, nor did she look at him. Instead, she stared out the window for the rest of the ride to her house. Damn, now he felt like a first class shit. It was why he wanted Jade with him, but he also just wanted her to go with

him. He wanted her on his arm everywhere he went. He couldn't tell her that part, it might scare her away.

He couldn't get over the feeling he'd hurt her by mentioning another woman. In fact, he knew he had. He was just going to have to make it up to her because there wasn't a thing he could do about it now.

Chapter Three

The day had been a disaster, but at least Rance had stopped Didier from asking Jade to the ball. It turned out she already had a date, and now, she was going to go with him, that much had been taken care of. He hadn't wanted to press the issue in front of Didier. He didn't want the other man to know just how soft her heart was. He should've felt guilty for pressuring her to cancel her date, but damned if he did. Jade was his. In his mind, she always had been. He just had no idea how to bring what he already knew would be into reality.

That's what brought him to his brother's front door. Although Regina was only six months pregnant, somehow Remy had gotten her to cut back the hours she worked in her office. It was Monday, so both would be home. Remy's café wasn't open on Mondays. Rance kind of wished Regina was still working at her office full time; it would have been far easier to

go see her surrounded by the trappings of her profession. Regina was a licensed psychiatrist and the only person Rance knew of who could help him with his problem.

He stood on the porch staring at the doorbell of the quaint cottage the newlyweds lived in whenever they stayed in the city. Funny, he never considered himself a wuss before. It was just galling to have to admit to another human being that he, Rance Chevalier, Asshole Supreme of the Chevalier clan didn't know the first thing about male-female relationships. Remy was going to eat this shit up.

"Hell," he muttered to himself ringing the doorbell. Standing here like a fool wasn't going to make things any easier.

The sight that greeted him as the door swung open had Rance backing up a step. He and Remy may be twins, but anyone could easily tell them apart. They were the same height, had the same dark hair, the same aquamarine eyes, the same general features but that was where the similarities ended.

Rance was thicker than his twin. In a tailored suit that was usually his outfit of choice it wasn't that noticeable, but in the t-shirt and jeans he had on today, Rance resembled a boxer whereas his twin had more of a swimmers build.

"Are you feeling all right?" Remy asked when he saw him. "Did your penthouse burn down? Did someone steal all your clothes?" Remy's eyes always seemed to be laughing at something. Sometimes Rance envied that. Of course, it had been his choice, his goal to make sure his brother never hid in the shadows that he knew his own eyes harbored. Didn't stop him from wondering what it would be like.

Envy of Remy's obvious mirth didn't surface today, however. Remy's usual longish curly Lord Byron hairstyle was in wild disarray, his shirt hanging open to reveal a bare chest and there was something smoking in his hand. It looked like some kind of metal comb with a thick wooden handle. There

seemed to be chunks of hair stuck in it. Hair that was still smoking.

“Remy, where’s Regina?” Rance asked carefully, trying really hard to resist the urge to tackle his brother and wrestle the thing in his hand away from him. Remy was a lot of things, but insane wasn’t one of them, right?

“Very funny. This,” Remy waved the metal comb thing in front of his face, “is not from my wife.”

Stepping back, Remy waved him inside as if all were perfectly normal, like he showed up on his brother’s door every day. There was slight tension in his body as he moved, but he didn’t try to block Rance or even ask why he had chosen to show up now.

“So what brings you here?” Remy asked it as if there was nothing at all unusual about finding his twin on his doorstep, but they both knew that wasn’t true.

To say they weren't close was a gross understatement. He purposely avoided his brother. Remy might be a practical joker, but he was way too perceptive. Rance had made his choice long ago. He didn't regret it, but he wouldn't explain it. Not to Remy. He had done what he had to do to make sure his twin had some kind of chance at a normal life. A price had to be paid, and he paid it. There was no regret in that, just a sadness that his actions had pushed away the one person in the world he was supposed to be closest to.

"I'm here to see your wife, actually." He felt uncharacteristically uncomfortable. Remy was watching him a little too closely. There wasn't much he could hide from him. He sensed it when Rance was troubled; one of the many reasons he stayed away.

"My wife?" Remy blinked. "The psychiatrist? That wife?"

Rance raised a brow. "You have more than one?"

He had to look away. He didn't want Remy seeing his vulnerability. He could barely tolerate feeling it.

He focused on the living room instead, stopping dead in his tracks. The place certainly felt like a home. The living room was bathed in natural light let in by the floor-to-ceiling bay windows. The décor was contemporary, at odds with the older neighborhood within the French Quarter. Outside, Spanish moss clung from majestic trees like ghosts of the city's past. The face of the homes lining the street brought to mind a time of horses and carts instead of cars and pollution. Inside, the home's burnt orange, muted golds, wheat and russet furnishings invited a visitor to sink into the large overstuffed couch or comfortable large chairs scattered about. Abstract paintings hung on the walls, modern miniature sculptures graced the corners of the room. The smell of fresh baked bread and desserts lingered in the air.

It would have been comforting if it wasn't for the scattered mannequin heads around the room, all looking as if they had been mutilated. There were multiple burns on their waxy smiling faces, some melted in scattered places, some had half the hair burnt off, others had partially straight, partially matted hair in clumps. It was rather macabre looking, completely out of place for the otherwise domestic bliss the home seemed to portray.

Given that Remy lived here, Rance would have expected something a little off. But this, this was a little much.

"She won't let me do her hair." Remy plopped down in a large chair as if that explanation made perfect sense.

"Excuse me?" Rance tried not to let his eyes wander back to the burned, abused looking heads, but he just couldn't help himself. Especially the one whose entire left side of the face was melted. How the hell did Remy manage to do that with that

little comb? And where the hell did the hair go on the ones with large patches missing?

“Regina won’t let me do her hair until I straighten the hair on one of these things without burning it.”

Rance blinked, trying to assimilate it all in his brain. Nope, he couldn’t do it. “Um, Remy you know these things are all plastic right?” When his brother just stared at him like he didn’t get his meaning, Rance was forced to explain. “If that metal comb in your hand is hot, it will melt the plastic. Heat does that to plastic. It melts it, you know?”

Remy started unblinking for a full minute, his face going from ashen gray to molten red. Rance almost felt sorry for him. If it wasn’t so funny, he would have.

“Regina!” Jumping to his feet Remy carefully wrapped the still smoking instrument of torture in a hand towel, then placed it on the coffee table. Rance stared at the thing, half

expecting it to burn through the towel and set the wood on fire.

It didn't though. Odd that.

"Stop bellowing, I'm just in the other room." A visibly pregnant Regina waltzed into the room as if all were right with the world. "Oh, Rance. I didn't know Remy was expecting you. Remy, clean this mess up."

"You tricked me," Remy accused, pouting like a four year old kid. Ah man, that was just pitiful.

Is this what love did to a man? Is this what he had to look forward to?

No, Remy was Remy and Regina was Regina. They had their own special dynamic going on. After all, Thierry hadn't changed all that much since marrying Angelique; he was still as autocratic as ever, he was just softer with it. And Aubrey was finally showing his true self. From what Rance could gather, a woman only accentuated what was already there. Remy had always been playful. Pathetic was new, but he wasn't about to

point it out. Besides, if Jade changed him so be it. It could only be for the better. Living a half life was no way to live at all. His brother and cousins had shown him that with their new lives. Rance wanted to feel that for himself.

“No, I didn’t. I was simply showing you how difficult doing a black woman’s hair is. Now you’ll stop asking.”

Poor Remy. He really didn’t stand a chance against his wife. Rance knew he didn’t mind at all. Regina’s simple explanation seemed to appease his twin somewhat.

“My brother came by to see you,” he announced heading out of the room. “I’ll be sulking in the bedroom.”

My brother. Two simple words, with a wealth of meaning. Remy had never called him his brother before, not to others. Most time he barely acknowledged they were related. Rance really couldn’t say he blamed him. The words touched him in a way he hadn’t expected. Seemed as if Jade was making him all kinds of sappy even if he didn’t show it.

Forcing down emotions was something in which Rance excelled. Lately he found himself feeling more and more. It was kind of like thawing out after a long frost. The emotions often stung as they were awakened, but he didn't want to go back to not feeling them. He would just have to learn to deal.

"If you're here about Jade, I'm not going to tell you anything she's told me in confidence." Regina cut right to the chase, eliminating all need for the usual small talk to ease into a subject.

"I wouldn't expect you to." Why would she? Jade was her friend. He was just her husband's asshole brother. "I'm not here to talk about her. Not directly."

Regina looked slightly surprised, which made Rance inordinately uncomfortable. The woman was rarely surprised by anything. She had obviously noted his interest in her friend. It made the subject a little easier.

"I'm listening."

Damn, this was hard. He just wasn't the kind of man to openly discuss his feelings. He wasn't really the kind of man who had them. He had been so used to squashing normal human emotions he had no idea where to begin.

"How does one go about this dating thing?" That didn't sound right. "What I meant to say was, if a man has interest in a woman, how would he go about letting this woman know of his said interest?" There, that was better.

"Are you seriously asking me how to ask Jade out?" Regina looked at him like he just announced he was really an alien from Mars. "Don't you, uh, know? I mean, you just ask her."

Rance squirmed in his seat. "Yeah, well, I don't date much."

"Much?"

She was really going to make him say it. "Look, I don't date."

"You don't say." He really didn't like the look crossing her face. It was the look of a therapist about to go digging. And, damn it, she was enjoying this.

"Look, Regina I'm not here for a session. I just need to know how to, uh, how to do the whole relationship thing." There it was all out in the open. "What does she like? Do I buy her flowers or something?"

"Wow." Regina sat back in her chair just staring. "Yeah, you know Rance, I really can't tell you how to make a woman like you. I can just suggest you be yourself. Share yourself a little and see if you click. There are no hard and fast rules, you just put yourself out there and see where it goes." Great, that wasn't helping at all. He was just as confused as he was before. It must have shown because Regina took pity on him. "Look, you're not exactly barking up the wrong tree if this is about

Jade, and I'm pretty sure it is. Just be careful. Jade doesn't have a hell of a lot experience. If you hurt her, I'll kick your ass."

Regina would never know how Jade's lack of experience, as she put it, made his cock jump to attention and his palms sweat. He figured as much. Hurting her was the last thing he intended to do. The little ray of hope she had given him was enough. Time for him to make a move.

"What the fuck, Thierry? Rance and Jade? You have to be fucking kidding me! He is just too...too...hell I don't know, but he isn't right for her!"

Didier couldn't remember ever being as pissed as he was right now. Rance sniffing around Jade? When the hell had this happened?

“He’s wanted her for a very long time.” Thierry was as calm as always, never surprised by the events that swirled around him.

Thierry made it his business to know any and everything about his family members. Hell, Didier had been one of his main assets. Having trained with their Uncle Boden in the Navy Special Forces, he was quite good at finding a needle in a haystack. He never saw this coming. He had never noticed Rance’s interest in Jade.

“I don’t give a flying fuck how long he has wanted her.” And honestly, Didier could care less. Jade was too fucking special for a jackass like Rance. Blood or no, some things are just plain wrong.

While he paced Thierry’s den, he noted the other man wasn’t saying a word, which shouted a hell of a lot. He was up against it, and he had no real allies here. Thierry might have been a stand up guy, but he was close to Rance. He would side

with Rance. They had grown up together, like brothers. They'd protected the younger ones together while Didier was growing up in a happy, well adjusted family. If it were any other thing, any other situation, he might have backed off. He could've been able to bow out and let Rance have whatever it was he thought he needed. But not with Jade. That cold-ass son of a bitch was too withdrawn for her.

"I shouldn't have come here." What the hell had he been thinking to bring his issues to Thierry. Like the guy would ever side with him. "You are probably happy as hell Rance wants to get with Jade. It completes your little group."

Thierry never blinked. "Don't presume to know what I'm thinking, Didi. I happen to agree with you."

It was absurd to feel the surge of hope rushing through him, but Didier felt it nonetheless.

"Look, it's not that I don't want the man to be happy. Whatever the hell that means for Rance. She's just too sweet for

someone like him, Thierry. The man is dark. There's just something not...right about him. Not when it comes to females. I've never even seen him pick a woman up, you know? Has he ever had a relationship outside of paying for it?"

"Not to my knowledge, no."

Didier just stared then. Not to his knowledge? There was nothing but nothing about the family, here or in Canada that Thierry didn't know. The man had managed to track him down in the middle of the Columbian jungle when his sister thought she was going to marry some drugged out asshole after her money. He'd been the one to make sure Didier and Rance wound up on the same CIA Special Forces team under Boden's command. Thierry was still the one who ran the massive conglomerate from his home while pretending to be an amateur painter.

"He never has, has he?"

Thierry didn't answer.

“Fuck, Thierry that’s just not normal.”

“Neither had I, Didi. In fact, I’m pretty sure only Aubrey and Remy had. So, if you’re looking for me to stop this, I won’t. But I won’t stand in your way as you fight it out. Jade is important to my wife, so she’s important to me. I won’t let anyone hurt her, meaning you or Rance.”

That was as close as it was going to come to having Thierry’s blessing. Didier couldn’t ask for more.

“Just be warned, Rance hasn’t exactly softened since you served with him. Don’t expect him to move aside. Now, tell me when are you planning on making a trip to the Great White North, and who exactly are you bringing back?”

Knowing the Jade conversation was over, Didier told Thierry of his plans to shut down Lady Rienne for once and for all. In the back of his mind he was making plans. He knew Rance would somehow get Jade to come to the ball with him,

but he would be damned if his cousin would leave with her. He could wait, for now.

Chapter Four

Jade paced her bedroom contemplating the gown on her bed. Alongside it were under things she would've never dared to buy for herself, complete with a corset and thigh-high genuine silk stockings that clipped to the bottom of the corset. Every article of clothing was jade-green; she guessed it was supposed to be ironic. It was beautiful, watered silk with delicate embroidery running down the side. There were even four inch jade sling-back heels that looked deadly. All her size. All bought by the man wearing a path through her living room rug.

She had planned to go to the ball with Victor Martinez, a real estate attorney with a nice smile and sunny disposition. He wasn't Chevalier handsome with their jet black hair and stunning aqua eyes, but he was decent. She had started to get on with her life and stop dreaming about something that would just never happen. Victor was the kind of guy she needed. Steady and dependable, liked kids, wasn't so handsome that he believed the world revolved around him. Somehow Rance had managed to talk her into cancelling with Victor and agreeing to go with him. He used Katrina's stepfather and their little brush with the man during brunch as an excuse.

And now this. She had to admit this dress was a hell of a lot nicer than the one she had been planning to wear. It was also way more form fitting. She didn't quite know what to make of the gift, if that's what it was supposed to be. Maybe he didn't want her to embarrass him. It didn't seem like the kind of thing Rance would do, but why else would he do it?

“Do you need any help?”

Jade jumped at the deep, honey-smooth voice right next to her ear. She never heard him open her bedroom door. Come to think of it, that was mighty bold of him to just let himself inside her room knowing she was dressing. So many sharp retorts sprang to the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed them when she felt the light brush of his fingertips along her collar bone. Oh, Lord the man made her weak in the knees. The whys didn't really matter when he turned on that Louisiana “bad boy” vibe. And people thought Remy was the playboy! Rance had his brothers and his cousins beat hands down, and he wasn't even trying.

Clutching the oversized, thick terrycloth towel tighter around her, Jade couldn't do more than shake her head. If she opened her mouth, he would surely hear all the barely suppressed desire in her voice. There was no way in hell she was letting that cat out of the bag. Yeah, she wanted him, but

unless she had any clear sign he was doing more than flirting, she was keeping that to herself.

She couldn't hold a man like Rance. He was too virile, too intense. Jade had a total of five sexual experiences, all with the same person and none of them good. She couldn't hope to hold a man like him. She wouldn't know where to begin.

"I hope I didn't offend you by buying this." Rance's voice had taken on a kind of purring quality. His accent was thicker. Her nipples pebbled painfully underneath the towel. "I saw it and I just knew it was perfect for you. I really wanted to see you in it. You'll wear it for me won't you, *petit*?"

"Yes." Was that her, sounding all breathy like that?

"Will you let me help you put it on?"

Now that she wasn't so sure about. Biting her bottom lip she eyed the clothes on her bed skeptically. She couldn't stand there naked in front of him. He was probably used to sleek, sexy

women. Jade was not that. She had curves; more than so than any of her friends. Although she worked out regularly she still had a slight rounded bump to her stomach. She wasn't obese or anything, but she wasn't model material.

"I tell you what," Rance broke into her thoughts. "I'll wait outside the door while you put it on, and I'll come in and lace you up, okay?"

Whew! That she could do. "Okay. Give me just a minute."

She could still feel the ghost of his touch even after he softly closed the door. She swore she could feel him on the other side. Hurrying, she stepped into the corset, tightening the contraption as best she could before shimmying into the gown. It wasn't nearly as tight as she thought it would be. Taking a glance in the mirror she had to admit, it looked good. She had to hold the dress up but it really brought out the darkness of her skin, the brown of her eyes seemed to glow just a little.

“I knew it would look good on you.”

Jade swallowed harshly as Rance strode back in the room. Again without knocking. It should have bothered her. She wasn't supposed to feel this thrilled by his complete disrespect of her privacy. He roamed her small house like he lived here. The prospect shouldn't have made her wet.

As if he were her lover, he began to tighten and tie-up the corset. Not too much, but enough to give her a near perfect hourglass figure. Next he laced the intricate closing at the back of the dress, dropping a fleeting kiss on her shoulder when he was done.

“What's the real reason you bought this for me?” She had to know. The last thing she wanted was to breathe false hope into her absurd crush. They were friends, their lives entwined through the people they loved. It didn't mean anything at all as far as a relationship was concerned. She would never allow herself to dream of that. An affair, yes, she could do that. She

could be an adult about it. She could walk away when he became bored as he inevitably would. His mistresses lasted about three months at a time; the last one six whole months. She knew it because she made it her business to know, even if the information cut her into shreds.

“I told you, I knew it would look like this on you. I wanted to see you in it. Are you ready to go?”

And that was that. So much for getting answers. Then again, that was Rance.

“Jade, what a minute.” There was quite a crush of people close to the ballroom doors. Angelique had decided to throw the charity event at the Hotel Monteleone. It seemed as if all the elite, both black and white, had decided to put in an appearance. He needed a minute before braving the crowds for the final touch to Jade’s outfit. He hadn’t wanted to do it at her

home because he knew she would fight it. Here, she wouldn't want to cause a scene.

Turning her around, he slipped the necklace that had been burning in his pocket onto her fragile neck. The antique emerald and diamond necklace glowed to perfection against the rich darkness of her skin. It was as if the necklace that had belonged to his great-grandmother had been made for her. It was one of the many pieces that had never belonged to Lady Rienne, much to her dismay, and never would. Soon the portion he had received from his grandfather would belong to Jade.

"Rance, I can't wear-" He silenced her with a gentle kiss, a faint brushing of his lips over hers. Their first, actually. When he lifted his head, she was staring wide-eyed at him like she'd never seen him before. He'd surprised her. She had no clue how badly he had wanted her, or for how long. Taking full advantage of her current state of shock, he slipped off the simple pearls she had worn, putting them in his pocket and

placed the earrings that matched the necklace on the delicate shell of her ears.

“There, now we’re ready.” Not able to resist, he gave her another butterfly kiss, then pulled her into the shelter of his arms. It felt so right to have her there, where she belonged. After tonight she’d know it, too. He was tired of dreaming about what could be – he was ready to make it happen. “Stay close to me, *catin*. Promise me?”

He didn’t wait for her answer as he shepherded her into the crowded ballroom. He didn’t pause to do more than nod at the many greetings thrown his way, striding straight to where his cousins and brother were waiting. He pointedly ignored the five sets of eyes that took in Jade’s jewelry before traveling back to him. Well, four. Remy looked as if he would burst into laughter at any minute, but hadn’t really spared his great-grandmother’s jewels a passing glance. Not that it mattered. He

couldn't be bothered to give a damn what was going on in any of their minds.

"Jade, why didn't you meet us at Aubrey's?" Much to Rance's dismay Angelique pulled Jade away, and the other women quickly closed ranks, shutting the men by their sides out as they all bent their heads.

"Girl, that man is seriously into you."

Jade tried to suppress the spark of hope welling in her breast at Regina's words. He certainly acted like he was interested, but she didn't want to read too much into it. He was being nice.

"Holy hell, Jade, those are his great-grandmother's jewels around your throat!" Angelique exclaimed in a hushed whisper, leaning close to inspect the necklace and the earrings Rance had put on her.

“Oh my, God, it is.” Regina was looking closely now too, each woman staring at her like she had suddenly stripped off all her clothes and did a table dance.

“How do you know?” This came from Katrina who moved in closer too, making Jade feel like some kind of exotic animal on display.

What if it were true? Why would Rance give her his great-grandmother’s jewelry to wear? She chanced a look in his direction, surprised to find his brooding eyes directly on her. He had to know what her friends were talking about; they were all crowded around her looking directly at her neck. To her surprise he smiled; a sweet, encouraging smile.

“You’ll be getting your own soon. Apparently, the jewels were placed in a trust, never given to the Old Bitch.” Angelique finally took a step back, nodding to herself. “Thierry’s dad gave him his when he graduated from college.”

“I’m not marrying, Aubrey. He can keep his jewelry.” Katrina said it like anyone believed her. No one did. They just didn’t say anything because she had enough on her mind. “You, Jade my friend, are as good as married if he’s already draping you in a fortune’s worth of jewelry.”

Jade looked to where he was standing again. He was still watching her even though he was deep in conversation with Thierry. It was just a loan. She didn’t have much in the way of jewels. He surely had noticed that. He was just trying to be nice.

“Have you seen Didier?” She asked it in general, not to one person. She needed to get off the subject of Rance.

“Not for a couple of days, which is weird.” Angelique frowned as she thought about it. “He is usually over once a day whispering about something or another with Thierry.”

“Stay away from Didier, Jade. Nothing good can come of it.”

Regina's warning just upset her as well as confused her. Why the hell should she stay away from Didier? He was nice, and not nearly as intense as Rance. She didn't believe she had a chance in hell with him either, but he was a good friend.

"Didier is a friend. That's all. And why the hell should I stay away from him?" She really didn't like where this conversation was going. She didn't realize she cast a questioning look in Rance's direction until he started walking her way again, a frown on his face.

"That's why," Katrina whispered before all of them took a step back to open a path for Rance.

Her heart beat hard against her ribcage. He was a gorgeous man. If he knew the fantasies she had about him, he would probably run in the other direction. Dirty, nasty fantasies. He was just being nice. That's all. She had to keep telling herself that before she did something stupid like fall in

love. Too bad it was already too late.

He didn't like it, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. He just felt cold without her next to him. His general lack of feelings had never really bothered him before, but it was getting harder and harder for him to be able to resist her natural warmth. There was just something about her that soothed him when he hadn't even been aware he was angry. He couldn't very well drag her back, though, he wanted to. He didn't like anyone's hands on her, not even the wife of his cousin.

"Yeah, I know how you feel," Thierry grouched, pressing a bourbon into his hand. "Can't very well tell her you don't like her friends touching her, though. It's too possessive."

Of course Thierry, of all people, would understand. Of all their generation of Chevaliers , Thierry was perhaps the one person as controlling as he was. Rance knew his issues stemmed from more than just a natural inclination, but with Thierry it

had been innate. The eldest of all of them, he didn't have to deal with their grandmother in quite the same way. For one thing, Thierry made her money. He made all of them insane amounts of money they didn't really need in the first place. It was a gift unlike any Rance had ever seen. Thierry just seemed to have a sixth sense about all matters of business and investment, even now when he was supposedly retired.

Speaking just as low as Thierry had, Rance agreed. "They warn women away from men like us, you know. Apparently, we are dangerous."

"I would love to see anyone try to take Angel away from me," Thierry sneered, his eyes never leaving his wife. Two years and he was still as hooked as the first day. Rance envied him.

"I know the feeling." Which brought to mind the cousin who wasn't present. "And speaking of which, where the hell is your cousin? I haven't heard from him for days."

Since the lunch fiasco, Rance expected Didier to come sniffing around Jade again, but he hadn't. Nor had he been around to watch Lady Rienne according to Piers. That made Rance nervous. The woman had actually tried to have Angelique killed. Now she had brought Aubrey's woman's stepfather into town and Lord knows what she had been talking to Gabriella about. He was sick to death of family drama and intrigue. All he wanted was to go bury himself in his woman for a lifetime or two and forget everything else.

Speaking of which...

"I'm giving this two hours maximum, then I'm taking Jade home."

Thierry quirked his lips, understanding far more than Rance would have liked. "Haven't slept with her yet have you?" It wasn't a question Rance cared to answer, so he didn't. "I recognize the signs, *mon ami*, and you got it bad. You best nail

that down before our Canadian cousin slips right in there and steals her from you.”

“I’d kill him.” And take her right back. “Excuse me.”

Maybe it was rude to pull her out of her cocoon of girlfriends, but Rance needed a little time with Jade all to himself.

“Excuse me, ladies, but I do believe *la Belle* Jade owes me a dance.”

Paying no heed to the gaping looks, he led her to the dance floor, pulling her tightly into his arms.

Rance didn’t dance. Thierry and Angelique had been married for two and a half years, but Jade had known Rance, at least in passing, for four. Before the intermingling between his family members and her best friends, she’d been to dozens of function where he was also in attendance and not once had she

ever seen him dance, or with an actual date for that matter. Jade knew good and well Rance had mistresses. He had until six months ago. He didn't date, he didn't "do" relationships. He didn't flirt or allow any woman to flirt with him. He had always been so solitary.

Maybe that was what first attracted her to him. There was just something about Rance Chevalier that made Jade want to fix him. Sometimes she just wanted to put his head right in between her breasts and never let him go. She would never in a million years act on it. Men like Rance never wanted to admit they needed comfort, or a woman. Whatever his demons, he was determined to fight them on his own. She seriously doubted he wanted or needed her help.

But he's dancing now. She didn't need to look around to know there were plenty of eyes glued on them right now. Some were in awe, some were disgusted, and one particular pair of eyes shot pure malevolence. It didn't bother her though. Let the

old witch glare. Rance would never let his grandmother hurt her, whether he knew it or not. She let everything fade away so she could revel in the moment. For whatever reason, he had chosen her to make some kind of statement. She really didn't care why, but she was going to pretend with her whole heart that it really did mean something.

Chapter Five

Didier's heart skipped a beat as soon as he saw her. All around him was chaos; secrets long buried being brought to light, but all he saw was Jade. Green silk clung to her short, curvaceous frame, pushing unbelievably full breasts up like an offering. She was so fucking beautiful it hurt to look at her. She was the kind of woman that called a man to love and protect her always. It was insane someone hadn't snapped her up and locked her away. Since he'd been in New Orleans, he hadn't seen her with anyone. He'd very carefully fostered a friendship with hopes it would develop into something more.

He hadn't counted on Rance. His cousin was so bottled up, Didier hadn't thought it possible for the man to fall for anyone. He'd met Rance before the rest of his New Orleans cousins; they had both served in the military under Uncle Boden, Rance's father. Didier had never seen Rance with a

respectable woman, preferring high priced call girls to actual dating. Not once had Rance ever picked a girl up in a bar or club. He didn't play the field. He paid for sex straight up using cryptic statements along the lines of having to pay for it anyway.

And here he was, his arms wrapped around the one woman Didier had ever fallen for. Who the hell couldn't fall head over heels for Jade? She was so sweet, coupled with a body that screamed all kinds of unspoken delights. She was so unconsciously sexy it should be a crime. And that dress she was wearing. It was all he could do not to rip her out of Rance's arms. He needed to, he really, really needed to.

"Jade, you look delicious tonight." Fuck being subtle. He was done with it. Rance wasn't being subtle. Let her choose.

"Thank you." She looked so cute when she was all embarrassed. "Are you okay? I mean, um, shouldn't you guys

be over there? Oh, my God I think your grandmother's having a heart attack!"

Both men looked casually over to where Lady Rienne was being confronted with her past. People were gathered around glued to the scandal unfolding. Didier couldn't be moved to feel anything for the old woman. He barely knew her, and what he knew was pure evil.

There was no way he was leaving Jade standing here with Rance. He had stepped back too often; he'd been sure that Rance was just being naturally protective. Jade was the best friend of Rance's sister-in-law and the wife of his cousin. Didier never once considered Rance was serious about sweet little Jade.

"I would ask you to dance but the music's stopped. I hope I get another chance to hold you very soon."

Didier reached out a finger to trace her elegant line of her jaw. Damned if Rance didn't growl at him. "She's in the arms she's meant to be in, Didier. Back off."

"Rance, please."

All she did was place her small hand on Rance's chest, looking up at the other man with those big soulful eyes of hers. That was all it took, and Rance melted. Didier wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen it with his own two eyes. Goddamn it to hell and back! Rance was serious.

"Really now? Why don't we let the lady judge that for herself."

He would fight for her if he had to. He couldn't be too late. Jade was so fucking perfect for him. He wanted to spend forever with her wrapped up in his arms. He knew he was supposed to love his cousin and all, but hell he didn't grow up with these guys. He would never be as close to them as they were to each other. And when it came to Jade, he would burn

that bridge willingly. He owed nothing to his New Orleans cousins.

“Please, don’t. This isn’t about me anyway.” Jade looked about ready to cry. Didier wanted to kick his own ass. The male posturing wasn’t going to get either man anywhere. “You two should talk this out. I’m so sorry for, well, your family problems. I’ll just go find-”

“No!” Both Didier and Rance said together reaching out and grasping one arm each.

Jade looked like she was either going to cry or...something. Damn.

“Jade, baby please,” Didier pleaded. Not Rance. Anyone but Rance. Well, that was a bunch of bullshit. No one but him.

“Jade, *cher*, stay with me. Don’t leave my side.” Rance stared deeply into Jade’s eyes, his voice nearly hypnotic.

Didier could feel Jade slipping away. She was leaning toward Rance, her eyes never leaving the other man. She was going to do what Rance asked her, whatever he asked of her. The stark reality ripped into Didier's gut like a hundred knives. Whatever the fuck Rance had done, Jade was deep under his spell. If he had half a brain, he would walk away now. But he couldn't. He knew he couldn't.

"Jade, please don't make decisions like this right now." He didn't care Rance was looking like he was ready to kill. Let his dear cousin make one move. He was ready for him. "Just...just give it some time."

He couldn't stop touching her. His hands roamed from her face to the gentle slope of her neck before Rance caught his hand in a death grip. Their eyes clashed, spines stiffened. Didier hoped Rance would throw a punch. He didn't, not with Jade's hand pressed against his chest. Rance hadn't even bothered to

look at him. His cousin was lost in the most beautiful, innocent brown eyes Didier had ever seen.

Fuck, this was not good.

“Didier, please just give Rance some space,” Jade pleaded, but she wasn’t even looking at him. She was killing him, and she didn’t even realize it.

“I’m not going to give up, baby.” He couldn’t. Rance didn’t deserve her. He couldn’t put his finger on exactly what it was, but there was something about Rance that was too dark, too tainted for Jade. She deserved a man who could give himself completely to her. Didier didn’t think his cousin was such a man. “Just...just hold off. Give me a chance.”

Rance turned those eyes that seemed to be the New Orleans Chevalier trademark towards him, but the other man didn’t have a chance at a retort.

“Katrina’s missing,” Remy interrupted their tense little tête-à-tête. “Her stepfather is here. We need to find her. Now!”

It killed Rance to do it, but he had to push his woman into the arms of his competition. Aubrey had to be losing his mind. He knew, for damn sure, he would be if it were Jade. Mother fuck, he would kill his own flesh and blood if he touched her.

“Baby, I need you to stay in this room with Didier,” Rance warned with a calm he for didn’t feel. Leading her to a small receiving room where Angelique and Regina were already seated. If Didier so much as touched her, he might have to rip his fucking hands off. “I’ll be back for you, *cher*. I swear it.”

Never in his entire life had Rance ever resented his cousins needing him. Hell, he’d sold his soul for his brother. There was a time when he would have merrily laid down his

life for any of them. Now, he wasn't so sure. He wanted to live a long time, as long as he had Jade. He just hoped like hell whatever he had to do tonight wouldn't stain his soul more than it already was.

"Y'all will find Katrina, won't you?" The trust in Jade's eyes made his chest swell. He wanted to spend the rest of his days fostering that look.

"I will, *cher*, I swear it."

Walking away from her with Thierry, Remy, Aubrey and Piers was the hardest thing he had ever done. He'd be damned if he was going to ever do it again.

"Let me take you home, sweetheart."

Jade rubbed her hands up and down her arms trying to ward off a chill. Katrina was spending some alone time with her

grandmother, leaving her alone with Didier. He had driven her, Katrina and Katrina's grandmother back to where Katrina lived with Aubrey in the Garden District after the other men had reappeared looking like hell's fury. Jade had no idea what had gone on while they'd been away, Katrina wouldn't say when she'd been escorted into the small receiving room. None of the men spoke of it, so she didn't either.

The man was seriously fine, but she just couldn't bring herself to feel for him the same way she felt about Rance, idiot that she was. Plus finding out he, too, was a Chevalier had put him firmly in the category of "Off Limits."

"I think I better wait for Rance. He told me to stay here."

She didn't know why she tended to do whatever Rance asked her to. There was something in the timbre of his voice, the way he looked at her when he spoke. Maybe some would call it weak, but it gave her a thrill. Not that Didier wasn't thrilling. She was more comfortable in a way with Didier. He

didn't make her all nervous, but he didn't make her heart race either. He was like an old pair of shoes, comfortable.

"Why are you two doing this?" She really wanted to know. This thing between he and Rance wasn't about her, it couldn't be. She was decent looking, intelligent, self-sufficient, but she was no femme fatale. Men didn't fight over the girl-next-door types unless they appeared in Playboy. No one would ever mistake her for a pin-up girl.

"Ah, sweet baby Jade. You don't think you're worth it?" he came to stand right in front of her, tracing his finger over her face.

At least he hadn't pretended to not know what she was talking about. The blue in his eyes became more pronounced as he stared down at her. He was serious, she realized with a start. He was honestly attracted to her. As for Rance, well, she really couldn't tell. She'd seen Rance's mistresses, three of them. They never seemed to last long and they were all gorgeous, exotic

looking women much taller and thinner than she was. But Didier wanted her. It should have made her feel all warm and fuzzy. It didn't. It felt nice, but it wasn't the bells and whistles she'd heard about from her friends. Even Katrina was blown away by Aubrey. Just once, Jade would really like to be blown away.

"I like you, Didier. I really do, but--"

"Don't say it." He put his finger against her lips to stop the words from falling. He didn't remove it either. The single digit did a slow sweep of her lips, his eyes glued to the movement. Okay, so maybe she did feel a little more than she'd first believed. The slow burn of arousal began in the pit of her belly. "I'm not asking you to make a decision right this second. All I'm saying is I'm here for you, okay? You can always come to me about anything. Anything, Jade."

She had a hard time swallowing against the lump that had formed in her throat. The heat from his hand now cupping

the side of her face did feel nice. He seemed to be waiting for something, maybe a sign from her, but she just couldn't give him one. Just by having him touching her so intimately, though there was really nothing sexual about it, she felt like she was being unfaithful. If he was waiting for her to say something, or make any kind of first move, he was bound for disappointment. But she couldn't exactly come right out and tell him that either.

This was crazy. Rance had been nice, overly so in the last several weeks. Since Katrina had been dealing with her personal demons and her stepfather, he was always around – at her office, her home. She chalked it up to the overwhelming need the Chevalier men seemed to have to be so protective of their women and those their women loved. Never once did Jade allow the delusion that Rance's sudden interest meant anything more than exactly what it was. She dreamed of it, but she didn't believe it. Not with Rance.

But you could have Didier. The thought seemed treacherous, yet enticing. Didier was one hell of a sexy man. He was just as tall as his Southern cousins, lean but a decidedly muscular build. His hair was worn a little longer than the others, hinting at luxurious jet-black curls. His eyes were simply amazing, a soft blue-gray that had a way of looking right into the soul of a person. And that mouth. It seemed Didier and Rance shared that one feature more than anyone else she'd noticed, a full sensual all-male mouth that looked like it could fly a woman right to heaven. She could do a hell of a lot worse.

"Take your hands off of her. Now."

Jade jumped at the quiet warning and would have scurried away from the man who held her now, but Didier snaked his arm around her waist pulling her to his side.

"I don't think I will." Didier didn't look away from her. He did take his hand off of her cheek, but that was only because he was now holding her around the waist.

She cast a pleading look at Rance as he stalked toward them. "Didier, let me go now please."

Even though she spoke softly, she knew Rance could hear her. The tick in his jaw was getting more pronounced, his fists clenching at his side. Didier didn't look like he wanted to comply, but as his hold loosened, Jade moved quickly to intercept Rance. Stepping in front of him she put both hands up against his chest in a feeble attempt to stop his forward momentum. He was going to hit Didier. There was no doubt in her mind that was his intention. By the grace of God, he stopped as soon as she touched him, his face softening as he looked down at her. She wouldn't have believed it possible, but she could actually feel the tension slowly ebb, flowing out of his body in a rush of exhaled breath.

She should pull her hands away now. The violence that had been swirling in his eyes was gone now. She didn't. He didn't have on the tuxedo he had donned earlier. The knit shirt

didn't seem much of a barrier at all. The heat from his chest seeped into her through her palms and shot straight to her pussy. She was having a hard time pulling air in her lungs.

"Are you ready to go?" She really wasn't imagining things this time. Rance's voice was deeper, sensual even. A nod was about as much communication as she could muster.

She blinked, not really believing her eyes as Rance's face seemed to get closer and closer. He was going to kiss her. It was a disturbingly thrilling thing. Oh Lord, what if she did it wrong? Sudden worry had her biting her bottom lip, though she didn't realize it until his finger gently tugged, forcing her to release it right before his mouth swept down on hers.

The world completely disappeared at the first brush of his lips against her own. So soft, yet so firm. A whimsical moan welled up from her throat as she gave in to the gentle prodding, opening for his tongue to sweep in, tangling around hers. She dissolved into his arms as they drew her flush against his solid

frame. She didn't care that one of his hands had completely destroyed her carefully erected up do as it burrowed into the strands to forcefully tilt her head upward to receive a deepening of his kiss. She didn't care that the other hand cupped her ass, lifting with incredible strength so that the apex between her thighs was pressed against an alarmingly large, rigid bulge.

"Let me take you home, *cher*. I need you." His lips traveled over her face, down her throat to linger against the swell of her breasts that were pushing against the material of the gown with urgency.

"Yes." It was never in doubt. No matter what the next day might bring, she wouldn't say no to him. She could never say no to him. She wanted him, even if it would be for a little while.'

Allowing Rance to escort her out of Katrina and Aubrey's, his mouth still exploring any and everywhere it could as they exited the house. Jade forgot about Didier standing

there. Forgot about telling Katrina goodbye. Right now, there was nothing at all beyond Rance.

Chapter Six

Rance had no idea how fast he drove to get to her house; he could barely remember the trip. As soon as he pulled into the driveway he jumped out of the car and vaulted to the passenger side to pull Jade out and into his arms. His mouth came down hard, harder than he'd intended. He should back off a little. He knew he could possibly be scaring the shit out of her. He just couldn't seem to pull back. Seeing Didier's hands on her had pushed him to his absolute limit. To make matters worse, she'd been vulnerable. He had felt her weakening, doubting, considering a man other than himself.

For too long, he had lived with the ghost of what could be with this woman. When he was near her he felt calmer, human; not the cold block of ice that had felt nothing for so long. Right now he was burning the hell up. The mewling sounds coming from her as he explored her mouth made him

harder, more desperate to be inside her. But not here. It was hard as hell to pull himself back, but he did just that, resting his head on the top of hers for just a minute.

“Come on, baby. Let’s get you inside.” He didn’t feel half as calm as he sounded. He was proud of himself for not jumping her right there against the car, but he really, really needed to get her inside.

It just wasn’t possible to let her go though. He held her from behind all the way to the door, his lips brushing across the side of her face as her shaking hands slid the key into the lock. He had to help her turn it; otherwise, he was going to take her right there. As soon as the door swung open, he scooped her into his arms, slamming the door closed with his foot.

“Oh, baby, I’ve been thinking of this all night.” As soon as he had fastened the form fitting dress on her he had wanted to peel the thing off. He took her straight to her bedroom setting her on her feet before taking a half step back. He was going to

do this right even if it killed him. *"Permettez-moi de te faire l'amour?"*

There had never been an occasion for Rance to ask a woman to make love before. It just felt right to ask in French. With Jade, he didn't have to worry she wouldn't know what he meant; French was taught in every school in Louisiana. Natives to the state always took it, though very few actually learned it. Jade would have. He was willing to bet she knew Creole, Cajun, Canadian and Parisian French.

"Do you really want to?"

Did he really wanted to? *"Jade, je vais vous donner la fessée, si vous me posiez cette question à nouveau."* He was going to spank her anyway on general principal. *"Stay right there, don't move."* She followed instructions beautifully as he walked to stand behind her. He stood there for a moment, watching as she fidgeted with her clutch. Slowly he reached down to the closure on her back, flicking the dress open hook by tiny hook. She still

didn't move, but her breathing became notably harsher. He let his finger linger against her skin as he slowly released her from the binding material of her dress. "You still think I don't want you." It wasn't a question, so he didn't really mind that he didn't get an answer. "We'll just have to see what we can do about that."

The dress slithered to the floor in an emerald puddle of silk. He didn't bother asking her to step out of the green circle; he lifted her out of it and stood her in front of the bureau mirror. Her eyes met his in a flash of pure panic before she lowered them again. That wasn't going to work at all.

"Open your eyes, sugar," he coaxed her, his teeth tugging gently at her ear. His fingers began unlacing her corset, but the formerly unhurried movements were gone. He wanted to see her bare, needed it badly. He couldn't get the damn thing off fast enough. Finally he was able to pull the corset away,

throwing it in the general direction of where the dress lay on the floor.

Oh God, she was perfect. Her breasts were unbelievable; full and round, they overflowed his hands. He cupped them then kneaded softly, loving the heavy weight in his palm. Two black cherry nipples stood out proudly at least half an inch long. His fingers circled her areola until both nubbins were beneath the pads of his fingertips. He pinched them, watching her reaction carefully. Her head came back to rest against his chest, a soft moan escaping her beautiful lips. Taking that as encouragement he rolled the nubbins, placing just a tad bit of pressure against them.

“Oh, God, Rance! That feels so good!”

Her hips rocked back against his pulsating dick, the full globes of her ass caressing him just right.

“I’m going to feast forever on these, baby. I won’t stop until you scream.” It was a promise he would keep tonight.

“Damn, these have to be the most gorgeous breasts in the world.”

He was fascinated by the way her body strained against him seeking a deeper connection, a more intimate touch. Though he was loath to do so, he let the full pillows go, his hands traveling down to where a lace thong covered her mound. He didn’t have the patience to take it off the right way. Taking a grip from the front and from behind he snapped the delicate material causing her to gasp.

Shit! Her mound was neatly trimmed, shaved on the side leaving a little patch right above her slit. His mouth watered as he slid a single digit against her puffy lips, moaning as he felt the wetness against his finger. He had to taste her now.

“Get on the bed, baby.” He just couldn’t wait anymore.
“I’ll be right there.”

Jade could feel the burn of his aquamarine eyes on her as she crawled up her bed, lying on her back. She didn’t quite

know what to do with her body so she just laid there, watching as he all but ripped off his own clothing. He really was magnificent; his tall body was all rippling muscle without an ounce of fat. What the hell was she, Jade Jessups, doing with a man like Rance Chevalier? Her heart bashed painfully against her chest. This was finally happening. It was really happening. He moved to the end of the bed, crawling slowly towards her. He stopped at her feet, kneeling as he stared down at her. His cock stood out long, thick and proud, the mushroomed head glistening. He wasn't touching it, but Jade could have sworn it moved.

"Spread you thighs for me, Jade-baby."

She did so because he asked. Because he was Rance. She'd never let anyone see her like this. Spread open and wanton. There wasn't anything she wouldn't do for him.

"Touch yourself. I want to see you make yourself come."

Her fingers parted the lips of her cunt, watching him watch her hand's movement with rapt attention. He kneeled between her spread thighs, stroking his rigid shaft. The sight was erotic, so hot. She moved her hands like she had many times before, losing herself in his arousal at watching her. Sex was not new to her. It was just never this hot. She'd certainly never masturbated in front of anyone before. She was a traditional, lights out, missionary position kind of girl. At least she thought she was. He was watching her fingers in rapt concentration, his face showcasing a hunger she had never seen in another person. It made her feel hotter, like she was some kind of wanton sex goddess. She dipped her fingers deep inside, moving her hips in time with her fingers. She used her thumb to flick at her clit, driving her body closer and closer to the edge.

"Fuck your fingers, Jade-baby. Make it come." His words fueled her, stroking her as surely as her fingers were doing. Her

other hand grasped her breasts, pinching her own nipples, wishing she had another hand to pay equal attention to the other. "Fuck your fingers, Jade-baby. Make it come."

She was going to come. Her body shook as she cried out her release, her hips arching off the bed as she sought to get more of her fingers inside. She didn't have a chance to come down from the high. As soon as she slipped her fingers free, he captured her wrist, sucking in both fingers like a man starving. The suction from his mouth sent fresh waves of need rushing through her. After licking every drop of her honey from her fingers, his head dipped between her spread thighs, his mouth latching on to her pussy. He tongued her as if it were a French kiss, curling his tongue to suck up every drop of juice she produced. Animalistic growls emitted from the back of his throat as he devoured her, vibrating against her clit.

Jade tugged on the silk of his hair, not sure if she wanted to push him away or drag him closer. It wasn't as if she'd never

had anyone eat her out before, but Rance was so far beyond what she was used to she was overwhelmed by the sensations wracking her body. The sinfully sweet agony, the almost unbearable bliss coursing through her veins had her alternately crying out and panting.

“Rance, oh God Rance!” What could she say? How could she possibly express what was happening to her? It was like she had waited her entire life for this, for him. The smoldering fire consumed her, her back arching off the mattress. She couldn’t take in enough air, and she didn’t care. She was gasping, trying not to be overwhelmed by the sensations. It was useless. Try as she might she couldn’t hold back.

“Do it, Jade-baby,” Rance growled against her pussy. “Come all over my face.”

He sucked on her clit, flicking his tongue back and forth as his steady gentle suction ignited her nerve endings. One thick digit entered her channel, stretching her, adding deliciously

sweet friction to the multitude of erotic sensation engulfing her body. When he added another, Jade's world expanded then contracted, narrowing down to one single focus. Her body jerked, her muscles tightened. The explosion started in the pit of her stomach, then spread like wildfire through every pore. She screamed, letting loose all the tension that had been building. It left her languid, but not sated. There was more to be had, and her body wanted it.

The kisses against her inner thighs tickled, tingling down to her toes. The slight abrasion of his stubble added an extra layer of feeling, starting the slow burn all over again. Instead of placing himself over her, he rolled over to his back, pulling her on top of him. Jade felt a moment of panic. She had no idea how to ride a man. She had seen in on television, but seeing and doing were two different thing.

"Rance?"

"Hum?" He wasn't paying attention.

He had both of her breasts cupped in his large hands, feasting on one, then the other. Bolts of electricity streaked from the tips of her nipples down her spine, her pussy clenching and unclenching. Throwing her head back she moaned hopelessly, lost in the whirlwind of passion. His teeth scraped across the puckered skin, his tongue licked away the little hurt before his lips tightened around the stiff point, suckling, then biting all over again.

Her hips moved as if she knew what she was doing. Had she been able to think clearly, Jade might have been horrifying embarrassed by the amount of wetness escaping her core to lubricate her ride. It took the thick head of his dick seeking entrance that brought her back to reality. She had to warn him.

“Rance, I can’t-oh!” Jade’s voice left her as the thick tip slid inside, just a little, before his hips moved back.

Just that one small moment, she felt opened, almost complete.

“Yes, you can, Jade-baby,” his answer was smoother than silk, a lazy smile quirking the corners of his full sensual lips. “I want you to ride it like you mean it. Take this dick and make it yours.”

“I don’t know how,” the confession was ripped from her. She bit her lower lip, eyes filling with tears of embarrassment. “I’ve never been...”

“On top?” he asked incredulously. “Just take me inside, *cher*, and work it any way you want it.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to...Oh!”

He thrust up, filling her completely. Now she really couldn’t breathe! He was so thick, so big. She could feel him so deep inside, pressing deep in her womb. She moved on him, swiveling her hips a little, seeking him. The friction began a slow burn, making her try harder for more. Lifting a little, she arched back down, gasping at the sensations it brought. Yes, this was it.

“Baby, if you don’t stop, I am gonna take it, and I can’t promise it will be gentle.”

“Fuck gentle.” She was way past that. She wanted this, wanted him with a madness that was so sweet, so all consuming.

Rance lifted her until he was kneeling; she wrapped her legs around his waist, then drove down hard just as he thrust up with equal enthusiasm. She didn’t have time for more than a gasp before he did it again, and again, his hands reflexively grabbing the cheeks of her ass to bring her closer with each thrust. His teeth scraped the side of her neck before locking down on the exposed flesh. Without thinking she bit him back, her nails digging into his shoulders. She was bucking as furiously as he thrust, needing him deeper, harder.

“Mine! My pussy, my woman-fucking MINE!”

The words sent an added electric shock down her spine, though Jade knew it was only temporary. She so wanted it to be true, to be forever.

“Look at me Jade-baby,” he growled. Her eyes opened on demand. There was nothing she wouldn’t do for this man, she was just terrified he knew that all too well. “Tell me! Look at me and tell me this is mine.”

“Yours, Rance. Only yours. It always has been.” She would worry about the consequences of the simple truth later. Right now, he had stripped her bare to the bone, she couldn’t hide even if she wanted to.

“Yeah, sugar, come for me. Come all over me.” His face was contorted with passion, small rivulets of sweat rolling down both of their bodies. He was perfect. The epitome of man. For this moment, she was his woman.

“Rance! Oh, God, Rance!”

Jade screamed, her body jerking up and down on the beautiful cock that had brought her untold joy. She felt him stiffen beneath her, felt his cock expand impossibly bigger, before throbbing. Even though she had just come, the splash of his seed deep inside set off another harder round of fireworks.

Tomorrow didn't matter. Next week didn't matter. All that mattered was right here, right now. Right now for Jade was perfect.

Chapter Seven

The sun filtered in through Jade's lacy curtains, curtains far too thin for Rance's tastes. Anyone could see in from her small backyard. He would have to fix that. Still, the light bathing her naked back in the soft golden glow of sunrise was stunning. She was sleeping soundly, a wealth of dark hair falling in an incredibly thick curtain past her shoulders. He loved her hair. He had pulled it, wrapped it around his fist as he

drove as deep as he could go inside her hot, tight pussy. It was soft and silky, as was the rest of her. Now he gently moved it to the side so it wouldn't obstruct his view of the way her back dipped in the middle and then rose to present the most luscious ass in the world. More than a handful, he had plans for that ass for the next sixty years or so.

He had kept her up for most of the night and he still wanted more. Now that he'd had a taste, he wanted to feast all day. He knew he had to let her sleep now; especially seeing as how he wasn't planning to let her out of this bedroom all weekend long. There were so many things he wanted to explore about her, to teach her. He was just about to lean down to kiss the dark skin that had become too much of a temptation to ignore when his cell phone started to ring. The last thing he wanted to do was to go answer it, but he didn't want it to wake Jade up either. Stifling a groan, he rolled away from the body of his dreams to rifle through his pants on the floor. As soon as he

saw the number he pressed ignore. The last person in the world he wanted to talk to was Didier.

Unfortunately, his Canadian cousin wasn't in the mood to be ignored. After the fifth call, Rance left the room altogether to answer the call.

"I'm not in the mood to talk, Didier." He wanted to get back to bed, back to Jade. He would have put the phone on silent, but he was too much of a control freak not to be available just in case. It was a curse, especially now.

"Where's Jade?" Didier's voice was crisp and to the point, setting Rance's teeth on edge. He thought he had made himself clear last night. There was no way he was allowing any man, not even his cousin to steal his woman away from him.

"What the fuck do you want, Didi?" It was none of Didi's damn business where Jade was.

“You need to come outside, but make sure Jade doesn’t.”

The line clicked signaling Didier had hung up. Rance didn’t need to be told twice. Moving silently, he jumped into his pants without bothering with a shirt or shoes and was out the door.

The smell hit him before he actually saw them. Muttering a soft explicative, he closed the front door silently, skirting the thick pool of blood staining the porch. Didier was standing right in front of it, scowling at the four carcasses of cats hanging from the rafters, their entrails ripped out and left there to be discovered. Shit! While he knew Lady Rienne had spoken with his mistress a while back, he had honestly believed Gabriella was smarter than this. What was done here wasn’t the work of someone working with a full deck. He couldn’t have this. The bitch would need to be dealt with quickly.

“Damn it, Rance I thought you got rid of that whore.” He hadn’t seen Thierry standing behind Didier until he had spoken,

but then, he couldn't seem to pull his eyes away from the horrific scene on the porch.

"Of course I did. Months ago." His wracked his brain to try to find out why Gabriella would do this. After the scene at her cottage, he had believed she understood where he was coming from. She'd made a couple of half-hearted attempts to get back together, but after cutting her off from her settlement for a time, she had quickly stopped trying. The bottom line had always been the most important thing for her. When the hell had that changed? "This doesn't make sense. Didier, find her. Find out where that bitch is. This can't go on. I don't want Jade seeing this shit."

"Seeing what?"

Rance's heart stuttered in his chest at the soft voice behind him. He never heard the door open.

“Go back inside, baby, Let us handle this.” She wasn’t going to do it. He knew it before he said it. It was too late. Her eyes strayed to the hanging carcasses before he could get to her.

“Oh my, God!”

He hated seeing her revulsion from the gruesome scene. Tears sprang to her eyes, her hands covered her mouth. He folded her in his arms holding her close, wishing like hell he could’ve protected her from this. He hated feeling this powerless. Burying his hand in her hair he gently pushed her head into his shoulder. He’d believed he had been so careful. He had gotten rid of his mistress months before coming to Jade. It had killed him, but he had bided his time.

Shit, he had no idea how to handle this. There were no words to say to make something like this better. If he were in the mood to be honest he would have to admit, at least to himself, she would probably be a hell of a lot better off if he’d never forced his way into her life. He didn’t feel like being that

honest. He wanted to make it better. He wanted to make the mutilated animals go away as if they'd never been. That wasn't going to happen, so what the hell should he do?

"Take her inside." Thierry was there, right beside him before Rance could come up with anything. "We'll take care of this."

Thierry could be an autocratic bastard at times, but Rance was grateful for his cousin's high-handed tendencies in this case. He took her inside to the couch and just held her. Because he couldn't think of any way to stop her tears, he cuddled her on his lap and rocked her until her sobs subsided.

"Why would anyone do something like that?" Her voice was muffled against his chest, her soft breath tingled his skin. "I don't understand it."

Her confused statement was like a knife twisting in his gut. It was his fault. He had brought this craziness into her life. His entire family was poison to decent people. It was like the

entire Chevalier clan was cursed. Still, his brother and cousins managed to find some kind of balance out of all this mess. He could do it, too. He had to, for both of their sakes. Hopefully, Gabriella would be found quickly so he could deal with it. He tightened his hold forcing down the knot in his throat. Of all the people in the world, Jade didn't deserve this.

He didn't answer her. He didn't know how. He just held her until she finally drifted off to sleep, and even then, he couldn't seem to move.

Jade was surprised she had gone to sleep. The scene outside of her home had sickened and appalled her so much, she thought she would surely see it in her dreams for a while to come. But she hadn't, probably because she had fallen asleep while Rance held her. Oh God how embarrassing! She had completely fallen apart after seeing those poor cats hanging

from her porch. Why would anyone do that? It didn't make sense. She had never done anything to anyone.

She shivered at the implications, suddenly feeling icy cold. Someone must hate her with a passion to leave dead cats hanging on her house. It implied a violence she just wasn't used to dealing with. She wasn't a criminal attorney, so it wasn't like she was used to the threats some of her colleagues got from time to time. She couldn't imagine who it could be.

The sound of male voices in her living room drifted through her closed door. Rance and Didier must still be out there. She didn't want to go and see. She was just too embarrassed. It was bad enough she had slept with Rance, she really didn't want or need to see the sympathy on their faces, or deal with the infamous Chevalier overprotective thing that every male member of their family seemed to suffer from. It was bad enough she had let her hopeless crush on Rance cloud her judgment so that she had actually slept with him knowing he

would never feel the same way about her as she did him. The last thing she wanted was for him to feel obligated to protect her from some unknown threat. She had three older brothers to do that.

That's what she would tell them. She would call one of her brothers to stay with her until it was all figured out. Once Rance had time to think about it, he would see they were completely wrong for each other. They could both forget last night ever happened. Well, she wouldn't. She would treasure the night for the rest of her life. But Rance would be able to get on with his life without feeling obligated.

She was just about to get out of bed so that she could clean herself up and have the conversation she was truly dreading when the door opened and Rance came in bearing a tray of delicious smelling food. Her stomach growled loudly as he stepped toward the bed.

“I thought you might be getting hungry.” His smile was gentle, and real. Butterflies fluttered in her belly just from the honest quirk of his lips. She was so pathetic when it came to this man. “Remy is here, along with Thierry, Piers and Didi. Seems Lady Rienne suffered from another attack today. The doctors are saying she will be paralyzed for the rest of her life, which shouldn’t last too long.”

Jade gasped, sitting straight up in the bed and reaching out for him before she could catch herself as he set the tray on the small table beside the bed. “I’m so sorry, Rance. I know she wasn’t a very nice person, but that’s just awful.”

Rance didn’t reply for so long she thought she might have said something wrong when he reached out to touch her cheek tenderly. “You’re one hell of a woman, Jade-baby, you know that?” She didn’t have a clue what he was talking about. “I couldn’t give a damn whether the old lady lives or dies, but we need to discuss what to do with her.”

“Shouldn’t your father and uncle be doing that? I mean she is their mother. And of course you care. I know she isn’t a very nice person, but it’s natural to feel bad, she is your grandmother. You probably just need time to process all that’s happened. It can’t be easy.”

This time she was rewarded with a long, slow kiss that had her toes curling. He was there on the bed with her in a blink of an eye, holding her just how he wanted her by her hair. She loved it. Maybe that made her some kind of freak, but she loved the way he grabbed her hair with just a little bit of pain. His other large hand worked his way underneath her t-shirt, massaging her full, heavy breast, pinching then pulling at her nipples.

This was the exact wrong thing she should be doing, especially with the other men in the house. Even knowing how wrong it was didn’t stop her juices from flowing. His kiss was all consuming, battering down her meager defenses. If he hadn’t

stopped she would have gladly spread her legs and let him inside.

“I have to go back out there.” His voice was rough against her ear, heavy laden with every bit as much pent-up passion as she felt. “I’ll be back soon and we can continue this conversation.” He accentuated his point with a hard, quick pinch to her nipple. “Eat your food, baby. You’re going to need it.”

“I don’t usually eat breakfast. I have a protein shake in the morning. I appreciate the food, but-”

“Eat for me, Jade, okay?”

His eyes gleamed as he looked directly at her and waited for her compliance. Katrina would have called her all kinds of weak had she been there, but Jade just couldn’t deny Rance much of anything. Even this.

“Okay, I will.”

With one last lingering kiss he got up to leave, stopping at the door.

“Jade, I will find who did that to your porch and I will take care of it. I promise. You don’t have to be scared or worried. I’m right here with you okay?” She gave a jerky nod for a reply, pulling the tray of food into her lap. “Good. Eat, then get some rest. You didn’t get much sleep last night.”

His tone implied she wouldn’t be getting much rest later today either. She sighed as the door softly clicked closed. So much for calling her brothers. There was no way in hell she could have any of them around when she had a man here; any man. At least she would get to live her fantasy a little while longer. And damn the consequences, she was going to enjoy it.

Chapter Eight

They resembled a den of wolves or something equally as primitive. Rance had never really noticed before, but they were all quite archaically male, a few steps away from beating their chests and dragging their women back to the cave. Piers and Remy to a lesser degree, but it was there nonetheless. Thierry surveyed everyone in the room without looking as though he was. As for himself and Didier, they were bristling at each other like they would go for the throat at any time. He wasn't sure if the whole thing was sad or funny.

"The old woman had another heart attack. The doctors don't give her much of a chance. She's paralyzed; she can do little more than grunt. The Fathers have decided to take her out to the plantation house and let her live out her days there. I suggested hospice care, but apparently our newly discovered aunt is a nurse." Remy cut his eyes toward Didier briefly. Rance

couldn't be sure, but he swore he detected something more. Something Remy wasn't telling them.

Apparently, Thierry did too. "How did she have this attack? You were there with Baptiste when it happened, am I right?"

Rance turned away from Didier then, ears perked. What the hell was Remy hiding? It might have been some weird twin sense, but Rance knew to the core of his being that Remy was hiding something, had done something while at the hospital.

"You were at the hospital? To visit Lady Rienne?" Rance didn't know why he was prodding. He should leave well enough alone. "Why? Since when have you gone to see her for any reason?"

Remy shrugged with his usual devil-may-care attitude. It was convincing, but Rance saw the slight tension just beneath the surface. Tension and guilt; now what in the hell did Remy have to be guilty about. Cold, ugly suspicion coiled in the dark

recesses of Rance's brain. He had never really felt the sparks of fear that currently prickled him under his skin. Remy wouldn't even look in his direction, like he knew Rance felt what he was burying underneath that boyish charm of his. No, Rance wasn't fooled at all. He was beginning to see a hell of a lot that Remy had hid from him for years. Emotions that roiled and boiled so deep Rance doubted even their father could see it.

Mother fucker! Remy knew. He knew what Rance had done.

"I was merely accompanying my newly found grandfather to visit his ex-wife." This time Remy looked him straight in the eye as if daring him to say something. What the hell could he say? A fresh wave of his own guilt assailed him as he stood under his twin's scrutiny. There was no doubt about it, Remy knew what Rance had done.

It made him feel sick to his stomach. It had been a long time since he felt the deep shame, the filthiness of the choices he

had made when he was far too young to make them. He had thought that part of himself was dead and gone, washed away by the ravages of time. He had been wrong.

Turning away, he said nothing more. He didn't want to get into it now. He knew he would have to. Remy wasn't the type to let something like this go. There would be a reckoning; and it couldn't have come at a worse time. With this thing with Jade, he so didn't need this right now. There was no way in hell he would ever tell her. He couldn't. He didn't believe for a second she would judge or condemn, he just didn't want to have to look in those wide, innocent eyes and see reflected there what he once was. He didn't think he could stomach it.

"Didi, do you think you could hunt this Gabriella woman down?" Luckily, Thierry had already dismissed their grandmother. It wasn't really their problem anymore. Let her sons worry about her.

"I will find her." Didier was looking at him rather than at Thierry. Rance didn't appreciate the speculation he saw in that look. No matter what might have been done in the past, Jade was his. She was his salvation. Rance wasn't about to give her up to his cousin just because the man had some kind of Knight-In-Shining-Armor complex. For some reason the man believed Jade was in need of saving. "Rance had just better make sure he deals with her when I do. I'm not cleaning up his mess."

Direct hit. "Fuck you, Didi. I don't think I asked you to."

"No, you just want me to find her for you, right?" Didier was sneering now, actually baring his teeth.

"You're such a good little hound dog, though. Unless of course you don't want to. I'm sure I could take care of it myself."

"Maybe you two should be hosed down."

Neither man looked away at Piers's soft spoken words, but Rance felt some of his ire dissolve. This wasn't Didier's fault. The responsibility belonged solely to him. Didier was simply a symptom of his problem. He was a man who had experience when it came to women you didn't have a contract with, and he wanted Jade. Acting like the dog in the manger would only play into Didier's hands, and was something Rance had no intention of doing.

"Look, you're right. I'll put out some feelers. I'll find Gabriella." He almost laughed out loud at the confusion that crossed Didier's face. Yeah, asshole, I am not about to walk right into your trap.

"I'll find her, damn it," Didier bit off, his French-Canadian accent becoming more pronounced. Rance had gotten to him. Good. "You make sure you watch over her."

It was one hell of an admission on Didier's part. Jade had a natural pull towards Rance, and he for one, was glad his

cousin recognized it. It was almost like admitting she belonged to him, which she did. Didier had just lost half the battle, and judging by the pent up anger evident in his eyes, Didier knew it.

“Good.” Thierry moved into the breach, clearing away the tension in the air as if it had never been. It was his specialty, after all. “Now, I think it may be a good idea for all of us to be at the house when Lady Rienne gets there, with our significant others.”

The bark of laughter from Piers was almost maniacal. It sent a shiver of foreboding up Rance’s spine. By the looks of the others, he saw he wasn’t the only one. Silently, he wished for the man to keep it together. It was bad enough he was going to have to acknowledge his darkest secret to his brother; he really didn’t need for everyone to know of what occurred in Lady Rienne’s house of horrors all those years ago.

“What?” Piers asked in all innocence. “The sight of her darlings with women she believes to be completely

unacceptable will likely push the old girl right off the edge.
Man, I can't wait to see it."

Jade picked at the food Rance had brought. She wasn't really in the mood to eat. Everything was happening way too fast, she didn't quite know what to think. She didn't really understand the abrupt turnaround where Rance was concerned. So now, all of sudden she was just so irresistible to him? As much as she tried to rationalize what was going on, it was just confusing. Yeah, she could understand he needed some kind of human connection, especially after the bomb shells dropped last night. Or was it a combination of not being in complete control where his family was concerned and Didier's interest?

Speaking of which, what the hell was that all about? Didier had always been nice; she had considered him a friend. Since when had interest grown to be something more than that?

Jade was more than willing to accept that perhaps some of Rance's sudden ardor was based on his newly found cousin horning in on his territory or something like that, but the more she thought about it, the less likely that seemed. Rance wasn't the petty type. She didn't believe for a second he would start a relationship, purely sexual or otherwise, just because some other guy was sniffing around her. She had never been his woman or girlfriend or whatever, so why would he. From all the things she observed about him, he never acted the way he had been acting towards her lately. Not for anyone.

So what was it then? A sudden epiphany that he really liked her? Just the thought caused her to snort out loud. "Yeah, right. He just can't live without me."

Then there were the dead cats on her porch. Jade had to force down the involuntary heaves just thinking about the disgusting scene brought on. Who would do something like that to her? And why? As much as she'd like to dismiss the incident

as a prank, she couldn't. The act was violent, intentional. People didn't do things like that as a prank. This was a message, but she couldn't for the life of her think of why.

She didn't need to be told Rance and his cousins thought it was from his ex-mistress. It wasn't. She knew it as soon as she knew her name. Men always tended to go with the obvious.

There was no way Rance's ex could have known they were sleeping together because before last night, they weren't. The woman would have had to have been watching her house, and Jade seriously doubted that. Her neighbors would have told her if there was some strange woman hanging around watching who came and went. There were a lot of retirees on her street, people with nothing better to do than to sit and watch who went by. It was one of the reasons she loved it here.

The act had been a warning, but she doubted it was someone obvious. The violence had been uncontrolled despite the planning it took. This wasn't a person working with a full

deck, and Jade couldn't see Rance ever being with anyone that crazy. He was smarter than that. He would have checked out any woman he entered that kind of relationship with; it was just in his nature. A person couldn't be that insane without there being signs or warnings. Rance wouldn't have missed that.

With a disgusted sigh, she pushed the food away and decided to take a shower. Maybe she could sneak out and go to the gym while the guys were busy plotting in her living room. Besides, she wasn't used to eating breakfast anymore. She usually drank the protein shake her trainer had given her. It was nasty as hell, but it gave her energy and helped her take off the pounds.

Pinning up her hair, she wrapped it before putting on a shower cap. The last thing she wanted to have to do was make an appointment at the hair dresser. It wasn't time for a touch up, but because it was so long and thick, blow drying it herself was pure hell. Not that she wasn't grateful she'd been blessed with a

great head of hair. It was probably because she hadn't been allowed to put any chemicals in it until she was eighteen. It was one of the few conceits she allowed herself. If only taking care of it that wasn't such a chore.

She was so engrossed in her thoughts she didn't hear the bathroom door open. It wasn't until a breeze of cool air invaded the shower that she became aware she was no longer alone. She didn't have time to get out more than a surprised gasp before Rance pulled her into his arms, his mouth devouring hers. Unlike last night, the kiss didn't begin soft or questioning. His tongue dove right in, conquering, demanding. While one hand mashed her slippery wet body close to his own equally nude one, the other ripped away the hair covering she had carefully arranged on her head.

So much for her hair, as if she could give a damn at the moment. Instantaneous heat suffused her entire being at first touch, her body awakening just for him. What was it about this

man that could turn her into a mass of hot blooded need in no time flat? Her formerly languid body coiled tightly, seeking the solace she knew he could provide.

“Did you miss me, baby?” Lord, even his voice could turn her on. The rough sound sent tingles down her back to coalesce right at her core. Desire pooled hot and wet, waiting to be filled.

Thankfully, he didn’t seem to require a response. Backing her up against the shower wall he hooked her leg in the crook of his arm and plunged forward, burying every inch of his thick, hard cock deep inside her needy pussy. The scream of supreme rapture caught in her throat, making it difficult to get enough air in her lungs. With strength she didn’t know she had, she pulled herself upward wrapping her other leg around his waist while hanging on to his broad shoulders for dear life.

So good, he filled her just right. Even though he wasn't moving yet just the feel of him pulsating inside her sent tiny quivers vibrating deep inside her womb.

"Please, Rance. You have to move." She didn't care how pitiful she sounded. She needed, damn it.

"Too tight. Fuck, Jade, you are killing me." His groan sounded like heaven to her ears. At least she wasn't the only one affected. "Can't last. Ah, hell, baby."

Finally he was moving; short jabbing strokes at first, almost as if he didn't want to leave her body. The small movements were worse than him not moving at all. She needed more.

"Damn it, Rance!" Her nails dug into his shoulders as she canted her hips seeking more friction, deeper penetration. "I need more!"

With a belly-deep groan he pulled almost all the way out and powered back inside her. It was so good. She let her body go; relying on him completely to hold her up as she lost herself in him, in what he was doing to her body.

“Shit! Jade-baby, you feel so damn good wrapped around me. So fucking tight around my dick. I could stay inside you forever.”

She liked that idea a lot. How had she ever survived twenty-eight years without feeling this complete?

“More. Give me more.” She had no idea if she could take more, but she needed this.

He drove into her so hard her head banged against the slick tiles. She couldn’t give a damn. All that mattered was the sweet friction building deep in her gut. She was right there, just a little bit more...

“Come for me, Jade-baby. Now!”

That was all it took. Her body imploded, shaking her from the inside out. She thought she might have screamed, but she couldn't be sure. All she could do was feel; feel his cock expanding inside her, feel her body fracturing, breaking apart completely and soaring.

"Rance!"

His hands clasped down on her hips, their pelvises mashing together so tightly not even air could get through. Tiny aftershocks raced through her even as she slumped against his solid frame. He held her as he turned off the water, and then exited the shower stall. Not bothering with towels he walked straight to the bed, never once slipping out from her as he laid her down in the middle of the bed. She would have complained about their wet bodies on the sheets, but she couldn't work up the energy. For one thing, he just felt so right covering her, his insistent lips making her forget everything except him. For another, he was still buried deep inside her. Even though she

had felt him release deep inside her in the shower, he was still rock hard, and he had begun to move. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head as he started to build the fire once again, ensuring that she wouldn't be thinking of anything other than him for a while to come.

Rance couldn't explain it if there was a gun to his head. He needed this woman something fierce. When he heard her in the shower all he could think about was her body naked and wet underneath the warm spray of water. He honestly had intended on taking a shower with her, maybe playing a little bit. Seeing her in the flesh had sent him over the edge. All of the sudden the need to be inside her became overwhelming.

As much as he tried to take it slow with Jade, he just didn't seem to be able to. Maybe in twenty years or so the insane need to take her would mellow a little. He doubted it. She was a perfect fit; surrounding him so tight he never wanted

to leave her sheath. Even though he had just come, he wanted more. His hips just wouldn't stay still. She felt so fucking good; despite being unbelievably wet her walls bore down on him like a silky vice, allowing him to feel every little tremor that raced through her cunt.

He held her tight, maybe too tight, his mouth moving any and everywhere he could reach. No one would ever believe this was the first time he had ever made love. Sex he had experience in abundance, but nothing had ever felt like this. This was so far beyond a physical release he had half a fear he would go insane from it.

Jade's legs came up and wrapped around him, leaving him completely surrounded by her. He wanted to melt into her; he wanted to be a part of her always. His movements became more intense, harder, deeper. Heaven help him, he wanted more.

“Tell me if it’s too much, baby. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Was that his voice sounding so frenzied? Rance was not hot and frantic about anything. He was cold and deliberate, even in bed. But not now, never with Jade.

“More. Take it, take me.” How sweet her breathless voice was. Her words sunk down into his skin, spurring him on.

“I don’t want to ever stop.” Hell, he didn’t think he could. “I need you, *cher*. I need to be inside you.”

“Yes!” Her body shook underneath him, her pussy spasming like crazy all around his dick. He could die right this second a happy man. “Rance, oh damn. I- I-”

“Fuck yeah, sugar, come just like that for me.”

He dug his toes into the bed to get a better hold. There was no way in hell he was going to leave the paradise of her arms and legs encasing him just for leverage. No woman had held him like this before; he had never allowed it. He had

always managed to keep himself detached, separate despite being inside another. With Jade such detachment just wasn't possible. He wanted to be as close as possible. He wanted his scent all over her; he wanted his mark on her neck, his cum deep inside her womb. He wanted everything.

Latching on to the delicate, sensitive skin on the side of her arched neck, he sucked, bit, then laved at the abused site, and then did it all over again. Instead of moving in and out of her hot, insistent core, he mashed their pelvises together in short thrusts, making sure to move against her exposed clit in little circles.

He didn't stop until he felt her shatter once more, squeezing him so tight he had no choice but to come with her. Not even his first time knocked him over as much as this. His head swam as he fought not to crush her after the tornado of explosive passion ebbed into gentle waves.

"Je t'aime si beaucoup. Je t'aimerai toujours," he told her softly, kissing her brow as he rolled them both over. She didn't hear a word. She was fast asleep.

Chapter Nine

“Ms. Jessups, Mr. Martinez is here to see you.” The chipper voice of her secretary seemed obscenely loud despite the roominess of her office.

Jade cast a worried look over at Rance who was reclining on the small couch in the corner of the room near the window. Even though she had spent every second with him this past weekend, he had shown up less than an hour after dropping her off at work. She didn’t know quite what to make of it. Well, other than the sex. He seemed to enjoy that. She really didn’t think she would be walking straight any time soon. But other than that, she really didn’t get why he hung around.

Well, other than the cat thing. It still creeped her out that someone would do something so violent and hateful. But then, she had a hard time figuring out hateful people. It seemed like such a waste of energy to work up serious dislike, especially for

someone a person didn't even know. No matter what Rance or his cousins might think, Jade was sure his ex didn't do this. She would just have to prove it to him.

"Are you going to answer her?" She really didn't like the quiet way he asked that. Not to mention the calm, emotionless expression on his face. The deadpan, "nothing is wrong, I'm not the least bit disturbed" thing was worse than the fury stamped across his face when Didier was around. At least with Didier, she was assured some kind of family loyalty would keep him in check. With a stranger she wasn't so sure.

Not that Rance would kill the man. Wait, he wouldn't, would he? What the hell had happened to Katrina's stepfather anyway? No one had mentioned it. No one spoke about it at all. Katrina had been cryptic when she had come into the receiving room the night of the ball. All the men had disappeared except for Piers and Didier. In the end, even Piers had left. The next thing they knew they were being escorted to two separate

houses; Katrina, her grandmother, and herself had gone to the house Katrina now shared with Aubrey, escorted by Didier. Angelique and Regina had been escorted to Angelique and Thierry's home by Piers. Jade had no idea where the other men had taken Katrina's stepfather. Nor had there been any mention on the news, not that she expected there to be.

"Don't you have to go to your uncle's press conference?"

She was hopeful that he would leave, but she had no real expectation he would do so. And of course, he didn't.

"Nope." He went back to studying the one of the files he had brought with him in his briefcase. Rance just looked weird in jeans and a t-shirt carrying a freaking briefcase. Like he was really looking at the damn thing.

"Ms. Jessups?"

Jade jumped as the intercom crackled to life once more. Damn! There was no way out of this. If she walked out to the

reception area, Rance would only follow her. "Send him in."

There was no other choice really.

Victor Martinez was a decent lawyer and an all around good guy even if he was a little thick around the middle. And yeah, he was a tad hairy, but he had the most earnest brown eyes Jade had ever seen. Plus, he really seemed to like her. She could do worse. The last thing she needed was for Rance to scare him away. Although she was thoroughly enjoying the sensual whirlwind that was Rance Chevalier, she couldn't afford to burn bridges. She did want to settle down one day, and Victor may not be exciting, but he was genuine.

"Hey, Jade. I know you said you'd call but I thought I'd swing by and offer you lunch. Maybe we can talk about making up for our date."

That was so sweet, Jade tried to answer before Rance could, she really did, but that wasn't going to happen.

“She has a date for lunch.” The damn man was so arrogant he didn’t bother to look up from the file he wasn’t really reading. That was just plain rude! “And for dinner, and for breakfast. Sorry, *mon ami*, Jade is quite taken.”

Something was going on with Rance. His accent got thicker, deliberately, his whole body was tense as if he was expecting a fight. It made no sense; he had a better chance of that with Didier, who at least could give as good as he got. Victor was no threat to Rance. There was no need to bully him.

“Mr. Chevalier is being ornery.” She moved around her desk to rub Victor’s arm in reassurance, only to find herself snatched back.

“He seems like a decent kind of guy, Jade-baby. I don’t want to have to hurt him.” Rance was suddenly right there, his arms around her waist, his low murmur in her ear before she could even blink.

His voice had been a little more than a soft growl in her ear, the thick erection pressed against her hip, it was too much. Her body melted against him, her eyes closed. Lord, it just felt so good in his arms. She almost forgot about Victor. Jerking upright she offered Victor a weak smile. No matter what Rance did to her libido there was never any cause to be rude.

“Victor, as you can see I have become...” Become what? Involved? Going steady? Oh, that was stupid, who the hell went steady these days. She had no idea what she and Rance were doing. She cast a quick glance up at him, hastily looking away at his wicked grin. If he said one more inappropriate thing she might have to kill him. Well, pout a little anyway.

“Jade and I are very, very serious.” Rance stroked the side of her neck with his finger tips. It tingled delightfully down to her toes. She had to bite her bottom lip to keep from groaning out loud. There was something she was supposed to be doing

wasn't there? And who the hell was coughing. It couldn't be Rance; not with his mouth teeth nipping on her ear...

"Uh, Jade?"

Oh dear Lord, Victor! How could she have forgotten him? With a gasp, she wrenched herself away from Rance's wicked kiss, guilt pressing down on her as she faced Victor again.

"Victor, I'm so sorry." This was so not like her. Rance just seemed to take away her better judgment. "Rance is just..."

Just what? There was no excuse for him or for her either.

"Jade, how do you... How much do you..." Victor looked at Rance not with awe or fear, but with suspicion. He was a hell of a lot braver than she had ever imagined. Rance was intimidating on a good day.

“She knows what she needs to know.” Rance was unrelenting. She wouldn’t expect anything less. “And you can leave now.”

That was it. No matter how much he turned her on or made her wet, there was no point in messing with a genuinely nice guy.

“Damn it, Rance, back off!” She pushed him against the chest, succeeding in knocking him back a step or two only because he allowed it. “Victor is a really nice guy and he doesn’t deserve to be bullied by you!” Turning back to Victor, she refrained from touching him; it was too much to ask Rance to deal with. He may not be serious about this, whatever they were doing, but he was possessive. She wasn’t about to pull the tiger’s tail. “Victor, I’m sorry if I led you on in any way. I hope we can be friends.”

It was such a weak thing to say. How many times had the very same words stung her? She hated like hell doing it to

anyone else. Despite Rance, she just had to reach out to touch Victor's shoulder. "I am so sorry if I led you on in any way, Victor. I really didn't mean to."

The words wouldn't mean a hell of a lot to someone who was hurting. She had vast amounts of experience with that, too. It sucked, not matter how you phrased it. Not that Victor was in love; they didn't know each other well enough for that.

"Sure, Jade. I understand."

He didn't. She could see that clearly.

"Thank you for coming by. Victor, was it?" Oh, Rance was in rare form now. He was antagonizing the man just because he could. Driving the nail in deep.

"Rance, could you possibly manage to be gracious for a few minutes?" She had really had enough of the posturing. "If you can't manage to hold a decent tongue in your head I will put you out."

She wouldn't. She doubted if she could, but there was no way she'd admit that to anyone.

"Victor, as you can see, I've seemed to have found myself somewhat...involved with Mr. Chevalier. Believe me when I say I never for a minute expected to. I never meant to hurt you and if I have, I hope you can forgive me one day."

It was a sorry excuse, but it was the only one she had. Victor could accept it and move on, or hate her forever. It was really out of her control now.

"Sure, Jade," Victor may have been addressing her but he was looking at Rance. "Really, I understand." He didn't. She could see it clearly. "If you need me, I'll be around."

Jade had to stop Rance from going after Victor's retreating form. A simple hand to the chest was all it took. He allowed her this, she didn't know why but he did. Somehow she knew Victor walking out wasn't the end of this. She just held him, and her breath, and waited.

Counting to ten wasn't working. Consoling himself with the fact that Jade wasn't attracted to this man, not really, wasn't helping either. It was madness, but the man had pissed him off more than Didier ever had sniffing around his woman. He didn't know a thing about this Victor person. What made him think he had any right to come into her office and ask for a date?

Rational thought was difficult. He knew he had no right to feel this way. It was silly to feel threatened or pissed because some other man wanted Jade. Who the hell wouldn't? It was inconceivable to him that she hadn't been snatched up a long time ago. She was the type of woman men dreamed about marrying. Not only was she a genuine person, kind and caring, but she was fucking beautiful beyond anything. A true, soul deep beauty that made him catch his breath every time he looked at her. Her body inspired thoughts of procreation on its

basest level. She was liquid fire in bed...in the shower, on the couch.

Ah, hell, now he was sporting one hell of a hard on.

“You- you- Jackass!”

Rance blinked at the little furious woman who rounded on him as soon as the door clicked shut behind the hapless Mr. Martinez. Did she just cuss at him? Surely she didn’t. Not sweet, innocent Jade.

“Honey, did you just use profanity? Did that naughty little word come out of your sweet little mouth?”

He had always considered himself a reasonably intelligent man. So why the hell was he acting so stupid? He may have never had a real girlfriend or whatever the hell people called it these days, but he had seen enough to know he was treading down the wrong path. And yet, his couldn’t seem to stop himself. She was well and truly pissed, and for some

reason, he liked it. He liked to see those brown eyes spitting fire at him. He loved to see the normally tranquil Jade all fierce and pissy.

“There was no reason do to that, Rance. He is no threat to you. All you were doing was throwing your weight around.” Taking the cutest little finger he had ever seen she actually poked him in the chest. “You. Are. An. Asshole!”

He needed to fuck her. Bend her over her own desk and pull up that too conservative skirt and bury himself balls deep inside her tight pussy.

“Yeah, baby girl. That I am.”

All he did was open his arms. Any other woman would have probably taken the free shot and punched him dead in his gut. But not her, not his Jade. God bless her, she walked right into his embrace and laid her head on his chest. He had always known there was something about this woman that called to

him on a level he never knew existed, and she just kept proving him right.

“Why does it always have to be a confrontation with you?” All the anger was gone from her voice as if it had never been. “Victor is not threat a to you. He isn’t...you.”

She had no clue how good she just made him feel by that simple statement. He should have left it there, but of course he didn’t. “And Didier?”

Damned if she didn’t snuggled deeper into his chest. His hands crept down to cup the full globes of her ass, pulling into his throbbing erection. He wasn’t going to be able to wait. He needed her like a junkie needed his next fix.

“Didi is a nice guy.” Rance had to snort at that one. Nice wasn’t an adjective he’s ever use to describe that particular cousin. “And he is just being nice to me. He doesn’t really want me. He just likes the idea of being some female’s knight in shining armor.”

Yeah he could see that. He really didn't want to think about Didier anymore, or Victor, or any other man who thought to take his place. Inching up her skirt, Rance set about erasing any other thought from her mind but him.

Chapter Ten

“So they’re taking Lady Rienne out to the country this weekend.”

Even though they were both working double time on the spin bikes, Angelique spoke like they were sitting in the living room having a lovely chat. Jade felt a twinge of jealousy before she could tamp it down. Their trainer was a tyrant. She couldn’t afford to waste energy on being envious.

“Thierry insists we go. Are you going with Rance?”

A fishing expedition. Jade should have expected as much.

“I don’t know. He hasn’t mentioned it.” Nor had he left her house in seven days. He spent half the work day in her office. It should have felt stifling, the way he hovered. Maybe it was because she had spent so much time alone, but it was nice. She felt wanted, cared about. Though not once did she ever

allow herself to forget Rance was around because he felt some kind of responsibility toward her.

Maybe it was selfish to take what he offered and pretend it was something more than what it was. It wasn't going to last, no matter how much she wanted to believe she saw forever in his eyes. It wasn't. It was some kind of temporary insanity.

"Jade, stop over-thinking it," Angelique sighed after their session was finally over. "Trust me, Rance is really into you."

"Of course he is. For now."

"Girl, pull your head out of your ass. The man is gone. He is always hanging around, he put his great-grandmother's jewelry on you. Come on, Jade. That isn't something a man would do just because. I bet he hasn't even taken them back has he?"

Damn, she had forgotten about the emeralds. She kept meaning to give them back, but he always seemed to distract

her. In fact, the only thing he could think about when Rance was around was Rance.

“Angelique, Rance isn’t Thierry. He isn’t the type to be crazy about anyone.”

Angelique looked like she wanted to say something, but turned away. That wasn't like her, which had Jade worried. Angel was one of the most open and honest people she knew. This wasn't a good sign.

“Jade...” Angel stopped, turning back to her. “Come on, let’s go to your place where we can talk in private.”

Rance was supposed to meet her back at her office in a couple of hours. She could always call him. “Okay, I’d rather take a shower in my own place anyway.”

“Amen to that.”

They took Angelique’s car; Jade hadn’t driven since the ball. Truthfully, it was a relief. She hated driving. Maybe it was

time she put her foot down and started again. Rance wouldn't be around forever, and she needed to get back in the habit. There were a lot of things she needed to start doing for herself again. The quicker she began to push Rance away the better for her. And Didier too for that matter. She was tired of hiding his calls from Rance because she was afraid of how he would react.

She let Angelique take a shower first while she prepared her protein drink. She hadn't been able to take it like she should have since Rance had practically moved in. The man insisted she eat way too much. She wouldn't be surprised if she had gained ten pounds since Friday night. Breakfast, lunch and dinner he was shoving food down her throat. It made the already tasteless protein drink even less palatable, but she had lost about fifteen pounds since she had been on the diet prescribed to her by her trainer. The woman was a tall, blond Napoleon but it had worked.

Yeah it was nice to hear Rance tell her she was skin and bones and she needed some more meat. He made her feel so sexy, something she had never been accused of being before. The way he held her...man she needed to get the hell away from him before this got ugly.

“You need to be beat, you know that right?”

Jade grimaced, downing the nasty concoction before Angel could say anything about it. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She really didn’t. It could have been the drink, or it could have been the look on her face. Angel had started picking up some of Thierry’s most irritating habits, like reading people.

“That look on your face, Jade Jessups. You were thinking about Rance and whatever you were thinking was dead wrong.”

Right. "Look, Angel I know you want to believe this, whatever it is between me and Rance, is true love, but trust me when I tell you it isn't. I think Rance just latched on to me because of you and Katrina and Regina. It has little to do with me as person, but the current trend of his closest relatives all getting with black women, my best friends in fact. I am the odd man out, so he and Didier think they need to step up to the plate. That's all it is."

"Wait, what? Didier? What the heck does he have to-" Angel's eyes got wide as saucers as she realized what Jade was implying. "You got two of them sniffing around after you? Get it Jade! Though seriously, you should probably warn Didier off before Rance kills the man."

Jade shook her head turning away so her friend wouldn't see the tears forming in her eyes. "It's not about me. None of it is." The pain must have been obvious because the next thing Jade knew, Angel was wrapping an arm around her. The tears

she tried so hard to hold back started to spill down her cheeks.

"I am so pathetic. I should have sent him away from the start.

It's going to kill me when he decides he's done playing."

"Oh baby girl, for an intelligent woman you're incredibly dense. Come on and sit with me for a minute."

Jade followed her friend blindly to the couch, trying to get a grip. It wasn't the end of the world. She's had six fantastic days and nights with the man of her dreams. It was more than a lot of people could claim.

"Listen, according to Thierry, Rance has never dated." Angelique spoke in a conspiratorial tone, like there were ears listening. "He's never had a girlfriend, never a lover. All his relationships have been bought and paid for in advance."

"What?" That didn't seem right. Rance was damn near the perfect man. Caring, attentive; he was going to make some woman very happy one day. "Angel that makes no sense. I mean, I know he's had mistresses lately, but a man in his

position would have to be careful. I don't believe for a second he's never once had someone special."

"Honey, my husband doesn't lie to me. He tried, but he stutters and turns all shades of red. It's really kinda cute."

And that certainly didn't sound at all like Thierry Chevalier. The man could have given Stalin a run for his money, not that Jade would ever admit that to his wife.

"I'm sorry but I have a hard time believing that." Not the Rance Jade had come to know – as much as anyone could come to know him anyway.

"Nevertheless, it's true. According to Thierry, Rance has been carrying this thing for you since he saw you in court the first time. I think that was the Boucher case, before I ever met Thierry."

That floored Jade. The Boucher case was a year before Angelique and Thierry got together. Jade had definitely noticed

Rance. He was a legend in the legal field in Louisiana, completely ruthless when it came to defending his clients. He had lost that case, to her. She'd spent forever researching everything she could about Charles Boucher who had tried to force rural families off of their seemingly useless swamp land. Turns out there was quite a bit of oil in that useless land.

She really didn't think Rance had noted her any more than any other attorney he had ever been up against. But how would Thierry have known the case if it wasn't true? Her heart began to pound with possibilities. Could he really feel for her? Could she afford to believe it?

"Thierry's a little worried because Rance has always been kind of, well, intense."

That made Jade laugh through her tears. Thierry was concerned that Rance was intense? That was just too rich for words. Thierry, the man who had watched Angelique from afar for years, the man who had muscled his way backstage when

Angelique was dancing incognito at one of Katrina's clubs, hell, the man had bank rolled Katrina's fetish clubs just because she was Angelique's friend. And he was calling someone else intense?

"Did you tell your husband about the pot calling the kettle black?" Jade giggled uncontrollably. "Thierry Chevalier calling someone else intense? That's rich. I bet the man knows my great-grandfather's name."

"Why would you say something like that?" Angel frowned. "And he does, but that's beside the point."

That set Jade off on another peal of laughter. Angel and her honest sweetness and naiveté and Thierry with his autocratic high hand seemed so mismatched. Like her and Rance. Wow, if they could make it work, maybe it wasn't that farfetched.

"Are you happy, Angel? I mean really happy?"

Her friend beamed, her smile as open and honest as the sun. “Hell yes. I never thought I could be this satisfied. Yes, Thierry is a bit much at times. And he thinks I don’t know he’s not really retired. There’s just no way he could live without not knowing everything that’s going on in his family – business or otherwise. That’s why I know for a fact Rance is into you.”

Jade let that sink in, warming her from the inside out. Angel wouldn’t lie to her to make her feel better.

“It’s weird that we would all wind up with them, ya know?” Jade said after a while.

“Or maybe it’s destiny.”

Maybe. It could be. She wanted so much for it to be true. Rance lit all of her fires. He made her merrily burn and beg for more. She had decent relationships before, but the thing with Rance wasn't normal. It rocked her from the inside out. It was the kind of thing you read about, but very few ever experienced.

“Jade? You don’t have any, uh, pets do you?”

“No. Why?” Jade wasn’t really paying attention to Angel now. Her mind was whirling with the possibilities.

“Cause I think that’s a gator coming out of your room.”

“I don’t think this is the work of a woman.”

Rance couldn’t reply to Piers at the moment. He was having a hard time tapping down the hopeless rage boiling inside. Jade should have never been here without him. What if they hadn’t seen the alligator before it was too late? What kind of twisted bitch would put a goddamn gator in someone’s house?

“I had that asshole Victor Martinez followed after he left Jade’s office.” It was actually a while after that. Rance had had Jade on her desk after Victor had left. Then again on the tiny thing she called a couch. Fuck! Where the hell was Didier? He

had to find out where Gabriella was. He wanted to wring the bitch's neck for this. He would feed her to the gators himself if he needed to.

"Why were you two here alone?" This was from Thierry looking directly at his wife. It was an answer Rance dearly needed to hear, though his eyes couldn't seem to tear themselves away from Jade, who hovered behind her friend rubbing her arms as if she was cold.

She wouldn't meet this gaze. He should have spanked her long before now. Not that that would change a thing. Yes, she was sweet as hell, but underneath that innocent exterior was a core of steel. Just like beneath those wide ingenuous eyes there was a pure vixen between the sheets.

"Come here, Jade." Angelique's answer to Thierry be damned, he needed to hold his woman. His eyes told him she was okay, but he needed to feel her, kiss her, spank her luscious

ass until she swore she wouldn't go off by herself without him until he found out who the hell was doing this.

Thank God she came without him having to ask twice. He didn't know what he would do if she hadn't. Crushing her to him, all he could do was thank the good Lord the damn gator hadn't taken a bite out of her hide. He knew firsthand how very delicious she really was.

"Well, Angelique Marie Dubois Chevalier? I'm waiting?" Thierry was fit to be tied, but Rance didn't really care for once.

All that mattered was the woman in his arms, that she was really safe, really here with him.

"Leave her alone. We came here to talk. What, is she not allowed to come to my house now?" Jade didn't leave his arms as she challenged his cousin. Thierry whirled around to glare at her only to be stopped by Rance's single raised brow.

Whatever his cousin had in his head to reply was swallowed out of respect for him, Thierry acknowledged Rance's silent warning with a barely perceptible nod of the head. Thierry would just have to wait until he got home to chastise his wife. Rance couldn't allow anything to upset Jade further. There was a freaking alligator in her house. Fuck, the thought sent his head spinning.

"Come on, baby girl, I'm taking you home with me." He should've done this a long time ago, right after the cat incident.

The last thing he needed to do was to start slipping now, not with the safety of his woman at risk. He cast one last look at the small, homey house where Piers and Remy were trying to trap the gator on their own. Both of them had thought it fun to trap gators that wandered on to the family property out in the country when they were younger. Rance didn't want to call the police, not yet. This was a family problem; they would take care of it as they always did.

“Wait, I need to talk to Angelique.” Jade pulled away from him, turning toward her friend.

How sick was it that he wanted to pull her back? He couldn’t smother her, he knew that on an intellectual level. At least from all he had observed and read women didn’t like that. Watching her now as she pulled Angelique over to the side Rance realized he was going to have to talk to her about it. What the hell was he supposed to say? “Hey Jade, I heard that women don’t like being all suffocated, but honey I’m going to need you to stick closer to me than white on rice until I can be sure you’re gonna okay. All right?” Yeah, that was going to go over real well. He could see those brown eyes blinking at him in dawning horror.

She already thought he was only with her out of some sort of obligation made worse by this shit. Maybe he should tell her how he felt and how long he’d felt it. And that would freak her out even more. He already felt like a damn stalker living his

wet dream, he didn't need her to see him that way, too. He had no idea how the hell men managed this whole relationship thing. The sharing and talking. He was so used to living inside his own head for as long as he could remember he wasn't really sure how to share.

Maybe he should go talk to Regina again. Maybe she had some kind of manual or something.

"Look, have Rance drop you off at my place Friday morning. I'll make an appointment at my spa for both of us so it will give us a chance to brain storm away from the watch dogs." Angelique kept her voice low, casting sly looks toward her husband who was watching them like a hawk. She hated times like this. Thierry would be sure to keep her by his side constantly for a while. It was cute the way he could be all overbearing and protective on one hand. On the other, it could be a pain in her ass.

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea, though I really don’t need an appointment for myself. I can just hang out while you get whatever done so we can talk. Something about this has been really bothering me.” Jade frowned, chewing on her bottom lip. “Angel, I don’t think this was done by a woman. This isn’t the kind of thing a woman would do. The cats maybe, but this? I don’t think so.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.” The men had already made up their minds about who was behind all this weirdness, but there was just something about it that seemed a little more...personal. Angelique couldn’t put her finger on it, but it just didn’t seem like a jealous woman thing. “And yeah, you are getting a treatment. Just think how happily surprised Rance will be after we get you all waxed smooth.” It was hard to suppress a belly laugh at Jade’s stunned expression. Good, she needed to get her mind off of all this craziness for a while until they could figure it all out. As protective as the Chevalier

men were about their women, sometimes they could overlook the obvious. Angelique had a feeling this was way more obvious than any of them expected. They just needed to find some clue. In the meantime, Jade needed to relax and let things progress with Rance as they should.

“Remember what I told you about him.” Angelique reminded her friend who was looking over at Rance now. “He has never really had a woman without a price tag. Be patient, try to be understanding, but please don’t doubt him or yourself. Let it happen okay?”

Jade looked doubtful, but Angelique could see some cracks in that protective wall she had surrounded herself in. It would happen. Angelique had faith it would. Jade was the best thing that could have happened to the too often dour Rance; and vice versa. If there was anyone who could make Jade see what a catch she really was it was Rance. They were a weird, but perfect, match.

“Come on. Jade,” Rance called out impatiently, making Angelique smile. Yep, the man was a goner. “We will need to pick you up some clothes and other stuff you may need before we go home.”

Jade blinked at him, then back at Angelique. “I can’t let him take me shopping,” she whispered in shocked horror.

This time Angelique didn’t hope back her laugh. “Oh, honey. You can’t go back in the house and get your clothes.” Her nose wrinkled as she looked over to Piers and Remy yelling at each other in their attempts to get to the gator. She wondered if they realized they were actually going to have to go in the house to get the damn thing. Men were so very special. “Let him take care of you a little. It’s good for him.”

Jade mumbled something under her breath, but she didn’t openly disagree for which Angelique was grateful. Rance would probably be hurt if she denied him this small thing. Jade would learn in time. But man was it going to be fun to watch.

Chapter Eleven

Jade would have never gone to any of these boutiques had she been on her own. Nor would she have selected the purchases she had thus far. She hated to admit it, but Rance had an eye for what looked good on her. More so than she ever did. The clothes he insisted she try on and eventually bought for her accentuated her figure, making her look sexier than she had ever imagined she could look. They cupped her breasts and her behind while nipping in her waist. She looked like a fifties pin-up girl.

There was no way she should've let him spend half as much as he had already, and he didn't appear to be anywhere near satisfied. Five boutiques on Canal Street, now they were working Magazine Street. The clothes, hair, bath and body products had been all well and good, but now they were working on intimate apparel. Jade wasn't sure if she wanted to

hide under a rock or run screaming down the street. The firm grip around her waist kept her from either option.

“Hold your head up, baby girl.” The soft whisper in her ear made her head snap up.

She had no idea she had been looking down. She almost wished Rance hadn’t noticed. Every eye in the exclusive lingerie shop was locked on them as they, well Rance, browsed. Oh, God, she would never come in this place again. Like she had ever been here before anyway. She made good money, but she had always felt guilty spending it. There didn’t seem like much of a point. She was raised in a decent middle class family with a budget, she was just used to living that way. She gave her parents quite a bit of money, not they wanted nor needed it. All three of her brothers made decent livings and they sent them money, too. She just didn’t know what else to do with it besides putting it away for retirement or a rainy day.

“You’re about a thirty-eight double D, right?” Damn, was there nothing this man didn’t notice?

“Yes.” Jade kept her voice so low that only he could possibly hear it. “Maybe you should wait outside or something, I can do this myself.”

“Aww, but Jade-baby there’s nothing in the world I’d rather do than pick out the lovely unmentionables I am dying to see you in.” The grin he threw her way was devastating, making her all weak in the knees. That smile made her panties wet despite her discomfort.

Rance opened his mouth to say something else, but an older woman rudely placed herself in front of him, cutting off whatever he was going to say before he could say it.

“Why Rance Chevalier, I thought that was you! I said to myself, why on earth would Rance be in a lady’s undergarment shop. Then of course, I remembered your past...predilections and I thought ‘well, of course, he would.’” The sickly sweet

exaggerated accent dripped with unmistakable innuendo. Rance went completely rigid as the woman trailed her heavily veined hand down his chest. "I heard about your grandmother, such a shame. Of course, I for one don't believe those horrid rumors." Her faded, watery hazel eyes cut to Jade, then she turned a devious smile back at him. "I know you will come around so we can chat. Something simply must be done to squash this..." Her eyes trailed back to Jade, a distasteful look sweeping her from head to toe. "Ugliness. I would be more than willing to stake my own good name for your wonderful family."

Jade felt three clashing emotions so strongly she fairly shook with it. She was furious on Rance's behalf, not just because the woman was unpardonably rude and vulgar, but that she would even begin to suggest... No, it was just too disgusting to give serious thought. That this woman thought she could do such a thing as brazenly approach him only added up to one thing, which horrified and infuriated Jade to the point

where she was just about ready to walk to the hospital and choke every ounce of life out of that bitch of a grandmother of his. It didn't take a detective to put the pieces together given this woman was, old enough to be her mother's grandmother, thought she could come on to a relatively young and virile man in broad daylight in public.

From what she knew of his past, Rance had gone to the Naval Academy at eighteen, leaving New Orleans within weeks of his graduation from high school. He hadn't come back until Piers's father had died of cirrhosis, and someone in the family needed to take over the law practice. Since that time he had rarely been seen in Lady Rienne's company, and never at any of her homes. The story unfolded in front of Jade with crystal clarity and it just pissed her off.

"Excuse me, but we were in the middle of a very important conversation and while I truly don't mean to be rude, I'm afraid we really can't be interrupted." Jade poured on every

lesson learned in Mrs. Bosant's deportment class in her smile and manner. Inside, she was seething, but she'd be damned if she would let this old goat see it. "I'm afraid a woman simply can't pass up the opportunity when her fiancé offers to not only pay for, but assist in purchasing, her trousseau." Batting her eyelashes up at Rance in the perfect impression of the Southern woman she truly was, she placed herself between him and the old woman. "Honey, I just don't feel comfortable with the things here. I think we should go back to that darling shop on Decatur Street?"

Rance looked down at her with such heartfelt gratefulness, Jade felt the sting of tears that she valiantly battled down. He didn't need her tears right now, he needed her strength, and that was exactly what he was going to get. Still, it tugged on her heart of hearts to see such a strong, dignified man grateful for such a tiny thing as putting an old hag in her place. He would have never done it himself. It wasn't like this was the

waitress at lunch that disrespected her. This woman was his elder, a woman he had no doubt known for some time. He might hate her guts, but he would've never been so blatantly indecorous no matter how much she deserved it.

"I don't know, sweetheart. I see a few things that have caught my interest." Lord, that sexy drawl thing he had going on whenever the mood struck him was devastating. The look that accompanied that voice was purely carnal and not at all a show. Her stomach did a little flip as she allowed him to lead her away.

She couldn't for the life of her remember picking out the many purchases she found herself with as they left the store. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the older lady that had propositioned Rance earlier gawking at them. Had she been following them through the store? She certainly looked like she had. What the hell was her problem? Did she really think she

could blackmail, explicitly or implicitly, a man like Rance? Was she high?

“Hold on for a second, sugar,” Rance murmured, kissing her forehead as he headed in the witch’s direction.

Lucky for him he didn’t let go of her hand. She would have stomped over there right by his side if he had.

“Mrs. Blanchard, may I introduce my fiancée, Jade Jessups?” Rance introduced them pleasantly, as if what had occurred thirty-some minutes ago never happened. All warmth he had used on her earlier was gone, in its place was the cold, disinterested man that was Rance’s public façade. She would never be fooled by it again, but it would no doubt send a shiver of foreboding down this woman’s spine. If not, then she just wasn’t human. “Jade-baby, this is Marie-Claire Blanchard, Lady Rienne’s very good friend. Mrs. Blanchard, you were at my cousin’s ball last Friday, weren’t you?” Jade could tell by the

woman's face she was indeed. "I really must apologize for the, uh, vulgar scene on my cousin's behalf."

"C-c-c-cousin?" The woman stuttered, her face turning red, than gray, and then red again.

"Angelique Chevalier. The wife of my cousin, Thierry, making her therefore, my cousin. It is such a shame to have family laundry aired in public. I really can't deny a thing that happened, as you were there and clearly saw it all. I appreciate your kind offer of assistance, but it is completely unnecessary."

They left the evil old woman there, sputtering after them. Damn, but it felt good.

Well, now he just didn't have a choice. Jade had no doubt figured out the dirty little secret of his past in that quick, fertile mind of hers. Compassionate and kind Jade might be, but stupid she was not. Marie-Claire Blanchard was one bold piece

of work. He had to whore for his grandmother since he was seventeen years old. Her condition for leaving his twin alone. Remy knew, now Jade. Soon Thierry and Aubrey would know too. Once the cat was out of the bag there was no way to put it back in.

The drive back to his place in the Warehouse District wasn't long, but Rance uncharacteristically tried to drag it out as long as he could. He wasn't looking forward to the conversation he had no choice but to have. He wasn't scared, he had more faith in Jade than that. He had been young and oh, so stupid. He had honestly believed at the time he was saving his brother the only way that was available to him. He knew better now. He could have gone to his father or Uncle Beaumont. Hadn't his father chewed his ass for months for not coming to him?

He had it better than Piers, though, whose father was too drunk, too self absorbed, too selfish to be moved much at what

was going to on to his own son let alone his nephew. Lady Rienne had really hit the height of all evil with both he and Piers. What she had them do was beyond criminal. She had certainly earned herself a special place in hell for that one. Foolishly he believed he could bury the past, that no one had to know. That just wasn't the way life worked.

It was perhaps for the best. He really didn't want to start life out with Jade with shadows in the corner or this particular secret hanging over his head. He just hadn't wanted to tell her. He was deeply ashamed, that was something that was never going away. He just really hadn't wanted to share this just yet.

Trump International boasted valet services, so there was no delay with carrying their many purchases up to the sixty-first floor. Funny, but standing outside his penthouse apartment he was suddenly reluctant to have her see where he lived. Jade's house was warm, comfortable. You walked in the door and you just felt like it was a home. His place was aseptic at best.

Everything was rather cold. His walls were stark white. He had art; modern abstract art more in metallic tones than anything else. There were several sculptures spread around. They too were abstract, metallic, offering no real warmth or hints to his inner character. The place had never really been a home, it was just where he went to relax, sleep or work in peace. He couldn't recall having a real home.

Not that he felt sorry for himself, it just was what it was. The whole place was anti-Jade. He didn't really feel comfortable with her seeing him as a gray, colorless person. He wasn't that person when he was with her. She brought color into his life.

"I know it's not exactly welcoming, but I don't expect we'll be here long."

"You don't?" Jade brightened visibly, a sure sign she had mistaken his meaning. Damn. "You think this whole scare thing will be over soon?"

“That’s what you think this is? Scare tactics?” Now that just boggled the mind. You didn’t put a live alligator in someone’s house just to scare them. This had skidded past scaring to “gonna die as soon as he got his hands on the bitch” in a New York minute. “Hold that thought. Go on into the living room, get comfortable and make yourself at home.”

Literally. He took all the packages to the master suite just to drive home the point. Her place was by his side, period. He wasn't letting go. She would have to walk away, and he was planning on making that nearly impossible. He didn't just deposit the bags in the room; he hung the clothes up in the walk in closet, cleared several drawers, folded and placed the clothes that weren't hung up in those drawers. He placed the shoes on the shoe shelves in the closet, put her brand new toothbrush right next to his own, placed all her toiletries in the appropriate places in the bathroom.

By the time he made it back to the living room, Jade had taken off her shoes and curled up in a corner of the too firm leather couch. He paused at the entryway, watching her lost in her thoughts. She looked neither scared nor angry, just thoughtful. She brought life into the room, made it look welcoming in some indescribable way. The sun seemed to shine through the windows a little brighter, the surroundings looking less austere than just moments before.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” She didn’t move when she asked, just regarded him in a straight, earnest gaze all her own. Damn, she was gorgeous.

It wasn't his dick that filled for once while staring at her looking right back at him. His chest felt tight, packed almost to bursting. He loved her. He loved her, wanted her, and though she had only said it as a way to knock Marie-Claire off her guard, she had said from her own lips they were getting

married. He was going to hold her to that. Anything less was unthinkable.

“I was just thinking we needed to go house hunting.” He wouldn’t ask her to live here. Penthouse apartment wasn’t her. She needed space, a yard, a garden, a big nursery.

“I don’t think I want to move out of my house, Rance. I’m sure this craziness will pass soon enough. In fact, I should probably go stay with my parents until it is. I don’t want to put you out.”

Nope, he didn’t like that idea at all. “You’re fine right here. I don’t think your parents would appreciate me moving into your childhood bedroom, or all the screams in the middle of the night.”

“Rance Chevalier, I do not scream.” She was blushing. It was genuine, refreshing, and the cutest damn thing he had ever seen.

She did, beautifully he might add. "I'm talking about me." He said it just to see if she would blush harder, and she did. Her dark chocolate skin turned a burgundy red, high on her cheekbones. How was it possible a woman like this existed in this day and age? "What I mean by house hunting is a place for you and me to start off our marriage. I was standing right there when you declared I was your fiancé, I have a witness. No doubt it's all over New Orleans finer homes by now. You have to marry me now. How would it look if you didn't? People will naturally assume it was me and paint me a monster for doing you wrong."

She didn't smile back at him, but she didn't laugh him off either. Her steady gaze on him never wavered. She looked as if she was trying to figure him out.

"You want to talk about it now?" The question was asked softly. She unwound her body as she spoke, pointedly looking at the place beside her.

Rance obeyed the unspoken command and sat down, rewarded by Jade climbing onto his lap when he did so. He didn't bother repressing a sigh as she laid her head on his shoulder, her arms snaking around his neck. This felt right, it felt good. He was looking forward to getting used to it. His apprehension became nonexistent, his body relaxing at her touch. The woman really did hold some kind of magical power over him. He couldn't be bothered to be upset when she was touching him.

"We were in high school when Remy got caught up with a girl from the bayou. Cherry Robichaud. Completely unacceptable in the eyes of Lady Rienne. He wasn't serious about her, just having a little fun. Cherry was a wild one, not the type to be tied down to one man until she had to. She got pregnant, but Remy had long since stopped sleeping with her. She tried to pin it on him. She made the tragic mistake of going to our loving grandmother, hoping for something, money,

marriage, I don't really know. Lady Rienne had her arrested. Cherry killed herself. Remy was furious, and I was afraid. Scared to death she would do something, though thinking back I have no idea what. She was going to send Remy to a military academy for the rest of his senior year, a bit too late for that kind of thing. I was scared she would choke the laughter out of him. Remy had been born with such laughter."

"How old were you?" Jade cut in, her arms tightening just a little.

"Seventeen. We both were." A stupid thing to say. They were twins after all. "I just wanted her to let him go. To let him be who and what he wanted to be. He wanted to study cooking, there was no way she was going to allow that. All her grandsons had to fit into her mold of what a Chevalier should be. "I offered myself, anything she wanted from me, if she would just leave him be. Cherry's death almost killed that laughter that was so much a part of Remy. I could never allow

that. She wanted...information. She wanted dirt on her so-called friends and enemies alike. She used me and someone else to get that information."

"You and Piers. She sold you." That was his Jade. She didn't miss a thing. It was one of the things that made her such razor sharp attorney. She saw through all the things people didn't want to admit and got right to the heart of the matter.

"I believe Piers wrote to my father. I'm not certain it was him, but Thierry was away at college. The general swooped down here before we graduated and stayed until I walked to get my diploma and carted me off to the Academy. I went through a mini-boot camp as preparation for the year to come. I didn't come back until Sorrel, Piers's father, finally died of cirrhosis. I've had maybe a handful of conversations with Lady Rienne since then."

“And no one knew.” It wasn't a question so he didn't answer. Closing his eyes he tried to ignore the tiny drops of moisture dropping on his neck.

She was crying for him. He couldn't remember anyone ever crying for him. It humbled a man, made something inside him just break a little. He could feel her pain as if it was his own, and in a way, it was. She was taking all the pain he had refused to allow himself to feel and expressing it in a way he never could.

“Baby, don't.” Because it was killing him. “Don't cry for me. That naïve kid is gone forever.”

“That's why you've never had a relationship with a woman isn't it? That's the reason you would only allow yourself mistresses before now.” He was stunned speechless. How the hell did she know that? She lifted her head, those big baby browns filled with tears. His tears. “That's why you have a hard time letting people get close isn't it? And why you are estranged

from Remy. You never wanted him to know that it was for him.”

He was floored. Yes, he’s always known Jade was insightful, but she knew him better than he ever believed. Better than he knew himself. And she grieved for him, for the idiotic, arrogant teenager he had been, believing he could save his brother and wound up destroying a piece of himself.

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Don’t you ever do something that stupid again, do you hear me? I will- I will- do something painful to you if you ever take on something like that all by yourself. And I am going to strangle that old hag with my bare hands. But if you ever do anything like that for me or for anyone else, Rance Chevalier, I will hurt you.”

He had to laugh. She was so fiercely serious, care and love shining through her anger, her little hands holding the

back of his shirt in her fists as she shook him, or tried to anyway. She was such a little thing, it really wasn't possible.

“Somehow I don’t think I’ll ever get that chance.” Not with this woman watching his back as ferociously as a mama lion.

“You’re damned right.”

Chapter Twelve

Jade wasn't satisfied with Rance's answer. He was a stubborn man, way too domineering for his own good. He would take the world on his shoulders if he could; it was one of the things she admired about him. It would be foolhardy to argue with him, so she didn't. Instead she kissed him, pouring her heart and everything she didn't know how to express into the act. He didn't fight her, but she never thought he would. His lips softened, then opened allowing her in to explore. For once, he didn't take control either, he simply let her lead.

Inevitably, the kiss heated and deepened, until Jade was moaning in concert with the man she was trying to comfort. His lips made her inside liquefy, spreading red hot need all through her. Her body melted into his, her hips mashing against the growing bulge in his lap. Her fingers crept to his hair, pulling with a little more force than she'd intended on the silky strands.

“Not here.” Jade blinked down at him, not quite understanding what he’d just said. She wanted his lips back, she wanted his hands on her body. Why was he stopping? “I want you in my room, in my bed.”

Well that certainly made it clear, especially when he stood up with her still wrapped around him.

“Rance, put me down, I can walk.” She was a little too heavy to be carried to bed, as romantic as the notion might be.

“Hush, this isn’t the first time I’ve carried you. You hardly weigh more than a child.”

He didn’t so much as grunt as he carried her down the hall through his bedroom door. He was right, this wasn’t the first time he’d carried her to bed, but the distance from her bathroom to her bed was no more than a few steps. The sentiment made her eyes water; it was possibly the sweetest thing she had ever heard. And he meant it, too. That made it twice as special.

He didn't give her much time to dwell on it though. As soon as her feet touched the ground he was undoing her ponytail, wrapping her hair around his hands like he was so obviously fond of doing and taking her mouth with the authority and vigor that was all Rance. The way he moved his lips on hers, forcing her mouth open for him made her knees weak. His tongue stroked hers with complete conviction.

"Oh, baby girl, what you do to me," he moaned, lifting his lips from hers. She wanted them back.

Instead of giving her what she wanted, he moved his lips down her jaw line to her neck, where he latched on, sucking with biting pressure until she was whimpering and weak, sinking completely in his embrace. By the time he lifted his head, Jade was a puddle of need, rubbing against him like a cat in heat. That was exactly how he made her feel and there was no shame in admitting that to herself.

“Undress for me, Jade-baby. I want to see you.” He took a step back, watching her with those glittering aquamarine eyes of his. There was nothing about the request that left room for her to say no. She had never really undressed herself for him before, definitely not in broad daylight where he was sure to see her body was less than perfect. “Don’t you dare start doubting now, sweetheart. I will spank that ass and love every minute of it.”

Lord, those words made her shiver, and it wasn't in fear. He would spank her, and she would thoroughly enjoy herself as he did. She pulled her shirt over her head trying not to cringe as the material drifted to the floor. Her sports bra was far from sexy, but no one would know that by the way his face tightened. When he looked at her like that, she believed herself to be the most desirable woman in the world.

“Keep going,” he growled, the bulge in his pants growing noticeably.

She couldn't help but think about what that cloth hid there. So big and thick, so hot and pulsating – alive. It filled her just right, with a sharp edge of pain making sure she felt every inch. Unconsciously she licked her lips as she slowly drew her own pants down her legs. How would he taste? She had never gotten the chance to find out. Suddenly, she didn't feel so shy about her shape, not with the way the organ in question jumped, visibly moving the linen that encased it. Her clothes couldn't be gone fast enough. She needed to touch, to taste.

She didn't remember moving, but there she was, on her knees pulling open the button and zipper on his pants. Thank goodness he was apt to go commando, so nothing stood between her and the broad shaft that fell into her hands. Fascinated by the smooth texture of the skin she started to stroke lightly up then down, squeezing ever so gently. Rewarded by a low moan from Rance and a drop of pearly pre-cum, she stuck out her tongue and swirled around the purplish

head. His hand jerked in her hair before starting to pull her back.

“Jade-baby, you don’t have to...Aww shit!”

Before he could pull her off she engulfed his turgid cock into her mouth, sucking down with a deep moan of her own. His hand jerked again, but this time to hold her closer. She started a slow, steady rhythm, sucking voraciously on his dick, trying to take in as much as she could. It just wasn't possible to get it all in her mouth so what she couldn't fit she used her hand to stimulate. She could feel the tension in his thighs as he fought to stay still. Not at all satisfied with that, Jade started to hum, moving faster down on his cock. His hips finally began to move in time with her ministrations. His tormented groans of pleasure only fueled her own desire, making her wetter, hotter. Giving him pleasure fed her own gratification.

“Sweetheart, you’re going to have to stop before I come.” It was a warning she really didn’t want to hear. She

wanted him to come; she wanted to bring him over the edge as he had done for her so many times before.

“No, *petit*.” He pulled out of her mouth, moving back and lifting her to her feet. “When I come, it will be inside you.”

She would have complained, but his mouth took her in a swift claiming, demanding her submission without saying a word. Her body naturally softened, melting into him as he walked her backwards to the bed. He didn’t lift his lips even as he threw off his clothes, or when he lifted her legs and thrust into her pussy, which was already dripping with need for him.

“Oh God, Rance!” Jade cried as she fell back, her pelvis bucking upward to welcome his plunge. “Please, don’t stop.”

“Not ever, *bébé*. I couldn’t if I tried.”

He powered into her, half on the bed, half crouching. He had her legs up around his shoulders, his eyes holding hers captive. She felt so incredibly full, the friction of his thickness

inside her making her burn just right. His strokes hit a spot deep inside her womb making her body hot and cold at the same time, ridding her of any lingering inhibitions she could have left. She bucked with abandon, not even trying to suppress or quiet her cries of rapture.

“Yes, Rance, fill me. Please, I need it so bad.” Hell, she wasn’t above begging. It felt too good not to.

“I know what you need, *petit*.” That was a good thing because she was so close.

But then he was gone. Jade attempted to grab at him to force him back, but wound up grabbing his hair. Rance had dropped to his knees, burying his face between her thighs. Her pussy felt cold and empty.

“I’m hungry.” A gasp was the only sound she could make in reply as he devoured her.

His tongue thrust ravenously inside her, his thumb tracing little circles on her clit. Electric currents raced up her spine as her hips reared up into his carnal kiss. Not more than a few plunges and she was crashing over the edge, pulling on his hair as her thighs locked around his neck. She was probably choking him, but she couldn't seem to let go. And he wasn't stopping.

"More." His voice was muffled against her nether lips, licking in between his demands. "Come again for me, *catin*. Feed me."

This time when he dove in, he alternated between fucking her cunt with his tongue and sucking down on her clit, a move sure to send her over again.

"Rance! You're going to drive me crazy. Please, please, I want you. I want your cock inside me. I need you so bad."

Her skin felt so tight, like she would explode at any second. Sensual heat engulfed her, making it hard to think. She

came again, unable to hold back the quake that shook her. Finally, he lifted his head and moved slowly up her body, trailing his mouth over her sensitized skin as he leisurely pulled them both up the bed. When he got to her breasts he stopped, pushing them together before licking around her areolas.

“You have the most beautiful breasts. So full.” He punctuated the statement by sucking both nipples into his mouth until she was squirming underneath him. “One day, my babies will feed here. Just thinking about it makes me dick so damn hard, baby. I want to fill you with little me’s for the rest of your life.”

That shouldn’t have sounded sexy. It shouldn’t have made her pussy spasm with approval, but it did. She had a tiny little orgasm just from him playing with her breasts.

“Rance, please, you have to get inside me.” Jade was sure she was going to lose her mind. It was all too much, too many sensations rioting through her all at once.

“Shhh. Je m’occuperai de vous le chéri. Open for me.”

Finally, he was sliding back to where he needed to be. Jade spread her legs willingly, inviting him as deep as she could get him. He felt so good inside her. His strokes sure and unhurried, loving every inch of her. His lips claimed hers, sharing her own taste with her. Their tongues melded together in a slow dance that matched the one of their hips. It was perfect. Jade never wanted to leave the ecstasy of his arms.

“Ton corps est mon trésor, Jade-baby. You were born for me.” For the first time she really believed it.

Collectively, they moved faster, straining against each other. Jade could feel her body climbing, this time, much higher than before. Rance’s large hands gripped her hips, pulling her up into his increasingly vigorous thrusts. She dug her nails into his shoulders trying to hold on in the face of the turbulent storm that was nearly there.

"I'm going to come," she warned in a desperate wail.

"Oh, God, Rance, it's too much. I'm going to--"

It was volcanic, throwing her entire being into complete, erotic chaos. Her body bowed, her legs locking around him as she screamed.

"Je t'aime et je t'aimerai toujours." She didn't mean to say it out loud. Her heart was just too full to keep it in. It slipped out just before she passed out.

Rance didn't move for a full minute, watching with awe as the woman who had come to mean more to him than anything else in the world slipped into unconsciousness. She had no idea what a gift she just gave him.

"I love you, too, Jade-baby. More than you'll ever know. I swear I will always take care of you. Always."

Rolling over, he made sure to keep his dick deep inside her as he pulled her prone body on top of his. What a fucking day. He had never felt so raw, but Jade made it all seem all right. He appreciated not having to explain his actions of so long ago, and for that he was grateful. He wasn't even sure what the hell he had been thinking as a brash seventeen-year-old. He was glad he didn't have to hide his past anymore. The relief was greater than he would've expected. She simply accepted what he'd done, understanding what was underneath his actions almost immediately. More than simply being brilliant, she was empathic and nonjudgmental. She put the pieces together and summed up all the bullshit that swirled around in simple concise terms.

He knew he didn't deserve a woman like this. But he wasn't giving her up. Whoever was behind all the crazy things that had been happening to her lately would pay dearly. He was positive it was Gabriella, but for the life of him he just

couldn't understand why. She only stood to lose by pissing him off. Already, he had cut off the generous stipend he had given her. She knew him well enough to know he had no mercy when it came to his enemies, and fucking with his woman was a sure fire way to become an enemy. Of all the people in the world that deserved to be cherished and protected it was Jade.

With a sigh, he decided not to dwell on it at the moment. He relaxed his body, waiting patiently for Jade to wake so they could make love again.

Chapter Thirteen

“We’ll drive you.”

Jade and Angelique shared a quick glance, turning quickly back to their men. This wouldn’t do at all. They wouldn’t be able to go and question the neighbors if Rance and Thierry were there. One of them had better come up with something quick.

“That won’t be necessary. We’ll be perfectly fine.” Angel grabbed Jade’s hand and tried to push her way past her husband, who wasn’t moving.

Damn, this wasn't looking good. Jade decided to let Angel have the first crack at it since she was still trying desperately to think up something plausible. So far she was drawing one big ole’ blank. Hopefully her friend could work some magic.

“Angel, there is no way in hell we’re letting you two out of our sight.” Thierry wasn’t kidding. If he was anything like Rance, and he was, he would be immovable.

“We’re only going to the spa. We are going to have the works today, hair, facials, nails. Plus they have the best restaurant. Come on, Thierry, please.”

Wow, Jade had never seen Angel as a sex kitten. The way she was batting her eyelashes and rubbing against Thierry was completely unlike the reserved, shy Angel she used to know. Thierry had really done wonders for her friend. She felt kind of like a voyeur watching the two of them, so she looked away and collided with Rance’s eyes staring right at her. He was leaning against the wall casually, but Jade could read the tension in his body. Whatever he was thinking, he was way off, and she needed to squash it now.

“Excuse us for a second, please.” She wasn’t really sure if either Thierry or Angel were listening. They seemed way too

into each other just now. Grabbing Rance's hand she dragged him into the bedroom.

"Am I suffocating you?"

Wow, she didn't have to say a word. He just came right out with it. She was momentarily stunned by his bluntness. Blinking, she walked back and dropped down on the bed. He didn't seem upset, but somehow she knew he was. He wouldn't allow himself to show it. She wondered how often he went about in life feeling all tied up in knots inside with no one ever noticing.

"Oh, Rance this isn't about you. I love being with you. The past week has been beyond my dreams. I just want to spend a little time with my friend, that's all. Plus, I wanted you to be surprised."

She wanted to weep for joy when she saw him visibly relax. She didn't even have to ask him to come and have a seat next to her. He sank down and wrapped his arms around her

and kissed her forehead. She sunk into his embrace, trying to will some peace into his body. He kept too much inside.

“You wanted me to be surprised by what?”

Jade smiled against his chest. So much for the big reveal.

“I’m getting waxed.”

The tension was back, but this time it was an entirely different kind of tension.

“Waxed?” She had to giggle at the hoarse cack. “You mean your legs, right?”

“No, not my legs.” Oh, Lord she hadn’t giggled so much since she was a kid.

Rance’s arms tightened around her, a small groan escaping from him as he squeezed her close. “Go, baby. I’ll be right here waiting when you get back.”

Rance stood next to his cousin watching the women gather their purses and flounce out the door.

“What do you say, give them a ten minute head start?”

Although he appreciated the way Thierry thought, he had to disagree this time. “Too long. They’re not going straight to the spa. I say we give them five.

“Deal.”

“Okay, I really made the appointment for two o’clock, so we can swing by your place and question the neighbors.” Angel was bubbling with enthusiasm at evading an escort. Jade hated to burst her bubble, but she had a feeling the guys had only let them go because they fully intended on following.

Normally, she would have warned Angel for fear it might cause trouble at home, but she knew Angel could handle Thierry. In fact, her friend would probably enjoy every bit of

any “punishment” Thierry might mete out. It was a little before twelve. They had a good hour and a half before they had to turn around and head to the spa. Maybe she could pick-up her protein drink mix while they were there. Her waistline couldn’t afford for her to completely blow off her diet, especially with her new wardrobe.

“We’ll have a light lunch at the spa and be back here before sunset. Why do men only think bad things happen after the sun goes down anyway? We found the gator in the middle of the day.”

“I’m glad you didn’t remind Thierry of that. That man of yours is more than a little protective.”

“And yours isn’t?” Angel shot right back. “Face it Jade, we caught ourselves the A-type personalities of the family.”

How strange, but she really did have a man of her very own. A hard headed, uber-macho, manly man. She had always thought she would settle down with someone nice and easy,

much like herself. This was not the kind of drama she had ever envisioned for herself. This was Angel and Katrina kind of intrigue. Jade always suspected she and Regina would be the sensible ones to settle down with like minded people. Instead, Katrina seemed to be the only one who caught herself an even tempered guy. Well, as even tempered as the Chevaliers got anyway.

The drive to her neighborhood was spent in companionable silence, but once there, Angel was on the case like a hound dog who'd caught a scent of its prey. It was as they had both suspected, the person who had put that gator into her home had been a male. No one seemed to have seen him clearly, only remembering that he had been rather nondescript. Neither short nor tall, not fat or skinny. It was simply amazing for her usually astute neighbors to have noticed so little about the man. He seemed to be one of those that no one ever noticed until it was too late.

“Well, that rules out Victor.” Jade was disheartened as they left the last house with a clear view to her own. She never really thought it was Victor anyway, but she had put him on her mental list just in case.

“The whole thing just doesn’t seem to add up.” Angel was frowning as they stomped across Jade’s front lawn. “I mean, who could possibly have anything against you? You don’t work with criminals, you do contract law. Who the hell could be so pissed about a contract violation that they would want to kill you?”

Angelique was in full agreement with her that this wasn't about Jade now seeing Rance. For one thing it was just too new for anyone to have worked up a good head of steam over. Secondly, Rance wasn't promised to any woman. Up until now, he had been the eternal bachelor giving no one any indication he wanted to settle down. It wasn't like he had to carry on the

family name, especially now that his twin's wife was near to bursting with child.

Jade couldn't help but take searching glances over her yard, looking for anything moving. She really hated this. Not feeling at home in your own home was the worst feeling in the world. This whole thing needed to be resolved quickly.

"I need to sit down and write out a list of people who could possibly have a grudge, then go from there." She just couldn't think of any other answer. "There has to be something I'm overlooking. I feel like there is something I'm missing and it's right in front of my face."

"What are you two ladies doing here?"

Both Jade and Angel jumped more than a few inches in the air, letting out little squeaks of fright as Remy swung open Jade's front door just as they walked up the three steps to the covered porch. Right behind him Piers appeared, busting out a

deep belly laugh at the sight of them clutching each other looking at Remy as if he were a ghost.

“We thought y’all already got the gator out. I was just coming by my house to pick up a few of my things.” Jade really didn’t mean to sound all indignant, but damn it Remy had scared the daylights out of them.

“We’re just here to make sure it’s all clear,” Piers rushed to tell them as soon as Remy opened his mouth. For that Jade was glad. She may be cool and calm around Rance, but she was walking on the edge right about now. She felt safe and protected when she was with Rance, but she felt oddly exposed and vulnerable away from him. She hated that feeling. She hadn’t needed a man to protect her from anything, ever, no matter what her brothers seemed to think. She had always lived her life in a way that just didn’t attract enemies, and she liked it like that.

The question seemed to be would she be willing to give up Rance to go back to that life. What if the threats were about him after all, only in a way she and Angel hadn't yet thought of? Would she be willing to give him up for her former peace? The answer was a resounding no. As much as she thought she could or would be able to let him go even a week ago, she found she didn't want to. Not now, not ever. She really did believe him when he said he wanted to be with her. Rance was a lot of things, but self delusional was not one of them. The man had more or less asked her to marry him. He would never tie himself to a woman he didn't love. He hadn't said it yet, but he had shown it in dozens of ways.

"Hey, Jade. Are you in there?" She snapped out of her silent thoughts to see Remy snapping his fingers in front of her face. Man, she needed to cut back on the ruminations.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" She tried to walk into the house, but Remy and Piers weren't budging.

“Tell us what you want and we’ll get it for you.” Remy repeated for her. “We got the gator out, but Didier put a silent alarm system on your doors and windows, and it went off last night. We’re just checking the place out.”

“Oh.” This situation was really trying to make her head hurt. It didn’t look as if she’d be coming home anytime soon. There wasn’t a heck of a lot she needed out of there, she would just really like to be surrounded by her own things. “I guess just my protein drink powder and the white jewelry box on my dresser. I need to give it back to Rance.”

“Sure thing, doll face. Wait right there.” Remy winked and disappeared toward the back while Piers could be seen walking to the kitchen.

It took longer than Jade expected for both men to return. Piers was first, carrying three large cans of the protein powder recommended by her trainer in a canvas shopping bag. Remy was still in the back.

“Are you sure this is all you need? I saw some diet stuff in your cabinet. I mean, I don’t know if you are on a diet or not. I didn’t mean to offend, but I can grab that stuff for you if you want me to.” Piers had to be the quietest of all the Chevaliers. He seemed to be the single one most likely to just go with the flow.

“No, this is it,” Jade assured him. “Thank you so much for getting it for me. I didn’t really want to buy more.”

Plus, there was no way Rance would let her snack on diet bars in between protein drinks. It was really endearing the way Piers turned a little red when she smiled at him. He was just so darn nice. He would make some lucky woman one hell of a husband one day.

“Hey, are you sure it was on your dresser?” Remy came back a few minutes later while she and Angel were making small talk with Piers. Jade hated to admit it but she was happy to see him return. Piers was sweet and all, but he wasn’t one for

small talk. It felt painful to try to come up with interesting topics, and they had only been talking for a few minutes. “I looked everywhere, even rifled through your drawers a little and couldn’t find it.”

Jade frowned. She had left it there Saturday when she woke up and found she still had on the very valuable jewels Rance had draped her with Friday night. She hadn’t touched it since. Wednesday before she left for work it was sitting right in the same place she had put it. She hadn’t worried too much about it because Rance hadn’t left her house. Maybe he’d taken them since then, but she couldn’t imagine when. It was Wednesday afternoon that the gator incident happened. Thursday they had both stayed in Rance’s apartment. Actually, they hadn’t left the bedroom. Jade never realized what a carnal person she was, or maybe it was just the chemical reaction to the man she’d given her heart to.

“Maybe I should come in and look.” She really didn’t want to be responsible for the loss of Rance’s great-grandmother’s jewelry.

“No can do. Rance would have my balls if I let you in here before I had a chance to check the place out.” Remy wasn’t budging. For all his being the funny one, he certainly had that autocratic my-way-or-the-highway look down. For a second there, he looked a little too much like his twin.

“Come on, Jade. I’m sure Rance has it already. We don’t want to be late for our appointment.”

With hurried goodbyes, they got into Angel’s car and drove away. Neither of them said anything until they were a good deal away.

“That’s just weird.” Angelique spoke up first, echoing Jade’s thoughts.

“Which part? The jewelry or the other attempted break in without anyone seeing a thing? Or maybe how no one seems to notice a two hundred pound reptile being put into my house?”

If her neighbors had seen a second person trying to sneak in, they would have said something, and not one of them mentioned seeing the gator. The man they could vaguely recall, but not one of them mentioned he had anything with him. How in the hell could someone transport a full sized alligator into a residential neighborhood without anyone seeing a thing?

“You know we should’ve thought of that,” Thierry groused, pulling out slowly after the women got about a half a block away. “The neighbors could have seen something.”

“Yeah, but if they had, they would have volunteered the information when we all showed up.” From what Jade had told Rance about her neighbors, they weren’t shy about sharing information.

“Good thing she didn’t call the cops first.”

Rance couldn’t hold back his shit eating grin. No, she hadn’t called the cops, she’d called him. As far as he knew, she hadn’t even thought about calling anyone else. They might be going a bit fast in the relationship arena, but it progressing beautifully. She trusted him, that was huge.

“Did you tell her about the missing jewelry yet? Or about going to the plantation this weekend?”

“I haven’t told her about the jewelry, but I have no doubt that was one of the things she came here for.” Rance avoided answering the second question. He wasn’t so sure he was going. Jade had helped him push past at least part of the bullshit he had lived with for far too long. He wasn’t sure he was ready to step foot in the place that had been his own personal hell for the last year of his so-called childhood.

“You’re going, Rance. If I have to be there, so do you.

Your woman can handle a paralyzed Lady Rienne. From what I

understand, the woman can't even speak." When Rance still said nothing, Thierry continued as if it were a real conversation. "What I can't figure out is how she had the second attack. The doctor said she had been stable and then suddenly all the alarms were going off. A little talk with the nurses and I find out the machines keeping the old girl alive had been pulled. What I can't figure out is how the hell that happened. I was at home, so it couldn't have been me. You were with Jade so--"

"Drop it." He wasn't about to go there. No matter how much he trusted Thierry, Rance was all too aware he knew exactly what happened.

"I'm just saying it's a damn good thing Baptiste and Remy were there. Though I can't imagine why either one of them would want to visit her."

Thierry was a cunning bastard. There was no doubt he had already puzzled out the whole sordid tale. It was his way of making sure Rance knew. It was information Rance didn't want

a reminder of. Now Thierry knew he had known all along. Nosey son of bitch just had to know everything. Well, almost everything.

“Well, I guess the devil got his due. But you, of all people, would already know that wouldn’t you.”

Mother fuck! So, Thierry knew too. What the hell didn’t he know? Rance grit his teeth but offered no information though he could feel Thierry’s gaze slide his way.

“Watch the fucking road, Machiavelli.” Thank the Good Lord Thierry hadn’t been born in another time. He would be a fucking tyrant.

“If that were true, it would have never happened.”

Not “You should have told me” or “Why didn’t you call me or write me,” just a simple statement was enough of a reprimand from the eldest of their generation. Rance got the message loud and clear, and he was grateful for it, but it was

little too late for would've, should've, could've. Rance wasn't even sure he would have chosen a different path if he could go back. All he could do was make sure his future was a lot brighter than his past.

Chapter Fourteen

"I hate this fucking house." Even though Rance knew Piers meant every word of what he'd just said, his cousin's voice carried no heat.

"At least this time we can leave." Rance wished he knew how Piers kept that zen-like quality. The man had even more reason to detest this place than he did.

There was an underlying guilt in his statement. He had left Piers here alone with Lady Rienne for a full year. Once his father came to collect him, Rance left so fast he didn't consider what his cousin would suffer once he was gone. Their grandmother had merrily pimped him out to old ladies to gather secrets from powerful families or simply to hold power over someone. He had no reason to believe she'd stopped just because he left. Hell, she used Piers for the same thing while he

was there, even though he was a year younger. Why she had left Thierry and Aubrey alone he'd never know.

"How long have you been here?" Piers asked him as soon as the other man saw him.

Rance and Jade had gotten there thirty minutes before. Jade was now in the kitchen with his newly found Aunt Therese, Didier's mother, and her friends. Remy, Thierry and Aubrey were in the library with their grandfather.

"Not very long." Rance shrugged. He hadn't wanted to announce his arrival. He'd needed a minute to get his bearings. The place just had bad vibes.

Rance didn't feel like getting to know Baptiste Chevalier, at least not yet. While he understood the reasons why the man had left his grandmother, he had to know what kind of living hell he was forcing on his sons and any children they had by staying away. He had lived with Lady Rienne long enough to know she was pure evil. Why hadn't he taken the boys with him

when he left? And why did his father and Uncle Beaumont act as though it was perfectly fine that he hadn't? He wasn't sure he wanted to understand the strange relationship between his elders. If his brother and his cousins welcomed him with open arms so be it, but Rance had a good reason to be bitter. He wasn't ready to let it go. He wasn't sure if he ever would be.

"Have you been down to the cellar yet?"

Rance stared at Piers like he'd lost his mind. The structure below the house wasn't just a cellar. One small corner was used as a wine cellar, but the rest of the area that was almost as long as the house was a series of rooms Lady Rienne had designed as a couple of bedrooms, a full bath, and a "rumpus room" where she had two of her grandsons entertain ladies of her choosing. Why would he ever want to go down there again?

“Before you ask, you should know the Elders have found out all about the room apparently, seeing as how it’s now occupied.”

“Occupied? What the hell do you mean occupied?”

Piers grinned like a kid who had found his daddy’s secret stash of porn magazines. Beckoning with his hand he led the way down to the wine cellar, then through the hidden door with all the glee of a kid on Christmas morning. Rance’s stomach roiled the closer they came to the room where he’d spent the worse year of his life. How could Piers traipse down here as if all was right with the world? Rance had to consider that perhaps he was weaker than his quiet, easy going cousin. The place still creeped the shit out of him, but Piers didn’t seemed bothered at all. How far down had Piers pushed the memories of his late teenage years? Or had he dealt with all the shit years before while Rance had still been running away?

They came to what appeared to be a solid wall, but Piers flipped a switch that was hidden behind a light switch. Part of the wall slid back quietly. It had been seamless, so Rance hadn't detected the small window that was right in front of him until now. The window peered into what had once been his room, the room where middle aged, over indulgent wives of society had pawed him, used him. Bile rushed up to his throat; he had to choke it down or he was going to lose it. Damn it, he should be over this shit. The last thing he should be feeling now was the need to run out of here as fast as possible and lose himself in Jade.

Just the thought of the woman waiting for him upstairs gave him the strength to look up, to face the room and everything it represented. It was different now. The décor was no longer gaudy red with bright gilt on every available surface. It was remodeled in soft peaches and cream, the furniture tasteful, the muted light was warm rather than tawdry.

“Who the hell is that?” He hadn’t seen them at first. His mind had been too caught up in his own memories.

Rance recognized the two men instantly. Who didn’t know their own father, even if his head was currently buried between pale dusky ivory thighs. His uncle Beaumont was equally as recognizable. His face clearly seen in profile as he feasted on the woman’s full breasts while his brother was otherwise occupied with bringing the single woman pleasure. He didn’t know why he was shocked; it wasn’t like either man was a saint. It was just hard to process seeing one’s father engaged in what looked to be a passionate ménage à trios.

“I come from one fucked up family.” The words weren’t really meant for anyone but himself, but they seemed to amuse the shit out of Piers.

“That would be Solange Dubois,” Piers informed him gleefully. “Angel’s missing cousin.”

Rance turned to Piers in shock. The missing cousin had been here the entire time? With Boden and Beaumont? The girl had been missing for over a year. Well, obviously not so missing. No wonder her mother hadn't been all that concerned. The two elders were probably paying the woman handsomely to keep her mouth shut. He knew Thierry and Angel didn't have a clue. Thierry was doing everything he could think of to try to keep Angel from looking for the cousin who had spied on her all her life and assisted her stepmother in making her miserable. At the same time, Thierry had people out there trying to find a trace of the woman. It was as if she'd disappeared off the face of the earth.

Okay, he'd felt sick before, but now he felt just downright dirty. The last thing in the world he ever needed to know was that his father was tag-teaming some chick with his older brother. It was too many different kinds of nasty. He needed to get the hell out of here. In fact, he needed to get the

hell out of this house. There had to be something in the air that made people lose their goddamn minds.

Without a word, he left Piers standing there, snickering at the two men old enough to be the father of the woman they were fucking. It was too much to process. Coming here was bad enough, but this, this was a bridge too far.

His stride didn't falter, even as he snagged two bottles of red wine off the shelf along the way. He had no idea what they were, he just knew he would need a drink to wash away a sight that would surely haunt him. He had to make one quick stop, even though he would just prefer to make his way to his woman and forget everything; his father and uncle, Lady Rienne, the nasty horny bitches who would fuck a seventeen year old to fill their empty lives, all of it. Rance just wanted to bury himself so deep in his woman he couldn't find his way out. Yet, he knew he had to tell Thierry what was down here. If nothing else, it would save his cousin's wife from worry,

though there was no way in hell he would be anywhere near when Thierry broke it to Angel that their fathers not only had her cousin but were fucking her so well there was no need to worry about her location or wellbeing.

Holy hell, Lady Rienne's head might just explode, never mind her bad heart. Every single son and/or grandson she had left was in some way involved with an African American woman. Oh, the poetic justice was thicker than molasses. They always said blood will tell, though who had said that Rance really didn't know.

Lost in a stupor, he strode into the library, ignoring everyone but Thierry. He wasn't here to chit chat and make nice. He needed out of this awful place, so he walked right up to Thierry, who happened to be talking at the time and leaned down to his ear.

"Your wife's cousin is in the cellar."

That was all he wanted to say so he turned to leave only to be stopped. Thierry held his arm in a death grip he probably could have broken, but that would mean a fight and Rance wasn't altogether sure he could have one of those at the moment without killing someone. It would probably be best not to allow himself to get angry, which was one of the reasons he didn't bother looking in Didier's direction though he had seen the jackass in his periphery.

"Excuse us, please. Rance needs to tell me something," Thierry, ever the polite one explained before getting up and starting toward the door.

"Rance, are you all right? You look a bit...peaked. Perhaps you should stay a while, talk it out."

He couldn't really look at Didier right now. He knew he couldn't. So, he didn't. Nor did he reply to Didier's taunt. Rance was aware he was projecting some weird vibes, but if that asshole implied he should stay away from Jade while in

such a state, he might not be able to suppress his anger anymore.

“Rance is fine, Didi. He just has something he needs to tell me.” Thierry was a wise one, but then, he had been the acting head of the family for a long time. He would of course understand Rance was walking the edge. “We’ll be right back.”

“I think I’ll go find Jade. There’s something I need to tell her. I’ll just walk you two out.”

The punch crashed into Didier’s face before Rance realized he threw it. Thierry, Remy and Aubrey seemed to jump between them to form a human wall before he could get off a second shot. It was too bad; if dear Didi wanted to volunteer as a punching bag, he was game.

“Didi, I think you should sit this one out and let Rance handle his woman.” Thierry tried to step into the breach, making sure Didi understood Jade was his, but it may be too late. It was all well and good before he had actually slept with

Jade. He had been willing to duke it out in a somewhat gentlemanly manner. As gentlemanly as he could get anyway. Now that he'd claimed her there was no way in hell he was going to let the bastard anywhere near her. Especially not to "protect" her from him. As if he would ever hurt her.

"And you think it's a good idea for him to go anywhere near her when he's like that?" Didi wasn't backing down either. Good. It would be more satisfying when he kicked his ass.

"Why don't you come and stop me, Didi. Y'all can just step aside and let us have it out."

"Rance, shut the fuck up and walk now." Thierry growled under his breath in his ear. "You don't want to do this now and you damn sure don't want to do this here. Let's go, so you can explain that little dime you dropped in my ear." Thierry looked over to Aubrey and Remy, "Hold his ass here. Do not let him leave." Rance noted that Baptiste hadn't moved from where he sat behind the massive mahogany desk. He

looked cool and calm, neither surprised nor particularly disturbed by the little drama going on between his grandsons. Interesting. "If you'll excuse me, Baptiste, Rance and I need to have a private word."

Rance allowed Thierry to guide him out of the room. Duking it out with Didi would serve no point now. They would no doubt have this conversation again, and he would be ready for it. It was cute when they were fighting for Jade, but damn it, he had won her as far as he was concerned.

They made it no further than the next room when Thierry's calm façade dropped. "Explain to me why my wife's cousin would be in the cellar, especially knowing I've been looking for her irritating ass for a fucking year."

The funny thing about Thierry was the more furious he got, the quieter he became. By the end of his sentence he was a hairsbreadth from whispering. There was a visible tick in his

jaw, a sign that his cousin wasn't far from throwing a punch himself. He really couldn't blame him.

"Look, I have no clue how long she's been here. I just know she's here." He really didn't want to tell Thierry what he'd seen or who had shown him.

"How about telling me how she got here, starting with who the hell brought her, and moving right along into why the hell she's in the fucking wine cellar."

Rance sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. He hated this, he hated being in this position. "There is more than a wine cellar down there." He wasn't going to go through this now. He was tired, emotionally, mentally. He just wanted to be done with it and there was no way to ease into a conversation like this one. "Angel's cousin, whatever her name is, is in one of the basement bedrooms with our fathers. Together. And they aren't down there whistling Dixie. Look, I'm done with this right now." Thierry opened his mouth, but Rance cut him off. "If you

have questions go ask your daddy. Now is not the time for this, Thierry. I'm tired."

Thierry snapped his mouth shut and looked at him like he had just told him he was really a woman deep down inside. Rance didn't make it a habit to admit weakness to anyone for anything. Oh well, time marches on, and a man had to march along with it or get marched over. Yeah, it was time to excuse himself from his lovely family. He was getting way too analytical.

He walked off from a still gaping Thierry determined to find Jade. It didn't take long. As soon as he entered the area near the back of the massive house he heard the tinkling chorus of feminine laughter. Clear and crisp it was devoid of any slyness or forced reserve. It surprised him in such a way that he stopped for a moment at the swinging double doors that led to the kitchen and listened. He never thought to hear such a sound coming from this house.

He entered the kitchen as quietly as he could, standing next to the door to watch the women as they talked and laughed over who knew what. He had thought to stay there a while, but Jade looked over her shoulder as soon as he walked in. He must have been projecting something because she came over without hesitation, laying her head on his chest.

This was it. This was what he needed. Paying no heed to the sudden silence of the room, he wrapped her in his arms and guided them out. It would be faster to take the back stairs to the bedroom they were staying in. Rance didn't think he could wait. As soon as he had her in his arms, all he could think about was being inside her. He was so hard he hurt, but even more, he needed her in a way he couldn't explain.

Then there was the wax. Rance didn't trust himself to actually see what Jade had done earlier at the spa. Thinking about it now only made his condition worse. They were at the foot of the stairs when Rance came to a complete stop. Turning

her around by her shoulders, he swooped down and took her mouth, tangling his hands in her hair. She had gotten that done too. It fell freely, the way he loved it, in big bouncing curls. She tasted like fresh fruit, white wine, and sweet Jade. He couldn't get enough.

"J'ai besoin de vous, bébé, I can't wait." If he remembered correctly, there was a large closet around here somewhere. Ah, directly to his right side. He simply picked Jade up and carried her to it, making sure to close the door behind them softly. "I'm sorry , *petit*. If you want me to stop I will. I just need you so bad."

"Je suis là pour vous. Prenez ce que vous avez besoin." He smiled in spite of himself. She spoke proper French, he should've known.

Rance went down to his knees pushing her skirt up as he did so. He wished there was more light so he could see her as he pushed down her panties. The feel of her bare mound made

him moan a little louder than he intended. Damn, he really wanted to see her dark chocolate puffy lips before sucking them into his mouth. He rubbed his cheek against her, loving the feel of her smooth skin.

“Did it hurt?” He knew it had; not from experience, but from what he had heard, it wasn't pleasant.

“Yes, it hurt a lot.” Her voice was a little breathless. He loved it when she sounded like that, knowing he was getting to her, turning her on.

“Does it still hurt, *cher*? You want me to kiss it for you?”

He didn't wait for an answer. Her scent was driving him crazy. His tongue took one slow sweep along her slit, savoring the feel of nothing at all between her flesh and his taste buds. He flicked her clit back and forth with his tongue, shuddering at her low, soft groans of pleasure. He alternated between savoring the texture and stimulating her love button until her gasping whispers became slightly louder groans.

“Shhhh, *bébé*, you don’t want anyone to hear us, *non*?

Then everyone would know what a bad girl you are.” Fuck, he could feel her getting even hotter, his cocked jumped in his slacks just from feeling her heat on his tongue. “You taste so damn good, Jade-baby. I could eat you forever.”

His tongue dove into her opening, lapping the nectar that flowed freely. His hands cupped the full globes of her ass, bringing her closer against his face. He slurped, sucked, licked and teased until his knees ached. And he loved every second of it. He loved the way she clutched his hair, the way she tried to stifle her cries of pleasure. He would never tire of the way she moved against him, rocking her hips in time with his movements. Her honey was the best medicine in the world, soothing him, feeding him.

“Oh God, Rance, I’m going to come.” Fuck yeah! Nothing would ever matter as much as making his woman come apart in orgasmic bliss.

Latching down on her juicy cunt he swallowed every drop, pushing her higher. He didn't move his mouth until her body stopped convulsing. He released his dick as he rose to his feet, gathering his woman in his arms. He lifted her, bracing her back against the wall before entering her wet heat with one swift plunge, not able to wait a second longer. Her cunt clutched him as he sawed into her, her walls clamped so tight around his shaft he had to fight not to come immediately. Jade clasped her legs around him, her hands clutching his shoulders as he powered into her, desperate for the solace only she could provide.

"You feel so good wrapped around my dick, Jade-baby. I could live buried inside you."

As much as he tried to take it slow, to savor the moment, there was just no way he could slow down. She was so hot, so wet, so fucking responsive. He clutched her hips and powered inside her, loving the way she opened for him. Her channel

spasmed around him. He wouldn't last. There was no way he could. Covering her lips with his own he tried like hell to contain the frenzied groans coming from the both of them. The very last thing he wanted or needed was any member of his family to come investigating. His balls felt as if they'd explode any second.

"Rance, I'm going to come."

"God, yes baby. Come all over my cock. Come for me."

She buried her face in his neck, her sharp little teeth digging into his skin. He loved it. He loved the way her nails dug into his shoulders. He could feel the grooves she was creating in his skin even through his shirt. His hips moved faster, harder trying to get as deep as possible. Her pussy shuddered, rocking him to his core. There was no way in hell he could hold back.

"Fuck yeah, baby. Come for me." His orgasm boiled over just feeling her release. Despite the soul shaking eruption he

had just experienced, he was still rock hard, still in need. At least now he felt sure they could make it to the bedroom.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jade’s voice was a little shaky, still heavy laden with passion.

“You know, I think I do.” Surprisingly it was true. He couldn’t think of anyone he’d rather unburden his soul with. “In a bit.” Reluctantly, he withdrew from her snug channel, smoothing the skirt of her dress down and picking up her underwear and stuffing it in his pocket. His unruly dick was difficult to stuff back in his pants, but he managed it in short order. Kissing her forehead, he quickly checked the hallway to make sure the coast was clear, then gathered his woman in his arms. “We’ll talk after. I need you again.”

Chapter Fifteen

Rance's stamina would never cease to amaze her. He carried her up the stairs to the room they would be sharing for the weekend, setting her on her feet right next to the bed. Turning her gently, he slowly unzipped her dress, skimming his lips down every inch of the skin he exposed. His caress raised goose bumps and made her already hard nipples scrape painfully against the delicate material of her bra. It was insane. She had just come, hard, yet she could feel her blood heating beneath the expert brush of his hands.

Already wet with his seed, her moisture began to flow again in earnest. When his lips met her lower spine she started to tremble, the tiny electric shockwaves raced through her, making her gasp as her already hot temperature rose another notch.

“You’re so fucking sexy, *cher*.” She felt the warm wetness of his tongue slide back up her spine, then the sharp nip against her earlobe. He released the clasp of her bra, sliding it and the sleeves of her dress off her shoulders. Gravity did the rest, leaving her clothing in a pool at her feet. “Get on the bed baby, I’ll be right back.”

Jade climbed to the middle of the king sized bed, waiting as Rance disappeared into the bathroom. She could hear water running, heard the rustle of clothes before he appeared once again, glorious nude with a plush white washcloth in his hand. Without a word, he climbed on the bed with her, pushing her thighs wide and cleaning her with a torturous gentleness that left her panting, lifting her hips as his cloth covered finger cleansed her, his face taut with desire as he watched his actions.

That’s right, he hadn’t been able to actually see her wax job in the closet. He was certainly looking now. He seemed riveted to the sight.

“That is one seriously pretty pussy, Jade-baby.” He threw the washcloth to the side as soon as he was done, lowering himself on his stomach between her splayed thighs. She could feel the hot tufts of breath as he ran a single finger down her slit and then back up again. “I think I need to kiss it again. Just to show it how pretty I think it is.”

“Stop teasing me before I kill you,” Jade half groaned, half growled back at him. The man seemed to delight in tormenting her. She had to admit she loved it. “I will rip you apart if you don’t do something soon Mr. Big Bad Ass.”

Rance sent her a wicked grin. Looking at him like that, smiling at her from between her thighs, it was a delicious sight.

“Jade Chevalier did you just cuss at me?”

Her hearted stuttered at his deliberate use of his last name instead of hers. She thought he’d been playing the other day when she told that awful woman that they were engaged . Then when he’d said she had to marry him now. It wasn't an

accident or a slip of the tongue. Rance didn't make such mistakes.

"Looks like I'm going to have to spank you now, bad girl." The statement was followed by a light smack to her bare mons. It stung a little, but the pleasure far outweighed any pain. He only spanked her once, leaving a burning yearning there. The lazy movements of his finger, absently stroking her slit, did nothing to help her reach the climax she was starting to crave badly.

"Oh God, that feels so good!" Sex with Rance was unlike anything she'd ever experienced, not that she had a heck of a lot to compare it to.

"What feels good? Tell me."

She knew what he wanted. For some reason he seemed to delight in forcing her to say dirty words when they made love. She wasn't going to give in right away, but she would,

eventually. It sent a taboo thrill all through her when he forced the words out of her.

“You touching me feels good.” Not what he wanted to hear, but she had known that before she’s said it. As a reward she got three shorter, sharp smacks to her cunt. Better than the last time, but still not enough.

This time instead of rubbing a finger against the lips of her pussy, he inserted two deep inside her, stroking against her G-spot before retreating. Jade whimpered in helpless frustration while Rance continued his slow, methodical torture. She tried pressing her pelvis against him, but he would only move back.

“Damn it, Rance, please!” He was driving her crazy. With her mound completely exposed, her pussy seemed more sensitive than before, his playful moves more intense.

“You know what I want, *cher*. Tell me what you want. Talk to me.”

“Spank my bare pussy. Lick me, suck me. Please Rance, make me cum.”

With a guttural snarl, he attacked her pussy like a man starved. She lay beneath his sensual assault. He couldn't seem to make up his mind as to whether he wanted to suck her clit or tongue fuck her channel. It was almost as bad as before when he deliberately held back. Jade clutched his hair yanking him forward as her pelvis rode his face. His fingers joined his mouth, driving into her as he lapped up every drop of her dew.

“So fucking sexy, Jade-baby,” he groaned against her hot flesh. “Keep it bare for me. Promise?”

“Yes, yes, oh God, yes!” Her voice was nothing more than a series of panting breaths, but she knew he could hear her by the vigor in which he suckled her clit. As much as she tried to hold back, to relish the moment, her hips bucked wildly, a teeth rattling orgasm shaking her to her very toes.

"I love the way you come for me." Rance spoke with husky arousal, sliding the bulbous head of his cock against her over stimulated nubbin. His mouth settled over an erect nipple, pulling gently with his teeth before repeating the action on the other. He never stopped his wicked caress, building up her desire for him to the boiling point once more.

"Inside me," she pleaded with no shame. "Please, baby, I need you inside me."

"You want my fingers?" He was teasing again. Driving her mad. "Or do you want my tongue again?"

"Your cock, damn it! I want every inch of your dick inside my cunt now!"

"Aww, baby girl." He slammed inside her with no mercy knocking the breath from her body. She knew he'd been spurred on by her words, knew it and loved it.

The slow teasing was long gone now as he took her almost savagely. She clutched at him, holding on for all she was worth as the delectable friction built to a fevered pitch. Her legs wrapped themselves around him, her back arching as she climbed that glorious crest quickly. Her mouth opened but no sound escaped as her body quaked, exploding under his exquisite thrusts.

“Shit yes, baby! Come for me.”

As if not satisfied with the other three, Rance used his thumb to press down on her clit as he continued to saw in and out of her still quivering core. He was trying to kill her.

“I can’t,” she gasped, trying like hell to stave off yet another detonation. “It’s too much!”

“Yes, you can Jade-baby. Do it for me. I need you to come for me one more time. Squeeze down on my dick and take me with you.”

That was all it took. Jade screamed this time, the explosion not leaving a single nerve ending unaffected. She could feel his cock expand inside her, felt this seed wash deep inside her womb and damned if it didn't set off a fresh round of jolts all through her. Whatever happened earlier had certainly set him off. She wondering absently if it meant she was a bad person as she slipped into unconsciousness.

Thierry wasn't the least bit surprised when Jade and Rance didn't make it to dinner. Frankly, he was glad Rance finally had someone who helped him release the tension that had always seemed tightly coiled in the pit of his gut, ready to explode. He didn't worry about his cousin hurting Jade; he had seen how Rance was with the woman. How he looked at her. While he knew Aubrey loved Katrina and Remy loved Regina, what Rance felt for Jade was something more akin to what he

felt for Angel. Love was far too tame a word for whatever the hell it was. Most people might call it an obsession, but that wasn't even close to being the truth.

Maybe it was genetic, or maybe it was just their distinct personalities, but Thierry and Rance had been cursed with the need to hold everything inside, taking on responsibilities for their family members when they were far too young to handle it, and the habit had only worsened with time. There was no one either of them could turn to, no one to share their burdens. Angel and Jade were that rare breed of woman that calmed the savage beast when no one or nothing else could.

Rance had no idea it had been Thierry who had instructed the General to come collect his son. Thierry never told him exactly what Lady Rienne was doing, but he made it crystal clear that it was imperative to get Rance the hell away from her. Piers he couldn't save, not completely. He had made sure he attended Yale, which was far enough away from the old

witch after high school, but he had been helpless to intervene before then. The old woman had been far too shrewd; he had no definitive proof something was wrong, just a feeling deep in his gut. Piers's father had been completely useless when it came to protecting his son, or anyone else. Sorrel Chevalier was a complete waste of space, an overindulgent, alcoholic asshole.

Looking around the table, Thierry was more or less satisfied with how things were turning out. Lady Rienne's ambulance had finally arrived, bringing her "home" to spend her final days. Perhaps setting her at the head of the table in her supported wheelchair, though she could neither speak nor eat, was a bit macabre, but hell they were southern. All old southern families had their quirks. Besides, it gave her a good look at the women her grandsons had chosen for their own. Too bad Solange wasn't here sandwiched between his father and his uncle, but that would come in time. He hadn't had a chance to

confront them about Rance's revelation yet, and he wouldn't before consulting with his wife.

Now all that lay ahead was making sure Didier got it through his thick head that Jade was very taken and to find who the hell was threatening Rance's woman.

Didier, he could deal with, though he seriously doubted after this weekend he would have to. The Canadian cousin simply needed to see them together without the haze of anger clouding his sight. Didier's curse was he was far too much like Rance and himself. Proving that perhaps the domineering thing was indeed genetic. Only Didi didn't have the hang ups his southern cousins had. He'd be fine once he got over his need to "rescue" Jade.

The other problem wasn't so easily solved. Thierry wasn't at all convinced all the things that had happened to Jade were the work of a demented mistress. Rance was no one's fool. He wouldn't have had an unbalanced mistress, and he

would've spotted any insanity in a heartbeat. He grew up with it; he knew how to spot a crazy woman at a thousand paces. Then there was Jade. She just wasn't the type of woman to collect dangerous enemies. Her family was nice and stable, not a crazy loon in the bunch. There was something they were missing. Something elusively close. It bugged the shit out of him that he couldn't put his finger on it.

"Stop obsessing."

Thierry had to smile at his wife's whispered instructions. Not so much because she knew what he was thinking, she seemed to be getting better and better at doing that. No, it was her hand discreetly messaging his growing erection that made him smile. Minx. She knew he would continue to straighten out any and all things that were wrong in his family so she simply took matters into her own hands by forcing him to think of something else.

“Keep it up and I’ll do you right here.” Or close enough anyway.

“I dare you,” she shot right back.

Damn, he loved her so fucking much. She was going to be pissed as hell when he told her about her cousin. Though Solange didn’t deserve any of Angel’s faithfulness, he knew his wife had been worried sick about her cousin, despite her aunt’s apparent indifference

With a sigh he grasped Angel’s wrist before he lost control. He hoped like hell she would still be interested when he told her where Solange was and what she’d been doing.

Chapter Sixteen

“Come on, I want to show you something.”

Jade hid a smile as Rance barreled into the sun room to snatch her away-again. He’d barely glanced at the other women in the room as he mumbled a generic greeting before leaning down to whisper in her ear. They had missed dinner, and breakfast. She didn’t think he had spoken more than a few words to his newfound aunt since the woman arrived in New Orleans. He’d never been the social type, but this was bordering on rude.

“Rance, don’t you think you should beg your aunt’s pardon?” she whispered back at him in gentle reprimand. “Kiss her on the cheek or something?”

He gave her a blank look before comprehension dawned. This time she didn’t bother hiding her smile. He was so cute

when he remembered to be human-like. His face got a little red and his eyes just a tad sheepish.

“Oh, um, Aunt Therese, how are you this morning, er, afternoon?” He reddened a little more as the reasons why it was afternoon before the woman had seen him probably fluttered through his memory.

Jade had definitely thought about it a lot since finally leaving their bed. After the closet, then again in the bedroom, they had just held each other as Rance told her all about the rooms downstairs. He talked about what had happened down there when he was seventeen, and of Piers dragging him down there yesterday to witness the bizarre thing between Solange, his father and his uncle. While the horror of what Lady Rienne demanded of her two grandsons wasn't really surprising given what she already knew, the ménage thing between the older Chevalier men and Angel's cousin was mind blowing.

Both older men tended to project old fashioned conservatism. The whole threesome thing wasn't something one would expect. At least not at the family's country home. And Solange had been missing for over a year. Had she been here all this time, with the both of them? While Beaumont, Thierry's father had been back and forth between here and DC, given he was still a sitting senator, Boden had retired from the Marines and as far as Jade knew, hadn't left. Did that mean Solange belonged to him and he occasionally shared with the Senator? Or was the General watching over her for Beaumont? It was all too weird.

"I am fine, Rance. It's nice to see you today." Jade really liked Therese. She was such a sweet motherly type. Her French-Canadian accent held more than a little humor as she regarded the nephew she didn't really know, a sparkle of laughter in those Chevalier aquamarine eyes. Against the light mocha of her skin, her eyes seemed to pop. She was really a stunning

older woman. "Happier because my other sons will be here soon, along with their father."

Rance seemed to grimace at the mention of her other sons. There were three, Jade believed, all younger than Didier. Anton, Laurent and Pascal. Thierry and Rance had met them, but the rest of the New Orleans branch hadn't. It should be really interesting to see both branches together.

"That should be very nice for you." Jade winced at her lover's response. Tact was a thing they would need to work on. At her little frown, he seemed to think about his statement. "I mean, it will be nice to see them all again. I'm sure the others will be delighted to meet them." He glanced down at her, she guessed to see if she approved. Jade gave him a little smile and a reassuring pat on the hand. He was so cute when he was trying to loosen up. "And thank you for staying around with Lady, uh, your...well, you know."

"It's quite all right." Therese laughed away any discomfort at not knowing what to refer to the woman who had given birth to his aunt. "You can call her my mother, I suppose she is. I feel no ill will that she gave me away. I'm rather relieved."

"I'll bet." Therese didn't hear the sarcastic statement. It was muttered under his breath, but Jade heard it loud and clear. "I hope you all don't mind if I steal Jade away for a while. There is something I want to show her."

"But of course," Therese laughed outright. "We'll be fine."

None of her girlfriends bothered to hide their amusement as Rance more or less dragged her away. It amused them all to no end to see the usually stoic Rance act completely out of character. Jade felt a certain amount of pride at being able to do that to him. Rance had always seemed so sad to her. He seemed to be loosening up, really living instead of just existing.

He took her out to what once was a carriage house, now converted into a detached garage. Jade wondered what was out here when she'd glimpsed it yesterday. There was a rather large garage attached to the house, so she thought it was used to store cars. She's been right. Inside was indeed a garage, but one loaded with everything needed to fix or even rebuild one. Her oldest brothers Jasper and Dante would kill for a set up like this one. Both men had great careers. Jasper worked as the head trainer and conditioner for the Saints. Dante owned his own construction company that was booming with business, partially thanks to signing on to Angel's charity projects, but they both loved rebuilding old cars, usually together. She remembered watching in awe when she was a kid as they would pool their resources, buy a clunker then fix it up and sell it for a profit. It had helped get them both through college.

“Hey, that’s a ’65 Camaro Supersport!” Jade exclaimed as Rance ripped off the car cover to reveal the yellow and black sports car underneath.

“Woman, you never cease to amaze me.” Jade preened under his awed praise, melting back into his embrace as he wrapped his arms around her from behind. “Do I even want to ask how you know what kind of car that is?”

There was a tad bit of jealousy in his voice, Lord love the man. How anyone could look like Rance and still be insecure, she’d never know. “I have three older brothers. Steve McQueen was like a superhero in our house. Does it run? Does it work?”

Speeding down a lonesome red clay road was one of the things Jade missed the most about being a grown up. Her brothers would sometimes take her for rides in the supped-up cars after they fixed them up. She hadn’t done that in so long.

“I never finished rebuilding it.” There was such a note of regret in his voice it tugged at her heart.

“You have to! I’ll help you. We can come out here on the weekends until it’s done, then you can take me for a ride.”

The hard bulge against her back jumped at her words. Seemed like it didn’t take much to get his engines revved and ready to go. It was yet another thing she loved about this man.

“I’d love to take you for a ride.” His hips moved sensuously against her backside as he murmured the words in her ear. She was melting immediately, all ready and eager for his touch. Surely this was too hot to last. They couldn’t possibly go on like this, the burning need that sparked with something so simple as an embrace, or even a look. “I just don’t think I want to bring you out here so often.”

“Rance, we can’t hide away from whoever it is trying to break us apart.” She turned to face him, reaching up to cup his face in her hands. “If we’re going to be together, we have to face whatever comes our way together. Besides, I can’t be safer than I am with you.”

There hadn't been any incidents in weeks. Still, Jade didn't go back to her house. Every time she mentioned it Rance would change the subject. He drove her to work every day, picked her up, and often showed up for lunch. On the weekends, the entire clan got together at the country house. So far, Lady Rienne held on but showed no signs of recovery. It was weird to see the vast differences between the Canadian side of the family and the southern one. Didier and his brothers were a rambunctious group, laughing, playing, and teasing loudly and without reserve. It was amusing to see Thierry, Rance, Remy, Aubrey and Piers watching them with something between horror and fascination.

Jade thought it was good for them to see a branch of their own family not so scarred by the actions of one evil woman. According to Regina, there had never really been a chance to

redeem Lady Rienne; the woman was a natural born sociopath. There would be no remorse from her because in her head, she was completely justified. Regina pointed out that those kinds of people couldn't be completely cured because they refused to see what was wrong in the first place. Still, Jade couldn't help but get a little sad watching the obvious anger and resentment in the old woman's face as she watched her family around her. The family she had done her best to destroy. Or rather save, in her demented mind. Most women her age would be smiling with love and gratitude for the health and welfare of her progeny. Lady Rienne sat there seething with hatred.

Baptiste hadn't left yet either. Jade had no idea why he was still hanging around. He was legally divorced from Lady Rienne and married to the former maid Lady Rienne paid to take her daughter away. She couldn't prove it, but Jade suspected it had something to do with this so-called threat against her. Nothing had happened in so long she was starting

to think maybe it had all been to scare her away from Rance, and when it didn't work, the person just gave up.

It took some doing, but gradually she was able to go alone with Angel to the gym as they had before. After about a couple of weeks, Rance and Thierry even stopped trailing them. It was sweet that they were overprotective, but it could also be irritating when trying to investigating without male interference.

“So, we have ruled out ex-mistresses completely,” Angel was frowning as they compared mental notes before they went into the private workout room with their trainer. They'd be too damn tired after the workout to do much but guzzle water and pant for air. “I found Gabriella, whose real name is Jane Moore by the way. She went back to Texas and married some old man. She's currently very pregnant, allegedly with the old man's baby, much to the despair of his other five kids.”

“I never thought it was her anyway.” What really bugged Jade was she had a feeling whoever had gutted the cats and put the damn alligator in her house was someone close. Very close. But who? “I still think it’s a man.”

“So do I.” Angel looked like she wanted to say something more, but she held back. “Listen, Jade, I have a hunch about something, but I really don’t want to say anything right now. Y’all are coming out to the country this weekend right?”

“As far as I know.” Jade had to put her head down. It had been throbbing all day. At first she thought it was just all the contracts she’d been going through lately, but the headaches didn’t seem to go away after work.

Maybe it was lack of sleep. Rance certainly hadn’t settled down at all; she was usually up half the night. That, coupled with the energy drink that didn’t seem to give her any energy. She was starting to feel like stir fried shit.

“I don’t think it matters now anyway.” Taking a deep breath, Jade pushed back the growing blah feeling. “Nothing has happened in weeks. I think it’s over.”

Angel slanted a look at her, one she couldn’t quite describe and liked even less. “Sure, Jade. Just make sure you stay safe okay? Don’t let your guard down.”

“I won’t.” Rance wouldn’t let her.

“I’m glad you’re with him,” Angel confessed giving her a bear hug. “You’re good for him.”

“Thanks, Angel. It’ll be fine, I’m sure of it.”

Chapter Seventeen

Rance looked at his watch for what had to be the tenth time in the last three minutes. He knew the people in the house were probably staring out the window at him, perhaps even calling the sheriff. He didn't think the city cops came out this far. The house looked just how a middle class country home should look, warm and inviting. It was off the main highway, down a dirt road surrounded by heavy woods, the nearest neighbor a couple of miles away. There was plenty of space, a large yard, good fishing nearby. It must have been a little slice of heaven growing up here, given what he knew of the people inside.

"Get out of the car, jackass. This was your idea, now go do it." He spoke to himself, though he wasn't really sure why. He never felt this nervous before. Well, not since the first time he took Jade to bed. He'd never admit it out loud, but he'd been

terrified at the time. But as time went on, the easier it got. Not easy in the sense that his relationship was easy. Dealing with Jade was confusing. He never knew when to tread carefully, or when to be “understanding”. Especially now.

Jade was moody lately, her usually sweet, gentle nature a little off kilter. Rance had strong suspicions why, but he was keeping those to himself. The last thing he wanted to do was piss her off, which was easy to do these days. Perversely, he enjoyed her mood swings. He never knew what to expect, so he waited each day to see what facet of his woman’s personality he learned about that day.

It was the relationship part that had been incredibly easy to fall into. Easier than he’d ever imagined. For a man who lived a solitary existence most of his life, Rance found he enjoyed the hell out of having someone to share things with. He felt calmer when she was around. It was incredibly easy to talk to her where before, he never shared much of anything outside of

Thierry and Aubrey. He loved having a woman in his bed when he woke up every morning. No, not a woman. Jade. Forever Jade.

Looking at his watch again, he mustered his courage and opened the car door. He had two hours before picking Jade up from work and heading out to the country. Hell, he was even enjoying the weekends out at the house he despised so much growing up. The place had an entirely different spirit even with Lady Rienne quietly dying in her suite, away from the rest of their suddenly large extended family. It might have been the vibe Aunt Therese and her brood brought with them, a love of life and family that seemed so foreign.

Or maybe it was being there with Jade. She made it easy to feel the wonder of the place he hadn't felt since realizing his family life was at best abnormal at a young age. And true to her word, she was a great assistant in the garage. They hadn't gotten very far on the restoration yet, seeing as how he couldn't

seem to get over how sexy she looked in motor oil or bent over an engine. He was going to have to work on that if he ever wanted to finish the damn car. He'd had the thing since he was sixteen.

Before he could knock on the door it swung open to reveal a very large, very serious looking man who outweighed him by about fifty pounds and was at least three inches taller than him. That was one hell of a feat seeing as how Rance was six-four.

"Can I help you?" The man's deep bass voice was expected, but it was still kind of off putting.

Automatically, Rance began sizing him up in his mind. It was a complete man thing, but if for some reason he needed to defend himself, it was best to thoroughly study the competition.

"I'm here to see Mr. Jessups." Wow, that was harder than it should've been. And what was up with the jumpy stomach? He was a grown ass man for crying out loud.

"My father doesn't need insurance or whatever you're selling." Not exactly polite, but not exactly rude either.

"I'm not selling anything. I'm here about Jade."

That got him a sweeping look before the man, whom he was guessing was one of Jade's brothers, turned to call for his father.

"Junious, let the man inside," an older woman's voice called out from somewhere in the house. "I didn't raise you to be rude."

The man, Junious, the youngest brother, was four years older than Jade, stepped aside, but just barely. Rance bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. He didn't think Junious would appreciate it. The whole protective thing was endearing though. He had felt the same about his twin a time or two. Hell, he'd sold his soul for his brother.

“Hello there, I’m Mrs. Lila Jessups.” A woman, who looked to be the exact replica of the woman he loved, stepped out of the kitchen, an apron tied around her waist. The aroma of a delicious meal filling his nostrils. “Oh, Mr. Chevalier! Well come on in and have a seat. My husband is back there in his study, he should be right along.”

Rance found himself hustled into a large open living room and onto a large overstuffed couch. Junious followed his mother slowly, his eyes never leaving Rance for a second. Well, apparently he was known. Did they know he was seeing Jade? Of course they did. She would have told her family herself. Jade wasn’t the type to keep secrets like that. She wouldn’t sleep with a man she was ashamed of, and she would never keep something like living with a man from the family she loved.

The living room was proof of the type of family this was. The walls were decorated with images of the children from birth to adulthood. Scores of trophies graced every available

space. Certificates of every type were framed and hung by the pictures, all dust free and well cared for. This was the kind of home Rance had only seen on television. He never really thought a living space could exude such a sense of love. Well, aside from Jade's small house anyway. Now he knew where it came from.

"Mr. Chevalier," a deeper voice than Junious's boomed as an even larger older man strode into the room. "Nice to meet you, I've heard a lot about you." There was an 'especially since you're seeing my little girl' implied but not said. Mr. Jessups's hand shake was meant to intimidate as well as humble. It worked.

Rance had never really feared another man in his life. There was something about Jasper Jessups, Sr. that scared the shit out of him. He had the whole if you hurt my daughter I'll kill you thing down pat, and he didn't have to say a word. Rance expected Jade's parents to be the typical sweet,

welcoming, fragile older couple. He'd been way off base. Sweet and welcoming they were, but no one could ever describe this couple as fragile.

Lila Jessups still had a figure similar to her daughter's, unconsciously sexy, though Lila carried herself like she was comfortable with her innate sensual figure. Nothing blatant or cougar-like about her, she simply was who she was. Jasper, Sr. was a large man, his body not the least bit soft with age. There wasn't much spare weight on him. He was a wall of solid muscle and strength. It wasn't exactly what one pictured when one thought about a retired high school principal and an older homemaker.

"Jade's all right isn't she?" Lila asked pleasantly after her husband was seated. Mr. Jessups sat in the large Lazyboy that was placed in the center of the room. Mrs. Jessups shared the couch with him, though she sat a ways away.

Rance felt the spotlight directly on him. They were curious, but not hostile. Well, except for Junious who stood behind his father. Rance shot the man a quick glance, wondering if he should do this in front of him. He decided against it. He hadn't told Jade what he was planning on doing, and frankly he hoped she didn't find out. It wasn't something people did anymore except maybe in a movie or a tawdry romance.

"Jade is fine." But they knew that. Jade talked to her mother once a day. "If it's all right I would much prefer to ask, uh, talk to you in private." His eyes went straight to Junious, unblinking, full of meaning. Jade's brothers he could deal with. He might get hurt in the offing, but he felt confident he could handle them. Her father, hell no.

"Junious, don't you have someplace to be?" Jasper didn't look at his son as he spoke. He kept a steady gaze right on

Rance. It was damned hard not to squirm under the direct scrutiny.

Junious left without a second prompting. Rance wasn't under any delusion it was anything he said. The elder Jessups radiated dominance over his domain. Jade spoke of her father with a sense of awe that Rance hadn't fully understood until now. Would his own children put him on such a pedestal one day? Would he be worthy of it? It was the wrong time and place, but his dick stirred at the thought of having children with Jade. He had to shift to make sure it wasn't visible.

Rance cleared his throat as Junious walked out, closing the door behind him. He was starting to sweat a little despite the cool interior. His mouth was dry and his hands were shaking.

"I, um, came to tell you I have been seeing your daughter for a little while now." Shit, was his voice quivering? What the hell was up with that?

“Yes, dear, we know.” Lila smiled kindly, patting his hand for reassurance. It worked. Strange, but the woman seemed to calm him. Not as much as her daughter did, but close.

“I’ve come to care for her very much.”

“Is that right?” Jasper drawled, kicking his chair back into a reclining position. “You came to tell us you care for our daughter, son?”

Now he could hear the school principal in the older man’s voice. All of a sudden he’d been sent to the office to explain his behavior and wait for the appropriate punishment. His ass actually clenched in remembrance. This wasn’t going like he envisioned.

“Well, no.” He had to clear his throat again, squirming a little under a pair of watchful and amused eyes. “I love Jade. I love her very much. I, uh, I plan on...that is, I am here to ask for

your permission to ask Jade for her hand in marriage.” He hoped that sounded better to them than it did to him.

Dead silence met the proclamation. Not good at all. He didn’t think he could shock the couple, but he obviously had. Wide eyed stares were all he got for a full minute. Lila broke out of her stupor first, saying nothing more than “Well” a couple of times. That seemed to stir Jasper, who righted his chair and leaned forward, fixing Rance with a long penetrating look.

“Son, did you just ask me if you could marry my baby girl?”

If the man said hell no, Rance was fucked. Coming here had been a gamble, though honestly he had only wanted to do this right. Jade deserved that, and so much more. He wanted her to have a huge family wedding. He wanted her surrounded by her family and friends. Regina still hadn’t reconciled with her father. Rance knew Remy’s wedding to his wife had been

bittersweet at best. If he didn't have Jade's parents' blessings, it was going to be a rocky start.

He was going to marry Jade regardless, but he would prefer to do it sooner rather than later. If they didn't agree now, he would just keep asking until they did. He couldn't change who he was, so if they didn't like him, well he would just have to grow on them.

"Yes, sir. I believe I did." There, he'd lain all out there. All he could do at this point was pray about it.

"Well, I'll be damned." Jasper rubbed his chin, still watching him like a hawk. "Of all the things I expected from you, I have to tell you, this wasn't one of them."

Was that good or bad? Shit, this was much, much worse than being with Jade for the first time. At least then he'd been reasonably sure she felt something for him. With her parents, he didn't have a clue. Beyond shock they weren't exactly showing him how they felt about it one way or another. For someone

who didn't care what people thought about him, suddenly there was a host of people whose opinions mattered. It was a lot to get used to. He wasn't really sure how to act.

"Have you asked Jade yet?" Lila was looking at him like he'd just said something like he was from Mars. How should he interpret that? Yes, it was strange to have a man ask for permission to marry rather than inform, but Jade was old fashioned at heart. Even if she didn't know about this, he didn't want her short changed.

"No ma'am. Not yet. I wanted to ask her this weekend. I wanted to talk you both first. I...Jade is a very traditional woman. Although I don't intend on telling her I asked you, I just want to do this right."

Jasper slowly climbed to his feet. Rance tensed, not really sure what to think when the older man walked in his direction.

"Stand up, son."

He stood facing Jade's father. Would the man punch him? It was impossible to tell what he might be thinking. When the big, heavily muscled arms came up, he flinched. He really, really hoped the man didn't hit him. There was no way in hell he could hit back, and that was just unfair.

"Welcome to the family."

Chapter Eighteen

Jade felt horrible. She couldn't eat and she was sleeping badly. Her stomach felt like hell, she couldn't even stand to take her energy drinks in the morning. Usually, she could drink the stuff when she couldn't eat for whatever reason. If she didn't get better by Monday she was going to have to go to the hospital. She didn't want to tell Rance yet. He'd been in such a good mood the last couple of days; she didn't want to worry him. It was probably the flu or something.

The drive out to the country house had been excruciating. All she wanted to do was throw up by the time they got there, but she managed to quell the urge. Thankfully Thierry had something he wanted to talk to Rance about so she was able to escape to their room to lay down.

"You look like hell," Angel announced breezing into the room. "You really need to go to the doctor."

“I will. Monday. Did you come across anything?” She didn’t want to talk about how bad she felt. It only made her feel worse.

“I think I might have. I want to check something else out to be sure.”

That made Jade sit up and take notice. “What? Where? Who?”

Angel held up her hand. “I don’t want to say anything right now. I’m just not sure. If I’m wrong and I tell you, I’ll feel awful. Just trust me okay?”

She could understand that. Especially if it was someone close, someone they all knew, though Jade couldn’t figure out who that might be. But she did trust Angel.

“Okay.” She nodded as she laid back down. “I’m going to take a nap.”

She didn't hear Angel leave. Her body just felt so heavy. Her stomach wouldn't stop heaving though she had tried to throw up and couldn't. Her body got hot, then cold, and then hot again. She just wanted it to end so she could get some rest. Although her eyes were closed, she just couldn't seem to find that elusive peace of true sleep. Deciding to just give up and go downstairs to see if she could find any flu medication, Jade tried to push herself up and found that she couldn't. Her arms and legs wouldn't move. When she tried to open her eyes, she found she couldn't do that either. Oh, God, what was wrong with her? A single tear escaped the corner of her eye. Something was seriously wrong, and she didn't think it was a simple illness either. All she could do was lie there and pray someone would come looking for her soon.

“The nurse thinks someone has been abusing Lady Rienne.” Thierry had decided to share the information with just his cousins. Boden and Beaumont had moved their little lady love from the basement rooms into Lady Rienne’s primary residence in Bayou St. John. Thierry hadn’t seen them much since.

Angel had been furious at both men for keeping her cousin away, but they had insisted it was for the best. They claimed Solange was fragile at present moment. What the hell that meant he wasn’t too sure. He also hadn’t wanted to upset Therese. Although there was no doubt in Thierry’s mind his grandmother didn’t appreciate it, his aunt spent a great deal of time sitting with the old woman, reading or just talking to her. In a way he supposed it was a well deserved torment. Lady Rienne’s daughter was everything the old woman was not.

So that left the five of them to figure it out. Not even Didier was present. He was off somewhere with his brothers.

“You don’t think it’s one of the DeCapêts do you?” Piers asked. “Because I seriously can’t see any of them doing something like that.”

“Neither can I.” Thierry had to admit it just made no sense. None of them had any reason to hate Lady Rienne as much as the five assembled men did. Boden and Beaumont were out because they weren’t around. Therese was definitely out. The woman was the quintessential mother-type. Thierry knew psychosis in a woman up close and personal. Therese was not psychotic in the least. It had to be one of them, but he didn’t want to believe that either. None of the daughter-in-laws went anywhere near Lady Rienne. They were their only choice left.

“The nurse showed me the bruises. Someone has been wailing on her. Apparently just because she can’t move doesn’t mean she can’t feel. Her eyes teared up every time the nurse touched one or moved her.”

There wasn't a lot of sympathy in the room, but then why should there be? There was disgust. It wasn't possible for him to read these men. Maybe he was losing his touch. The answer had to be here.

"If any of us are guilty I hardly think that person is going to stand up saying 'Yeah, it's me'," Rance pointed out. "I know I wouldn't."

"You wouldn't beat up on a helpless old lady either. But I would." Leave it to Remy to be bluntly honest. Well, he could rule him out. Remy hated Lady Rienne with a passion, but he couldn't be bothered to do something so slimy. He would have done it long ago while she was still relatively hearty, just to make it hurt worse.

"Just, be on the lookout. I don't like this one damned bit. It implies that we are harboring a dangerous person. Anyone who would do something like this..." Thierry let the words hang out there, unable to voice the logical conclusion.

“Great, now we can all be paranoid of one another,”

Aubrey muttered, shaking his head.

He was right. Now they would all be looking at one another with suspicion when they had always relied on one another. It was a shitty thing, but Thierry knew he wasn’t wrong. Someone in this room was completely off his rocker. He was very afraid he had a good idea who.

“Jade? Jade-baby wake up. You’ve been sleeping for hours.”

Had she been there for hours? She really didn’t know. She kept drifting in and out of consciousness. As much as she wanted to she couldn’t open her eyes, she couldn’t speak to tell him something was wrong. She felt him gently shake her, but she couldn’t respond.

“Jade? *Cher*, is something wrong?”

Damn, now his voice was fading. He wasn't going away was he? He couldn't! She needed help. Her body just refused to move so much as a pinky. No, he wasn't moving. He was still talking, but she couldn't focus on his words. He was lifting her, holding her. She felt the vibrations from his chest and knew he was still speaking. She tried to hang on when she felt herself slipping away, but darkness loomed, swiftly overtaking her. Using every ounce of strength she could summon she managed to open her mouth.

“Help me.”

Rance was petrified. He yelled for someone, anyone, barking out orders to call an ambulance to whomever the hell had come bursting into the room. He didn't see who it was, he didn't care. There was something seriously wrong with Jade. His heart beat so hard it felt as if it would break free of his chest. She had said “help me” before anything else. Her breathing was

too shallow, her beautiful dark skin taking on an ashen cast. He had no clue what to do.

The nurse hired to care for Lady Rienne ran into the room, poking and prodding. She was babbling something about dilated eyes and low pulse, but he had no idea what that meant. She wanted him to put her down, but he couldn't do that. He couldn't let her go. The woman was on the phone with someone, discussing symptoms. The symptoms were obvious; Jade was passed out, she was struggling to stay alive. He didn't want to hear about symptoms he wanted something done, yesterday.

He must have said it out loud because Thierry was there, trying to calm him down. Fuck calm. He would be calm when his woman was well again. He couldn't lose her. He just couldn't. He didn't want to face the day without her. He didn't understand what had happened, it was just impossible to comprehend what was going on.

It seemed to take forever for the emergency vehicle to get there. They were using a helicopter instead of an ambulance. The nurse had hooked Jade up to a breathing apparatus, scaring Rance even more. He had to fight to be let on the helicopter with her. There was no way in hell he was letting her go alone. Yelling at anyone listening to call her parents, he climbed on board and did something he had never done before. He prayed.

Angel waited until almost everyone was piled into their cars and racing toward the hospital before holding her husband back.

"You don't want to go to the hospital?" Thierry was understandably confused.

"If I'm right, we could be helping a heck of a lot more." She was no longer unsure, however. She knew she was right.

She first went through Jade and Rance's room, collecting the protein drink Jade had every morning. "I have a hunch the hospital is going to need this." She handed it to her husband before they made their way down the hall.

The room they entered next was meticulously clean. There was no personal affects anywhere to be seen. Angel went through the drawers, cabinets and luggage without care for where she was throwing things. There was nothing there. She was positive she was right, but she couldn't find anything to prove it. Where would a person keep incriminating evidence?

"You said there were basement rooms somewhere, right?" That had to be it. It made so much sense. "Show me where they are."

It took longer than she would've liked but she found what she was looking for. The emerald jewelry Rance had given Jade to wear for the charity ball. No one had seen it since the alligator incident.

"I'll be damned," Thierry whispered as she held up the evidence in her hands. "I never suspected. I thought it was Baptiste with the way he had been watching us all since he's been here. What the hell? How did I miss this?"

"No time for that now, we have to go to the hospital. We have my best friend to save."

He took off with everyone else, hanging back so his car was the last in the caravan of speeding vehicles. By slowing gradually as they went along, he gave the impression of going along with the race to see what was wrong with Jade. Sweet little Jade. He had to sneer at that. The woman was far from the innocent girl everyone believed her to be. She was a whore, just like all women. He'd seen her with his own two eyes. She had somehow seduced Rance, when the man should've known better. Rance of all people should've been able to see right

through her. But he hadn't. He had fallen into the spider's web and now needed to be saved. The rest of them deserved what they got. They had no clue what a treacherous bitch a woman could be.

Halfway to the city he turned and headed back to the house, punching the engine along the way. He was just about there when he saw another car speeding down the road. Thinking quickly, he pulled off to the side, taking a dirt road in a cloud of dust. They didn't see him. They sped right by, making him smile. He had no idea what Thierry and his bitch were doing, but they wouldn't be throwing a wrench into his plans.

He had to park his car along the side of the road before he got to the plantation. There were too many windows, too many different ways a person could see him driving in. Sneaking into the house was ridiculously easy. There was no

one here but the nurse and her. All he had to do was wait for the nurse to leave her room.

Turned out he didn't have long to wait. Slipping into the room as the nurse went toward the kitchen, he extracted the knife he had sheathed under his shirt. Razor sharp with a serrated edge, it was perfect for retribution. He waited a long time for this. How fortuitous that the poison he had slipped into little Jade's protein powder chose today to finally take effect when they were all gathered there. He was beginning to wonder if he used too low a dose.

He didn't bother to slip into the room, walking tall and proud so the bedridden bitch could see him clearly. Her eyes widened as she took in the wicked knife he wasn't bothering to hide. Oh, how long he'd waited to see the fear in her eyes. Years had turned into decades, but he had waited. He knew his day would come sooner or later. His patience had paid off. Oh, how sweet this was going to be.

No one noticed that he wasn't with the caravan. No doubt they would miss him at the hospital, but if his hunch was right, all could easily be explained. He waited in the house, hanging back in the shadows. Lady Rienne's rooms were in the left wing, away from all of the grandchildren whose lives she had tried to control or destroy or both. That had been his idea. He had felt something was amiss, he hadn't been wrong. He watched as the man punched the old woman, pricked her, hit her with any and everything available. That kind of rage was something that didn't happen overnight. It built slowly over the years, reaching to a boiling point now. It was hard to understand how a person could hold on to such emotions over God knows how many years. There had to have been a chance to let it go, opportunities to get help.

Should he stop this? He could have easily stopped the other man. There was no doubt he could have overpowered him when he was walking tall into Lady Rienne's suite. Lord, help him he didn't. He chose to watch. He knew what was about to happen, but he did nothing to stop it. She had ultimately done this to herself. She had created this monster in a way. He was going to have to spend years in confession, but damn it, he really couldn't move.

It wasn't quick. The old woman opened her mouth to scream over and over again, though she uttered nothing more than painful grunts. Tears flowed down her face, agony radiating from her eyes. He had to look away. The mutilation was enough to turn his stomach, and he had a cast iron stomach, or so he thought.

He watched and waited for the man to finish, but he didn't simply cut her throat when he was finished. No, he stepped back and watched as she died slowly, her blood

staining the white of the sheets, dripping down, pooling in a dark, red stain on the floor. He had to choke down his bile as he saw the man's profile. He was taking glee in this. He couldn't be allowed to hurt anyone else. Lady Rienne was one thing. She had reaped what she had sown so long ago. But he couldn't be allowed to destroy another life. Rance deserved the happiness he finally found. This man wouldn't be allowed to interfere with that. He would see to it personally.

Chapter Nineteen

Lord her body hurt, but at least she could open her eyes. She had no idea how long she'd been asleep, but at least her stomach wasn't going crazy anymore. The light hurt, so she had to squint, looking around her. She blinked, not recognizing the white walls, the television braced on brackets from the ceiling. There was some kind of loud, annoying beeping noise. And why did Rance look like he'd been crying? Rance didn't cry.

"Baby, you're awake!"

Why was he sitting in the uncomfortable looking chair by the bed? What the hell was going on here?

"Where am I?" Her throat felt like a desert. "Thirsty." God, it hurt to talk. The last thing she remembered was telling Angel she wanted to sleep. How long had she been out?

"You're in the hospital. You were poisoned."

“How?” More importantly, why? By whom? A million questions raced through her brain. “I don’t understand.”

Rance didn’t answer her right away. There was something more, something he was holding back from her. He let go of her hand, pouring her some water then holding the straw to her mouth. “Drink, baby. I’ll answer your questions, just get comfortable.”

His hands smoothed her hair back while she took a sip, and then another. As soon as she was finished, he climbed on to the bed with her, settling her back against his chest. He was starting to scare her. It wasn't like Rance to beat around the bush like this. Whatever he had to say had to be bad.

“I love you, Jade. I love you more than I ever thought it was possible to love another human being. When you wouldn’t wake up I was so damned scared. There was nothing I could do.” Jade felt her eyes water at the pain so clearly evident in his voice. His arms were squeezing her, it kind of hurt, but she

didn't want to say anything. He seemed to need this. "Baby, I'm so sorry. I brought this mess into your life. If I were a stronger man I would walk away. But I'm not that strong. I can't let you go." She wanted to sing Amen, but there was more. She could feel it. "You...you were pregnant. The baby soaked up most of the poison and...well, you miscarried."

"What? Pregnant? What happened to me?" Emotions swamped her, ones she had no idea what to do with. She'd been pregnant? Well, of course she had. They never once even thought about protection; it was unforgiveable in modern times. She felt a sense of loss, but she couldn't really say pain. How could she mourn something she never knew existed?

But Rance had had time to process it. She felt his pain. His arms tightened even more, like he was afraid she would slip away. No doubt the pain would come soon enough. Right now, she just felt raw. Someone had really tried to kill her this time. There was no ambiguity about it, someone wanted her dead.

"I love you, Rance. Whatever is happening, we'll figure it out." How she didn't know. She didn't want to think about it right now. She just wanted to be held, to disappear from the world for a minute. It was too much to process.

"Jade! Oh my poor baby! What happened? Are you all right?" Lila Jessups burst into the room like an avenging angel. The other members of her family weren't far behind.

She wanted to stop Rance when he unwound himself from around her and got off the bed. She loved her family, but she wanted Rance next to her more than she wanted her mother right now. It was their pain, the two of them. Oddly, she felt as if her family was intruding somehow.

"I'll be back sweetheart," Rance whispered, kissing her forehead before leaving the room.

She felt like crying as she watched him go. He looked so sad, so defeated. It was completely out of character. When she

saw her brothers follow him, she knew she had to send someone after them.

“Daddy, stop them. Don’t let them lay a finger on Rance.” Despite being weak, Jade’s voice was strong and unwavering. “Tell them if they touch him I swear I will cook their...um...”

“Jasper, tell those boys their sister will serve them up their own balls if they touch my new son-in-law. He’s the only I have, and I kind of like him so I will be mighty upset if there is a hair missing from his head. I just might help her, after I tan their hides.”

Her daddy grunted, shaking his head. He took his time, as he always did, kissing her on the cheek before turning toward the door. “Yeah, unfortunately, I like him too. But if I find out you’re here because of that boy I’ll kill him myself. And I’d like to see either of you serve anything up to me.”

Jade waited until her father walked out before turning to her mother. “You met him in the waiting room?” How the hell did her parents know Rance?

“No, he came out to the house. Asked your father and me for your hand. Poor thing was all scared and nervous. He actually flinched when your daddy hugged him. I think your fiancé thought my Jasper was going to hit him.” Lila chuckled as if it was the funniest thing in the world.

Jade was stunned. Rance asked her parents if he could marry her. Tears really did fall now. It was the sweetest things she’d ever heard! It was thoughtful and loving, and one hundred percent the Rance he rarely let others see. He had made himself vulnerable to people he didn’t know, and for him that was a huge leap of faith.

“Oh, Mama, I love him so much.” Her mother was by her side as soon as the silent tears became sobs. “We lost a baby. I

had no idea I was pregnant. He is hurting so much. I just don't know how to help him. What do I do to take the pain away?"

"Shhh, hush. You make it better by getting well. There will be other babies. By the way that man acts, there'll be a lot of them. You worry about you. That man will be just fine."

Rance could feel the eyes on his back as he walked away from hospital room. That's why he didn't bother stopping even though Thierry was trying to wave him over. He shook his head slightly and headed outside ready to face what was coming. However, as soon as he turned around he almost changed his mind. The fist that flew into his face felt like a Mack truck decided to use his jaw to play bumper cars. He had no idea which one of the three hit him, but it hurt like hell.

He tried to brace himself for the next hit when suddenly Didier and his brother, Pascal were in between him and Jade's brothers.

"I don't think so, *mes amis*. My cousin is a jackass true, but I'm afraid I can't allow you to pummel his face in." Didier let his accent flow free, meaning he was pissed. Damn, this could get messy.

"Move, Didier. They're upset. They have every right to be." Besides, the physical pain made the emotional one easier to deal with. At least he would have something else to dwell on.

"Our baby sister has been poisoned. Nothing like this has ever happened to her until she met that son-of-a-bitch." The one speaking looked like he might be the oldest, which would make him Jasper Jr., Junious he knew, and he wasn't speaking. He just looked ready to go.

Unfortunately, Remy and Thierry had followed them outside. It was looking uglier and uglier.

"You think Rance poisoned her?" Remy knew that wasn't what they were saying. Rance fixed a glare on his brother, but as usual, Remy was studiously ignoring him. "He loves her. He

would never hurt her. If you want to hit him you're going to have to go through us."

"You think we won't?" That was from Junious. So far, the middle brother, Dante, said nothing, nor did he look as if he wanted to pound him into the ground. There was no doubt he would if it came to that, but he wasn't looking like he was out for blood.

"I think you will go back into the hospital, pay your respects to your sister, and sit your asses down somewhere." Jasper, Sr. strolled outside as if nothing at all was amiss. His voice didn't raise nor did it hold any traceable anger. He didn't appear tense or overly concerned a brawl was about to go down in front of a hospital. He was a cool one. His sons must have sensed something more because every one of them dropped their aggressive posture. Fascinating. "Rance, I believe your woman would be wanting to see you. You better get back into the room."

If his own sons were afraid to argue, Rance wasn't about to. Jasper, Sr. may have seemed cool, calm, and collected, but still waters were known to run deep. He started to walk back in only to be stopped by Thierry.

“We need to speak, soon. Angel found out who’s doing all this.”

Angel? How the hell did she figure it out when it had stumped the rest of them? Hell, Didier couldn’t even find Gabriella. What had they missed? “Who?” He would kill them with his bare hands. Not only had they threatened the life of the person who meant the most to him, they had killed his child. He couldn’t forgive that. Couldn’t overlook it.

Thierry shook his head. “Not the time. Later. Go see about Jade.”

He wasn’t going to argue. He could kill the person later. Right now Jade needed him. Heaven help him but he suspected he might just need her more.

“Lady Rienne is dead.” It wasn't like they weren't expecting it, so Remy barely bat an eye at the news Aubrey brought him.

“Okay, so?” He knew it sounded callous, but he wasn't about to pretend he felt anything more than relief. Maybe he should feel grateful towards her for raising them all, but he didn't. That had been a curse rather than a blessing. He would have been better off in foster care. Besides, he had fully intended on killing her when he and Baptiste had gone to see her in the hospital. If Baptiste hadn't have unplugged the machine, he would have. The old bat was just too damn ornery to die.

“She was mutilated and left to drain out. Someone made more than two dozen deep cuts in various places on her body, chopped off some of her fingers, a few toes, took off a single

hand, a single foot and left her just like that to bleed out. She was murdered. The nurse is hysterical, Thierry is trying to calm her down and keep her quiet.”

Now that was just plain nasty. Never mind the way someone had chosen to dispatch the evil witch, but they had to actually touch her to do it. He hoped they’d been wearing gloves. Her kind of crazy was obviously contagious if that’s the way the person decided to take her out. He was about to say as much when he noticed his wife out of the corner of his eye. She was trying to hide it, but she was panting mighty hard, one hand on her stomach and the other had a death grip on the chair. He turned and right before his eyes, her water broke.

Holy hell she was in labor. She wasn’t due for another month and a half. “She’s in labor.” He said it, but he couldn’t move. They had gone over it, but all the things they had talked about didn’t seem to be coming forth in his head at the moment. “She’s in labor!”

Paralysis gave way to complete panic. He ran to the nurses' station, but they had apparently noticed because someone was by her side with a wheelchair, someone else was on the phone to maternity. What the hell was he supposed to be doing?

"Go with your wife, Remy." Aubrey pushed him toward the wheel chair that was making its way to the elevator. His knees felt like they were made of water. Someone grabbed his arm and hustled him along. He had no idea who, he couldn't tear his eyes away from his wife. She looked like she was in extreme pain, sweat popping out along her forehead.

Was it supposed to be that painful? She was starting to make weird noises he didn't know a person was capable of. Was that normal? And why the hell was she in labor now? Something had to be wrong.

“She’s not supposed to be doing that,” he told the nurse pushing her. “She isn’t due for a month and a half. Tell the doctor he has to stop this. I’m not ready.”

“You can’t stop mid-labor you idiot.” Regina didn’t sound like herself. His wife wasn’t that mean. “If you can’t handle it, stay in the waiting room.”

He decided she must be scared, out of sorts. He kneeled helpfully by her side to console her. “Don’t worry, baby I’m right here. It will be fine. You’ll be fine. I’m sure the doctor can give you something to make the baby wait.”

“Remy, if you don’t shut the fuck up, I will kill you with my bare hands. You just stand there, hold my hand and don’t speak. I cannot take the sound of your voice right now.”

Remy stared at the doppelganger masquerading as the woman he loved. Did she really just curse at him? Regina didn’t curse, unless she was in the middle of an orgasm. Nope, this wasn’t his wife. This was some strange woman who took over

Regina's body. Getting to his feet he stuck out his hand and said nothing more. He would wait for his wife to return because he couldn't talk to this woman. She might kill him.

Chapter Twenty

Thierry had wanted to tell him something. Rance meant to go back out to find out who the hell was responsible for the loss of his and Jade's baby, but Jade wanted him to hold her. Climbing back on the bed, he silently done just that until both of them fell asleep. Thierry had come in saying Regina was in labor and they were all going upstairs for a while to see about Regina. He was about to be an uncle.

He was happy for Remy, he really was, but he couldn't leave Jade. The thought of her being in the hospital room all alone was unacceptable. Her family stayed a while, but he needed to be right here. He wasn't sure what had woken him, but his eyes opened to see the door creep open. It was dark, so he couldn't see who was trying to sneak in. The shadow told him no more than the person was tall and lean, and definitely a man. Angel and Jade had been right.

He tensed, aware he was in the worst possible defensive position. Jade was laying on him, he would have to find a way to move her in order to protect her. Short of throwing her to the floor, he wasn't sure how he was going to do that. The scarce moonlight filtering through the blinds glinted off the knife the guy held in his hands. Fuck! He didn't have a choice, he was going to have to push Jade to the floor and pounce. He couldn't let this man get anywhere near her. He just wasn't sure he could throw her to the ground. She had been through enough already. He didn't have any other options, however, so it had to be done.

Or maybe not. The man hadn't closed the door all the way. This was a brand new hospital, one the family owned, built after the hurricane. Someone else was right behind the mysterious would-be assailant. Rance tightened his hold on Jade just in case. If nothing else he would be able to flip them quickly and take the knife somewhere to his back. Hopefully somewhere that would not debilitate him from fighting back.

The man was steadily making his way over to the bed with agonizing slowness. The man behind him was lifting something in his hand. Rance held his breath, ready to move but not knowing what the hell he was going to do. Just as the knife was raised, its wicked looking edge gleaming in the moonlight, a flash of lighting shot out from behind him. There was no more than a whisper of sound, but the sight was unmistakable. The man with the knife stopped dead in his tracks, a gasp escaping from his lips before he crumbled to a heap on the ground. The shot had been true, straight through the heart at close range. The angle, a thing of beauty; no splatter, no mess. Whoever the hell that was doing the shooting was an expert.

He fumbled with the lights, flicking them on low so he wouldn't wake Jade. She didn't need to see this. He wasn't prepared to see his grandfather standing there with a smoking gun in his hand. The elder looked grieved. That look made

Rance look down unwilling to see who was on the floor. He was too afraid that he already knew.

Lying in the hospital bed as Jade slept had given him a lot of time to really think clearly. His mind had quieted enough to do some serious deduction. He didn't like what it all added up to. He was afraid he knew who it was down there; he didn't want to confirm it. It was going to break his heart.

"I'll call Thierry. We'll get someone in here to take him away." Baptiste sounded tired. Rance supposed he had every right to.

While he didn't have the whole sordid story, Rance knew he had gone through a lot with Lady Rienne, even after he left. He hadn't completely abandoned his sons as Rance had first thought. He had simply pretended to be dead so as not to shame his ex-wife and make life more difficult for them. His family had built up a name here in Louisiana. He wanted his sons to have every advantage of that name. Rance had to

wonder how often and how deeply he regretted his decision now. There was no doubt he did, look at all that had happened.

Taken aback, Rance looked down recognizing the man instantly. For the second time in his adult life, he cried.

“Piers?” Aubrey sounded as bad as Rance felt. “But why? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I got out, Aubrey. Piers didn’t. Who knows what she did after I was gone.”

Aubrey had been in New Orleans, but lived on campus at LSU, rarely coming home. Besides, his head had always been in a book. That was how he blocked out the craziness that surrounded him. Rance didn’t blame him. Honestly, if there was anyone to blame, it would have to be Lady Rienne and Sorrel, Piers’s father.

“Man, this is seriously fucked up.” Didier looked like he was going to be sick.

Thierry said nothing, staring blankly out the window of the waiting room. Rance could feel his inner rage and understood it. They should have known. They should have seen it. Instead it was Baptiste who hadn’t really known Piers at all who had seen something off about their cousin. If they had seen it sooner, maybe they could have gotten him some help. But Piers had hidden it well.

“Did either of you tell the General or the Senator?” Aubrey asked. “Did Baptiste?”

“Hell no, none of them needed to know.” Thierry’s voice was curt; he didn’t turn around as he spoke. “They were too damn busy with their lives to see the bullshit going in their mother’s house. Fuck them.”

As bitter of a pill as it was, it was over, Rance was relieved. It was over. Unless one of them decided to go

completely insane, it was seriously over. It was weird to have nothing ominous hanging over them anymore. No invisible threats to watch out for. They were finally as normal as family could get.

“I’m going for a walk,” Thierry threw out to no one in general, stomping out of the room.

“I’m going to go...find Katrina. She’s probably staring at the babies again. She seems fascinated by them.” Aubrey got up and left, leaving Rance alone with his thoughts.

Jade’s mother was in visiting her. He’d already been upstairs to see his new nieces. Regina and Remy had had twins. The most beautiful baby girls he’d ever seen. Of course they were the only babies he ever really looked at closely, but they were adorable. He didn’t begrudge his brother his blessings, but it hurt a little knowing his own child had died before he or she had ever gotten a chance to live.

He should have seen it. How could he not have known Piers was off his rocker? Surely there had been signs, something that was out of place. Baptiste had certainly seen it. Why hadn't he?

"Stop obsessing." Rance looked up to see Angel smiling down at him. "You couldn't have known. No one did."

"Baptiste did."

"Baptiste didn't really know Piers. Sometimes it's easier to see something is wrong with a person if you don't know them. It's not your responsibility to know everything that is wrong with your family you know. You and Thierry take on way too much responsibility that's not really yours to take on. You did all you could do. No one could've expected more."

He wanted to argue with her point, but there was nothing he could say. She was right in way. There weren't a hell of a lot of options for any of them. Maybe for their parents, but that was neither here nor there. He couldn't go back in time and

make all of their fathers take responsibility. Back then, men weren't really expected to be single parents if there was a female relative to help them raise their children. By all accounts, Lady Rienne had gotten worse with time. Her evilness had to have time to develop. There wasn't much of a point going around pointing fingers. Piers was gone. Nothing could bring him back.

"So have you asked Jade yet?" Angel prodded taking a seat next to him.

"Ask her what?"

"To marry you, what else? Thierry told me you had Boden give you your great-grandmother's ring. Is it true all that jewelry came from the collection of Marie Antoinette? Thierry told me about it, but I didn't know if he was serious or not."

"Some of it, not all. Not the ring. The ring was designed my great-great grandfather for his bride. And no I hadn't asked her yet."

He was going to the night she got sick. Thank God her body had rejected the massive amounts of black cohosh in that damned powdered drink she had insisted on drinking for breakfast instead of eating. The substance in itself wasn't illegal or even harmful in proper doses. It wasn't supposed to kill, but it could damage the liver or make a person seriously ill. Native Americans had used it for female complaints including childbirth, which explained what brought on the miscarriage.

Of all the things that could have gone wrong, Rance felt blessed he hadn't lost Jade and that she hadn't been seriously damaged. The loss of the baby hurt, but the loss of Jade would have killed him.

"What are you waiting for? Get in there and make her day. There is no perfect time or place to ask. Just be natural. It will do you both some good. I'm going to go find my husband." Giving him a quick kiss on the forehead, she got up to leave. "He's probably moping around somewhere obsessing."

“Thank you.” He owed Angel a lot. Other than Baptiste, she was the only one who had figured the whole mess out. “I mean that.”

She shrugged it off. “I just wish I could have warned you guys sooner.”

She was right. He got up and went back to Jade’s room, stepping out of his shoes and slipping into the bed with her as she talked to her mother. Lila only stayed a few minutes more before kissing her daughter and promising to return tomorrow. When she left, Rance took the ring out of his pocket. He’d been carrying the thing around for a week, trying to figure out the right time to ask her. He thought about taking the Camaro out for a spin and asking her then, but he didn’t think he wanted to wait.

Lifting her hand, he slid it on.

“I wanted to wait for the perfect time to ask you, but there doesn’t seem to be a perfect time.” He held on to her,

holding it up for them both to look at. It fit her perfectly, like it had been made for her. The antique diamond ring was a tad on the large side, a little too flashy for her tastes he knew, but it had been in the family for a very long time. Lady Rienne was the only woman since it was made, who had not worn it. Supposedly because Baptiste had married her in Canada. Rance suspected that some part of him had known even then something wasn't right about his chosen bride. "This ring was my great-great grandmother's. I'm not sure why the General had this and not the Senator, but he did. I want you to wear it, if you will do me the great honor of being my wife."

Jade turned, climbing face first on to his lap. God help him he tried to tamp down his natural reaction, but he couldn't. Even in that ugly hospital gown, she was the sexiest woman alive to him. The little minx had the nerve to rock on his erection, knowing he couldn't very well finish what she was starting.

"I'm going to spank your ass as soon as you're better," he murmured kissing those delectable lips.

"What took you so long? My parents said you came out to their house a week ago." Damn, he was really hoping they wouldn't tell her. "That was really sweet by the way, asking them before you asked me. They got a kick out of that. Daddy said it shows you have character."

"And your brothers?" Peevish he knew, but he was curious.

"Oh, they hate you." She laughed like it was funny. One of her brothers had a wicked right cross. At least he thought it was a right cross. "And yes, I'll marry you. It's going to drive Junious crazy. For some reason he really hates you."

"And that's funny to you?" God, he loved this woman. He had to kiss her again. He didn't think he would be able to let her out of his sight for at least a month. Maybe longer.

“It’s hilarious. Junious is a player. The only one still single. He thinks every single man in America thinks like he does.”

Rance could relate. It took a man falling hard to understand what it felt like. No single man would believe him if he told them loving a woman is like losing half yourself and not wanting it back. “I love you, Jade –baby. Forever.”

“And I love you right back, Rance. Forever.”

Chapter Twenty-One

"You didn't have to...do what you did." Remy was beginning to think he would never find his brother. Despite the fact they were all still coming out the country house on the weekends. Rance had gotten rather good at avoiding him.

Part of the reason was this enormous guilt Thierry and Rance seemed to be hauling around about Piers. Remy could never understand it, but both men had seemed to assume a father-figure role in all of their lives long ago, and they had never outgrown it. It used to drive him crazy, but now he realized he owed them both far more than he ever realized. Especially his older brother.

"How did you find out?" Rance didn't look at him when he spoke. He stared resolutely out of the window of the library where Remy guessed he had been holed up since getting here with Jade.

“Baptiste told me. I don’t know how he knew.” One thing was for sure, Remy now knew where Rance, Thierry and Didier got their creepy have-to-know-everything proclivities from. “I’m not going to ask you why. I know. But the child Cherry was carrying wasn’t mine, Rance. I would have been fine after a while.”

“I knew that. I’ve always known.” Remy was shocked by that. He had always thought Rance believed he had gotten the Cajun teenager pregnant all those years ago. “And you wouldn’t have been alright Remy. She would have thought of something, anything she could to try to break you.”

“Did you really think I was that weak?” Now he was pissed. Break him? Rance thought he was so easily squashed he willing became a whore for their grandmother?

Rance sighed so heavily, Remy almost forgave the comment.

"No I didn't think she would break you. But I knew she would take the laughter right out of you. She would've choke the light right out of your eyes. I couldn't have that Remy. I would do it all again to make sure that never happened."

"And what about you? What, you never deserved to be happy?"

Rance looked at him with a wry smile. "I never was. That's the thing. You were happy, full of life. I didn't have that, didn't want it. But I wasn't about to watch you lose it. It's neither here nor there. It's done. I just wish I could have saved Piers."

Remy couldn't say anything to that. He too wished he had seen some sign, had some kind of clue. Whatever went on after the rest of them had left had twisted Piers so deeply, so profoundly, and none of them had known. They had all been too wrapped up in their own lives to spare their youngest cousin much of a thought.

No matter what Remy said, he knew his brother would carry that guilt for a long time to come. No one could relate to whatever personal hell Piers had gone through more than Rance. For a while, they had gone through it together. From what Baptiste had told him, Rance had been seriously fucked up in the head when he had left New Orleans for the Academy. It had taken years for him to talk more than a few words beyond what he absolutely had to. In all that time, he had never come home. Not until Uncle Sorrel had died.

Remy didn't know whether or not he had called or checked in on Piers, but he just couldn't imagine otherwise. God knows Piers had never appeared to be anything more than his usual quiet, reserved self. He had always been there for his cousins, but he had never shared much. He had even volunteered to stay on with Lady Rienne after the old woman had tried to kill Angelique. In all this time, he had never let on there was a tempest brewing inside his head.

“I know I don’t say it, but I love you man.” It didn’t feel as weird as Remy thought it would in saying it. The Chevalier men just didn’t talk like that to one another. “I will always be grateful and pissed. But don’t ever do something like that again.”

This time when Rance smiled there was real joy in his face. It was as shocking as it was wondrous to see it. Remy knew he had to be thinking about Jade. She had done miracles for Rance.

“I don’t need to. You turned out alright.”

“I think I want to have a baby.”

Thierry stared at his wife, his dick hardening instantly even though he was trying to find a reason, any reason to change the subject. Was she serious? He had no idea. She wasn't looking at him so he couldn't see if there was laughter in her

eyes or not. He supposed it could be the new twins, Zelime and Zulime, already affectionately referred to as Zellie and Zullie. They were adorable little girls, but Thierry couldn't help but wonder. Did mental illness run in the blood? Piers had definitely been stark raving mad, and no one had known. No one but the old man.

He tried to hate his grandfather. Baptiste should've come to them with his suspicions. Why hadn't he? Why did he stand idly by and watched as Piers slaughtered his own grandmother? Thierry would have killed the old woman himself to spare Piers that. There were a lot of things Thierry would have gladly done to spare Piers. He'd had the chance to do nothing.

"I swear 'fore the Lord God Almighty, if you and Rance don't stop blaming yourselves for everything that goes wrong in this family I will geld you both!"

She was looking at him now. Glaring would be a more apt definition. This wouldn't be the first time they had had this argument in the last three weeks since his grandfather had killed his cousin, probably wouldn't be the last. It was still shocking to see the normally even tempered Angelique Dubois Chevalier so mad her face had taken on a reddish color beneath the even russet color of her skin.

"Sugar, you don't understand--"

"Oh, I understand all right." Her hands went to her hips, her foot tapping impatiently against the hardwood floor. "You are sitting there grieving for a man you didn't even know! The Piers you loved died long before the night he tried to kill my best friend in her hospital bed."

"Rance would've stopped him from doing that." Yet, her words held a truth he didn't wanted to admit. He didn't know Piers. No one had. His younger cousin had always been the quiet one, the one who never complained, stood silently in

the background, soothing disagreements and acting as the family diplomat.

Had Piers hated his role? Had he wanted out of the little box they had placed him in?

“At what cost, Thierry? Rance was unarmed, in the bed with Jade while she slept. Someone would’ve gotten hurt. And what would Rance have done? Held him down and yelled out for help?”

No, Rance would have never called a living soul. He would have tried to subdue Piers on his own, and if he couldn’t he would have taken him out. Of all the burdens Rance carried, that was one Baptiste had spared him – spared them all. It was likely Piers was every bit as damaged as Lady Rienne had been. There was no cure for that kind of insanity. It only grew worse and worse with time until any and everything was justified in their pursuit of their own ends.

Well, hell. As usual, his little wife was right. There had been no way. He still didn't understand why Baptiste had allowed the gruesome murder of Lady Rienne, but did he need to? After all that woman had done, perhaps this was her reward. There were questions that would never be answered, but who really needed to know? Knowledge of what had driven Piers to this would only make it worse in a way, Thierry already felt like he had abandoned his younger cousins who were his brothers when he went off to college. He had been so relieved to get away from his overbearing grandmother then, all he had thought about was his freedom.

Until Piers's letter. He had written about what was happening to Rance, begging him to intervene before it was too late. Thierry didn't hesitate calling the General and tell him he needed to go collect his eldest son. He never even thought Piers had been going through the same hell. Piers's father had been here and done nothing.

“You know, the General and the Senator are responsible for far more than you and Rance. You were kids, too young for the responsibilities you took on. Let it go, Thierry.” Angel sat on his lap, placing her head on his shoulder. She never failed to make him feel better just by her touch. When he was holding her he felt as though there was nothing in world he couldn’t do. Like everything would work out.

“And our babies will be in no danger of being insane. We would make the very best parents.”

“You’re serious?” There went that unruly cock again. Think about impregnating his wife made his head swim. “you really want to start a family now?”

“I want our kids to grow up with their cousins. There’s no doubt Rance will knock up Jade in short order. I just hope they make it to the altar first. Mr. Jessups would kill him. I want our children to be around the same age as their cousins. I want them to play together, look out for one another. Plus I want

more than one, and not too far apart, so we need to get moving.” Thierry couldn’t help but laugh at that one. Jade’s father scared the shit out of him; he knew the man probably unnerved Rance, who normally wasn’t scared of anything. He could completely understand her point about growing up together. He and his cousins did have great memories that no one could take away. “Plus, it might encourage poor Didi to go find a woman of his own.”

That was going to be a problem. Didier had stepped back, but anyone with eyes could see by the way he still watched Jade that he wanted her. Thierry felt a twinge of guilt for sending Didi down to the garage a few minutes before he and Angel had come upstairs. Rance was working on his Camaro with Jade’s help. Thierry had gone out there once to ask Rance something and swiftly turned around and come back inside. He knew what Didi was likely to see, but he needed to

see it. It could only help snap him out of the hopeless crush he had.

“I think you might be right,” he finally agreed with his wife, laying her down on the bed before covering her body with his own. “Let’s start right now.”

Didier didn’t want to see what was right in front of his face, but he couldn’t seem to walk away either. Rance and Jade locked in a passionate kiss was like a gut shot, but he stood there like an idiot, unable to look away. Watching his cousin’s hands roam the vivacious curves of Jade’s body made him burn with equal parts jealous and longing. He just knew the smooth, dark skin underneath Rance’s hands were every bit as soft as it looked.

What would it be like to have Jade’s head flung back, her lips slightly opened as she moaned for his touch? Every caress

made her pant a little harder, the kisses Rance traced over every inch of skin he slowly uncovered. Didier fought the urge to stalk over to the unsuspecting lovers and rip Rance from the woman he loved. A woman who would probably never love him back. The way she looked at Rance as his cousin cupped her generous breasts, bringing them up to his mouth to feast.

Merde, she was so sexy! Her exposed thighs widened to allow Rance to nestle his body between them. Didier's mouth watered as his eyes traveled over the full, inviting curves. Her hips were moving, grinding against Rance's body. Didier couldn't bite back a groan when Rance dropped to his knees suddenly, ripping her skimpy underwear off her body and burying his face between her spread thighs. He licked his lips as he watched. She would taste sweet there, Didier knew it without a doubt. His own cock throbbed painfully as he watched her body fall back against the car, exposed breasts heaving as Rance pleased her with his mouth.

He could walk over there right now and take one of the generous mounds into his mouth. He could lick and suck one of those diamond hard nipples until she screamed. But Rance would no doubt try to kill him and she would never look at him the same way. Pain lanced his chest like a sharp, bitter knife had been plunge into his heart without mercy. Lord, how he wanted her. It was painfully clear who Jade wanted, who she burned for, and it wasn't him. Her small hands clutched the hair of her lover, her pelvis lifting to offer herself completely.

She would never whimper for him like she was now for Rance. She would never whisper how much she loved him, how good he was making her feel. Not once would he get to experience what it would be like to drink her honey as she fell apart under his mouth. From the look of supreme satisfaction on his cousin's face, it was something glorious indeed.

When Rance rose to his feet, Didier noted his pants had already been loosened, his rampant dick sticking straight out in

anticipation. Didier had no idea where his cousin found the will power to hold back from sliding deep inside her, but he did. Instead, Rance tracked open mouthed kisses slowly up her torso, pulling her up to take her mouth once more in what looked to be a soul searing kiss.

He must have entered her then because Jade's head dropped back once more, a lusty cry piercing the night. Their bodies began to move in that age old dance of lust, only the love between the two of them made the act all that much hotter. They couldn't seem to stop touching each other, kissing each other. The sound of Jade begging Rance not to stop, of Rance promising he would never think of it, would haunt Didier forever. He would probably see this scene played over and over in his mind every time he closed his eyes. He should have long since walked away.

He shouldn't have come here. Although his mother and brothers still occupied the plantation house, Didier knew he

should have gone home after Piers's death. Home to Canada. He had no idea why he was still in New Orleans in the first place. At first it had been fun working for Thierry, getting to know the cousins he had only heard about through Rance and Thierry. Until he had met Jade.

Of course Didier had known for some time Rance was enamored with the woman. He watched her like hawk, but he hadn't ever approached her. He seriously hadn't tried to get between Rance and Jade, he had just convinced himself Rance was never going to make a move. Guilt made his steps heavy as he turned his back on the couple in the old carriage house. That was a lie. He had always known why Rance tried to stay away from Jade. It could be summed up in two words. Lady Rienne. He had known it was only a matter of time before Rance's will broke and he would go after the woman he had been desperate for. That was the main reason Didier had begun to make his move. But he had been too late.

He couldn't begrudge Jade her happiness, and Rance made her happy. It drove him crazy to admit it, but she was good for Rance. She made him...almost human. Still, Didier would forever kick himself in the ass for not moving sooner, like right after Thierry married Angelique. It wasn't a chivalrous thought, it was shady as hell, but Jade was worth it.

He doubted he would stop wanting her. He could never act on it now, but man, he wanted her.

All he could do at this point was watch and wait. He didn't expect Rance to mess up, but you never knew. Rance was a cold bastard at best. Didier had only seen him act like a normal human being when he was with her. If he stepped out of line just once, if he hurt her at all...Well, then all bets were off.

Epilogue

“Didn’t I tell you I hate blindfolds?” She was lying of course, but he just might believe it.

“That’s not what you said last night, Jade-baby,” Rance reminded her, biting her ear. The move never failed to send shivers down her spine. “Step up. One more. Okay just a second.”

Jade heard a door open and knew immediately what her surprise was. In fact, she’d been expecting something like this for a while now. Rance’s apartment was opulent, there was plenty of space, but a penthouse just wasn’t her. With the wedding so close, she knew he was planning something big.

He took the blindfold off and literally took her breath away. It was gorgeous! The house looked massive, but it didn’t look too much. It looked like a family home. A very large family. Despite the obvious understated opulence, it wasn’t too

upscale. She could see little kids running down the wide halls or the curving staircase. She hated the kinds of houses that looked like children weren't welcome. She wanted a home, not a museum.

Stepping inside she was struck by the amount of natural light that streamed through the many windows. The light seemed to follow her further into the place as she explored it. It made the place cheerful and comfortable despite being empty. It must be built on a rise because there was no lack of sun anywhere, with the exception of the back study. That would be Rance's. She would take the small second library nearer to the front of the house. The floor to ceiling windows there had a beautiful view of the garden. She couldn't wait to get her hands dirty in the rich, dark soil.

He took her room by room, pointing out the various amenities, but he really didn't need to. She was in love with the

place. It was the perfect blending of both of them. She could be happy here. Very, very happy.

“I love it!” Throwing her arms around him she showed him how much in her kiss.

As always, he took over, making her knees weak by the unique sensual onslaught that was all Rance. He nibbled on her lower lips before swiping it with his tongue, then dove back for more. His firm grip on her hair kept her mouth open for his exploration- she loved the small bite of pain that came when he did that. It made her nipples taut, her pussy getting wetter by the second. By the time he let her up for air she had almost forgotten her own name.

“One more room to look at.” His eyes were heavy, that unique wicked grin gracing his lips. Jade moaned softly knowing full well what that look meant. It made her all hot and tingly when he looked at her like that. “Come on, *bébé*. Let me show you the master bedroom.”

She wasn't surprised to find a California king bed all made up with pure white sheets, overstuffed fluffy pillows and a down comforter in the otherwise bare room. The only other item in the room was a large painting hanging over the bed. It was a painting of Rance holding her, both of them in the buff. It was stunning, and looked so real. The likeness was breathtaking.

“Thierry painted it. It’s an early wedding present.” Jade just nodded. She couldn’t really speak past the lump in her throat. It was a beautifully sensuous painting. She looked beautiful in it. There was a look in her eyes in the picture; a gleam of a well satisfied woman, one with a delicious secret. She could relate to that.

“I only wish I looked like that.” That woman had a beautiful body. The face might be hers, but that body was one of a goddess.

“That’s exactly how I see you, *cher*. You have a body built for sin. My own personal playground and I plan on enjoying it for a very, very long time.”

There was no answer for that. Not with his lips on her neck, his hands busy undoing the buttons on her blouse. The suction against her skin was electric; her body went from hot to overdrive in seconds. Her clothes were too hot, too heavy despite the natural chill in the air. They couldn’t be gone fast enough. She alternated ripping them away, and ripping his. She needed skin against skin, with not even air between them.

By the time they were both as nature intended, she was beyond foreplay. She pushed him down on the bed first climbing on top before he could stop her. Ah, but Rance couldn’t allow her full control. It was a quirk in his nature she thoroughly enjoyed. He grabbed her hips before she impaled herself on his thick, heavy cock. She wanted to cry. It was so damn, hard and ready. She needed to feel it inside her.

“So impatient.” The playful chide was coupled with his finger sliding along her slit. “Have I told you how much I love your pretty pussy like this? My pretty pussy that is.”

“Yes, all yours.” Her body trembled with anticipation. She tried pushing forward to at least get a little satisfaction from his blunt fingers. He wasn't allowing it though. The man loved driving her crazy with lust.

Figuring turnabout was fair play; she began to slide her wet cunt along the length of his dick, circling the head of his shaft with her finger. She used the pearl of pre-cum seeping from the mushroomed head as lubrication as she swirled her fingers round and round. That drove him crazy. He often told her the head was the most sensitive part of his dick. Since then she had used the broad helmet to antagonize him every bit as much as he did her. She'd much prefer to drive him wild with her pussy, but she would take what she could get right now.

“You’re a very bad girl.” That was followed by a smack to the ass. The burn went straight to her core, causing her to buck with a tormented groan. She loved it when he spanked her ass. She swore she could come like that if he ever kept it up, but he never did. He was always afraid to seriously hurt her. “Keep it up and I might have to spank that pretty little pussy.”

Jade couldn’t hold back a smile at that one. Like that was a punishment. To prove her point, she lifted up ever so slightly and with his cock, slapped her own pussy with it. Now it was his turn to buck, hissing through his teeth as he did so. “Oh, I’m so scared.” She did it a couple of more times until his jaw was clinched, his eyes closed tight.

Not giving him a change to recover, she rose on her knees and sank down on every delicious inch. He didn’t have time to do more than moan before she was moving, rocking her hips so that the head of his dick hit her G-spot on every down stroke. He filled her so perfectly, touching every part inside she

needed touched. His hands tightened on her hips, but he didn't try to stop her this time. Instead he moved with her, canting his pelvis so she got the full effect. She knew it wouldn't take him long to take over completely, so she used every second to tease, moving all the way up until only the tip remained inside before sliding back down and rocking in a little circle.

“Fuck, *bébé*, that feels so good. Just like that. Ride me. Don't stop.”

She had no intention of stopping. She rocked faster and faster, working her hips on each down stroke in circles, reaching her first climax before she could remember to hold back. The orgasm was explosive, but she knew there was much more to come. Rance liked for her to come several times before following suit. She was still shuddering when he sat straight up with a pure animalistic growl. Wrapping his fist around her hair, he firmly jerked her head back, engulfing one breast while pinching down on the other. Oh, fuck that felt good. She

wrapped her legs around him as he rose to his knees, powering inside her without letting go. Using the muscles in her thighs she worked him right back, giving as good as she got.

All too soon, she felt yet another climax building in the pit of her belly. She didn't even try to hold this one back. There would be another. "Yes, oh damn yes! Rance, I love you so much."

"Mine! My pussy, my woman. I will never let you go, Jade-baby. I swear. Oh shit, baby, you feel so fucking good wrapped around my cock. Fuck me back, just like that."

She was lost in a haze of Rance. He was everywhere around her all at once. So deep inside, his mouth ravaging her nipples, taking her mouth, biting her neck. Sweat glistened off their skin as they moved as one, with one goal. Her moans and whimpers gave way to impassioned screams, her nails digging into his skin. He liked that too. She'd witnessed him counting them on more than one occasion. One climax blended into

another until she was nothing more than one massive orgasm. It was almost too much.

“Rance, I can’t- I can’t-” She couldn’t what she didn’t know. Couldn’t come again? She never stopped. Couldn’t stop loving him? Such a thing was inconceivable.

“Jade-baby, I’m going to come. Oh baby, you’re making me- Fuck!”

She buried her face in the side of his neck and bit him. She was pretty sure she was drawing blood, but he only held her tighter, smashing their pelvises together. It took a while before Jade was able to form a coherent thought. They just lay there fully attached, comfortable with the silence.

“I love you, Rance. I can’t wait to become Mrs. Rance Chevalier.”

“And I can’t wait to become Mr. Jade Chevalier.”

She snorted at that one. Even though he was a macho ass much of the time, he had feminist streak a mile wide. It was unexpected, but cute as hell.

“Well, I for one am glad everyone will be there next week for the ceremony. I can’t wait to meet this woman Baptiste is married to. And thank you for making up with Didi. He didn’t really like me, you know. He just thought he did.”

Rance opened one eye and smacked her on one ass cheek, hard.

“Yeah, he liked you all right. A little too much. He actually came to me. He just needed time to realize you’ve always been mine. You just didn’t understand it yet.”

“Oh, and now I do?” One day she would tell him that teasing him got predictable results. His dick started to grow hard again inside her. It took less than a minute and she found herself flat on her back, her man moving slowly inside her.

“I think I need to show you one more time. So you don’t forget. Forever, Jade. You’re mine forever.”

The End