



Koko Brown &
Taige Crenshaw

Forever, I Da

Loose Id

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Dedications

First and foremost, this book is dedicated to Richard and Mildred Loving, who weren't looking to set a precedent in 1958, just the right to be married and raise a family in peace. I would also like to thank Heather Hollis, my editor, for being so patient and giving us more time to see our story to fruition, and Bekki Lynn for coming in at the last minute to help with final edits. Last, but not least, I would like to thank Taige for coming in at the 13th hour and saving the day!

-- KB

To my mother, who has always been my number one fan. Although you are no longer with me, I know you are smiling down at me. To Marilyn, my sister and second mother, who has always believed in me. To my lunch buddies, who listen to me ramble on about my writing ideas. Thanks to Bekki Lynn. Thanks to Koko for asking me to do this book with her. It was fun and a blast to write.

-- TC

Chapter One

The fine hairs on the back of Rosalind Fletcher's neck stood up at the lyrical tinkling of the shop's door bells. Without looking up, she knew who'd entered. She'd anticipated Ashley Benedict's arrival all week. He was the reason for their coming in an hour early to prepare for this morning's cake tasting, and for the sudden shaking of her hands.

Her assistant, Lacreteria, stretched up on her tiptoes to look through the glass partition that allowed them to see the showroom. Rosalind shrugged off a twinge of jealousy at the other woman's wolf whistle.

"Lord have mercy, Ashley Benedict is fine! I'm not one for blonds, but that man is an exception." When she moved around the stainless steel prepping table, Rosalind stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"I'll see to Benedict, Lacreteria. I still need you to brew the coffee for the Loving Room."

"Dang it, Roz, you're always cock blocking." Rosalind ignored the white washcloth thrown in disgust on the tabletop, instead busying herself with the strings of her apron. "If I didn't know any better, I would think you wanted Ashley Benedict for yourself." Rosalind's fingers stilled on the cotton ties. "But considering you're too wrapped up in this business to pay any man any attention, I'm not worried about you trying to steal my man."

“Your man?” Rosalind’s lips quirked at the corners.

Lacretia smoothed her plump hands over her generous hips and down her thighs. “Yeah, girl. Didn’t I tell you that me and Mr. Ashley Benedict have a thing going on?”

Rosalind chuckled at her antics. “No, you didn’t tell me. And I’m pretty sure you didn’t tell Orlando, either, because you and your man are still alive and not lying six feet under.”

“Hoo-wee! Ain’t that the truth. My man has always been mighty possessive when it comes to his Lacretia. You know why, don’t you?” When Rosalind didn’t interrupt her, she continued, “I have diamonds between my thighs.”

“And here I thought it was the wedding cake I gave you.” Chuckling, Rosalind balled up her apron and threw it at the other woman. Even though she tipped the scales at a little over two hundred pounds, Lacretia was pretty nimble, easily catching the garment in midair.

“Could be that too. Everyone knows Forever, I Do’s wedding cakes are mighty lucky.” Rosalind stiffened, but the other woman didn’t seem to notice, because she kept yapping. “I haven’t seen a divorce in all the years I’ve been working here.”

“And you won’t, if I have anything to do with it. My great-grandmomma Trudy would roll over in her grave if she found out I’d botched up the Fletcher streak --”

Ding...ding...ding...ding.

Rosalind pressed her lips together at the impatient pounding on the service bell. Lacretia stepped around her and held up her hands. “Don’t blow your top just yet, Roz. At least let him be here for fifteen minutes before you do.”

“I can only promise ten.” With that said, Rosalind left Lacretia and made her way through the kitchen and into the showroom.

“Ah, the fair Rosalind. For a minute, I thought you’d forgotten our appointment.” The sound of the honey-dipped Southern drawl caused Rosalind to stop short.

Even though she’d had plenty of time to prepare for Ashley Benedict, nothing could prepare her body for being in the same room with him. Like a match to a Roman candle, her

body always reacted to him. Her temperature rose several degrees, breathing became nearly impossible in the first sixty seconds, and an irrational anger spoiled her usually temperate demeanor.

Built to last, Ashley Benedict stood several inches over six feet. Good thing, since his muscular frame would've been too bulky on a shorter man. Instead, it suited him, gave him the look of a free agent at the top of his game rather than one of the most sought-after wedding planners in the Low Country.

Dressed in a pair of black dress slacks and a white button-down shirt, Ashley's summer tan gleamed golden against the white crispness of his shirt. He must have spent the weekend on *Slow as Molasses*, his forty-foot sailboat and a notorious pussy magnet.

Rosalind frowned. The image of a svelte redhead sprawled on the deck of his boat and him bucking away between her legs put a sour taste in her mouth. Needing an outlet for her suddenly foul mood, she retorted with a little more bite than she'd intended. "In all of the years you've known me, Benedict, have I ever forgotten any of our appointments?"

Ashley's green eyes grew thoughtful, then crinkled at the corners as he gave her a magnanimous grin. Rosalind smoothed a hand over her stomach to calm a sudden onslaught of butterflies. Yet it didn't stop the rush of blood to her pussy when he rested his elbows on the edge of the glass bakery display.

"I don't think there's ever been a time when you weren't the consummate professional -- what a waste."

Rosalind's pussy lips twitched as his eyes slid over her like the last piece of red velvet cake at a family reunion. Remembering he had more notches on his sailboat's mast than bird droppings, she quickly pulled it together. But she found she couldn't resist asking him the reason for his last statement. "What do you mean by that, Benedict?"

Ashley shrugged one of those linebacker shoulders of his, and his lips parted, but the kitchen door burst open, interrupting the moment.

“Roz! Girl, I have to run up to the school. The principal suspended Pookie for skipping algebra again. The coffee’s brewing, and everything’s set up in the Loving Room for the Morgan and Sullivan wedding pa --”

Lacretia paused midsentence to look over Rosalind’s shoulder at their customer. Her dark face split into a wide grin. “Hey, there, Mr. Ashley. You’re looking mighty fine today. But I’m not too surprised. You always look good.”

Rosalind reminded herself that her assistant was a happily married woman of fifteen years. If she’d been single, she’d be wearing the kitchen door right about now.

“Thanks, Lacretia. You’re lovely as always. Orlando’s a lucky man.”

She chuckled at the compliment. “Humph. You just say the word, Mr. Ashley, and he won’t be lucky no more.”

To bring the pair back to the present before she revisited this morning’s breakfast of scrambled eggs and hopping John, Rosalind interrupted their flirting. “Will you be back this afternoon?”

“I hate to leave you in the lurch, but I doubt it, Roz. I need to be there when Orlando gets home. I don’t want to waste our Christmas savings on bail.”

“Don’t worry yourself about things here, then. We only have one tasting today, and we don’t need to start on the Murchison anniversary cake until tomorrow.”

Lacretia’s face lit up in an appreciative smile. “Thanks, Roz. I’ll be here bright and early tomorrow morning. If I’m not, there’s only one place you’ll find me...down in the emergency room at Regional.” Rosalind shook her head when the other woman broke into raucous laughter. “Well, I’m out.”

Lacretia turned around to leave, but she stopped. Her gaze swung between them, a knowing glint sparkling in their black depths. “You two act civil to one another, you hear?”

As soon as the door closed behind her, it hit Rosalind like a ton of bricks. She and Ashley Benedict were totally alone -- well, at least until his clients showed up. Unable to

meet his gaze lest she spontaneously combust like a soufflé revealed too soon, she turned her head to look at the clock next to the register.

Despite her evasiveness, it didn't relieve the tension settling in the crook of her neck, or the goose bumps running down her bare arms as she felt his eyes on her. Resisting the urge to hightail it out of there and into the kitchen, she concentrated her efforts on telling the time.

"It's a quarter till eleven, Rosalind."

Rosalind's eyes met his. And to her utter mortification, he winked at her. She bristled. For some reason, the humor reflected in their light green depths rankled her. Channeling her embarrassment into indignation, she drew herself up. "I'll have you know I'm very capable of telling the time, Benedict, and I would appreciate it if you used my last name."

"Of course you can, since I'm sure you're capable of doing quite a lot of things, Ros" -- when she narrowed her eyes, his full lips twisted into a devilish smile -- "Miss Fletcher, but you seemed to be having a little trouble. Plus, I can't resist helping a damsel in distress, especially when it seems like I'm the cause of it."

The thought of him possibly knowing his effect on her made her cheeks inflame. Thank goodness her skin was as brown as the bark on a Southern magnolia, thus saving her from further embarrassment.

Rosalind racked her brain for an avenue of escape. "If you would excuse me, I'm going to put on the final touches for the cake tasting."

Proud of her quick thinking, Rosalind couldn't help the shit-eating grin that curled her lips as she left him standing at the display counter.

* * * * *

"I've always been rather curious about this room. You call it the Loving Room, right?"

Rosalind's fingers stilled on the placement she'd been adjusting, and she whirled around to face him. Sizing up the current situation, she groaned in dismay. Not only was Ashley blocking her only exit, but her libido had bubbled to the surface in the form of a pair of budding nipples. Not one to be caught in an embarrassing situation twice, she crossed her arms over her chest.

She didn't realize her defensive gesture squeezed her ample bosom together and pushed it up and almost over the edge of her sundress. But she caught on pretty quickly when his eyes darkened to a lush spearmint green and dipped somewhere between her shoulders and belly button.

"You weren't invited, Benedict. What are you doing in here?" she asked, attempting to draw him into conversation and away from her cleavage.

"Curiosity. I guess it finally killed the cat."

Rosalind brushed aside his attempt at humor and instead concentrated on the matter at hand -- getting him out of the Loving Room. "Well, your nine lives have run out; it's time for you to leave." Rosalind made a move to help him on his way, but he sidestepped her efforts by pushing away from the door and walking over to the table.

Rosalind gulped. His mere presence seemed to shrink the room in half.

"You don't allow anyone in here to pick the cake but the bride and groom. Not even the all-intrusive mother of the bride. Why is that, Miss Fletcher?"

She felt the hackles on the back of her neck stand up. "Why should there be a reason? Shouldn't the bride and groom be allowed to make such a personal decision without any outside influence? They *are* the ones making the lifelong commitment."

Rosalind watched him trace the edge of a linen tablecloth with a manicured fingernail before he looked up at her. She waited for him to say something or acknowledge her explanation, but he remained silent. Every passing second he stood there staring at her seemed like an eternity.

Bad boys, bad boys...whatcha gonna do...

Saved by the bell -- or cell phone, in this case! Rosalind nodded her head toward the mobile strapped to his belt as the obnoxious ringtone repeated itself. "Aren't you going to answer that?"

As if agitated, Ashley raked his hands through his hair, mussing up the neat golden curls. With a heavy sigh, he unclipped the phone and looked down at the display. "It's Alicia Morgan. I better get this."

Rosalind fiddled with the twin place settings while he spoke with his client. After a brief exchange, he signed off.

"The Morgan and Sullivan party won't be able to make it. Stacy had an unexpected board of directors' meeting. They want to reschedule for the same time next Tuesday, if you're available. I'm really sorry about this."

Rosalind shrugged her shoulders. "No problem. This is a business, and you have to roll with the flies that get caught in the honey every now and then."

When she reached to begin the necessary cleanup, Ashley started picking up plates as well. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm helping you clean up."

Rosalind eyed him dubiously. "Why?"

"It's the least I can do since my clients bailed out on you at the last minute."

Rosalind eyed him, but seeing nothing untoward in his expression, she finally acquiesced. "Okay, but don't get in my way." She reached out and took the two plates arranged with individual slices of flavored wedding cake from him. "I'll take these. Can you handle the place settings?"

"I can handle anything you throw my way."

Rosalind pursed her lips at his innuendo. Thankfully for him, his act of kindness saved him from a sharp rebuttal. As she kicked the door open, she wondered who would save her from him.

Hungrily, Ashley watched her leave the room. Her prickly exterior did nothing to quench his desire. When she got that haughty tone and slight snarl on her full lips, he wanted to kiss it off, then use her mouth for more pleasurable pursuits.

He didn't know what about him always irked her to get all hot under the collar. Yet he enjoyed provoking her to see the angry flash in her expressive dark brown eyes.

What a shame when a man gets hard from a woman hating his guts. Ashley laughed at himself. It was a sad fact, but true. Rosalind Fletcher was under his skin.

From the top of her long, dark, reddish brown curls to her dainty feet, she had him enthralled. The vibrancy of her smooth mocha complexion, stunning, high, sculptured cheeks, and luscious mouth always made him entertain thoughts of lying her down and licking her all over.

Too bad I'm not under her skin. He rubbed his itchy palms against the sides of his slacks. *Pull it together, Benedict. You need to think of something besides spanking that ass.*

Taking a calming breath, he looked around the room. He'd always been curious about the Loving Room. She guarded it zealously by not letting anyone in but the bride and groom. In fact, he'd seen her face down the most overzealous mothers and refuse them entry. Since she was the most sought-after cake designer in Beaufort, South Carolina, they always backed down.

Speaking of cakes, Ashley glanced down at the last plate of samples. Spying a slice of Southern red velvet -- his favorite flavor out of the twenty or so Forever, I Do offered, he reached for the plate, raised the cake to his mouth, and took a bite.

A burst of cocoa and vanilla filled his mouth. He moaned, a reaction he usually had when he tasted Forever, I Do cakes.

A sensation of heat raced through him; then suddenly the taste intensified. Shuddering, Ashley locked his knees as they went weak. He gripped the table with his other hand and looked at the cake. In all the times he'd eaten her cakes, he'd never experienced anything like this. He raised the slice to take another bite, but a hand slapped it out of his grasp.

"Hey," he protested, turning to look down at her.

"How much did you eat?" Her husky voice, weighted with a sharp tone, went straight to his cock. "That cake isn't for you. So you have no right to be eating it. I knew I shouldn't have left you alone in here."

She was accusatory, pacing back and forth. With a glare, she continued to berate him for eating the red velvet. Ashley didn't understand what the big deal was, but he didn't stop her tirade. Her agitated movements made her breasts jiggle and her ass shake. His palms started to itch again.

How tight is that ass? he wondered.

She swished past him again -- still talking, but he wasn't hearing a word. All his attention was on her luscious curves, outlined so well under her pale yellow sundress. She shook her head, causing her shoulder-length curls to flow around her.

"Don't you have anything to say?" she demanded.

I want to taste you, he thought, but said aloud, "Nothing you'd want to hear, sweet cheeks. It was delicious but tasted different than usual. Richer." He picked up the remainder.

She slapped it out of his hand again. "Don't eat that!"

Ashley narrowed his eyes. "What's your problem? It'll only go to waste."

He reached for another, but she snatched the plate up before he could get to it. She hurried over to the counter and placed the plate next to a four-tier cake display. Not knowing he'd followed her, she turned around and bumped into him.

Instinctively, Ashley grabbed her arms to steady her. Wrong move. A touch of her silken skin against his palms produced a spattering of goose bumps along his skin.

For the second time that day, he growled. A primal need to have her suddenly overwhelmed him. His focus shrank. All he cared about was tasting her.

“What are you doing?” She tried shrugging him off. “Let me go,” she snapped.

He tightened his hold and jerked her against his body. She gasped, then shivered. Ashley smiled. Nervously, she licked her lips. He followed the movement. The glistening, plump flesh tempted him.

“Let me go, Benedict.” The hoarseness in her tone ran counter to her otherwise-straight face.

“When I’m ready. My name is Ashley, and before today is done, you’ll be moaning it.”

“Wha --”

He cut her off with a kiss.

Chapter Two

Ashley shuddered at the first taste of her lips. There was a beguiling sweetness he couldn't place. Murmuring, he speared his tongue deeper into her mouth, dueling with her tongue, enjoying her taste.

Almonds and roses. She tasted sweet, decadent, and delicious.

He smiled inwardly when she leaned into him, her body fitting against his frame as if they were already lovers. Rosalind might deny she wanted him, but the chemistry they had and the way she kissed him back told the truth. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

Slowly, he swirled his tongue around the inside of her mouth, then caught her tongue between his teeth. He bit down gently. She hissed, then went limp. Banding his arms around her tighter, he imagined the feel of her hot cunt gripping his cock as he took her hard and long. The thought made him shiver. He'd wanted her for so long. And now that he'd had a taste, he wasn't letting her go.

Rosalind reveled in the softness of his lips. The hard pressure of his kiss and the slight sting of pain as he bit her tongue made her pussy clench, then flood with wetness. She gasped again at the heat of his mouth. Sliding her hands around his neck, she aligned her

body with his. The muscular chest she had long ogled whenever he wasn't looking felt better than she'd imagined.

Oh, man, he's a good kisser! Rosalind mused as she swirled her tongue in countermotion to his and purred at the feel of his tongue mating with hers. A full sensation flooded her pussy. She gasped at the shock of it, locking her suddenly weakened knees.

Heat flooded over her tongue, ran down her throat, and burst under the force of her moan. It was like drinking a shot of moonshine -- hot, sensual, and straight to the head. Closing her eyes, she held him closer as he ravished and conquered.

Ashley's groan vibrated against her tongue, driving her already heightened nerve endings into overdrive. With each motion of his firm lips and tongue, her pussy undulated.

What are you doing? You're making out with Ashley Benedict. Playboy wedding planner to the well heeled throughout South Carolina's Low Country, and the one man you can't stand. Liar, liar...pants on fire! You hide behind your supposed dislike, but you really want him!

Ignoring the contradicting views, Rosalind decided that since she was acting out of character, she would go for it. What harm could one innocent kiss cause? Leaning into him, she met his tongue in a lazy duel.

When he slid his hands up her back, his touch left heat in its wake. He cupped her face, stroking along it in a slow, maddening caress. His lips became more demanding and ravenous. He made a guttural sound in the back of his throat. The sound vibrated through her.

He's marking me as his. No, you fool! He's under the influence of the mojo in the cake. He isn't yours to have.

Ashley bit, suckled, and swirled his way into her inner conversation. The clean, salty taste of him filled her, successfully blocking out everything else.

Mentally, she kicked her rational side out the door and locked it. Moaning, she kissed him back. Sensing her surrender, his kiss became more demanding. His fingers slid into her hair, and he pulled her head back, holding her immobile. Rosalind didn't mind his manhandling as long as he handled her.

Suddenly his kisses gentled, his tongue discovering all the sensitive areas, awakening sensations that racked her body. The contrast between the two extremes left her breathless, her panties sopping wet, yet wanting more.

Rosalind pressed into him, and his arms tightened around her waist. Taking the lead, she licked around his lips, then swept her tongue deep inside his mouth. She devoured him. He did the same in return, discovering every nook and cranny before deepening the kiss, alternating between lick, suck, then bite -- repeating each with increased intensity until her body stiffened in shock and her pussy undulated in time with his kisses.

She gripped his arms as her knees gave out beneath her. Ashley growled at her sudden vulnerability, but he didn't let up. Not even when her insides went liquid and her body pitched over into an orgasm.

"Ashley," she moaned against his lips while he ate at her mouth and her body continued to gush with release. From the moment she'd met him, she'd known one taste of him would cause her all sorts of problems. But an orgasm?

The aftershock in her pussy eased slowly, but when he bit her bottom lip, it ignited another aftershock to her overaroused state.

Rosalind slumped against him again. Thankfully, his arms held her up. But it didn't help that he continued his seduction, as his tongue stroked along the sides of her mouth and his teeth nipped playfully at her bottom lip.

Finally, he pulled away. Their parting made a lush, wet sound. Opening her eyes, she met his darkened green gaze. Her eyes dipped lower to his mouth, which was curved in a devilish grin.

“My name sounds good on your lips.”

She stiffened and tried to get away, but he kept his hold on her. He dipped his head and captured her lips again. Unable to help herself, Rosalind leaned against him, her mind already fuzzy with desire.

His tongue plunged in and out of her mouth, mimicking the act of sex as her pussy contracted. She groaned. Ashley chuckled.

Hearing his bravado, Rosalind came to her senses. She wrenched her lips away from his and launched herself away from him. Stumbling backward, she watched him follow with a predatory swagger, his green eyes hungry and intense. Putting up a trembling hand, she shook her head.

“We can’t do this.”

Ashley’s smile widened into an arrogant slant. “We already *did* it. Remember? I just made you come. That’s why your nipples are so hard, and your panties are probably more than wet.”

Rosalind gasped at his frankness. But she found herself practically breathless when his eyes dropped to the evidence. Crossing her arms over her breasts, she hissed as she grazed her traitorous nubs.

When he finally met her gaze, his green eyes twinkled with an inner fire, and he licked his lips slowly, as if he wanted to bare her and feast.

“Stop looking at me like that!” she demanded.

“Like what?” He gave her a patently innocent look.

“As if you just want to eat me alive, when you really don’t,” she snapped.

“True.”

Surprise and disappointment hit her square in the gut. It was that easy.

“I don’t want to *just* eat you. I want to lick you from top to bottom, then sink myself into your hot pussy. Would you like that, Rosalind?”

She liked it all right; her insides were shaking like a leaf.

As she digested his words, he closed the distance between them.

“Ashley, you have to stop this. You aren’t thinking clearly.”

He didn’t listen. He kept coming until he stood just inside her personal space. Rosalind fought her instinct to step back. She wished she would have, because she almost swayed into him when she caught a whiff of his scent -- pure male, mixed with obvious need.

Rosalind clenched her fists to keep from reaching out and touching him. Deep down, she knew his desire had nothing to do with her. It was the charm recipe she’d mixed into the Morgan and Sullivan samples. The same samples he’d mistakenly eaten.

She ignored the tinge of disappointment pulling at the back of her consciousness. It just wasn’t possible for them to be together. Even now, the charm was still working its magic. His skin glistened with a light sheen of sweat. His cheeks were flushed and his lips swollen from their kisses. Unconsciously, Rosalind touched hers and found them still tender. A knowing smile touched his lips. She dropped her hand.

Shit. Don’t do anything else to tempt him, girl. Get him out of here as fast as you can, so you can get some sense.

“I think you’d better be go --”

He interrupted her. “Not until you realize that my thoughts are clear as a bell. I want you. Plain and simple, Rosalind Fletcher. Even if you keep denying it to yourself, your body is calling you a liar. As I speak, your heart is beating like a scared rabbit, and if I wasn’t mistaken, you’ve already memorized my kisses. ”

Rosalind shook her head. With the charm in his body, Ashley couldn’t think rationally. Not until he had the antidote. He might want her now, but once he was cured, he would go back to not paying her any attention.

“You don’t want me, Ashley. Please leave.” Rosalind made sure her voice sounded flippant and snappish, like she usually did when dealing with him.

"I'm leaving." He sighed, running a finger down the side of her face. She held still, refusing to show how his touch ignited her.

"But I want you to know this. And mark my words. I've wanted to taste you for a long time. Now that I have, I plan on doing it again, but next time I'm going to be inside you."

Rosalind didn't harbor any doubts as to the meaning of his words, because his eyes were filled with promises of lots and lots of heated sex. Ashley cupped her cheek gently before finally letting go. He then turned and strode toward the door leading out of the Loving Room. But he stopped in the doorway to look back at her.

"We'll be speaking soon, sweet cheeks."

A few seconds later, Rosalind heard the familiar tinkle of the front door bells. Taking a deep breath, she stumbled over to the counter, shaking.

Damn him. He made me come with only a kiss!

"Grandma Trudy, you made some powerful mojo. Let's hope you made a powerful antidote for it too."

With a shaky hand and a nervous laugh, she pushed back her hair from her face. If she was this flustered and weak in the knees, she could only imagine the shape she would be in if they actually did the deed.

On rubbery legs, Rosalind pushed away from the counter, turned, and walked out of the Loving Room and into the front showroom.

As she tidied up, she vowed that she would do everything in her power to fix this. Ashley would receive the antidote and wouldn't remember a thing. She, on the other hand, would remember that kiss, his scent, and his touch.

Oh God. What am I going to do?

* * * * *

"Damn! Where is it?"

Rosalind slammed the dresser drawer shut before whirling around in search of another possible hiding place. Grandma Trudy's old charm book had to be somewhere. And her mother's attic was the last stop after three long days of searching every single nook and cranny of the antebellum manse. As much fun as the mojo was, it had to go, especially after Ashley's scary but tempting declaration.

Spying an old sea chest nestled in the far corner, Rosalind hurried over to it. At the sight of the family crest on the top, she got a surge of hope that she'd finally found the book. She groaned when she spotted the old padlock.

"Dang it, Momma! You haven't been on a vacation in over fifteen years, so why did you have to choose to go on one now? And a month-long cruise at that!"

Rosalind stomped around the dusty space in search of something to pick the lock. When her eyes fell on an old storage box, she knelt down and flipped the lid. She rifled through the contents before finally finding a paper clip attached to a stack of old receipts.

Rising, she walked back over to the chest, knelt beside it, and in short order, managed to pick the lock. She said a quick prayer as she opened the heavy top and scrutinized the contents.

An old stack of pictures brought a soft smile to Rosalind's face. As she flipped through them, she laughed at the weird poses and god-awful clothing she and her siblings were in. But tears burned her eyes as she came across a photo of her father. He'd been gone for over eleven years, but it still seemed like only yesterday they'd lost him to lung cancer.

Gently, she placed the pictures on the hardwood floor. Next, she took out the old love letters her dad had written to her mom that were bundled with an orange ribbon, putting them on the floor also.

Finally, when the chest was almost empty, she spied the familiar pale cream silken bag with the burnt orange family crest.

"Yes." Rosalind lifted out the covered book lying near the bottom.

In quick, efficient movements, she repacked the trunk, then stood, taking the book with her. Hurrying back to the kitchen, she pulled out a chair and sat, placing the book on the table in front of her. Smiling, she ran her hand over the bag, tracing the design. Loosening the drawstring, she pulled out the leather-bound book. The title above the family crest made her chuckle: *Mrs. Trudy's Book of Cure-Alls*.

"Well, Grandma Trudy, I hope there is a reversal for your loving spell. I don't know how I'll resist Ashley if there isn't. I know what he feels for me now isn't real, but..."

She didn't finish the statement, just opened the book, flipped to the table of contents, found the right page, and started to read.

"You've gotta be kidding me. There is an antidote, but where the hell would I find a scale of a fish born at midnight or frog spit?" She shuddered. "There has to be a recipe calling for common ingredients." She flipped a few more pages. "Now that's better. I can find all of these at the supermarket."

Getting up, she grabbed the notebook and pen her mom kept next to the phone and sat back down to jot down the ingredients. Once she was done, she read over her notes and compared them to the recipe.

She read the last line again. *If all else fails, ask your momma.*

Rosalind hoped it didn't have to come down to that. Although her mom was fun and easygoing, she hated involving her in her personal life. She just didn't ask a question or two - she asked a hundred. No. Her mother was better left out of this one. Besides, she'd caused this mess, and she aimed to clean up.

Closing the book, Rosalind placed it back in the cloth bag. After she returned it to where she'd found it, she came back downstairs and locked her mother's front door behind her as she left.

It was time to get to work. She had an antidote to make.

* * * * *

Rosalind put the finishing touches on her magically enhanced ladyfinger cookies. Icing the last one, she put down her piping bag and eyed her creation.

Stop stalling and call him.

After finding the antidote, she'd gathered all the ingredients but hadn't put it together right away. Although she was avoiding Ashley's calls, ignoring his text messages, and making sure she was busy during his impromptu visits, she was enjoying the attention too much to take the steps to stop it.

Even Lactetia's good-natured threats to kick her butt for stealing her man didn't rally her to make the cure. Only when he'd cornered her in the walk-in freezer that morning and kissed her silly did Rosalind know she had to put an end to his advances.

She sighed as she picked up the cordless phone and dialed Ashley's number. As it rang, she ignored the twinge of disappointment that washed over her. He wasn't hers to have. One day, she would be making his cake. Be there when he and his bride did their tasting in the Loving Room. That bride would not be her. The pain the idea caused made her want to hang up the phone.

"Rosalind, I've been waiting for your call." His voice was flirtatious.

"This isn't a social call. I need a guinea pig to test a new recipe I'm thinking of adding to our catalog of flavors. Do you have time to test it for me?"

"If that's the only way I can see you. I'm available now. I'll be at the shop in less than half an hour. "

"I'm at home. Come by here." She gave him the directions.

"I'm coming in twenty minutes, tops." He chuckled before hanging up. The way he said it elicited visions of them naked and going at it.

Rosalind gulped. She carefully put the phone into the cradle. Exhaling, she placed her hand over her fluttering tummy.

Pull it together, girl. After this, he won't be chasing you.

Rolling her head to ease the tension in her shoulders, she walked over to the sink and proceeded to wash the pots and pans she'd dirtied in order to make her magical concoction. Once she was done, she cleaned up her prep area, then sat down on a stool to wait.

"Crap." Rosalind jumped, slapping her hand over her heart when the doorbell rang several minutes later. Resisting the urge to run to the tall mirror in her bedroom, she smoothed down the skirt of her floral sundress, then ran her fingers through her hair. With one final deep breath, she hurried out of the kitchen and down the hallway to the front door.

Okay, you can do this. He's only a man who's been bewitched by a hundred-year-old curse.

Ding-dong! Startled, Rosalind jumped again.

Swallowing the rest of her pep talk, she opened the door.

Chapter Three

Ashley leaned against the door frame. In a hunter green T-shirt that hugged his chest and even snuggler blue jeans, he was the epitome of sexy, casual male. As he ran his hand through his golden locks, a smile curved his lips. Remembering all he had done with his mouth, her pussy throbbed and nipples pebbled. He reached up and touched her face.

“I missed you, sweet cheeks.” His voice was soft.

An intense longing filled her. She wished what he was saying was true and not because of an enchantment. His gaze held a look of desire and so much more. Rosalind refused to name what she saw.

“Are you going to let me in?”

“Of course. I-I’m sorry.”

Rosalind stepped back. No sooner was he over the threshold than he had the door locked behind him and pulled her into his arms for a kiss. Rosalind stiffened, then went limp. His kiss was soft and gentle -- not all encompassing like the first time. Yet it still had the same results, because when he finally released her, it took her several moments to unscramble her jumbled thoughts.

“Missed your taste,” he whispered, lacing his fingers with hers. Rosalind tried to ignore the warm, fuzzy feeling his words and his touch created. “Since I’ve already had the sweet I’ve been craving, lead me to the rest, Miss Fletcher. I’m officially your guinea pig for the day.”

Chuckling, Rosalind found this relaxed Ashley even more irresistible than the meticulous wedding planner she dealt with so often or the man who kept trying to seduce her. “Come on, guinea pig.”

She tugged on his hand and led him down the hall to the kitchen. Upon entering, he looked around with open appreciation.

“Nice place you have here. Makes me want to move in.”

Rosalind ignored his word play and accepted his compliment. Her entire house was a haven, but her kitchen was her sanctuary. Lots of color, knickknacks, and comfort were what she’d wanted when she’d designed this room, and she had achieved it. The only thing missing was a family to cook for.

Giving in to temptation, she stroked her thumb along his. For a second, she let herself imagine he was her man, coming to her house just to spend time together. Too bad it wasn’t reality. Pushing the thought away before someone played the violin, she dropped his hand to focus on what she needed to do.

She gestured to the breakfast nook and the plate of ladyfingers.

“Mmm...ladyfingers are my favorite,” he said as he took a seat. “May I?”

“Isn’t that why you’re here?” Rosalind took a seat close to him. She clenched her fists in her lap as he studied the cookie, then raised it to his lips.

He paused before taking a bite.

“Will you make our kids cookies when they come home from school?”

Rosalind pressed her lips together in consternation. How could he know marriage and kids were unrealistic fantasies she’d pushed aside long ago? At least she thought she had until

now. What was she thinking? She rarely had time to date, much less maintain a serious relationship.

Ignoring his serious expression, she looked pointedly at the cookies.

“Don’t be foolish, Benedict. I make wedding cakes for others. Always the baker and never the bride.” She forced a laugh.

“Never say never.”

Miffed at the fanciful dreams he was trying to fill her head with, she snapped, “Eat the damn cookie, Benedict.”

“Someday, Rosalind, you will eat your words -- literally.”

Ashley lifted the cookie and took a bite. Rosalind watched him closely, knowing the antidote would take effect as soon as he swallowed it. But instead, he spit it out, dropping the rest of the uneaten cookie on the plate.

“What’s wrong?”

“Coconut! I hate the taste of it. Always have. Sorry, sweet cheeks. I can’t be your guinea pig.”

At a loss for words, Rosalind stared at him, at the cookies, then back at him.

“Come on, Ashley.” She used a cajoling tone and ran her finger across the back of his hand. “Just one bite.”

“I’ve waited a long time to hear you use that sexy tone with me, but even that won’t work. Maybe you can get Lactetia to test them for you.”

“But --”

He placed a finger over her lips. “We can do something else.”

Her mind raced with images of naked, tangled limbs.

Ashley laughed. “What are you thinking? You look like you’re about to self-combust.”

“Nothing,” she squeaked. No way was she about to admit she wanted him naked and spread out for her pleasure.

He stood, pulling her out of her chair. “Which way is the living room?”

“Why?”

“We’re about to do something both of us haven’t done in a long time,” he purred. Rosalind shuddered.

Curious, she allowed him to lead her back into the hallway. When he stopped to look down at her, she gestured to her left.

Despite her misgivings, Rosalind followed him into the living room and even took a seat next to him on the couch, still wondering what he was about.

“Where’s the remote control?” he asked.

She reached around him and opened the drawer to a side table. Before she straightened, Ashley nuzzled his nose against her hair. Rosalind shuddered, turning her head to look at him. His eyes were filled with need.

Needing to circumvent a perilous situation in her already-weakened state, she decided to jog his memory. “I thought we were going to do something we haven’t done in a long time?”

“We are,” Ashley countered. “But for some reason I can’t keep my hands to myself.”

“You’re not thinking clearly,” Rosalind mumbled.

“Wow! That’s the first time I’ve heard that one. Usually it’s ‘you’re not thinking with your head.’”

“That either,” Rosalind replied, looking pointedly at his erection.

A boyish grin, combined with the heated look in his eyes, made her heart race, while her body flushed with desire.

“There’s that too, but I know what I want, Rosalind. I want you. All of you.”

With each of his words, her pussy clenched with need. She shivered at the touch of his lips against her cheek. He continued in a softer tone.

“When you decide to come to me, I’ll make you scream. Until then we’re going to do something neither of us have the time to do -- watch TV.” At her look of surprise, he winked. “Rest assured, I’ll throw in some cuddling and necking during the commercials.”

Rosalind rebelled. There was no way she was going to sit here and pretend like they were a happy couple. She started to move away, but an arm around her waist stopped her.

“Relax,” he whispered in her ear.

Rosalind held still while he turned on the TV and flipped through the channels.

She was surprised at his final selection. “The Food Network?”

“Yeah, *Cooking With Sin* is coming on any minute.”

She returned her attention to him, narrowing her eyes. “Are you watching for the show or the hostess?”

“The hostess, of course.”

She pushed against him. He laughed but held her fast, pressing her to his side.

“Come on, Sinclair’s great at what she does, and since her show is shot here in Beaufort, it’s a must watch. Besides, your sister might know how to burn up the kitchen with her recipes” -- Ashley squeezed her -- “but you’re the one who makes me burn with desire.”

“Corny. Real corny, Benedict.” Rosalind smacked at him playfully.

“Hey, at least I am good at something,” he replied.

You’re good at more things than you think, blondie!

Even though she didn’t voice her opinion, Rosalind didn’t have a problem admitting it. Just like she didn’t mind admitting that she quite enjoyed the idea of sitting back and watching TV with him. Even if it was her older and, in her book, more successful sister’s show. Relaxing back into his arms, Rosalind watched the opening montage. Although

Cooking With Sin was going on its fifth season, she still couldn't believe her sister had her own TV show -- which featured many of great-grandmamma Trudy's old Gullah recipes, no less.

Maybe if I had done a TV show instead, I wouldn't be in this mess.

Ashley tightened his arms around her. She rested her hand against his forearm where it rested across her stomach. Rosalind wished that her dress and bra weren't between her skin and the heat of his hand.

A quick peek at his face made her sigh. Unlike her, he seemed to be focused on the show. Taking a breath, she inhaled his scent and shifted on the couch until her head was on his thigh. He ran his fingers through her hair. Stifling a moan, Rosalind tried not to beg him to take her.

After avoiding him for days, she'd finally called. Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, he planned to take advantage of the opportunity. To show her that although he wanted her body, he enjoyed her company.

Leaning over, he heard her breathing deepen. When he looked down, her eyes were closed. She'd fallen asleep.

In slumber, her face was even more enchanting. Tracing a finger down her nose, across her lip, around her chin, and then against each cheek, he chuckled when she swatted at him. Even asleep she was feisty.

While *Cooking With Sin* played in the background, he held her in his arms. Ironical how he'd finally gotten her to sleep with him, just not in the way he'd envisioned.

After sitting there for longer than he cared to admit, Ashley turned off the television. Careful not to disturb her, he moved her off his lap. Snagging a pillow from behind his back, he placed it under her head. Walking over to the armchair, he took the quilt off the back of

it and then returned to her. Spreading it over her, he smoothed it, then kissed her softly on the lips.

Tiptoeing out of the room, he quietly left the house, locking the front door behind him. Once outside, he stopped on the bottom step and looked up into the night sky.

Ashley smiled when a shooting star streaked across the sky. Putting his hands in his pockets, he walked to his car.

* * * * *

“I was wondering when you’d turn up. Come by to see the other woman?” Lacreteria asked, pursing her lips and eyeing Ashley up and down.

“Now, Lacreteria, you know you’re the only one for me.” He chuckled.

“I don’t believe a word. Nowadays you only spare me a few words, then you hightail it to that man-stealing heifer back there.” Lacreteria humphed.

Ashley couldn’t dispute her claim. Whenever he got a second in his hectic schedule, he came by to see Rosalind.

“Where is she, anyway?” He glanced around.

“In the back, putting the last-minute touches on a cake for a wedding later today.” Lacreteria gestured to the swinging doors behind her.

“Thanks, Lacreteria. You’re a doll.”

Ashley walked the length of the counter and to the other door that led to the back.

“You know, another woman would be offended when a man left her presence so fast. But I ain’t mad at you.”

Ashley pushed open the door and went into the back, Lacreteria’s laughter trailing behind him. He stopped on the other side, captured by the sight before him. Rosalind was bent over, reaching into one of the bottom drawers of the freezer. Her ass was perfectly

displayed in pale yellow slacks. Walking over to her, he couldn't resist. He stroked his hand over her butt. Rosalind gasped and turned with her fist cocked. He caught it.

"What do you think you're doing, Benedict?" She jerked her hand away, stepping back.

"Enjoying the view." He grinned, rocking back on his heels.

"What have I told you about touching me?" Rosalind glared.

"Lookie but no touchie." He sighed.

Rosalind had been prickly since the night she had fallen asleep in his arms. He came by despite her overt animosity, trying to break through her walls. So far, he wasn't having any luck.

"Actually, I have another flavor for you to test." She hurried over to the steel table in the center.

Ashley's stomach rolled. He dreaded hearing those words each time he came by. In the last few visits, she'd always had something for him to try. All of them tasted awful.

He couldn't understand why. Usually the pastries and cakes she gave away as samples in the bakery when she was trying to test a new flavor combination were delicious. Yet these new ones were nasty. The last one had made him sick all night. He kept telling her she didn't need any new flavor. She hadn't listened. If he didn't know better, he would swear she was trying to kill him.

Ashley glanced at her suspiciously. She looked so anxious and nervous. His heart softened. He wasn't used to seeing this expression on her. Reluctantly, he made his way over to the table and took a seat on high stool. At the sight of a hefty slice of tiramisu nestled in the center of a pink cake plate, he groaned. On his next trip to the dentist, he was going to beg Dr. Winthrop to remove his sweet tooth.

"Umm...sweet cheeks... Why don't we take these samples out for everyone to test?" He reached for the plate.

“No!” she said sharply. As if remembering herself, she smiled. “I trust your palate, Benedict. And I want to be certain it lives up to the bakery’s other flavors before I add it to the menu.” She pushed the plate toward him. “Please, Ashley. Take a taste.”

When she used his name like that, Ashley knew he would do anything she asked. He picked up his fork and sliced into the Italian delicacy. However, when he brought the cake to his lips, his stomach clenched.

As he hesitated at the threshold, he glanced at her. Rosalind’s look was intense. He gulped, raising the fork to his mouth. His hand shook and his palms became clammy.

Come on, Benedict, you can do this. He opened his mouth, pulling the pastry closer.

“Rosalind, where are the extra ribbons?” Lacreteria called.

“Under the counter.” Rosalind walked around the table to the door. She pushed it and went into the front.

Thank you, Lacreteria!

Ashley looked around frantically for a place to ditch the deadly serving. Spotting a trash can by the back door, he hurried over and dumped the entire contents inside. Straightening, he walked back over to table just in time.

Seconds later, Rosalind came back into the kitchen. She looked at him, then the empty plate. A sad smile curved her lips. “So, how was it?”

He refused to feel guilty.

It was him or those awful cookies. And he liked himself more. Standing, he went over to her and put his hand on her waist. She stiffened, then watched him suspiciously.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine. Are you going to make me a happy man and finally accept my invitation to dinner?”

Rosalind watched him, then muttered. “Not enough fish scales.”

“What?” He frowned.

“Ummm... I’ve already scaled my fish for my dinner tonight. I can’t go out,” she finished in a rush.

Watching her, he wondered why she was acting so strangely. Rosalind pushed his hands away and moved back from him.

“Besides, you see me enough. You come by here often,” she griped.

The annoyance in her tone pissed him off.

“You know what, Miss Fletcher, you won’t have to worry about me coming by.” He grabbed her, pulling her into his body. “No matter how you deny it, you want me.”

She opened her mouth.

“Hush. You do. Your body tells me every time we’re in the same room. The catch in your breath. The way your pulse races when I get close. Your nipples get hard, and I’m sure if I were to touch you I would find you wet. Wet and aching for me,” he whispered against the side of her face.

He felt her shudder. A frisson of pleasure shot through him, but he released her and stepped away.

“You’re going to have to come to me, Rosalind. When you do, no more running or backing away.”

He stroked a finger against her cheek, then turned and left.

Chapter Four

“Careful...careful...there!”

Rosalind stepped back to look at her masterpiece. A three-tiered cake composed of yellow lemon-flavored cream cheese icing and an infusion of intricately crafted tropical flowers made of edible gum paste.

“Roz, girl, you outdid yourself this time. I’m not sure whether to eat it or spray it with water.”

“It better be the former. I spent three days making those hibiscuses. I just hope Theo and Isaac like it.”

“Girl, I’m sure they will. Everyone loves your cakes.”

“They might not love this one if the wind keeps kicking up.” Rosalind twisted her lips in consternation. She absolutely hated beachside receptions. A beautiful backdrop, true, but they were a holy horror to caterers. It was an uncontrolled environment where any and everything could happen, and it usually did.

“Maybe you could ask the event planner to drop the flaps.”

“Tried that.” Rosalind accepted the stack of cake plates Lactetia handed her. “Christie went AWOL a couple of hours ago; her water broke this morning. Her replacement was supposed to be here an hour ago, but as far as I know, he or she is still a no-show.”

“Mr. Ashley, what a nice surprise.”

“Ladies.” Even though he’d addressed both of them, he only had eyes for her.

Must be something in the water, Rosalind lamented, since she had the same malady. It couldn’t be helped.

Dressed in a khaki-colored linen suit, Ashley Benedict was a long, cool drink, which deserved savoring. And to make matters worse, since he’d held to his word, she hadn’t seen hide nor hair of him in over a week. Seeing him now made her suddenly realize she’d missed him.

Breaking the spell he had over her, she snapped to. “You’re Christie’s replacement?”

When one of his eyebrows shot up at her question, Rosalind licked her lips. *Damn, even his eyebrows are sexy.*

“Why are you so surprised, Miss Fletcher?”

Rosalind’s spine stiffened when she noted he’d reverted to using her last name.

Somewhat miffed at the formality in his tone and demeanor, she couldn’t resist goading him. “I would think a promise ceremony on a limited budget would be beneath you.”

“Most of my clients may have money, but that doesn’t mean I’m a snob. Plus, Christie saved my hide a time or two. So the least I could do was return the favor.”

“How generous of you.” Rosalind steeled herself for a battle when his eyes narrowed. But instead of picking up the gauntlet, his full lips curled into a sensuous smile.

“A generous person is always well rewarded. You should try it sometime, Miss Fletcher. It’s very liberating.” The sound of laughter drew his attention. Theo, Isaac, and the rest of their guests were making their way over to the reception tent.

“If you ladies would excuse me, I need to get back to work.”

“What the heck is going on between you and Mr. Ashley?” Lacreteria asked when he was out of earshot. “The heat between you two was hotter than a witch’s tit in a brass bra. He was coming by every day, and then he stopped. You’ve been crabbiest than a Low Country boil.” Lacreteria narrowed her eyes. “You’ve been holding back on me.”

Rosalind picked up one of the cake dishes and began fanning herself. “There’s absolutely nothing going on between Ashley Benedict and me. There never was, and never will be.”

“Humph, somebody should tell Mr. Ashley, because the way he was looking at you, I’m surprised you didn’t go up in flames.”

Feeling as if she’d been caught in a lie, Rosalind put the plate back on the table.

“Ungh...hunh...beep, beep! Theo and Isaac sure know how to throw a party!” Lacreteria chuckled as she sopped her brow with a rumpled napkin.

Rosalind snorted. Despite the live band, people raving over her cake, and an outpouring of well wishes for the stalwart couple who’d been together for more than fifteen years, it might as well have been a funeral.

How can I enjoy myself when Ashley Benedict’s been making an ass of himself with a certain Delta Brightman for half the evening?

With frosted lips, big tits, and even bigger hair, Delta was a cougar on the prowl. Almost three sheets to the wind from the free liquor bar, Delta only had eyes for Ashley. And to Rosalind’s chagrin, he seemed only to have eyes for her. If they weren’t dancing on the dance floor, they were perpetually sitting at a table for two, like now, engaged in private conversation peppered with surreptitious glances and roaming hands.

Rosalind stiffened when they suddenly both stood up. “If they get on the dance floor one more time, I think I’m going to hurl.”

“Who’re are you talking about?”

“No one,” she muttered. Damn, she’d been so engrossed in Ashley’s antics she’d forgotten she wasn’t alone.

Rosalind watched the pair walk toward the dance floor. With each step she gritted her teeth as Delta swayed into him. But thankfully, they circumvented it instead, stopping to briefly to confer with the celebratory couple.

Obviously they were saying their good-byes, because they didn’t join the revelry on the dance floor or return to their table. Instead, to Rosalind’s horror, they exited the tent.

* * * * *

Hours later, Rosalind watched as the last of the cleanup staff left. Since the guests of honor were already en route to their honeymoon and everyone else off to other pursuits, she should have been gone as well. Most of her things were already packed in the van, and yet she found herself lingering.

“Face it. You just don’t want to go home to an empty house.” Not when another woman was possibly lying in Ashley’s arms.

Rosalind frowned. She’d done so well this past week. While Ashley had kept his distance, she was able to concentrate on finding an antidote to the loving spell. However, tonight all her gains had gone down the drain, because from the minute she’d laid eyes on him, her thoughts were totally consumed by him.

And when he’d left with his companion in tow, her evening had turned decidedly sour. If Ashley was with someone else, then that meant the spell was broken, and the antidote was no longer needed.

If that’s the case, then why do I feel so horrible? And why am I still here, standing on a lonely private beach instead of on my way home?

“You’re losing your marbles, that’s why.”

Rosalind vacillated for another ten minutes before finally deciding to head home. Walking up to the tent, she lifted the flap and went inside. She grabbed the last of her stuff and then headed for the exit.

“I wasn’t expecting anyone to still be here.”

Rosalind swung around. Ashley stood at the opposite exit, his jacket thrown over his shoulder. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to make sure the rental company picked up the chairs and tables, and I had to pick up the tablecloths before I called it a night.”

“I’m surprised you’re even here.” She snorted. “Must’ve been hard to pull yourself away from Delta.”

His eyes narrowed. Silently, she cursed herself for her wayward tongue.

“You can’t possibly be jealous of Delta Brightman!”

“I’m not. You should be careful, though. I heard she’s looking for husband number six.” She knew it was none of her business, but she couldn’t help it.

“Not that I owe you an explanation, but I took Ms. Brightman home only because she’d had too much to drink. If I hadn’t and my mother got wind of it, she’d tan my hide. Delta’s been a friend of my mother’s for more than twenty years.”

Cowed by the information, Rosalind fidgeted with her bag strap. “You’re right, you don’t owe me an explanation. And just for the record, I don’t care what you do with your free time.”

“You’re still a beautiful liar.” The hairs on the back of Rosalind’s neck stood on end as he walked toward her. The insinuation was as palpable as the sexual tension between them.

“Believe what you want, Benedict. I’m done here.” With that said, Rosalind headed for the exit and the blessed safety of her car.

“Speaking of want -- I still want you, Rosalind.”

Rosalind's steps slowed. The charm hadn't worked, after all. While she racked her brain for something to hold him off before they did something they'd both regret, she heard him coming up behind her. She gasped when he touched her shoulders.

"Stop running from the truth, Rosalind. I want you, and I know you want me. Just say the words, and I'm all yours."

Torn, Rosalind squeezed her eyes shut. She knew he was still under the effect of the charm, but what he said was true. She wanted him. Ached to feel his body against hers while he made love to her. But did she have the courage to accept what he was offering, despite knowing it wouldn't last?

Whirling around, she faced him. In the dim light of the tent, his expression was inscrutable. Pushing her uncertainty aside, she called his bluff. "I want you. Are you happy now? I want you to touch me. Make slow, long, hard love to me, so that I scream your name and forget my own."

Rosalind put her hand on his chest. His heart was racing. "I want you to give me your all, Ashley. Fuck me."

But Ashley wasn't hearing any of her declaration, because he shook his head. Rosalind's heart did somersaults. "It won't be fucking. I'm going to make love to you."

"It doesn't matter. Just take me."

Rosalind leaned upward on tiptoe and pressed her mouth against his. His soft, sensuous groan vibrated against her lips. She opened his mouth, taking in the sound he made and giving him one of her own. His hands spanned her waist, pulling her close. A ragged gasp ripped from her as his strong hands cupped her ass. His hold tightened around her, and he lifted her.

Instinctively, she pulled her skirt up, then wrapped her legs around him. A shudder racked her as his cock pressed against her. Feeling wanton, she rubbed her crotch against his hard bulge. Ashley shivered.

With a lusty sound, she withdrew from his lips. His lids were lowered, his icy green eyes filled with unbridled desire. Tightening her legs around him, she told him, "Take me now, Ashley." He took a step forward, and a deep, guttural groan spilled from her lips. The motion had caused his cock to rub against her aching pussy.

By the time he lowered her on the pile of tablecloths stacked in the corner, Rosalind was about to lose her mind. Thankfully, he didn't take his time unbuttoning her chef's jacket and the blouse underneath. He quickly removed both garments and then flicked open the front clasp of her flesh-colored bra.

With his fingers, he circled one nipple and then the other. Rosalind gasped and arched off the linens. "Stop teasing me and make love to me, Benedict!"

Known to be a good listener, Ashley did as he was told. He yanked her panties off, then reared up on his haunches, freed his cock, and took protection from his pocket.

A moan bubbled from her as she viewed his massive erection. The thick veins stood out prominently, and the mushroom-shaped tip was slick with precum. She ran her tongue over her lips, wanting to taste it.

Ashley pumped his cock, put on a condom, and knelt over her. His hands slid up her legs, parting them. She widened her thighs to accommodate his hips. Positioning himself, he rested his cock against her wet slit. Rosalind shifted, trying to get him inside of her. He gripped her hips, stilling her movements.

He leaned forward to kiss her, his tongue slipping between her lips. His taste was decadent and addictive. She sucked on his tongue, biting it gently. He thrust into her, brushing her clit. Rosalind undulated her hips, whimpering at the friction. It wasn't enough. She gripped his butt, holding him as she ground against him. Ashley countered her motion -- increasing the friction.

He pulled out; then, in a swift, sensual glide, he thrust into her. The sensation of his cock filling her for the first time made her lose her sense of reality.

“Yes...o...f...yes...please,” was the only thing she could manage.

His blond hair damp and sweaty, Ashley set a hard, demanding pace. Yet Rosalind met him thrust for thrust as she raised her legs higher around his waist. A wicked smile curved his lips; the change in angle was exquisite. Gripping his butt, she pulled him into her.

The sound of flesh slapping against flesh and their ragged breathing filled their secret alcove. A gasp ripped from her. He rotated his hips between thrusts. Alternating the direction, keeping her on edge, building her need for him. Moving her hips in countermotion, she whimpered when he slid his hands into her hair. His impassioned gaze held her at bay as he continued to take her.

“Ooo...ye...I...ne...mo...” Incoherent words tumbled from her lips. Yet Ashley didn’t let up on his sensual mastery. His strokes drove her higher and higher. Rosalind arched her back and opened her mouth as if to scream, but it was lost in the recesses of his kisses as he crushed his mouth against hers. Need burned the back of her throat, a sweet, potent mix of desire and lust.

Ashley’s body rubbed against hers harder and harder, his movements bordering on the primitive. An almost-painful ache settled in the pit of her stomach. On a whimper, she rocked faster, meeting his thrusts.

Rosalind groaned at the depths of his cock’s reach. The delicious pressure built inside of her, demanding release. As if realizing what she needed, Ashley thrust hard and fast, his body trembling. That drove her over the edge.

“Yeeeeessss... Fuuuuck!” she screamed.

In spite of her release, he continued on and on, pumping into her with a sensual brutality that drove her over the edge again and again.

Ashley increased his strokes, wanting all she could give and more. Her pussy clenched around him, milking him. He gritted his teeth, fighting off an orgasm. He didn’t want it to

end too soon. He wanted her to feel him tomorrow. Hell, even a few days from now. She would remember their first time.

He lowered his body against hers, nuzzling into the crook of her neck. He bit against her pulse, marking her. Her pussy spasmed as another orgasm filled her. The hot gush of her cum coated him, sending him sliding even deeper into her. The scent of sex mixed with her scent was intoxicating. It was a smell he would never forget -- musky, sweet, and habit forming.

Cupping her ass, he rocked her against his cock. Her long legs tightened around his back while her nails bit into his skin. The sting of pain only made him pump harder.

"More," she moaned.

Only too glad to oblige, Ashley continued to hold her ass. She whimpered, harsh sobs of need spilling from her throat. A satisfied smile curved his lips as he continued to take her. She was his, even if she wouldn't admit it.

"You're mine, Rosalind, and no one will have you but me." Her brown eyes widened, then filled with what looked to be tears. Attempting to gauge the turn in her emotions, he thrust deep and watched her eyes turn glassy with pleasure. The light sheen of sweat on her caramel skin made her glow with desire. A fierce pleasure filled him as he witnessed her need.

"Admit it!" He punctuated each word with a hard thrust.

"What...?" Rosalind asked breathlessly.

"You're...mine," he demanded with each stroke of his cock into her clutching pussy.

She bit her lip, her body shaking with pleasure.

"Say...it..." Grunting, he thrust again and again.

Her eyes met his, and she stared at him. Then she rolled her hips in a wicked move that made his heart beat a wild staccato. She clenched her pussy around his cock in a sensual vise,

and then she arched. Looking down, he watched as his cock slipped in and out of her silken heat. The combination of seeing her engulf him and feeling it was a sensory overload.

“Ashley.”

Her husky voice drew his eyes to hers. The carnality in her look was like a physical touch. The pressure inside of him burst like a dam. His cum spilled inside her, pulsing with each load. He fell forward. She trembled, holding him. He shifted to get comfortable. He moved her with him, not wanting to be parted from her.

“What was that noise?” Rosalind groaned.

He lifted his head. “I don’t hear anything.” He molded her body against his. “Rest for a bit, and then we’ll go to my house for round two, since it’s closer.”

“You must think you’re the Energizer Bunny.” She laughed.

He looked at her soberly. “I just go on and on, sweet cheeks.”

“Cheesy, real cheesy,” she teased.

After some time, they dressed, then left the tent hand in hand. Together, they climbed the stairs of the boardwalk leading to the parking area. Reaching her car, Ashley pulled Rosalind to him and kissed her.

“If we don’t stop, someone is going to tell us to get a room.”

Ashley sighed, but he broke away. “See you in a bit?”

“You better.” She cupped his cheek, then got into her van and drove off.

As he walked to his SUV, Ashley frowned at the other vehicle sitting under the lamppost. He could’ve sworn when he’d driven up earlier that only Rosalind’s van remained. Shrugging, he quickened his pace, anxious to get to his house and Rosalind.

* * * * *

Ashley smiled. Despite the really early hour, Rosalind was humming as she made him breakfast in his kitchen. Taking a sip of his coffee, he hoped she didn’t try some new way of

making the eggs. He was little afraid after the constant taste testings. But at least the view was enjoyable.

His pajama shirt looked good on her. Shifting his cock in the matching bottoms, he wished they had time for more sex. He knew they couldn't; they both had lots to do today. Although he would love to blow off his schedule, he knew he wouldn't. The couples who entrusted him with their special days needed him. So he would eat breakfast with Rosalind and then head off to work.

There's always later.

Rosalind put a plate in front of him. He raised his face to hers. She kissed his cheeks, making a noise. He pulled her onto his lap and kissed her hungrily. Despite making love to her throughout the night and into the wee hours of the morning, he still wanted more. Rosalind broke off first.

"Uh-uh...don't start something we can't finish." She stood, got her plate, and sat across from him.

Ashley looked at the eggs, strawberry-filled crepes, and bacon. Cautiously, he picked up his fork and took a bite. He breathed a sigh of relief -- the eggs tasted divine. Figuring she couldn't screw up the bacon, he took a big bite. He was right. It was crisp and delicious. With a sinking feeling, he eyed the crepe.

"Why aren't you eating?" she asked.

"Are you still testing flavors?" He looked at her.

"What?" There was confusion on her face.

"You know, the new flavor for your menu."

She looked at the crepe, then back at him, and laughed.

"No. Eat your breakfast." She continued to chuckle.

Not really thinking it was funny, he took a cautious bite of the crepe. It was airy and sweet. No weird flavor. He started to eat his breakfast with enthusiasm. After a few minutes, he realized Rosalind wasn't eating. He looked at her quizzically.

"I had a great time last night and this morning," she said softly. She looked embarrassed and went back to eating her breakfast.

Warmth filled him. It wasn't much, but it was a step.

Chapter Five

Due to the early morning hour, Rosalind had no trouble finding a parking space in front of Treasured Coast Food Supply. After shouldering the company van against the curb, she grabbed the keys, her purse, and her weekly supply list, which had grown twice as long due to her preoccupation with outlasting Ashley's insatiable appetite and finding an antidote.

Since her order had doubled, and she needed to prepare for two upcoming weddings, Rosalind took one of the complimentary red Radio Flyer wagons into the store with her. Housed in a former general store, Treasured Coast still contained the original slat-wood floors, gondola shelving, and long maple counter.

"Good morning, Ms. Mable," Rosalind called out upon entering. She waved at the gray-haired woman perched on a stool behind the counter, who looked up when she walked in. Usually quick at the draw with a warm smile and hello, the other woman pursed her lips tightly, then went back to studying a black ledger book.

Rosalind frowned, taken aback. *Maybe Ms. Mable is having a bad day.* Ignoring the woman's rudeness, she walked over and placed her list on the counter. Without looking up or acknowledging her presence, Ms. Mable took the list.

“Willie!” she yelled over her shoulder. “Miss Fletcher’s here and needs an order filled.” Rosalind frowned again. Willie hadn’t handled her order in over five years. Ms. Mable always chose to do it herself, since they used that time to gossip and get caught up.

“How are you this morning, Ms. Mable?”

“I’m doing fine,” she replied tartly without looking up. Instead, she centered her attention on Rosalind’s supply list and the numbers she proceeded to enter into the adding machine with a quiet efficiency.

“A terrible hot spell we’ve been having lately.”

Ms. Mable’s hand stilled over the yellowed keys. She tilted her head back and looked at Rosalind through a pair of pink cat glasses perched on the end of her nose. Her features, normally genial and open, now looked pinched and distant.

“Too hot, in my opinion. It seems to be frying the brains of a few people whom I once considered upstanding citizens in our community. Ones who knew their place, didn’t go overstepping their boundaries and disrupting the natural order of things.”

Rosalind’s spine stiffened. “Natural order of things?” There wasn’t any way possible that Ms. Mable could have found out about her after-party rendezvous.

“Now, mind you, I don’t have a racist bone in my body, but I don’t think we should go intermixing with whites. It’s a disgrace in my book. We should remember where we came from. Remember the struggles.”

Instead of shaming her, Ms. Mable’s words angered her. She might not foresee a future with Ashley, but that didn’t mean she agreed with the other woman’s opinion. “So you’re telling me that a person should allow history to dictate who they love and who they don’t love. And that we should judge a person by what a certain few have done, rather than their own individual merit?”

Ms. Mable dismissed her words with a wave of her hand. “All of them think the same. Some of them are just more polite than others. And don’t get me started on the children of such unions. Why do you think they call ’em mixed? Mixed-up, they is.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Ms. Mable ripped the tape from the roll. “Did you hear me stutter? You bill is gonna to be two thirty-eight fifty. That’s including the tax.”

Rosalind didn’t take the bill. She picked up her supplies list and shoved it back in her purse. She was halfway across the room when Ms. Mable called out, “Where are you going?”

By the time Rosalind turned back around, the chasm between two different generations seemed to have widened even further. “I came here to get my groceries. Not an outdated sermon shoved down my throat.”

At the woman’s blank look, Rosalind almost felt sorry for her utter obliviousness. “So, you’re not going to get your groceries?”

Rosalind felt like rolling her eyes. She settled on sarcasm. “Did I stutter?”

As she made her way to her van, Rosalind couldn’t help thinking:

A week’s worth of baking supplies = \$238.50

Ms. Mable’s gasping-like-a-fish-out-of-water expression = priceless

* * * * *

An hour later, Rosalind bustled through the back door of the bakery, carrying an armload of Piggy Wiggly eco-friendly grocery bags.

“Ms. Mable was closed this morning?” Loretta asked, helping her with the armload of bags.

“She’s open, but I couldn’t bring myself to buy into that woman’s ignorance.”

“What are you talking about?”

"I patronize Ms. Mable for the store's supplies, not her opinions on who I should and should not date."

Lacretia's lips formed a perfect O of surprise. "So, the rumors *are* true?"

Rosalind felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment. "What rumors?"

Lacretia opened one of the bags and began unpacking the groceries. "That you and Mr. Ashley are knocking boots. They say you all's moans and groans could've uprooted that tent down on the beach."

Rosalind wiped her hands down her face and emitted a groan similar to a wounded bear. How could she have allowed her momentary weakness for Ashley's cock to ruin her reputation and possibly jeopardize her career?

"Girl, I wouldn't worry my head about what people are saying. Personally, I wouldn't give a flying rat's ass what people said about me when a fine man like Mr. Ashley had his eye on me."

That would be fine and dandy, if he were really into her and not influenced by a generations-old charming spell. The sooner she found an antidote, the sooner she could get her life back to normal. "Considering Ashley's reputation, I don't expect to hold his interest for much longer."

"Girl, please. If you ask me, I think all that stuff you've heard about Mr. Ashley is all he say, she say."

"How can it all be lies, Lacretia? At least one bridesmaid from every wedding we've worked on has claimed to have slept with him."

"I wouldn't be surprised if half of those women were trying to scare off the others, so they could have him all to themselves. And maybe Mr. Ashley was just too much of a gentleman to call them out for it."

Rosalind snorted. "That's a bunch of bull if I ever heard any."

“How can it be when I’ve heard of women doing it all the time? My own cousin, Bernetha, you know the one who lives over on Sea Island? Well, she stole her husband, Big Earl, from his last girlfriend by going around telling lies about them hooking up when they really didn’t. The girlfriend dumped him for cheating, and the other women wouldn’t touch him with a twenty-foot pole. While the path was clear, Bernetha waltzed right up and made him hers.”

Rosalind’s eyes widened when Lactetia picked up the Pauline’s Fabric Store bag. She’d stopped there to pick up a few items before heading to the grocery store. She must have grabbed the bag from her van by mistake when bringing in the rest of the supplies.

“You planning on making some more table napkins for the Loving Room?” Lactetia asked, rummaging through the bag. “I get the ecru cotton, but what’s up with the pillow filling, red yarn, and green buttons?”

Rosalind snatched the bag from underneath her nose. “It’s not for making table napkins,” she mumbled. “I’m working on a project at home. I must have brought the bag inside by mistake. Let me go and put it back in the car before I forget it.” Belying the anxiety running rampant through her body, Rosalind, cool as a cucumber, headed toward the back door.

“What kind of project you working on?”

“I need a few throw pillows for the living room.”

Lactetia sniffed. “If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought you were making some kind of doll.”

Thank goodness Lactetia’s back was turned, because she missed Rosalind stumbling down the back steps.

* * * * *

Later that evening, Rosalind couldn't help mulling over the current turn of events. It was disconcerting, to say the least, to learn she'd become fodder for backroom gossip. Okay, so her life up until now had been rather boring and routine, living the quiet yet respectable life of a sought-after cake baker. But there wasn't anything wrong with that; routine had brought her a sense of order and security.

Now all that had changed at the hands of a big, bewitched blond who couldn't keep his hands off her. She should have thrown him out the second he'd entered.

But oh, no! She had to let her libido take charge. Stupid thing couldn't care less about consequences or ruining reputations. Only immediate gratification. And being all alone in a room with Ashley Benedict was the pinnacle of self-indulgence.

You have no one to blame but yourself, Rosalind Monet Fletcher. You broke the cardinal rule: absolutely no one is allowed in the Loving Room except for the bride and groom.

"That darn Ashley Benedict," Rosalind mumbled, piercing the flesh-colored fabric with a sewing needle. A couple of more stitches, and the body of the *gris-gris* doll would be finished. She'd already fastened the green buttons, which matched the exact shade of his eyes. And then filled the form with pillow stuffing and red pepper. All she needed to do now was attach the blond strands she'd stolen from Ashley's hairbrush and the red chastity string.

Rosalind frowned down at the *gris-gris* doll. Once completed, the charm would work almost immediately. Great. Ashley would be released from the charm's power almost instantaneously, but she, on the other hand, would continue to suffer. There wasn't an antidote for Ashley Benedict's omnipotent charm. And unfortunately for her, no cure existed. How could there be one when her feelings existed naturally?

With a heavy sigh, Rosalind fell back into the sofa cushions. *How can I move on after having a taste of what could've been?* "Just deserts for playing with people's emotions all

these years.” Ironical how the one person responsible for making so many couples happy over the years would possibly find her own.

Rosalind made quick work of finishing the doll before setting it aside. As per her routine in the evenings, she balanced the day’s books, surfed the Internet for unique cake recipes to try, and then readied herself for bed.

By eight o’clock, she was propped up in her favorite sofa chair, flipping through the cable channels.

Ding...dong.

Rosalind frowned at the front door. “Who in the heck could that be?” No one ever paid her any visits at this time of night. Unfolding herself from the sofa chair, she prayed it wasn’t an emergency.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me, Ashley.”

Rosalind’s stomach rolled and her clit thumped at the sound of his lazy drawl. When images of the last time she’d seen him popped into her head, she swayed on her feet. Before she lost her footing, she grabbed onto the doorknob and rested her head against the door. To calm her nerves, she decided to count to ten.

About halfway through, he interrupted her. “So are you going to let me in? Or do I need to huff and puff and blow your door down?”

“Come on, pull yourself together, Roz,” she muttered. “He’s only a man under a centuries-old spell. And not the man of your dreams.” Looking at it that way enabled her to put things into perspective again. With her resolve bolstered and her desire tempered, she unlocked the deadbolt.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, stepping back to allow him in.

“I was thinking about you and couldn’t resist dropping by and seeing if you wanted to ride with me down to Savannah to catch the last set at Hard Hearted Hannah’s. I know the

bartender, so he'll reserve us a table --" But then all seemed to be forgotten when his eyes swept over her.

Rosalind tightened the collar of her terrycloth robe around her neck. Thank goodness for the garment's thick material or her arousal would have been seen clear as day with her impertinent nipples.

"I didn't catch you at an inopportune time, did I?"

"Yes...no...ah... I was just watching TV."

He looked over her shoulder to the television. "Oh, really. Anything interesting?"

"Yes --" Rosalind turned her head to look at the console. She almost melted in embarrassment. The movie she'd been watching had obviously gone off. In its place, a couple gyrated in the throes of ecstasy.

"You know...maybe we can stay in."

"No! Give me twenty minutes, and I'll be dressed and ready to go."

His eyes still glued to the small-screen antics of the couple in the throes of an orgasm, Ashley turned his head to the side and mumbled. "You better make it ten, before I get any ideas."

While Rosalind went into the bedroom to get ready, Ashley made himself comfortable on the couch. Not really one for soft porn -- or any porn, for that matter -- he looked around for the remote control. Spotting it on the other end of the couch, he leaned over. But instead of getting the remote, his eyes fell on the handmade toy next to it.

Propped up against the pillows, it reminded him of one of the makeshift rag dolls his grandmother had saved from when she was a little girl during the Great Depression. Only this one, which sported a pair of green buttons as eyes, an odd tuft of blond hair, and a red string tied around its waist, didn't seem old, but brand-new.

Unable to resist temptation, he picked up the toy. “What the heck is this thing filled with?” Ashley squeezed the sides in an attempt to figure out the filling. But he must have manhandled it too hard, because some of the insides trickled out on his fingers.

Ashley looked down at his hands. His eyes narrowed. He’d heard of people filling dolls with sawdust, leaves, or feathers, but never red pepper. “Well, I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

“What are you doing, Benedict?”

Unfazed by her blistering tone, he replied matter-of-factly, “It looks like you caught me playing with your doll.” Ashley’s gaze shifted from the pitiful makeshift doll to Rosalind.

The vein in the hollow of his neck pulsed to life. He whistled under his breath. If she could turn out like *this* in less than fifteen minutes, he’d need resuscitation if she was given more of a concession.

She’d replaced her pink bathrobe with a formfitting strapless number that hugged all of her curves and highlighted the caramel tones in her skin. She shifted nervously from one foot to the other while her hair floated around her shoulders, and her full lips -- dusted with red lip gloss -- were pursed. She was so naturally beautiful she didn’t need any other accoutrements.

Have mercy, I am a goner. Ashley knew it was bad manners to drop over unannounced. His mother had raised him better. Yet it was hard to think about proper behavior when it came to Rosalind Fletcher. To make up for his lack of manners, he’d resisted the urge to yank her into his arms upon arrival, cup her round ass in his both of his hands, and kiss her until her knees buckled.

But seeing her dressed like this squashed all thoughts of chivalry. Rising from the couch, his movement brought him in direct contact with her scent. Closing his eyes, he inhaled. The smell of vanilla intermingled with citrus tickled his senses.

Ashley smiled to himself. Soon he would have her scent wrapped around him along with her luscious body.

“We *are* going out, aren’t we?”

Ashley opened his eyes slowly. He wanted to savor this moment between him and his prey.

“No,” he replied, discarding the doll over his shoulder. The sound of her gasp overshadowed the hollow *thump* of the doll hitting the sofa cushion. “I love jazz, but there’s something else that tops my list of favorites.”

“A-and what’s that?” Her voice was a breathy whisper. Hearing the catch in her voice, his cock stiffened.

“Of course it’s you.”

Chapter Six

“If we don’t leave now, we’re going to be late.”

Ashley smiled at her efforts to hold him off. Fat chance. Neither hell nor high water could hold him back from possessing her, especially when she looked so mouthwateringly ripe.

“No worries. Our plans have changed.” Feeling a need to be closer to her, he took the steps necessary to close the space between them. When he stopped just inside her personal space, he reached out to run his hand along the bodice of her dress.

“What do you mean *our* plans have changed?”

Feeling a fight coming on, he decided to perform a little quality management. Bending at the waist, he scooped her up, deposited her on his shoulder, and then headed down the hallway of the shotgun bungalow in search of the master bedroom.

“You can’t just make me shut up by manhandling me.”

“No, but I can think of something more pleasurable that will.” Ashley looked through the door of the first room on the right. It had only a leather sofa and an antique rolltop desk, and he figured it was her home office.

The room on the left was summarily dismissed as well because of a pair of twin beds and the stuffed animals nestled among the pillows. Ashley smiled. The room was obviously made up for her brother Malcolm's twin girls.

"I won't put up with this much longer, Ashley Benedict. Put me down, right now!"

"My pleasure," he replied, sliding his arm from her waist and releasing her. Since he was standing near the side of her queen-size sleigh bed by then, she had no other place to fall but on top of it.

Ashley smiled as she bounced on the white chenille spread, her lips working to form a coherent sentence. While she struggled with her outrage, he climbed on next to her. Wrapping his arm around her waist like before, he pulled her body flush against his. He leaned in close to bury his nose in her lush locks.

"Mmm...Rosalind. You smell as sweet as your namesake. I could bury myself in your scent for the rest of my natural-born days."

He felt her grow still under him. Thinking she had no more fight in her, he inhaled one last time before he continued his conquest. Yes, this was a conquest, for he not only wanted Rosalind's body like their night on the beach, he wanted to get inside her mind. Get under her skin. He wanted to possess her so completely that she wouldn't think about another man making love to her.

Ashley skimmed the fine hairs at her temple with the tip of his nose. He smiled when a gasp escaped her lips, her warm breath ruffling the collar of his dress shirt. Shifting slightly, he traced kisses along the silky smoothness of her jaw until his lips met hers.

He ran his tongue over her bottom lip. His cock jumped at the sound of her soft moan. He pulled the sound into his mouth along with the lip. He sucked on it. Ran his tongue over the silky flesh. He'd meant only to tease her, but he soon found the more he teased, the more he wanted. And so did she, because she writhed underneath him and her fingers slipped into his hair, playing havoc with his sensitive scalp.

“Rosalind...” He tilted his head to the side to gain a better advantage before he crushed his mouth over hers. She matched his enthusiasm. Her tongue dueled with his. She gave as good as she received. So good, his hands trembled as he ran them up and down her back.

“W-what are you doing to me, Ashley Benedict?” she breathed against his swollen lips.

The better question was what *she* was doing to *him*, Ashley mused. He’d bedded dozens of women over the years and even found himself in love a time or two. But none of them had scrambled his brains like Rosalind. None of them had made him want to possess them like her, to crawl under her skin and embed himself there and never leave.

Ashley’s chest expanded with emotion. Dare he say he was in love? He couldn’t have made a better choice. Even though she seemed to project this hard, professional veneer to the world, underneath she was a passionate woman filled with a vulnerability that made him want to push heaven and earth to protect her.

Ashley rose up on one elbow while his free hand searched for the zipper of her dress. When his fingertips grazed the metal teeth, he grasped the slider and unzipped it slowly.

Once the dress lay open, he leaned back and looked at her. “Do you want more, Rosalind?” Ashley’s toes curled as he watched her eyes flutter open. Mercy. She had to be the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

Instead of answering him, she pulled herself up, using his hair as an anchor, and latched on to his lips. To his surprise, she kissed him with a ferocity he hadn’t known she possessed, or had seen her display before.

While he allowed her to take the lead, Ashley brushed his hand over the luscious swell of her breasts and the top edge of her bodice. Spurred by a need to have her lying under him, open and bare, he slipped his hand inside and pulled the material down, exposing her chocolate-tipped nipples.

Ashley dipped his head to capture one of them. A feral growl exploded from deep within him. The contact of their flesh must have affected her as well, because her back bowed off the bed, inadvertently thrusting her nipple deeper into his mouth.

Whoever said chocolate is an aphrodisiac should win a Pulitzer!

Ashley sucked on each nipple in turn, his tongue running between each mound with feathery kisses and wide swipes. Deciding he wanted more, he grasped the edges of her dress and pulled it down over her belly and hips. He moaned in appreciation when she lifted her hips. It caused her pussy to brush against his cock.

Ashley's sanity packed its bags and left the building when she suddenly turned up the heat by pulling his tongue into her mouth and sucking on it. She wrapped her legs around his, and her nimble fingers unfastened the tiny buttons of his dress shirt.

Her lack of inhibition fired his blood and had his cock stiffening. Ready to make the final connection, Ashley looped a thumb under the side straps of her panties and, like her dress, pulled them down.

As she lay completely bare before him, Ashley pushed back on his heels, his hands dropping to the waistband of his slacks. He paused when her hands fell to her breasts and she began squeezing and fondling them.

Tearing at his belt, he removed the rest of his clothing. But before he threw his trousers aside, he reached in the pocket and removed his wallet. He dug inside and pulled out a condom. With trembling fingers, he ripped the foil apart, pulled the rubber out, and then rolled it over himself.

"Are you ready?" he whispered, suddenly finding himself overwhelmed.

"Do you really have to ask? I think I was ready for this the minute I answered the door."

"You think?" Ashley sniffed, feigning indignation. "I'm almost insulted that you weren't ready for me again soon after the last time. Like I was for you."

“Is this a good enough answer, then?” As if to make it perfectly clear, she pulled her legs up and out until they were perfectly bent and he could see her pink pussy.

Ashley bent over her, placing a forearm on either side of her head. At six feet three and two hundred and twenty-five pounds, he wanted to knock the breath out of her from his sexual prowess, not from his size. Yet, Rosalind wasn't having any of it. She reached up, looped her arms around his neck, and pulled him down, her legs wrapping around his waist.

The warm press of her curves against the hard planes of his body and her cunt cradling the hood of his cock sent a shiver down his spine. But he had little time to gather his faculties because Rosalind was rubbing against his shaft and whispering words of urgency and need. After pulling his hips back, he surged forward.

They both groaned in unison.

“Mercy, Rosalind! You had to be made for me. You're so tight, so perfect,” he hissed, burying his face in the crook of her neck and pumping a path in her hot channel.

He increased his tempo, establishing a rollicking rhythm that had Rosalind whimpering and clawing at his shoulder. Instead of it tempering his ardor, her passion galvanized him to give her all that he had. Thrusting deeper and deeper...faster and faster, he smiled when her moans of pleasure rivaled the banging of the headboard against the wall.

“I'm about to come already!”

“No, not yet. I don't want you to come until I tell you to come.”

“Are you kidding me? There's no way! You're making me feel...” she trailed off.

Ashley's heartbeat quickened. “How do I make you feel?” But she pressed her lips together, shook her head, and her beautiful dark brown eyes squeezed shut against his intense scrutiny.

“Tell me,” he insisted, digging the balls of his feet into the mattress and rising above her. While she fought for words, he continued to thrust and swivel his hips. He wouldn't

give her any mercy. If driving her out of her mind weakened her self-control, then he would continue to drive it out of her.

“Ashley...Ashley...Ashley.” She panted.

“Tell me, Rosalind!”

“You make feel so good! I-I’m almost afraid that it’s going to end.”

A smile curved his lips. The first chip had finally fallen.

As if her confession was too much on her psyche, she arched her back, bucked against him once...twice...a third time. She pushed against him and then let out a deep-throated scream that rocked him to his very core and almost sent him tumbling over the edge with her.

Rosalind floated on the edges of a mind-blowing orgasm. The only thing keeping her in the here and now were the rhythmic thrusts of Ashley’s delicious cock. However, before she shuddered into another orgasm, he stopped.

Her eyes still blurry and heavy-lidded, Rosalind watched him lean over and rifle through her nightstand.

“Ah, just as I thought. Rosalind Fletcher isn’t all sugar and spice. And a little kink is always nice.” Chuckling, he pulled out a small bottle of self-heating KY jelly, which she used to lubricate a battery-operated vibrator called the Pink Bunny.

Embarrassed, Rosalind groaned and tried covering her face with her arm, but he pulled her arm away.

“What are you about to do?” she whispered as he squeezed a dollop in his hand and then smeared it over himself.

He peeped up at her and smiled. His green eyes -- no longer pale and translucent -- sparkled like twin emeralds. “I’m about to do something I’ve wanted to do for quite a long time.”

Before she could decipher his words, she felt the bed shift with his weight, and then he straddled her rib cage. He grasped both of her breasts, squeezed them together, and then slid his cock between them.

Rosalind hissed. The rub of his cock between the tight, warm space created by her breasts almost made her lose it again. It must have had a mutual effect, because his eyes fluttered closed. The look of pleasure on his face magnified his natural beauty tenfold.

“Look at me.” Rosalind didn’t know where the commanding voice came from, but she went with it, since it demanded results. “I want you to look at me when you make love to me.”

His eyes popped open, and that sensual smile of his that made her knees weak curled the corners of his mouth. “Yes, ma’am,” he drawled, his voice thick with honey.

His eyes locked with hers; he slid his hard length over her skin. The purplish head of his cock peeked, then disappeared with every thrust and parry. He was so warm, so strong. Rosalind bit her lip. The feel and image of him making love to her in such an unusual position was as pleasurable as having him deep inside her.

Rosalind pressed her thighs together, trying to create friction for her aching clit. With rhythmic movements, she timed her clenching to match the hot pace of his cock. As another orgasm blossomed within her body, his body jerked.

“Ah!” he cried. His abdomen clenched. His chest heaved like the wind had been knocked out of him, and a spurt of white cream erupted from his cock and landed on her shoulder. Despite his body being racked with his release, he continued to milk his cock with an increased vigor. His semen shot from him in a continuous stream to bathe her collarbone, neck, and breasts.

Rosalind moaned. His hot, sticky cum made her skin tingle, touching off nerve endings that had sent her over the edge earlier. To quicken her release, she strummed her clit. For the second time that night, her body exploded in tiny fragments of color and light.

* * * * *

“It’s time to get up, sleepyhead.”

Rosalind groaned when the plantation shutters covering her bedroom window opened, letting in the early morning light. Not ready to face the day, she tried to bury her head under the down comforter, but she came up short. When she looked down, his hand held the other end of the spread.

“Ashley, please, I need some sleep!”

“You’ve been sleeping all morning.”

“Because we’ve been doing it all night.” Rosalind couldn’t help but smile at Ashley’s chuckle, which was decidedly wicked and unrepentant. In spite of being thoroughly satiated after hours and hours of loving, Ashley-style, she couldn’t keep her body from reacting when he climbed up into the bed and settled on top of her.

“If you want me to get up, you have to get off the comforter, Benedict.”

“I’m not so sure I want to go eat now, since I have such a delectable and appetizing morsel right here,” he confessed, before dipping his head and nibbling her earlobe. “I don’t know what’s the matter with me when it comes to you.” He paused to bite the side of her neck. “But I can’t seem to keep my hands to myself.”

“Well, you better learn how to, because if you don’t, I’ll waste away.”

“We wouldn’t want that, would we?” he purred, grinding his cock against her. Even through the thick coverlet, she could feel his growing erection. When he lowered his head to kiss her, her stomach rumbled. “Come on, I ran us a bath. After that, I want to take you to one of my favorite restaurants. We should still be able to make it for brunch hour.”

* * * * *

An hour later, Ashley pulled into Malcolm's on the Waterfront. Whistling to himself, he pulled his black SUV into a parking space, totally oblivious to the fact that Rosalind was slowly imploding.

Where is a paper bag when you need one? Rosalind groaned inwardly as he jumped out and came around to her side of the vehicle. He helped her down, closed the door behind her, and then took her hand.

From the multitude of choices in Beaufort County, Ashley had to be fan of her brother's cooking? True, Malcolm's place attracted patrons throughout the region, but she'd never assumed it would be on Ashley's favorite list, much less that he'd be a regular of Malcolm's popular Sunday brunch.

Rosalind took several calming breaths while he opened the door for her. The smell of a country breakfast and the cacophony of a busy restaurant during peak hours filtered through the open archway separating the front foyer from the main dining area and greeted them. As did Malcolm's hostess and family friend, Cleo.

"Mr. Benedict, how are you this...?" Cleo's words trailed off when her eyes dropped to Rosalind's hand clasped in his. "Hey, Roz. Surprised to see you here. I guess you didn't have a wedding to do yesterday."

All Malcolm's staff knew she rarely came in on Sundays, since it was one of her only two days off. "No, I didn't, so I'm here to eat. Is Malcolm in?"

Cleo slowly dragged her gaze from Ashley to her. "Of course he's in. Today's one of his busiest days. You know he won't leave the running of his baby to anyone else. He's in the back, working in the kitchen. One of the short-order cooks sprained his ankle last night fishing, so he's swamped this morning, but I can tell him to come out and see you if you want."

"No! That's okay." Rosalind hoped she didn't sound too overeager to keep her brother at bay.

“If you two are ready, I have your usual table waiting, Mr. Benedict.”

The walk to their table became the main event, as many people turned from their meals and conversations to watch the ten-foot gorilla in the room -- Beaufort County’s newest couple. She tried to pull her hand free, but Ashley wouldn’t let her, maintaining a tenacious grip.

Admittedly, most of the stares were primarily appreciative in manner, from females, and directed at Ashley, who even at this early hour was still as stunning as when he’d shown up on her doorstep last night. In an effort to ignore feelings of jealousy, she remembered the reality of the situation. However, she couldn’t ignore the other more hostile glances.

As they skirted a table of thirtysomething couples, Ashley slowed. “Hello, gang. How is everyone this morning?” Rosalind eyed the group, who seemed more interested in finding out who was on his arm than returning his greeting.

“Who’s your *friend*, Ash?” a redheaded man in a pale green polo shirt asked.

To her surprise, Ashley pulled her in front of him. “Everybody, I’d like to introduce you to Rosalind Fletcher. A very special friend of mine and one of the most sought-after cake bakers in the Low Country.”

Feeling like a fly under a microscope, Rosalind stood by stoically while he introduced each person by name and then exchanged a few polite pleasantries, mainly about family and the upcoming spring regatta.

Thankfully, their food arrived, interrupting further conversation. Ashley made promises to join them for drinks later in the week before leaving them to their meal. However, they didn’t get more than a few steps when she overheard the redhead and obvious leader of the group snicker.

“What nerve! It’s one thing to lie down with them, but to go introducing one of them to your friends...damn fool. He’s acting like he’s won the fucking lottery.”

Rosalind's first inclination was to turn around and stuff the asshole's words down his throat, but Ashley beat her to the punch.

Chapter Seven

“What did you say?” Ashley couldn’t believe what he’d heard.

“Come on, Ash, you can’t be serious. You’re acting like a fool, going around with her.” Paul Vandeen looked Rosalind up and down, then gave Ashley a haughty look before continuing. “You need to wake the fu --”

“I would suggest you not finish what you are about to say,” Ashley stated quietly, his fists clenched.

Paul looked around uneasily. The people sitting at his table shifted in their seats. Ashley smiled. It wasn’t a pleasant grin.

“Don’t you ever talk about Rosalind that way again. Unlike you, she has class, a great deal of respect from her peers, and doesn’t let bigoted opinions rule her. You could learn a lot from her.” He ignored the heads turning to stare at them. “You have gall, Paul. Sitting in her brother’s restaurant and making such a comment. I should call you out, but you’re lucky I’m a gentleman. Now apologize, or I’ll forget that I am one.”

Paul sputtered.

Ashley raised his eyebrows. “All I want to hear is an apology and nothing else.”

“Sorry.” Paul glared.

Ashley returned the look, baring his teeth.

He glanced around the quite-packed restaurant and stated, "Now, go back to your meals."

Scattered applause broke out around the room. He turned to Rosalind, who had a smug grin on her face. Lacing his fingers with hers, he continued to escort her to their table. He glared at anyone who dared to give them any nasty looks.

"What the hell do you mean we have to leave?" Paul's strident voice made him look up after they'd seated themselves.

Ashley chuckled. Waiters were clearing the table of the half-eaten plates of food. Malcolm Fletcher -- Rosalind's brother -- stood with his arms crossed over his broad chest.

"You're not welcome here any longer," he stated in a soft voice.

Paul opened his mouth. Malcolm cut him off.

"Uh-uh, I'm not much of a gentleman like Mr. Benedict, so you don't want to test me. Now get out," he barked.

Paul sputtered, glared, then turned and left. The rest of his dining companions went with him. Malcolm sauntered over to Ashley and Rosalind's table.

"You sure know how to stir things up." He leaned over and kissed Rosalind on her cheek.

She swatted at him playfully. "It's my mission in life."

He laughed. "Momma needs to come back to keep you under control." He sobered and looked at Ashley. "You should have hit the blowhard."

"I was tempted, but he isn't worth it," Ashley replied.

Malcolm tilted his head to the side, then said softly, "Hurt her and I will find you." The lethal threat in his voice was clear to understand.

"Malcolm," Rosalind hissed.

Malcolm ignored her and walked away.

“Sorry about him.” She sounded embarrassed.

“No, sweet cheeks, he’s your brother. That’s what he’s supposed to do. Protect you. In time, he’ll understand that I’m not going anywhere, and I’m not going to hurt you.”

A sad look filtered across her face.

“What’s wrong?”

She shook her head and smiled. “Nothing. Let’s have breakfast. I need to make a stop at my mom’s house before going in for a few hours to Forever, I Do.”

He looked over the menu he was reading. “You have to work today? Isn’t the store usually closed?”

Ashley frowned. He was looking forward to spending the day with her. This would derail the day he had planned.

“I have some last-minute preparations for the Baldwin wedding.”

Although he wasn’t the planner, he’d heard about the elaborate wedding.

“Okay. I’ll come help you.”

“Distract me, you mean. No, I can’t get any work done with you there. Wipe that grin off your face.”

“So, I’m a distraction.” He chuckled.

“Oh no, I am not going to feed that overinflated ego.”

“I’ll come by your house later.”

“I need to get rest for the wedding tomorrow. I’m hectic over the next few days. I’ll call you, or see you at the Morgan and Sullivan wedding,” she stated.

Ashley put down the menu, reached across the table, and took her hand. “Are you trying to avoid me? After la --”

“Shh...” She glanced around to the other diners sitting close by, then returned her attention to him before continuing. “I’m not avoiding you. I have to work. You know how it is right now.”

“Sorry, I do know. I have back-to-back bookings myself. Thankfully, I haven’t gotten any frantic calls that something has gone wrong. Let’s enjoy breakfast.” He signaled for the waiter.

* * * * *

At the door of her mother’s house, he caught her hand before she unlocked it. Pulling her to him, he kissed her thoroughly before finally releasing her.

“I’ll call you later.” Ashley went back to his car, waving as he backed out of the driveway.

Whistling as he drove, he suddenly made a right. Twenty minutes later, he walked into Chavel Jewels. He went directly to the case with pendants.

“Ashley. Nice to see you again. It’s been a while,” a stuffy nasal voice intoned.

He stifled his groan at the sound of Klaus Chavel. He had hoped Damon -- the younger Chavel -- would serve him.

Mustering up a smile, he answered, “Yes, it has, Mr. Chavel.”

“Tell your folks that I said hello.”

“I will.”

“So what can we get for you today?”

“I’m not sure. I’m looking for a p...” He trailed off as he spotted what he wanted. Smiling, he gestured. “I want that.”

“Ah, an excellent piece.” Klaus opened the display case, took it out, and handed it to him.

Ashley studied the pendant close-up. The detailing was fabulous. The hibiscus looked real, with all the large trumpet-shaped petals like the real flower. There were five petals alternating between gold, white gold, and silver, and each even had the slight crinkly look at the edges. In the center was a line of gold that depicted the staminal column and seed capsules. He raised the pendant, and light flashed off the tiny, round flecks.

“Are those diamonds?”

“Yes. It is superbly crafted and the flower almost looks real.”

“Yes, it does. I’ll take it.” He placed it back on the velvet cloth on top of the glass case.

“Excellent. If you want, there is a matching ring to go with it.”

“Really? Let me see it.”

Klaus walked away, then came back. “Here it is.”

Ashley gasped as he viewed the ring. It was even more stunning than the pendant. It had the same detailing and the alternating petals, yet it was the center that took his breath away. Instead of a capsule in the center, there was a gem that had a mixture of hibiscus in the center in gold. His hand shook as he took it from Klaus.

Oh my God. This is the ring I want Rosalind to wear when I marry her. His head jerked up as he realized what he was thinking. A grin spread across his face.

“I’ll take them both.”

“Good. They are --”

He waved his hand, cutting Klaus off. “Cost doesn’t matter. Give me a sec, I need one more thing.”

He wandered over to the other rings. Studying them, he spotted the one he wanted. It had a band of gold with a variety of gems ranging from ruby, to sapphire, to amber, set in a starburst design around a diamond in the center.

“I’ll take this also.”

Klaus came over and took out the ring. His face was pinched with a sour expression.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Charge it to my account,” Ashley stated firmly.

Klaus took the ring out of the case, then went to the other items. He packaged them slowly, looking over at Ashley, frowning and muttering. Losing patience fast, Ashley gritted his teeth. Finally, Klaus came to him, placed the silver Chavel Jewels bag on the counter, then presented the receipt for him to sign. He signed it and picked up his purchase, then turned to leave.

“You can’t be seriously thinking of marrying that woman.” Klaus hissed.

Ashley’s fists clenched and he turned back to him. “I not only plan on marrying her, but you will be invited to the wedding. You will smile and wish us well, or I will take my business elsewhere.”

Klaus paled. “I will...umm...”

Ashley left as the man sputtered. He and his family did a lot of business with Chavel Jewels. Enraged at Klaus’s audacity, he strode to his car, disarmed his alarm, opened the door, and got in. He backed out of the space and drove away. His phone rang, interrupting his seething. He pressed his Bluetooth.

“Benedict.”

“Ash, I’m sorry about my dad.”

“You don’t need to apologize for him, Damon. He’s not the only one.” Ashley sighed.

“Small-minded idiots. Ignore them.”

“I am.”

“So, I heard congrats are in order.”

“Not yet. I have to ask first.”

Damon snorted. "Please. Who can resist the Benedict charm? Let me know after you ask, and we'll go out to celebrate."

"Will do."

"Again, sorry about my dad. I told him I would help you from now on."

"Thanks."

"No, thanks for your business and friendship. Gotta go. Speak with you soon."

When he signed off, Ashley glanced at the bag and hoped Damon was right.

* * * * *

"Anything interesting happen while I was gone?"

Rosalind bit her fingernails nervously while she watched her mother pack the front-loading washer with her dirty travel clothes. A victim of thin, brittle nails and a huge dilemma, she would only have nubs by the time she finally came clean.

"Someone other than the bride and groom tasted the loving potion. I accidentally walked in on him. And for the past three weeks, I've tried to find an antidote."

As if she hadn't just been informed their centuries-old spell for making long-lasting, loving relationships had gone catastrophically wrong, her mother removed the cap off a bottle of washing detergent. While pouring the blue liquid into the dispenser, she spoke. "And for the past three weeks, you've also had the time of your life, no?"

The hairs on the back of Rosalind's neck prickled. "W-what do you mean?"

"Well...if you walked in on him, and you were the first person he laid eyes on, then you should've been fighting off his unwanted advances as well. So, since you didn't mention it, and you aren't sitting in jail, I just assumed." After pressing the Start button, her mother stepped back into the kitchen, and when she passed Rosalind, she squeezed her knee with her hand.

Sitting on a three-step stool by the laundry-room door, Rosalind rested her elbows on her knees. “The past three weeks have turned my life inside out.”

“No worries, sugar foot,” her mother said as she filled a teapot with water. “All we have to do is make the antidote, and your life will be back to normal.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of...”

Rosalind gave her mother a sheepish smile when she turned away from the stove to look at her. “Just who are we talking about?”

“Ashley Benedict.”

Rosalind smiled ruefully when her mother threw her head back and laughed. “It’s about time you two got together.”

She sat up straighter. “What do you mean it’s about time? There’s never been anything between the two of us.”

“Girl, who’re you trying to fool? You two are more flammable than a pile of cow manure.”

Rosalind opened her mouth to refute her mother’s claim, but she pressed her lips together again because she knew she couldn’t dispute the truth.

As her mother reached up and pulled two cups from the cabinet, she continued, “I was hoping you would wake up one day and allow Mr. Benedict a chance, but since the loving potion did the trick, then it’s all good.”

Unable to contain her angst any longer, Rosalind hopped off the stool and began to pace back and forth. “But that’s it, Momma! It’s not all fine and dandy. Ashley’s only acting under the influence of Grandma Trudy’s loving spell.” When she retraced her steps, her mother stood staring at her. “What?” Her mother shook her head as if in disbelief. Rosalind’s brow knitted together in confusion. “What? Please don’t tell me there isn’t a remedy?”

“Of course there’s an antidote. Why would one make a spell and not have a cure for it? Wouldn’t make much sense.”

“Then why did you just give me that look?”

“I’m just surprised that you don’t know how the loving spell works.”

“I know how it works, Momma. In fact, I have firsthand knowledge how it works. It makes people unable to keep their hands off one another.”

A conspiratorial smile lit her mother’s features. “Mr. Benedict’s unable to keep his hands off you?”

Rosalind scratched the back of her head. “His hands, his lips, and other body parts I won’t discuss.” Her cheeks heated with embarrassment while her mother hooted with laughter.

“If that’s the case, you might not want a remedy for what ails Mr. Benedict.”

“But it isn’t right, Momma. The loving potion has made a victim of both of us.”

Her mother took Rosalind’s hand in hers and led her over to the kitchen island. She pulled out a chair for each of them and then motioned for her to take a seat. “What’s troubling you, sugar foot?”

“A part of me wants to find an antidote, and another part of me wants to throw your book of spells in the Beaufort River.” Rosalind shifted uneasily when her mother chuckled.

“Sounds like you’re in love, or pretty close to it.”

Rosalind sniffed. “That’s absurd, Momma. This has only been going on for three weeks.”

“True. *But*...you’ve been attracted to Mr. Benedict for years. And through the dozens of weddings you’ve done together, I’m sure you’ve come to know him pretty well.”

“I know him, all right. Despite the fact that he’s honest, hardworking, and great at what he does, he always seems to get a kick out of pushing my buttons. I don’t think I ever did a wedding when we didn’t get into it about something or other.”

“Well, there you have it! You all’s fighting was nothing but an outlet for your pent-up emotions. I think they call it sexual tension.”

“Or arrogance.”

Her mother shook her head. “Don’t you see what I’m trying to tell you? The loving spell will only intensify what’s already there. Make the person walk the straight and narrow and prevent them from ever straying. But it can’t create something that was never present.”

“So, you’re trying to tell me that Ashley Benedict has always had feelings for me?”

“I’ll go one step further. I’m going to prove it to you. We’re going to make the antidote. And after you apply it, then you’ll see.”

“Well, while we’re at it, we need to burn the loving spell.”

Her mother paused on the bottom step of the flight of stairs leading to the attic. “Why do we need to burn it? What about the business?”

“I’m done with meddling with other people’s lives, Momma. People should be free to love how they want without any help or encouragement from us. And don’t worry about the business. The spell doesn’t affect the taste of the cakes, and people aren’t buying them due to an old superstition, but because they taste good.”

Her mother looked off into space. Then, as if making up her mind, she squeezed Rosalind’s hand, a smile of resignation curling her lips. “Okay, sugar foot. We’ll retire it, but only if you’ll give Mr. Benedict a chance.”

“Okay, Momma.”

Even though she’d spoken the words to placate her mother, she knew they weren’t necessary. Her inner pragmatist wouldn’t allow her to hold on to the hope that maybe her mother was right.

Chapter Eight

Rosalind put down her fork and rested her chin in her hand as she watched Ashley eat. Taking a bite of the crème brûlée, he made a pleased noise. Sadness welled inside of her. If all went well, this would be their last date. The last time he looked at her with such hunger and tenderness.

He put down his fork and leaned back, groaning. “That was delicious, sweet cheeks. I’m glad that you decided to give up on adding a new flavor to the bakery.” Ashley grinned.

Rosalind laughed. When she had invited him to dinner, she’d had to assure him that she wasn’t testing any new flavors. He had asked again when he arrived. The cautious way he took his first bite of each dish was comical, but she didn’t laugh. It was hard to when she felt so sad.

Blinking back tears, she stood up and walked their plates over to the sink. *Come on, Roz, get a grip.* Forcing a smile, she turned back to him.

Her gaze fell on a small velvet box sitting in the center of the table.

“I love you. Will you marry me?” He opened the box.

The engagement ring was stunning. Rosalind walked over and picked up the box. With a shaking hand, she traced the design. It was the kind of ring she would have wanted from a man who asked her to marry him. Too bad this was the wrong man.

Blinking back tears, she met his gaze and smiled gently at him.

“Come with me.” She held out her hand.

Ashley didn’t move. “Are you going to answer me?” The nervousness in his voice went right to her heart.

“Later,” she choked out.

She knew later he wouldn’t want her anymore. But tonight he would be hers. This last night would be all about him. Ashley reluctantly put away the ring and stood. Lacing her fingers with his, she led him out of the kitchen, down the short hallway to her bedroom.

Rosalind let his hand go and walked around the room, lighting the candles she had set up. When she was done, she turned to Ashley, who still stood in the doorway. Walking over to him, she took his hand again and led him to the bed. She undressed him. When he was bare, she gestured for him to get on the bed.

“So what do you have planned?” A lazy smile curved his lips.

“I’m going to pamper you,” she replied. But then she added to herself, *and release you from a hundred-year-old spell after I have one last night with you.*

According to her mother’s directions, the antidote needed twenty-four hours to take effect. She knew it was selfish, but she wanted this last night with him. After shedding her clothing, she put on the silk robe she’d placed on the chair by the bed earlier.

“Aw, sweet cheeks, why are you covering up the view?” He pouted.

“You’ll see it in a bit. Now roll over onto your stomach.”

He complied. Taking another breath to stave off the tears, she reached for the bottle of massage oil. Studying the bottle, she didn’t know if she wanted the antidote to work or not. It didn’t matter; she had to try. It wasn’t fair to have him enthralled with her. He deserved a

woman whom he truly loved -- by his choice and not because of some mojo. These last few weeks had been a dream. A fantasy that had to end, even if she wished it wouldn't.

Be strong -- you can do this. Straddling him, she shuddered as her bare mound rested against the small of his back. Ashley groaned low. She poured oil into her hands before setting the bottle aside yet within easy reach.

Rubbing her hands together, she felt the oil warm, activating the spell. She lowered her hands to his shoulders and smoothed it across them. The scent of cinnamon and vanilla filled the air. She had chosen to make the cure in a scent she enjoyed. A scent he seemed to love.

Silent, she rubbed the oil over his back, stopping only to pour more as she needed it. Soon she lost herself in the textures of his skin, the heat of his body, and the play of his muscles underneath her touch. "Turn over," she said, getting off him and kneeling on the bed next to his hip.

He rolled over. Her eyes went to his erection, standing prominently from his body. Her mouth watered to taste him, but she had to force herself not to think about it. Focusing on the task at hand, she continued her massage.

She worked the oil in over his chest, down his torso, and over his pelvis. Bypassing his groin area, she smoothed oil down each leg, between his toes and on the bottoms of his feet.

Setting the empty bottle on the bedside table, she shifted until she knelt between his spread thighs. She licked her lips, then leaned over him. Swiping her tongue across the tip of his cock, she tasted his precum. His loud groan shook his entire body.

Enclosing the mushroom-shaped head in her mouth, she enjoyed the taste of him against her tongue. Murmuring, Rosalind relaxed her throat and sucked more of him into her mouth. He bucked. She held his hips still.

Up and down, she gripped him with her lips, feeling the ridges, the swollen veins. Ashley's hands gripped her head. Moaning, she swirled her tongue along his velvet-soft skin. Lifting her head, she wrapped her hand around his cock, twisting as she sucked.

“Ah, Rosalind,” he moaned.

She increased her suction. Moving one hand down, she squeezed his sac, then gently stroked her fingers against the sensitive flesh under his balls. He shouted, bucking deeper into her mouth. Glancing up, her breath caught at the harsh lines of desire on his face. His incoherent murmurs filled the air.

Smiling fiercely, she removed her hand, then took him all in. She swallowed around his hot length. Ashley pulled at her hair. A sting of pain made her purr. His groans spurred her on.

She sucked faster, tasting more of his sweet cum. Tightening her lips, she raked her teeth over him as she withdrew. Swooping back down, she relaxed and deep throated him again. He arched, groaning. His release gushed into her mouth. Rosalind swallowed. Tears burned her eyes and fell unchecked as she gave him pleasure.

Ashley shuddered at the sweet pull of her lips on his cock. Gripping her hair, he lifted her off his still-hard erection. The tears on her face surprised him. His heart softened; he was overwhelmed himself. He pulled her up to him until they were face-to-face. He held her waist, lifting her over him. In one motion, he impaled her. Rosalind screamed. She had pampered him with great food and a sensual massage. He was now hungry for all of her. He unknotted the belt of her robe, then removed the garment.

He pumped his hips up into her sweet, wet canal. She braced her hands on his chest, pushing up and down. His cock slid in and out of her. Tightening her legs around him, she ground against him. Arching his head back, he held her hips. She moaned, rotating her pelvis. She gushed. Her wetness made him sink deeper. He moved, shifting her until he was on his knees with her still on his cock. He pumped in a firm in-and-out motion. She wailed and dug her nails into his shoulders.

The side of her face rested against his. He turned his head, taking her lips in a hungry kiss. Her tears wet his face, and his own eyes filled. Their joining was beautiful. Rosalind held him tight. He hissed at the feel of her nails biting into his skin. Running his hands up her back, he held her shoulders and pulled her down onto him. Pounding into her, he felt her legs clasp around him higher. He held her hair, pulling her head back. He licked against the center of her throat, then bit gently. She whimpered.

A grin curved his lips. The woman he loved was making him feel like a king. Although she hadn't answered his proposal, he knew she would say yes. No way they could be so in sync and her answer be any different. With each touch, he knew what they had was real. Tonight she had shown him she believed it too. He kissed her. The taste of her tears humbled him. She wasn't one to cry. It was good to know she was as overwhelmed as he was. Holding her close, he shuddered at her body sliding against his. Her nipples were hard against his chest. Thrusting harder, he sucked in her moan. Her pussy gripped him in a silken cocoon, her pussy walls contracting around his cock in a pleasurable sensation.

When she'd started to suck his cock, it had taken all his control not to stop her and fuck her. Him letting her do as she willed benefited him. The feel of her hot mouth around his cock had been like nothing he had ever known. Soft, tender, intense, and so right, it had pushed all his buttons. He would drive her wild first.

He stilled. Rosalind moaned. Releasing her mouth, he licked her lips. She whimpered and tried to kiss him. He moved his head back, not letting her.

"Ashley, move," she demanded.

She tried to move, but he held her still.

"Feel me," he whispered against her lips.

"I will if you'll just move," she screamed.

"Be still and just feel," he urged.

Rosalind glared at him, then shuddered and leaned against him. He held her ass and hummed against her lips. She licked his. Suddenly she gasped. Her pussy undulated. He held still, letting her feel him. She shook uncontrollably, wild whimpers coming from her.

“Please...Ashley...move,” she screamed.

The sensual demand in her tone broke his control. Swiveling his hips, he rammed into her. Over and over again. She met him thrust for thrust. Grunting and rubbing against him. The tightening of her cunt against his cock warned him of her impending orgasm. Her pussy contracted. She went over into climax. Her nails scored his shoulders. Growling, he pushed into her. She contracted violently on his cock, sending him over into his own release.

Pumping his hips in time with the pulsation of his cock, he kissed her. Moisture wet his face and lips. His own eyes filled with tears too. Running his hands up her back, he held her close. He banded his arms around her, watching her brown gaze go unfocused. He gripped her hips, pulling her against him, still thrusting.

She seemed to understand what he needed. She rotated her hips, creating a delicious friction. His cock continued to pulse. He loosened his hold, pulling on her hair until her back was arched away from him. He licked down her neck, then sucked her chocolate nipples into his mouth. She whimpered in the back of her throat as she ground against him. Spreading his legs wide, his cock sank deeper into her pussy. Her pussy walls undulated against him. She shuddered hard, her womb contracting against the head of his cock.

He lowered his head, burying it against her throat, licking against her pulse. He bit gently, holding her while she shuddered. He rocked his hips, the last of his release flowing out of him. Her pussy clutched at him in greedy demand. He gave and gave it all to her. She whimpered, collapsing against him. He moved, lying back on the bed with her in his arms. She sprawled over him, cuddling against his chest. Lazily, he kissed her. At the taste of salt, he pulled away. The tears on her face glistened. Gently, he wiped them away. She opened her eyes. The anguished sorrow in their depths made his heart race.

“What’s wrong?” he asked softly.

Smiling, she looked at him and then kissed him. “Nothing, just feeling a little out of sorts. It’ll all be okay tomorrow.”

She rested her head on his chest, her hand over his heart. Shuddering breaths filled her. Her body shook with soft sobs. Ashley’s concern mounted.

“What can I do?”

She raised her head, tears falling from her eyes. She smiled sadly. Her finger traced the lines of his face. It was as if she was memorizing his features.

“Just hold me,” she pleaded.

“Always.” He held her close.

She lay as she had before.

“At least until tomorrow,” she replied.

He didn’t correct her, just held her close. Rosalind lay against him, and before long, her breathing changed, going soft in sleep. Ashley wiped the remaining tears wetting her face. Long into the night, he watched over her and mulled over the reason for her tears, but most importantly the meaning behind her words.

* * * * *

Rosalind walked around the Morgan-Sullivan cake one more time. Done in white and pale green icing, the five-tiered cake had two bottom layers, which were square, and three on top, which were round. Each layer contained a piping of minipearls and a flow of pale green roses cascading down one side.

Eyeing the particular shade of green, Rosalind frowned. It was the same shade as his eyes. She turned away, folding her arms over her belly. She hadn’t seen Ashley since the night she’d given him the antidote over two weeks ago. Putting two and two together, she’d

realized the antidote must have worked. Of course, she should be overjoyed that her life had turned back to normal, except she couldn't get him out of her mind.

Rosalind wandered through the two dozen or so tables set up for this afternoon's reception, barely looking at the lavish table settings filled with Ecuadorian roses. Instead, she mused over how fitting it would have been to see Ashley at today's wedding, since it was their clients' taste testing that had started all of this. But that wasn't going to happen.

Even though she knew he wouldn't look at her with the same desire and tenderness, she'd been looking forward to seeing him. At least until her baby sister, Monica, who was catering the wedding, let her know Ashley couldn't make it and another planner would be in attendance.

He's avoiding you.

Rosalind made a detour for the balcony. She needed fresh air, and badly. Once outside, she walked over to the railing and looked out at Daufuskie Island Resort's Melrose Golf Course and the Atlantic Ocean in the distance. Despite the beauty of the scene before her, she didn't appreciate any of it as her heart warred with her common sense, and she didn't hear the French doors open behind her fifteen minutes later.

"Hey, sis, the guests are arriving. Don't forget, I still need your help since Vince never showed up."

"Okay, Monica. I'll be there in a minute."

When the doors closed behind her sister, Rosalind wiped at a tear. "Come on, girl, you need to pull it together. You know this was for the best. He wasn't yours to have." She pushed away from the rail and turned around.

"Hello, Rosalind."

Chapter Nine

As if in a daze, Rosalind watched Ashley stride across the outside deck toward her. When he reached for her, she held up her hands to hold him off. He stopped and frowned. A bewildered expression molded his otherwise mouthwatering features.

“What’s up, sweet cheeks? You aren’t glad to see me? I sure as hell missed you.”

A shiver ran down Rosalind’s spine at the sound of the nickname he’d christened her with at the beginning of their whirlwind affair. But she quickly pulled herself together and attempted to set things back on track. Stepping around him, she was thankful he didn’t reach for her again.

“You have no right to call me that, Ashley Benedict.”

Rosalind raised her chin stubbornly at his raised eyebrow.

“Are we back to that again?” Ashley raked his hands through his blond locks in obvious frustration. “I know I said I would call, but my grandmother’s house was in worse shape than we first assumed after the storm. She lost everything. The roof came off, and the ensuing rains flooded everything. So the past two weeks have been spent in Ormond Beach trying to help Nan salvage what little she had left, getting her affairs in order, and then moving her in with me. I guess you didn’t get my message I left with Lactetia before I left?”

“No...I took a week off,” she replied. More like hiding, Rosalind mused.

After he'd left that morning, she'd left a message on the answering machine at Forever, I Do for Lactetia, telling her she was taking a few days off. Rosalind didn't have any weddings planned that following weekend, so she didn't feel guilty about it. Since she didn't usually take any days off without advance notice, Lactetia had called. She hadn't answered, instead letting the machine pick it up. She remembered Lactetia mentioning Ashley had called, but nothing about why. She hadn't called to find out, not wanting to know.

“After I was sure Nan was settled in at my place, I went looking for you. Not finding you at home or the shop, I finally remembered today's wedding. I'm sorry for my lack of manners, Rosalind. Do you forgive me?”

While he'd offered his apology, he'd closed the space between them. He cupped her cheek. “I didn't even think I would be here to see the couple walk down the aisle. I've missed you.” He leaned in and kissed her.

Rosalind stiffened, then leaned against him, returning his kiss. He murmured and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into him. Moaning, she fitted her body to his. But then alarm bells went off in her head. If Ashley was calling her “sweet cheeks” and making proclamations that he missed her, then that meant only one thing.

The antidote didn't work.

Even if she felt like following him to the ends of the earth, she knew it wasn't fair to him. Cursing the situation she'd fallen into, she placed her palms on his chest and pushed back from him.

“We can't do this.”

“You're right, we can't start anything here.” He winked, then continued, “Later.” He trailed his finger down her cheek. “We have a lot to discuss. I'm still waiting for your answer to my proposal.”

Rosalind groaned. His expression was so earnest and guileless, she almost didn't follow through with what she knew she had to do.

"Ashley, I can't marry you."

At first, Rosalind thought he took her rejection well, since he didn't say a word, just stood there staring at her with an otherwise-blank expression. But when he shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth, a muscle ticking in his jaw like a time bomb, she knew it was best to get the hell out of Dodge.

When she made a move to leave, though, he grabbed hold of her elbow and brought her back around.

"Ow... Ashley, you're hurting me!"

"Is this another one of your games?" he hissed, ignoring her whimper of pain. "Are you doing this so I'll come running after you like all the other times?"

"No! Ashley, it's not. I swear."

"Then tell me why you won't marry me?"

The lie was on her tongue, but she couldn't do it. Not when he looked so vulnerable and his hand shook on her arm. Rosalind decided to come clean.

"Do you remember all of those times when I told you that you weren't thinking clearly?"

"How could I forget?" He snorted. "That was one of your best defenses. Sorry, sweet cheeks, it won't get you out of this one."

Rosalind shook her head. "The reason I kept telling you that was because my cakes have a special recipe." She almost laughed at his bewilderment, but given the current circumstances, she rushed onward. "Have you ever wondered why everyone from here to Savannah requests my cakes?"

"They're delicious, and they're some of the best I've ever seen."

“Thanks for the compliment.” Rosalind sighed. “But it’s not only that. People around here know that a Fletcher wedding cake brings good luck. The men never stray, the women always keep their men happy, and none have ever faced each other on opposite ends of a divorce courtroom.”

“So what do your cakes have to do with us? We’re not married. Remember, that’s what I’m trying to get you to do.”

“What I’m trying to say is that the recipe for my cakes is derived from an old Gullah recipe handed down from mother to daughter for almost a century, originating with my great-grandmother Trudy. She loved her husband, Albert, so strongly but grew tired of him straying to other women. So, to prevent it from happening, she fixed up a spell, blended it into a cake to satisfy his sweet tooth, and served it to him on their one-year anniversary. From that day on, my great-grandfather Albert only parked his shoes under his wife’s bed.”

Rosalind sighed in relief when he released her arm and stepped back. “If that were the case, then even the wedding guests would be falling over each other.”

“I only put the charm in the batter for the initial cake tasting.”

Ashley nodded his head. “That’s why you guard the Loving Room like a momma bear, and why you went off on me. I bit into the cake you’d made for Stacy and Will.”

“Exactly. So you really aren’t in love with me, Ashley. It’s the cake making you think you are.”

Rosalind waited for him to say something, to call her nuts for this tomfoolery about roots and charms, but he simply stared at her. So she continued, “I tried to break the spell with a gris-gris doll and several different concoctions mixed up in cookies, cakes, and pies, but none of them seemed to work.” Rosalind narrowed her eyes when he suddenly threw his head back and laughed. He didn’t stop until tears rolled down his cheeks and his chest heaved from a lack of oxygen.

“What’s so funny?”

“Everything! All this time I thought you were trying to kill me with all of those god-awful taste testings, but you were simply trying to rid me of some hocus-pocus mumbo jumbo.”

Rosalind put her hands on her hips. She might be sorry for manipulating his feelings, but she wasn’t ashamed of her heritage. “It’s not mumbo jumbo. Grandma Trudy’s spell does work.”

Ashley moved so quickly, pulling her into the circle of his arms, she didn’t have a chance. “I don’t discount the power of your grandmother’s recipe, sweet cheeks. I do, however, discount the fact that you seem to think that my feelings for you were brought on by it.”

Rosalind leaned back to look at him. Her eyes scanned his face. Nope. He didn’t appear to have lost his marbles. She sniffed. He hadn’t started on the free liquor bar. He couldn’t possibly be saying what she thought...no, *hoped* he was saying! As if reading her thoughts, he winked. “Rosalind Fletcher, don’t you realize I’ve wanted you ever since the first day I laid eyes on you?

“Y-you did?” Rosalind felt her heart constrict and then swell.

“Why do you think I send all my clients your way?”

“I-I-I just thought it was the reputation of the cakes.”

“I admit, your cakes are delectable, but the proprietress even more so. I just simply used my clients as a means to visit you on a regular basis.”

“But why didn’t you say anything before? Why act the asshole for so many years?”

Ashley shrugged. “I never saw anything in your demeanor that showed me you would welcome my advances. So, I bided my time by teasing you and getting under your skin, chipping away at your hard outer shell in hopes you would finally let me in. Maybe the recipe did help. It only loosened my reservations and amped up my desire for you a notch or two.”

"It enhanced what was already there," Rosalind whispered.

Ashley tipped her chin up with his index finger. "What did you say?"

Rosalind shook her head. "Nothing. I was just thinking of something my mother told me not too long ago."

"Well, since we have that cleared out of the way, what do you say? Are we going to be jumping the broom soon, or are you going to continue to try and poison me?"

Rosalind laid her head on his chest. Joyous laughter rocked her shoulders. When she looked back up at him, her eyes swam with tears. She opened her mouth, but the French doors leading out to the deck suddenly burst open, and her sister poked her head out, her sweaty curls drooping heavily around her face.

"I hate to break up this reunion, but it's like a zoo in here."

Rosalind slapped her hand over mouth. She'd completely forgotten she'd promised to help her sister serve the guests. When she moved to step out of Ashley's arms, she didn't get very far.

"Where are you going? Don't you think I deserve an answer?"

Rosalind leaned up on tiptoe and covered his mouth. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around his neck as all the love she'd felt for him washed over her. Breaking it off before the urge to sneak away with him overtook her, leaving her sister in the lurch, she stepped back.

"Yes," she whispered.

"What does that mean?" Ashley called. "Does that mean 'Yes, I deserve an answer'? Or 'Yes, I love you and I'll marry you'?"

"Yes to both, Ashley Benedict. Yes, you deserve an answer for all of the undue distress I've caused your stomach. And yes, I love you more than life itself, and nothing would make me happier than being your wife. Will you marry me, Ashley Benedict?"

Chuckling, Ashley pulled her back into his arms. "Yes. But under one condition?"

“Anything, as long as you’re mine forever.”

“I’ll marry you as long as you don’t bake our wedding cake.”

Rosalind pressed her lips together to temper her sudden urge to laugh. Instead, she feigned indignation. “I’m one of the best wedding cake designers around! How can I not bake my own wedding cake?”

“Because at our wedding, I want you to finally be the bride and not the cake baker.”

Recognizing her own words, Rosalind smiled. “Since you put it that way, I guess I’ll make a compromise.”

“And what’s that?”

“I’ll promise not to bake our wedding cake *if* you promise not to stray.”

“Done.”

“And you have my word that I’ll try my best to make you happy.”

“No need to promise that one, sweet cheeks. You’ve already done that by accepting my proposal.”

He then took her hand, and together they walked back inside.

 THE END 

Koko Brown

Koko Brown is a pseudonym for a quintessential romance junkie who once read over 200 Zebra Club novels in less than 30 days the summer before her senior year in high school. A writer in her own right, she self-published and made a profit from a newspaper she distributed to her fellow classmates at the tender age of nine. Unfortunately, the school principal didn't appreciate the competition and put her out of business after one best-selling issue.

Koko continued to write and read everything she could get her hands on. She honed her writing skills as a staff writer on her college's newspaper, writing obituaries for the local newspaper, and teaching English to secondary grade students.

While not writing, Koko loves to travel, having great conversations, thrift store shopping, riding motorcycles (she recently sold a Yamaha 650 Classic), surfing the Internet and working up the nerve to go snowboarding again.

Taige Crenshaw

Taige Crenshaw has been enthralled with the written word from time she picked up her first book. It wasn't long before she started to make up her own tales of romance.

With novels set in today, in alternate dimensions, or in the future, she writes with adventure, fun, sassy heroines, and sexy heroes.

Always hard at work creating new and exciting places Taige can be found curled up with a hot novel with exciting characters when she is not creating her own. Join her in the fun, frolic, interesting people and far reaches of the world in her novels.