

# Book III of the Chevalier Saga

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# Dedication

This book is dedicated with many thanks to Nicole, Yvonne, Raquel, Jeanie, Andrea and Rolanda. Thank you guys for letting me pick your brains, listen to me obsess and pushing me through.

# THE TAMING OF KATRINA BY SHARA AZOD

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### CHAPTER ONE

Aubrey didn't want to go home. Walking out of his cousin's Rance's office building, he knew if he went home sooner or later Remy, Piers, Thierry and Rance would show up, offering to take him out to celebrate his newfound freedom. Aubrey didn't feel like celebrating. He was glad the divorce was final, relieved it had been a painless endeavor, but this was not a cause for celebration. He hoped that Susan was happy. God knows she deserved to be. He had effectively ignored her for the entire five years they had been married. He hoped she would find someone who would treat her like she was the center of their universe.

Getting in his car, he found himself heading out of town toward the west bayou country. An hour later, he turned off Highway 90 to follow a dirt road for about three miles before he spotted a large, square two-story building. There weren't many cars in the parking lot. It was early Thursday afternoon; only the hardcore would be inside the club. That was exactly what he was looking for, after a drink or two he'd find some lonely anonymous woman and take her upstairs. He had no place to be tomorrow, having opted out of teaching summer classes this year. His heart wasn't in it. He wasn't sure he was all that interested in teaching anymore. He still found history fascinating; it allowed him to spend most of his time researching and writing papers he had never published. He now had enough to compile a tome.

Choosing a booth in a darkened corner, Aubrey slouched, whiskey in hand as he surveyed the room. Despite the non-descript exterior, the club kind of looked like an English gentleman's club. There were booths in the back, all covered with butter soft leather, near the dance floor were overstuffed armchairs that could comfortable seat two. The dance floor itself was polished wood. There were no tacky disco balls, no mirrors. Someone walking in from the street probably wouldn't know what to make of it. But then, no one would walk in from the street.

Unbeknownst to his cousins, Aubrey had joined a number of such clubs. Even when he was married he would often disappear into one for hours at a time. Back then, he didn't sleep with other women, he went more to punish himself. His cravings were not like many that frequented these places. He was not really into BDSM in the true definition of the term. His peccadilloes dealt more with control of his partner. Complete absolute control, though only in the bedroom. Nothing turned him on more than a woman granting him unconditional dominance over her pleasure, and nothing turned him off more than a woman who wanted to be dominated out of bed. He had married Susan knowing she did nothing for the appetites that kept him awake and wanting every night. He could never be that man for her; he just wasn't the man she needed. He had been relieved when he finally noticed his wife had left him. Susan required romance — soft music and

candlelight. She liked to be wooed with soft words and gentle caresses. Despite what most people believed. Aubrey was not a soft man. He had nothing against romantic evenings, hell, he enjoyed spoiling a lover, but he needed something more.

Before his marriage he had been easy to find someone to give him what he needed. Although this was well before beauteous Ms. Smith had opened her little pleasure houses, there had been plenty of places to go to meet someone. Back then he was not so much interested in a relationship. The longest he had been with anyone was about six months. The problem was most women who were into being dominated were true submissives. He didn't want a true sub. He wanted someone confident, secure in herself. Someone who would make him work for it. More than anything else, his time with Susan had given him a desire for someone permanent. He didn't want Susan, or anyone remotely like her, but he did want a partner for life. A wife, lover and friend. He had pretty good idea who that woman would be. It was just going to be hell getting her to agree.

For now, he would settle for one night with a willing partner. The woman he really wanted rarely came to this club. That was why he chose to drive all the way out here. He wasn't so sure he could stop himself from taking what he really wanted.

"Why so glum?"

Aubrey was jerked out of his ruminations by the voice that haunted his dreams. He watched warily as she slipped into the booth, sitting directly opposite of him. She reached over to take a small drink out his glass, leaving a perfect outline of her rose colored lipstick on the rim. His dick twitched as she set the glass back in front of him.

"Well?" she asked when he remained silent, arching a perfect russet eyebrow in expectation.

Katrina Smith was a true red bone. Her golden skin held a distinctive reddish tint; her hair was deep russet with natural gold highlights. Her world-wary eyes were the color of rich sherry, large and expressive. She wasn't short, nor was she tall, standing at five feet six inches. She had the body of a 1950s pin-up girl. She had the perfect hourglass shape, all ripe in just the right places. She wore clothes that accentuated her figure, but couldn't really be called provocative. She also happened to be one of the sharpest lawyers in the city. Aside from the ones who belonged to one of her many clubs, her clients would never have guessed she was the owner of the largest chain of alternative lifestyle social establishments in the South. Many called her the Grand Mistress. She carried herself as a dominatrix, even dressed as one after hours from time to time. But Aubrey knew nothing could be farther from the truth. He had been watching her for quite some time.

Katrina was begging to be taken by a man strong enough to take her. Not so much dominated in her life – she was likely to kill any man who tried. Rather, she was in desperate need of a man who would not bend so easily to her will. For some unknown reason, the only men Katrina had been attached to in anyone's memory were decidedly on the submissive side. It made absolutely no sense. She damn near shimmered with sexual frustration. It wasn't like she couldn't find what she needed in abundance. Aubrey was damned glad she hadn't, but it was puzzling.

There was a darkness about her, an unapproachable aura that kept most men away. Shadows lurked in those sherry colored eyes of hers. Watching her too closely always gave him a sense of deep melancholy. Those who were bold enough to approach her never managed to touch her in a real way. Not the way Aubrey burned to touch her.

"So I guess that means you aren't going to answer me."

"My divorce became final today," he finally answered. "And I am not glum."

"Oh," Katrina responded. "Sorry. I didn't realize."

She was sorry. Aubrey was a decent kind of guy. She knew he was a Dom, just as she most of her regular members predilections. Word was he was kind of on the gentle side, liking to dominate but not really into many kinks. Subs loved him. He had only started actually sleeping with female

members recently, since he wife left him. She respected that about him. Most of her female V.I.P. members were crazy about him, even the Dommes. Like his cousins, Aubrey was an extremely handsome man. Tall, well built and with those distinct Chevalier blue-green eyes. But where the rest of his cousins had jet-black hair, Aubrey's hair was reddish brown. The women he had been with claimed he was not only physically gorgeous, but he was wonderfully masterful, knowing just where to touch a woman among many other things.

She often wondered what it would be like to be with someone like that. Someone who would not only take charge, but would bring her all the pleasure she could take, and then some. She had plenty of opportunities to be with a Dom, but she chose not to. She couldn't give anyone that kind of power over her, no matter how much she might secretly carve it. Trusting a man with everything you were was a dangerous proposition and she was not about take that kind of chance.

"There is nothing to be sorry about," Aubrey replied watching her closely. He had good idea of the thoughts running through that beautiful head of hers. She thought it dangerous to give a man dominion over her. Not only did she not trust men in general, she didn't trust herself. "Susan and I never should have married. We were completely incompatible. I am not glum; I just didn't feel like dealing with my cousins tonight."

Katrina could understand that one. Not that she was begrudged Angelique and Regina their happiness or anything, but it was hard to be around the newlyweds. First of all, Thierry was usually not far from wherever Angelique happened to be. Remy was worse, being that Regina was pregnant. And secondly, there was only so much kissy face, lovey-dovey bullshit an innocent bystander could take. Regina had been increasingly unavailable lately. Jade was, well Jade. As smart as Katrina's law partner was, she could be incredibly ditsy at times.

Poor Jade was being pursued by Rance Chevalier, although she didn't realize it. Right now she was "assisting" Rance in one of the many pro-bono cases he had recently acquired, as she had been doing more and more lately. Katrina wished Rance would stop beating around the bush and just tell Jade how he felt about her and get the whole thing over with. She had no doubt Jade felt the same way about him; the other woman just needed a little push in the right direction.

"So why did you come all the way out here?" Katrina asked, taking another drink from his glass.

To avoid running into you, Aubrey thought to himself. Aloud he simply stated, "Just wanted to be alone."

Katrina nodded. She could understand that. She came out here because she just didn't feel like being "on" tonight for her many patrons, and she couldn't quite bring herself to go to her lonely apartment. It was just a little too pathetic. She chose lovers carefully; usually men with just a touch of submissiveness (she just couldn't bring herself to be with a true Sub). Men who wouldn't be in town too long. He last "relationship" lasted about a month. That had been well over a year ago. She was lonely, but not really needy. Because her sex life had rarely been exciting, she really didn't miss that the physical side of being with someone. She missed closeness, no matter who false it was. Pretending in a lovers arms was a hell of a lot easier than pretending on your own.

"I'll leave you to it then."

Before she could move to ease out of the booth, a surprisingly strong hand grabbed her wrist. A bolt of pure electricity shot straight up her arm.

"Stay."

Katrina looked up startled and found herself ensnared by deep turquoise eyes. He didn't look away as he repeated the command.

"Stay. I don't wish you to leave."

*I don't wish you to leave?* Spoken like a Dom. Still she didn't move.

"Look, Aubrey," she began carefully, still not quite able to look away from his very direct gaze. "You're a decent guy and all, but I'm not into the domineering type."

Aubrey couldn't help but give her sad little grin. "Aren't you?"

That brought her up short. She had spent her entire adult life cultivating a certain persona of a strong, independent woman, which she was. But she knew that giving off even a hint that she might be submissive invited a type of man she just didn't want to deal with. There was no way this sexy, bookish man could have seen through her carefully crafted façade. While she might well be strong and independent, there was a part of her that carved to be conquered absolutely and unreservedly. He couldn't know that.

"No." She meant it to come out in a clear, firm voice, but was little more than a whisper.

"Oh, I think you do, dahlin'."

Katrina had never heard Aubrey's voice sound like that, all sonorous and sexy with a deep Louisiana drawl that was unlike anything found throughout the South. All of sudden he looked nothing like the absent-minded professor she thought she knew and very much like a predator. She shook her head slowly, unwilling to believe the change that had happened right before her eyes. Or had he always been like that? Maybe she just missed it before. Generally, she was very careful to observe people who entered her sphere. She wanted to know exactly who she was dealing with. But this time, she had not seen what lurked just underneath the skin with Aubrey Chevalier. She wasn't sure what kind of fool that made her.

"Are you scared, *chere*? Don't be. I won't hurt you."

Wouldn't he? Aubrey was something she just was not used to dealing with. Not that he was a Dom, but he was a chameleon. He was a wolf in sheep's clothing. God help her, but she might be well and truly trapped.

### CHAPTER TWO

"Come with me."

"I can't."

Aubrey frowned as Katrina tugged, trying to get her hand back. He could feel the heat radiating from her skin, see her breath deepening, see her nipples hardening. But there was stark fear in her eyes. She was near panic. This was not the Katrina he had come to know. She looked more frightened than a virgin facing a gang bang.

"What is it?"

His tone brooked no argument, and he could tell immediately he had made it worse. Tiny pebbles of sweat broke out on her brow, she was panting just a little, and it wasn't from excitement. What the hell?

He released her, not knowing what else to do.

"Katrina, I-"

"I have to go."

Katrina jumped to her feel and practically ran. Half way to the door, she remembered to *check* her gait, slowing down only enough to not attract prying eyes. *He* was watching. She could feel those eyes boring into her back. She had to get out of here and far, far away from Aubrey Chevalier. The man saw entirely too much.

She had actually been tempted. One command and she wanted to jump. There was no way she could ever allow that. There was no way she could ever think to even taste what he had to offer. Like a hypnotizing snake offering her a piece of scrumptious fruit, she had wanted to take a bite. She would be lying if she didn't admit to herself if she didn't admit she wanted him. Katrina had never been fond of ignoring the truth. Self delusion was a danger she couldn't afford to indulge in. Her panties got damp whenever Aubrey was anywhere in the vicinity. She knew immediately when he walked into a room. She could almost taste his kiss. Almost.

She wanted his lips on her, everywhere. She wanted to feel what it was like to lay in his arms, just once. But she couldn't do it. Every time she talked herself into just one little nibble, terror swamped her before she could take a single step. She couldn't do it. She couldn't take that step. She was physically incapable of being with anyone she couldn't control. She needed to be the dominant in any relationship like she needed air.

The problem was that she got no satisfaction in those relationships. After a while, she stopped even trying. It was so pathetic to yearn for something and not be able to ever experience it. She lay in her bed at night, her body burning with desperate need, but it would never be fulfilled. Her own hands were poor substitutes for the firm, warm caress of a lover. Toys were laughable when it came to this itch. They could never scratch it. Hell,

she had even tried being with a woman. Nothing but nothing could erase the fantasies that lived in her brain. No one was close to making her wet and needy like Aubrey.

It wasn't until she was down the road and a safe enough distance away from the club that she allowed the bitter tears that always seemed to linger so close to the surface to flow. It wasn't fair to want so badly and never be able to partake. She saw the women that flocked to Aubrey and envied them their ability to give themselves so freely. As appalled as she was that they could allow themselves to be controlled by any man, she could understand it with Aubrey. She hated them. She wanted to be them. She looked at them with disdain. Once or twice she had been tempted to snatch some chick's hair out by the roots for touching him. But he wasn't hers; she had no right to feel such things.

Ah, but to be with him...

This way lies heartbreak, disaster and worse.

She had to remember that. She must repeat it as her mantra.

This time, words repeated in her head held little comfort. Half of her wanted to turn right back around and grab what Aubrey was offering. The other half was doing the sensible thing – getting the hell out of dodge.

Aubrey watched Karina flee with a mixture of frustration and trepidation. He had known it was a bad idea to mess with her this soon. He

had avoided her because he knew he wouldn't be able to resist her. If he was with her just once, he would want more. A junkie knew well his drug of choice, his was Katrina. He also knew it was way too soon. She didn't trust him, and he had given no reason why she should.

He had been avoiding Katrina, not because he didn't want to be around her, he wanted to be around her a little too much. She intrigued him. In fact, she drove him crazy. There was a deep barely suppressed sensuality that was much more than the sex kitten Domme façade she put on for the world. He wanted badly to be the man to set her free, but not for the assholes that belonged to the clubs she owned. She wanted her all to himself. He wanted to be the only one she let her hair down for. Once he had allowed others to rule his life. He knew better than most what it was like to live confined, locking your true desired inside a little box never to be opened. He wanted to let Katrina out of her box.

The more he watched her, the perplexed her became. She seemed such a walking contradiction. Thierry's marriage to Angelique allowed him to see her outside her clubs without the face she put on for her customers and members. Gone was the smirky, sexual being she was inside the clubs. She didn't slither when she walked, her voice didn't purr. She was still tough as nails, but she was real. Her straightforward dry humor turned him on more than any sensual act she put on.

She didn't trust men in general, he had observed that much. What he had never suspected was the reasons might not be as mundane as he had imagined.

What had just happened here went beyond just a simple wariness of a man she didn't know that well. Katrina had been terrified by something. Aubrey was very afraid he had a rough idea why. The sheen of sweat on her forehead was not from the fear of giving up control - not in a general sense. She was trembling in fear before she had taken off. He couldn't shake the sensation of deep foreboding freezing the breath in his lungs.

Fuck no. Not Katrina.

A rage unlike any he had ever known choked him, making him gasp for breath. Someone somewhere had hurt her badly. That unapproachable air of hers wasn't about some boyfriend who had cheated on her once. This wasn't so simple. Her hurt went down to her soul. Those incredible sherry colored eyes had glazed over and gone far away. There was something broken inside her.

There would be no one night stands tonight. He had lost his taste for it.

Damn, he hadn't even so much as kissed her, and already he felt her brand across his heart just as surely as if she had taken the branding iron to it herself. Subconsciously rubbing his chest, Aubrey considered his options. There were only two; leave her alone, or work like hell to get past that fortress wall she had erected against all things male. It would be selfish as hell to just go after her knowing how she felt and suspecting the reason for it.

What did she really need? He was no psychiatrist, so he really couldn't say. Would it be the right thing to just give up for her own peace of mind? Every fiber in him rebelled against that. He wanted her, and not just in the physical sense. He wanted *her*. But was he doing her any favors by perusing her?

Only one person could possibly have the answers, and he was going to get them.

### CHAPTER THREE

Regina eyed Aubrey with a mixture of amusement and shock. This was so not the Aubrey she though she knew. She doubted his cousin knew this Aubrey either. Here he was, trying hard to keep completely still in the chair in front of her desk, sans glasses, looking every bit as fierce as Thierry or Rance. Even his usual "professor" clothes were gone. He wore a form fitting black button down, black slacks, black loafers. His auburn hair still was a little long and unkempt, but the overall effect could be devastating to an unsuspecting female. Nice, very nice-though nowhere near as sexy as her Remy.

And he didn't seem to have a clue.

"Why do you hide yourself behind that absent minded professor persona?" It wasn't what he was here for, but she really, really wanted to know.

"What?"

Aubrey seemed to be thrown by that one, so Regina elaborated.

"Look at you," she waved her hand in his general direction. "Whenever you are gathered with your cousins, you are in some kind of professor type get up. Plain white shirt, some form of tweed. And the glasses. You don't need glasses at all do you?"

At least he had the grace to blush.

"No."

"Then why the subterfuge?"

Aubrey squirmed in his seat, his frown more pronounced. "I am not here for me," he groused. "But if answering your question will get me the answers I need-"

"Yes, yes, it will."

Sighing, he ran his hands distractedly through his hair. Damn, he hadn't thought this would be this hard. He knew if anyone knew Katrina's secrets, it would be Regina. He wasn't asking Regina to betray her friend's trust, not that she would anyway. Regina was a trained professional, a certified doctor. She would know what would be the best way for him to proceed. He figured the good doctor would want to protect her best friend. He had not suspected she would dig into his psyche.

"It is, was, easier," he admitted. It wasn't easy to say it out loud, but if anything was worth it, Katrina was.

"Was?"

"I did my time," he was aware of the slight bitterness in his voice, but damn he had! He had married the woman his grandmother had handpicked; he had pursued the profession she had decreed he should have. How much of his life was he supposed to give? "And perhaps, it kept Lady Rienne out of your business?" Regina knew she was pushing, but it became more and more important to her that she knew what was going on with Aubrey before she told him a thing to help in his pursuit of Katrina.

The last thing in the world Katrina needed was a man who was unsure who he was. As it stood, any man interested in a serious relationship with her would have to tread very carefully. Regina also wanted to be sure this wasn't some kind of contagious thing with these Chevalier men.

It was just too much of a coincidence that not one, not two, but three of them were all interested in African American women. Four if one was to count Rance, which she didn't seeing as Rance had been all into Jade long before Thierry and Angelique even met. Regina also doubted he would ever do anything about it. He didn't want his grandmother, the infamous Lady Rienne, anywhere near Jade. Given that she had tried to have Angelique killed for taking away the Chevalier Golden Boy, Regina didn't blame him. Lady Rienne would pop a blood vessel if Rance were to defect to the "Dark Side" also.

"I know what you're thinking," Aubrey growled at her. "And you are dead wrong."

"What am I thinking, Aubrey?"

He didn't care for her tone one bit. The speculation in her eyes made his blood boil.

"You think it is some kind of fetish. All of us being attracted to black women." He was sneering, he knew he shouldn't, but damn it, couldn't a man just be attracted to a woman because of who she was. "I am not even going to pretend I know why. I frankly could care less. All I know is how I feel about Katrina. It wouldn't matter to me what color she was."

"But she just happens to be black," Regina pointed out unnecessarily.

"As am I, as is Angel, as is Jade..."

She let her sentence trail off, he got the point.

To his credit, Aubrey didn't flinch. He didn't turn away to look the least bit sheepish or guilty. He looked pissed. He narrowed his eyes, leaned forward and met her gaze unwavering.

"And?"

Well, damn. That was positively Rance-esque.

"Okay, I'll help you." He had just told her what she needed to know.

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Aubrey's head spun with everything Regina had told him, but he was enraged by everything she hadn't said.

Not once had Regina gone into whatever it was in Katrina's past that made her do wary of men, but she hadn't needed to. The advice she had to give spoke volumes.

Never touch her without invitation. Don't crowd her. Stay clear of blatantly sexual conversations. Never, ever lie or keep anything from her. No secrets, no half truths. Give her space, but if you're serious, don't ever let her believe you are only interested in one thing. Be attentive, be gentle, but don't let her manipulate you. Don't ever show weakness.

Everything Regina had told him was written in stone in his head. He had pumped for all the information he was going to get, but there were two very important things he needed to do before he began his courtship in earnest. Dealing with his grandmother, Lady Rienne, was going to be the hardest.

The older woman pretty much ignored him for the most part. He had married properly; he was a respectable professor, a leader in his field. By all appearance, he was the ideal grandson, more or less. Being his profession was education, she had never expected too much of him, but then, he had planned it that way. Cowardly of him, but it was far easier than dealing in the realm of power like Thierry, Rance, Uncle Boden, or Uncle Beaumont. As long as he kept up appearances, the old woman stayed out of his hair. That was the reason he became a professor; it was the reason he never bothered to

pay attention to most anything but his historical research. It kept Lady Rienne off his back.

When he stumbled across a dearly held secret of his family, he had kept it close to his breast, knowing one day it might come in handy.

Today was the day.

His stomach roiled when he pulled up to the Chevalier estate. This was not going to be pretty.

"Aubrey! I hope you are here to tell me you are going to collect that wayward wife of yours!"

Lady Rienne looked older. The lines in her face deeper, her frown seemed to be permanently etched on her face.

She wasn't taking Remy's marriage and impending fatherhood well. Aubrey had no idea what Remy, or more likely his twin Rance, had against the old lady, but thus far she hadn't even attempted to do anything crazy against Regina, Remy's wife. Given what she had done to try to stop Thierry from marrying Angelique, the lovely daughter of the New Orleans's mayor, it was downright amazing she had more or less left Regina and Remy alone.

Aubrey had to find a way to make sure she would treat Katrina with the same hands off policy.

"I am divorced," he replied dryly, watching his grandmother make a great show of studying the paperwork on her desk.

It had been hard on her; even he would be willing to admit that. She had left the boards of no less than five charities after Thierry's marriage. He imagined the "requests" that she step down from many others and leave some organizations given that yet another of her grandsons had married an African American woman.

The so called "New South" was full of contradictions. There might have been more African American elected officials, more people of color who owned businesses and inhabited the middle and upper classes, but life was still segregated, especially in the circles Lady Rienne ran in. She was the queen of old Southern society, had clawed her way to the top, and now her grandchildren were pulling her down from her perch.

However, it was a perch to which she didn't really belong. None of them did. He wondered when she was going to realize, if ever she would. Money and power was not enough for her. She wanted the envy of all of Louisiana. Well, hell she had that. Aubrey would be a fool to even think their family would have gotten to where it was had the truth been known. It wasn't that he and his cousins didn't appreciate their place in the world. It was simply the price had been too high.

What does it profit a man to gain the world and lose his soul?

This was something Lady Rienne would have to answer for herself.

"I am planning on seeing someone new," he began, seating himself in front of the desk.

He hated this study. All peach pastels, it was the epitome of class and style, personifying, supposedly, the woman who now sat behind her desk. He should have felt some amount of sorrow, some guilt for what he was about to do, but he felt none.

"Aubrey," Lady Rienne's voice became stringent. It was the tone she used when she did not want to be gainsaid. "You will not tell me you too have chosen a completely inappropriate woman! Remy wasn't to be helped, Thierry was a tragedy, but you! Do not let the impudence of your cousins sway you!"

And this was why he felt no pity. Her delusions knew no bounds.

"I wasn't asking your permission."

He watched, somewhat fascinated as her face turned several interesting shades of red and purple. Her hands crushed the paper in her grip. "I forbid it! Whatever you *think* you are doing, you had best think again!" Her voice was no more than a hiss, but of course, the Lady Rienne would never be so crass as to raise her voice.

"Again, I did not come here for your permission. I came to warn you."

There was no way Aubrey could have known she had received a similar "warning" not more than two weeks before. Aubrey and Rance? Lady Rienne's head began to pound unmercifully. Was this in some way her fault? Had her

blood tainted her grandchildren? What was there unholy fascination with dark women? What could she possibly do to prevent this?

She had been sloppy with Angelique. The little bitch had Thierry so thoroughly wrapped around her fingers, Rienne hadn't been able to get close enough. She had waited too late. Well, she would not make that mistake again!

Did they really think by stationing the detestable Didier in her home they would be able to control her? She did not get to where she was today without quite a few contacts. She wasn't about to lose another grandson to this-this predilection for dark meat!

"Aubrey, you are historian," she had to force herself to calm down. She couldn't afford to give the boy a hint of what she was about. "I am sure you have heard of this phenomenon before."

"And what phenomena would that be?" He knew; he wanted her to say it out loud.

"The same one that had many a master sneaking into the salve cabins" Lady Rienne drawled waving her hand airily in the air. "The thrill of the forbidden. African women were so much more...free with themselves. More earthy. I suppose it is still true of their descendants."

Aubrey gripped his seat in an effort not to do anything he would regret. She dared to sit there and act as if an entire group of people was beneath her. "Well, my dear Grandmother, you should know." He waited as her face drained of all color as his true meaning sunk in. "Yes, I am a historian. I have spent countless hours going through parish records and tracing bloodlines. I will admit, you did a very good job of covering your tracks, but not well enough. I am warning you now for once and for all, stay out of my personal affairs, or you will be sorry."

"You would not destroy your entire family! Think of your uncles! It would ruin Beaumont's political career?"

"Perhaps," or it could enhance it. "But at least the Chevalier clan would finally be free of all your secrets and lies."

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

"Hello, Katrina."

Katrina jumped at the sound of his voice in her ear. Aubrey.

Since the day at her club she had dreamed of him. Every night she lay awake wishing she could lie in his arms.

She had known coming to one of Thierry and Angelique's brunches, he would be here too. She had to be some kind of masochist, and not the good kind, to torment herself like this. She couldn't have him, not the way she wanted to.

"Go away, Aubrey," she hissed, knowing that he wouldn't. Or what was more, that she didn't want him to.

She noticed the tweeds and the glasses were gone. She appeared to be the only one who noticed. His cousins treated him the same way the always had. Not bad – all of the younger Chevalier men seem to have a healthy respect for one another. They just talked to him like they knew he wasn't really paying attention. Usually he wasn't. It amazed her that men as sharp as Thierry and Rance, who usually missed nothing going on in their family would be so blind when it came to Aubrey.

"Do you really want me to?"

Ah, but he was astute.

"No," she admitted. "But don't read anything into that."

Aubrey raised his hands in mock surrender. Right, like she believed that for one second.

"I won't, I promise."

He was adorable when he pretended to be all innocent like that. The naughty gleam in his eyes made her heart flutter. She wanted to lean forward and rub herself against his body; she even caught herself swaying in his general direction before pulling herself back. He didn't miss it. One eyebrow rose, but thankfully he didn't comment.

"How have you been?" he asked, leaning against the wall.

Katrina shivered under his heated gaze. His eyes swept down her body like a caress, but he didn't move to touch her. Casting a quick glance around she noticed no one was paying them the least bit of attention. Why would they? She was one of New Orleans greatest "Madames" without owning an out and out brothel. She was the sex kitten every man wanted, though none could claim to have had. Aubrey was a history professor. He lived in his research and books. He was the type of man who didn't notice when his own wife left him.

Which didn't make any sense now that she thought about it.

"You knew when your wife left you didn't you?" She had to know.

Maybe others saw him as the type who wouldn't, but she knew better.

"Yeah, I noticed," a sly grin accompanied the confession. "I just couldn't move myself to do anything to stop it. Though after she was gone, I really did lose track of time before I said anything."

"That sounded callous." Maybe she was right to keep him at arm's length.

"We were both miserable. We married to make our families happy. She didn't want to be my wife any more than I wanted to be her husband."

"There must have been a time-"

"There wasn't."

It sounded so final, so sure. She believed him.

"Why do you allow people to think of you as some kind of distracted nerd?"

It was Aubrey's turn to look around. He needed to have this conversation with her, but not be overheard. He wanted to get things on track with her before bringing the rest of the clan in.

"Will you come somewhere with me?"

It was probably too soon to ask her that, but he took the chance.

"Yes."

He didn't wait for her to change her mind. He didn't bother making polite excuses to his cousins or Katrina's friends. He touched only her arm and only with gentle pressure, but he guided her swiftly out of the side door.

"Did you drive?"

Katrina's heart went into overdrive as she shook her head. What the hell was she doing? And why?

In her head, she knew she couldn't really trust any man, no matter how trustworthy they appeared to be on the outside.

Yet she trusted Aubrey. She couldn't say she wasn't scared, because she was. Her panic didn't overshadow her excitement though. She had no idea what would happen, but she wanted to see.

"No," she was surprised her voice sounded as steady and clear as it did.

"Jade and I got a ride with Remy and Regina."

"Rance will see that Jade gets home."

And he would. Rance would make damn sure Jade got home. Too bad he seemed unwilling to do anything else. But that was really not her concern right now.

"Where are we going?" Katrina asked once she was in the car.

Aubrey looked over to where she sat. Her body was still, her hands clutching the door as if she would jump out at any second. Someplace public it was. But not one of her clubs. He'd be damned if he would take her there.

"How about a café?" There were nice and open. She could get away at any time if she felt the need.

Katrina was vaguely disappointed, but relieved at the same time. She wanted to spent time with him. Since the afternoon at the club, she had thought of little else. But she knew she would freeze the moment he started to make a move. She couldn't have that. She had to be in complete control of herself and any situation she found herself in. So pulling up the small neighborhood café was perfect.

No matter how much her body was crying out for more.

"You haven't been to any of my clubs lately," Katrina commented once they seated in a back corner table.

Not that she had been looking for him, but she had noticed.

Aubrey shrugged. Knowing what he now knew about Katrina, seeing her in one of her fetish clubs was the last thing he wanted. He had considered dropping by her office and asking her to lunch, but it would have been too easy for her to say no. He knew he would eventually see her at Thierry's or at Remy's restaurant.

"I found what I wanted," Aubrey leaned back in his chair, looking at her intently. He didn't want there to be any misunderstandings about his intentions. "No one else will do. I just have to work for it."

Katrina wasn't the type of woman to fall for pretty words. Suave men did nothing for her. There was just something about the way he said it, straight forward and matter-of-factly that made her breath catch. He wasn't trying to be smooth. He was laying it out on the table.

"And if you get the one you want? What then?"

Was that really her that asked that? She knew what would happen. Everything would be all roses for a short time, then it would fall to shit. Especially when he found out about her past.

She couldn't take that. She didn't want to see the disgust in his eyes when he learned about the real Katrina.

"Never mind," she cut him off before he could answer. "It doesn't matter."

"Katrina..." Did he want to go there? No, he decided. Too soon. "You asked me why I hide my, uh, true self to my cousins. I would like to give you the answers."

"You don't own me anything."

"Oh, but I do," he insisted. "I want you to know. Even if you think it won't make a difference, I want to tell you."

He waited, making sure she understood his meaning before continuing.

When she finally shrugged, he continued.

"At first, it was a defense against Lady Rienne. As long as I was studious, kept my head down and my nose buried in a book, she never bothered me much. She didn't try to organize my life like she did the rest.

She was content to let me teach and research. I saw what she did to the others, especially Thierry and Rance. They never had a chance, after a while it became a habit. It was easier to live in hiding than it was to live. It became more than a habit, but part of who I was. Kind of a fractured man."

"And now you have decided to come out, so to speak?"

"Yeah, something like that?"

"For me?"

If he told her it was all for her, she would run. And he wouldn't blame her.

"No, Katrina. For me. Partly because I can't have you any other way and partly because I don't want to live like that anymore. I want to be with you, and to answer your earlier question, I plan to keep you, forever."

That was what she was afraid of. It could never happen. She might want it as badly as he seemed to, but it was not in the cards.

"You don't find it odd that damn near every one of your cousins is into black chicks?" She said it to deflect the seriousness of the moment, but she was curious about that little fact also.

Aubrey gave her a look she couldn't interpret, opened his mouth, then closed it again. For a minute there, she didn't think he was going to answer her.

"No, I don't find it odd at all."

He didn't say anything more, just sat there looking uncomfortable as hell. It was not Katrina's turn to raise an eyebrow, letting him know she wasn't going to beg, but she expected her question to be answered.

"Look, Katrina, I would love to tell you more, but we haven't quite reached that stage yet."

"And you seriously expect us to with an answer like that?"

She wasn't being fair and she knew it.

"No Katrina, I don't, which is why one day I will tell you. But not today. Maybe at lunch tomorrow?"

She had to smile at that one. He was good.

## CHAPTER FIVE

"I can't believe you're seeing Aubrey!" Jade's voice was more of an excited whisper.

Katrina knew the usual Sunday brunch with the girls would be brutal. She had considered not coming, but that would have been a chicken shit thing to do. Besides, she wasn't seeing Aubrey, not exactly. They were hanging out. She found she actually liked to be around him, which was unusual. She didn't generally like to be around men, they worked her nerves on so many levels, and no matter what they said, if they were straight, they were thinking of ways to get in your pants. Who had time for that?

Not that Aubrey wasn't looking for a way into her pants. He was very honest about that. The good professor was also looking for a way into her heart. That was so not going to happen, but it was fun letting him try.

"I am not seeing Aubrey, he is a friend." She hoped that would be the end of the conversation.

She was wrong.

"Aren't you the one always telling us a man can't be your friend? That he was either a gay, which makes him a girlfriend, or he was a potential, just in case?" Angelique teased, her eyes shining with laughter.

It was wonderful to see Angel all happy and carefree. Her mother, well, stepmother as it turned out, had always treated her like dirt. Katrina had

been tempted more than once to slap the bougie bitch silly. Angelique was one the sweetest people Katrina had ever met; to see her eyes all shining with an inner glow after those dark shadows that had been so pronounced when they all though Angel would marry Paul Guidry, demon-from-hell, was truly satisfying. Katrina had been shocked as shit when Thierry, who was also her silent business partner in some of her earlier clubs, had ordered her in his office and demanded to know why Angel had been dancing at one of the out of the way clubs all alone with no protection. Of course, Katrina hadn't known her friend had chosen to go out there and shake her groove thing on stage on the night in question. There was no way she would have ever allowed her to go out there alone.

Thierry was good for Angelique.

If only...No, there was no point in thinking like that.

"And how far do you think he would take our relationship if he knew about my past?"

The faces of the other three women at the table immediately fell. She really hadn't meant to bring them all down like that, but she wasn't about to sit here and pretend she could ever have a future with Aubrey was just a little more than she could bear right now.

"Katrina you don't know-"

"Come on, Jade, really?" Katrina scoffed. "Going up against the crazy Grandmother is one thing. Do you really think he would be willing to do that for a former prostitute?"

Silence, averted eyes. Yeah, they were her girls, but that always seemed to bring them up short.

"You don't have to tell him," Regina suggested.

Of all people, Regina? Regina the head shrink telling her to keep something from a potential...whatever the hell he was?

"Now that wouldn't make for a 'healthy' relationship, would it?" she couldn't help but sneer. They all knew the suggestion was pure bullshit.

"Katrina, it wasn't your fault..." Angelique began, but Katrina had had about enough.

"You know what, forget it," throwing down her napkin, she fished some money out of her purse and threw that too in the general direction of the table.

Tears she had refused to shed up till now threaten to overflow, she damn sure couldn't be in public should they decide to spill over.

Pity. She saw it in their eyes when they briefly refused to look at her. She couldn't take it.

"And Jade, you need to stop with the rabbit food," pointing to her partner's salad. "You aren't meant to be a size two; you're starting to look sick."

Wasn't the first time she had pointed that out, but Jade's eating habits were beginning to upset her. The woman was not looking healthy. Nor was this first brunch she had stormed out on because of Aubrey. The damn man was turning her life upside down.

#### And for what?

The tears burned, she couldn't hold them back. She was trying to wipe them away when she ran right smack into the man in question himself.

He didn't ask a thing, just enfolded her in the strongest arms she had ever felt. Was this what it felt like? Katrina could honestly say she had never felt safe or secure in any man's arms. She couldn't really recall the last time she was held. She knew there were eyes watching, and she couldn't bring herself to care. Angelique, Jade and Katrina were likely gaping with their tongues hanging out. She didn't care about any of it.

Just this once, Katrina wanted to take comfort in the strong arms offered her, even if they were a danger to her piece of mind. Just this once, she wanted to know what it felt like to be cherished, even if for a little while. Running and hiding was wearing her out. She was just so damn tired of

never knowing what it felt like to be with a real man, someone who took charge and made her feel like she was all woman. Aubrey's woman.

"Take me somewhere," she cried Aubrey's solid chest. "Away from everything, everyone."

Aubrey took in a harsh breath. His emotions ran the gambit between shock, outrage, and pity. He had to ruthlessly suppress the latter, she wouldn't appreciate it. Most of all, he wanted to make the hurt and pain he had heard in her voice go away. He would give all he had to make it all better.

"Katrina, are you sure you want this?"

Could he hold back? He didn't think so. The woman was constantly the star of his dreams, dreams that would probably make her run screaming if she only knew. Thus far, he had only met her in public; it was safer for the both of them. He had tried to keep Regina's warnings in the forefront of his mind whenever he was with her. It didn't help the raging hard-ons that were every present whenever he saw her. It didn't ease the burning need for her even a little. Not touching her was killing him. He didn't want to move from this spot, now that she was all yielding in his arms, he didn't want to let her out of his embrace. He was terrified he might never feel her like this again.

More than anything, he didn't want to fuck this up.

"I'm sure," her fingers dug into the flesh on his back, her body trembled against his.

He should say no. If he had half a brain, he would take home, or someplace public-safe. Heaven help him, he wanted her. He wanted to show her he didn't give a damn about where she had been, only where she was going. And he intended to be with him wherever that was.

"Come on, my car is over here."

He prayed she wouldn't regret this. He would just have to make damn sure she didn't.

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That was all it took, and Katrina found herself in his car, heading away from New Orleans for that matter.

"Where are we going?' she asked nervously. What the hell was she doing?

Living a fantasy, the little voice in her head told her. It wasn't comforting, but it was damned exciting.

"Trust, Katrina. I promise I won't hurt you," Aubrey answered, casting a quick glance in her direction.

Patience, he told himself. He was taking her to a country house he purchased a few months back. He had bought it fully furnished on a whim from a professor who was relocating to a university out of state. He'd only

been there a couple of times when he didn't want to be bothered. It was quiet and out of the way. He had no intentions of sleeping with her, yet. She had to be able to trust him. This was just to begin that process.

It took an hour to get to the house. Katrina squirmed in her seat. Aubrey hadn't looked away from the road, hadn't touched her in any way, yet she had the feeling his attention was focused completely on her. He didn't speak, leaving her nerves on edge. When he pulled off the main highway to a dirt road she felt her heart pounding so loud she was sure he could hear it.

"Are you nervous, *chere*?"

The sound of his voice, deep and sensual, made her jump. His accent was much more pronounced. Generally, Aubrey didn't have much of an accent.

"No," she lied watching as they drove down a canopy road, not a building in sight. It was a good twenty minutes before she spotted a house off in the distance. It was a massive typical southern plantation type manor house, though there were no surrounding fields of crops or any other visible evidence that it might have been just that. Aubrey drove up the circular drive and stopped right in front of the door. She stayed seated until he came around to open her door and hand her out of the car.

"Did you have any plans for tonight?" he asked as he guided her up the front steps.

Katrina didn't miss his deliberate choice of words. Not "Do you have any plans," but "Did you have any plans." Normally, she would have told a guy off for presuming too much, but the way Aubrey said it held a promise she was anxious to see fulfilled. She had asked for this, practically begged for it. She wasn't going to back out now because of a case of nerves.

He unlocked the door and waved her inside. Katrina stepped into the foyer and turned to face him.

"If I did?" She didn't know why she asked. She didn't, and even if she did, she wanted this.

Aubrey closed and locked the door behind them, then set his keys on a small table located a few feet from the door before turning to face her. He stared silently until she began to shift from on foot to another.

"I won't force you to stay, Katrina," he informed. "But I can and will force you not to want to leave."

That was all it took for her panties to go damp, and he hadn't even touched her.

"Come," he told her, turning to move deeper into the darkened house.

Katrina followed silently up a curving staircase and into a room to the right. She was both relieved and disappointed to see it wasn't a bedroom. Unsure what to expect, she stood by the door while Aubrey lit a single lamp by a rather large leather easy chair. In the weak light she could see the room

appeared to be a library of sorts. Two walls were lined with floor to ceiling bookshelves, all full of books. The room itself was done in light browns and tans, very masculine and sparsely furnished. The only other furniture in the room was an armchair next to the leather easy chair and a window seat underneath the large window. Aubrey settled into the easy chair, so Katrina moved towards the chair next to him.

"Come here, Katrina."

She froze and looked toward him.

"You can sit right here," he told her patting his lap.

She swallowed and moved to perch on his knees. He simply chuckled and lifted her to settle her firmly on his lap, then eased the chair all the way back, gently pushing her head down on his shoulder. She wasn't altogether sure what she had been expecting, but cuddling hadn't really come to mind.

"When was the last time you were with anyone?" Aubrey asked casually while stroking her back in slow circles.

"About six months ago," she admitted, and then decided to pose the same question. "And you?"

"Two months, but you knew that."

She had. She knew every time he had hooked up with someone out of one of her clubs.

"Tell me about the last time you made love," Aubrey asked her, his hands moving to remove her pumps.

She was wearing a simple grey tailored business skirt that came to the top of her knees and a simple light grey cotton shell. She was thankful she had chosen not to wear nylons. It was summer; it was just too hot for that. She squirmed a little when his hands moved up her legs to rub her thighs in lazy, unhurried strokes. She squeezed her thighs together to try to relieve the growing ache there.

"Katrina? I'm waiting."

God she loved that voice! So deep and . . . commanding. She could come from just listening to him talk. Why had she never noticed before?

"It was nothing special," she told him. That was an understatement. It had been a disaster. She had gotten together with a businessman who was in New Orleans looking for real estate he could buy cheaply and turn around and sell it to developers. The first time had been disastrous. He had lasted a good two minutes. The only reason she continued to see him was to undercut his attempt to buy property in the 9th Ward to sell to out-of-state developers. Unfortunately, the sex never got any better.

"Did he fail to make you come?"

One hand reached under her arm to rest right under her breast while the other forced her thighs apart. He didn't move to actually cup her breast or go any further than her upper thigh. She could feel a cool breeze against her now soaking underwear, her nipples as hard as rocks.

"Yes," the single word came out little more than a strangled whisper. Why wouldn't he touch her? She tried to curve her body just a little to force either hand to give her a little relief, but shifted her so that her back was against chest, her legs spread wide straddling his hard thighs. Her skirt was bunched up at her waist leaving open and vulnerable. Lord help her but she loved the feeling!

"Poor baby," Aubrey murmured against her ear. "What did you do for relief?"

Maybe if she wiggled her butt against the erection she felt against her. Instead trying to still her, as she expected, Aubrey pushed upward, letting her feel his entire incredible length. She couldn't ever recall wanting something as badly as she wanted the hard, thick cock she felt against her rear right now.

"Tell me, Katrina," he demanded in that sexy voice. "What did you do?"

The hand on her upper thigh moved to her inner thigh, then back up again. While he was getting closer to where she wanted to be touched, he wasn't nearly close enough.

"I took care of myself. I masturbated," she told him, unable to keep the need out of her voice.

"How? Did you touch your breasts like this?"

He ran the hand not busy tormenting her thigh light over her breast.

"No," Katrina moaned at the light caress.

Aubrey moved his hand under her shirt and up to gently cup her breast.

"Like this?" he asked.

"Yes," she moaned, arching into his touch.

"Did you do this?" He rolled her nipple with his fingers, exerting just the right amount of pressure. He nuzzled the side of her neck. "Is this how you touched them?"

"Oh, yes!"

Generally it took a while and a hell of a lot on manipulation to make her come, but with one touch, he sent her over the edge. Who knew you could come just by nipple play?

"Where else did you touch yourself, Katrina?" Aubrey breathed in her ear. Damn she was so beautifully responsive, just like he knew she'd be. Her face was flushed, her breath coming in pants. But he wanted more. He wanted her completely disarmed and responsive to him. Then maybe he could do something about the ranging hard on in his pants. Too bad it couldn't be today.

"I touched my vagina," Katrina panted, amazed by what he had managed to do to her with little effort. She was in real trouble here. This was not the kind of man you could screw and then walk away.

His hands went still. Though one hand still cupped her breast, she felt the other slide further down her thigh, away from where she wanted it to be.

"You're what?" His voice turned harsh, more demanding. She knew instinctively what he wanted.

"My pussy," she quickly amended. "I touched my pussy."

Aubrey smiled to himself. Oh, yeah she was perfect. "Tell me how."

He felt her relax against him as his hand moved back to her inner thigh, allowing his finger to lightly skim the outside of her underwear. She was completely smooth between her legs. His mouth watered at the possibilities. The red silk thong was a perfect foil for the reddish tints in her golden skin. His hips pushed up reflexively just looking down at her. Moving the scarp of material to the side, he slid his finger to part her labia, then run against her clit, loving how wet and ready she was.

"Did you touch my pussy like this?"

Katrina nodded, unable to speak. She closed her eyes to bask in his touch. While one had pinched and pulled at her nipples, moving from one breast to the other to ensure equal stimulation, his other hand pleasured her deprived pussy. He had inserted two fingers deep inside while his thumb

rubbed in little circles on her clit. Her hips moved with him, trying to draw him deeper inside.

"Do you like to be stroked like this, baby? Does it make you want to come?"

"Yes, yes! Aubrey, please!"

"Please what?" Aubrey asked, but he already knew. She wanted permission to come. She hadn't even realized she was doing so, but he was pleased nonetheless.

"Let me come," Katrina panted, "I want to come."

Never in a million years would she have ever dreamed she would beg permission from any man to seek her own pleasure. Somehow she knew giving over a little control to Aubrey would only increase her own gratification. It was only for now, she assured herself. Just for their time together.

"Come for me sweetheart."

She had rarely achieved an orgasm with a partner, and the ones she reached on her own were okay. Never in her life had she come as hard or as fast as she did now.

"Aubrey! Oh, damn, Aubrey!" she screamed as she rode his hand.

It was so beautiful, he almost ejaculated in his pants. He held his hand still as she rode it out, waiting until the last shudders had subsided before pulling both hands free. He couldn't resist bringing the hand that had been between her legs to his mouth to lick it clean. Delicious.

Katrina slumped against him, barely able to keep her eyes open.

"I never knew it could be like that," she murmured, trying without success to stay awake.

"Oh, baby, we haven't even begun," Aubrey assured her. She would be completely his eventually – no matter how long it took.

### CHAPTER SIX

She wasn't asleep. Although her breathing was even and steady, he knew she wasn't asleep. Did she regret being here with him? The thought kept Aubrey from relaxing next to her and falling to sleep himself. He didn't want to miss out on any part of this night; it might have to sustain him for a while.

"How much did you hear today?" Her voice may have been docile, but he wasn't fooled. There was hell of a lot more to that question than she was letting on.

"All of it," he admitted. There was no point in lying about it. She would be able to tell.

Katrina tried to pull away, but Aubrey wasn't having that. He tugged her closer in the crock of his arms, his head resting on top of hers. He ran his hand up and down her back until she began to relax. It took a few minutes, but gradually he felt the tension melt from her body.

"Is that why you didn't go all the way?" she asked after a while.

"You know better than that." Even now his cock throbbed, so hard he actually was getting a headache from it.

He was planning on waiting until she drifted off to sleep, then slip into the shower to take the edge off. He knew from experience it wouldn't be anywhere near enough. He was destined to stay half hard until he found relief inside his woman. But he could wait. He wasn't an animal and Katrina needed time. He would give her all the time she needed.

"Then why didn't you?"

"Katrina, do you trust me?" He knew she didn't, but that couldn't be helped. If he were in her shoes, he wouldn't trust him either.

Katrina mulled the question over. She didn't *not* trust him. She hadn't panicked in the study earlier, hadn't even thought about the control she allowed him. But she couldn't honestly say she had been completely relaxed either. She wanted to be. She really did.

"Do you want me," she asked instead of answering the question.

Truthfully, she didn't know the answer.

"Like I want my next breath."

Was she ready for this? If she took it that last step, would she freak out once he was on top of her?

"I'd like to try..." Damn it, she wasn't good at all this vulnerable shit! Shifting so that she was half laying on top of him, she looking down straight into his eyes. "I can't promise you I can be what you want. But I want you. I might...I might freak out a little bit, but I want to try."

It was enough.

Aubrey exhaled, moving to the little stand beside the bed, he withdrew two pair of hand cuffs from the drawer. The house was only half furnished, but there were a number of toys, all brand new strategically placed throughout the place. There had always been one person on his mind when he placed them there. He had just given up hope of using them anytime soon.

Unlike what he had envisioned, these cuffs weren't for her.

"Aubrey, I don't think I can-"

"Not for you." Damn, his was having a hard time drawing in enough air. It was hard enough trying not to be too eager, he wanted her so damn bad.

"You want me to cuff you?" Katrina hadn't considered that. She had to admit, she was a hell of a lot more thrilled by the prospect than she was about the alternative. She felt a huge amount of dread slither away. She would be control, but he wouldn't a milquetoast the way her more recent lovers had been. It was a stimulating thought.

"If it will make you more comfortable, then yes."

Katrina bit her lip, considering. He seemed to become larger in front of her eyes. This way she could have what she desired most without risking becoming a quivering mass of hysterics. Yes, she would take that chance.

Taking the lined cuffs from him, she fastened each wrist carefully, making sure they weren't too tight, but they were secure. She'd had plenty of

experience, but he never commented. Once he was all secure, she leaned back, sitting upright on his lap. She looked over his body in the soft light of the lamp beside the bed. He really was a beautiful specimen. One hundred percent male. Broad shoulders, hard abs, a narrow waist that flared out to perfectly proportioned hip, large masculine thighs. And his dick. That was one gorgeous looking cock. She had never seen one like it; all thick and long. It was a cock that could frighten a virgin yet make a real woman's mouth water in bittersweet expectancy.

He would stretch her. He would fill her up so completely she couldn't help but feel every delicious inch.

Katrina let hands travel over his hot flesh, soothing over his chest and down his abdomen. His body was such a contrast, smooth satiny skin with steely muscles underneath. She could feel his flesh heating underneath her hands, feel the fine sheen of perspiration breaking out all over. Leaning forward, she ran her tongue down the plains of his front. Her own juices flowed with his responding groans. Using her teeth, she nipped at his nipples, loving the gasp elicited but her action.

"Baby, you're killing me."

She liked the sound of that.

Encouraged, she moved steadily southward until she reached his now rock hard rod. The little helmet head looked angry, all reddish purple, bobbing as if it was begging. Katrina had never once taken one in her mouth of her own free will. She was nonetheless fascinated by it, like a snake snared by a charmer, she found herself leaning into it. Her tongue had snaked out and encircled the heated tip. A small pearly drop of cum coated her tongue, but surprisingly, she didn't gag. She loved the way his hips came off the bed, the way he growled, jerking on the handcuffs. She wanted more.

"Katrina, baby, you don't have to-Oh, Fuck!"

She swallowed him, allowing him full access into her mouth. She just couldn't get enough! This was not about "servicing" him; it wasn't an act of domination. It was her giving, and him receiving. It was offered freely and accepted for the gift it was. That alone made it so very different from any other experience she had ever had. Katrina tasted every tiny part of him, alternating between taking him deep into her throat and switching to the delicate sac between his thighs.

It wasn't experience or practice that spurred her on, just pure instinct.

Learning what turned him on and drove him higher by his reactions. His bucking and groans only made her wetter, more desperate to see to his completion.

"Damn, baby, back off," Aubrey warned through clinched teeth. "I can't stop it baby, please."

There was no chance of that happening. Redoubling her effort, she locked down on his length, urging him with her tongue and gentle but persistent suckling to give in.

"Shit! Oh, shit!"

Not a single drop was spilt as he exploded in her mouth.

Katrina waited until he had relaxed completely before crawling back up his body and releasing the cuffs. She didn't need them, of that she was sure now.

"Katrina, don't."

She shook her head. This was not the way she wanted it to be.

"I don't need them. I don't want them. I want you, just as you are."

Aubrey couldn't remember ever feeling quite so nervous. Not even his first time was as daunting as this. She was giving him her trust, a monumental step. He wasn't too sure he could control himself enough not to shatter the fragile thing she had just handed him.

"Sugar, I can't...I am not sure if I can be gentle."

Already his cock was back to full mast, demanding to experience the sweet treasure between her thighs. He hadn't moved his hands from their position above his head. He was terrified of what might happen when he finally did touch her.

"I don't want you to be gentle, Aubrey. I want you to be you."

No sooner than the words left her mouth, his hands were tangled in her hair, pulling her head down to devour her lips. Her capitulation was beyond sweet. There was no fright or panic in the trembles that wracked her body now. She rubbed her wetness against his thigh in frantic need of completion. He could well understand how she felt. Raising his leg, he pressed against her pussy, giving just a taste of what she begged for.

"Aubrey, I need more," Katrina panted, ripping her mouth away from his.

He didn't want her to beg, he didn't need that. Cupping her ass, he lifted her into position. He meant to slide into her slowly, to allow her time to adjust, but Katrina was having none of that. As soon as the head of his cock butted against her opening, she dropped down on his entire cock, encasing him in a vice so tight he had to fight not to come again.

"Easy, baby" he murmured, fighting to hang on.

It was better than he had ever imagined. She was so damn wet, yet so damn tight. He had to keep a firm hold on her hips to keep her from moving too fast. He would be lost if she did. He didn't guide her, but slowed down the rocking motion, loving the way her walls contracted around him. His world swam with her every move, pulling him deeper and deeper inside.

The full breasts swaying in front of his face were too much of a temptation. He had to let go of her hips to cup the glorious dark golden-red

globes and bring them to his watering mouth. As soon as his mouth surrounded one hardened nipple, he felt a quake deep inside her glorious pussy, suckling just as sure as her mouth had earlier.

"Aubrey!"

Ah, hell it was just too much! His own hips surged upward, meeting her now frenzied movements stroke from stroke. His hands were everywhere at once, pinching a nipple, pulling her closer, stroking her back. No sooner did one quake end than another began, dragging him into a vortex of unadulterated pleasure so intense it was painful. Her sheath locked down, allowing him minimum movement. There was no way to stop the eruption from exploding deep inside her.

And still he had to have more.

He didn't allow her time to come off her high. Before she could blink, Aubrey had her on her back, her legs placed on his shoulders. Her eyes widened as he began to move, slowly, pulling almost completely out of her before heaving back to the hilt. She was so full she was overflowing, but he didn't stop.

And she didn't want him to.

She couldn't move and she didn't care. She gave her body up completely to his ministrations, closing his eyes to savor the exquisite pleasure/pain he was giving her.

"Open your eyes, Katrina."

They opened on command. He looked so damn dominant rocking above her, His face etched in something akin to agony. Those incredible turquoise eyes had turned dark blue, watching her intently. It was magnificent.

"Feel what you do to me, sweetheart," he rasped, taking his time, driving her out of her mind. "I can't get enough of you. I can come a thousand times and I will still want more."

Those words, that voice, everything thrilled her down to her toes. She could feel her body climbing the peak once more.

"Only you do this to me," Aubrey went on, making love to her ears as surely as he was her body. "I will always want you, and only you. This is mine, from this day forward, only mine. As I am only yours."

"Yes." He hadn't really asked a question, but she couldn't deny the truth of his words. She had been born for this, and for this man. Just as surely as he had been born to belong solely to her. *All hers*. She liked the sound of that.

"You are so wet," he reached down and squeezed her aching clit between his thumb and his forefinger. "Do you like this? Do you like what I am doing to you?"

"Yes!" How could he even ask? Like there was a doubt!

"When you come, I want you to scream for me. Can you do that for me?"

Wasn't she screaming already?

"Katrina!"

He stopped moving. She couldn't move her hips to demand more, he was holding her down too tightly.

"Please, Aubrey!" She needed more, she had to have more!

"Answer me. Are you going to scream for me, sugar?"

"Yes!" Anything, she would do anything to relief the tormenting throbbing deep in her center.

"Then come now, baby. Come for me and let me feel it!"

Her body obeyed on command, smashing completely apart as she screamed, her nails embedding themselves into his shoulders. She could vaguely hear his responded howl from somewhere in the background until everything gradually faded to black.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Aubrey scowled up at Katrina's apartment, located above one of her raunchiest clubs. *Spank* had to be the most popular club on Bourbon Street, although you had to be a member to get in. Members couldn't even have guests, as with the majority of her clubs. Members had to be at least twenty-five years of age and all had to sign a nondisclosure agreement to get membership. It was also the most expensive. Despite all of that, the place was notorious. It was the home away from home for the most hardcore BDSM practitioners.

He didn't like the fact she chose this for her home one damn bit. He also knew better than to say anything about it. They may have reached an unspoken agreement in the bedroom, but this was something else entirely. Already Katrina's control was firmly back in place. He was half afraid she would balk at him staying the night.

But he would be staying.

"Is there a parking garage?"

He didn't turn, but he could feel her eyes on his face.

"You don't have to do this." Her voice was full of barely suppressed angst, like she was expecting the worse.

He wouldn't do this here the car, but they obviously needed to talk. "Garage?"

She pointed him in the right direction and waited until he parked in one of her two reserved spots before broaching the subject again.

"Look, if it makes you feel better, you can walk me up to my apartment and wait until I am safely inside with the door securely locked or whatever. I don't think it's a good idea if you come in. It's late, I have to work tomorrow."

Aubrey stared at her for so long she wondered if he would even bother to protest. She found that she was more terrified he wouldn't than she was that he would. Her heart beat so loud she was certain he could hear it. Why didn't he say something?

"Do you want this to become an argument?" he finally asked softly.

Too softly. He was prepared for a fight she realized. Surprisingly, she didn't want to give him one. She didn't want to be alone. But she could never allow him to think it would be that easy. It was bad enough she knew how vulnerable to this man she really was; he could never be allowed to have this knowledge. Not yet anyway.

However, she had sneaking suspicion he already knew.

"If we have to." Now why didn't she sound as convincing as she meant to?

Aubrey expelled a harsh breath. He wasn't going to fight with her, but he wasn't leaving her tonight either. It would be the worst thing he could do. If he could have his way, she would never sleep alone another night, but he knew he had to take it one night at a time.

"I don't know want the night to end," he admitted to her. It was far more honest than getting all domineering on her, and just as true as the fact he didn't want her to go inside and believe even for a minute their coming together was anything less than it was. It meant the world to him. She meant the world to him. He would one day learn who it was that hurt her so badly. When he did, he would not rest until he destroyed everything that person thought they were. Thierry and Rance weren't the only ones who knew how to play dirty. "I don't want to leave you. Please, let me stay with you, Katrina."

Well, damn. That deflated her fight or flight instincts. He didn't challenge her, he didn't get all demanding, he just expressed his want to be with her. She wasn't sure what to do with that.

"Why?" It was an honest question. This was so outside her realm of experience she was thrown completely of kilter.

"Because I just want to be with you."

Yeah, she got that much. "Yes, but why?"

Aubrey blinked at her. Was she serious?

"Katrina, do you think tonight was all about sex?"

"Wasn't it?"

"Was that all it was for you?" He knew it wasn't, but did she realize it? What was going through her head?

"Yes-No...I don't know."

She looked miserable and confused, so unlike the Katrina he knew. He hated to see her like this, like a lost child. She was a sexy incredibly strong woman, if only she would realize it.

"It wasn't for me, honey," he assured her softly, pulling her to him. The car didn't lend him too much room to hold her, but he did the best he could. "Katrina, I don't care about your past. I only want to be a part of your future."

Yeah, he said that now. But how long before the entire ugly truth came out? How soon before he started to slip away? And it was now too late to save herself the heartache. Like the junkie her mother was, she was desperate, already desperate, for her next hit. He was that hit. She had fought her entire life not to end up like her mother, not to be so dependent on a man there was no individual left in her, just what he wanted and what he needed; even sacrificing her own child to keep that man happy. It had been a hellish existence. She never wanted to go back there.

Aubrey is nothing like Fedor Kozlov, a little voice echoed in her head. "Just for tonight." It was all she could give.

Aubrey didn't reply. He didn't want to kill the mood. Instead, he just led her up the back stairs holding out his hands for her keys. Surprisingly, she handed them over without argument. He wondered if she even realized it.

He didn't try to make love to her again, he just held her. It was what they both needed right now. Tomorrow would come soon enough. For now, he just gave up a prayer of thanksgiving that for tonight, she was in his arms, where she should be.

# **CHAPTER EIGHT**

"She's up to something," Didier paced in back in forth as Thierry watched in amusement from his stool.

It was damned distracting, as Thierry was trying to paint. Sighing he set down his brush. He wasn't going to get a damn thing finished until Didier got whatever was riding him off his chest. Moving to settle on the couch he eyes the other man expectantly.

"Okay, tell me, why do you think Lady Rienne is up to something?"

"She bought several prepaid cells phones, she never uses them in the house, and she has begun to take these walks. I can't eavesdrop on what she's saying or who she is talking to. I have a suspicion this is either concerning Rance or Aubrey?"

"Aubrey? What the hell does he have to do with anything?" Thierry was flummoxed by that one.

It was a damn shame they had to keep their own grandmother under surveillance; but her rapid hatred of her grandsons' choices of women was legion. She had never accepted his or Remy's brides, and she never would. Her gall knew no end. There was nothing she would not do to keep her position in society. A position she felt slipping away with each of the imagined perfidy of her grandsons. She was dangerous; one more defection

from her iron rule could push the increasingly deranged woman over the edge.

Thierry was afraid they were going to have to put Lady Rienne some place she couldn't be a danger to others. It was something they should have done after she tried to have his own wife, Angelique, killed. In the end, he had let his natural affection for the woman who raised him sway him. He had hoped Didier would have been a deterrent, apparently not. They had all let fact that she had done little more than try to encourage a wedge between Remy's wife, Regina, and her father had be a prove Lady Rienne had mellowed. It was considerably less than she had done to him. They had been fooled.

But Aubrey? As far as Thierry knew, Aubrey had no interest beyond his historical research, whatever that was. The man hadn't noticed his own wife had left him for crying out loud! What could he possibly be doing to raise Lady Rienne's ire?

"So you didn't know about Aubrey and Katrina?" Didier asked drily, raising a brow.

Thierry almost fell of the couch.

"Come again?" He couldn't have heard him right.

"Aubrey Chevalier, son of Noel Chevalier, deceased. Fourth born grandson of the so-called Lady Rienne Chevalier and Katrina Smith, formerly

Katrina van Dermy of Las Vegas, Nevada. Daughter of Katherine van Dermy also of Las Vegas by way of Lansing, Michigan."

Thierry winced at the heavy sarcasm. Didier's disdain of Arienne Chevalier, also known as Lady Rienne seemed to increase with each passing day. It was completely contrary to what Thierry's two part purpose for asking him to keep a watch on the old woman.

"Why do you hate her so much?" It was a stupid question. Thierry knew full well why Didier hated her. And damn her for encouraging that hate by her actions.

"You're kidding, right?" Didier asked him incredulously.

He really didn't have an answer to that. Didier had every reason to despise Lady Rienne. Come to think of it, so did he. Not wanting to get into it, Thierry changed the subject.

"Should I tell Aubrey who Katrina really is? I mean, she seems a little much for him."

At that Didier snorted. "You really don't know him very well do you?"

"Aubrey? He is...studious," Thierry was really at a loss. Aubrey never seemed ... present. His head was always in his books or his research; he never really paid attention to the world around him. That he had taking up with Katrina was a shock. He couldn't imagine a more unlikely couple.

"Aubrey has been going to Katrina's clubs for some time," Didier informed him. "You know the clubs in which you have like thirty percent interest? Word is subs love him."

"Aubrey?!"

That was beyond a shock. Thierry took pride on knowing just about everything there was to know about his family. He had been the de facto "man" of the house for so long, especially since his father and uncle never came home, he felt it was his responsibility to protect them, to guide them, to ensure nothing ever hurt them. To find out he never really knew one of the cousins that were closer than brothers to him was like a punch in the gut.

"Are you sure?"

Of course Didier was sure. The man could find out just about anything he set his mind to, except when it came to Lady Rienne. The woman was too damn slippery.

"Have no fear for Aubrey," Didier assured. "If you are concerned for anyone, be concerned for Katrina."

Thierry doubted that very much, but he trusted Didier. The other man had done research into Katrina long before he ever got into business with her. There was nothing he didn't turn up. Thierry wasn't so simple or closed-minded to think she was in anyway not good enough for Aubrey; he just understood she was deeply scarred. It was bound to affect any relationship

she was in, which was probably why she tended not to have them. Aubrey was a Chevalier. If he was doing the chasing, he was interested in far more than a casual thing. That meant he was serious about her.

At any other time, Thierry might have thought about interfering. One of the many blessings that came from being deeply in love with his wife was that he had learned he couldn't order the lives of the ones he loved. That was exactly what his grandmother had done for more years than he had been alive. He wouldn't become the type of person she was. He couldn't help but worry for Aubrey – and for Katrina. If a true, long term relationship was what they were truly embarking on, someone could get hurt badly. He didn't want that for either of them.

"And Rance?" Thierry asked after a while.

"I know she visited the woman Rance was keeping in a nice little cottage east of the city," Didier informed him. "I don't know what it was about, but I know Rance hasn't been back out there since."

"Do you think it had anything to do with her visit?"

"Hell, no," Didier snorted. "I just thought it odd she would show interest in Rance's mistress. Or former mistress. It wasn't like he was going to marry her. In fact, he went out of his way to make sure he was never seen with the woman. Odd considering he's not married."

Only it wasn't odd at all, and they both knew it. Thierry chose to ignore Didier's sarcasm this time. They both knew Rance didn't want his mistress anywhere near Jade Jessups, close friends to his wife, Katrina, and Remy's wife.

It was odd considering Rance was doggedly avoiding ever letting on how badly he wanted Jade. He had carried a torch for her long before Thierry ever got with Angelique. For whatever reason, Rance felt it was his duty not to push their grandmother further over the edge. Thierry hadn't realized how far she would go to keep up appearances; it had been a costly mistake. Rance wasn't about to visit an insane woman on Jade. Thierry had to wonder whether he was still feeling guilt over not being able to save his twin's girlfriend from the machinations of Lady Rienne years ago.

No matter how Thierry tried to talk Rance out of his nonsensical culpability, the man had convinced himself he could have done something to stop the girl's tragic death.

"All we can do is watch her closely until we know more," Thierry thought out loud.

"We?"

Thierry shrugged, "Okay, you. Just remember you volunteered for the job.

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Arienne seethed as she watched her grandson disappear up the back steps of the tawdry French Quarter club. The charming peach colored exterior of the classic French building complete with wrought iron balconies draped with greenery did nothing to disguise the disgusting perversions that went on inside the building. The woman who owned the building was equally tainted. She was beyond the trash Thierry and Remy had brought into the family. There was no way while she still drew breath she would ever allow some two-bit whore into the fold.

Not that she welcomed the other two interlopers. Thierry watched his wife like a hawk and would probably strangle his own flesh and blood if she ever raised a hand against the woman...again. Remy would do far worse. But Aubrey!

Even as a child, Arienne had never had a moment's trouble from the boy. He had been quiet; perhaps, now that she thought back, he had been too quiet. Maybe he had planned against her all along! This could not happen!

Her head began to pound just thinking about the treachery of all of her grandsons. With the exception of Piers, they had all been disloyal to her. Disloyal to the family legacy. None of them deserved to bear the name of Chevalier. Her own sons had been so easy, especially after their father...

No, she would not think of the past, of what she had been forced to do. She had given everything for this family; she would not see it all come to naught. She would not allow one the cities founding families to become diluted. They would be pure, they would be untainted.

Clutching the invaluable information she had recently obtained, she order the driver to take her to the outskirts of town. At least her staff was still faithful. They should be she paid them well enough to keep them reliable. As if that swine Didier could ever hope to keep her from doing what she needed to do!

The one good thing about her grandsons was that women tended to love them; some enough to do anything to keep them. So Rance thought he would try to be with that sniveling little lawyer did he? Since the loss of Thierry, he was the strongest of all her grandchildren. He had to lead the next generation. She would not lose him. She would just be more careful this time. The boy had been foolish enough to actually warn her in advance of his mutiny. Warn her! As if she would take it lying down! That only gave the opportunity to plan carefully this time.

And Aubrey... poor misguided Aubrey. This woman he was infatuated with had probably used sex to lure him into her web. His rightful wife, Susan was probably the first person he had ever had sex with! This Smith woman had used her wiles to mislead and influence him. Smith wasn't even her real name! She was a bastard child, given her mother's name because she had no father. Katrina van Dermy, born to a part time lounge singer, part time pole

dancer, and full time drug addict. The woman was from the gutter, and Arienne would make damn sure she ended up there.

All of her plans were coming together nicely. All she had to do now is sit back and watch.

## **CHAPTER NINE**

The panic she had expected to feel far sooner was chocking Katrina. She paced the expanse of her office, terrified to go home, terrified not to. Aubrey thought he knew the entire sordid tale of her life before she came here, but he only knew the half of it. He hadn't left, despite the fact she had walked the streets as early as fourteen, until her grandmother finally got custody of her once her mother was arrested one too many times, and her stepfather was unable to talk the courts out of it any longer. He didn't know what had gone on before; what she had done.

Even now Aubrey was there waiting for her. He was probably busy writing, as he did when she was at work. He had taken a leave of absence from his position, but that had happened before they got together. She knew he was working on something near and dear to his heart, she just didn't know what. He had been very secretive about it. That didn't really bother her. What bothered her was he hadn't left her apartment since their first night together.

During the day when she was stuck here going over contracts, drafting business agreements, and composing threatening letters to other attorneys on behalf of her clients Aubrey had been moving his personal effects into her home. It was because he knew she would balk at moving into his place, and she would say no if he asked, so he just did it.

Even though that really turned her on about him, it scared the shit out of her. She didn't want to become dependent on him. She was already showing signs of a kind of reliance on him she just didn't need. She couldn't sleep without him being beside her in bed. She didn't worry about what she would have for dinner, didn't ever consider picking anything up because she knew he would have it all taken care of by the time she got there. Most of all, she hadn't been to any of her clubs.

This had to stop. She could not allow this to happen. Not now, not ever.

Grabbing her purse, she stalked out of the office yelling goodbye in the general direction of Jade's office. She managed to speak to the two paralegals and the secretary before opening the door to lead her out of the inner office. To the irritatingly bubbly receptionist, she could only manage a sneer. The chick worked her last nerve; too happy, to perfectly pretty. Katrina had learned never to trust the type.

By the time she made it to her car, she was going over what she was planning on telling Aubrey before she stopped herself. What the hell was she thinking? She didn't need to explain herself to anyone, least of all a damn man! She was not going to be this woman! She refused to report to him, to bow to his wishes.

No matter how damn good it felt to follow his lead in bed. Or in the shower, in the living room, the kitchen.

"Shit!"

This had to stop. She couldn't allow it to get any deeper. No matter how much she didn't want it to end.

She sat outside her own apartment for thirty minutes giving herself a pep talk before venturing inside. She had to be strong. She had to.

She didn't pause to speak when she walked inside. As she suspected, Aubrey was hunched over his computer, his fingers flying across the keyboard. The spicy smell of gumbo from Remy's café permeated the air. She wasn't going to stop to shoot the shit. She wouldn't be lured from her purpose with good wine and even better food. She had something she needed to do. Something for herself, to reassert her independence. Not for one second did she believe he hadn't noticed her entry. Aubrey noticed everything, at lease when it came to her he did. He didn't move from his position behind the desk.

My desk, she silently amended. My home, my body, my life!

Stomping into the bedroom, she rummaged through her closets until she found what she was looking for. Shiny black leather was exactly the right look for her current mood. She made her shower quick, and then slithered into short miniskirt and tight bustier which pushed her breasts up impossibly high. The metal spiked heel of the knee length boots coupled with the smallish black leather whip bolstered her flagging sense of dominance. The jet black liner that she applied to her eyes and blood red lipstick she

artfully brushed on her lips gave her the smoky sexuality she was never seen in her clubs without. Scraping her hair back into an impossibly tight bun, then attaching her custom made twenty-two inch pony tail completed the look she was going for.

This was who she was. No one, not even a Chevalier could ever change that. The past couple of weeks had been nothing more than a dream. It wasn't for her. Happily ever after didn't happen for people like her. She needed to remember that always. She needed to remember who she was and where she came from.

She didn't bother with anything more than identification, which she slipped into her bustier. It was her damn club – she didn't have to pay for crap. She just needed to find some poor soul in the mood to be dominated. She needed to exert her power. Aubrey had left her feeling weak and soft. She was *not* soft. She was not, nor would she ever be the little woman. It was best he understood that now.

Katrina was fully expecting an argument or at least a comment when she strolled back into the living room. Aubrey said nothing. He looked up and seeing her in all her glory, leaned back in the chair, arching an eyebrow.

Cocky fucker.

Fine; if he thought she would volunteer an explanation, he was sorely mistaken. She strode determinately toward the door, her hearted thundering. What if he tried to stop her? What if he didn't?

He didn't.

Why did that hurt? She wanted to do this, right? Why is it when the door slammed shut behind her did she feel as if she had just closed the door in her best hope of an alternate future?

Aubrey knew better than to try to stop her. He had been waiting for this, knew it would happen, he just hadn't expected it to hurt quite so much. For the last couple of days he could feel Katrina's agitation growing. Some nights she would lay awake, choking down her growing panic. All he could do was hold her, let her know in every way he could he wasn't going anywhere. He tried like hell not to smother her. He had suppressed his own instincts to protect her, but he knew it wouldn't have done any good. In fact, it probably would have made her bolt. He had no intentions of allowing Katrina to do anything to hurt herself, as she was trying to do. He wasn't going to rush after her either.

Taking a glance at his watch he marked the time. He would give her thirty minutes. It was killing him, but he had to wait before charging down to the club. Heaven knows he wanted to rush downstairs and carry her ass back upstairs. No, what he really wanted to do was to take her to his house and

not let her out again until she understood she was his woman, and that he loved her, and nothing but death was going to keep him away from her.

He wouldn't be doing himself any favors by stopping her before she left. What awaited her down there was emptiness. She would revel in her so-called freedom for a minute or two, but then she would realize what all that shit really was. Loneliness, a desperate attempt to keep the shadows at bay. She might not think he held the light to chase away her shadowy demons yet, but then, it was his job to prove her wrong.

Sitting there in the quiet apartment gave him too much time to think. Katrina's place was devoid of anything overtly personal. The wide open space was tastefully decorated in a chic modern décor; art that was neither cheap nor expensive graced the walls. There were no personal effects anywhere to be seen. It was almost as cold as a suite set aside for visiting executives.

By contrast, the bedroom was decorated to heighten the erotic senses. She had a whole Moroccan harem thing going on. Not that he didn't appreciate the effect, but it was as if she expected to always be "on" in there. So far, he thought he had done a decent job of squashing that notion, but he knew he had to get her out of that setting. Every time they had made love, Aubrey had to fight to get to the real Katrina. They needed to be someplace where it was just the two of them, raw and uncensored. Like the first time.

Checking the time, Aubrey slowly stood. It was time to go get his woman.

It was damned hard to constrain the need to rush out of the apartment, but he managed through sheer force of will. He didn't bother to change out of his jeans and pull over; he didn't have the patience to dress like a Dom. His attire would scream more than he could say in words. They didn't need the trappings of anything between them. Two burly bouncers at the bottom of the inner stairwell guarded the marrow doorway that led from the club up to Katrina's apartment. Neither man batted an eye at his presence. Both stepped aside as he approached.

"Be gentle, man" one of bouncers whispered as he walked by. "She is in rare form tonight."

Very little shocked Aubrey, but that did. He paused and looked toward the man who merely jerked his head toward the stage. From the door, Aubrey could see the scene being acted out onstage clearly. The red toned woman with the ass length pony tail was hard to miss. He could probably spot her in a crowd of thousands. She was wielding her whip with precision against the upturned buttocks of a red-head who had been fettered face down over some kind of stool or something.

Katrina wasn't being vicious; she wasn't abusing the woman who by all appearances was enjoying her "punishment" very much. It was just that the

visual wasn't lost on him. That woman was shaped very much like Katrina. Her body was tall, lush, and full. The realization hit Aubrey in the gut, making him want to howl in frustrated ire.

Katrina was punishing herself.

His heart broke a little with his every step closer.

No, baby, no. He knew she didn't feel worthy of a real relationship, had known it for a while, but to see the self loathing being acted out was devastating. He was there, onstage with her before he knew what he was doing. Grabbing her by the arm, he dragged her off the stage and toward the back door. His one and only thought was to get her out of here.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Katrina hissed, digging in her heels to grind them both to a stop.

Aubrey glanced around, noting a few faces turned in their direction, watching the little drama avidly.

"Do you really want to do this here?" He sure as hell didn't, but Katrina was spoiling for a fight.

"There is nothing to fight about," she drew herself up to her full height, looking more past him than at him. Her defiance didn't quite reach her eyes. "I am just blowing off a little steam. If you can't handle that-" she shrugged, as if it meant nothing.

There was no way he was letting her off that easy.

"Is that what you were doing?" His voice lowered as he leaned in closer. If anyone wanted to listen they were going to have to fight for it. "Do you want me to tell you what I think you were doing, sweetheart."

Katrina was suddenly inordinately aware of tuned in ears. She didn't want to have this conversation, now or ever.

"Leave!" she jeered. "Just go pack up all your shit and go!"

"Not gonna be that easy, chere."

To her astonishment, he threw he rover his shoulder and marched back up the back stairs into her apartment without breaking a sweat. She didn't pound at his back, there were just too many interested onlookers for that, but as he kicked the door shut, she heaved herself up and off of him.

"You autocratic son of a bitch!" She had no worry of being heard downstairs. The pounding music would take care of that. "I was in the middle of something, something that had nothing to do with you! If you can't handle it, you can't handle Katrina!"

To her absolute fury, he didn't rise to her bait. He didn't raise his voice, just stood there all smug, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Referring to yourself in the third person now?"

"Oh, shut up!" The whip flicked before she had a chance to think about it.

The sound of the supple leather cutting into the flesh of his cheek seemed to echo in the room. Katrina stood motionless, too afraid to move, too afraid to run.

What had she done? She really hadn't meant to actually *strike* him. She had just wanted to shake him. To show him who she really was.

And who the hell was that?

"I-I'm sorry," she whispered through a haze of tears she just couldn't keep inside any longer. "I swear, I didn't mean..."

The last thing she expected in return was for Aubrey to gather in his arms and hold her close. Nothing could have stopped the flood gates now. She sobbed all of her anger and frustration into his broad chest, not knowing how to put what she was feeling into words.

How could this man love her? How was it possible for her to have someone who would stand there and let her hit him in the face, and not knock the shit out of her? What kind of man was this?

## CHAPTER TEN

"Come on, baby, let's get out of here."

Aubrey didn't pause to let her gather any of her things; she wasn't going to need anything but her. The real Katrina stripped bare to her essence. This was the breakthrough he had hoped and prayed for, he wasn't going to waste his time and let the moment slip past.

He carried her out of the apartment and straight to his car. Going out to the bayou house wasn't a good idea, so he took her to his home, a respectable monstrosity of a house in the Garden District. A wedding present from Lady Rienne, he had taken great pains to make sure no part his home reminded him of his cold grandmother. She would probably have a heart attack if she saw the informal "décor" that graced every room of the house. It was a place designed for comfort and warmth, two things she had never understood.

It was the perfect place to take Katrina. Susan had never really stayed there much even they were married. Not that he had noticed. His marriage was indeed the one thing he had managed to truly forget. It sounded cold, but his ex-wife had felt the same way. Together they were miserable, thought they were never really enemies. Living apart they were at least friends.

Carrying his precious bundle through the doors, Aubrey could honestly say for the first time he felt he was really coming home. The house had always seemed too big, too empty no matter how much he tried to cram it full with massive bookcases filled to the brim in every room, large overstuffed furniture, and knick knacks from just about every corner of the globe. In the end it had always been just him. Walking in with the woman he wanted to spend his lifetime trying to figure out filled the space with light that had nothing to do with the switches he threw on as he passed them.

Aubrey never wanted Katrina to leave here. He never wanted her to go back to that cold ass impersonal apartment she existed in; and that was all she had been doing-existing. There was so much fire banked inside of her. And it wasn't merely sexual. Katrina had ruthlessly suppressed her zeal for life, too afraid of being slapped back down. He couldn't imagine anyone going through what she must have gone through to emerge victorious, but that was exactly what she had done. She had shaken the dirt of the street that was never really her dirt and worked to get where she was today. Her ownership of fetish clubs aside, Katrina was one hell of a lawyer. No one had given her that, she had worked for it.

And yet he knew she feel felt the dirt of her past clinging like some kind of leech that refused to let go. A little ritual cleansing was in order.

Taking her straight to the master bath, Aubrey sat her down on the counter by the sink, then went over to the massive free standing claw-foot porcelain tub he designed himself. This bathroom was filled in every corner with tall, thick plants, with more greenery hanging down from the ceiling. There was a sky light about that gave a spectacular view of the night's stars. Checking the water temperature, he added dried lilacs and a touch of lilac oil before disrobing himself. Only when he and the water were ready did he turn to Katrina.

She wasn't crying anymore; for that at least he was grateful. But she looked so lost, with her knees curled up to her chin and her arms wrapped firmly around them, she looked like a lost little girl. He took special care peeling the leather from her body, then carefully took the bobby pins out that were anchoring the pony tail to her head. He made sure to massage her scalp before pulling her own hair into a loose knot at the crown of her head. As much as he wished he could play with the silky soft strands, there was another more pressing issue at hand.

He decided to wash the dramatic make up off her face before soaking in the steamy water awaiting them both. He was as gentle as he could be. Using the softest washcloth he could find, scrubbing as softly as he could. Tear once again gathered in the forlorn brown jewels; it was all the emotions she didn't know how to express.

Aubrey swallowed the lump in his throat. He could feel her anguish every bit as much as if he was experiencing the pain himself. He would give his right arm to take all her hurt away. Nothing but time would heal the wounds she had buried deep underneath a façade of toughness.

Hell yes, she was tough. She was the bravest woman he had ever known. He would not fail her like so many had in her past. he would fight with her every step of the way to free her from the horrors of her past, or die trying. Nothing was said as he held her closely in the healing waters. Letting the lilac infused steam sooth them both. He didn't say anything, in truth, he didn't know what to say. If he said he understood what she felt, he would be lying, so why bother?

How could he really understand? He could empathize, and he did, but he could never really understand what Katrina was going through. He could comprehend her suffering on an intellectual level, but he would never fully know what it was like for her. He hated it, but he couldn't deny it. He could only do so much to make it better. If taking a whip to his face had helped bring her a step closer to him, he would endure it a thousand times over — and it still wouldn't be enough. Forcing someone to face their demons was no guarantee the person would conquer them.

Tread carefully, Aubrey admonished himself, holding tightly to the body that was completely bare in more ways than one.

Katrina didn't know what to say, or if she should say anything at all. In her mind she could hear the hiss of the whip descending, she saw it connecting to the lightly tanned cheek, saw a thin line of ruby blood swell and trickle down the side of the face. The crackle of leather contacting skin seemed a death knell on something that could have been wondrous. He didn't move. His eyes turned from their clear aquamarine to a deep emerald, and for a split second she felt remorse unlike any she had ever known. Surely he would be furious; he would either walk away for good, or slap the shit out of her.

Aubrey had done neither. The emotion churning in his eyes hadn't been anger, it had been pain. Katrina had seen the emotion too often staring back at her in the mirror far too many times not to recognize what she was seeing. She never understood how people felt shame at such mundane actions before now. Shame was a sentiment she had always attributed to the darkest acts of the soul. Shame was a thing that had been reserved for the abyss she dared not stare into. He had showed her it could brought to fore with a vengeance just by being careless with a gentle soul.

The last thing Katrina wanted to do was run Aubrey off. It had taken the shock of her whip against his face to help her admit it. The agitation she had been feeling was self-inflicted, as it always was. She was too scared to trust this man was serious about loving her, just Katrina. And here he was, holding her as if she was precious. He had stripped the things she hated the most about herself off her as surely as he had stripped off her disguise.

Why? It made no sense. He could have anyone he wanted, why her?

She wanted ask, but the truth was she was too terrified to. She didn't want anything to break this spell. She felt completely worn out, her body felt as bruised as if she had been in a fight. And not once did he even attempt to have sex.

She would be lying to deny she got wet every time Aubrey touched her. She would be foolish not to admit her nipples hardened and throbbed and her breathing became nothing more than desperate gasps of air whenever he was near. His silences turned her on more than whispered promises of satisfaction ever could, but in bed, when he ordered her around in the deep rasp — damn! Nothing was as sexy. But for now, he seemed to sense she just wanted to be held.

She had never really been held before, not by a man anyway. Her experiences might be vast when it came to the physical elements of sex, but the emotional was not something she was familiar with. That's what scared her the most about Aubrey. No matter how hot and nasty things got, he never failed to hold her afterwards, to soothe his hands down her body, to kiss her on the forehead, stroke her cheek, to tell her how beautiful she was *after*. She was too afraid to believe it.

So she tried to push him away.

And he hadn't let her.

Even after the soak in the bath tub, Aubrey dried her body carefully, rubbed lotion into her skin, then pulled one of his t-shirts over her head. Wearing nothing but boxers himself, he led her to his bed. It wasn't particularly big, certainly not as big as her California king, but it had to be the most comfortable bed she had ever been in. Instead of laying her head against the multitude of big, fluffy pillow, however, Aubrey pulled her into his embrace, laying her head against his chest. She could hear his heartbeat, steady and strong echoing in his ear.

Strong enough to love me.

If ever there was a man strong enough to love her, it was Aubrey. Everything about the man screamed, *Rest here, you are safe with me.* He asked for nothing from her, only herself. Not the Dominatrix she pretended to be, not the ice cold business woman she had to be at work. Just Katrina, with her scars and her insecurities, her quirky sense of humor, and even her dry skin. He seemed to really enjoy putting lotion on her perpetual dry body. He seemed to sense when she wasn't in the mood, but the man went hard every time she walked into the room. And not because she was dressed in leathers with fuck me pumps rocking on her feet. He got hard when she was in sweats with no makeup and her hair pulled into a sloppy pony tail.

Best of all, he didn't talk to her when she didn't want to talk. Like this moment, she didn't have the words. He didn't question it, didn't reprimand her for that wicked gash on his cheek. He had every right to. He would be completely justified to demand an explanation, or even an apology. She didn't have one. She had been ... ashamed. There was that damn word again, shame. She had been ashamed because she knew he understood what was behind that scene onstage. He knew she had been punishing herself for ever daring to believe she could be happy, or at least normal. And he wasn't going to allow it. For once, the first time in her life, a man wouldn't allow her to punish herself for trying to be something she wasn't, a girl friend type.

Men wanted to fuck her, they wanted to claim they had been with her, but never had a man wanted her. She was beginning to feel that if she didn't run out now, she would be sucked in, and offer Aubrey everything. She had been so afraid of what he might do *to* her love, or worse to her, she hadn't considered what he had already done. He had loved her.

He might be deliciously bossy and domineering behind closed doors, but he had never questioned her outside the bedroom. He hadn't hinted she might want to get rid of her clubs, hadn't tried to dress her, or tell her what she should eat. Most of all, he hadn't tried to use her sexuality against her.

It was too soon to know what would come between them, if there was a future for them at all. It wasn't too soon to reflect on everything she knew about Aubrey. While he tended to hide himself from his family, he had shown her all he was from the very beginning. He hadn't hid anything, he hadn't ever lied. If she asked, he told her what she wanted to know. Aubrey wasn't Fedor.

He was nothing like any man she had ever known. He had a silent strength that surpassed that of even his cousins Thierry and Rance who were unapologetically Alpha-type males. Their dominance was overt and in your face. Aubrey on the other hand felt no need to assert his dominance. He didn't try to force his will, though Katrina found, he didn't really have to. She wanted him to take charge on her body, of her pleasure. And he was secure enough to step off when she needed him to.

No, this man was nothing like Fedor; her stepfather could never hope to be half the man Aubrey was.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

When Fedor Kozlov had first gotten the call from the old woman in New Orleans, he thought it was a joke. His stepdaughter had disappeared when she was sixteen, losing him quite a bit of expected income and crushing his dreams of a lucrative future. He had searched everywhere for the little bitch. There was no doubt the mother of his junkie of a wife had hid the girl from him, causing him not only to lose good paying customers who were dying for a piece of young tight ass, but depriving himself of one of the fringe benefits of his marriage. Katrina was his, no one else had the right to touch her without his permission.

He hadn't married a washed up lounge singer turned stripper for love. Katherine had brought in a lot of money in her day, but that wasn't worth marriage. Her daughter however, had held the promise of a true sexual goddess, even at the tender age of ten. He had kept his hands to himself, playing the loving husband for four long years before he touched her. In some places in the world, she would have been marriageable age then. He had groomed her for more than the life of a high priced prostitute. That had just been her introduction. He had had big plans, and marrying Katherine had been the easiest way he could train the future sex goddess he had intended Katrina to be.

And Katrina had held true to her promise. Even though she had been in the beginning stages of her training, johns loved her. She was wild and defiant; she made a man long to tame her. Even he had never been able to wash her feisty sweetness out of his system. Seeing her again after so long had only increased the desperate longing that had stayed with him over the years. She was nice and ripe, having fully come into her womanhood. He had watched her from the secluded corner of her club. One of the many she owned, he had come to find out.

Little Kitty Kat had made quite a name for herself. He had taught her well it appears. He didn't believe for a second she had built it all herself. According to the bitter old hag who had contacted him, she had slept with first one grandson to get the funding for this endeavor, and when he had tired of her, she had moved to a younger, more vulnerable man she could swindle.

Fedor had doubted the old lady when she had first called, and he believed her even less now that he had seen Kat with some poor sap his own two eyes. Whoever it was that had financed his Kitten's little business was probably still as much her chump as the poor fool who had carried out of her delightful little club a week ago.

Fedor had to laugh at that. No one could tame his little Kitty Kat; he had made sure of that years ago. He had carefully molded her into the perfect

sex machine, but not for some rich weakling of a college professor. Old Lady Chevalier must be mad if she thought for a second he would actually help her get her precious grandson out of the clutches of his biggest money maker. He planned on assisting his baby girl in draining him for all he was worth, and then some.

But where the hell were they? Fedor had cased her apartment and her office since Monday night when she had disappeared and still hadn't seen hide nor hair of her. He was running out of patience. He needed to get back to his business interests in Nevada, but he wasn't planning on going alone. He had lost his most prized possession twelve years ago, that wasn't going to happen again.

Poor little Kitty Kat had dug in deep here. Whatever her con, and there appeared to be many, she had done a damn good job at fooling the right people. He would just have to remind her of who she was. She wasn't some lawyer, he would bet his fortune on it. She couldn't seem to shake her nature, as evidenced by the clubs she had opened. This was closer to who she really was, the Kitty Kat he had always known. That people would believe otherwise was laughable.

He had to admit he was surprised to learn Katrina had been masquerading as an attorney. He didn't believe for a second she had actually *earned* that law degree. More likely she had slept her way through law

school, if she had indeed gone at all. People like them didn't go to college; they made their way on their wits. Katrina had been taught by the best – him. She had known it was risky though, pretending to be a high powered lawyer. He would simply save her and get out while the getting was good, taking the pretty boy professor's money with them.

She might be reluctant at first, but Fedor had the goods on Katrina. She wouldn't want him to expose her to her uppity friends or her wanna-be boyfriend. If he had to, he would kill them all to get Katrina back where she belonged, with him. Katherine would no doubt overdose soon; that or he would be forced to get rid of her, she had outlived her usefulness anyway. He had married her for Katrina, and now that she was close, he didn't need the washed up junkie whore anymore. Years of planning and plotting were finally coming together.

With Kitty Kat by his side, he would be the undisputed king of the sex industry in Nevada, possibly the entire West Coast. She would star in movies, command thousands of dollars for a single night, and help him run his dungeons and brothels. Not to mention the fringe benefits of being his number one.

He damn near rubbed his hands together with glee. Finally, he would be all he was meant to be, with the right woman by his side. Finally.

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Lydia Ray didn't bother to hide her disdain as she watched her only child wracked with dry heaves. She felt no pity for the emaciated form that hung over the side of the toilet. As soon as she left the overpriced, gaudy house in the hills overlooking Las Vegas, her daughter would find a "cure" for what ailed her. But Lydia wasn't about to leave until she got answers.

"Where did Fedor go, Katherine?"

Disgust colored her every word. A mother should love her child. Lydia had always believed a mother's love was completely unconditional. She found she couldn't dredge up any softer feelings for the woman in the bathroom floor. The floor may have been Italian marble, the gown that hung off the woman's skeletal frame might have been the finest silk, but the woman herself was nothing but trash. Trash she had given birth to.

Katherine had always been a precocious child. Lydia and her dear departed husband had spoiled her, perhaps too much. But they had always tried to instill values in their only child. They had tried to teach her right from wrong. Lydia hadn't wanted Katherine to come to college here in Nevada; she had never really trusted her daughter. It had taken less than a year before Katherine had dropped out and was singing in various lounges, taking drugs.

Then came along Michael van Dermy. Lydia had thought she disliked the man her daughter had married; he was too wild, too carefree. But at nineteen and pregnant, Katherine had been adamant. What could she do? Her daughter needed a husband and a father for her child. It wasn't like they could have stopped the girl from doing whatever she wanted to anyway.

But Michael had died in a motorcycle accident not long after Katherine had given birth to a baby girl. Lydia had flown out to Nevada to help out, but her grief had been so deep, Lydia had feared for her daughter's life. Lord, please forgive her for thinking so, but Lydia almost regretted something hadn't happened to Katherine during those early dark times. Heaven knows it would have been easier for her grandchild.

It had been a slow slide to the bottom for Katherine, and Lydia had been cursed to watch every agonizing second of it. The lounge singing led to too much drink and drugs, until finally, Katherine had been unable to hold on to a gig. Then came Fedor Kozlov. The Russian immigrant had waltzed into Katherine's life when Katrina was little more than five. The couple ignored the child for the most part, leaving Katrina in her care for days at a time.

But then, there had been no reason for Fedor to pay any attention to his brand new number one whore's child. Katherine had still had her dark honey golden looks, generous curves and deceiving charm. She made a lot of money for the Russian pimp. She stripped in his clubs, slept with his customers and generally did whatever he told her to. The use of drugs had

increased gradually, first to ensure she was kept in line, then because she couldn't function without him.

Unfortunately, Katrina had grown to be more beautiful than her mother. Her skin had a reddish tint, her hair naturally auburn. Red bone, through and through, Lydia's little granddaughter had a temper to match. A temper Fedor saw as untapped passion. Lydia tried to keep Katrina away from Katherine and her boyfriend as much as possible, but she had no proof to get the man locked up. Eventually the police was so tired of her calls, they began to ignore her.

Then Fedor married Katherine, and adopted Katrina. Lydia had wanted to howl at the fates. Because they had legal custody of her granddaughter, they kept her away. First the man tried to buy her off. As if she would sell her soul! When that didn't work, he had threatened. When all threats to her life made no impact, he threatened Katherine.

It wasn't much of a choice to Lydia. The daughter she loved was dead, killed with her first husband. Nothing but nothing would ever stop Lydia from trying to protect her grandbaby, who was the only innocent in her eyes. Lydia might have even killed Fedor herself when she learned what he had begun to prostitute her baby. Instead, she out smarted him. Using a dummy client, she had managed to get her granddaughter away from the sorry

excuses for human beings that Katherine and Fedor were. She had sent her far away from them, paying for a boarding school with Fedor's own money.

Katrina had built a good life for herself. She had made Lydia prouder than she could have ever imagined. She hadn't let these people beat her down or kill her spirit. Lydia would be damned if these people were going to ruin it for her baby.

"Where the hell is your husband, Katherine?" Lydia was fast losing patience. Her foot practically itched to kick this woman in her now bony ass.

"How am I supposed to know?" Katherine whined. "Get out! I need my medicine."

Pathetic, Lydia thought to herself. Odd that no matter how strung out Katherine was, she never used drugs in front of her. Perhaps it was some last vestige of respect for her mother. Lydia could have cared less. Katherine was no longer her child. She couldn't have made that more clear.

"I will drag you to detox myself and tell them you lost your mind and aren't to be trusted if you don't tell me where the hell your husband went."

Sad how something like detox or rehab could put the fear of God into Katherine unlike anything else. She was just so far gone, Lydia wondered how it was possible the woman hadn't overdosed.

"He went to New Orleans to bring that ungrateful brat back."

Katherine spit out, rolling over to shoot an accusing look at her mother.

"Why, I don't know. We're better off without her. I am all Fedor needs."

Lydia could, and did, snort at that. Katherine was of little use to anyone, least of all herself.

"You always loved her more than me," Katherine accused, bitterness fairly dripping from her lips. "She was all you ever cared about! I am your daughter, not her!"

Lydia shook her head as she turned to leave. Katherine wasn't worth the argument.

"Do you hear me old lady!" Katherine's shrill voice rose as she struggled to pull herself up. "I am you daughter, not that ungrateful bitch!"

Lydia paused and cast a pitying look over her shoulder. Katherine really did look like a dead woman walking. It would be a blessed relief when she passed on. What a sorry waste of life.

"I have no daughter," she said sadly. "But I still have a granddaughter, in spite of you."

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

Aubrey liked to watch Katrina tool around his house – their home – in nothing but his dress shirt. Her hair was pulled up into a pony tail, sans the add-on, her face free of the artifice of makeup. She hadn't been back to work, or to her apartment since they left Monday night. Instead, they had been spent the week talking, making love, getting to know one another. He leaned back and watched as she polished of some yogurt, growing hard as he watched her tongue lick the last of the creamy substance off the spoon. He swallowed a moan as the silver utensil disappeared in her mouth and reappeared a moment later. He wanted to be where that spoon was right now, and they had just made love less than an hour earlier.

She was so unconsciously sexy, he could watch her all day. He wanted to be the one licking the dab of yogurt from the side of her mouth.

She looked happy, truly happy. He intended to keep her that way.

Not all of the shadows in her eyes were gone, but that would come in time. Aubrey had to suppress his need to travel to Las Vegas himself after all she had told him. Her stepfather was a sickness the world could do without. Aubrey had every intention on killing the man, it was only a matter of time. But Katrina didn't need to be bothered by that. It was just something he had to do.

Katrina had come a long, long way. His heart felt like bursting with pride when he thought about all the things she had been through. Her will and strength awed him. So many others would have used such a past as an excuse to give up on life, to mire in pity and darker, uglier things. Not his Katrina. She didn't just survive, she thrived. She didn't merely overcome, she had conquered. If anything, he was unworthy of such a woman. Her trust and love bowed him over. He would rather put a gun to his head than to betray her.

"Why are you smiling like an idiot?" Katrina asked, sauntering over to settle in his lap.

Damn, he loved when she did that. She fit perfectly, her plush behind nestling right up against his crotch. He inhaled her scent, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close. Her scent drove him crazy, reminding him something spicy sweet. His arms felt empty without her. There wasn't a chance in hell she was moving back to that damnable apartment of hers. She belonged with him, always.

"Because I have you," he murmured against the skin of her exposed neck.

The way she melted against him as he placed little nibbling kisses on her skin made his already hard cock like steel beneath her. His hands moved automatically to cup her full breasts, rolling her nipples between his thumb and forefinger. Her deep throated sigh, complete with her legs falling open was just the reaction Aubrey was looking for. One hand snaked between her legs, his fingers stroking against the seam of her puffy nether lips. Katrina responded by pushing back against him, her ass grinding against his cock.

Releasing her breasts for the barest of seconds, he tugged on the pony tail to force her head back against his shoulder, his mouth capturing hers. Her mouth opened willingly, their tongues meeting and entwining as if each one of them was trying to taste every bit of the other. Only the need for air broke them apart.

"Are you still frisky?" she teased. Even that little half-smile of hers got him going.

"Ummm, you are nice and wet," his harsh groan was followed by his teeth gently tugging on her ear.

"Aubrey, please." The whispered plea was nowhere near as anxious as he wanted it to be.

"You aren't ready yet." But he would make sure she was. He wanted her to hot for it, she could barely stand it. "Stand up and turn around for me, baby."

Thankfully, he only had on a pair of shorts himself, which he quickly stripped down his legs before pulling his shirt away from her body. Her body, as always, took his breath away. She was all lush, full curves, the kind of real

woman that men dreamed about but for reasons that escaped him never admitted they wanted. She was the sexiest woman alive to him. He couldn't wait to spend his life becoming acquainted with every inch of her skin.

"Come here, baby."

He didn't wait for her to comply, but pulled her down back into his lap facing him. His mouth watered just looking at her breasts. High and plump, her long, dark copper nipples jutted out arrogantly, all hard and pointy. He seriously regretted that he had but one mouth to give.

"Put your hands behind you back and keep them there," he rasped, lowering his head to one waiting bud.

Katrina loved the feel of Aubrey's hot mouth on her nipples. His greedy suckles, sharp, stinging bites, and soothing laps sent bolts of electricity through her body. He never failed to reduce her insides into pure molten lava, ready to erupt at a moment's notice. His broad fingers caressed her pussy, driving her to distraction, but not diving in. She could feel her own wetness which he used as lubrication, moving up to circle her clit, then returning to his unhurried strokes against her lips. Her head fell back as she jutted her breasts more firmly into his mouth, grinding her hips forward in an attempt to force his fingers inside her. He didn't budge, as usual, but the suction on her breasts increased, thereby increasing the wonderful shots of pleasure that raced down her spine. The muscles in her legs began to spasm, she was

going to come. She could feel the intense tension building deep in her core.

Yet she was miles away from being satisfied.

"Aubrey!" She growled in demand, knowing he would ignore her plea.

"Tell me what you need." He lifted his head to stare into her eyes. The banked passion reflected in his blue-green depths sent her heart into overdrive.

"I need more," she begged. With Aubrey it didn't seem pathetic, begging. When they were together he was completely focused on her. It turned her on to see how much her pleasure fed his own. "I want to come."

"You can come now." His fingers trailed back up to her clit, pinching the sensitive nubbin before rubbing away the sting. "Come for me, Katrina."

She didn't event to hold back. Her juices flooded her channel, coating his fingers. She watched as he lifted his hand, sucking every drop from his thick digits. She knew what he wanted next. Her pussy jumped in expectancy, wanting that tongue licking her, possessing her. But first...

In an act of defiance, she slid from his lap to her knees in front of him.

"Don't," Aubrey warned, trying to scoot backwards, but it was too late.

Her mouth encased the head of his cock, her tongue swirling around the ultrasensitive crown.

She was no fool. Aubrey hadn't let her love him like this for some time now, and she knew why. She needed to make him understand this wasn't about anything more than the two of him. The taste of him exploded on her taste buds, urging her to slide the throbbing length back as far she possibly could. His moans fed her already blazing flame, increasing the itch no one in world could scratch other than Aubrey. She loved making him feel good. She loved everything about being with him.

"Fuck! Baby, you have to stop."

She didn't. Instead she increased her movements, moving up and down on as much of him as she possibly could, then dipping down to gently sucked each delicate ball sac into her mouth.

"Shit!"

Before she could go back to her main prize, Katrina found herself splayed out on the kitchen table, legs firmly in place on Aubrey's shoulder. The man dove into her pussy like it was the last oasis in the desert. He alternated between spearing his tongue deep inside her before curling the devastating weapon upward to tease her clit. He kept a firm grip on her hips, keeping her immobile.

"Aubrey, please, please!"

She had no idea what the hell she was asking for; he was giving her exactly what she had wanted, and then some. She howled out loud when his tongue was replaced by two digits, finding her g-spot with deadly accuracy.

"I want to see you come again" he demanded, his voice rough with passion. "Come for me, Katrina."

Aubrey's cock pulsed so hard it hurt. He wanted nothing more than to bury himself deep inside her, but he had to watch her reach her peak one more time. She was so fucking beautiful when she came, he would never get tired of watching her. He couldn't resist leaning down to suck on her clit, just as his fingers drove her over the edge. Her body shook, her breathing little more than rasps. So fucking perfect.

"Yeah, baby, just like that."

Before she could recover, he was there, thrusting deep inside until her was completely buried within her core. Her walls pulsated against his entire length; Aubrey had to bite the inside of his cheek to hold on. Perfection. She was so damn tight, so damn wet, he couldn't imagine how both could be true, and yet it was.

Her jerky movements beneath him urged him to move. He didn't want to, not yet, but he had little choice. Katrina had the ability to dive him completely mad like no one else ever could. Despite his plan to take her slowly at first, he couldn't hold back. He drove into her wildly, meshing their pelvises together. He felt her clit protruding, rubbing against him on every down-stroke, felt the way it made her body tremble. Every quake inside her body drove his own.

"Do you know how perfect you are?" The words may have been loving and gentle, but his tone was anything but. "So hot, so sexy. I want to stay inside you forever, *chere*, just like this."

She loved that idea, and would have said so had been able to talk. As it was, Aubrey was driving her out of her mind with pure pleasure. Every nerve ending tingled, every sensation rocked her to her core. The only thing she seemed capable of saying was his name, which she repeated breathlessly, turning it into something between a chant and a prayer.

"Aubrey, Aubrey! Oh shit, Aubrey!"

This was the way it was supposed to be, something she had been missing her entire life. She gave everything, holding nothing back. Her nails clawed at his back, her hips rose to meet his every lunge. She wanted him deeper, though she knew he was as deep as he could possible go. She wanted him to become a permanent part of her.

"I need you to come again for me, chere. Come with me."

Her body was perfect attuned to his own she had little choice. Just his words sent her over, her body bursting in an inferno. Spots literally danced in front her eyes as she screamed his name. Nothing had ever felt so painfully good; nothing ever could.

"I love you." The words slipped out before Katrina could call them back. She had never said those three words to a soul other than her friends and her grandmother. They were too precious to throw around without taking their meaning, their real meaning, into account.

"I love you, Katrina," Aubrey replied softly, kissing her tenderly.

She had no doubt that he did. He had bent over backwards to show her how much.

"I know."

A curious warmth spread to her that had nothing to do with the unbelievable bout of making love they had just had. Instead of running from what she had just laid bare to this man, she wanted to do nothing more than to snuggle, which they did after Aubrey carried her back to his bed. Who would have thought it possible? A university professor had done what she swore no man would ever do – he had tamed her.

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

"Where is my stepdaughter?"

Arienne eyed the Russian man with distaste. It galled her to have to meet clandestinely in the seedier parts of the city. It was all necessary because of that watchdog, Didier. Thierry knew damn well she couldn't refuse to have the man in her home, not with what he and Rance had hanging over her head. It was still infuriating to have to come up with excuses on why she had a permanent house guest. She had heard whispered rumors the boy was Piers's lover!

Her own sons Beaumont and Boden refused to lift a finger when it came to her grandsons. Beaumont was delighted – *delighted* – in his daughter-in-law. How could he not see Angelique was hurting his career? His Senate seat may be safe for now, but he had begun to listen to her liberal prattling. Arienne was afraid he might leave the party. That was not to be borne!

There was little she could do about Angelique for now. She had to focus on the two new problems at hand. What the hell was it with her grandchildren and black women? After all she had done to keep this family's legacy alive. The bastard of a man she married certainly hadn't had a care for his own name, a name steeped in history and pride. May his soul rot in hell eternally! She was the one who had pushed him to live up to his name. She

was the reason Thierry had tripled the families fortunes. Hadn't she noticed her grandson's natural aptitude and pushed him into business? And Rance – she had pushed him to go into the academy, and on to law school. He was a shark in the courtroom, completely ruthless. And Aubrey, always with his head in a book. A prestigious professorship at Tulane was perfect for him. Didn't he know she was working behind the scenes to make him a dean? How did he think he got tenure? He didn't really think it was because of his research and prolific writing, did he? She had greased the wheels hard to make sure he was the youngest history professor to ever make tenure.

She couldn't let this happen. She wouldn't. Especially with Remy's wife expecting.

Remy. Her one great failure. Why he took the death of that swamp trash so damn personally she would never know. He didn't even love the girl. She had checked into it, the child that whore had tried to pass off as a Chevalier wasn't even his! Who would have known she would kill herself? Arienne had only wanted to scare the girl a little.

"Did you hear me, lady?"

Her attention returned to the disreputable man leering at her across the greasy diner table. She shudder to think what the employees of this establishment could have possible wiped the laminate with. She slid a pristine linen invitation across the surface toward the man, unwilling to hand him anything. If their hands accidently touched she would have to boil her hand. The man looked as oily as the table. She was sure he was carrying more than one communicable disease.

"She will be there. You can collect her and get the hell out of my state," she hissed, hating that she was forced to deal with such scum.

"So you own the state now?" he retorted back, revealing teeth that seemed a little too white.

The man's entire persona seemed off. He wore expensive clothes, nouveau riche clothes in any event, but they looked wrong on him. Like they didn't belong. The two goons that hung behind him made him look like a caricature of a movie screen mobster. This reminded her...

"Leave the goons," she told him imperially climbing to her feet. "All of New Orleans society will be there; they will not be let in."

"They are my bodyguards," he shrugged as if she were impressed. "I am an important man. I can't go anywhere without them. Too many undesirable people out there looking to make a quick buck."

Like you, she thought but said nothing.

"Speaking of which, where is my money?"

Arienne pulled a thick envelope out her purse and slid it too across the table. She had a nearly uncontrollable urge to throw it in his face.

"They will not be let in" she restated firmly. "Bring them at your own risk. You will only cause a scene, but that is none of my concern. I don't know you – we have never met."

She let that be the last word, sailing out of the deplorable place without looking back. Her face flamed bright red with anger. How dare he?! Did he think himself more important to than her own son, a United States senator? The common ingrate! Perhaps she should have him killed.

No, no that would leave her with one red-headed problem she didn't need. Damn that weak kneed Susan! If the little twit had been able to give her grandson what he needed, he wouldn't have to resort to sleeping with trash. But no! The Susan had run away like a frightened rabbit. Why there was a time when her own husband wouldn't have dreamed of looking to another woman.

A sharp pain pierced her heart so savagely, Arienne had to stop and lean against her car to catch her breath. For a split second the past swam in front of her eyes. Memories she had ruthlessly suppressed rushed to the fore. How long had she been fighting this battle? How many things had she done to keep the wolves of the world at bay?

Why were they doing this to her? What was happening to her family. She had worked so damn hard. She felt as if she had made a deal with the devil and now that bastard was reneging! It was untenable!

"Ma'am? Are you alright?"

She waved her driver away and straightened her spine. She was Lady Rienne, she would damn well act like it.

"I'm fine," she declared, moving to get into the car.

She had one more stop to make. Katrina was as good as out of the way, but that Jade character would take much more finesse. Especially with Rance so damned suspicious. One wrong move and she might push him into the woman's waiting arms.

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Didier was on his cell phone before the lights of Lady Rienne's car disappeared out of side. He didn't bother to call Thierry, who would only try to reign in his grandmother. That bitch on wheels couldn't be reigned in, she had to be stopped. There was only one thing that would stop her besides death. She had to be faced with the cold hard truth. All her dirty little secrets had to be laid bare before all to knock her off that perch she believed herself to be nailed to.

"Grand-père, I need you to come," he said as soon as the older man answered the other line. Time was of the essence, there was no time for pleasantries. "And please bring maman with you."

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The weather was perfect for the bimonthly brunch Katrina shared with her best friends. Since Remy had opened his restaurant, the women had a choice courtyard table and the grub was on the house. For that alone, Katrina could have kissed Regina for marrying her husband. The fact that Remy made her friend deliriously happy was an added bonus.

It was the first time they had all been together since she had moved in with Aubrey. Since all the women helped her move, her new relationship was neither a surprise to the others, nor was it a main topic of conversation. Katrina couldn't have been more grateful about that. She wasn't ready to talk in depth about it, it was just too new.

"Did you get your ball gown yet?"

Katrina groaned inwardly at Angelique's question. There were few things she hated more that society events. Even after all this time, she always felt like she didn't belong, like a fraud about to be found out at any given second. Expensive threads did not a debutante make. Shifting in her seat, readymade lies springing to the tip of her tongue, she felt a hand encasing hers.

Regina. Of the three friends that meant more to her than sisters ever could, Regina knew more than anyone her deep seated insecurities. How many impromptu therapy sessions had they had in dorm rooms, tiny apartments, then fancy offices once they had finally "made it"? Katrina knew

everything she had today she earned, but this thing with Aubrey had all raw in ways she had never been before.

She didn't want to embarrass him. She wanted to be the woman he deserved.

"Who is better than you?" Regina whispered for her ears alone.

No one. The answer was said mentally, but it still did wonders. Their little mantra seemed silly, but it gave her fortitude and bolstered the delicate walls of her inner fortress. No one is better than me.

"Aubrey and I are going tomorrow to pick something out," she answered breezily. Inside she may be a bundle of exposed nerves, but she didn't have to show it.

"So, this thing is serious then?" Jade asked so cautiously Katrina wanted to kick herself so being so wrapped up in her own problems, she had completely forgotten about Jade.

Poor Jade, pinning away for a man who refused to act on their mutual attraction. Damn Rance Chevalier and his stupid ass overprotective hide. By staying away from the woman he wanted most, he was killing them both. He believed himself to be protecting Jade from that psychotic bitch of a grandmother of his, when all he was doing was breaking the heart of the sweetest woman Katrina had ever known.

Before meeting Jade, she had no idea people like that even existed. Angelique and Regina were good people, but Jade had some kind of weird inner light very few people possessed. Kind of like an angel come to Earth. She always put others first, would give a person her last dime, and never had a bad word to say about even the foulest person. And her parents were just like her. She was just so genuinely nice it boggled the mind.

"Yeah, I guess we are: Katrina admitted, feeling sorry for her friend and partner but knowing there was nothing she could do to ease the other woman's pain. It had to be hard on Jade with all her friends pairing off all of a sudden. "Are you still going with Geraldo?"

"His name is Victor, and yes," Jade retorted with a roll of her eyes.

"Is he going to trim some of that facial hair down? Will he be wearing his best polyester tux for the evening?" Katrina just couldn't help it, dude looked like a cheesy Geraldo Rivera with that thick mustache and those elevator shoes.

"I wish you would let me set you up, Jade," Regina did her best to smother her chuckles at Katrina's antics. "A lot of guys ask about you."

"Yeah, right," Jade snorted, looking down.

That was another thing about Jade, she had no glue how guilelessly beautiful she was. She had the most flawless deep ebony skin, all silky-smooth and unblemished. Her light brown eyes were a startling contrast,

wide and completely without duplicity. Her hair was jet black, true and deep, unbelievably thick and long, falling to the middle of her back. Women spent hundreds of dollars for weaves to get hair like that.

For some reason, Jade believed herself to be fat, as evidenced by all the rabbit food she had been eating lately, and hours spent at the gym. It may be true she had a true J-Lo ass, Jade was built like a brick house. Men stared for days at those cannons she called breasts, her waist was perfectly tapered. All Jade could seem to focus on were her hips and the tiny mound of her stomach. She was meant to be a healthy size 10 or 12, not the size 5 she was striving for.

"I ought to dress you in a negligee and turn you lose in one of my clubs," Katrina thought out loud, loving the natural blush that immediately blossomed on Jade's cheek. Twenty-eight and still as innocent as a virgin – unreal.

"I want to throw that damn salad over her head," Angelique agreed, garnering shocked looks from everyone at the table.

"Thierry is rubbing off on you," Regina stated what everyone was thinking.

"In more ways than one," Angelique grinned wickedly, receiving in more astonished stares. "What?"

A shadow fell over the table before anyone could say a word. Katrina happened to glance up and immediately froze. White noise filled her ears as she broke out in a cold sweat. No! It was mirage, it had to be.

"Hello, my little Kitty Kat," the hateful voice from her worst nightmares purred in a heavy Russian accent.

Her mouth fell open, but no sound came out. She wanted to scream, to run, to scratch out his fucking hateful blue eyes, but she was immobile, completely unable to move.

"Katrina?" Regina placed her hand on hers once more, and this time, Katrina grasped it like her only anchor in a storm. "Are you all right?"

Not now! Why was he here? How had he found her? Her chest tightened painfully as she fought for air. Why couldn't she speak or move? She had played this scene over and over in her mind for years, this was not how this was supposed to be.

Jade, dear Lord sweet little Jade sprung up to her full five feet two inches and poked the most dangerous snake Katrina had ever known right in his chest.

"I don't know who the hell you are, but I have a good idea," Jade fumed. "You better get the hell out of here before I lose my religion on your pathetic ass!"

Oh, Lord Jade cursed! And all she could do was sit in a damned catatonic daze. She had to get Jade away from him before he hurt her.

"I think you had best turn around and run back to whatever rock you crawled out from under," Angelique's voice was every bit as ice cold as Thierry at his most dangerous.

Odd. Katrina observed Jade's white hot fury and Angelique dangerous coldness as if from outside herself. With the exception of the tremors quickly racking her body, she was still as death, holding on to sanity was Regina whispered fervently in her ear.

"He can't hurt you anymore, Katrina. He is weak, he is nothing. You are stronger than him. He knows that. You're not that scared little girl anymore. You are strong, you are the queen of your destiny. He is nothing."

Her eyes closed as she absorbed the strength of Regina's encouragement. She *was* stronger. He couldn't hurt her unless she allowed it, and she had no intention of ever letting that happen again.

"Leave." It was little more than a whisper, but it filled her with power that built gradually. The next one was more forceful. "Leave. There is nothing for you here."

"Come on, Kitty Kat," the hateful cajoling voice made her physically ill.

"I have come all this way. Surely you have a hug for Daddy."

She was going to throw up. He used to make her call him that. She hadn't uttered the word since leaving Nevada.

She sat in stunned silence, trying to process that Fedor was standing right there in from of her, when her friends sprung into action.

Jade hauled off and punched him, hard, right in the gut, then drove her knee directly in into his groin.

"Do you want me to cause a scene?" the diminutive former sweetheart asked, loudly.

Katrina was grasped by her arms by Angelique or Regina, she couldn't tell which. Her eyes were glued to Fedor curled up into a ball on the ground.

Who knew Jade had that in her?

As she was guided past the man on the ground, she could have sworn she witnessed Angelique's finely pedicured foot connect with the side of his head. She tried to hang on, just or a minute longer. She managed to make it through the restaurant. She heard Regina and Remy, heard Angelique issuing orders. As soon as she felt the cushions of a car seat, she passed out.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Katrina didn't want to go to the ball. It was the last place she wanted to be. The fact that Fedor had found her, that he was here in New Orleans, had her all twisted in knots. He had strolled up to her as if he had never done a thing wrong, like she would be happy to see him. What kind of delusions did he have to just walk right up to her in public, surrounded by her friends? She hadn't seen the man since she was sixteen years old, before her grandmother had snuck her out of Las Vegas to safety. She hadn't seen her either for twelve long years. She could never go back there; just going to Angelique's wedding there had her on pins and needles. She could never bring her grandmother here for fear she would be followed. Phone calls were all the connection she had with the woman who had risked her very life for her.

And she sat there petrified, unable to move. Angelique had taken her here, where Aubrey had held her until she stopped shaking, then made love to her until he was all she could think about. Didier's warning call about Lady Rienne meeting with Fedor came just a bit too late. At least now they knew how her stepfather had found her, and very good idea where he would try to contact her next.

"We are with you," Regina declared, putting her comforting arms around her.

"Yeah, that rat bastard has to get through us," Angelique added, hugging her from the other side.

It was laughable really, that Regina with her now protruding belly and Angelique who had never fought her way out of a wet paper bag were so ready to defend her. It brought tears to her eyes. Friends like this didn't come around every day.

"I think we should geld him," Regina whispered in a conspiratorial whisper.

She needn't have bothered to whisper; Aubrey had his cousins Thierry and Remy were off planning in his study, leaving the women to wait in full ball dress for them to escort them to Angelique's fundraiser.

Katrina wasn't really shocked Lady Rienne had hunted down her stepfather and brought him here to New Orleans. She supposed he was supposed to "deal" with her. She should have anticipated something like this. She should have warned Aubrey. What if he had attacked Aubrey? Or worse?

The sick feeling in her gut got worse. She had never considered she might be putting his life in danger by getting involved with him. One thing was for sure, she wasn't going to run, nor would she allow him to break her down. What she had with Aubrey was worth fighting for. She would face him head on, unlike what had happened at the restaurant. She would face her own personal demon come to life knowing that when she stood up to Fedor,

she wouldn't be alone. As much as she feared for Aubrey's safety, knowing that Fedor was a low, down rat bastard who wasn't above killing to get his way, she was equally afraid of what Aubrey might do to protect her. Fedor wasn't used to being up against such a powerful family. Aubrey was a Chevalier through and through, every bit as Alpha when his "woman" was threatened. She respected that.

The cousins had gone into protect and defend mode. She hadn't spent a second out of Aubrey sight since they found out. Whereas once she would have gotten indignant, Katrina found she didn't mind at all. In fact, she kind of liked it. He made her feel truly safe for the first time in her life. Right now, Piers was glued to Lady Rienne's side, while Rance had damn near moved into Jade's house. Didier had said Lady Rienne had been seen at the house Rance had bought for his former mistress, and afterwards the woman had all but disappeared.

According to what Aubrey had told her, the mistress hadn't been too happy about getting her walking papers. They were all worried she was planning something against Jade, especially Rance. Looks like Lady Rienne had gone in for a twofer.

There was something seriously wrong with that woman. Her hatred bordered on the psychotic. If she had investigated Katrina, she would have had to find out what kind of man Fedor was. How any woman could throw another woman to someone like him was beyond Katrina. It was the ultimate betrayal of their collective womanhood.

Funny, a few weeks ago she would've felt scared shitless. Although she felt physically ill and more than a little terrified for Aubrey, Katrina wasn't scared of Fedor herself at all. She was anxious, nervous as hell, but she wasn't scared for herself. It was time to put this all behind her and rid herself of her past.

"Vegas has a lot of desert. We will strip him, stake him over a red ant hill, cut off his eyelids, make thin, one inch cuts all over his body, sprinkle the cuts with salt, then when the sun approaches high noon, slit open his gut and let loose a famished coyote on his ass."

Both Katrina and Regina simply stared at the genteel born, daughter of the mayor as she sat there, all thoughtful, plotting out loud. Katrina quite frankly was too scared to say much of anything at all. That entire scenario had been damned frightening.

"That's my baby!"

Thierry's voice couldn't even break through the shock of the two other women, who hadn't moved an inch.

"Damn, Thierry, you're rubbing off on sweet little innocent Angel,"
Remy cracked. "Now that I think about it, are you sure that's really the

mayor's daughter. She looks an awful lot like this woman that used to strip down at..."

"Remy if you don't shut the hell up, I will stake *you* out in the desert,"

Thierry cut him off quickly.

Everyone in the room knew that Angelique used to strip from time to time in disguise at one of Katrina's clubs outside the city limits, but Thierry refused to ever admit it had been her, even to his family.

"And then I will drop psychotropic drugs into your food and drive you insane," Regina rejoined sweetly.

"Who's rubbing off on whom?" Angelique laughed.

It all seemed so normal, like one of their many Sunday dinners they all still had together. Who would have thought they were off to confront her crazy, obsessed stepfather, Katrina wondered. She was truly blessed in her friends, who were really her family.

"We better get going," Aubrey pulled her up and into his arms. "I am right here, *chere*," he whispered for her ears alone. "Always."

Aubrey let her go as they went towards the awaiting limousines. He waited until she was in conversation with Regina and Angelique before turning to Thierry. "I meant what I said. This bastard is mine. Make sure Didier knows that. I will stand trial if I have to, but he will die tonight."

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Thierry frowned once he was out of the sight of everyone except his wife. Something bigger was going on here, but he couldn't imagine what it was. That bothered him. He generally knew everything there was to know about his family. He hadn't seen the whole Katrina and Aubrey thing coming, and definitely hadn't seen Lady Rienne would get to the woman's stepfather. She kept slipping Didier's watchful eye. He was going to have to get more eyes on her in the future.

"What has you all pensive?" Angelique asked, snuggling into his side.

He had to smile at his beautiful wife. She was so precious to him, when he had almost lost her he thought he would go insane. He could only imagine what Aubrey must be feeling. Thierry had known all about her past, having done in depth research before he went into business with her long before he and Angelique had gotten together. He had to admit he admired the hell out of Katrina for how far she had come, and how she had fought to make something of her life. Too many couldn't say the same. He really couldn't have asked for a better woman to be with his cousin. It just blew his mind Aubrey wasn't the not-all-there bookworm they all believed him to be.

"I haven't been able to get in touch with Didier for a couple of days."

"And this worries you because..?"

"I am afraid of what he might do."

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Aubrey was holding Katrina too tightly, he knew that, but he couldn't bring himself to loosen his grip. Damn that Russian bastard for hurting her again. He was going to kill him. Nothing could keep him from it. The man simply couldn't be allowed to walk on Earth another day.

He would be there at the benefit tonight; Aubrey was willing to bet on it. No one seemed to be able to find Didier, the Special Forces guru, it would be up to them. Rance wouldn't leave Jade's side, not now that his ex-mistress was missing after visits from Lady Rienne. Thierry would of course cover his wife, and Remy couldn't be pried from Regina's side. With Piers watching his grandmother, they were covered, but Aubrey couldn't help but think it wouldn't be enough. Fedor Kozlov was a professional criminal. After his little stunt at the restaurant, he would know they were on to him. Hopefully he would underestimate them and get cocky.

Aubrey had to keep Katrina in the open surrounded by people. It shouldn't be hard.

So why did he have such a bad feeling about this?

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

Fedor came to a dead stop when he spotted her, all the air swooshing out of his lungs. She was everything he knew she would become. She had begun developing young, fully ripe now. Her statuesque physique was something born of dreams. The reddish tint to her dark skin sparkled, coupled with natural auburn hair that flowed a little past her shoulders may not be unusual for an African American woman here in the South, but it would drive his clientele who had little to no knowledge of the rich and varied backgrounds of the peoples of America crazy. Her mother had once had the potential to be this dark honey dream, but the woman was weak, not strong enough to stand by his side. Katrina stood with her back straight, regally, staring down each of these pampered buffoons as if she belonged here. She looked like an exotic bloom cast among plain, pale roses.

He had to be careful to stay out of her line of sight, and that of her boyfriend. He wanted the advantage of surprise when he approached her. That she would not welcome him coming for her was a given, but Fedor was sure once he convinced her she couldn't hope to keep this con up for long, she would come home willingly. He didn't allow for the fact she had run away from him and stayed away enter into the equation. If she balked, he had the goods to keep her quiet. She would be coming back to Las Vegas with him, one way or another.

His obsession with Katrina was not simply that she was the one that got away. Katrina wasn't the first woman to run from his "protection." She was simply the one he couldn't let go. As he watched, he felt the lust that had always burned deep in his gut grow until the flames threatened to consume him. He had built his dreams around finding her again. He always knew one day, they would be together. They would build an empire, gradually placing the killing blow on the dying Italian mafia in Nevada. Over time, they would make their way into Arizona, New Mexico, and eventually, the major prize-California. He couldn't do it without her, he had to have her.

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Fedor was tracking her. She hadn't seen him, but she could feel his hot gaze, making her skin crawl in disgust. He was out there among the teeming mass waiting, silently willing her free from Aubrey's side.

Patience, asshole, we will have our confrontation.

Katrina was ready for him this time. The incident at the restaurant had been a rude awakening. She was ashamed of her reaction, but that would never happen again. It had been a shock to her system, she hadn't expected it, but she should have. She had spent every waking moment since then mentally preparing herself. She was ready, hell she was spoiling for a fight. She would be free of Fedor tonight, one way or another.

Aubrey was tense, constantly scanning for any threats. It was sweet, but unnecessary. This was her war, and she would fight it and win. She would never allow any harm to come Aubrey's way. She just needed to shake him and draw Fedor far away from him. Aubrey had no experience with the scum of the earth like Fedor. Men like her stepfather dealt in violence every day. They used brute force, intimidation, and fear as a means to an end. Aubrey didn't need to be involved with this.

She finally got her chance when a dean from Aubrey's university cornered him about something. She slipped from his side without his notice, but she knew that wouldn't last very long. She waded into the crowd, moving as swiftly as she could without gaining Aubrey's notice. More than once she had to duck out of his line of sight. She steadily made her way toward one of the side doors that flanked the ballroom. They led to small waiting rooms designed for those who wished to escape the heat and crush of the ball. The weight of the small gun hidden in her clutch reassured her as she smiled, murmuring polite words as she moved towards her goal.

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Didier paused outside the hotel. Streams of beautiful people poured from pausing limousines, Bentleys, even a couple of pickup trucks. Local news crews were stationed at the doors, stopping only the crème de la crème of the party goers. A few minutes more, and most of the cameras would move inside for local coverage. Perfect.

"Did you tell them you were doing this?"

"I told no one," Didier answered shortly.

He had considered it, but he knew Thierry would have tried to stop him. Lord, love Thierry, the man really believed he could protect all his loved ones, even Lady Rienne. How the man could still harbor tender feelings for his grandmother, Didier would never know. There wasn't anything redeemable left in the old bag.

"Son, are you sure about this? Maybe there can be another way. A private meeting perhaps?"

Didier wanted to engulf his mother in his arms. He wished like hell there was another way. Even with all her suspicious activity, there was nothing concrete against Arienne Chevalier, just suspicions. While her family knew the truth, there wasn't enough to convict. Her quest to keep her family "pure" had become a dangerous obsession that thrown the old lady completely off kilter. She wouldn't stop until she was forced, she wouldn't quit unless they made her. Piers, Rance and Thierry still held their grandmother in awe somewhat. They still wanted to protect her by avoiding all the scandal. Didier wasn't cursed with the need to protect the crazy woman. He felt nothing but contempt for her.

He felt guilty for what he was about to put his mother through, but it had to be done. This craziness had to end.

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Arienne grit her teeth as she accepted well wishes, more than half of which was false. She knew what these vultures were saying about her family behind her back. She could feel the pitying stares from her rivals and so-called friends alike. This had to stop.

Her grandsons thought they could contain her, stop her from doing what she had to do. They were all in for a very rude awakening. It wasn't an accident the dean of the history department had decided to talk to Aubrey about his impending retirement tonight. Arienne watched the trashy red bone slip away, moving through the ball room as if she belonged. She watched the Russian criminal give slow chase. Good riddance to bad rubbish. After tonight at least one grandson would be free.

Her gaze wandered until she found Rance, squiring that little coalblack nobody around. Soon she too will be out of the way, permanently. Rance's former mistress had a mercenary heart and was surprisingly easy to work with. Their plan was ingenious, no one would ever suspect what happened until it was far too late. Remy and Thierry may be forever lost to her, but it was not too late to save the rest of her boys. It was for their own good, one day they would see that. A small commotion drew her attention to the entrance doors. A pack of reporters snapped pictures in a mad flurry, garnering attention throughout the ball room. Arienne frowned as she tried to stretch her neck to get a better look. Surely Angelique didn't extend invitations to the celebrity element that had flocked to New Orleans as their new "cause" after that ghastly storm. How very tawdry that would be.

The reporters and whomever they were surrounding appeared to moving in her direction. A sea of people cleared a path as they got ever closer. What in the world...

"Hello, Arienne."

Years melted away at the sound of that voice. The last time she had heard that voice it has been raised in anger, throwing vile accusations at her like so many stones. She had done what was best, but he had not listened. He had blamed her, cursed her and finally walked away, never looking back. She had built up her life and strengthened her family alone, building an empire on the ashes of all this man had burned to the ground. He hadn't understood what she had known so well.

She could feel her heart stutter as the implications came crashing down on her. Already, the older among the ball attendees were whispering the identity of this debonair stranger.

How dare he stand there looking for all the world as if he had any right to be here, to interfere with what she had carefully crafted. He still stood straight and tall, his aquamarine eyes shooting accusing daggers straight at her. His hair was now liberally sprinkled with gray, but he didn't at all resemble the seventy-year old man he was.

"Baptiste! I thought you were dead!" Arienne thought no such a lie, but she was a master at saving face. She was daring him to claim differently, betting he wouldn't want to embarrass his sons, who now stood behind her on either side, or his grandsons, who were pushing their way through the crowd.

"You know very well that is a lie, Arienne," Baptiste showed no mercy as he crushed her delicate house of cards. "And you know full well why I left you"

A small woman pushed past the tall figure to stand in front of Baptiste Chevalier, the man Arienne had declared dead for the past forty years. She had to be at least forty-five, maybe older, it was impossible to tell with her ageless face and clear café au lait skin.

"Is this the reason you left?" Arienne switched tactics, deciding to play the spurned woman. She was desperate to save face anyway she could.

"Hello, Mother."

The room began to spin, spots dance in front of her eyes. No! This couldn't be!

"No words of welcome for your daughter, Arienne?" Baptiste spat, and loudly.

The room was deathly quiet, every ear tuned to the drama unfolding in front of them. Arienne felt her face heat, even as her body went cold. How could they do this to her? After all she had done, it couldn't be over, not like this.

"This, this is not my child!" She was screeching, but she had to stop this. "Boden! Beaumont! Tell them, this is a filthy lie!"

"You can't expect us to deny our own sister, Mother."

Boden knew? Was that how Thierry had met Didier? Were her own sons against her too?

"That is not my child," she hissed, looking wildly at the people gathered, ogling her as if she were some side show freak. "That couldn't possibly be my child!"

"Blood will tell."

That voice dropped Arienne to her knees. Her hands clutched at her chest to try to slow down the wild beating of her heart.

"Giles, even you are against me?"

And elderly black man hobbled forward, assisted by Didier. His eyes showed all the sorrow of a man who had seen too much in his time. The resemblance was uncanny, anyone seeing the two of them together would know the truth.

"We were all so proud of you, Arienne, marrying into a good family," the old man looked down on the elderly woman on her knees in a designer ball gown. No one made a move to help her up, her own family stayed a few feet back. The old man moved forward and kneeled. "We were all so sad when you never wrote, never called. We never knew what happened to you until your husband showed up with a baby some forty years ago. I knew she was yours just by looking at her. How could you do that, Arienne? How could you send your own child away like that?"

Lady Rienne was no more, Arienne could only point a shaking finger in the woman's direction. "She was going to ruin everything. No one knew where I came from. No one could tell what I was. I passed, here in the heart of the South. They all thought I was white. Then *she* was born. Everyone would know. Everyone knew I was pregnant, I couldn't pass her off as someone else's child. She would have been provided for. But no!"

Her gaze flashed to her husband, the man who should have stayed dead. She should have killed him herself before he had the chance to follow the child to Canada. He should have been grateful she was fighting to preserve his family's image. They could have been arrested just for being married in Louisiana, but the damn man didn't want to let the child go. He

wanted them all to pack up and move to Canada, after she worked so hard to leave that place. She had great plans for her family; she wasn't going to let one throwback child ruin everything.

"You had to go after the child," she accused her husband. "You couldn't leave it alone. What about your own sons? You never thought of them did you?"

"I have been a part of my sons' lives since the day I walked out on you,"

Baptiste threw back at her. "They knew where I was and why for years."

"Is that true, Boden?" How far did this conspiracy go? How could they have known all this time, and never let on?

"Yes, Beaumont and I both knew. We would have never said a word until you started in on our sons."

Arienne couldn't breathe. Her heart would not slow down! She tried to scream but no sound would come. They were all watching her, reporters snapped their pictures, bright bulbs flashed in her face. What have they done to her? Didn't they know they were ruining everything? She tried to tell them that, but it was too hard to utter the words. Her eyes found Rance and Aubrey, both looking at her with disgust. How dare they look at her like that!

"It is too late for your bitch," she managed to gasp out, fighting to hold on to consciousness just to have her say. Pinning Rance in her glare she spit, "It has already begun. You will never be able to save her long enough to have her. I will have the last laugh."

The look of horrified fury on Rance's face was enough. Her grandsons had destroyed everything she had spent years to build, at least one of them will feel her vengeance. Two, if the gods were kind. She would be avenged. It was her last thought before losing consciousness.

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

Katrina was so enraptured by the family drama unfolding for all the world to see. Lady Rienne was on her knees, yet no one person moved to help her. She hissed something to either Rance or Aubrey, or both, then passed out cold. No one moved at first, staring down at the old woman with horrified fascination.

Lady Rienne was black. Forget the fact her dead husband was very much alive, the woman had actually tried to get rid of her own child to stop others from knowing her secret. What kind of person did that? She was so wrapped up she forgot about Fedor.

The push was took her completely by surprise, knocking her into one of the small waiting rooms. Her brain immediately processed what was happening. Swallowing down her first twinge of fear, she thrust her clutch behind her back, flicking it open with twist of her fingers. Her hands unerringly found the cold, comforting steel of her gun; gripping tightly, her finger curled around the trigger.

She would kill him if she had to. Jade was a damn good lawyer; she would put her fate in her partner's hands. The one thing she wouldn't do was continue to live in fear. The bastard would never again interfere in her life.

"Hello again, my little Kitty Kat," Fedor purred, moving toward her.

She knew what he wanted, what he expecting. He wanted to cow her. He had taken her earlier fear as encouragement, convinced he would haunt her dreams since his sudden appearance. Well, he was in for a surprise, because anger fueled her now. Anger that he would dare even imagine she would willingly go with him back into hell.

"I am not your little anything, Fedor." Her voice was calm, even, and gave away nothing. It was a far cry from what she really felt. Fury, betrayal and repugnance warred with the overwhelming desire for revenge. He deserved to suffer before he rotted in hell.

"But you are," his smirk was self assured and decidedly oily. Her stomach roiled as he stood nose to nose, but she wasn't about to back down. He closer he was, the easier the shot. "And soon, we will be one happy family again. Wouldn't that be nice, honey? Wouldn't you like that?"

"I would rather eat dog shit than go anywhere with you. It will be a cold day in hell before we will ever be a family. You are nothing but a small time pimp with big time aspirations. I am beyond you."

Fedor stopped in the act of lifting his hand to caress her hair. His face blazed dark red before he delivered a slap that snapped Katrina's head back. Fed by her own inner rage, she kept her stance, though the entire side of her face flamed and throbbed. He would not win, not this time, not ever again.

"Uppity bitch, you think you are too good for me?" His accent was thicker the angrier he got. Katrina smiled serenely, knowing it would infuriate him further. "How do you think your she-bitch friends would feel about you once I tell them what you really are?"

Katrina made a great show of pulling her free hand out in front of her to pretend to casually study her nails. In truth, she was assessing his stance, whether or not he was poised for another strike. She also noted he had failed to lock the door behind him. Idiot. Fedor was always impatient, believing all around him so sufficiently intimidated no one would dare gainsay him. Aubrey would notice her absence soon. The dramatic scene had been in its closing acts before she was pushed into the room. It might take him a minute or two locate which room she was in, but she knew he would find her. She would have to finish this before he arrived. He had been through enough tonight, she wouldn't allow this taint to touch him if she could help it.

"You do know that the term bitch implies the subject is female, right? The 'she' in front is completely repetitive and sounds dim. But then, we are talking about you."

She was starting to really enjoy goading him. He wouldn't beat her badly, not here. He would want to take her somewhere her screams couldn't be heard. That would never happen, but he didn't know that. She just needed him to be so mad he wasn't paying close attention, and it was working.

"I will go out there and scream to all those fancy people what a liar you are," Fedor was hissing so hard, spit gathered in the corners of his mouth as if he were actually foaming. Perfect. "A lawyer? What, did you do sleep your way through law school?" He gave a crazed howl of laughter that showcased just how far gone he was. "We both know you never went to law school. You are a sham! What will your little boyfriend do when he finds out, huh? Or your precious little friends?"

That stunned her, though she realized it really shouldn't have. Fedor underestimated all women, her in particular. Had her grandmother not gotten her out of Las Vegas when she did, Katrina would have killed him one day, and he would have never seen it coming. She owed her grandmother so much. This man was worse than simply crazy, he was impossibly ignorant.

She laughed, unable to help herself. She had gone to school with many in the ballroom. This idiot's proclamations would be taken for exactly what it was, the ravings of an insane criminal.

Her laughter pushed him over the edge, He raised his hand to strike again, just as Katrina was preparing to pull her gun forward and shoot.

Neither had the chance to put their plans into action. The door to the room crashed open, a shot rang out, echoing loudly in the eerie silence. Katrina watched as Fedor fell in slow motion, screaming out in pain clutching his leg. Another shot sounded, hitting his other leg. She watched a spray of

blood splatter the light beige carpet, watched him whirl in agony, unable to believe what she was seeing.

She didn't want to look towards the door, terrified to see who was standing there. *Not Aubrey. Lord, please, not Aubrey.* 

Pounding feet sounded from the hallway. There were shouts, all masculine coming closer. She couldn't look. Her knees buckled. Sinking to the ground, tears flooded her eyes. Arms enfolded her, but she still couldn't look up.

"Katrina? Katrina, *chere*, please look at me."

Gulping the wail of anguish her eyes lifted slowly. Aubrey was there, holding her, stroking her hair. He looked like he had just run a mile. In the background, someone was demanding to know who someone was. Thierry. It was the voice that answered that stopped her heart.

"My name is Lydia Ray, and yes, I shot that bastard. And before you ask, I didn't shoot to kill, I want him to suffer. No amount pain will be enough for what he has put my grandbaby through."

Katrina's eyes swung toward the door. She couldn't believe what she was seeing, but right there was the woman responsible for saving her life and more importantly, her sanity.

"As soon as I found out he was coming here to torture my grandchild, I followed. Call the police, I could give a damn. Just give me fair warning so I

can finish him off tonight. He will never again hurt my baby, even if I have to come back from the grave to stop him."

"Grandma?" Katrina's voice broke saying the word. It had been so long, she despaired of ever seeing her again.

Then, for the second time in her life, Katrina fainted.

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Lady Rienne had suffered a heart attack. Because no one had moved when she first collapsed, and even then, no one bothered taking her pulse, much less attempted any type of resuscitation, her prognosis wasn't encouraging. The only one to willing climb into the ambulance with the aged woman was her disowned brother Giles. She seemed to be gone from people's thought as soon as the rescue vehicle sped away. New Orleans society was far to agog about the revealing of Chevalier family secrets, no one paid much attention to the goings on in the waiting rooms.

People surrounded Baptiste Chevalier and newly discovered Chevalier daughter, Therese Chevalier de Capêt, Didier's mother.

Aubrey settled Katrina in a separate waiting room, her grandmother and friends by her side. He didn't want to leave her there, but there was something he needed to do.

"Let me do this, Aubrey," Didier had managed to slip the throng of gossip mongering party goers to join his cousins as they debated how to get rid of the vermin alternating between wakeful torment and unconsciousness due to the bullets lodged in each knee cap.

Katrina's grandmother was one hell of a shot, incapacitating the Russian man without killing him. It had to hurt like a son-of-bitch, but no one wasted any sympathy on him.

"No." He didn't expound on the statement. He knew they all understood.

"You don't want this on you conscious, man, trust me."

Aubrey looked at the man he never knew was his cousin before tonight. Really looked. There were shadows in his eyes. There was a shadow, a gloom about the man. Aubrey had accepted him on face value because he worked for Thierry. He too had trusted Didier with secrets he would have trusted no one outside their family because his older cousin had, and Thierry was far more protective of them all than anyone else. He realized now he really should have. Aubrey had known about Lady Rienne's real identity. He had even known about the child and Baptiste. He hadn't thought the child would have grown up and had a child of her own. Didier was a Chevalier through and through, with all the same overbearing shielding instincts they all had. Well, except for Piers.

"This is about my woman, I have to do this," he told him, hoping Didier understood. Rance and Thierry had instinctively, moving to his back instead attempting to dissuade him.

"I'll go take care of the police," Piers offered. He worked with Angelique's father now that he had decided not to run for Congress. He knew all the people who needed to know to cover up what was about to happen.

"Aubrey," Didier began, and then shook his head, understanding it would do no good. "Just make it quick. I'll go back outside to keep the wolves at bay."

"It won't be quick or easy, but we will try to keep him as quiet as possible."

Didier nodded and left, leaving Aubrey, Rance, and Thierry with Fedor lying where he was shot.

"I need something to stuff in his mouth," Aubrey threw over his shoulder as he bent down to face the man who had caused the woman he loved so much pain.

Rance shoved his own sock into Fedor's mouth, moving to pin down one arm, while Thierry took the other. His legs were useless, as he was unable to move without extreme pain. Aubrey pulled out the razor sharp knife, then slowly, meticulously opening the coat and dress shirt of the prone man.

He was no longer furious, or even mildly upset. His mind was set to one purpose. Retribution.

"I have always been told revenge is a dish best served cold," Aubrey mused out loud, not really to the Russian even though he was looking directly into the panicked man's eyes. "I will see what I can do to heat this up for you."

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Her grandmother safely ensconced in a guest room, Katrina paced the bedroom she now shared with Aubrey, biting her lips in agitation. Aubrey had stayed at the ballroom, supposedly to deal with the police. She was not so easily fooled.

Aubrey, Thierry, and Rance had been nowhere to be seen when Didier had escorted them all home. Jade was also in a guest room here, while Remy had taken his wife and Angelique Remy and Regina's to wait for Thierry. Therese and Baptiste left with Boden and Beaumont. All had been ordered to be present for Beaumont's press conference tomorrow at noon. His Senate seat might well be in jeopardy, but the older man was downright gleeful at the open return of his father and sister. Apparently, he had not enjoyed his life as a Senator; at least not for the party he represented. He had run and stayed in the Senate to make his mother happy, in hopes she wouldn't be so

hard on his son, Thierry. When it became apparent that wouldn't help, it had been too late for him. He saw this as a way out.

Katrina understood better than Jade or Regina, Boden and Beaumont's plight. They had been trapped in a kind of familial hell for which there was no escape as so long as secrets and lies prevailed. At least now Thierry, Remy, Rance, Aubrey, and Piers had a chance at true happiness, without having to look over their shoulder or protect their backs from their own grandmother.

It was weird how the ones who hurt a person the most were often the ones who were supposed to love you unconditionally. Katrina's mother had sold her out for Fedor, her grandmother had basically washed her hands of her own daughter to save her granddaughter. The cycle seemed to never end.

But Aubrey wouldn't be like that. He would be the best of father's should Katrina ever get over her phobia of actually having children. He wouldn't use her or hurt for his own selfish reasons.

"Why aren't you in bed?"

Katrina jumped, then ran onto his waiting arms. He had showered somewhere, cluing her into what he might have been doing all this time.

"Where have you been? What did you do? Aubrey, please tell me you didn't do anything stupid."

"What would you call stupid, Katrina?" It was a quiet statement, said in a way that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

The comment brought her up short. Fedor wasn't at all sane, and they probably wouldn't have been able to charge him with much. There was no doubt given his instability he would have kept coming after her now that he knew where she was. And she wouldn't be the only one who might have gotten hurt.

Aubrey sighed, pulling her back into his arms. "Chere, I can promise you I would never intentionally hurt you. I can promise you that you're the only woman I ever want in my bed. I promise to love you forever and take care you always. But don't ever expect me not to protect what is mine. Don't ever think that I won't do whatever it takes to keep you safe. And most of all don't ever try to take on something like this by yourself ever again."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The press conference went surprisingly well. Aubrey wanted to laugh at his uncle Beaumont's frustration to how understanding the reporters and his "supporters" were being in the light of his family scandal. He had repeatedly tried to stress that he had known the entire sordid tale all along, but people were winking and nodding, believing him to be protecting his mother who had obviously lost her mind. He left going to his estate in the country immediately following the hour of pure hell, grumbling about how he would switch parties before the next election to "show the smug bastards they didn't know shit." Piers had gleefully informed all that the move would probably just endear him to everyone, especially minorities, ensuring his reelection.

Aubrey had spent the rest of the afternoon locked in his study while Katrina, her grandmother and Katrina's friends had begun making plans for the older woman to relocate here. He had been patient, nodding when he was supposed to, smiling at all the right times and being as respectful as any person with a painful hard-on could possibly be.

Thankfully, Lydia and Regina's mother, Marilyn, had hit it off and decided to go and socialize with women their own age. Angelique, Regina and Jade had left soon after leaving him blessedly alone with his woman at last.

Katrina had barely closed the front door before Aubrey was behind her, grinding his erection into her behind.

"Put your hands on the door and don't move," he growled into her ear, lifting her skirt around her waist.

He sent a silent prayer of thanks that she was indeed wearing a skirt today. Her legs fell open for him without a word, her ass tilting up temptingly. There was no way in hell we was going to ignore the invitation. Too far gone for foreplay, he ripped her panties from her body, entering her with one thrust. She was wet and ready, encasing him snuggly.

"Umm, I have been thinking about this all day," she murmured, accepting every inch without protest.

Damn, he would never get tired of that first glorious plunge. No words could ever describe how good it felt.

"Have you, *chere*? Surely, you could have stolen away for a few minutes if that were true." He stopped moving, halting the movements of her hips, though it was killing him to do so. "Should I spank you for keeping that to yourself until now?"

Her answering moan was his undoing. The first firm smack to her luscious ass sent shivers through them both. Her walls spasmed against his rigid cock, making it impossible not to move.

"You feel so damn good, *chere.*" Another smack was quickly followed by more lunges, wild and demanding.

Her back arched, her arms hooking around his neck. He couldn't be bothered to make her replace her hands back on the door. Passion overrode ever other sense as the moved together, crashing their bodies into one another. His hands moved everywhere, her breasts, her hips, her clit. Her hands pulled at his hair urging him on. Nothing matter but the two of them at that moment. The world could have come to an end and neither would care.

"Come for me, baby," Aubrey growled, too close to the edge to come back. "Come for me now."

Katrina quaked, her body wracked with ripples of pure bliss at her lover's command. She felt him forge forward on last time, his body stiffening his grip becoming unbearably tight. She relished every second, loved the feel of his teeth against her neck, his harsh puffs of air against her skin. Her body rode his release, milking him for all she worth.

And it wasn't enough.

He left her body reluctantly, parting with a lingering kiss to her shoulder.

"How much longer would you say we have?" he asked, pulling her towards the bedroom.

"I think we have a good two hours before my grandmother gets back."

"I think we better make good use of that time."

Katrina couldn't agree more.

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Remy entered the private hospital room behind his grandfather. The older man had been determined to accompany him here, perhaps guessing at his intent. In fact, Baptiste seemed to hang around Remy on a constant basis, considering this was his first trip back to New Orleans in forty years. He had claimed it was because he already knew Thierry and Rance. Remy pointed out that he didn't know Aubrey or Piers, but the old man hadn't seemed to take that seriously.

It rankled Remy to no end that his twin had known their grandfather for years and never said a word. Remy had known Lady Rienne's husband wasn't dead; he had ferreted out that information and used it to gain his freedom from her years ago. He had no idea his grandmother was actually black, which amused Remy on a level he didn't think he could be amused. And that his twin had known and used it to keep their grandmother off Remy's back all these years was a hard pill to swallow. He had always believed Rance had sided with Lady Rienne all those years ago with the death of Cherry, his one time girlfriend who had tried blackmailing him into marriage. Cherry had come to Remy pregnant and scared, and although he

refused to be blackmailed into raising a child that wasn't his own at the tender age of eighteen, he had wanted to help her. Unfortunately, she had gone to Lady Rienne, a drastic mistake. Cherry had wound up dead, and Rance had turned his back on him. Or so he had thought. Instead, Rance had been fighting for him to be free of their grandmother's sickening web of deceit and lies.

Remy had no problem admitting he was wrong, but this was damned galling. He was going to have to grovel for a minute, though he doubted his twin would want that. Still, he felt as if he owed that and so much more to his brother. Rance had wanted nothing in return, had accepted Remy's painful snubbing for years and not said a word.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

Remy was shaken out of his dreary musing, surprised to see they were standing next to his grandmother's bed.

Baptiste wasn't asking if he was ready to see his grandmother, but rather he if was ready to do what he'd come here to do.

Was he ready? Surely he was going to burn in hell for this, but he couldn't take the chance the woman might mess up Rance's best chance for peace. His brother had given up much for him, this was the least he could do.

With a curt nod, he looked down at the seemingly frail woman with tubes sticking out of every orifice. Her face was an odd shade of grayish purple, he supposed from all that inner bile she had kept deep inside her for decades. Apparently that wasn't at all healthy. He would take a note of that.

Her eyes watched the two of them, hatred evident in their dull depths.

Even now she dared to lay there and blame everyone else for all her troubles.

How deluded could one woman be?

Baptiste removed the tube from the old woman's mouth, causing her to cough in protest. It was so odd to see her so weak. The formidable woman he had always known seemed a distant memory.

"Where is Gabriella, and what have you two hatched?" Remy didn't bother with inane chatter. He had a purpose; he wanted to get to it.

"Like I would ever tell the two of you," she wheezed, her voice a faint whisper of pure scorn.

"We will find her," Remy assured her casually, unable to feel much for this woman. Odd, shouldn't familial love be unconditional? He felt no such love at the moment. Perhaps in time. "The only question is whether you want to meet your maker with a clear conscious."

"I will never tell you a damn thing," she spat, her sentence ending in a fit of coughs. "Get out!"

Remy shook his head, but he knew he would get nowhere. So it would end like this. He hadn't really expected anything different.

Remy reached out only to have his hand stilled by his grandfather.

"I won't let you do this," Baptiste told him firmly, his grip unexpectedly strong for a man his age. "I started this, I will end it."

The older man unplugged the machines before Remy could reach them.

Neither man said a word, just watched as the light faded from Arienne Chevalier's eyes.

# **EPILOGUE**

"I love you, but we are not getting married."

Aubrey smiled, hearing Katrina's declaration for what it was. She had been through a lot in the past week, he was willing to take baby steps, for now.

"I am serious, Aubrey," she declared, sitting up in bed and fixing him with what he supposed was her "stern" look. "I am not getting married. Not ever. And I am not too interested in being a mother."

"I heard you, baby" he drawled, pulling her back into his arms. "We can talk about it later."

When she was ready to say yes. He wouldn't push her, and frankly, if she was never ready to have children that was fine with him. She was the most important thing in his world. She *would* be his wife though. Sooner or later. He could wait for it, having waited his entire life to find a woman like her in the first place.

"Why do I get the feeling you are not agreeing with me?" Katrina grumbled, snuggling back into his arms.

"Because I'm not, maybe?"

Katrina hid her smile in his chest. Her words notwithstanding, she knew damn well she would eventually marry Aubrey, but her little show of independence felt good. She would proclaim she wouldn't marry him for as long as he let her, which wouldn't be for long. Truth was, she was kind of looking forward to submitting, just this once.

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Rance frowned as he tried to get comfortable on Jade's couch. This shit was killing him. The woman he wanted more than he wanted his next breath of air was in the next room. Sleeping on her couch every night had given him piece of mind that she was safe, but it had also given him one hell of a case of blue balls.

Not that he would rather be anyplace else. He felt an odd sense of calm just being near Jade. For the first time in his life, he was completely stressfree, able to let down all his guards around this woman. She had no idea she worked him into knots yet, tamed his savage beast at the same time.

"You can't be comfortable."

Rance hadn't heard her come in. springing up to a sitting position, he wanted to groan when he saw her standing there in a tank top and sweat shorts. She had the most beautiful skin, deep, dark and smooth. He wanted to caress it, not only with his hands, but with his tongue, his...

He really had to stop thinking like this. He was already little more than a walking hard-on.

"You don't have to sleep on the couch you know."

Her only other bedroom had been converted into a home office, so there was only one other place she could be referring to. His dick jumped in his boxers, making him pull the blanket over his crotch.

"I'm not kicking you out of your own bed."

Jade bit her lip, looking so adorable e wanted to eat her up. Damn, he had it bad.

"We are both adults, we can share the bed without...you know."

There wasn't a chance in hell he could share this woman's bed without being all over her. He wanted to tell her no, to say he was fine on the couch, but the words stuck in his throat. Before his rational brain could catch up with his mouth, he heard himself saying okay, saw her tentative smile, and wanted to kick himself in the ass.

He was going to make love to her – tonight. He just hoped like hell he didn't fuck up and ruin all chances of being with her on a permanent basis.

Jade knew she shouldn't have offered. She was setting herself up for heartbreak, but she just couldn't resist it. She had crushed on Rance forever, before Angelique even met Thierry, but never would have dreamed of approaching him. Her friend's marriage had brought her dream man into her life in ways she had never imagined, but not in the ways she wanted.

Rance was here because his grandmother had gotten it into her head that he wanted her. A notion that was so ridiculous it would have been laughable had it not hurt so much. He thought he was protecting her, but what he was really doing was tearing her heart apart.

She led the way into her bedroom, her stomach practically in her throat she was so nervous. It was too late to take the invitation back now. All she could do was lay there, besides the man who ruled her dreams, and suffer through not being able to touch him, to kiss, to know what it would be like to have him take her.

It was going to be a long night.

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