



Loose Id

In the
Eyes of Love

Sheri Livingston

Praise for the writing of Sheri Livingston

In the Eyes of Love

Sheri Livingston has crafted a powerfully moving love story between two women struggling to overcome painful pasts to fulfill the tender passion that has exploded between them. I enjoyed this book!

-- Sedonia Guillone, author of *Tao of Love 1: Danny's Dragon*, coming soon from Loose Id

In the Eyes of Love is a beautiful love story of healing hearts and learning to live with past mistakes. If you've ever had a persistent ex who needed a lesson, you'll love this inventive and humorous tale. This one goes on the keeper shelf.

-- Lena Austin, author of *Sex World 2: Guardian* (Loose Id)

Ms. Livingston's story of Morgan, her self-centered ex, Dawn, and her new love Shane kept me reading, eager to find out what happened to them, and what their secrets were. Realistic, intense emotion is coupled with some of the hottest F/F sex scenes I've ever read! The prose also contains some beautiful turns of phrase.

-- Barrie Abalard, author of *Hot for Teacher* (coming soon from Loose Id)

A punchy, passionate story about Morgan, a woman torn between the lover who betrayed her, and the new woman in her life. Sheri Livingston's lesbian romance is a richly written voyage into Morgan's life, with vivid characters, dialogue that leaps off the page, and beautifully written love scenes. Loved it, this was a real page turner for me, I was right there with the characters, hanging to find out what would happen next. Much enjoyed.

-- Saskia Walker, author of "The Strangeling" in *Rites of Passion* (Loose Id)

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LooseId
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Warning

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (homoerotic sex).

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Dedication

A warm round of applause goes out to all the members of the Romantic-Writers-Critique-Club. Without your help, I'd still be twiddling my thumbs and staring at a computer screen. Thank you sooo much.

To Angela Knight, a person I feel honored to call a friend. Thank you so much for pointing me to a group of awesome authors and having faith in my writing. And, the next time we hit the highway ... I'm driving!! LOL

To Fatima. Ha! You thought I was going to forget you, didn't ya? Your turn!

To my "Better Half." Thanks for always having faith that I'd figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up. And, for never complaining while I typed away at ungodly hours of the night, and my side of the bed was cold. You're the best and I love you.

And, to Barbara Karmazin. Your help and your encouragement pushed me further than you could ever imagine. Someone might have pointed me in your direction, but it was your wings that held tight and helped me soar in the Writing Sky. I can never thank you enough.

Chapter One

Rachel slammed her desk drawer. "Can't live with 'em ... can't live without 'em."

"What are you grumbling about now?" Morgan uncurled her legs and straightened up from her usual slouch in Rachel's visitor's chair. The bustling sound of fingers tapping on keyboards and mingled voices filled the air beyond the office door.

Spending time with Rachel meant less time for Morgan's thoughts to trail to Dawn. Images of her former lover, sketched perfectly in her mind, were still vivid no matter how long a year without her seemed.

"Steve! He makes me so mad!" Rachel slung her pen down to join an already cluttered mess on her desk. "He started in on me again last night. 'Why do you have to work there?' Why can't you work from home so you'll be free to travel with me?" Rachel's long brown hair tumbled around her face bringing out the bright green of her hazel eyes. "Why can't he just leave me alone and be happy that he has a wife who wants a career?"

Morgan worried about Rachel now that she'd wedged herself between a rock and a hard place. The rock being Steve and his football career; the hard place being the career she'd built for herself. Neither one could be more proud of the other. Morgan prayed they'd find a happy medium somewhere in the mix. And, if anyone could do it, these two lovebirds surely could.

"I can't answer that one for you, babe." Morgan twirled a lock of hair around her finger, and stared at the wall. Dawn's brown eyes played across the screen in her mind, sending goose bumps trailing down her spine.

"Girl! Snap out of it!" Rachel's words jerked Morgan from her deep trance. "How come every time I mention Steve's name, you get all goo-goo-eyed? You trippin' over my man or what?" Rachel grinned with her joke.

"Yes. Oooh, yes!" Morgan dragged her words out in a parody of a skanky slut. "I want your man. I want him to be all mine so I can ravish him every moment of the day."

"Pfft. A three-minute ravish, if you're lucky. Wait, maybe five on his good days," Rachel giggled.

Morgan puckered her lips, "*Hell* no! I don't want your man. The last time I checked, lesbians don't like the *real* thing."

"Well, that takes my man out. He sure as hell has the real thing." She dramatically licked her lips. "And God, does he knows how to use it."

"Don't gross me out this early in the day." Morgan gave her a smirk.

"How do I keep doing that?" Rachel's eyes rounded.

"Do what?"

"One second I'm mad as hell at him and then I remember something awesome about him and my temper goes right out the window."

Morgan gave her a sweet smile. "It's called true love, my dear."

"Yes ma'am, it is." She gave Morgan a schoolgirl smile. "But I'd like to stay mad for longer than a few hours so he could grovel for awhile."

Morgan felt for her. Rachel wanted nothing more than to be a successful career woman. And she was. The two of them had worked hard, grueling hours to make *Strut* the hottest magazine for women. There weren't too many people out there who could say they honestly loved their job. Rachel and Morgan couldn't wait to get to work every day just to be around each other.

"I can't wait 'til tonight. I'm going to dance my ass off, drink too much, and flirt with every guy that gets within ten feet of me and don't you *dare* remind me they're *all* gay!" Rachel stood up and danced a little jiggle in front of Morgan, making her loose gray slacks sway around her ankles. Her long open curls bounced around her head. She stopped mid-giggle and said, "You're still going with us tonight, right?"

"I'm not sure. I wanted to get some stuff done on my last article. I still have Mrs. Newhart to interview for next month on our cosmetics line and Ms. Oglesby to attempt, *again*, to find." Morgan smothered a yawn with her hand, "And I'm tired of watching you and Jay fight over who gets to flirt with the guys. You know how pissed he gets when you invade his territory." She grinned.

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Oh, yeah, like I have anything a gay man wants. What man in a gay bar is going to hit on me?" She pointed to herself, indicating tiny breasts through her pink vee-neck blouse.

Morgan glanced aside, thinking about Jay. He liked to put on a show, pretending he was playing the field, but he and Paul made a perfect couple, living in the first-floor apartment right below hers. Those two shared their lives as partners. Jay liked to flirt to

make himself feel good, but Paul didn't mind. He knew Jay would never betray him. Why couldn't she be as lucky?

A vision of Dawn floated through her mind. A white sports bra laced over broad, tanned shoulders, skimming around to hug a muscular back. A perfect indentation in her back ran from the bra's edge, leading down to a tight ass.

"There you go with that far away look again. Can't you ever stop thinking about her? She's not worth one second of that pretty little brain of yours. Why can't you just get over it? It's been a year now." Rachel bent to lock eyes with Morgan. "Come on girl, you've got to get a life."

"I'm not thinking about her. I was just thinking about all the things I have to do this weekend."

"Bullshit! Your apartment is spotless. You're just stalling so you can hide away all weekend. You can't fool me, and do or die, you're going with us this weekend. We have this gig all set up. Everyone's meeting me at Joe's at seven, so you'd *better* be there." Morgan wasn't getting out of it. She knew defeat when she saw it.

"Fine, but I'm not staying long, and I'm not doing any of that nasty dancing you seem to thrive on." Morgan shot Rachel an obscene glare, crossed her eyes, and stuck her tongue out at her through the corner of her mouth. "You and Jay can rule the dance floor, and I'll hang out with Steve."

"Don't cross those pretty blue eyes at me, and oh, *yes, you are*, because after I get a few drinks down your throat, you'll be dancing on the table." Rachel shook her finger at Morgan.

"Yes, mother!"

"Good! Now get back to work. Can't you see I'm busy? Damn, can't a girl get anything done around here without listening to all of your problems?" She grinned and winked.

"Smart ass!" Morgan climbed out of the chair, grinned and headed out of Rachel's office, passing the maze of white cubicles as she went. She recalled sitting behind one of those tight fitting walls, only large enough for a desk, two chairs, and a tropical palm tucked in the corner. After climbing the ladder of success, she was finally able to kiss that tiny space goodbye.

Back in her office, she plopped down in the leather chair and folded her arms over her chest, staring out the large windows. Memories of Dawn's gorgeous face flooded her vision until the jarring sound of the phone ringing swiped the feel of precious lips from her mind.

"Hello. Morgan Rhinehart, lead journalist," Morgan said in her business voice.

"Hi, babe." Jay's raspy voice came through the line.

"Hi there," she mocked him in her normal voice, "What are you up to? Get any tattoos today?" The long-time joke between them would never lose its humor.

He begged for a tattoo on his thirty-second birthday, and Morgan had obliged by taking him to a highly recommended tattoo parlor. He'd been brave until he faced the needles and surgical gloves. At the first sight of blood, the birthday boy had passed out cold.

"No, you bitch. Are you ever going to let me forget that? ... Nah, I wouldn't let you live it down either." His girlish cackle filled her eardrums. "We still on for tonight?"

"Yes. You know Rachel isn't going to let me beg off. She'll drag me kicking and screaming all the way to the dance floor if she has to."

"Well, it's for your own good. You need to put that bitch out of your mind because she ain't worth it. I wished curses on her, you know? Yep. Curses! I wished for her to wake up one morning with lice in her hair and, you know, I *am* sort of psychic like that, and one day all of my wishes *will* come true."

Morgan laughed. "Now who're you calling mean? Lice? Can't think of anything better than that? Maybe like, crossed-eyes, a witch's nose, a hump-back, you know, something that will make her look less appealing to every woman in Atlanta?"

"Oooh. I likey, I likey. I'll see what I can do. We'll just give her a complete make-over." She envisioned his hip poking out to the side and his feminine-like hand coming to rest there.

"So are you still going with us? Or is that a stupid question?" Morgan blurted, wanting to change the topic from sex, which of course she wasn't getting at the moment.

"Of course I'm going. Do you think I would miss out on a thing like that?" he asked.

"What's so exciting about Rachel dancing with all the guys that you can't touch because you have a hot man yourself, then me drinking myself under a table and having to be toted home all alone to a cold, empty bed? That sure sounds like something you just *can't* miss." Morgan laughed without humor, saddened to know that might happen.

"Oh, honey. I think you have it ass backwards. Those men are all jealous because *I'm* the one taken. They all want me and I know it. I just *know* it! As for you getting drunk, well, I know how to undress you and stick you in the bed. Been there done that so many times I can't even count. Just think, one day you're gonna walk in there and the love of your life could be standing on the other side of the room with open arms. Morgan! Gotta go." The connection was gone.

Yeah right. The love of her life was a heartbreaker. The love of her life was someone who sent her heart through a paper shredder then laughed as it bled out the other side. But so far, the love of her life was the only love of her life.

The image of Dawn crept back into her mind. Sexy brown eyes looked adoringly into Morgan's, while her hands wrapped around Morgan's waist. Morgan's lips pressed against those of her lover, while roaming hands slid down the small of her back to cup her butt and pull her tighter into her.

She pushed away from her desk and headed to the filing cabinet tucked in the corner of her office. She thumbed through the colored tabs until she found the one labeled “Shamrock Gallery” and headed back to her chair.

She dialed Shamrock’s number. The answering machine clicked on at the other end of the line. Once again, she would be leaving a voicemail. Aggravation seeped into Morgan. She prayed it wouldn’t be apparent in her message.

“Ms. Oglesby, this is Morgan Rhinehart. Our deadline is creeping up fast on your article. If we don’t get a contract signed by you and in my hand by Friday, I’ll have no other choice but to push it to next month. I hope I haven’t said or done something to offend you and cause you to stop talking with us about this. If I have, I apologize. Please return my call at your earliest convenience.”

Morgan slammed down the phone.

John, another co-worker, with coke-bottle glasses and a freckled face, stuck his head around the doorjamb.

“Want to come eat with us?” He slicked his red thinning hair down above his large ears.

“Sure. I’m starving.”

Half an hour later John, Rachel, and Morgan sat in a red shiny booth of the sixties café called Maggie’s. Tunes from an Elvis song seeped from the jukebox while chatter from customers filled the air. Their food was delivered as the three of them talked about contracts and deadlines.

“Rachel, I tried to call Ms. Oglesby but got her machine again. What the hell did I do to her?” Morgan asked, knowing Rachel was just as confused over why their mystery lady wouldn’t return their calls.

“I have no idea. We’ll just use the new make-up line from *Sisco*. It’s not what Sandra wanted, but we don’t have a choice if the woman’s not going to call us back.” She placed a piece of crisp lettuce between her lips.

Sandra was the owner of *Strut*. She was a daring woman with dark eyes and flaming red hair that hung down to the middle of her back. She’d founded the magazine in 1995, and by 1997 it had become America’s number-one seller. She was also a very lenient boss until rubbed the wrong way, this being one of those times.

“I guess you’re right. It bugs me, that flip of the coin she did on us.” Morgan said then took a bite of her hamburger.

They finished their lunch and returned to their building.

Once back in her office, Morgan checked her messages. There were none and that irked her. The rest of the day slogged by as she double-checked the articles that would soon appear on *Strut*’s slick pages.

At five o'clock, Morgan cleared her desk, tucked the files back into their drawers, and wandered down the gray-carpeted halls, passing a row of tropical plants between the office doors.

"You gonna stay here all night?" Morgan poked her head into Rachel's office to find Rachel rummaging through papers. "Steve will have the cops out looking for you within the hour if you don't hurry up."

"Yeah yeah. Hold your horses." Her friend's face beamed as a bright smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "I'm sealing the deal on our art page, Ms. Thing."

"Oh, my God!" Morgan rushed into the room, a giddy feeling gripping her gut. "Are you kidding?"

"No. I don't know what you said when you called her earlier, but I finally heard from Ms. Oglesby. She's not dropping by to sign the contracts, so I'm driving over to the gallery. Sandra is beside herself. You know how she is at being first in line." Rachel's pretty face beamed as she stuffed papers into her briefcase.

"That's so awesome. This calls for a celebration. Ice cream, anyone?"

"Oh, you heifer. You know I'm still on a diet. How could you even mention anything sweet?" She paused, turning a devilish grin Morgan's way, "Baskin & Robbins in half an hour?" They both laughed at the joke and hugged each other.

"I'll see you tonight. Joe's at seven?" Morgan asked, still hesitant about their night out.

"Yep. And if you're not there, I'll hunt you down and stick gum in your hair." A serious look covered her face.

"Ohhh. Baby. That turns me on, you know? Can you add syrup and whipped cream?" Morgan added for good measure.

"Slut!" Rachel teased, "Want to come with me to the gallery? Ms. Oglesby made it clear that she'd be busy but would take a few seconds off to sign it. She didn't elaborate on why she stopped calling us. But who cares? It's over now, right?" She grabbed her purse from the wooden coat rack and gave Morgan an expectant look.

"No. I'd rather keep our mystery lady a mystery. You can describe her to me later. Besides, she made it clear she wanted to talk to you and only you. I guess I intimidated her or something," Morgan faked a leering smile at Rachel. "Guess you have a sexier voice than I do."

Rachel grinned and winked. "Well, then get your butt home and get dressed. And you *better* be there on time, missy."

She reached out and pulled Rachel's arm. "I'm going to get over this, I promise. Who knows, maybe I'll start tonight."

Morgan watched as Rachel turned toward Sandra's office. Then she headed in the opposite direction. She took the elevator down and exited into the noisy lobby. She loved its hustle and bustle, with people chattering about things of which only they knew the

meaning. It meant she was still alive and that life was still going on around her, even if her own existence had stalled.

She strode through the double doors and out into the bright sunshine. The streets of Atlanta were in full swing -- it was Friday. She fell in behind a gay couple with their fingers looped together. She couldn't believe how far this world had come. Years ago, men would have been shot for snuggling close to each other, let alone walking out in public holding hands.

The couple's entwined fingers dredged up memories Morgan tried to push away. She used to hold hands with Dawn while eating ice cream under the park's tall oak trees or while taking leisurely strolls in the late afternoon. She missed the feel of her lover's strong arms surrounding her, hovering around her like the safety of an umbrella in a downpour. She thought of the love they used to share. She missed Dawn. But deep inside, Morgan knew that love could never be again, and that broke her heart.

Morgan made her way home as Dawn's sweet brown eyes continued to play across the screen inside her mind.

Chapter Two

Shane Oglesby stared at the delicate features she created on the canvas. The sweet face of the woman sent a heated shiver down her spine. She reached out and carelessly touched the image, wishing that it was real flesh and not the hard bumpy feel of dried paint. Long blonde curls tumbled down a fragile back. She wondered what it would be like to grasp that waist while her fingers plunged deep within that perfect body.

A rap on the door brought her head reeling forward and away from the easel.

"Come in," Shane called out to the intruder of her daydreams.

Scott, her trusting, humorous, never a dull moment when around him, assistant, poked his head inside past the large cherry door. "Harry is here to pick up his painting. He said you wanted to talk with him before he left?" His chiseled jaw rested against the edge of the door, while he batted his long eyelashes at Shane. "Want me to wait with him? I don't mind at all."

Shane smirked at him, reaching to cover the painting with a sheet from the back of the easel, reluctant to leave the sight of the beauty that lay on its canvas. "It's okay. I'm coming."

"Dang." Scott drummed his loafers on the floor. "You never let me have any fun. You're a bad boss." He pulled his lips into a pout.

"I know, I'm mean as hell and make you slave all day. I guess that's why you've found more dates right here in this office than all the gay bars you've ever been to combined?" She winked while brushing past him, leaving him standing in the doorway with his half-cocked smile.

"That's because all the rich hot guys come here." Playfulness was apparent in his voice. Shane headed down the wine carpeted halls.

Harry was looking over the new picture Scott had hung to dry earlier in the day.

"Hi, Harry. Like it?" She smiled. The man only nodded, unable to tear his eyes from the picture.

"Like it? I love it. You can feel it -- like it's alive." He looked at Shane, pure admiration in his eyes. His silvering hair was slung over his head to hide his balding scalp. A yellow golf shirt fit his body like a glove and matched the yellow pinstripe in his gray slacks.

"I'm glad you approve, but you'll need to wait forty-eight hours before you have it framed. I added an extra layer of varnish, as you requested, and I want to make sure it cures before you do anything with it."

"Shane, I couldn't be happier with it. It's her, alive and in living color." His eyes watered as he stared at the loving face of his wife, long gone five years after losing her battle with cancer. "You do such beautiful work."

Harry patted Shane's shoulder with his brown blotched hands while she slid the frame from its hook on the wall. She smiled at him, watching his unsteady hands grip the temporary wooden frame.

"Thank you, Harry. I'll send Scott to help you frame it on Monday. It's dry enough now, but take it out and lay it flat when you get home. Will you be home?"

"You bet. And, thank you again."

Shane watched as the man shuffled back down the hall. She smiled after him and then headed back to her office. She closed the heavy door and slunk down into her black leather chair, swiveling around to catch the sunrays streaming through the weeping willow outside the ground-floor window. Bees eagerly sucked at the flower blossoms.

A face came to life in her mind. The beautiful face of a woman named Morgan. Her sadness foretold of a broken heart, something that tore a hole through Shane from the second she laid eyes on her.

Shane let her mind fall back to the day she had seen Morgan for the first time.

Shane had received a phone call from a journalist, Morgan Rhinehart, from *Strut* magazine, wanting to do an article on her and her new art gallery, Shamrock. She declined. She was content in the humble secure surroundings of her artwork. This woman however, was persistent. Shane finally gave in, compelled with no reason why, to do what this woman wanted of her. She felt drawn to her, even through the earpiece of a phone. She made a time for the appointment and agreed to do the interview.

Her brother, who was waiting to take her to lunch, clapped her on the back so hard she thought she'd be bruised. "I'm so proud of you," Evan said. "It's about time you put yourself back out there and stop hiding from the world. It's time you let this go. You can't change the past."

Shane only smiled at him, praying he was right, feeling like he wasn't. But maybe it was time to stop living in the past and start stepping toward the future. Her brother was right. She couldn't change things now.

Reluctantly, after a lunch full of conversation with Evan, she drove to the office of *Strut* and pushed her way into the bustling lobby. She approached a woman sitting inside a circular desk and asked for Morgan Rhinehart. The receptionist pointed down the hall while she talked into a stem perched around her ear. Shane smiled weakly and headed down the gray carpeted hall.

She approached the open door bearing the name of Morgan Rhinehart. Across the room, a petite woman held a steaming mug and rested the side of her weary head and shoulder against a window overlooking downtown Atlanta. The glass, like a mirror against the brightness, reflected her saddened sky-blue eyes.

The woman's gaze was far beyond the glass skyscrapers and high-rise buildings. She never moved as Shane took a step closer, heart wrenching at the pain she saw nestled in the depths of the reflection shining back at her.

Attraction coursed through Shane's gut. Heat started in the pit of her stomach and burned a path to her throat. She licked her dry lips and stared, unable to move, unable to blink.

This woman was magical, pure and innocent, yet sadness was written all over her tanned face.

Shane stood immobilized under the power of the oblivious woman whose long blonde hair hung in wide curls down her back. Taking a long sip from her mug, she sighed. Her stare was glued to something far past the beauty of the summer sky.

A fist clenched Shane's heart. The sight of those sad blue eyes brought forth an image of her own true love. A love that was no more. A love that she missed so much sometimes it left her breathless from crying.

Shane turned around, fled back into the lobby, and sprinted to her car. Instinct told her this woman would tear her heart out and feed it to the lions. She raced back to the security of her office and never took another phone call from the beautiful Morgan.

Images of Morgan's velvet lips breathlessly parting under Shane's power, kept her awake at night, feverish and writhing with need. To feel those legs wrapped around her waist while she dove fingers into her dark core. Her body ached for this woman. Her mind could see nothing but this woman. Her soul wanted nothing else. Yet, she knew she couldn't have her. Even through her own misery, Shane knew this was a scarred woman.

Shane shook her head, wiping away thoughts of red lips pressed against hers. She left the gallery and headed to her favorite café hoping to diminish thoughts of the beautiful lady.

Shane froze at the sight of Morgan sitting on the inside of the booth while a red-haired man sat on the outside. Another woman sat across from her, obviously not her lover, but a deep bond between them was apparent. Shane slid into the booth unnoticed behind them, straining to hear their conversation. She relished the sound of Morgan's voice. The realization that Morgan never laughed, tugged at her heartstrings. She wanted to make her laugh. She wanted to be the one to paint a smile back on her face.

Shane cocked her head at the mention of her own name. She heard the sadness in Morgan's voice. Shane's heart halted as Morgan's words flowed over the back of the booth. "What the hell did I do to her?" Morgan had said, confusion clouding her voice.

Shane slid from the booth, ignoring the waitress that halted by her table, eyeing her suspiciously, and made her way back to the office. She picked up the phone, dialed *Strut's* number, and left a message for the other lady, Rachel, that had called several times. She explained that she would be signing the contract, even without the interview.

She walked back to the picture, the image that was now etched permanently in her mind. She traced the swirls of paint, the outline of a perfect face, the curve of her body. She was in love with a person who didn't even know her name.

Chapter Three

Dawn drove into the entrance of the new subdivision, past the rock boulders that would bear the new name, and into the driveway of the job site currently under contract. Loud whistles from her crew greeted her. Shirtless, dark-tanned men walked on the roof carrying heavy bundles of shingles over their shoulders. She waved to them and headed inside the shell of the house.

She could never tire of watching the houses go from clumps of vacant dirt to beautiful houses, one wall at a time, one beam of a roof at a time. She wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty and welcomed the invitation to jump in and help. Owning the business, not having to do hard labor anymore, still didn't stop her from getting sweaty with her crew.

A few men hung from the rafters. Hard puffs of air hissed behind the pop of the nail guns they tossed around like children's toys. Men barked orders above her while beams were laid across the back side of the house in the last part of construction for a separate garage.

She waved again and walked up the makeshift stairs leading to the open roof over the garage. She found Raul waiting for her, a pleased grin on his face.

"You guys made great progress today." She stood on the top, looking past him over the expanse of the roof. Her men slapped shingles against the plywood and banged roofing nails in with a single blow from their hammers.

"We always do. Looks like we'll finish two or three days early at the pace we're going." He hoisted his leg and straddled a beam, dangling his long legs into the open air beneath him.

She made her way back down the stairs and strolled around the house, checking different parts for flaws. After admiring the work the men did, she climbed back into her truck and headed back to the office.

Morgan eased into Dawn's mind while she braked behind a red light. She'd tried calling her ex-lover numerous times over the past few weeks. Morgan was dodging her, no doubt with that bitch Rachel helping her the whole way. She wished that woman would mind her own damn business for a change and leave Morgan the hell alone.

She missed her. Missed having that body pressed against her every night, missed fucking her brains out every chance she got. She could never tire of feeling those voluptuous curves nestled under the sheets with her, knowing in time, Morgan would miss her so much she'd come crawling back.

In the meantime, the women used to pacify her time would have to do. They weren't her Morgan, but they would at least keep her warm at night, keep her satisfied.

She parked against the curb, got out, and pushed her way into the front door of the office she shared with Seth. The space was small, but more than enough room for them to run two different businesses. His being interior decoration, hers the action hands-on construction.

She crossed the room. He was busy at his computer, steadily punching the keyboard. "Hi, gorgeous, any calls?"

He looked over his shoulder at her. A cute boyish grin stole across his lips, making the dimples she was sure every man in the gay bars crooned over. "Nope. No one loves you today, sorry."

"Oh. Someone does, but she won't answer her damn phone." She grinned back and headed to the fridge against the back wall. She opened the door, pulled a soda from inside and turned back to him. "What do you think I'm doing wrong?"

"Besides fucking every pair of shaven legs you can find, I'd have to say nothing." He gave her a wry smile, showing his distaste for her whoring habit.

"The house should be complete by the weekend." She ignored his glare. "The other crews will start next week."

"That's great. Your men sure move fast." He slicked his fingers through his hair and leaned back in the chair. "I got a call for a new job this morning. I'm supposed to meet with the architect this evening to see if it's what I really want. It sounds luscious ... right up my alley."

"Congrats." She focused on the paintings that filled the wall. "Why do you collect those ugly things?"

He swiveled his chair to see which painting had caught her attention. "Why do you collect women?" he asked with his back turned to her.

"Point made!"

"No, really, why do you collect women?" He turned his chair back around, staring at her. "You had a perfect woman, more than willing to share the rest of her life with you, yet you treated her like shit. Why?"

"I'm not getting into this again with you. I'm sorry I asked about your stupid paintings." She pushed away from the fridge and made her way to her own desk.

"That's what I thought." Seth turned his attention back to the computer screen.

Dawn growled under her breath and turned toward her own computer. She let Seth's questions roll around her mind. Was it because Morgan let her? No. She'd hid her habit well enough. Getting caught twice was total laxness on her part, underestimating her lover's partner, staying too long with the same piece of ass. She should have stayed with her original plan, fuck 'em and leave 'em. That simple! But Sarah, oh, Sarah had been too easy to fuck. Her screams still echoed in Dawn's mind, especially now that Morgan was gone. And the one before, what was her name? It didn't matter now. She'd let that go on too long also.

Grumbling under her breath, she switched on the power to her computer. After completing a new order for a delivery of more shingles to the job site and going over payroll for the crew, she checked the time and told Seth goodbye.

After climbing back in the truck, she made her way toward her drab, lonely apartment. Morgan oozed into her mind again. She couldn't shake thoughts of her lately. Normally she would cruise the bars, find a delicious piece of ass, and take her home. Today, she had no desire to find anything but Morgan. She'd gone too long without seeing or talking to her and wanted to hear her voice, not the one on the answering machine.

Almost a year had passed since her fling with Sarah, the one that finally drove Morgan over the edge. If Morgan had known how many women Dawn had actually fucked while she lived with her, Morgan would have run a long time earlier.

Too often, she often wondered what it was about Morgan that kept her so attached. Was it the lesbian virgin she'd been when they'd met in high school? She doubted it -- she'd had plenty of others. Was it her body with its sexy curves? She doubted that too -- she'd had hundreds just as sexy. Her only conclusion was Morgan's heart, so kind and true. She loved with every ounce of it, adored even the stupidest of things. Whimpering puppies and screaming infants drew Morgan to them like magnets. That heart had to be what she loved so much. A heart that had loved her unconditionally, the heart she wanted back in her life.

She made it home and walked into the bare surroundings. Furnishings were slim since getting Morgan back was of utmost importance. She wouldn't need them once she moved back in with her, so buying them was useless.

After tossing her keys on top of the TV, she made her way to the phone sitting on the floor and pushed the button on the answering machine.

Only a recording of a telemarketer occupied the tape's space. She punched the delete button and grabbed the phone, speed dialing Morgan, getting the sexy recorded voice instead of the real one she needed to hear.

Dawn left the thousandth brief message, cut the phone off and threw it onto the couch.

She walked across the lifeless room and into her bedroom, stopping long enough to envision Morgan sprawled across her bed, naked and waiting. She could see her long blonde hair billowing across the sheets, calling for Dawn's fingers to yank their way through every wave.

Shaking the images from her mind, she went into the bathroom. Determination was strong this evening. She wouldn't give up without seeing, hearing, or feeling Morgan tonight.

Dawn kicked off her shoes, skimmed out of her clothes, and left them on the floor. She stepped into the shower stall and turned the handle. Scalding water sluiced over her skin. She closed her eyes and let the water slick down her hair, visions of Morgan's body invading the blackness behind her lids with lightening speed.

"Tonight, Morgan. Tonight's my night. No more running and no more hiding. Your time is up."

An hour later she posed in the jeans and shirt Morgan had bought her a year ago. The jeans Morgan had told her a hundred times how sexy her ass looked in them. She sat down on the couch, re-dialed Morgan's number, then heard the click of a phone, and not an answering machine.

She felt her breath catch and smiled at the sweet sound of Morgan ... the real Morgan.

Chapter Four

Morgan turned the key to her apartment, and heard the phone's shrill. She left the door ajar and ran, almost knocking over the crystal vase sitting on the computer desk beside the phone. Without looking at the display box, she grabbed the receiver.

"Hello?"

There was no response, only the sound of breathing. Her heart somersaulted in her chest.

"Hello?" she asked again.

"Why won't you take my calls?"

Dawn's voice sounded calm and relaxed on the other end. Morgan's heart climbed to the base of her throat, throbbing, and pumping wildly. She gritted her teeth and tightened her jaw. Her body would never forget trembling beneath Dawn's power. Her voice alone had that much control over Morgan.

"I can't believe you have the nerve to call here." She forced the words through her aching throat. "Dawn, please don't call here again."

Dredging up the last of her willpower Morgan hung up and listened to the dial tone. Outside the window, the early evening sun dipped below the trees. Morgan's shadow reached across the wine-colored carpet to the hutch filled with her grandmother's precious china. Her hands trembling, she laid the phone back in the cradle, knowing Dawn would call again. She cut the ringer off so she wouldn't hear that demanding cry.

Morgan dropped her purse with a thump by the desk and flopped into the brown plush couch. The cushions folded around her. She stared ahead of her at the loving faces of her parents that adorned the entertainment center in their silver frames. She ached for them sometimes. She yearned to talk to her father, to tell him how her heart hurt and have him kiss away the pain.

But he wasn't here, and he couldn't kiss away this hurt. She was destined to hold that terrible empty feeling inside her forever. With a sigh, she leaned forward and shoved off the couch, catching the paisley throw pillow before it landed on the floor.

As she walked the endless distance back to the open door, Morgan felt like she was standing still while the room whooshed by her. She left the apartment, pulled the key from the lock and then shut the door behind her. She walked back down the stairs to Jay and Phil's apartment. The tempting aroma of garlic and herbs met her as she approached their door. Her tongue automatically dripped with saliva.

Phil was the master chef in their household while Jay did all the cleaning and decorating. Phil wouldn't let Jay anywhere near his kitchen and Jay wouldn't let Phil shop for any furniture, curtains, knickknacks, or pictures. They made a perfect couple. Morgan loved them both dearly.

"Hey, baby doll. Good day at work?" Phil yelled from the kitchen as Morgan barged through the unlocked door, leaving thoughts of Dawn in the hall since she was not liked here.

"It was great. How was your day?" She strolled into the kitchen to see what he was cooking. "Mmm. Something smells delicious in here." She took a deliberate whiff of the sauce simmering in a pot.

"I sold three paintings." His excitement rose in the air as he stuck his hand over the pot to keep her from dipping her finger in for a taste.

Aside from owning a pet store that Jay managed, Phil was also an artist, drawing unusual abstracts. *Strut* had featured his artwork a few times.

"That's wonderful!" Morgan hugged him quickly and planted a kiss on his naturally red lips, "I have some exciting news too. We got the Shamrock contract. Signed, sealed, and delivered as we speak." Morgan added, doing a victory dance.

"Oh, honey. That's awesome. Now we have three reasons to celebrate tonight."

"Three? Your paintings, my contract, where did number three come from?" Morgan wondered how such wonderful things were going on around her without her knowledge. As gentle as a lamb, he placed a single well-manicured finger on her chest.

"That is number one. All the rest pales in comparison. That heart, on the mend, healing every day, is what I'm celebrating tonight."

His words made a lump rise in her throat. Hot tears threatened to spill from her eyes.

"Don't get all sappy sweet on me," she said, pushing his finger away. She turned her head as well so he couldn't see the traitorous tears glistening in her eyes. "I want you to tell me all the gossip you've managed to collect on our famous new gallery owner, Ms. Oglesby." Keeping her drippy eyes under control, Morgan escaped his food bar and walked to the round dining table covered with a white lace runner and plates set out for display. She pulled a chair out and plopped into the padded seat with a grateful sigh.

“What makes you think I know anything about her?” His smile deepened, hiding information.

“You’re an artist. She’s an artist. You should know something about her.” Morgan looked back.

Phil pursed his lips. “Well, rumor says her partner died under mysterious circumstances, possibly a brutal murder. I’ve never seen her, but a friend of mine said he had and that she’s young and beautiful.” He rolled his eyes, and then shrugged. “But, my so called friend is crazy as a loon, so I don’t believe anything he says. She’s probably an old ugly hag.”

Morgan rearranged the knife and fork by the plate simply to occupy her hands. “All I know is she’s from California and has preserved her father’s dreams by opening Shamrock Gallery. The other thing is, she can’t stand me now, and I have no idea why. But hell, who cares? Rachel’s on her way to snag our mystery lady’s John Hancock and that’s all that matters.” Morgan sniffed the air. “What the hell are you cooking over there that’s making my taste buds go crazy?”

“Oh! Just something I threw together for tomorrow’s dinner with my mom.” He beamed over his masterpiece, happy she noticed. “Just some mushrooms and sautéed onions over skinless, boneless chicken fried in garlic butter, served over linguini noodles.”

Morgan said the dreaded words before she could change her mind, “By the way, Dawn called again.”

Phil straightened. His face reddened with rage. “Why in the hell is that cunt calling you again? I can’t believe she’d start calling you after all this time. Who does she think she is anyway? Just come and get me the next time she calls. I’ll put that bitch right in her place.” He strode back and forth with fingers snapping and hips swinging. He stopped, took one good look at her, and blurted out, “No! Morgan, tell me no. I can tell by the look on your face that you still want to talk to her. Did you talk to her? What did you say to her? I can’t believe you. Morgan, why? What she did to you was horrible and unforgivable. She cheated on you. Not once, but twice. How many times does she have to screw around on you before you get it through your thick skull that she doesn’t love you?”

Morgan picked up the napkin, crumpled it between her fingers, and then smoothed the fabric out again. “No I didn’t talk to her. I told her to stop calling and hung up on her. Are you happy? Where’s Jay by the way?” She quickly changed the subject.

“He’s *still* primping in there.” He nodded in the direction of their huge guest bathroom. “I have no idea what he does in there. He doesn’t look any different when he goes in than he does when he comes out. And he won’t ever let me in. I swear he has some man shoved down the drain and pulls him out once a day to use and abuse him. *Lucky dog!*”

“I heard that.” Jay’s muffled voice came through the door. “You wish *you* were the lucky man in the drain. You’re just jealous that you can’t look this beautiful all the time like me. Just get over it, honey. Ain’t no man alive as gorgeous as me. Others have tried but have never achieved it. Just face it ... you have the best looking man alive.”

Phil and Morgan rolled their eyes at each other.

“And don’t you dare roll those eyes!”

Phil and Morgan laughed. These men were the loves of her life.

As if reading her mind Phil walked over, pulled Morgan out of the chair and put his arm around her shoulder. “Come here, baby doll.” He drew her to him and squished her face in his apron top. “I know you miss her, and I know you wanted so badly for things to work out. She just wasn’t for you. Accept defeat and walk away. She doesn’t want you back for the right reasons. Has she ever said she was sorry? Has she ever shown any type of remorse? Please believe me, baby, you’re so much better off without her.”

“I miss her so much, Phil. I can’t believe she tore our relationship apart like that. I can’t believe that I let her do it again. Why do I still love her so damn much? What am I supposed to do?” She begged for answers feeling a lump rise in her throat again.

“Honey, I can’t give you those answers. I can just be here for you and talk you through it the best way I know how. All I know is that it’ll get better whether you think it will or not. Every time she calls, you have my shoulder and every time you think of her, I have a bat for your head!” He giggled.

“I love you so much,” She squeezed back, “Thank you so much for being my friend, and thank you even more for being the fool who’s in love with my bestest gay friend.” Morgan pulled away from his embrace and winked at him with somber eyes.

“Someone had to do it. Might as well be me.” He shrugged, winked, and walked back to the aromas wafting from the kitchen.

Jay honored them with his presence. He sauntered over and put his arm around Morgan’s shoulder, then pushed his hips out in that feminine way he had. “I love you too, and I’m honored to be your bestest gay friend in the world, honey, but Phil’s right. She doesn’t deserve you.” He kissed Morgan square on the mouth, then turned to Phil, slowly closing the distance between himself and his lover. “As for you, if you ever cheat on me, I’ll burn every item that you own. Then I’ll get a voodoo doll and torture you for the rest of your life,” he said, snapping his fingers in a Z formation.

He wrapped his hands around Phil’s waist and pulled him close. Their sweet, lingering kiss brought forth an image of Dawn again. “You know guys? I think its time for me to get on with my life. I think it’s time I find someone to help me get over this broken heart of mine.” The words were out of her mouth before she could change her mind, whether she meant them or not.

“Oh, honey! I think it’s a great idea. Let’s go find you a butch stud that’ll put the likes of that floozy bitch to shame.” He beamed just thinking about it, then looked down at his paint-splattered T-shirt and jeans, “Oh, I’m a mess! I have to look my best tonight. Oh! And would you just look at this kitchen!” He gave a terribly exaggerated squeal and ran from the table into the kitchen. He was never as good at the squealing as Jay was.

Phil chanted words and phrases, what sounded like Greek, while Jay walked Morgan to the door.

* * * * *

Morgan saw the light blinking on the answering machine as soon as she started across the living room. It was a habit she couldn't seem to break. Waiting and watching, she'd willed the phone to ring for six months after their break up. It took her even longer to actually change the greeting from Dawn's voice to hers in a stupid effort to hold on to any part of Dawn that she could.

Morgan wanted to run to the answering machine but guilt from Phil and Jay's conversation kept her at a steady pace. She reached for the phone with clumsy fingers.

"Dear God. Please don't let it be that sexy voice." She prayed and pushed the button.

Dawn's voice was seductive as ever.

"Please talk to me, Morgan. I really need to see you. I'm begging you ..."

Morgan slammed her finger down on the stop button. How dare Dawn ask to see her? *How dare she keep my heart twisted like this? Why can't she just leave me alone?* But Morgan knew she didn't want that either. Having Dawn still want her gave her a sick thrill.

The red glow of the ringer fluttered beside her, indicating another call was coming through. She warily, yet willingly, reached for the phone.

"What do you want, Dawn?"

"Thank you for picking up. Morgan, please don't hang up on me. I just wanted to hear your voice, that's all."

"You've already heard my voice on the answering machine. Please stop calling here."

"Can I see you? Tonight? Now? Please, I need to see you. I miss you." The husky sweet voice echoed through Morgan's ears and down her spine, leaving a trail of heated goose bumps in their wake. Dawn knew all the words Morgan longed to hear. Visions of spitting on her, or scratching her eyes out, blossomed in crystal clear shards in her mind.

Taking those words to heart would only cause more misery for her. *Run, Morgan, Run!! Run away. Run from that sexy voice that's behind those sweet brown eyes that you are so damn in love with. Eyes that burned a hole right through your soul. Run Morgan!* Her brain screamed Phil's warnings back at her.

"Dawn, I can't, and besides, we're going out tonight."

"Please, don't go. Stay at home. I'll rent a movie and order some take-out. I can't bear to think of you in the arms of another woman."

An image of Dawn's betrayal flooded Morgan's thoughts, "Neither could I, Dawn. Neither could I." Morgan slammed the phone down.

She willed her body to walk down the narrow hall. Painted palm trees arched across the walls, a present from Phil. She strode into the tiny bathroom. The bright pink of the shaggy rug and walls should have lifted her spirits, but instead, only dragged her down deeper into a blue funk.

She kicked off her shoes and undressed, throwing each garment into the lighthouse hamper standing by the sliding shower doors. She slipped into the empty porcelain surroundings without bothering to cut the water on. She twisted the clear knobs. Cold, refreshing water sluiced over her fever-hot skin. She shivered, then turned the knobs and added more hot to mingle, backing into the water and letting the stinging stream flow over her head, into her face, and pull the weariness away.

Chapter Five

Shane glanced up to see the familiar face of Morgan's co-worker, Rachel, pass in front of her office window. She quickly yanked the sheet back over her framed princess and made her way to the lobby just as Rachel entered the gallery.

Rachel had called within an hour of leaving the restaurant, ecstatic about Shane's message. Shane wanted those contracts signed as quickly as possible, so she made arrangements to meet with Rachel at the gallery.

The office was quiet since Scott had left for the weekend.

"Rachel Watkins?" she asked, surveying the bright-eyed woman.

"Yes. Ms. Oglesby?" Rachel extended her hand.

"So nice to meet you. Come on in." Shane moved back and allowed Rachel into the office. Once inside, she eased the door shut behind them out of habit.

"We're so excited you finally called us back. We were beginning to wonder if you'd been kidnapped or something. Morgan, um, Ms. Rhinehart, has called so many times, unable to contact you."

The mention of Morgan's name sent a jolt through Shane. She sucked in her breath, blew it out in a steady stream, and turned back to her guest.

"I'm sorry about that. I've been extremely busy. Let's get this contract signed." An image of sky-blue eyes looking past the craziness of this world, played across Shane's mind. How she wanted to caress away the stress in those tight slender shoulders. She dreamed of pressing a kiss against those pert pink lips; to watch them part in heated pleasure.

She shook away the images and concentrated on the documents before her. She grabbed a pen from the canister by the phone, scanned the more important legalities of the contract, and signed her name as quickly as possible.

She looked back up into the caring eyes of Rachel, and pushed the papers back across the table.

“Thank you,” Rachel said, gathering up the papers. She looked around the room at each piece on the walls. “Your artwork is out of this world. I’d like to see more if you have time.”

Shane watched Rachel’s eyes scan the room, desperately hoping she wouldn’t ask about the one covered. That wasn’t a picture she was ready to show the world, but rather a desperate plea from an emotionless painter, ready to put her past to bed and awaken the future. Her courage to do so wasn’t as easy as painting the portrait had been.

Shane rose from her chair, a smile spreading across her face, “With pleasure.” She extended her hand toward the door, gesturing for Rachel to stand and lead the way.

She explained each frame as they strolled down the white walls covered in art.

“What about this one?” Rachel asked, pointing to a picture of a little girl. The child was crying while she stood in the midst of rubble.

“A child from California after an earthquake. The debris at her feet is her home,” Shane explained, staring at the child’s tear-stained face.

“Shane, do you go out very often?”

Shane’s head whipped around, coming to face Rachel. “Um, no, not really. Why do you ask?”

“Me and a few other friends are going out. I thought you might like to go with us.”

Shane chuckled under her breath, “I’m a lesbian, Mrs. Watkins. I don’t think I’d go over too well in your kind of bar.”

Rachel gasped beside her. A bright joker smile spread across her lips, “Well, then you have to come with us. We’re going to a gay bar.”

“Will Morgan, with the sad eyes, be joining you?”

A frown furrowed Rachel’s brow. “Why would you ask me that? Do you know Morgan?”

“No, I don’t.” Shane hated that she’d spoken without thinking.

“Then, what made you ask that?” Rachel’s eyes narrowed. “Morgan’s not just my co-worker. She’s my best friend.”

Shane ran the toes of her tennis shoes across the floor, dragging circles, and turned her eyes back up to meet Rachel. “Tell me about her.”

“Well, she’s the love of my life, aside from my hubby. She’s been with the same, um, woman since we were in high school. The bitch broke her heart into a million pieces, and well, Morgan can’t seem to find a way to put them back together.” Rachel shook her head as if she heard some horrible sound. “I can’t believe I just said that. I made her sound so sappy.” Rachel grinned up at Shane.

“And this woman, the heart breaker, where is she now?”

“Dawn? The bitch? Well, she was gone until lately. She’s started calling Morgan again, trying to turn up the heat.” Rachel snarled and tightened her lips, showing glossy white teeth. “She makes me sick. I’d like nothing better than to see Morgan tell her ass off. I’d be more than happy to do it for her, but it’s not my place.”

“So, Morgan will be joining us tonight?” Shane couldn’t resist the urge to ask again, antsy with the fact that she could be near her.

“Yes, she will.” Rachel’s eyes twinkled under the lighted sconces hanging over the painting. “Would you like to come with us? To meet Morgan?” A mischievous grin stole across Rachel’s mouth.

“Yes. Yes, I would. But I think we need to talk first. There’s a lot you need to know.”

Still grinning, Rachel followed Shane back down the hall.

* * * * *

An hour later, Morgan stepped out of the shower refreshed and almost giddy about the night ahead of her. While adding more clothes to an already heaping pile on the floor, Morgan settled on a pair of low cut jeans to show off her flat stomach and belly ring. The belly ring was something Dawn had talked her into years ago. “It’s sexy as hell,” she’d said more times than Morgan could count after they’d left the body piercing parlor, her skin still red from the surgical needle’s puncture wound.

Morgan added a cream-colored halter top with three tiny buttons that nestled between her breast, showing a delicate rib cage. She pulled the single loop over her head, then turned to peer in the full-length mirror fastened behind the closet door. Small cleavage, pushed up by the well-padded strapless bra, peered back at her through the reflection. She sighed and walked back into the closet.

Shoes weren’t really an issue since they were usually off her feet within minutes of entering the bar, something that used to entice Dawn. This gesture would not be geared toward her tonight, nor would the tight fitting outfit. She wanted thoughts of Dawn to cease. Anything to make her heart forget for even a few hours that it was no longer meshed together. And anything to make her friends not look at her like some freak of nature for being so deeply in love with a person whose first commitment was to herself. Tonight Morgan would show them she was back on the prowl.

The phone rang and she quickly grabbed it up.

“You ready?” Rachel yelled.

“Yes, mother. Getting ready to dry my hair and throw my face on as we speak.”

“Skimpy jeans?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Skimpy shirt?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Oh, *baby*! I think I might cry. You make your mother proud,”

“Are you on your way to Joe’s?”

Joe’s was a restaurant Morgan and Rachel started going to while Rachel was in college studying to be a journalist. Joe’s was a quiet little place where they quickly became regulars. He and his sweet wife, Angelica, made them feel like part of the family. They welcomed them every day with smiles meant for the dearest of friends or family. She’d come to think of them as her very own parents.

“We’re in the parking lot already, baby. Just waiting for you guys to get your slack asses down here. What the hell is taking so long?” she growled.

“Come rescue me from this maniac.” Steve screamed into the phone.

“Poor, Steve. Bless him for having the balls to marry you.”

“Oh, shut up. He’s been blessed enough.” Rachel giggled. “Have you heard anything from Jay and Phil?”

“I saw them about an hour ago, so they should be there any time. And, as for me, I’m dressed to kill and tonight baby, I’m looking for a piece of ass!” She laughed but didn’t feel like it.

“Oh, my God! What happened to bring this on? ... Did that bitch call you again? How much do I owe her?” she asked sarcastically.

“Yes, she did call, but she’s got nothing to do with this. Like I told you, I’m ready to go on with my life, and tonight’s going to be that night. Morgan is back!” she said without any enthusiasm.

“Well, whatever did it, I tip my hat to it. So hurry and get your sexy ass down here. I have someone I want you to meet.” The connection was lost. Another one of Rachel’s famous hang-ups.

Morgan laid the receiver back in the cradle and returned to add the final touches to her hair and make-up. She chose to wear her hair down. The blonde strands would highlight her tanned shoulders.

With hair and make-up complete she walked back into the living room, grabbed her purse, and glanced back at the cozy apartment. She hoped tonight would be the last time she looked at it through hazed eyes. Tomorrow when she opened them she prayed a new person would be there to share life with her. She pulled the door closed behind her.

Chapter Six

Shane entered the restaurant and spotted Rachel immediately with her bright eyes and cheerful face. Her radiant smile was enough to help relieve the anxiety of the night Shane had ahead of her.

She followed Rachel to a long wooden table with more happy faces greeting her with steady gazes, standing to shake her hand. She liked Jay and Phil immediately. Their quirky demeanor was enough to ease her anxious feelings of meeting Morgan. She eased into a chair to wait for Morgan's arrival and listened to their chatter.

A few minutes later, Morgan entered the front doors. Shane's nervousness spiraled while she watched Morgan approach a tiny woman. Her face brightened with the woman's words, then frowned and turned to scan the room for her friends. She turned and headed in their direction while Shane held her breath.

"Morgan! Morgan! Over here." Rachel squealed with Morgan's approach. "Oh my God! Look at you. Oh, the fun we're gonna have tonight."

Shane and Morgan's eyes briefly locked before Morgan turned and put her face right into Rachel's.

"I'm so going to kill you. You are such a dog. You actually told Angelica I was on the prowl?" Morgan pointed behind her, indicating the woman she'd just talked to. "I'm so going to put laxatives in your drinks tonight," Morgan said, trying to hold back her laughter, a bright playful smile etched her lips. "She actually gave me a lecture on how to pick up women. And look at me." Morgan pointed to herself. "I'm dressed like a slut and there she was telling me to *not* look easy."

"Oh. She's so silly. I just told her that we were taking you out tonight for a few drinks." Rachel looked over Morgan's shoulder, an obvious indication she was lying. "Well, I might have mentioned that you were feeling better and starting to get over things, and well, that

you might be ready to start looking again, but it was really not much.” Her lie thickened as her eyes dropped to her foot sliding circles on the tiled floor. She looked back up at Morgan with a sheepish grin.

Rachel’s husband stood and hugged Morgan. “She’s lying, baby. She spilled her guts and yours along with it as soon as Angela said hi.” He grinned and kissed her on the cheek.

Rachel swatted him on the ass. “You’re supposed to stick up for your wife, you know? Not rat her out. Some hubby you are.” She turned back to Rachel and fluttered her eyelashes. “Oh, come on, Morgan, you know how much she hated Dawn. I made her night. Give me a break.” A bright smile lit up her face.

“Well, I think you look gorgeous, and you sure don’t look like any slut I’ve ever seen.” Shane couldn’t control her voice.

That was enough to shut Morgan up. She turned and met Shane’s eyes. A trickle of goose bumps ran the length of Shane’s spine. She rose and pulled an empty chair out for Morgan. While never taking her eyes away, Morgan slowly walked in the direction she was being summoned to sit as if enchanted.

“Morgan, I’d like for you to meet someone.” Morgan’s gaze fell away from Shane and drifted toward Rachel. “Morgan, meet Shane. Shane Oglesby. This is our mystery lady,” she added, showing every single tooth.

Morgan’s expression went from confusion to pure delight. She swung her head around in Shane’s direction and threw out her hand. “It’s so nice to meet you, Shane.” Shane watched delicate fingers protrude in her direction and found hers moving on their own accord toward velvet skin. “The pleasure’s all mine, Morgan. I’m just as pleased to meet you.”

“As you know, I work with Rachel at *Strut*. We’re pleased to have you as our customer, and it’s so nice to finally put a face to the voice.”

Shane’s fingers slid into Morgan’s outstretched hand. She felt a sizzle run through her fingers when their skin touched.

Heavenly. The word tossed around inside Shane’s head. She looked into those mesmerizing eyes. Her attraction to Morgan was more powerful than she imagined. “Man. I’m getting hot just watching this scene. If you guys don’t stop now, I’ll be forced to take Phil right back home and have my way with him,” Jay said from his chair across the table, goosing Phil in the side.

Shane couldn’t tear her eyes from Morgan’s. A flapping butterfly coursed through her stomach. She released Morgan’s hand and watched a blush crawl along her cheeks. “And even the blood crawling to your ears is sexy.”

Shane’s skin prickled. She forced her gaze away from Morgan’s soft-featured face and sat down with a thump, knees weak.

“Okay, you two. I wasn’t kidding.” Jay pursed his lips at them. Morgan slid into her chair.

The waitress sauntered over to take their orders, and then quickly walked away.

"So, what brought you to Atlanta, Georgia of all places?" Morgan asked, turning to look at her.

"My brother. He's lived here since my father died. Vernon Oglesby, in case you don't know." Her gaze was glued to every portion of Morgan's face, memorizing every laugh line, every speckle of color in her eyes. "And he invited me to come here to live with him and his wife. Things weren't going so great in California, so I packed up and came here." She let her gaze fall away from Morgan with remembrance of her lost love, the reason her love was lost.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but glad you made it here. We're excited to feature your new pieces next month. Your artwork is beautiful." Morgan gave her a bright smile. "I found a few interesting pieces on the Internet."

"Thank you. I don't hold a candle to my father, but he was proud of my work and that's what made me open Shamrock, to sort of continue his legacy." Shane's eyes climbed up to meet Morgan's, her breath caught in her throat. "What piece did you find interesting?"

"Actually, it was a child, crying, standing in the middle of debris." Shane's eyes automatically drifted to Rachel, remembering their conversation over that particular piece.

"Shane, what part of California are you from?" Phil's question cut the tension between them.

"Palm Springs." She turned toward Phil. Jay was picking lint from Phil's shirt, oblivious to anyone else around him.

"Are you a football buff, by chance?" Steve asked.

"Oh, God. Don't get him started on football." Rachel growled but gave him a quick kiss on the lips.

Shane grinned. "Die hard Raider fan."

"Did you leave anyone behind when you left?" Phil asked. Shane smiled when he caught a swift kick from Morgan under the table. "Sorry, wasn't being nosy. Well, yes, I was being nosy." He leaned forward to rub his leg, squinting at Morgan.

"No. I didn't leave anyone behind." Her eyes drifted back to the table, unable to look at him while she told her lie, knowing she left Shelby's ghost along with secrets.

Their dinner arrived to break the aura that formed around them. While they ate, Jay talked about his customers from the pet store, Phil talked about the new piece he was working on, Steve talked about the pro football team he played for, and Rachel talked about remodeling a room in her house. Shane and Morgan sat and listened.

Shane thought of her own life and how screwed up things were, how things had been since the accident. She willed herself to put her past where it should be ... in the past. She couldn't change what she'd done to her true love, but she could move forward from here, with someone new, someone who didn't know her past.

Would Morgan be able to look her in the eyes if she knew the deep dark secret Shane harbored? Would she run screaming from the room if she knew she was sitting beside a murderer?

She listened while Morgan's friends talked about their lives. She listened to the quietness of Morgan, understanding completely what it was like to have a broken heart and to lose someone you loved and needed more than life itself.

She watched a smile break across Morgan's face at something Phil said. Shane felt completely at ease with Morgan's friends. They rose to leave and Shane quickly went behind Morgan to pull out her chair. She towered a few inches over Morgan. An uncontrollable urge to lean down and clamp her mouth around those perfect lips pushed at Shane. She shoved the thought aside and allowed Morgan to drift past her, watching that well rounded ass sway toward the front door.

"Did you drive?" Shane asked Morgan, her voice but a whisper, while they walked across the parking lot.

"Yes, I did." Morgan eyed her friends warily.

"Then let me drive you over to the bar. You won't want to drive after drinking."

Without another word, Shane stopped beside a huge Ford truck and opened the door. Morgan took one last glance at her friends. Shane followed her gaze. Rachel's face bore that of Cupid at work while she cuddled against Steve. Jay's teeth were gripped on his thumb, showing he totally approved of Shane. Phil's eyes were glued on Jay's crotch.

* * * * *

Morgan entered the bar, enthusiasm mixed with a little dread. She was still unsure if she could go through with prowling for a woman, especially now that one particular woman was giving her so much attention before she even got to the bar. She'd been with Dawn since she graduated from high school, ten years to be exact, and never had to live the life of women on the hunt for companions. She had Dawn, and there was no need to look for anyone else. This was going to be harder than she thought.

The drive over had been a quiet one. Even in the wide cabin of the truck, their bodies had been too close. Morgan watched as a Shane reached for the radio dial, turning up the sound of the hip hop beat. She could almost feel those fingers trail a heated path between her breasts, stopping long enough to tease a sensitized nipple, pink and erect. She imagined the same fingers sliding down her stomach while a wet tongue probed over her hardened nipple. Her lips parted in her fantasy, matching the ones in reality. When she thought of those thick fingers sliding between her legs, she gasped. She turned to meet Shane's eyes, watching her with curiosity. In the second it took her to clear her throat, a smile slid across Shane's lips.

She eyed Shane and felt a jolt of lightning bite at her gut.

They walked to the tables near the bar where Phil and Jay were greeting everyone with hugs and squeals as if they hadn't seen each other in years. Men! Gay men at that! Such drama queens. And they loved it. The more drama, the happier they were.

"All right, Morgan. This is *your* night. What can I start you out getting drunk on?" Rachel asked, awakening Morgan from her stare on Shane's profile.

"You can start by coming to the bathroom with me." Morgan gave her a look that said she better follow. Morgan excused them and towed Rachel toward the bathroom.

She pushed open the door and walked through, finding two women leaning against the counter, obviously needing a motel, and walked past them to a more secluded area of the bathroom. She turned to Rachel. "Okay, give it up. Why the hell is Shane Oglesby here?" Morgan turned to Rachel.

Rachel shrugged. "As soon as I laid eyes on her, I thought of you. She's gorgeous *and* a lesbian. She didn't have one problem telling me." Her hazel eyes sparkled with mischief.

"You still didn't answer my damn question. Why the hell is she here?"

"Because you're back in the game and I thought I'd help. There! Happy?"

"What?!" Morgan screamed. "What the hell did you tell her?"

"I didn't tell her anything, just invited her to come out with us." Rachel's eyes told Morgan there was more to the story than that.

"You're lying, Rachel. I can see it all over your face. What did you tell her?"

"I told her the truth, dammit!" Rachel stomped her foot and dropped her gaze to the floor. "I told her you were single, available, and broken-hearted. There!"

Morgan stood in awe. So that was the reason Shane was so flirty. Rachel had just told this scrumptious woman that she was easy prey. How stupid could Rachel be? And why couldn't she keep her damn mouth shut?

"That's exactly what I thought. That explains it!" Morgan tightened her jaw, turning to glance behind her. Yet, wasn't that why she was here? Wouldn't a fuck be good enough tonight if the magical new love didn't appear? But, not with a client. She blew her frustration out with a steady stream of air, and turned back to Rachel, "I don't need your help finding a fuck, Rachel. I'm not looking for a fuck, although it will do tonight. So whatever you told her, *untell* it. She's our client for crying out loud."

Morgan huffed at her. Rachel smiled back. Morgan smiled at her, and they went back to the table.

"I'll start out with a beer, thank you," Morgan said to Rachel as she sank down in a chair, but knew she would be getting a Crown and Coke and about two shots of whatever Rachel could think of.

Steve and Rachel walked off toward the bar.

Shane sat down in the empty chair beside her. "Do you mind if I sit by the sexiest person in this place?" Morgan tensed at her words. *Man! She's ever so clever with her words. I bet she's conned a few dozen women into bed with those emerald eyes and sweet tongue.*

"Sure, you can sit there, but I promise I won't be the sexiest person in this place tonight." Morgan tensed now that she knew the real reason for Shane's flirtations.

"Well, you'll be to me, since my eyes won't be on anyone else." Her voice was light and steady.

Morgan whipped her head around to stare at her. Raw determination flickered in Shane's eyes. "Well, Shane, I'd advise you to put those pretty green eyes on anyone else but me tonight. I came here looking for something. I intend to find it but I won't be looking for it in a client. Ethically I can't mix business with pleasure.

Shane's eyes lost their fiery glow as Morgan's words bit through her. "I see," she said, turning back to face the crowded room.

Morgan instantly hated her words, wanting to retract them and then throw herself at Shane. She had to keep reminding herself that Shane was a client, hands off. That was all that kept her from making such a drastic move. However, the burning embers searing her insides were almost more than she could handle.

Rachel to the rescue, and to her detriment, handed Morgan a Crown and Coke, as if Morgan didn't know. Steve handed Shane a beer. They both sat down in the chairs across the table.

"Here's to my best friend in the whole wide world, that I love almost more than anything," Rachel said, lifting her glass of something pink toward them. "This is to her broken heart that we'll start to mend tonight." She clinked her glass against Shane's beer bottle. "Here's to you, Morgan. I hope you find just what you're looking for, and I hope you fuck her brains right out of her body for me and you both." Rachel laughed at her own joke, winking at the wide-eyed Shane. A frown curled her brow as she realized the air around Morgan and Shane had changed.

Phil and Jay made their way back to the table after greeting and squealing with everyone in the bar. Jay gave Morgan a wink and then shrank back as she gave him a fierce stare. He nestled his head in the folds of Phil's neck, whispering words. Their heads came back up to stare at Morgan and Shane.

Morgan ignored their confused stares and turned her attention back to the crowd. She felt her heart thumping wildly in her chest at the closeness of Shane. What was it about this woman that made her feel like this? Was she searching too hard for that new love? Was she confusing a flirt with something more? How could she be? Rachel had basically just given Shane directions right to her bedroom. She flashed a quick glance at Shane. Her hand hung limp across her leg crossed at the ankle. Morgan stared at Shane's fingers. Her brain saw them crystal clear, diving into her, stroke after stroke. She smothered a moan in her throat as a heat wave washed over her.

Shane shifted in her chair. Morgan diverted her eyes away, willing the fire to sizzle out before she did something stupid, like yank Shane's head back and lick a wet path over her neck.

The thump of speakers and drowning blare of the music yanked Morgan from her delicious thoughts. Rachel jumped up, ran around to Morgan's side of the table, grabbed her arm, and pulled her to the dance floor where they found an open spot near the edge, leaving Shane to watch.

Chapter Seven

Dawn pulled into the crowded parking lot of the gay bar. She'd never been so excited when Morgan said she'd be joining her ignorant friends for a night out. It was like an invitation since Morgan always went to the same gay bar. She smiled to herself and slid from the truck, crunching pebbles under her feet with every step toward the front door.

She could see Rachel now eyeing her with hatred etched in her eyes. She knew Rachel would like nothing more than see her as road kill, splattered across some desolate highway. Her smile grew as she approached the bar doors. She couldn't care less what Rachel, nor Morgan's other faggot friends, thought of her. As long as she had Morgan back in her control, they could all rot in hell as far as she was concerned.

She pushed through the doors, heard the blast of music, and searched the surroundings for the woman she wanted nothing more than to shove on her bed and hear her screams of pleasure.

Her search only brought forth their old friends sitting at the table. Another woman sat at the end. Morgan and Rachel were nowhere in sight.

A fist tightened around the pit of her stomach. Had Morgan played her? Telling her she was going out when in fact she was sitting at home alone, laughing, knowing Dawn would be hunting her?

She passed the table, watching Phil's eyes narrow with rage. Jay snarled, mumbling under his breath. She gave them both a bright fuck you smile and continued to the bar. A few women gave her their brightest flirtatious smiles as she slid onto the stool and ordered a drink from the butch bartender, complete with black spiked bracelets, a matching choker around her neck.

She looked back at the woman sitting at the table with Jay, Phil, and Steve. Her broad shoulders filled her shirt like presents in a stocking. The woman's eyes cut over to her as if

feeling her penetrating stare. Dawn nodded to her. The woman gave her a frigid stare and then turned her glare back to the dance floor. Dawn watched a fevered flush wash over her face and turned her gaze toward whatever had captured her attention.

The sight of Morgan's ass sliding down the legs of a woman had her jerking off the stool. Anger raced through every vein with firing heat. The woman's fingers slid onto the flat of Morgan's stomach. She eased toward the dance floor, more than prepared to rip the woman limb from limb for daring to put her hands on her scrumptious Morgan.

Morgan looked more beautiful than ever, showing off her sexy curves in her low-waisted jeans and halter top. Her silver belly ring glistened under the strobe lights. Dawn wanted to suck that ring into her mouth while she plunged her fingers inside Morgan, capturing every moan and scream that would escape her parted lips.

Morgan slid to the floor, her voluptuous ass gliding down the legs of the woman, back arched, rolling her hips, driving Dawn, as well as her dance partner, to another level of need.

She watched the heated expression erupt from the woman's face and felt a growl rumble through her throat. Morgan shot her ass out and rubbed up the length of the woman. Her hands slithered back around to Morgan's stomach, and Dawn watched her lips find the skin of Morgan's neck. Her green-eyed monster roared to life.

She shoved past people standing near the dance floor, ready to yank this woman off her feet and pound her face into a bloody mess, when the song abruptly ended. Morgan turned and stared at her panting partner, smiling a seductive smile that turned Dawn's stomach, and turned to walk off the stage.

Dawn stepped in her path and watched her eyes round in surprise. Anger quickly took its place. She watched hatred sink into Morgan's eyes right before she felt the slap of her delicate hand.

Her head rocked to the side with more brutal force than she knew Morgan possessed. She turned back to look at her, saw tears welling in Morgan's eyes, felt her own heart lurch in her chest.

"You disgust me. It makes me sick to even look at your face," Morgan growled and then darted around her.

Dawn glared at Morgan's dance partner who dared to follow Morgan. "Touch her again and die." She took a step toward the woman, fearing she would tear her apart anyway, and watched her back up in shock. She grabbed hold of her anger and turned in the direction Morgan had fled.

She caught up to her at the bar. She slid in beside her, more than ready to beg and plead, to do anything to get her into bed tonight. She had to have that sexy body pressed against hers before the night was over.

"Why, Dawn?" Morgan's soft voice surprised her after the slap she took. "Why?"

Dawn reached her hand toward Morgan's lying limp on the counter. Morgan yanked it back as if a snake were ready to strike.

"Morgan, I can't beg you enough to forgive me. What can I do to win back your trust?" Dawn felt her heart twist, felt heat spread over her just as fast, needing Morgan in her arms, in her bed, between her legs.

"You can't take this away." Morgan turned with a new drink in hand, and without looking back, headed to her table.

Dawn watched Morgan sink into a chair beside the woman, wondering who she was, or what she meant to the group. The woman stared at Dawn with disgust plastered across her face. Dawn gave her a curt smile before heading toward the pool tables where she could keep a better eye on Morgan and still search the crowd for a back-up piece of ass in case Morgan decided to play hard-to-get for the rest of the night.

She found friends and joined in their pool game, careful not to let Morgan out of her sight, more careful to watch the new stranger sitting with them.

Later, while listening to a cute little thing flirt with her, she noticed the woman being led to the dance floor by a raving red-haired luscious piece of ass. She watched Morgan, curious to what her reaction was. Morgan was glaring at their retreating backs. A jealous streak raced down Dawn's spine to see envy on Morgan's face ... the woman that was supposed to belong to her.

She watched Morgan jump from her chair and flee to the bathroom. A sick feeling washed over her. Morgan liked this woman. Where did this woman come from? And what was she to Morgan?

Dawn smiled a wicked grin. *Poor, Morgan. You can't seem to steer clear of sluts, can you, baby?*

She moved her attention back to the dance floor and watched a fine show of seduction being played out by the red-haired beauty, anger setting in while she watched the show of attention being ignored by the woman, who's attention was glued to the closing bathroom door.

* * * * *

Morgan darted a path to the bathroom. She pushed her way through tongue-swapping women to the sink and shoved her shaking hands under the cold water, hoping it would drag her thoughts and anger down the drain with it. She stared at her reflection in the mirror. *What the hell are you doing? You've got a woman out there that would like to drive her tongue down your throat. To hell if she thinks you're easy. Isn't that what you're here for? Screw the client ... literally.*

She cut off the water and smoothed her jeans out with wet hands. The song ended. She froze, not wanting to go back to the table when Shane arrived with her new woman. She leaned against the wall, stalling until she could clear her thoughts.

The bathroom door opened. Shane's tall form filled the space. Morgan's gaze slowly slid over her like raindrops falling down a windowpane. Shane closed the door.

Morgan's heart jumped into her throat to see such heated passion in the depths of her eyes. She let her breath out and watched Shane close the space between them. She stared into Shane's eyes, feeling butterflies flap helplessly in her stomach.

Shane's lips clamped over hers. A tongue slid into her mouth, awakening every nerve in her body. A moan started in the pit of her gut, escaped into Shane's mouth. Tongues explored while fingers wove into short waves and long curls of each other's hair.

Morgan jerked back from their embrace, panting short breaths, confusion clouding her thoughts. She slowly swiped the back of her hand across her swollen lips, staring at the floor, feeling heat course between her legs.

She slowly shook her head and looked up into mesmerizing green eyes. "I can't do this, Shane."

Want was written across every laugh line on Shane's face. A smile lifted the corners of her mouth. Morgan shot around her and pushed her way through the door.

She paced back to the table. Her mind screamed to run back, to endure another powerful kiss, but kept walking, faster with every step, terrified of the helpless feeling inside her. She sank down in the chair, chills running down her legs, and looked up. Rachel leaned over the table and grinned from ear to ear at her.

Before she could say a word, Jay jumped up from his chair, grabbed Rachel and Steve by the arm and dragged them to the dance floor. Morgan unclenched her fists and sagged back to stew in her thoughts.

Shane inched into the vacated chair, a smug smile plastered on her lips, making the hair stand up on Morgan's neck. She ignored the smile, turning to watch Jay dance his goofy dance. He was never much for dancing to the beat of the music. He had his own music playing in his head.

Fingers slid across her leg. Her heart stumbled. She turned her eyes on Shane, only inches from her face.

"Let's get out of here, Morgan."

Heat burrowed between Morgan's legs. She shook her head and managed a desperate whisper. "I can't. You're my client."

"Yes, you can. Let me show you how." Shane pulled her arm, leading her gently out of the chair. She let Shane lead her like a scolded dog, unable to bark her objections. She wanted to be led. She wanted to be mastered by such heated hands.

As they approached the door, Dawn stepped in front of them. Morgan drew in a deep breath, still holding it when Dawn snarled at Shane.

Want for another woman etched every curve of Morgan's face. A mountain of molten anger rumbled in her veins. She looked between Morgan and the woman that dared to attempt to lead her baby out of this bar.

"And just where in the hell do you think you're going with my girlfriend?"

A devious smile lifted the corners of the woman's lips. Phil rose from the table and stood beside the woman. The tension between them churned like a tsunami ready to unleash its power. Rachel and Jay rushed up with Steve stalling behind. They skidded to a stop behind Morgan and swiveled their heads back and forth, their gazes filled with avid hunger.

Catfight! Crude images shimmered in Dawn's mind. Everyone was watching and waiting for her and the woman to roll about on the floor, pulling each other's hair out fighting for Morgan like stupid idiots.

"I'm taking her somewhere you're not welcome to join." The woman's voice was deep and ragged.

Dawn looked into eyes that meant every word she said. She had every intention of taking Morgan out of this bar. She glanced at Morgan's face, fear etched her raised brow.

"I don't fucking think so." Dawn muttered. Brutal images of everything she could do to this woman, stirred in her mind.

"Well, I do. And if you'll kindly step out of my way, I have some business to tend to." The woman snaked her arm around Morgan's waist and pulled her deeper in her grasp.

Morgan allowed the woman to pull her toward the exit. Her wide eyes proved she was totally aware of the fire building inside Dawn. An image of Morgan's lips panting under the power of this woman ripped through the screen in her mind. She knew she had to stop Morgan from making a huge mistake.

Dawn grabbed Morgan's arm, gently tugging her back, wanting to punch the woman while she had a clean shot.

"Bitch," Rachel cursed behind her while Phil chanted "Oh, shit!" under his breath. She ignored them and concentrated on pleading Morgan with her eyes.

Morgan looked between them, her mind obviously twisting. Dawn willed tears to puddle in her eyes. Morgan took one last glance at Shane, smiled a sweet smile, and turned back to Dawn. Dawn matched her smile, feeling her heart lift at her precious lips, knowing Morgan wasn't going to leave.

"I'm leaving, Dawn. Have a good life."

Phil whistled, loud and piercing. Morgan smiled over her shoulder at her friends and winked at Rachel before the door closed behind them.

Dawn stood in awe at the wooden door. She felt the stares of Morgan's friends and dared to look back at them. Their faces bore those of someone who'd just hit the jackpot.

"Fuck you." Dawn spat her words at Rachel then moved away from them, steady as could be.

She let her gaze fall across the crowd, searching for the one she knew would replace Morgan tonight.

* * * * *

They stepped into the crisp night air. A breeze blew across Shane's heated cheeks, not helping the heat coursing between her thighs.

She escorted Morgan to the truck like the winner of a grand prize. She held the door open for her and then almost galloped around to her side. She climbed into the truck, reaching for Morgan's hand. "You okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

Shane smiled, feeling her heart bounce hard in her chest at the feel of Morgan's silken fingers.

"It felt good to say that to her."

"You did great in there." Shane gave her hand a gentle squeeze and started the truck.

Shane drove down the bright city streets. She was on top of the world and nothing could knock her from this platform. Morgan had left with her, leaving Dawn in the dust. She never dreamed this would happen, nor could she still believe it was true. She wanted to pinch herself to make sure she was alive and really breathing.

They finally arrived in front of her two-story house. Lights glistened in several windows to welcome Morgan. They parked in the gravel driveway, and Shane quickly came around to open her door. Morgan eyed her as she slid from the truck, nervous sweaty palms reached for her outstretched hand.

Shane led her onto the wraparound porch and into the house. She closed and locked the door behind them, then pushed Morgan against the wall with a heated kiss, mint tingling on her tongue. Shane's fingers wove through the blonde curls of Morgan's hair, and Shane inhaled the jasmine scent. A moan escaped her lips, matching the sound escaping Morgan. Shane pulled her away from the door then led them across the darkened room. She felt the edge of the couch buckle Morgan's knees and tumbled down on top of her.

Want, need, and desire pulsed through her veins. She wanted Morgan naked and completely at her mercy. Her lips found Morgan's and clamped down hard. Her fingers popped buttons on Morgan's halter top, brushing kisses down her silken neck. She found the last button, and pushed the fabric apart, revealing the swell of breasts, nipples hard for attention. She slithered her way down Morgan's chest, found an erect nipple, and sucked it

between her lips. Morgan sighed into the darkness around them. Shane's insides clenched with the delicate sound.

Morgan's fingers wove through her hair, tugging gently, pushing her nipple deeper into Shane's mouth. Shane reacted by nipping the pink bud with her teeth, jolting another groan from her throat.

"You feel so damn good." Shane breathlessly huffed over Morgan's skin. "And taste even better." She quickly sucked the nipple back into her mouth.

Morgan stiffened above her. She opened her eyes and found ocean-blue eyes looking down at her, a frown etched her brow. She released her suctioned hold on Morgan's nipple. "Just enjoy it, Morgan."

She inched her way back up Morgan's body, joining their lips in another fevered kiss. Morgan's arms snaked around her neck, deepening the kiss. Morgan's body writhed under her. Shane wanted nothing more than to please that demanding ache.

She ended the kiss and slid down Morgan's stomach, found the clasp of her tight jeans and yanked them open. She rose above Morgan. "Let's get these things the hell out of the way." Morgan kicked off her sandals. Shane pulled both jeans and thong over now bare feet and tossed them in a heap on the floor.

She looked over Morgan's naked body through the dim light of the moon oozing through the mini blinds. Every curve, every dip, every fold, was now memorized like a Kodak moment. Morgan attempted to rise. Shane grabbed her hips and yanked her ass to the edge of the couch. She slid to her knees on the floor and leaned her face between Morgan's legs.

Morgan gasped and threw her head into the cushions as Shane's tongue flickered across her clit. Her fingers tugged at Shane's hair as fingers invaded the wet lips between her thighs, finding them ready and waiting for entry. Her mouth folded around Morgan's clit, softly sucking. Morgan's moans were music to her ears.

She ground her hips against Shane's face while fingers probed between her legs, looking for a dark hidden core, finding it. One finger eased inside Morgan's cunt, teasing the sides, plunging deeper.

"Oh, my ... God" Morgan panted, throwing her head further into the cushions, arching her chest into the air.

Shane released her suctioned hold on Morgan's clit. A single finger slid in and out. Another finger joined the first, slipping back inside her. "I think I could eat you alive, Morgan."

"Then ... do it."

Shane sank between Morgan's legs, sucking her clit and driving her fingers deeper. Morgan moaned into the air, gasping for breath, clawing against the fabric of the couch.

Shane loosed her lips from Morgan's clit and slid her thumb to replace it, needing to watch every expression slide across Morgan's face, needing to savor every flicker of desire.

Morgan screamed out. She trembled and writhed with convulsions. Shane drove her fingers to the hilt inside of her, wiggling them, spreading her wider, sending more pumps erupting from Morgan.

She watched Morgan's face, painting each expression into the deepest part of her brain, never wanting to forget the first time she carried Morgan over this peak. She knew in her heart, by the look in Morgan's eyes when she fearfully faced Dawn, that this might be the last time she would see this beauty again. She meant to cherish every moment.

Morgan's body fell in a heap above her, depleted of energy. A smile spread across her lips.

"What're you smiling about?" Shane eased her fingers out and pulled her body off the floor. She slid against Morgan's sweaty skin.

"I'm just thinking of the million questions Jay is thinking of asking me right now," Morgan said with a giggle. A pang stabbed Shane's gut when she realized she'd made the broken-hearted Morgan smile after all. She'd painted a smile back on her beautiful face, if only for a short while.

"Your friends love you very much." Shane trailed her fingers along Morgan's rib cage, relishing the subtle texture of her velvet skin.

"A little too much sometimes." Morgan opened her eyes, sending a jolt through Shane. "But I love them right back, and they know it."

"It's a rare thing to have friends who love you, no matter what." Shane pulled Morgan to her, kissing her neck, unable to stop her hands from needing to feel her, to hold her.

What's your story, Shane Oglesby?" She nuzzled her cheek into Shane's neck.

Shane wrapped her arms around her. She was more than ready to hand her heart freely to Morgan, to do with what she wanted.

"What's your deep dark secret?" Morgan asked.

Shane stiffened at Morgan's words. Was she ready to spill her guts to this woman? A woman who wouldn't be here come morning light? A woman who would surely crawl back to the arms of her lost lover?

Morgan leaned up to look at her.

Shane's heart tightened at the depths of Morgan's eyes. "I don't have any secrets."

"Everyone has secrets." Morgan played with the buttons on Shane's shirt.

Shane watched Morgan, wanting to feel and watch another orgasm spiral out of her body. "I don't want to talk about secrets or lost lovers." She pressed her lips to Morgan's. "I don't want to hear anything else escape those delicious lips except a scream as I plunge my

fingers back where they were seconds ago.” She slid down on the couch, pulling Morgan on top of her, running her fingers down her delicate back, over her rounded ass.

Shane closed her lips over Morgan’s, inhaling the scent of her, wanting to bottle it up and open it when her body missed her. *Don’t think about that now. Just enjoy what you have before you, right here and now.*

She ended the kiss. “I want you in my bed, not like this.”

Shane eased from under Morgan, stood and reached her hand down to her. Morgan eased her slender fingers into Shane’s, stood, naked, and eagerly followed her up the carpeted flight of stairs.

Shane pulled Morgan against her as soon as they stepped into the large bedroom. Morgan’s fingers fumbled with buttons while Shane’s wove through unruly blonde curls, then glided them over Morgan’s body. Buttons unfastened, opening a path for Morgan’s heated lips to touch her chest. Fingers fumbled further for the clasp of Shane’s blue jeans, wielding them over hips, and down around her ankles.

Her shirt landed in a heap by their feet. Shane twisted out of her sports bra, shimmied out of her underwear, and stepped out of her jeans and shoes. She savored the look in Morgan’s passionate, blazing eyes. Eyes that said she was more than ready to dive back into lovemaking. Those eyes burned a hole through her soul, leaving her breathless, and at Morgan’s mercy. *Just don’t fall, Shane. Just don’t fall.*

Morgan stepped forward. Shane breathed deeply, inhaling every fragrance she could. She eased Morgan toward the bed, wanting, needing her hands all over this woman. She wanted to savor every second she had in her arms because she knew Morgan might dive back into Dawn’s arms.

She slid on top of Morgan, spreading her legs apart with her knee. Morgan moaned beneath her, sending a shiver trailing down her own spine. She eased her body down, pressing skin on skin, feeling the heat between them.

Morgan’s lips pressed against her, grinding her crotch into Shane’s pelvic bone. Shane pushed against her. “What I wouldn’t give to have something to sink into you right now.”

Morgan’s eyes flew open. “What would make you say that?”

“Because, I want to be inside you, to know what you feel like.” Shane leaned further for another kiss. Morgan backed away as much as the bed beneath her head would allow.

“If I wanted the real thing, I’d be with a man. You’re perfect.”

She pushed her lips to Morgan’s, grinding her hips against her crotch, pulling moans from her throat. Morgan draped her legs over Shane’s hips and bucked beneath her. She sure didn’t act like someone who didn’t want anything driven inside her.

A thought came to Shane. Morgan said “the real thing.” Did that mean she wanted toys? Would she flee at the prospect?

Morgan's legs tightened around her, driving Shane harder between her thighs. She pulled her lips away and ducked to Shane's neck, nipping skin between her teeth. "You're driving me crazy."

"That's a good thing, right?" Shane arched her neck, giving Morgan all the skin she wanted.

Morgan ground her crotch against Shane. "I'm burning alive."

Liquid fire crashed between Shane's thighs as Morgan licked and sucked her neck, grinding her hips in slow demanding circles, huffing short breaths against her skin.

"Do you trust me, Morgan?"

"Yes." Morgan's whisper was but a huff against Shane's neck.

Shane leaned above her and unhooked her legs from around her. A grunt sounded beneath her. She opened the nightstand drawer and pulled out a strap-on. When she looked back to Morgan, she wore a look of disappointment mixed with need. Shane wanted to toss it across the room and pick up where she'd left off. A quick pang of embarrassment washed over her for even daring to bring it out.

Morgan shifted, pulled her legs together, and attempted to roll over.

Shane reached out and stopped her in mid-motion. "Where are you going?"

Morgan looked at her as if Shane was a complete moron for asking. She narrowed her eyes. "I thought ... I thought you wanted ..." She stared at Shane in utter confusion.

Shane knew immediately what Morgan thought, and it made her sick. She was sure it was Dawn's way of being in control, as if doggie style was the only way two women could have sex with toys. *Dawn was one smooth sailor. Morgan is about to be in for a rude awakening. She might never want Dawn back after tonight.*

She moved back over Morgan and opened her legs. "I don't fuck anyone, Morgan. Please understand that." She lay over her, pressed her lips to Morgan's and snaked her tongue inside, felt Morgan's hips rise against her stomach.

When the kiss ended, passionate eyes opened to stare at Shane.

"Show me." Morgan whispered.

Shane's insides clinched with the delicate demand. She leaned back and strapped the device around her hips, never breaking eye contact with Morgan. She held the end of the dildo and placed her hand on the bed beside Morgan to brace her weight.

Determined, curious eyes watched and waited. Shane released the dildo and instead slid two fingers inside Morgan's deliciously wet cunt.

Morgan arched and released a moan as Shane slid her thumb over her clit, dragging slow, lazy circles over it. She quickened her strokes inside Morgan until her hips matched her rhythm. Morgan's fingers dug into the comforter.

Her insides tightened around Shane's fingers, her body quivering. Shane removed her fingers and guided the head of the dildo to her wet opening. Morgan's legs fell further apart with anticipation. Shane slid inside her a few inches. Morgan arched and circled her hips, reaching for more. Shane burned with need.

Morgan wrapped her legs around Shane and bucked her hips.

Shane pushed her weight against her, giving Morgan every inch of the dildo.

Morgan gasped and released a soft cry as her ankles locked behind Shane's back. Shane was lost in the sound, wanted to hear loud squeals of pleasure erupt from the beauty bucking beneath her.

She lay flat on Morgan and slowly slid in and out of her, grinding her hips in circles against Morgan's clit. Delicate arms wrapped around her neck, wove fingers into the strands of her hair, and looked adoringly into her eyes.

Morgan's arms tightened around her neck, one roaming hand digging into her back, as she held on to Shane for dear life. She ground her hips harder, faster, with Shane matching her grind for grind, hump for hump, and stroke for stroke.

Sooner than Shane wanted, Morgan threw her head back, dug her nails into her back, and released a gut wrenching scream of pleasure. "I'm coming ... oh, my ... God."

Shane slammed her hips against Morgan, pressing as hard as she could. Morgan bucked wildly beneath her, circling her clit against Shane.

Moans settled to pants, pants settled to gasps of air, and gasps of air settled to heavy breathing ... and then Morgan opened her eyes ... and Shane fell again. She was almost positive Morgan was along for the ride.

Chapter Eight

“I can’t believe you left with that woman. I love you so much. Do you know how much my heart is breaking right now? I can’t think straight. It’s driving me crazy. It’s four in the morning, and you’re still not back. I’m dying inside, slowly. I wish I was dead, it’d be less pain. I want you back Morgan, no matter what happens with you and that bitch tonight. I know you want me too. I could see it in your eyes, smell it in the air around you. You love me. You belong to only me. Oh, God, I’m hurting so bad right now. I want to find you, drag you home where you belong, and make slow, passionate love to you, the way it should be.”

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeppppppppp!

Dawn cursed under her breath. “Bitch. Cunt” She tightened her grip on the phone, wanting to feel it shatter in her bare hands.

A shapely leg slithered under the covers from across the room, slow and sexy. Sensual curves of a scrumptious body undulated under the sheets.

She dialed the number again and prayed that her whispered words would be audible to Morgan.

“Morgan, please call me when you get home. Please tell me that you love me and that you want me back, too. Please tell me this heartache will be over soon because I can’t take much more. I’m drowning. I’m dying.” Angry tears streamed down while she spilled her heart out to Morgan’s answering machine. “I don’t think I can take much more. If you don’t answer soon, I think I’ll go insane. My stomach’s in knots. My heart hurts. My mind is full of visions of what that bitch is doing to you, what she’s making you feel, what I should be making you feel. Please Morgan, I’m begging you, take me back. Come back where you belong, where you know you belong.”

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeppppppppp!

The woman's body slithered again, arms stretched. A beautiful face, turned to search her surroundings, found Dawn.

"What're you doing?" the sweet sleepy voice asked.

"Watching you ... wanting you ... needing you." The lies fell easily from Dawn's lips. She kept her voice seductive and soothing and inched the phone behind her in the chair.

The face that held the sweet voice smiled, sucking in the magic of Dawn's words, calling her back to bed with a lazy nod.

Dawn eased out of the chair, careful to swipe away wet tears, and strode across the floor, easing onto the bed, covering the woman with her body. Arms fell around her neck, kissing a wet trail down her neck, doing nothing to arouse Dawn's desire.

"Make love to me again." The sound of the woman's whispered words sank claws into Dawn's gut. Under better circumstances, she'd have obliged, with a bonus, but now, her mind was on Morgan. The woman's words only aggravated her while Dawn struggled to remember her name ... Brittany?

Dawn lifted her head, staring down at this beauty, willing her mind's eye to see Morgan. She reached slow, steady fingers toward that flaming red hair, twisting her fingers in their long strands, and pulled them into her fist.

"How about instead, I just fuck your brains out and send you on your way?"

"That'll work too, baby. You can do with me what you want." A seductive smile lifted the corners of Brittany's mouth, making a jolt of anger spread quickly through Dawn.

She eased off Brittany, sitting up on her knees, pulling the fisted hair with her, bringing her to a sitting position. She pulled Brittany's mouth to her nipple and worked its tip between her lips.

"Mmm. Kinky, I love it." She sucked Dawn's nipple into her mouth, running her tongue over a hardened tip.

Dawn ran her fingers across Brittany's shoulder, feeling the softness, closing her eyes, letting her mind drift to Morgan. Her sweet, loving Morgan. A woman she couldn't erase from her mind no matter how many women she slept with, never finding the one that would take away those embedded memories.

The woman's mouth became Morgan's mouth. The woman's tongue became Morgan's tongue. The red hair became blonde silk in her mind's eye. She had her Morgan back, here before her, making love to her, wanting and needing her.

Brittany loosened her suction on Dawn's nipple. Dawn opened her eyes. Her Morgan was gone, leaving the betrayal of her love within arms reach. She should send this woman away. She should tell her that her heart and mind belonged to another, yet tempting eyes willed her to continue.

Dawn slowly pushed her onto her back, watching her arch in anticipation. She slid her fingers between Brittany's legs, kneading them into wiry hair, listening to moans escape her lips.

"So tell me about the woman you were dancing with," Dawn said, playfully dragging her fingers across the woman's clit.

"What about her? She was ... hot!" The woman's breathless words came back to Dawn.

"Were you trying to seduce her?" Dawn's fingers found a dark hole, sinking a fingertip inside, making the woman breathe harder and arch her back to catch more.

"Hell ... yeah!"

"Why, if she was with someone?"

"That other woman wasn't ... with her. She didn't show that hot ass woman an ounce ... of attention. I thought ... I'd jump in to take what I could." She tossed her head back and moaned when Dawn sank her finger deeper inside her.

"Did you think you could have her?"

"I don't ... know ... she ... was hot, and being ignored." Dawn plunged more fingers inside. She smiled, loving that someone noticed her Morgan didn't belong to that bitch.

"Do you think she could have done this to you?" Dawn added more fingers, plunged harder, faster, sending the woman's head back into the pillow. The woman's legs fell further apart.

"Why are we ... talking about that ... woman? She had eyes ... for only one person. Oh, my God, yes, fuck me, baby." The woman bucked her hips harder, catching the rhythm of Dawn's strokes.

"Do you think that woman is doing this to her pretty little partner?" Dawn's fingers stretched the insides of the woman. She brought her thumb to circle on a clit. The woman's fingers fisted sheets in her hands.

"I'd imagine ... that pretty little thing is ... getting her ... brains fucked out at the same time you're fucking ... mine out."

Dawn yanked her fingers from inside the woman and pushed off the bed.

"Get your clothes on and get the hell out of here." Dawn paced around the near empty bedroom. Only a chair, a dresser, and a bed filled the space.

"What the hell is your problem?" The woman obeyed and scampered out of the bed, searching desperately for her clothes.

"Nothing. I just grew tired of you all of a sudden."

She jerked her head in Dawn's direction, "What? You're suddenly tired of me, after all that fucking we've done for hours?" A glint of rage sparkled in her brown eyes as recognition set in. "Oh, I got it now. That pretty little thing was your girlfriend, or rather, used to be." Dawn whipped her head around and glared at her tormentor.

Slinking slowly across the room, Brittany smiled a seductive smile at Dawn. "It's okay. I can be your play toy while you get your revenge." She reached for Dawn, teasing her fingertip across a hardened nipple, "I don't mind."

Dawn pushed her hand away, grabbed the woman's arm, and flung her back on the bed, face down. She eased onto the bed, spreading her legs, and slipped fingers inside. The woman's loud moans echoed through the room while Dawn drove her fingers into her wet creamy cunt, sliding deep inside her.

"That's right, baby. Take your revenge out on me." She threw her head back. Dawn only rammed her fingers harder, faster, wanting to make her own heartache dissolve.

The woman's fingers slid down the bed, searching for Dawn's crotch. Dawn leaned further over her, grabbed the woman's hand, and pushed long fingers between her legs.

Dawn tossed her head back, pulling her fingers out of the woman, inching further to find her clit. Soft cries escaped both of them while they drove each other's orgasms to their peaks.

Morgan. I love you. Please feel me wherever you are. Love me.

She smiled. Then, after she had Morgan gasping and crying out beneath her, she could let the suffering begin again.

* * * * *

Morgan awoke with a gasp. Goose bumps prickled along her arms and legs. She felt a light breeze drift across her leg that had slipped from under the sheets. She yanked it back under, nuzzled closer inside the shelter of the strong arms that engulfed her. She stared at the clock, glowing soft green. Arms pulled her tighter into an embrace, securing her, while she drifted back to sleep.

Hours later she awoke in a tangled web of arms and legs, unmistakable heat from a warm body. She nestled in deeper, feeling heavy arms shift around her, wrapping her in a tight embrace. A leg shifted, pinning hers to the bed, more muscular than it should be. A head pressed into her neck, more hair than there should be.

Morgan gasped, throwing her body to a full upright position, staring wild-eyed around her, remembering.

A body lifted beside her, reaching for her. Not Dawn. *Oh, my God. What have I done?* Memories of Dawn's face, eyes welled with tears, flooded her vision. Morgan turned to stare at the occupant of the bed. A lazy smile lifted the corners of Shane's mouth.

Soft light filled the room while morning sun pressed its rays against the blowing curtains. Morgan stared at Shane, her previous night filling her brain like coffee brimming a mug. *Too much to drink? No, but for a cheap drunk, yes. But I wanted to leave. I wanted to make love to Shane. I wanted to spit in Dawn's face. The liquor didn't make me do that. But*

what better excuse to use right now, when a client, a very tanned, broad, delicious-bodied client, lay beside me?

"What's wrong?" Shane asked in a sleepy, raspy voice.

"I'm sorry." Morgan said, hating the words, but knowing she had to say them. Leaving bars with a woman, besides Dawn, wasn't anything she'd ever done before. Dawn was the only female she'd ever made love to. She couldn't believe how much she'd wanted this woman, or how easy it was for her leave with her, after only knowing her a few hours. *Boy, does she ever think I'm a slut. So much for her words, "You don't look like any slut I've ever seen." That's an understatement now, after what I've done.*

"For what?" Shane wiped sleep from her eyes, stretching, sliding her arms around Morgan's waist.

"For this, what we did, what we shouldn't have done. I think I had too much to drink." Morgan twisted out of Shane's warm embrace sliding off the bed in search of her clothes.

Shane slid off the bed, her athletic, naked body coming to stand beside Morgan, sending a warm shiver down Morgan's spine at the closeness. "Don't you know you're never supposed to say you're sorry after such awesome sex? Tends to take away the magic of it all."

"I'm sorry about that, too. I should have never come here. We should have never ..."

Morgan's words were lost as she turned to stare at Shane. Those breathtaking eyes, so full of mystery, so full of desire, even this early in the morning, turned something tight in her gut.

Pressing a single finger to her lips, Shane silenced her.

Shane leaned her tousled head against Morgan's cheek, and whispered, "Please, don't say you're sorry. I could never be sorry for what happened in this bed last night. What I am sorry about, is that you found it so easy to say those words yourself."

Morgan felt her heart twist into a knotted fist as Shane's breath fell across her cheek. The strands of her hair felt like silk against her cheek. Morgan parted her lips in remembrance of their night, closing her eyes, seeing the memories clearly.

Morgan's eyes popped open, and she quickly pulled away from Shane, willing herself to escape the desire she heard in Shane's voice, the same desire she felt welling in her own gut. Her eyes roamed the floor for clothes. Finding them, she inched to each piece, and donned them with dread. Shane watched as Morgan attempted to ignore what had transpired between them.

They both dressed and made their way down the plush carpeted stairs. Framed smiling faces lined the wall in a straight path descending with each step. Morgan looked carefully at each portrait, guessing who the people were, or what they meant to Shane. She reached the last step, the final picture. This picture sucked her in like a tornado. Shane's lips were pressed firmly against a brunette's lips, obviously more than family or friend. Their arms were tangled together, holding each other close.

Shane quickly stepped around Morgan, heading into the large open living room. Morgan followed her, watching Shane plop down on the same couch they'd made love on last night, the first breathtaking time.

Morgan picked up her sandals and purse by the door then looked back at Shane's gloomy face, not knowing what to say or do.

You can't leave here without saying something, anything. For crying out loud, you just made love to this woman, for long glorious hours. Don't you dare walk out of this house without saying something.

Morgan obeyed her thoughts and inched toward the black plush couch. She fell in beside her, wanting to ease the tension between them.

"Morgan, would you go out with me sometime? Dinner, a movie, anything?" Shane asked, not turning to look at her.

Morgan wanted to say yes, knowing she couldn't. She didn't date clients, and she didn't play games. She'd done both. What she felt last night for Shane was more mind blowing than she could have ever imagined, but she knew she didn't have an ounce of her heart left to give to Shane. It wasn't fair to lead her on, and it sure wasn't fair that she'd made love to her, either. She'd played a fool's game last night, toying with another person's heart and mind. She had to fix this before she walked out that door.

She twisted on the couch, turning to face the weary-eyed Shane. "Shane, I can't. I hope you understand."

"More than I care to." Shane turned to face her, making Morgan's breath catch. Shane eyed her for a second, her mind obviously twisting over her next words. "Dawn doesn't deserve you." She pushed off the couch and headed toward the front door.

Morgan knew the conversation was over. There wasn't anything else she could say to make this any easier. She followed Shane out the door, waited while she closed it, and then followed her back to the truck.

They climbed inside and made their way back to Joe's in silence.

* * * * *

Shane stared ahead at the road as they drove in eerie silence. She wanted to treasure every second they'd shared together, but it was eating her alive to know that Morgan was going to throw herself back at Dawn. Of course, at Dawn's earliest convenience. And Shane had helped push her there.

The look on Dawn's face last night had proved she wasn't going to give up without a fight for Morgan. She'd allowed her to leave last night, not believing the powerful love she knew Morgan held for her would ever allow her do anything to hurt Dawn. Dawn didn't believe that Morgan would go through with what Shane led her to believe. It made her sick to think about it.

But Morgan had gone through with their lovemaking, quite easily. Shane realized now that the liquor probably had more to do with it than anything, but she didn't care. Whatever reason there was for the powerful intimacy they'd shared, she welcomed with open arms. But, now back in reality, she hated more than anything to know that Dawn would push back until Morgan gave in. She'd have her memories, however. No matter how intense and no matter how little, she had them, and they would have to do.

Shane pulled alongside Morgan's tiny car and turned to look at her. Sweet blue eyes looked back at her, twisting her heart.

"Morgan, if I'd never met you, I'd have missed you anyway." She laughed softly as she admitted, "I stole that line from some movie. I don't remember which one. But it's still true." Morgan's eyes widened with her words, her eyes becoming glassy. Shane reached across her and pushed open the door.

She watched Morgan slide from the truck, watched her ass twitch in those painted-on jeans, and cringed when Morgan turned back to look at her. Those eyes were struggling. It was written all over her face. She was heart-wrenched over her dilemma.

Shane pulled out of the parking lot with a new feeling of jubilation. She'd tormented the mind of this beauty, made her think twice about her decision. She could live with that, even if she never saw that gorgeous face again.

* * * * *

Morgan watched Shane's truck pull out of the parking lot, wanting desperately to stop her and throw herself back into those strong arms. Her words had touched a part of Morgan that had only been touched by Dawn.

A few more nights of awesome sex wouldn't hurt anything, right?

She tossed the question from her head and sank into the leather seat. But on the ride home, mind blips of making love to Shane coursed through her brain.

She couldn't remember feeling so loved, so wanted, so cherished. Shane's fingers had caressed every inch of her, as if memorizing every fold, every curve. She felt deep love stretch between them, unlike anything she'd ever felt with Dawn.

Dawn made her feel like a prize, to be shown to the world with pride, then tossed into a dusty attic when something new came along. Shane made her feel like a prize as well, something to be guarded and taken care of with gentle loving hands, and proudly shown forever.

Her heart twisted. How did she get herself into this mess?

After arriving at her building, Morgan crept quietly past Jay's door. She wasn't ready to spill her guts just yet. Entering her apartment, she glanced at the answering machine. Out of habit, it was the first thing she sought. The light was blinking.

She knew it would be Dawn.

Chapter Nine

Morgan stared at the answering machine while it spilled out the sensual words of her betraying ex-lover. She hugged a throw pillow against her chest, curled her knees under her, and cried.

The floodgates had finally opened, allowing the damned up emotions and tears to flow. The words she longed to hear for a year were recorded on a tiny, little tape. The words she needed to hear a year ago, were flowing shamelessly from the lips of the woman she loved, needed, and couldn't find a way to live without.

What should she do about them now? After all this time, after all this heartache, what in the hell was she supposed to do? Play hard to get and let Dawn fight her way back into her heart? Play easy and let the reconciliation begin? Hadn't she already played the part of hard to get, or rather, hard to get back? She'd been wined and dined back into Dawn's arms, with Dawn pretending to fight, Morgan pretending to play hard to get as well. Each time, the ending was the same. Dawn would cheat on her and leave her to cry her heart out all over again.

A brisk rap sounded on the door. Morgan's head jerked up. Her heart stalled. Her sobbing breath caught in her chest. *Please, let it be Jay. Please, let it be Rachel. I can't face Dawn right now.*

She eased off the couch, slipping quietly to the door, and peered through the peephole for her visitor's face.

Dawn stood on the threshold, a frown furrowing her brow, sadness clouding her eyes. A huge, aching cloud of pain and love seeped into every pore of Morgan's body. Swallowing the huge, throbbing lump, she turned the knob.

Dawn's face bloomed into a smile. She pushed the door open further and crept toward Morgan. She opened her arms and Morgan slid into the comfort she'd known for ten years, until Shane.

Morgan pulled Dawn inside.

Dawn grinned. "I knew you'd let me in."

Morgan's insides melted. All Dawn had to do was smile and her crotch was wet with anticipation.

Dawn leaned forward and they kissed. Her tongue danced inside Morgan's mouth. She pulled Morgan's leg up around her waist and ground her hips into Morgan's crotch.

Morgan's heart beat fast against her chest. Goose bumps trailed down her legs, making her skin prickle in their path. Expected pleasure had her head swimming already.

What the hell am I doing?

Morgan jerked her head back, shoved her hands against Dawn, bringing her leg off of Dawn's hip. She slowly shook her head, trying to think in clear and logical fashion. Her crotch was wet with remembrance of what Dawn's body could do to hers.

"Get the hell out of here, Dawn. I'm not kidding."

Dawn smiled. She grabbed Morgan's arm, twisted it behind her back and then twirled her around, pulling her ass into Dawn's stomach. Dawn's lovely mouth latched on Morgan's neck, biting, sucking. At the same time, Dawn grabbed Morgan's crotch with the other hand, digging hard.

"I want you, Morgan." She breathed her hot whispered words over Morgan's neck. "I want you so bad."

Dawn was rough. Her hand still pinned Morgan's arm between them while her fingers dug deep into Morgan's crotch, through her jeans.

"Stop. Please. Stop."

Dawn ignored her plea. "Take off your pants, Morgan." She released her hold on Morgan's arm and pushed her forward.

Morgan slowly shook her head. Liquid fire crashed between her thighs just thinking of what Dawn could do with her body.

Dawn reached out and grasped the snap of her jeans, yanked the zipper open with a groan, and pulled her jeans down around her ankles.

Morgan knew she shouldn't want Dawn. But she did. Her crotch was a tingling, wet mass of aching need.

Dawn pushed Morgan to the couch, forced her down to her knees on the thick cushions, then turned her to hang over the arm. Dawn fell over Morgan's back. Her hand slipped under Morgan's stomach, down between her legs, finding her wet crotch. Her

fingertips spread Morgan's wet lips, found a swollen clit, and circled it. Morgan moaned and threw her head back.

Dawn's free hand slithered down Morgan's back, over her ass and between her legs. She found a dark cave, wet and waiting, and plunged her fingers inside. Morgan's fingers dug into the couch. Her face fell forward, and she moaned loudly into the fabric. Dawn's fingers dove hard and fast, rendering Morgan helpless.

Morgan's fists opened and closed against the couch. She panted for breath while a single finger crept between the cheeks of her ass, slipping easily into the depths. Morgan screamed with pleasure. Dawn's fingers were in every hole, dipping and diving, while a tip circled her clit. Morgan's orgasm pummeled over the edge, sending her body into rapid convulsions. Her body racked against the couch. She shoved her face deeper into the cushion, moaning and screaming out her pleasure.

As Morgan's pumps diminished, Dawn's fingers slowed to a steady pace, inching in, inching out. When Morgan relaxed, fingers were pulled from her. Morgan, released of all energy, crumpled to the floor.

What the hell am I doing? How could I let my body and mind be so controlled by her?

Morgan pulled her hands up to cover her face. "Dawn, this is wrong."

"No, it's not, Morgan. This could never be wrong between us." Dawn stared down at her. "Morgan, you know I want you back. I can't live without you. I was a fool for hurting you."

"Yes, you were, but you were determined to have her and the one before her and all the ones I don't even know about. You don't know how to be faithful." Morgan turned away from her, unwilling to look into her eyes for another second.

"You know what? Screw you! I begged and pleaded all night long, poured my guts out on your answering machine, *proving* to you how sorry I was and how much I wanted you back. And this is what I get in return?" Dawn's brown eyes blazed fire at Morgan as she rose from the floor.

The same fire sizzled and popped inside Morgan's head.

Morgan yanked her jeans up and glared. "What did you *prove*, Dawn? That you couldn't stand to see me walk out that door last night with another woman? It's okay when you do it, but God forbid Morgan finds the balls to do the same. You can go screw *yourself*." Morgan clenched her fists by her side.

Dawn turned and strode to the door, turning back before she twisted the knob. "It's a good thing a real woman laid in my bed last night. She was delicious after I hung up that phone. It's amazing how a few tears can bring out the fucking beast in some people, huh?"

Morgan stared at her. A cold, hard hand squeezed her heart. She willed herself to get control. She begged her body to hold its ground, to not leap at Dawn and sink her fingers deep in her eyes.

She breathed deep, lifted her hand, and pointed at the door. "Get out, Dawn. There's nothing left for you here." She knew the words were far from the truth, but wasn't about to show any hint of it to Dawn.

Dawn turned and darted from the room, leaving the door ajar. Her footsteps echoed down the stairs.

Morgan flew to the door, needing to have another final say. This feeling that was taking over was too awesome to end just yet.

"Hey, Dawn!" Morgan screamed at the head clearing the final steps to disappear out of the lobby door. Dawn stopped, turned back and glared up at her. "She didn't fuck me, by the way. She made love to me. It was the most awesome, mind-blowing, out-of-this-world sex I've ever had in my whole *fucking* life. Whew boy!" Morgan fanned herself while she stared down at Dawn. "And tell your new girlfriend to get rid of the cheap perfume. It stunk up my apartment."

Fire erupted within Dawn's brown eyes. Morgan feared for a second she'd fly back up the stairs and rip her apart limb from limb. She only glared, balling her fists by her side, and then turned and headed out the door.

Morgan raced back inside her apartment and slammed the door. She flew to the window overlooking the street and watched Dawn stomp back to her car, throw her body inside, and pull away from the curb.

She turned and looked at her surroundings. Her heart was beating wildly in her chest.

"Oh, my God!" Morgan clamped her hand around her mouth, contorted in a wide smile. "I guess I told her, huh?" she mumbled behind her hand, trying to stop the bouts of giggles.

She walked over and sank into the couch, suddenly realizing exactly what she'd said.

"She deserved that, you wussy. She deserved the sting of every word."

Morgan smiled to herself, trying to will her heart to stop pounding. She'd just hurt the person she loved more than her own breath. But she deserved it, and it felt good to finally say something so angry to her. It felt damn good to see that look spread across Dawn's face at her words.

More memories flooded Morgan's mind. These bitable images, the ones that ended life as Morgan knew it. She held her breath while anger rushed through her veins, bringing back the empty feeling she'd carried with her over a year ago while she walked out of Dawn's life.

Morgan's devastating phone call came around 2:30 in the afternoon. Sandra had sent everyone home early after nabbing a big deal with a new cosmetic line.

Morgan walked into her apartment, giddy with anticipation. Dawn had plans for a romantic dinner and joyous sex between the sheets.

"Your bitch is in a motel room right now fucking my girlfriend. If you want to see for yourself come to the Radisson on Heritage Drive." The phone went dead.

Morgan's heart did a thousand somersaults while she dialed Dawn's cell phone. It went straight to voice mail. *This is not happening. This is not happening to me, and whoever that person was was just trying to stir the old shit back up. It's a lie, and I'm not falling for it.*

But could she ignore it? Could she ignore what she felt deep inside was true? She reached for her purse and within minutes was heading in the direction of the motel.

She pulled into the parking lot to see a butch dyke leaned against a ratty two-door Honda. Her dark brown spiked hair was gelled back on both sides of her head. She glared at Morgan with hard blue eyes. A quick flip of her wrist ordered her closer.

Morgan crossed the five-foot section with her heart pounding in her chest.

"They're in the room on the end. Number 102, to be exact." The dyke curled her lip and nodded toward the building.

"How do you know it's *my* girlfriend in there?"

"Well, let's see." The woman reared back, reaching inside her car. "Maybe because I knew my bitch was up to no good, *again*, so I had her followed. It's been going on for almost a month now," she said through gritted teeth.

"You still haven't told me how you know it's *my damn* girlfriend in that room."

A picture, taken between slits of curtains came into view. Dawn's silky hair, twisted on her head, was buried between the legs of her lover. The soft hair was unmistakable, for it was the same hair Morgan's hands had yanked on many nights of lovemaking. Dawn's blonde lover was pulled to the edge of the bed. Her legs dangled over Dawn's shoulders. She was propped up by her hands while her head hung back, cascading her long locks of blonde curls down to the bed. Her lips were parted with the obvious pleasure Dawn was freely giving to her, a pleasure only Morgan was supposed to be given by those lips.

This picture was replaced by another. This one showed a sensual embrace of lips, tongues barely touching, while Dawn tangled her fingers into her lover's long hair. Her other hand was hidden inside the curves of the blonde's legs. Morgan's heart ceased to pump. A lump rose in her throat, threatening tears. Her brain worked in overdrive. Images of her lover, tearing their lives apart rested limply in her fingers. Physical pain shot through her heart while her stomach felt like something was eating it from the inside out. She felt nausea roll through her before the world started blackening around her. The pictures fell from her fingers to the ground.

"Why did you call me? You could have easily been here waiting for them alone."

"Having a faithful partner is important to me. It's obviously not to her. I'd hope someone would do the same for me."

They waited against the side of the building for what seemed like years when finally a door creaked open. The sound of kissing and giggling floated back for a few seconds before Morgan gathered her nerve and stepped around the corner.

Dawn's eyes were blank with lust, then recognition set in. Her face went pale, and no one moved a muscle while they stood staring.

Morgan's whispered words were barely audible. "I sure hope she was worth it. I hope she was worth every ounce of sweat you just put into fucking her brains out. Your face disgusts me, and I never wanna see you again."

Morgan spat right in Dawn's face. Her face was on fire, and her heart was torturously ripping apart. She turned to walk away and another thought came to her.

She turned around, lifting her ring finger into her other hand. She squeezed the ring that had encircled her finger for nine years, pulling hard, sending jolts of pain through her fingertips, until it popped free. She held it aloft. The glimmering gold band sparkled against the afternoon sun. Then she tossed it on the concrete at Dawn's feet.

"I won't be needing that anymore, now will I?" Morgan turned and walked away without ever looking back into Dawn's magnetic eyes.

She walked across that parking lot in a zombie-like state of mind, heart squealing with pain, knowing her life was never going to be the same.

She numbed herself to the pain ... and never shed a single tear. Until today.

Chapter Ten

Morgan walked into her office, reluctant to be there, and threw her purse under the desk. She'd spent the rest of her weekend crying, letting loose those pent up emotions, and trying to figure out what she wanted to do with the rest of her life.

Thoughts of Shane, thoughts of Dawn, mingled in her mind, leaving her desperate for answers. What she felt for Shane had to be her warped brain desperately hunting for love, needing hopelessly to get past Dawn. She couldn't get the image of Shane's caring green eyes staring back at her, out of her mind. Nor, could she shake the disgusted look Dawn gave her right before she'd plunged another raging orgasm from Morgan's body, knowing full well Morgan had spent the night in the arms of another woman.

She shook the depressing thoughts from her mind and made her way down the hall. There in the break room, she found John in the canteen pouring coffee into a mug. His red hair glowed florescent orange under the bright lights. He turned as she approached.

"Good morning, Morgan. How did your weekend go?"

"It was fine. How was yours?" She reached for a cup and poured herself coffee, while he filled his mug with enough sugar to send a diabetic into a coma.

"It was kind of boring. I just hung out with some friends." He pushed his glasses further onto his nose with the tip of a finger. "I have a favor to ask you."

"Sure, if I can. What's up?" she peered down the hall as a few co-workers made their way into the office.

"I have a friend who needs a date for the grand opening of Howard Gallery. It's not going to be anything formal. I know you don't date guys, um, well, you know what I mean, but I was thinking if you weren't busy, would you mind being his date this Friday?"

His hesitance to call her a lesbian made her smile. He grinned back, his face reddening. She envisioned his friend would be just as geeky. She hoped his friend had a similar wacky sense of humor too. John was a good guy.

"I'd love to, John. Wasn't the owner a football player or something?"

"Yes, he was. My friend actually works with him as his agent." John chuckled. His freckled hand inched back to his glasses. "Matt's my friend, by the way."

Morgan gave him a curious stare. Was this John's way of saying he was gay? No. Her mind was in the gutter. "Great. Have him swing by the office so I can meet him and make plans."

John snorted out a giggle, ducked his nodding head, and strode down the hall toward his office. He'd just gotten to the end of the hall when Rachel burst through the elevator doors. Shit! Morgan ducked back into the break room. But, it was too late. Rachel raced in, clapped her hands and squealed at the sight of her. Morgan almost choked on her coffee.

"Spill your guts, baby. Tell mama everything." Rachel shouted and paced in Morgan's direction.

"There's nothing to tell."

Rachel threw her head back and roared out a piercing laugh. When she was over her bouts of laughter, she looked back at Morgan, tears welling in her eyes, holding her stomach. "You lie so bad. Come on in here and tell me everything. Every juicy little detail, baby. And don't you dare leave out one tiny moan."

Rachel ducked into her office, leaving Morgan flushed in the hall, looking around to see who had heard the loud outburst.

Morgan headed into Rachel's office. Rachel surprised her by wrapping her arms around her neck, hugging her almost as tight as she had the day she'd pushed tiny little Jessica into the world.

Rachel released her death grip, turned smiling eyes to Morgan, and dove back for another hug. "What's got into you?" Rachel hardly ever hugged her. It felt weird like she'd just stepped into the twilight zone.

Rachel backed away, keeping Morgan at arms reach. "The first hug was just to say I was proud of you after Friday. The second one was to let you know that I love you no matter what decisions you make."

Morgan felt a lump rise in her throat and choked back tears. "Football season's over, so Steve shouldn't be leaving anytime soon. You usually get all clingy when he's leaving, so *you* spill it." Morgan slipped her coffee cup back to her lips, eyeing Rachel over the rim.

"Nothing's up. I just wanted you to know how much I love you is all. I don't have to have any special reason to hug my best friend." Rachel slid into her chair. "Your turn. I want every detail of Friday night." Her smile was bright as she stared up at Morgan.

Morgan shook a finger at her. "You're bad. I'm not giving you any details. I will, however, tell you that I had a good time."

Rachel squinted her eyes; then a grin broke across her face. "That means you got laid." She licked her index finger and stroked an imaginary number one in the air. "Mission accomplished."

Morgan only sipped more coffee from her mug, trying to hide her smile.

"I bout pissed my pants when you told Dawn to have a good life. That was perfect. I could win millions if I'd had a picture of her face." Rachel's smile slid away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"It's okay. She deserved it. But, I still care about her." Morgan felt her heart twist at the mention of Dawn's name.

"I know you do." Rachel's eyes glistened. "But it's time to get on with your life you know? So tell me about Shane."

Morgan shared enough details to pacify Rachel for the day then made her way back to her office. She walked to the window overlooking downtown Atlanta. Horns blew, people yelled, others walked to avoid the road rage. She leaned her head against the glass and turned her gaze to the morning sky. If only she could fly out of here, to the open sky, away from her broken heart, away from the dilemmas of her life. How great it would be to climb onto the ledge, leap, and fly away. How peaceful it would be to void the images of Dawn's betrayal that were damned to haunt her forever.

* * * * *

Shane awoke Monday morning with a clear mind. She'd spent the rest of her weekend going through photo albums, pulling out one picture after the other and throwing each one into a box.

She'd walked around the house, pulling frames from the wall and tossing them into the box as well. Friday night had given her new hope of life. She might be in love with someone who was in love with another, but those few hours of freedom made her realize spending the rest of her life locked away from the world wasn't what she wanted. She wanted to be alive. She wanted to be loved and give back love in return.

As pictures of Shelby were placed into the box, Shane felt her shoulders lift from the weight she'd carried for so long. She knelt in front of the box, seeing her smiling Shelby looking back at her. "I won't ever forget you. I'm so sorry." Tears threatened to overflow. She swallowed them back, not yet ready to release all the pain.

And now, as she made her way to the gallery, the world seemed so much brighter, so much cleaner and purer, alien. She removed her sunglasses and pushed through the doors of the gallery. Scott stood in the middle of the lobby, his fists perched on his hips.

"I hear you're a trouble maker, Ms. You. I hear you kicked some woman's ass and stole her partner. And on top of that, you didn't even call me to tell me any juicy details. My heart is wounded." He slid his hand over his heart in unconscious echo of his words. "I'm supposed to be your best friend, and you can't even call to tell me you got laid?" He gave Shane his playful pout.

Shane chuckled. "First of all, I did *not* kick anyone's ass. Second, I did *not* steal anyone's partner. And *third*, I didn't know I was supposed to call you every time I got laid."

"Every time! What do you mean *every* time? You *never* get laid. You don't go anywhere *to* get laid." Scott perched against the counter, eyes wide. "So, come on, tell me everything."

"I met someone, her ex-girlfriend showed up, we had a few words, and then we left. That's it. Nothing more. Nothing less. Sorry to bore you."

"Uh-uh. No you don't, sister." His finger swished back and forth at Shane. "What did you do when you left? Where'd you go? Those are the details I want." Scott's eyes widened as he suddenly realized what he was asking. "Oh, gross! Women! Yuck. Never mind. I don't want to hear anything else." He scooted away, mumbling under his breath and made his way down the hall toward the framing room.

Shane shook her head and smiled at his retreating back then turned to her office. The easel beckoned her. She walked to it, pulled the sheet over to expose the beauty that lay beneath, and felt her breath catch.

Was she ready to get on with her life? Was she ready to let her past bury itself? Was she truly ready to step toward the future? This beauty before her made her think twice about her shedding her feelings of pain.

* * * * *

Morgan was glancing through articles that would soon appear on *Strut's* pages when a rap on the door tore her attention from the computer screen. She turned to see a handsome man standing inside the open door. His limp hair hung in waves on his head, reminding her of an overgrown surfer dude.

"May I help you?"

"Are you Morgan?" His dark almond eyes sparkled with friendly interest. He stepped further into the room.

"Yes, I'm Morgan." She took in his build. His faded jeans hugged his hips, wrapped tight around the large bulge in his pants.

"I'm Matt. John asked me to come by to meet you so we could make plans for Friday night. I totally appreciate you being my date." His eyes raked over Morgan.

Morgan wondered how John could have befriended this man. They were total opposites of one another. He was more on the geeky side of fashion, while this man looked as

if he'd stepped right off the cover of a magazine. Why did this studly guy need his geeky friend to find him a blind date? There had to be some flaw here somewhere.

"No problem. I wanted to take a peak at Mr. Howard's paintings anyway. They're all related to football, right?"

He smiled back at her, displaying perfect white teeth. Morgan wondered if there was anything about him that wasn't perfect. "Yeah, total football buff, he is." He stepped further into the room, easing the door shut behind him

Morgan shook her head at the sight of his luscious ass in those tight pants while he strode across the room and sank into her visitors' chair. A quick image of Jay panting with lovestruck desire flashed through her mind. She smiled to herself. If she were interested in men, she'd definitely be interested in this one and give Jay a run for his money.

Shane flashed through her mind. Her sweet green eyes above a gentle smile, stared back at her.

Morgan missed her already.

* * * * *

Shane stared out the window of her office. She wondered what Morgan would be doing right now. Was she absorbed in work or thinking about her in return? Did Morgan want her, like she wanted Morgan? An image of Morgan, wrapped in Dawn's arms, pushed out the good thoughts, leaving only a bitter taste in her mouth.

She turned away from the window, wanting to shed thoughts of Morgan, yet her body ached to feel her again, smell her again, and see her one more time.

It was nearing noon. She could drive to Morgan's office and possibly catch her leaving for lunch. To watch those slender legs, to see those billowing locks of curls bounce around her head ... that should be enough to ease her lust. But, would that be enough now? Would it be enough to calm the churning waters inside her? After having Morgan, feeling her silken skin, making her body writhe with orgasm after orgasm, would any other woman be good enough now?

Shane shook her head, deciding it would only lengthen her torture to see her again, unable to touch her, and made her way to the lobby. Scott leaned back in his chair with his feet propped on the desk. The phone was perched on his shoulder while he picked at his nails, only raising an eyebrow to her as she approached.

"Eric, I have to let you go. My boss is giving me evil eyes. Yep. Okay. See you Friday. I'll drag Shane with me." He gave a soft chuckle. "You got that right. Bye." Scott dropped the phone into the cradle and turned back to look at Shane.

"That was a friend of mine. He's invited me to the grand opening of the Howard Gallery. I'm making you go with me."

“Why would I want to go to some overpaid retired football jock’s grand opening? You don’t even like football. Why are you going?” Shane propped an elbow on the counter. A couple of pedestrians passed the door. They slowed down, staring at the paintings in the windows, admiring her work.

“I don’t go for the paintings, dear heart. I go for the luscious asses, the rich boys in fine clothing, and dick.” He smiled a devious smile.

“You’re gross.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Not as gross as the shit you women do to each other. Now, *that* is gross.”

“Let’s go get something to eat. I’m starving.” Shane knew the perfect place.

“See! Talk about pussy and you automatically get hungry. That must have been some lay you got.” He pushed away from the desk. “But, I’m starving, and you’re paying, so let’s go.”

They drove to Maggie’s Diner and pulled to the curb. A vice grip tightened around the pit of Shane’s stomach. Would Morgan be there? Would she flee if she saw Shane? Would Shane melt at the sight of her?

She shoved the door open with a grunt, disgusted with herself for being such a loser, unable to shake this woman from her thoughts, and made her way inside the café. Morgan wasn’t anywhere. She sank into the booth across from Scott. As if God granted her a dying wish, Morgan and Rachel pushed through the front door. Her breath caught in her throat. She could feel her cheeks flush with the memories of the night they’d shared together, the mind-blowing orgasms they’d given to each other.

This was a mistake. Shane knew the very second that Morgan’s eyes locked on her that she’d erred in coming here. She wanted to slither under the table and melt through the hardwood floor. She needed to get away. She couldn’t stand to be so close to this beauty, after making love to her, and not be able to touch her.

Rachel squealed when she saw Shane, yanking her from her heated thoughts. She rushed over to the table, practically dragging Morgan behind her. Shane pulled her gaze from Morgan and turned to look at Rachel.

“Hi, Shane. How are you?” Rachel asked, showing every tooth in her mouth.

“I’m fine. And you?” Her gaze drifted to Morgan, unable to stop.

Morgan stared back at her, sadness in the depths of her eyes. That sadness gripped at Shane’s heart. She’d been able to swipe away that pain for awhile.

A smile crept across Morgan’s face, sending a jolt through Shane’s heart.

“Can we join you guys?” Rachel broke the tension. “Who’s your friend, Shane?” Rachel scooted into the booth next to Scott, who eased over to allow her room.

Shane was aware Morgan would be sitting next to her. She’d be close enough to feel her heat, to smell her scent. Morgan eased into the seat beside her. Her tan slacks molded around her frame like a glove. Her loose black vee-neck left little for the imagination. Shane

didn't need her imagination. She had her own vivid memories of those pert nipples being sucked between her lips. She had the sound of Morgan's moans embedded in her mind, something she'd heard over and over in her head from the second Morgan slipped from her truck, and out of her life.

"And you are?" Rachel turned toward Scott.

He grinned at her. "I'm Scott. I work with Shane. And you are?"

"I'm Rachel, and this is Morgan. We work for *Strut*." Rachel beamed at Scott, staring between Shane and Morgan.

"Oh. Awesome magazine." He gushed and fluttered his eyelashes at her in obvious parody. "When you guys come to take pics, make sure you call first so I can wear my diamonds and furs."

Everyone laughed. The rest of lunch was spent in total silence.

* * * * *

"What the hell was that all about?" Scott asked as soon as they walked through the gallery doors.

"What was what all about?" Shane eyed him, hoping to ward off his nosy questions.

"Duuuuuhhhhhhhh! You know exactly what I'm talking about. You were sweating bullets in there. Was that her? Morgan? The one who nailed your ass good Friday night? Nice catch by the way."

"You're nosy. Go frame something. Sell something." She strolled toward her office, stopped in mid-step and turned back to him. "Go to Harry's and frame his picture. That should keep you busy for a while."

"I've already framed Harry's and the new ones are drying. Sorry boss, I've done my job very well today." His schoolboy smile lifted his lips. "Can I go home?"

"Go." She threw her hand toward the front door.

He squealed, clapped his hands like a cheerleader, and ran from the gallery, not taking a chance on Shane changing her mind.

The front door eased open again, bringing with it the blaring horns from the street corner, and Morgan.

Chapter Eleven

Morgan moved aside when Scott ran from the gallery doors. He skidded to a stop at her side, eyes rounding with recognition.

"You're Morgan, from the café, right?"

"Yes. Scott, right?"

"Yep. Just a word of advice." He squared his shoulders and took on a serious expression. "That's my very good friend in there. She's fragile, even though she's built like a brick shithouse. I love her and if you hurt her, well, I'll have to do something drastic like, um, cut your hair off in your sleep." He gave her a curt nod and then continued down the sidewalk.

Morgan furrowed her brow, wondering exactly what Shane had said to him. She must be totally out of her mind to have taken Rachel's advice.

Just drive over there and listen to what Shane has to say. Morgan replayed Rachel's parting words before she left the café.

She took a deep breath, praying Rachel was right, and pushed open the door. Shane stopped in mid-motion. The blast of horns followed Morgan inside. She pulled her sunglasses off and faced Shane, feeling a knot grip her stomach.

"Hi, Shane," Morgan said, tensing at being near her again, alone in the same room with her. "I wanted to talk to you, if you have time." Morgan took in Shane's tall frame with long legs wrapped inside dark carpenter jeans. Morgan remembered their strength, pushing against her crotch while she screamed with an orgasm. Heat burrowed between her legs instantly. Memories, vivid as a Polaroid, page after page, flipped through her mind.

"Sure." Shane eyed her warily.

"Is there somewhere else more private?" Morgan glanced around the studio, wishing she'd called instead.

“Here’s fine. What’s up?”

Morgan tensed at the sharpness of Shane’s tone. Should she tell her that she felt something for her and that something had given her the courage to send Dawn fleeing from her apartment? Should she tell her that she thought about her all weekend or get right down to business and tell Shane that she thought she was falling in love with her, no matter how pathetic that would sound? Hell no! With that icy look before her, how stupid would those words be?

“Friday night.”

“What about it?”

Morgan’s true words were lost with Shane’s cold stare. “What I did, what we did, was a mistake.”

Shane’s jaw tightened. Regret for her blunt choice of words, crept through Morgan. “I’m sorry. That was harsh.”

“It’s already forgotten.” Shane’s chiseled jaw clamped down harder. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

Morgan felt anger seep through her. How dare Shane mock her? How dare she stand here and act like what they shared was only a nightly fuck with no feelings attached?

“Was there something else you wanted to discuss?” Shane cut through her thoughts and searing anger.

“No, I guess that was all.” Morgan turned toward the door, not knowing what else to say to the icy Shane, hating she’d allowed herself to feel anything.

“Morgan?” Her name, spoken with such desire, such need, stopped her heart, as well as her steps. She turned around to find Shane within a foot of her. “Let’s talk.”

Shane’s lips parted as if to say something else. Morgan waited, feeling heat pierce her crotch at the closeness. Shane leaned into her, bringing her hand through the crook of Morgan’s arm. Morgan held her breath, closed her eyes, lips automatically parting, anticipating velvet lips.

A click sounded behind her. She opened her eyes. Shane was within inches of her face. Morgan felt Shane’s hot breath against her cheek. Shane smiled a sheepish grin. “We can go in the back. I didn’t want to leave the doors unlocked without someone in the lobby.” Shane backed away, leaving Morgan weak in the knees, crotch scorching. “Follow me.”

Morgan composed herself and followed Shane down the hall, watching her ass roll in her jeans, remembering too well how tight that ass was in her grasp while she held on for dear life with an orgasm racking through her body.

Morgan tightened her hands into fists, trying with all her might to shed the memories while she diverted her attention from Shane’s broad back and shoulders to the paintings lining the walls. She slowed to look at each one. Smiling faces, sad people, were but a few beautiful pieces. Shane had managed to capture the sorrow, the happiness, and the emptiness

of each face. Morgan cursed under her breath, hating she'd missed other paintings while she ogled Shane's ass.

Shane slowed in front of her, eyeing her. "Sorry, I was admiring your work. They're beautiful."

Shane watched her curiously. "Thanks."

Morgan followed her into a large cozy room. A couch lined one wall. A round dining table sat in the middle of the floor with directors' chairs. Remnants of doughnut boxes lay on top. Butterfly chairs sat against another wall in bright neon colors, matching the paint splatter on the walls.

"These walls are gorgeous. I love the way you splattered paint everywhere. Weird, but cool." Morgan walked along the bare wall, looking back at Shane.

Shane grinned, looking around the room. "That was Scott and a friend. They sat in here for hours before they came up with the idea. They literally covered the whole floor in plastic, opened cans of paint, ordered me out, and started a paint war." Shane smiled and looked back at Morgan.

Morgan broke the trance and walked toward another painting. An old man, cradling a bouquet of flowers while leaning over a grave, caught Morgan's attention. The tombstone bore the name of Ella Mae, no doubt the man's wife. Morgan felt sadness sweep over her at the loneliness caught in the depths of the man's blue eyes. His never ending love flooded the colors of his face.

Morgan felt a prickle of heat before Shane's body brushed against her. A Pepsi slid into her vision with fingers she remembered too well, wrapped snug around the can. Shane's firm arm rested against hers. "Want something to drink?" Shane's breath brushed against her cheek.

Shane's palm rested on her back, making skin come to life under its heat. Morgan jerked her eyes open and turned to stare at Shane. Green eyes looked at her curiously. A smile lifted the corners of Shane's mouth, revealing those perfect pearl teeth. She eased the drink toward Morgan's hand. Cold touched her fingers and she turned her attention to the can, wanting desperately to slap it from Shane's grasp and run like hell.

She opened her fisted hand and took the can. Shane stepped back from her. "So what did you really come here for?" She kept the distance close, not giving Morgan enough room to break the spell around her.

Morgan opened her mouth to speak, forgetting the words that were in her brain only seconds before, and stared.

Shane watched her curiously while she fought to find her words. Morgan knew a single touch would send her mind spiraling out of control. She wrestled with herself to yank Shane's body against hers, lick a wet path down her throat. She needed to feel her heat again,

wanted to feel those thick fingers plunge deep inside her. Her cheeks heated with the need coursing through her body.

“Come, sit down.” Shane sank onto the couch and patted the empty space beside her. She felt the uncontrollable urge to grab handfuls of Shane’s dark wavy hair and slam her against a wall, a chair, a table, anything in the room strong enough to hold their weight.

She turned, and sat on the couch, feeling heat sizzle through her crotch, keeping distance between them. She didn’t trust herself so close.

“I just wanted to say how sorry I was. I should have never done ... we should have never ... hell, I don’t know what I mean anymore.” Her thoughts were jumbled, rendering her speechless, unable to make sense to her words.

“Morgan, stop worrying about it. As long as you’re happy and as long as things are settled between you and Dawn, as I’m sure they are, then that’s all that matters.”

Morgan wanted to scream at Shane, to tell her that she’d sent Dawn running from her apartment while she screamed at her how good sex with Shane had been, how making love to Shane had given her the courage to say such mean things to Dawn, how she wanted to do it again and again and again. She remembered Shane’s cold stare and lifeless words, and thought better of it. She sure wasn’t going to come across as begging or pleading, or desperate as hell.

Shane’s lips parted, fighting with her own words. Morgan imagined what those words would be; fool, stupid ass, are you out of your mind, was but a few of the things she could hear Shane saying to her.

She steadied her beating heart, trying to control the impulse to climb all over Shane, finding it harder and harder to do so. Shane stared back at her ... her face, so gorgeous, with those cute dimples ready to break free with a smile. The impulse to rip Shane’s clothes off her body and plunge her fingers between her legs was becoming unbearable.

Shane shifted, turning to face her. Morgan held her breath. “Does Dawn make your eyes flutter shut with just the touch of skin?” Morgan let out her breath, watched Shane’s lips move seductively with each word. “Does she make you wet from just being near her? Does she make you feel like this?” Morgan felt her stomach lurch while Shane slid across the plush couch. She seized Morgan’s lips. A soft cry escaped Morgan’s throat before Shane’s tongue slipped between her lips.

Morgan’s moans mingled with Shane’s, echoing through the bright colored room. Her fingers sifted through the waves of Shane’s hair while her tongue found rhythm inside Shane’s mouth. Morgan panted through parted lips while Shane broke the embrace, sliding her mouth down Morgan’s neck. Morgan’s head fell back to the cushions. Shane’s lips sucked at the raging pulse in her neck then licked a path down her chest, dipping its tip between her cleavage.

"Shane ... please stop" Shane ignored her breathless weak plea, pulled loose material aside, pulling a sheer bra over a hardened nipple, ducked her head, and grasped its erect tip into her mouth.

Shane gave her nipple a quick suck then released it. Her seductive eyes drifted to Morgan's. "If I believed you really wanted me to, Morgan, I would. You don't want me to stop." Shane pulled Morgan's bra over her enwrapped breast. Another hardened nipple appeared before her, this one was sucked just as eagerly into Shane's mouth. Morgan bucked her hips against Shane, heat searing her crotch.

Shane grabbed Morgan's hips, pulled her flat on the couch, still sucking her nipple gently between hot lips. Morgan's hips ground into Shane with need.

Shane let loose her suctioned hold on Morgan's nipple, slid her body up the length of her, and caught Morgan's lips in another sensual kiss. Her fingers slid to Morgan's face and into the strands of her hair.

Morgan broke the kiss and slipped her lips down Shane's neck, finding a throbbing pulse under her tongue. She couldn't control herself anymore. The more she wanted Shane to stop, the more she wanted her to continue it. The more she told herself this was a mistake, the less her body listened. Her insides came alive under Shane's caress. Her nerves jumped with each heated trail of Shane's wet tongue across her nipples. Her insides pulsed with anticipation of Shane's fingers diving inside her.

Get some damn control, Morgan. This is wrong. Stop, before it's too late.

She demanded her body to listen, to stop the heavenly madness before it went too far. She yanked her head from Shane's neck and attempted to slither out from under her. Shane's eyes fluttered open, peering down at her. "What's wrong?"

"We shouldn't be doing this."

Shane shocked her by smiling. Her hand slid down Morgan's stomach and inched between her legs.

Morgan gasped as Shane's palm gripped her crotch. Morgan felt heat sizzle between her legs, felt the sting of her clit as it pulsed under the pressure of Shane's hand.

"Oh, dear God." Shane's head dropped to Morgan's chest; a long breath escaped her lips. "How can I believe a word you're saying when you're soaked? I feel how much you want me." Shane's fingers dug harder, more forcefully, sending a groan from Morgan's throat.

Morgan's insides coiled with need, ready to spring free. She bucked her hips into Shane's hand, wanting more, while Shane rubbed heat between her legs. Her mind was out of control, leaving her body yearning for pleasure.

An animal roared to life inside Morgan. She leaned forward, found Shane's neck, nipped hard with bared teeth, and then sucked skin between her lips. Shane groaned above her, adding fuel to the beast. She reached her fingers between their bodies, fisted Shane's

shirt into her hand and yanked it up. Shane leaned forward and allowed her to pull it over her head, looking down into Morgan's eyes.

That look, crystal clear with its meaning, drove Morgan over another brink of passion. She needed Shane. She wanted to be carried over that peak, now, just as furious as all the others that Shane had given so freely to her. She yearned to feel those fingers plunge deep inside her.

Shane allowed Morgan to slip from under her.

Morgan stood, facing Shane, looking down into eyes that wanted and needed her. She pulled her loose fitting blouse over her head and let it drift to the floor. Shane pulled to the edge of the couch, pushing her lips against Morgan's stomach, kissing a wet trail along her skin, unsnapping slacks, tugging them gently over hips.

Morgan watched Shane's thin lips suck at her skin. She unsnapped the clasp nestled between her breasts and let her bra fall to the floor.

Morgan's slacks drifted down around her ankles while Shane's fingers dipped between her legs, caressing her heated crotch.

Shane slipped her fingers inside Morgan's thong, eased it over her hips, and let it fall around the slacks crumpled at the floor. Morgan stepped out of her shoes and the fallen clothing and stood naked before Shane's passionate gaze. She felt so beautiful wrapped in the depths of those emerald eyes.

Shane stood. Her delicate fingers trailed soft lines down Morgan's arms, down a rib cage, stopping short of black wiry hair. "I don't think I could paint something so breathtaking."

Morgan's heart wrenched inside her chest at Shane's words. Shane's lips descended, soft sensual lips closed around hers with more care than she'd ever known, even under the attention of Dawn, especially under the attention of Dawn. She kissed Shane back with just as much passion.

Shane dipped and hooked her arms under Morgan's knees. She lifted Morgan into her arms like a fragile sculpture and laid her gently on the couch, still locked in a loving kiss. She eased her body over Morgan's, broke the kiss, and slid down the length of her, stopping when her face dipped between Morgan's thighs.

Morgan gasped and threw her head back when Shane's tongue slid across her clit, swollen and ready. Shane's fingers slid easily inside her wetness. Morgan panted soft moans above her, grinding her hips into Shane's face, feeling her orgasm inching fast to its peak.

Shane's fingers, sinking stroke after stroke inside her, plunged her orgasm to its edge. Her tongue flickered across Morgan's clit, faster with every hump of her hips, catching the rhythm.

Morgan's body froze. Her orgasm rocketed over the edge. Convulsions racked her body, pump after hard pump, squeezing Shane's fingers still driving inside her. Her moans vibrated inside her chest.

Soft spasms of her orgasm gently tightened around Shane's fingers. A breathless pant was all Morgan had left.

Shane inched her way along Morgan's side, coming to lie beside her.

Morgan let Shane pull her into her strong arms. She pressed her face into Shane's neck, breathing in her scent. She opened her eyes and looked around at Shane's world. The paintings watched over them with caring colors. Morgan's heart twisted in her chest while fingers stroked along her back in lazy circles.

How the hell did this happen to me? How in hell could I have fallen in love so fast? This is impossible.

A frown creased her brow as the words rolled around in her head. She stared above her at the ceiling fan and let Dawn drift into her mind. Her uncaring betrayal had left a hole inside Morgan. Was Shane the filling to that hole?

Shane shifted and looked down at her. Morgan glanced away. *Can she see what I'm thinking? Did she feel that flutter when Dawn eased into my mind?*

Shane eased off the couch, picked up clothing from the floor, turned back to her and dropped them on her stomach. Shane's face took on its icy stare again. Morgan felt her breath catch, waiting for Shane to speak.

"I have a ton of work to do, and I need to get a move on. Our meeting is adjourned, Morgan."

Morgan's stomach lurched. An acidic taste stung the back of her throat while Shane stared at her.

"Okay." Anger slowly stole over Morgan. She grabbed the clothes and stood. Morgan donned one article of clothing at a time, never tearing her gaze from Shane's. Heat spread across her cheeks while she stared at the icy look washing over Shane's face. "Did I miss something?"

"No, you didn't miss anything."

"Then, what the hell is wrong with you?"

Shane turned and headed to the table, pulling empty doughnut boxes into her grasp, and tossing them into the trash can by the door. Morgan watched her tight back, rage building with each step she took away from her. "Nothing is wrong with me. I'm a busy person, Morgan."

Morgan's tears threatened, forming a lump in her throat. She swallowed it down, demanding herself not to cry.

“Have you lost your fucking mind? Is this some type of warped game you’re playing?” Morgan’s anger rose faster. She clinched her fists by her side, ready to rip Shane’s hair from her head, sink her fingers into her eyes.

Shane only stared at her, her loving face had gone blank, uncaring. Morgan donned her shirt and tore past Shane, tears finally letting loose. She ran down the hall and out into the bright sunshine, racing to the shelter of her car.

Chapter Twelve

Shane gripped the doorframe, her knuckles turning white with the pressure. It took all her willpower not to chase Morgan down the hall and tell her what a lie her words were, how she was protecting her heart, how fucking in love with her she was.

Yet, she couldn't. When she'd looked back at Morgan and saw that confused helpless look wash over her face, she knew Dawn was the reason for the frown. Morgan was fighting with herself again, knowing what they were doing was a mistake; no matter how much enjoyment she'd gotten from screaming in pleasure.

That look on her face seconds after Shane pulled an orgasm from her body proved she thought of Dawn. It made Shane sick to think she couldn't tear Dawn from her mind. Dawn was all she thought of.

How was she going to remove Morgan's luxurious body out of her mind? How was she ever going to get past this inevitable heartbreak?

Shane bit back her tears and pushed her head against the doorframe. She had to harden her heart and find a way to let loose her love. Otherwise, her heart would break.

Shane etched Morgan's worried look into her mind, hating she hadn't kept that look off Morgan's face longer than a few seconds after her orgasm. She wasn't going to win her heart. It was time to face the truth.

Tears threatened Shane again. "I'm gonna miss you, Morgan."

* * * * *

Morgan rushed past Rachel who was standing at the edge of a cubicle talking with another co-worker. She raced into her own office and slammed the door. She rushed to the window, tears blinding her vision.

There was a single knock on her door then Rachel pushed her way inside. Morgan felt her heart twist in her chest. *What the hell was that all about? What the fuck is happening to me? Why can't I find a decent person instead of all these loser women?*

"What the hell happened?" Rachel pushed her door shut and ran across the floor to embrace her.

Morgan pushed away, anger rising like a balloon inside her. "Stay away from me, Rachel. I'm tired of taking your advice to only find myself deeper in shit. I should have taken Dawn back long before now. But no, I listened to my best friend, who would never do anything to hurt me, yet you only led me to the hurt. I was stupid to listen to you."

At the harshness of Morgan's words, Rachel sucked in her breath. "I have never done anything to hurt you. How could you say that to me?" Rachel stepped forward to console Morgan. "Please, tell me what happened."

Morgan stepped back, pushing at Rachel's hands, not wanting Rachel anywhere near her. "Shane is just as sick as you are. Stay out of my business, Rachel." Morgan stepped back to her desk, grabbed the phone and began dialing. She left Sandra a message that she was sick and leaving for the day.

She turned back to Rachel who looked at her with concern. Morgan bit back the impulse to slap her. "Stay the fuck away from me. All of you."

Rachel's eyes brimmed with tears. Morgan took one last look at her confused face then darted from the room.

She pushed her way through the elevator doors then ran across the parking lot, found her car and darted out into traffic, her tears blinding her. The traffic was backed up at the red light. She glanced around her, wishing she were somewhere far away from this misery.

Her cell phone rang beside her. She reached down and flipped it open.

"Hello?"

"I love you." Dawn's seductive voice oozed over her like melted butter.

Morgan felt her anger spike. "What do you want, Dawn?"

"I want you. Only you."

Morgan tensed, her stomach knotted. "Aren't you getting tired of this, Dawn? I mean, don't you have some girlfriend you need to be fucking? Can you please just stop calling me?"

"There isn't a woman on this earth that could take your place. My body aches for only you. My heart beats for only you. My hands want to feel only you."

Morgan felt steel strap around her heart. "Dawn, give it a fucking rest why don't you?" She was sick of this game, of being miserable. "Go find someone to fuck. It's what you're good at, right?"

"I'm better at making love to you." Dawn was running out of steam. Morgan heard it in her voice. Her heart wasn't beating wildly anymore. It was calm and relaxed. "Why don't you let me take you out tonight?"

* * * * *

Shane snatched up the shrilling phone.

"What the hell did you do to her?" Rachel screamed.

Tears streamed down Shane's face. She shook her head, unable to speak, waiting for the wave to pass. "I can't do it, Rachel."

"Do what?" Shane heard a huff escape Rachel. "Never mind, I'm coming over."

Shane waited, crying harder, hating herself for what she'd said to Morgan, wanting to throw her fate to the wind and tell her everything, starting with Shelby's death, ending with how in love with her she'd been since the day she saw her sad face pressed against a glass pane.

Too soon, Rachel barged through the gallery doors and emerged in her office, ready to rip Shane apart one limb at a time. It would be less painful after hurting Morgan the way she had.

"What did you do to her?" Rachel smacked her hands down on Shane's desk, leaning over to peer down at her, rage smoldered in her eyes.

Shane looked into the cold eyes of Morgan's best friend and felt her heart rip from her chest. How could she do that to Morgan? Why didn't she just tell her how she really felt, leaving her heart's fate in the hands of Morgan.

"I'm sorry, Rachel." Shane felt tears threaten again and swallowed them back.

"Sorry for what? What did you do to her dammit?" Rachel's face, anger-filled, leaned closer to her.

"She came here to tell me that she was sorry for what happened Friday night ... said it was a mistake. I didn't believe her. Things got extremely heated ... we made love ... but, I couldn't take the thought of her going back to that scum, so I said some pretty harsh things to her."

"Like what?" Rachel leaned back and crossed her arms across her chest, glaring down at Shane.

Shane rose from her chair and crossed around to the front of the desk, leaning against it. "I told her our meeting was adjourned."

Rachel's mouth flew open, her eyes rounding with anger. "After you fucked her?" Her hands flew to her hips. "How could you?"

"I don't *fuck* anyone, Rachel." Shane narrowed her eyes at her, searing anger at herself, at Rachel's words. "And you just had to be here. That look on her face, after it was over, was sick. Dawn was plastered in her mind."

Rachel slumped into a chair. "I don't know what the hell you thought you saw in her, but you're wrong. She told Dawn everything, found pleasure in it, said you gave her more courage than she knew she possessed. She sent Dawn fleeing from her apartment in a fit of rage."

Shane stared down at Rachel. Morgan's face filled her mind. She saw her enter the gallery, desire on her face, felt the icicles that sliced through her own heart, ready to defend it. She saw Morgan's face contort in embarrassment at her cold words, felt her heart lurch with the sadness that washed over Morgan's face. *Why hadn't she just told me? Was that what she'd come here to tell me? Did my lifeless words make her chicken out?*

"I don't know what she told you, but whatever it was, it wasn't what she was supposed to say." Rachel rose from her chair to face Shane, anger still sizzled in her eyes. "She was supposed to tell you that she felt something, that she liked you and that she was getting over Dawn, thanks to *you*."

"Oh, shit!"

"Yeah, oh, shit."

"I was so cold to her."

"But why? You haven't seen her since Friday night. What did you think she was coming here to say?"

"I don't know, Rachel. She was quiet at lunch. What else would she come here to say other than it was a mistake?" Shane heard the fault being pointed at her, angered by it. "I have my own heart to protect here, Rachel. I don't have to defend my actions to you, or to anyone else for that matter. Morgan's a grown adult. If she wanted to tell me something, she could have come out and said it, instead of dancing around the subject." Shane stood her ground, glaring at Rachel.

"Then maybe Morgan was right." Rachel turned toward the door, took a few steps, stopped and turned around, daggers erupting from her eyes. "She was an easy lay for you, all heart-broken and shit. I guess I was stupid for believing all that horseshit you told me about being in love with her, love at first sight you said. Poor Morgan. No wonder she chickened out. She saw right through you, and then couldn't control herself. Now, she hates me, blames me for sending her over here to tell you the truth. She's right you fucking pervert."

Rachel flew from the room and out of the gallery doors before Shane could stop her. Fire erupted in the pit of her stomach at Rachel's words. They couldn't be further from the truth. How dare Rachel turn the tables on her.

But, isn't that exactly what this looked like? Like she'd played such easy prey, fucked her when she knew she was at her lowest, instead of wanting to be the one that painted a permanent smile back on her face?

Shane felt disgusted for not giving Morgan a chance to tell her what was really on her mind, for herself turning cold when Morgan was ready to spill her guts about the love she might feel for her.

Shane's mouth flew open, Rachel's words finally sinking in. "She loves me."

She flew back around the desk, grabbed up the phone, hastily punching numbers. "Please answer the phone, Morgan."

* * * * *

Morgan stepped out of the shower to a shrilling phone. She ignored it. She wasn't ready to talk to Rachel, or anyone else for that matter. She was tired of listening to everyone's advice and sick of feeling helpless and weak. It was time to harden her heart. It was time to bring her bitch to life and put the meek little thing to bed.

Morgan kept herself busy for the rest of the day, cleaning each room, pulling sheets from the bed, anything to keep her thoughts from trailing to Shane. She'd washed away all traces from her body, letting Shane escape in the water's tornado down the drain. She meant to keep her there, washed out to sea, forever out of her mind.

Yet, every time she closed her eyes she saw green eyes looking back at her. She could still feel Shane's hands on her, lovingly caressing every inch of her, memorizing her. She saw the icy look on Shane's face, hating it, wishing she'd slapped it instead of rushing out like a blubbering idiot. How pathetic could she be? No more. No more pathetic Morgan and no more tears.

Someone tapped on the door.

Morgan crept to it, saw Dawn through the peephole, and flung the door open.

Dawn looked sharp as ever in her Dockers and peach Oxford shirt, buttoned low to show a tight chest over a white sports bra. She inched toward Morgan as the door creaked open and gave her a quick peck on the lips. "You look edible." Dawn said then slithered fingers down Morgan's ribcage.

"What are you doing here?" Morgan attempted to escape her grasp. "I told you no."

"Come on. It's just dinner."

Morgan pushed her hands away and eased out of her grasp. "Fine. But, just dinner." She grabbed her keys from the stand, eased out the door, and waited for Dawn to exit before she closed the door.

They made their way down the stairs and out into the late evening sunshine. The heat did nothing to lift Morgan's spirits or to wipe away the hurt from Shane's words or to help ease her dread of going out with Dawn again.

She knew she was making a mistake, yet caring wasn't part of her now. She'd hardened herself and closed all open doors to her heart. Not even Dawn could get through this barrier now. She'd be damned if she'd go through another rip in her heart.

Their dinner was spent in unpleasant quietness. Morgan couldn't think of a single conversation to share with Dawn who continued to slide closer to her in the booth, trapping her against the wooden back. Her eyes never veered from a shapely ass that would pass their table. It made Morgan sick to watch her. She loved not caring. It gave her more freedom to be emotionless to Dawn's ravishing stares on other women.

"Can I go home with you?" Dawn whispered to her, staring at a woman's ass stepping past the table.

"No."

Morgan felt nothing. She hated this feeling of numbness taking over, yet she didn't falter. She was determined to keep up with the cold person she could feel herself becoming. She was going against all the advice of her loving friends by just sitting in a restaurant with Dawn. What would they think of her right now? Jay would whistle steam from his ears. Phil would shake his head in disgust and Rachel, oh, Rachel, would give her the somber "I can't believe you're doing this to yourself" look.

Screw them!

They left the restaurant. Several times on the ride home, Morgan had to shove Dawn's hands away.

Dawn's car rounded the corner in front of Morgan's apartment building. Rachel was standing on the curb with Jay. Their gazes turned toward the car, a disgusted look plastered on their faces while they watched Morgan exit the car.

"See you." Dawn yelled from her open window, more for show to Rachel and Jay, than to Morgan.

Morgan nodded and dared a look back at the sidewalk. Rachel's look, a look that Morgan knew would be there, was etched perfectly on her face.

Jay's jaw tightened. "What the hell are you doing, Morgan? What is it about that scum you find so damn appealing?"

Morgan stared at him, hating that she was hurting him. "Ask Rachel. She's good at retelling stories and butting into people's business."

Morgan shoved past them and raced up the stairs to her apartment.

* * * * *

Shane redialed Morgan's number again, still getting the voice mail. After her conversation with Rachel, she knew she was the reason for Morgan's bitter words. If she had only listened to what Morgan had to say, she could have been able to see through it, instead

of assuming. If she'd only let Morgan walk out that door instead of making love to her, things might have been different. Now she'd hurt Morgan further.

She pushed the edge of her palm against her head, gritting her teeth. "Stupid ass" She screamed at herself then pushed away from her desk, carrying the cordless with her.

Darkness filled the air outside the gallery. Neon lights from the city buildings brightened the streets. Shane stood at the door, watching cars travel with ease down the streets. She knew she should just go home, attempt to find Morgan tomorrow, when things were calmer, yet being here, among her dreams, kept her from driving herself crazy.

The phone rang in her hand.

"Hello?" She yelled into the phone.

There was a pause before Rachel's shaky voice started. "I thought I should let you know that Morgan was out with Dawn tonight. I'm so sorry, Shane."

Shane felt her heart plummet out of her chest. With Rachel's cold words, it was over; the end before the beginning. She heard Rachel snifle into the phone, felt her own tears threaten.

"I'm sorry that I said those mean things to you."

Shane pulled the phone from her ear. There was nothing left to say and nothing left to hear. She pushed the button and let the phone slip from her grasp, landing with a thud on the carpet.

The words she knew she would hear hurt more than she realized they would. How did she get herself into this? How could she have allowed herself to fall in love so damn fast? She remembered seeing the sad Morgan leaning her precious face against that window, looking helplessly through glass, her eyes begging for something, anything, to take away her heartache. Shane had wanted nothing more than to draw Morgan a perfect life. Now she would never get a chance. What she feared the most was before her now. It was time to deal with it.

Shane pushed away from the door, her heart completely numb. She knew what she had to do, and it was time to get busy.

She walked down the hall toward the closet and pulled a tall box from inside. She made her way back to her office. The easel faced the window, always away from anyone who might see it from her open door. No other eyes had seen the beauty beneath the sheet. She pulled the sheet over the frame and felt her breath catch. "I miss you already. Goodbye, Morgan" Shane said to her framed beauty. She dropped the sheet on the floor, tightened her jaw, and carried the frame to lobby. She placed it gently in the box.

She hoped she could close her heart as easily as closing the box had been. She knew this was going to be more torture than she could imagine.

She carried the box back to the closet and closed the door. She walked back to the counter and picked up the phone. She took a good long look around her. This would be the

last time she looked at it through hazed eyes. The next time she entered this room, her life would be changed.

She dialed the number, heard the familiar voice answer on the other end and choked back a sob.

Chapter Thirteen

Shane stepped through the sliding doors of the airport. People rushed past her, pulling their rolling luggage bags. She searched the signs for the terminal that would carry her out of this town.

She found the sign and with reluctance, headed in its direction.

Not long after, she walked down the long hallway that led her to the plane. A flight attendant escorted her to a seat. Shane placed her carry-on bag into the compartment above her seat and sat down to wait. Faces floated past her, finding their own seats. She stared out the window and watched men in uniforms hustle about the plane, making last minute inspections. Soon the plane was in the air carrying her away. She watched the cars shrink to matchbox size and turned her attention to the people around her, strangers, heading in the same direction.

Her thoughts drifted to Morgan. Shane hoped she'd find peace in the decision she'd made to take Dawn back. Shane prayed Dawn would change and make Morgan happy -- something she doubted, but stranger things had happened. She knew Dawn's type. Always taking, never giving in return, and only thinking of themselves.

Shane closed her eyes and let the vision of Morgan's face sink into her mind. How had she let herself fall in love with her? She knew from the second she laid eyes on her that she was filled with sorrow. Hadn't Shane done all she could to steer clear of women like Morgan? Why was this one different from the rest? How in the hell had she let Morgan into her heart so fast? Why couldn't she cease all thoughts of her?

Through her memory, she felt Morgan's thin fingers gliding along her face, through her hair, between her legs. Shane forced her eyes open and found a tiny pair of blue ones looking back at her. She smiled at the little girl staring at her around the edge of the seat in front of her.

“Are you sad?” the little girl asked in a sweet voice.

“A little bit. But not for long.”

The little girl’s face brightened with a smile, showing tiny little teeth. Her blonde curls fell around her face while she inched further around the chair. “Want to color in my book with me?”

“Sure” Shane watched her turn to someone beside her then jump down from her seat.

She sat at Shane’s feet, and spread crayons across her book then looked up at Shane. “What’s your favorite color?”

Blonde, Shane thought, but said, “Blue.” The color of her mood.

“Pink is mine. You can use them both if you want.” The little girl stood and handed the book and crayons to Shane. She fingered through the book until she found one she liked then turned the book around. “This is one you can color. See, that woman is alone, just like you.” The little girl smiled again, sending a chill down Shane’s spine.

Yep, all alone she was. “Thank you. Aren’t you going to help me?” Shane asked.

“Sure.” Her face brightened with Shane’s invitation. “Why are you sad?” The girl asked while she stared down at the book, concentrating hard on staying in the lines and tucked a lock of curl behind her ear.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m not now that you’re here letting me color in your book.” Shane hoped to dodge curious questions she knew children could ask. “How old are you?”

“I’m seven and a half. My mom says I can’t talk to strangers but she let me talk to you because you are not a stranger on the plane.” She pulled another crayon from Shane’s lap and started another part of the picture.

“Your mom loves you and doesn’t want a stranger to take you away from her. Some people are bad. You have to be careful and do what your mommy tells you.”

Shane felt sadness wash over her. She’d always wanted to share children with someone who would be there for the rest of their lives. Shelby hadn’t been that person. She knew within a few years of their relationship that Shelby was not mother material, yet she loved her anyway and vowed to spend the rest of their lives together.

She pushed all thoughts from her mind and concentrated on helping the little girl. The rest of the plane ride was spent coloring pictures and listening to her stories about school and classmates.

When the plane landed, the little girl and her mother walked behind Shane down the unloading ramp. She shocked Shane by giving a tight hug after her mother removed their bags from the circular belt. “I hope you get happy real soon.”

Shane leaned down and ruffled her hair. “I will. I promise.” She gave her a wink.

Shane removed her bags from the belt and turned toward the hustle of the airport lobby. She searched for a familiar face.

"Shane. Shane!" Her sister screamed from the lobby. She jumped up from the chain of chairs and ran toward Shane.

Shane dropped her bags by her side and waited for the collision. Teresa jumped into her arms, still too skinny, hair much longer than the last time she'd seen her.

"When are you going to get some meat on these bones, girl?" Shane asked, pushing Teresa away to get a good look at her, realizing how much she had missed her pain-in-the-ass sister.

Shane would never forget the day her mother had come home from the doctor to announce she was having a baby. Her father had only stared at her from his recliner. Shane had feared he would faint. She'd dreaded more than anything the day they brought home the tiny, shitting, "dear God, someone make it shut up" baby. Teresa had cried for the first six months of her life, leaving the whole household miserable from lack of sleep. With eleven years separating them, Shane never dreamed this incredible bond would develop.

"Models don't have fat on their bodies, Shane. Get over it. I'm still healthy, and I don't make myself throw up or anything gross like that."

Teresa bounced in front of her. "And look at you. Wow. When did you get so buff?" She held Shane's shoulders in her grasp, looking her over from head to toe. "Artist's aren't supposed to look like this are they?"

"Like you would know what artists are supposed to look like?" Shane gave her a knowing smile since her "crew" looked like they'd stepped off the cover of a magazine, and no one looked outside the rectangular box. "Besides, being bored does that to a person. It was either the gym or gain a hundred pounds. The gym won." She gave a shrug and smiled.

They headed out of the airport and into the parking garage. Her sister stopped short of her car. "So? Are you going to tell me what brought you back here? I thought this was forbidden territory."

Shane cringed and turned to stare at her. "It's time to face it, Tee. That's all."

"Bullshit. You've faced it. It's over. When are you going to get past this? It wasn't your fucking fault." Shane turned toward the car and dropped her bags. Teresa followed with a sigh. "Who is she?"

Shane turned, shocked, and met a mirror image of her own green eyes. "What do you mean?"

"This woman, who is she?" A smile spread across Teresa's face.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Shane jerked open the door and started tossing her bags inside.

"Oh. Okay. I get it." Teresa backed up and started around the back of the car. "Well, Morgan sounds like a hottie."

Shane's breath caught inside her chest at the mention of Morgan's name. "How the hell did you hear about Morgan?"

“Duh! Do you think Scott could keep something like that to himself? He called Evan within an hour of your lunch date. And then of course, Evan called little ole me.” Teresa smiled a wicked grin, pulled open her door and eased inside, leaving Shane to stare. “You comin’ or what?”

Shane made a mental note to fire Scott. Smiling and shaking her head, she ducked into the front seat.

The flat desert and humid air welcomed Shane home. The same bumper-to-bumper traffic escorted them down the city streets of Palm Springs. Palm trees lined the streets, whipping their tentacles in the wind. Skateboarders maneuvered along the sidewalks doing their stunts.

They eased along with the traffic and Shane thought of Shelby. What would their lives be like now had she lived? Would Shane have ever forgiven her for the betrayal of their love? Would Shelby still be with her new lover, leaving Shane all alone? Would Shane have found another, and forgotten all about Shelby? The answers however, were buried along with Shelby.

Shane’s old neighborhood came into view. Her mother would be waiting with hugs and bright pink kisses. She’d ask a thousand questions about Shane’s supposedly new love, assuming Teresa or Evan had shared the information, knowing they would have. Shane hated she would have to tell her mother she was still a bachelorette.

Teresa pulled into the driveway and her mother squealed from the long porch. She ran across the perfect green grass. Her attempt to hold onto her youth showed with her wardrobe complete with hip-hugger jeans and tight fitting T-shirt bearing the logo “It’s cute how you think I’m listening.” Shane realized how much she missed her mother’s liveliness, yet dreaded answering questions she wasn’t ready to discuss. Her mother had tried relentlessly to help Shane shed the pain she’d carried inside herself over Shelby. She’d cried like a baby when Shane made the final decision to leave this place full of memories to head across the map for a new life of loneliness.

Shane inched out of the car and braced herself for her mother’s hug. With Shane taking after her father, tall and broad shouldered, she was capable of lifting her mother off her feet with their embrace.

“Jesus! Look at you. You look so much like your father, rest his soul, it makes me want to cry. God, it’s only been two years.” She pinched her cheeks like a child, smiling bright. Her looped earrings dangled by her neck, making her look younger than her fifty-seven years.

“Hi, Mom.” She smiled knowing questions were brewing in the back of her mother’s mind.

Her mother’s gaze moved to Teresa. “Tee, take her bags to her old room.” Her gaze moved back to Shane. “I’m so happy you’re here. How long are you staying?”

"I don't know." Shane turned, not ready to confess her reasons for being back, and helped Teresa drag her bags from the car.

"Uncle Nikki's coming tonight for dinner and a few others might be stopping by," her mother said from behind her, happiness etched into every word.

Shane smiled, knowing the house would be full of relatives within the hour. Maybe being back among people that she loved and cherished would help lift her spirits.

An hour later the first of Shane's family started filling the house. Her mother hustled about the apple adorned kitchen, clearly preparing for an army. Laughter and spices filled the room while more people filed into the house, making Shane feel an empty place in her heart fill. She missed the loud hustle and bustle of large families.

"Shane!" Teresa screamed from the living room.

Shane lifted off the stool and made her way toward to the living room. "This is my boyfriend, Daniel." Teresa beamed.

Shane stuck her hand out. A strong shake greeted her. She liked him already. Anyone that could tame the brat in her baby sister would be warmly welcomed into their family.

"It's nice to meet you," Daniel said, moving his gaze back to Teresa, adoration snug in their depths.

"Nice to meet you, too."

Another face filled the doorway behind Daniel. Shane smiled. A fist gripped her stomach and tears threatened. Her best friend smiled back at her. Shane inched around Daniel and Teresa and opened her arms for Kelly.

Kelly all but jumped into her open arms, hugging tight to her.

"Damn, you look great, Shane." Kelly leaned back to stare up at Shane with small blue eyes. "Atlanta is treating you nice, huh? How the hell have you been? Forget my number?" Kelly gave a pained look then smiled, showing dimples in her round face. That beamed smile told Shane she was forgiven for shutting Kelly out for so long.

Shane shrugged, taking in Kelly's new spiked hair style. "Business is going great. I just opened a gallery and will have my very own page in *Strut* next month. Life's great."

"Uh huh." Kelly responded giving Shane a knowing look, then turned her attention to Daniel's broad shoulders. She walked around to the front of him, eyeing him with curiosity. "And who is this man drooling all over your way too damn skinny sister?"

"I am *not* too skinny." Teresa pouted at Kelly. "This is Daniel, my boyfriend." Teresa beamed from ear to ear while she stared at her new handsome beau. Her green eyes glistened with affection.

Dinner and conversation soon started. Shane hustled from face to face, giving hugs, chatting about life and jobs, making her ache for love and companionship.

When people started to thin out, Kelly grabbed her and pulled her onto the front porch. "Let's get out of here. We have some catching up to do. I also have someone I want you to meet."

* * * * *

Morgan ducked down the hall, thankful that she'd been able to avoid Rachel for the better part of the day, especially the long day they had had today. Overtime was rare for them, but today Sandra had met them bright and early and made it clear no one was leaving the building until she had printouts on her desk and all deadlines had been met. Even though Morgan and Rachel weren't involved with that part of the project, they knew better than to ask if they could leave.

She couldn't remember one day of her life since high school that she hadn't spoken to Rachel. They'd never had a cross word in all those years and even through her anger, she missed their daily talks about nothing in particular.

She entered her office and eased the door shut behind her. With phone calls, contracts and filing complete, she walked to the window. She glanced out at the late evening sun dipping its orange face behind the tall buildings. The urge to feel herself fly, gripped at her. *Man, did I ever fuck things up. I should have kicked Dawn's ass and told Shane the truth. I could be happy right now instead of miserable.*

Someone rapped on her door, tearing the thoughts from her mind.

"Come in."

John poked his head into her office. "We're outta here."

Morgan nodded. He left, pulling the door shut behind him. She turned back to the window for one last glance. People strolled on the sidewalks while others rushed with hurried steps.

"You'll think of me, Shane." Morgan said to her reflection in the glass then turned and headed out of her office, dreading another night all alone.

Chapter Fourteen

Shane eased into Kelly's car. She hated ducking out of her "welcome home" family gathering, but she wanted more than anything to feel the wind whipping through her hair and just talk, if for nothing else, just to have someone else listen and understand. Being with Kelly would surely bring both with her convertible BMW and her famous "big ears."

"So, Shane, how's the *real* life going?" She chuckled beside Shane as if knowing the answer.

"Miserable." Shane smiled. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed her friend until now.

Kelly pulled to the red light and turned to look at Shane. "It's not Shelby is it? I mean, you've been through enough over that."

Having Kelly here, after the few years she'd been gone, was like a breath of fresh air. She immediately felt her problems diminish with the ability to talk to someone who wouldn't merely understand, but would listen as well. From the second she'd met Kelly in the grocery store, choking back laughter while she told the bagging clerk that he was barking up the wrong tree by flirting with her and even if he grew a pussy, she wouldn't give him a second glance. Needless to say, anytime Kelly was in the store, the clerk would vanish into thin air, and their friendship had grown from there.

"It's time to let Shelby rest in peace."

Kelly's eyes widened beside her. She smiled and leaned over, pulling Shane into her arms, giving her a tight hug. She clapped her on the back with her strong hands. "I'm so damn happy to hear it. I think she deserves that."

A lump rose in Shane's throat. She swallowed back tears, not ready to pull the plug on her dam. She studied Kelly's pudgy face with a smile and turned back to the light turning green.

Kelly soon pulled into a driveway and eased out of her seat. Shane followed her to the front porch she'd walked across for years. A TV blared behind the closed door. Bright lights shone through the fan-shaped window of the front door. Kelly opened the door and led them inside.

"I'm home." She yelled over the blaring news reporter. She walked to the TV and shut it off.

A mumbled voice came from down the hall and soon the tiny figure of a woman appeared with a towel wrapped around her head, silk pajama's swinging around her thin legs, glancing between Shane and Kelly, a bright smile lifting her mouth. Kelly walked over and pulled the woman into her arms and turned back to look at Shane.

"Shane, this is Veronica."

Shane smiled at the woman, feeling warmth spread over her. After all those years of fighting and arguing with Kelly, who never wanted to find a lover because "life was too short to play the games that lesbians play," Kelly had finally broken down and stepped into the game.

Veronica's face lit up with a bright smile. "It's so nice to meet you. I've seen a million pictures, heard a thousand tales, and now I finally get to meet the famous Shane." Her hand slid from her towel and emerged before Shane. Shane took the delicate hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"I told Shane we would go get a drink to catch up on old times. Do you mind?" Kelly asked then leaned over and placed her lips against Veronica's cheek.

"Of course. Of course. Go. Get out of here. I was about to curl up with a book anyway." She slid into Kelly's embrace, fitting like a missing piece of a puzzle in the grooves of Kelly's arms.

Shane's heart swelled for Kelly. It was about time she unlocked her heart and let herself give away that love she kept bottled up inside her. Shane always knew whoever won her heart, would have loyalty for the rest of her life. She had no doubt their love was genuine and would last them for all eternity.

Shane's gut tightened with her thoughts. That same love is what she had possessed for Shelby. That same love is what she now possessed for Morgan.

An hour later, they were perched at the bar, watching bodies bump and grind on the dance floor. Old acquaintances stopped by to say hello, making the trip back even more meaningful.

Kelly pushed the tip of her beer bottle to her lips, took a long gulp, and turned back to look at Shane. "So, how long are you staying?"

Shane pulled her attention from the sweaty faces of the people dancing to the fast rap song. "I promised my assistant that I'd go with him to a new gallery opening so I'll have to leave by late week. Friday at the latest."

Kelly swiveled on the stool and propped her elbows on the bar, leaning her back against it. "So, tell me about your love life, assuming that's what made you want to put Shelby to rest."

Shane felt a cold prickle course through her veins at the mention of Shelby; her beautiful, betraying ghost with her long wavy auburn hair and a bright cheerful smile. Shane could never seem to keep that smile on her face for long periods of time. There always seemed to be some kind of turmoil or another with Shelby. Their arguments would appear from thin air, leaving Shane to wonder if she were losing her mind. Shelby seemed to thrive on make-up sex, something Shane had gladly obliged.

The arguments however, seemed ridiculous, lasting even after orgasms were long forgotten. She'd never bitten her lip so much as she did with Shelby, wanting to do anything to please her or to keep her happy and connected with her.

And even through the fighting, make-up sex, and betrayal, she couldn't have loved her more. She knew in her heart she would have forgiven Shelby, never looking back, even if she could never trust her again.

"Shelby had more secrets than I'll ever know, but it's time to put her to rest. I can't keep living my life in the past, blaming myself for what happened."

"Amen to that."

Shane took a swig of her beer, remembering the last words Shelby ever spoke to her.

It was Shelby's Thursday night out with the girls. She kissed Shane goodbye, grabbed her purse and tore out of their home.

Shane knew Shelby was cheating, could feel it in her bones, her heart as well. She begged Shelby to tell her the truth, needing to hear the treacherous words, no matter how much they would tear her insides out. Shelby had adamantly denied the accusations, begging Shane to believe that she loved only her. Shane however, knew it was a lie. Her kisses weren't the same, her affection wasn't the same, and their sex was far from the same.

Shane sat for hours in the dark house, staring out the window. Her heart was ripped apart, her stomach in knots. One way or the other, she had to know the truth. She sped out of their driveway, determined to find Shelby and put an end to the misery of not knowing. She made her way down the bright city streets searching their favorite bars for Shelby's shiny red Nissan. She finally found it across town, many miles from their house.

She pulled as far back as she could so no one would see her, and waited. Hours, it seemed, crept by while she waited, strumming fingers on the steering wheel, listening to music on the radio. Finally, a car pulled into the parking lot. Shane almost ignored it until she heard Shelby's unmistakable laugh.

Her attention spiked while she watched Shelby ease out of the passenger side of a convertible. Another woman appeared on the other side and leaned against the car. Shelby strolled around, pressed her body against the woman, and leaned in for a heated kiss.

Shane choked back a sob, her heart ripping inside her chest. She closed her eyes to shut out the view of Shelby's betrayal, and hung her head. Her stomach formed a tight knot while she held her breath, wanting to curl up in her seat and die.

She forced her eyes open to see Shelby still pressed against the woman, smiling and laughing. Shane drew in her breath, grabbed the door handle and pushed her way out of the car. She walked the endless distance between herself and Shelby, their giggles getting louder with every step.

The crunching of pebbles grew louder and Shelby's head jerked up. Her smile evaporated from her face and anger replaced it.

"Shane." Shelby's eyes rounded, lack of caring that she was busted, showed on her face.

"Hello, Shelby." Shane continued to walk toward them, anger replacing her depression.

"What are you doing here?"

"That's a stupid question. You know exactly why I'm here."

She watched the woman turn around, eye her with distaste. She halted her steps. "So, this is the scum you're throwing away our relationship for?" Her voice sounded jerky while she held back tears.

Shelby looked between her lovers, a smile stealing across her face, making Shane sick to her stomach. "As a matter of fact, it is."

Shane held her breath, not knowing what to do with the information now, after waiting so long to hear it. She opened her mouth to say something but had no voice left to speak.

Shelby stared at her, a smile plastered on her face, daring Shane to do something about it. "What's wrong, Shane. Can't think of anything else to say? After all those long talks, after all that begging and pleading for me to tell you the truth, you can't think of anything to fucking say now?"

Shane felt icicles pierce her heart with every lifeless, uncaring word that slid from Shelby's mouth. "Yes, I do, as a matter of fact. Fuck you."

"Not anymore, Shane. I have a new fuck."

Anger erupted in Shane. She held her ground, wanting to charge around the car, grab both of them and slam their heads together, leave them both in a bloody mess on the rocks beneath them.

She stared at the beautiful face of the woman she loved more than life itself. A plea came to life inside her.

"Shelby, don't do this." The plea was out of her mouth before she could stop it, along with another image of pounding her fists into the face of this new lover of Shelby's.

"Oh, baby, I've already done it a hundred times." She turned her smirking face toward her new lover. "Plan to do it a hundred more."

Bloody hell! She took another step toward them, watched Shelby's eyes round with fear, then turned and stomped back to her car. Images of a bloody face erupted in her mind. She wanted to run back and kill both of them with her bare hands. Going to jail would be worth it to see that smile swiped off Shelby's face along with the satisfied one plastered on her lover's, but she could never hurt Shelby.

She fisted her palms by her side, trying to get control, heard a car crank behind her and turned. Shelby's hair was flowing around her head while the woman's car approached Shane. She stopped, turned, and watched the car slide past her.

"Go home, Shane. No one wants you here."

Shane stood before her car, watching the taillights glow across the back end of the car, slowly gliding down the aisle of the parking lot, and felt a monster roar to life inside her.

Shelby screamed something at her that was caught in the sound of gravel crunching under the weight of the tires. Shane ran to her own car, determined to have her hands on either one of them now. Shelby's cruel words and uncaring face edged Shane further, willed her to shut up that mouth permanently.

Shane chased them down bright lit streets and onto back roads, following them back into neon lit roads again. The wind whipped against her face from her open window, doing nothing to cool the fire burning in her soul.

Words from a ghost whispered in her ear. She heard her father's voice crystal clear, as if he sat in the seat beside her. She ignored the words she couldn't understand and watched the convertible cross lanes of traffic, barely missing a car. Horns blew at her as she darted across the same lanes, following close.

The voice of her father screamed in her head again, this time the words audible. "She's not worth it. Let her go."

Shane gasped and slowed her speed, watched the convertible ease away. She slammed the brakes and slid against the curb. She buried her face in her hands, squeezing her face in the strength of her own hands, and screamed, forcing her monster to calm itself.

She looked back up to see brake lights from the convertible, watched it stop in the middle of the road. Tears welled in her eyes. She knew the end of Shelby was here before her. No more arguing, no more fighting, and surely no more make-up sex. The end to their relationship was staring her in the face. Over ... just like that.

She drew in a deep breath, demanded her heart to cease the pain, and pulled back across the road, making a U-turn and heading away from the convertible.

She felt her heart twist with her reality and looked back into the rear view mirror, just in time to see a semi-truck slam into the passenger side of their car.

Shane slammed the brakes, flipped the car around and sped in their direction, her heart in her throat, pulse raging through her veins. She skidded to a stop, jumped out of her car, running with every ounce of speed she had. She ran for Shelby's side. A delicate bloody arm

lay through the smashed window. Shelby's head lay against the head of her lover, her eyes focused on the afterworld.

She fell to her knees screaming Shelby's name over and over, pain searing her heart like nothing she'd ever felt before.

"Shane, I could never begin to say that I know what you're feeling," Kelly said from beside her, tearing her from her bleeding memories, "but I do know you would have never done anything to hurt Shelby. What happened was not your fault."

Shane gave her a weak smile, her memories causing more pain. "If I'd just kept walking to my car, left, and never looked back, it would have never happened. She was daring me to fight for her."

"Shane, dammit, you're only human. I'm so fucking sorry to say this, but that bitch was worthless. Kill me for saying such hard words about someone who can't be here to defend themselves, but you're my best friend, and you didn't deserve the shit she put you through."

Shane gritted her teeth, trying to calm herself from Kelly's words. "I loved her. I would have forgiven her. We could have fixed our problems."

Kelly jumped from her stool, slammed her beer down on the counter and faced Shane with rage smoldering in the depths of her eyes. "Bullshit. She would have fucked someone else within a week. She'd *been* doing it, you *knew* it, yet you kept going as if she were the most perfect thing that ever walked the face of this earth."

"Back off, Kelly."

"Fuck you, Shane. You've tormented yourself over this for a year, locked yourself away from the world, from your family and friends. You're too fucking good to be hanging onto her ghost. She didn't fucking love you. Don't you see that?" Kelly's eyes raged in front of her.

Shane rose from her stool, towering over Kelly by a good foot. She looked down into her friend's eyes, anger flowing over her like molten lava. "She didn't deserve to die."

Kelly's face calmed with Shane's words. She hung her head, nodding agreement. "I'm sorry." She turned her blue eyes back up to Shane. "I just can't stand to see you so tortured over it. It's been so long and you don't deserve to be miserable anymore. I love you, Shane. You're my best friend."

Shane felt relief wash over her. She eased back onto the stool. "Tomorrow, I bury Shelby."

Chapter Fifteen

Morgan crept through the lobby doors of her apartment after a long day at work of going through contracts, eating lunch alone, and thinking non-stop about Shane, tried to slip past Jay and Phil's apartment unheard. She was halfway up the landing when their door flew open. Morgan froze in her steps, hoping to be unnoticed.

"You have some nerve." Phil's harsh tone bellowed.

She turned around and met his hard stare.

"I don't know what your problem is, nor do I give a shit anymore. If you want to ruin your life with that bitch, then do it. If you want to watch her screw a thousand more women, then do it, but don't you dare take your anger out on the ones that love you." Phil paced toward the bottom of the stairs.

Morgan only stared at him, anger gripping her gut while her heart twisted for one of her best friends.

She parted her lips to defend herself. Phil shot his palm up to quiet her. "I don't want to hear anything you have to say. You do what you want. We'll support you no matter what stupid mistakes you make. When you come down off your high-horse, make sure you come see us." He turned and darted back through his door, slamming it for good measure.

Morgan stood on the steps, the railing gripped tight in her hand, watching the gold knocker bang against the burgundy door. She contemplated barging through and telling them both how sick and tired she was of listening to their advice, then thought better of it. Gay men could out argue anyone in the world, leaving you tongue tied, tripping over your own words, and begging for mercy. She knew she wouldn't win with those two.

She headed up the remaining steps and pushed through her apartment door.

The red blinking light on the answering machine beckoned her. She tossed her purse on the couch and stepped to the desk, hesitating to hear the messages. She could hear

Rachel's voice in her head, screaming her disapproval. She could hear Jay's raspy voice asking, "What the hell are you thinking?" Would Dawn be on there, with more pleas? Would Shane be on there, asking for another fuck?

Her finger lingered over the play button. She punched the delete button before she could change her mind, erasing all unknown messages. Not wanting to sit at home alone, she grabbed her purse and headed out the door.

She crept past Jay's door, rushed through the lobby doors, and jumped in her car.

Rachel's face loomed before her, hurt and confused. She hated the harsh words she'd said to her. She was sick and tired of being so miserable that she'd fired off her anger at her best friend. But, did she deserve it? Wasn't it her who conned Shane into coming out with them. Wasn't Rachel the real reason she walked out that door with Shane, wanting and needing her approval. Wasn't Rachel the one that talked her into going to the gallery, leading her to another embarrassing moment, even if hot sex came before it?

She let the questions roll around her head while lights blurred past her. And what about Shane? What kind of game was she playing? She remembered the look of disappointment on her face the morning after, feeling love course through her with every caressing touch then the look of hatred in her eyes as she told Morgan their meeting was over.

"Meeting?!" Morgan screamed to herself in the empty cabin of the car. "Fuck! She's no different than Dawn. At least I didn't get my heart wrapped up in it before she showed her true colors."

Morgan knew that was a lie, too. She knew her heart had already gotten involved, no matter how much she'd tried to spare it. She knew what she felt for Shane was genuine.

Morgan leaned against the window, propping her head in her hand. "I'm just as fucked up as both of them."

She drove into the parking lot of Burger Queen, ordered her usual greasy hamburger, and then tore open the wrapper before she'd even left the parking lot.

While munching on the burger, Phil and Jay stole the thoughts from her mind. They were her friends, only wanting the best for her. And Rachel, she was no different. How could she treat her friends with so little respect when they'd been there through the thick and thin of her depression? And, how could she possibly make up for the harsh things she'd said to all of them?

She pushed the last bite of burger into her mouth, turned the car into a convenience store, and made her way inside.

After scouring the alcoholic beverage section, she found Phil and Jay's favorite beer, Corona, paid for it, and left the store.

She arrived at her apartment, stalled outside Jay's door, desperately wanting to join in a long night of TV shows with her beloved friends. Would they forgive and forget?

Before she could knock, their door creaked open. Phil stood in the opening, a knowing look on his face. Morgan's eyes overflowed with tears as she held out the beers. Phil's arms opened and Morgan slid into them.

"It's okay, baby." He stroked her hair, rocking her gently. "You know we love you."

She shook her head, swiping tears from her face, and slid from his grasp. He pushed open the door and took the six-pack from her and then she walked through to find Jay lying on the couch, his eyes turning, taking on a hard stare as he saw her.

"Jay, I'm sorry for what I said to you." His stare turned soft. He smiled at her then patted the couch. She crossed the space and fell on the couch beside him, taking the warm place that Phil had occupied before she yanked him away from his lounging.

She spooned in beside him, knowing that all was forgiven. Phil sank onto the end of the couch, taking their feet into his lap, patting them gently. They spent the next hours laughing at their favorite TV shows, munching on Phil's homemade chocolate chip cookies, chunking popcorn into each other's mouths.

No one asked her what had happened. They didn't have to. They just knew.

* * * * *

Shane awoke to her mother jerking the curtains open. She grunted and turned toward the wall of her old bedroom. "Mom!"

"It's time to get your lazy ass out of that bed."

Shane ignored her, hoping she would go away.

"Come on. Get up. We have lots to do today."

"Like what?"

"Things. Get up!"

Shane grumbled and slid from under the covers, letting her feet feel for the floor. She'd had way too much to drink last night. While telling Kelly all about Morgan and the way she'd treated her before she fled the gallery in tears, she'd drunk beer after beer, thankful by the tenth, that Kelly was the designated driver.

She eased up on the edge of the bed while her mother slammed the door shut. She grimaced and pushed her palms to her ears, trying to quiet the echo it left.

"Jeez, Ma!"

An hour later, and a long hot shower to boot, Shane made her way down the hallway she'd crept down a million times in her life. She found her mother sitting at the food bar, coffee mug steaming from her lips.

Shane walked into the kitchen and poured herself a cup, spooned sugar into it, and turned back to look at her mother over the bar.

"So, what is so demanding that it couldn't wait for me to sleep a while longer?"

Eyebrows rose over the rim of a mug. Her mother pointed a single finger toward the front door. Shane followed the finger and saw her box, filled with Shelby's pictures, sitting by the front door.

"Where the hell did you get that?" Shane felt her breath catch, anger that her mother would go through her things surfaced.

"I was putting fresh sheets on the bed for you."

"And?"

"Well, I wanted to see what was in the box. Those pictures could only mean one thing."

Shane stared at her. The bangle bracelets on her arm clinked each time she lifted the mug to her mouth. Her hair was pulled loosely at the back of her head, making her look so young.

"You didn't have any right to go through my things."

"Oh, chill out. It's not like you're sixteen again and I'm looking for a stash of pot. I merely wanted to know what was in the box."

"Mom!"

"Fine. Sue me for snooping." She lifted from the stool, walked around to the kitchen and started pulling boxes from the freezer. "I'm just excited, is all. I knew there was more to your visit than you'd say."

Within minutes, a breakfast burrito was being served hot and fresh from the microwave. Shane ate while her mother jabbered about her bridge club and the hot man at the gym.

"I thought about inviting him to join me in the Jacuzzi, but didn't want to be too forward." Shane almost choked on the food in her mouth. "Would that have been too forward?"

"Ma! Damn. Too much information."

"Oh, come on. You act like I'm old and withered. I'm in the prime of my life. Sex is a healthy thing you know? Keeps the blood flowing."

Shane shook her head, tossing the last bite of food into her mouth and turned to look at her mother.

"So, you met this man at the gym, considered screwing him right there in the Jacuzzi. Did you happen to think about protection? That healthy sex can be not so healthy if you get it from the wrong person."

Her mother laughed and slapped her hand down on the table, sending the bangle bracelets clinking hard on her wrist. "Who'd have ever thought I'd be sitting here with my daughter, with *her* telling me to use protection." She stood up from the stool, still giggling

and dropped her empty mug into the sink. She took another look at Shane, still watching her with confusion then laughed again while she made her way to her bedroom.

Shane stared at the closed door. "I wasn't kidding!"

She waited for her to come back and finish the conversation. When long minutes went by, she knew her mother had left so Shane could get on with what she knew she had to do. Bury Shelby.

An hour later, Shane pulled into the cemetery. She followed the long drive that wound through the tombstones; each bearing the name of someone's loved one.

She found Shelby's grave with ease. A spot on the grassy hill she could find in a drunken stupor and her eyes closed, a state of mind she'd been in more than a hundred times while visiting her buried lover. She'd spent many nights curled into a ball, never wanting to leave where she knew the love of her life rested beneath the ground. She'd cried herself to sleep night after night with granite as her pillow.

She walked toward the grave, sorrow gripping her heart like a fist. She stared down at Shelby's name engraved on the marble, tears spilling from her eyes. She knelt down and wiped dried leaves from the base, leaning further to sit Indian style before the love of her life.

"Hello, Shelby." Shane began, tears gushing, heart wrenched. "I've missed you. I'm so sorry for what happened to you. I'm sorry that you didn't love me and even more sorry that it took me so long to figure it out. I know it now, and I can't keep blaming myself for what happened." Shane choked out another sob. "It wasn't my fault."

Shane's fingers caressed the marble, pouring her heart out to thin air "I met someone that makes me feel the way I felt when I was with you. I love her, and it's time to let you go, even though she doesn't love me."

Shane looked around her. Trees hung their limbs while her heart poured out to their ears. Wind blew through their leaves, across her face, caressing her with gentle fingers. "I'll always love you, but it's time to go on with my life. I'll never forget what we had, no matter how hard it was sometimes. I know you loved me in your own special way. I just wasn't enough for you."

Shane looked back at Shelby's name and felt weight lift from her shoulders. "Please forgive me for loving you too much. I'll never forget you, Shelby."

Shane rose. She stared around her at the brightness of the day. Honeysuckle wafted under her nose. Rays spread their warm fingers over her. She left the weight from her shoulders on the ground at Shelby's grave, and walked away. A smile lifted the corners of her mouth. She knew she was going to be all right, no matter what the future held.

Chapter Sixteen

Friday crept up too fast for Morgan. She dreaded her date with the gorgeous Matt. She hadn't been on a date with a man since high school, even though this favor didn't constitute a date. She'd told Jay how Matt's perfect body had strode into her office, how he resembled the models from the front cover of a magazine, leaving Jay to drool over her description. He'd jokingly offered a hundred times to take her place with raised eyebrows from Phil, who'd refused to go, saying football was for pansies.

But more than she dreaded the non-date, she dreaded seeing Shane again. Scott had said they would be there. Would she be with a date of her own? How would she feel about that if she did?

Morgan was happy she and Rachel were speaking again. She'd approached Rachel the morning after watching movies with the guys, knowing Rachel would greet her with open arms, forgetting the harsh words Morgan had hurled at her. She told Rachel about her date with Dawn, how she felt a void where she used to be breathless, and then thanked her for being patient until she finally saw the light, how much she loved and missed her, and how sorry she was for going off on her the way she had. Rachel merely smiled ... and understood.

She was grateful Dawn hadn't dialed her number or tried to contact her in any way. Even though she was relieved, she was also saddened that their relationship had fallen apart. It was time to step toward a bright future, however, no matter what the new deck of cards dealt her.

She pushed her way through the front doors of *Strut*, a smile bright on her face. She felt like the world waited on her now, to do with it what she wanted. She had a new meaning for life, to love and be loved in return. But, time was on her side. She would wait for that perfect person, and then welcome them with loving, open arms. She knew she

couldn't rush love and Rachel knew it as well, promising to stop her attempts at matchmaking.

Rachel met her in the break room. "Good morning, beautiful" Rachel said as she poured steaming coffee into her mug.

"Hi, yourself." Morgan reached for the pot. "Did you and Steve get things worked out about work?"

"Oh, yeah." She grinned over her mug and winked.

"That's great."

"Can you come over tonight for dinner?"

"Can't. I'm going on date." She watched Rachel's brow lift in surprise and smiled at her.

"What?! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm kidding. It's not a real date. It's with a man." She grinned back, nodding to a few employees passing them. "I'm doing John a favor by going with a friend of his to Howard Gallery's opening tonight."

"Cool. Steve doesn't want to go. Says it's weird to see some buff football jock as an artist now. I guess he doesn't want to ruin his image of him." She laughed, shrugging her shoulders. "And who's the lucky date?"

"Matt's his name."

"Matt? Doesn't he work with Dan? An agent or something?"

"Yes, I think that's what John said. Totally hot, let me tell ya."

Rachel gave her a hard stare, thoughts churning behind her eyes. "And speaking of hot, when are you ever going to tell me what happened with, you know who?"

"Probably never. She just, um, how do you say it, showed her true colors?"

"No ... she didn't." Rachel turned and strolled away, leaving Morgan to ponder her words, curious as to their meaning.

She shrugged and made her way to her office, ready to get the day started. Shamrock Gallery's article would be on her desk within the hour for approval and her once-over. She dreaded seeing those beautiful paintings again. They would only remind her of gorgeous green eyes, gentle hands making her tremble and a perfect body lying between her legs; all the things she wanted to forget

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Shane hugged her crying mom who had mascara streaming down her face. "Mom, stop crying. I promise to send Tee back in one piece."

"I know she'll be back in one piece. She's too mean not to." She grinned through quivering lips. "I'm worried about you. Are you going to be okay now?"

Shane looked down into the caring eyes of her mother. "I'm going to be just fine." She gave her another tight squeeze then turned to Kelly.

Kelly smiled back, Veronica standing firmly by her side. Her smile was just as bright as Kelly's. Shane stepped forward, hating to leave her best friend after all the catching up they'd done over the long week. "Keep her in check, Veronica." Shane gave her a quick hug.

"No problem."

"Keep in touch, Shane." Kelly stepped forward and gave Shane a quick pat on the shoulder. "We're still planning on flying out in a few weeks. I'll call you and give you specific details when I know them."

"I'm looking forward to it."

Shane and Teresa gave another round of hugs and kisses and walked down the aisle that would carry her home and Teresa to her first visit of Shane's world. She missed her hometown, but Atlanta needed her more than this place did. It had been there to see her through the darkest part of her life. She owed it something in return ... her happiness. She was determined to give it.

She slid into her seat, happy to be heading back to the gallery, and her paintings. She had a few things tucked in the back of her mind that needed to be spread on canvas, to hopefully rid them from her mind.

Teresa slid in beside her. "Okay, now that we're away from everyone, I want to hear all about Morgan."

"Tee, I don't want to talk about her."

"I heard you talking to Scott. What did he say?"

"Nothing that concerns you." Shane gave her a smile then eased back in the chair.

Teresa tossed her leg over the other and straightened her back ... a perfect model posture. She tossed her thin blonde hair over her shoulders and turned back to Shane. "So, she's going to be at this thingy tonight?"

"Jeez! First mom and the pictures, now you and the phone calls. Can't a girl ever have any privacy in the Oglesby family?" Shane thought about what she'd just said, then busted out laughing. "Stupid question!"

"I'd say. So, come on, what's the game plan?"

"There is no game plan. All he said was he'd seen the guest list and she was on it. I don't care if she's there or not." Shane twisted in her seat and stared out the window.

"Liar. You can't wait to see her again."

Shane ignored her. A few minutes later she glanced over to see the cute sleeping face of her sister. She turned back to the window. Morgan crashed through her mind like a plane nose-diving to earth, catching her breath. She fisted her hand while an image of Morgan's hardened nipples, screaming for attention, fluttered through her mind's eye. Head thrown

back, curls billowing around her head, lips parted, raw pleasure escaping through every scream.

Shane cursed under her breath, gritting her teeth with the searing heat spreading between her legs at a simple memory. She watched the pages flip behind her closed lids, faster and faster with each turn of the memory. Morgan, back arched, body racking with convulsions churned Shane's stomach, stung her clit.

She banged her hand down on the arm of the chair, yanked her head forward, eyes widening, and rose out of the chair. Teresa slept peacefully in her chair.

Shane eased around her and made her way to the tiny bathroom, no bigger than a janitor's closet. She pulled the knob for the water, slipped her hands under the cold fluid and doused it on her face. She stared back at herself in the mirror.

"Get over it girl. She's gone."

She stilled her beating heart and made her way back to her seat, determined to make it through the night at the gallery opening without falling all over herself at the sight of Morgan.

Another thought occurred to her. What if Morgan was there with Dawn? Could she take the sight of them together? Would she be able to refrain from ripping the bitch's head off, knowing she was only playing games with Morgan?

She dared herself to close her eyes, to nap while in the sky so she would be prepared for the night ahead of her. Images left her in peace and she drifted off to sleep, awakening with the intercom announcing their arrival home.

* * * * *

Morgan arrived home, excited, yet full of dread, for the night she had ahead of her. She was extremely excited about finally getting to see the paintings that she'd heard so many stories about. It was rare that a man would go from that type of profession to the dark seclusion of an artist. She was excited to meet him.

She showered, dressed casually as Matt had told her to, even though most of the wardrobe was in hopes that Shane would stumble all over her feet at the sight of her. She dialed Matt's number.

"Hello?" His sexy voice oozed through the phone lines.

"Hi. It's Morgan."

"Hiya. You ready for tonight? I can't tell you how much I appreciate you doing this for me."

"No problem. I'm curious to see Dan's art."

"Great. How about something to eat before we get there?"

He gave her a sexy laugh. She envisioned his surfer smile. "Sounds great. I'm ready when you are."

She gave him directions and made her way out of the apartment, down to Jay's. She barged in and found them eating dinner from the couch, the TV blaring MTV's finest tunes.

"He's on his way."

Phil turned, taking in her outfit.

"You look great!"

She looked down at her mini-skirt and spiked heels complete with tight fitting white vee-neck blouse. "Don't think it's too revealing?"

Phil gave her a curious stare then turned back to his plate. "Didn't you say Shane was going to be there? That outfit will make her eat her heart out." He forked a mouthful of food into his mouth.

"Ooh. Delicious. We get to see him?" Jay asked, ignoring their conversation about Shane.

"Yep. And don't go crazy either. I'm sure he's married or taken, or something. The same as *you*."

"Pfft. Phil doesn't count." He goosed Phil in the side and pecked a quick kiss on his cheek.

"You guys are too funny," Morgan said, admiring their cute ways with each other, their devoted love to one another.

"Literally. What took you so long to figure it out?" Phil mumbled through his mouth full of food.

Morgan was standing at the window when she saw the Lincoln Navigator pull to the curb. She motioned for Jay and Phil to follow her outside. They practically shoved her through the lobby doors and out onto the sidewalk.

She scooted off to the side as soon as she cleared the door, pressing her shirt down, giving them both a harsh glare. "Excuse me. I think *I'm* the one going out?"

They ignored her and watched Matt slide around the large vehicle. His smile lit up his face as he saw her standing there. "Wow. Look at you."

"Hi, Matt." She gave him a bright smile, giggling at Jay and Phil's open mouths. "These are my druggie friends. They're high on crack right now. Forgive the drool."

Matt's gaze turned on her friends, taking in their gaping mouths, and gave them a schoolboy smile. He nodded at their stares, then strode toward Morgan. He stuck out his hand as if she were a princess, getting asked for the last dance. She watched his eyes twinkle before her and slid her fingers into his palm. He closed his fingers around hers and led her to the car door.

"Your friends seem cool." Matt said while he edged away from the curb, his hand resting on the gear shifter.

"They're a mess alright." That was an understatement coming from a man who'd just watched two gay men literally frozen with drool dripping from the corners of their mouths ... and never batted an eye at them, as if he'd seen it hundreds of times.

They pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant then walked inside. Matt asked for a table in the back, away from everyone. The waitress led them to a table, then left them to ponder the menus.

Morgan looked around the empty space, wondering why he would want the seclusion. Didn't John tell him that she wasn't interested in men? She tried to recall the conversation with him in her head, unable to remember it in depth. Surely he'd been told and didn't assume this to be a real date. Morgan wanted to pinch herself now for not bringing it up, letting him know he didn't stand a chance, no matter how luscious his body was.

Matt tossed the menu on the table and cupped his hands together under his chin, elbows resting on the table. "Morgan, John said I could trust you."

She tensed and shifted in her seat. "Of course."

"Do you know anything about Dan?"

Morgan stared at him, flipping the pages of the computer screen in her mind with the research she'd done on him. "He's a retired football player and now an artist. He used to own a gallery but closed it due to problems. He moved here from Chicago and continued his career as an artist. Now he's opened the new gallery. He's committed to painting football-related pictures."

"And?"

"And. That's all I know."

Matt grinned at her, dipped his forehead to his cupped hands, and sighed. "Well, that's not all."

Morgan sensed a big whopping story coming up, something that was going to blow her mind. She straightened and waited.

Matt lifted his head. "He's gay."

Morgan felt a gush of warmth wash over her. She was ecstatic to know this man was "family."

"That's awesome." She smiled back at Matt. "John never told me."

"That's because no one is supposed to know. Dan's my partner." His eyes took on a hazed glare. "I run his gallery."

The whole whopping story crashed into Morgan like an asteroid. She envisioned the buff body of a football player with this walking cover of a magazine ... a shun waiting to

happen. No wonder their relationship was so hush-hush. Football players were never gay, nor were they artists. It was a double whammy for this man, Matt's lover.

"Oh." Morgan heard the unsurprised tone of her voice.

"You don't act that surprised." Matt leaned against the back of his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Well, to be honest, I am. I think what shocks me the most is how you were able to hide it so well."

"Hiding it is not something I'm very happy about. But I love Dan. I'd do anything to uphold his reputation. But, after tonight, I'm done."

"What!?"

"I can't hide anymore. I've done it for five years ... for him. It's time to start my own life and stop living through his. When the party's over, so are Matt and Dan."

Morgan gasped and leaned closer to him. "You can't do that to him."

That beautiful surfer smile broke across his face. "He'll be just fine. He's a tough one."

"You have to talk to him, give him a chance to make that decision on his own."

"He's already made his decision, for five years to be exact. He's hid our relationship from everyone. He doesn't want people to know, and I fully understand."

Morgan leaned back, staring around the empty room. "He still deserves a chance to make that decision. It's not fair for you to do that to him."

The waitress arrived, took their order and scurried away.

"Thank you." Morgan blurted to end the silence that formed around them.

"What for?"

"For telling me the truth ... for sharing that with me."

"Well, it's the least I could do after you've agreed to be my date tonight. Thank you, by the way."

"Speaking of which, do you do this often? Meaning, find a date to cover your truth."

"Yes. Anytime there's a big to do going on, I find a woman to waltz on my arm for show and parade around the room as if she's the best thing that ever popped into my life."

An image of walking through the room wrapped in his luscious arms, flashed through Morgan's mind. The sight of Shane staring wide-eyed at her fell behind it.

Morgan grinned. "I'm game for that. I have someone I'd like to aggravate tonight as well."

"Oh, really?" He leaned in, curiosity glistening in his eyes. "So you'll be making someone jealous while I'm hiding the truth?" A smile broke across his face revealing those perfect white teeth. "Sounds like fun."

“You game? Maybe we can make Dan just as jealous, have him throw his career to the wind for you.”

Matt laughed. Cute dimples deepened on his face. “That’ll be the day.”

“I think tonight’s going to be a great night for both of us.”

They ate their dinner in silence, plans churning in their minds, getting ready for the night they both had ahead of them.

An hour later, they arrived in the parking lot of the gallery. They stood staring at the white brick building then looked back at each other.

“You ready for show and tell?” Matt asked then extended his hand out to her.

“Hell yeah.” She slid her fingers into his with ease, ready to turn all heads when she entered the room. “Let’s do it.”

He gave her a knowing smile then pulled her through the door. The crowd swallowed them as they breezed through, stopping to ogle the paintings sitting about the room. Football was this man’s life. It showed through every painting. He loved this sport like he loved no other, possibly more than his lover. Tonight would show that truth.

Chapter Seventeen

Shane watched the gorgeous man's fingers entwined with Morgan's, feeling a fist grip her gut. Shane gasped, unable to believe what she was seeing. Morgan ... with a *man*?

Morgan's long legs disappeared under a short jean mini-skirt. Shane wished her own hands were ducking under the fabric to encase a well-rounded ass. The white shirt wrapped her body like Saran Wrap, showing every curve of her breasts. Cleavage screamed for her tongue.

Shane stared as the man's arm encircled Morgan's waist, pulling her tight against him. Her breath caught in her chest while Morgan turned those beautiful blue eyes up to meet his, smiling her sweet smile.

Shane ripped her gaze from them, turning to stare at Teresa. She wore a wicked smile on her face.

"What!?" Shane yelled at her.

"You don't have to tell me who Morgan is. The look on your face shows every emotion."

Shane only glared at her, anger seeping through every pore of her body. "So what? I don't give a shit what she does."

"I'm thinking that two can play at this game. She doesn't know I'm your sister." Teresa winked at her, a smile breaking across her face.

Shane stared down at her then turned back to Morgan just in time to see her head fall back with laughter, her blonde curls cascading down that delicate back.

Shane pushed back the impulse to dart across the floor, grab those locks of curls in her grasp and ram her tongue down Morgan's throat.

Scott bounced up, tearing her from her heated thoughts. "This party sucks. They need a dance floor and loud thumping music so I can shake my ass." He stared between Shane and Teresa, his eyes widening. "What? What the hell are you two up to?"

He followed their gaze to Morgan. "Ooh. She's here. And damn at the hot ass she's toting at her side. Bitable, edible ... and gay as hell. I have to have a bite of that." Scott turned to flee in their direction.

Shane's hand whipped out to grab his arm. "What do you mean gay?"

Scott stared down at her hand, eyes widening, then eased his arm out of her grasp. "Chill, baby. Don't leave marks. I bruise easy."

"What do you mean, Scott?" Her voice rose another notch.

"Gay. You know, like screwing men, gay, like that. Helloooo! Did you forget what that means?"

"Hell no I didn't forget what it means. How do you know *that* man is gay?" She tossed her head in Morgan's direction.

"His shoes." His lips pursed while he ogled the couple. "And I want to take them off. See ya!" He shoved away and darted for Morgan and the man.

Shane turned back to Teresa. A smile was plastered on her face, eyes full of mischief. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yep. I'll lead the way."

Teresa grabbed Shane's arm, as sisterly as she could, but hint at seduction. Shane felt like a pervert while she let Teresa lead her through the crowd, nearing Morgan.

Morgan turned with their approach, hatred plastered in her ocean eyes. Shane gave her a serious smile then turned her gaze down on Teresa. Teresa snuggled into her. Acid stung Shane's throat at the thought of her very own sister all snuggled up with her. They breezed past Morgan as if she didn't exist.

Shane heard Scott's voice rise. "Don't you just love football? It's so hot. I watch it all the time." The liar! He wouldn't know football if one smashed his dick.

She heard the man's seductive chuckle and knew right then and there ... he was gay.

Morgan was playing games with her. She was happy to see she cared enough to play it, yet determined to play her end just as well. If Morgan wanted a game, she was more than willing to give her a run for her money.

Teresa pulled Shane into another room. "Wow! Did you see the look on her face? She could have killed me with her bare hands.

"Yep." Shane felt an uncontrollable urge to rush back, toss Morgan over her shoulder, find a dark secluded place, then drive her fingers deep inside her and hear her screams of satisfaction.

“Step one complete.” Teresa dared a glance around the doorframe. “Ready for number two?”

Shane’s heart raced in her chest at the very thought of what her sister’s next move might be. Shane didn’t think she could take too much more snuggling with her very own sister. How gross.

* * * * *

Morgan stared at Shane’s retreating back. The blonde on her arm stared Morgan down, giving her the biggest “fuck you” look she’d ever been given. She gave her a perfect one in return.

She held herself back by tightening her grip on Matt’s arm. She saw herself yanking that woman’s hair out of her head ... one fistful at a time.

Matt squeezed back and followed her gaze. He gave her a knowing look attached with a wink.

“I love football.” Scott interrupted her thoughts. She turned back to stare at him, open-mouthed. The liar! Maybe the football players posing in their briefs. She stared at him as if he was some alien from outer space then heard Matt’s seductive chuckle. Uh-oh! *Please tell me that was not two men making a connection.*

Matt shifted his weight to another foot and his gaze fell to her. She gave him a tiny glare. His eyes widened.

“Can you go get me something to drink, babe? Crown and Coke?” She rubbed his arm for show.

“Sure.” He gave her a puzzled look, nodded his head at Scott with a smile, then walked away.

Morgan turned her attention on Scott. “Still want to cut my hair off?”

His eyes were glued on Matt’s retreating ass. He tore his gaze away and stared at her, a cute boyish grin stole across his face. “Maybe. I told you not to hurt her.”

“I didn’t. She’s the one that played a mean game, not me.”

“Sort of like the one you’re playing now?”

Morgan gasped. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, come on! That man’s gay as a three-dollar bill, yet you’re strutting around here like a grand-prize winner.”

Morgan’s face heated. She wanted to tell him it was a lie, but knew she couldn’t fool a gay man with their inner radar for other gay men. She was trapped.

“So, my question is, are you doing this for Shane’s sake? Or are you both doing it for someone else’s?” Scott gave her a serious look and crossed his arms over his chest.

Morgan watched Matt take the drink from the bartender and turn back in their direction. "Both. And besides, Shane has her own date for tonight."

Scott tore her attention from Matt with a loud piercing laugh. "That's her sister!"

Recognition washed over Morgan. Those eyes. The woman's eyes had been green ... twins to her sister's. So Shane was playing the game too, and very well she had to add. A devious feeling spread through her veins.

"Will you please excuse me?" Morgan ducked away and cut Matt off. She took her drink from his hand, downed it and led him away from the crowd.

"Was that her? The tall one with the blonde?"

She tossed her empty plastic cup in a trash can against the wall then turned back to him. "Yes, but it's her sister. She doesn't know I know."

"Ooh. Yummy." His face contorted as if he smelled a skunk. "And how yucky!"

A man approached them. Morgan knew instantly it was Dan, Matt's lover. His broad shoulders nudged against Matt's. Matt turned toward him. Love flashed in his eyes and was gone with a sizzling pop. Morgan felt for him. He loved a man that loved his career more than anything in the world.

"Who's your gorgeous date?" Dan turned piercing brown eyes on her.

"I'm Morgan." She stuck out her hand. Big burly fingers inched in her direction. He clamped his hand around hers with a tad bit too much strength for a lady, then dropped it. She could see anger gripped in his eyes.

"Are you going to come and join me tonight?" He turned brown eyes on Matt, his jaw clamped down hard.

"Dan, as a matter of fact, I'm having way too much fun with Morgan. I think I'll hang out with her tonight. I'm sure you have everything under control." He gave Dan a determined stare.

Dan's chiseled jaw hardened even more. His eyes glazed over with anger. Morgan feared he would unleash that anger on Matt. She envisioned a gory mess at the hands of this huge man.

Dan gave Morgan a hardened stare then stomped away.

"Holy shit!" Morgan watched the beefy man retreat. "He's huge."

"Yep. And strong as an ox. Makes my heart go pitty-pat."

Morgan gave him a sweet smile, warmth spreading over her. "Go with him. He wants you by his side."

"I don't care. I'm tired of being hid. If he doesn't love me enough to show me to the world, then I'll find someone who will."

His tone ended the conversation. Morgan gave him an empathetic smile and turned her attention back to Scott. He was looking over the football paintings as if he'd found his long lost love.

"Scott knows you're gay."

"I know. Takes one to know one ... as the old saying goes."

She giggled at him.

"So. What now? Ready for show and tell with that hunky woman with her sister on her arm." He opened his mouth and stuck his finger inside. "Gag!"

She grabbed his hand and took off in the direction Shane and her sister had taken. She found them in another room. Her sister's arm shot out to grab Shane's. Morgan gave her a stare then smiled.

Matt pulled her into his side and slowed their pace. "Would you like me to take you to a football game one day? You'd look breathtaking with a jersey and ball cap."

"Ooh, yes. I'd love that, Matt." She snaked her arm around his waist.

"And then when the game's over, I'm sure you'd look even more spectacular in nothing *but* a jersey and ball cap."

Morgan cuddled into him as Shane's head whipped around toward them. She darted her gaze away, not wanting Shane to see she was watching. She let her hand fall to his ass then dipped her fingers into the pockets of his designer jeans. *This is not much different from a woman. Just don't look at the bulge between his legs and you'll never know the difference. Come on, Morgan. Play your game, baby.*

She dared a glance over her shoulder. Shane was grinning at her ... not a care in the world. She yanked her gaze back. Was that mocking in her eyes? Did she know that Matt was gay? Was Morgan making a total fool of herself?

They circled the room. Shane and her sister were standing arm in arm against the wall, staring at each other.

As they approached them, Shane's sister leaned to whisper something to Shane. Shane threw her head back and let out a fake laugh then turned her smiling face on Morgan. Morgan gave her a glare then tugged Matt out of the room.

* * * * *

Shane watched Morgan duck out of the room. She'd never had so much self control. She wanted nothing more than to hear Morgan scream with pleasure, again and again.

"That's enough. You're grossing me out." Shane let loose her sister's arm and turned to stare at her.

"Yeah. Besides, she didn't seem to give a shit anyway. You might be fighting a losing battle, oh dearest sister."

Shane knew exactly what she was talking about. She'd noticed it too. "I agree. It was almost as if she knew." They glared at each other, eyes squinting. "Scott!"

They both laughed, both completely embarrassed. "Shit. Now what? I've just come off as the biggest pervert in the world."

"I'd say." Teresa dared a glance around the corner. "However, if you play your cards right, you'll get a chance to get her alone. She's heading to the bathroom."

Shane eased around her sister and watched Morgan's curls bounce around her head while she strolled down the hall. Her ass twitched in her tight mini-skirt, begging for Shane's attention.

Shane eased out of the room and followed Morgan down the hall. Morgan turned into the bathroom. Shane stopped outside the door, sucked in a long breath, blew it out in a steady stream, and then pushed open the door.

The door creaked, echoing around the blue tiled walls. Morgan was leaned over the sink, water spilling over her hands. She glanced into the mirror above her and caught the sight of Shane. Anger shot smoothly across her face while she diverted her gaze back to the water.

"Having a good time, Shane?"

"Grand time. And you?"

"I'm having the time of my life."

Shane smiled at her back, knowing she was lying, hearing the lie in every word. "That's great. And your gay boyfriend?" She crossed her arms over her chest. "Is he having a good time, too?"

Morgan's head whipped around, hands dripping water. "My what?"

As if a magnet had been turned on, she felt the force pulling her to Morgan, watching those eyes widen the closer she got. "Your *gay* boyfriend."

Anger quickly replaced Morgan's confusion. She turned back to the sink, popped the handle down, and yanked a paper towel from the holder. With a slow, casual turn in Shane's direction, she smacked the paper roughly between her hands, then tossed it in the trashcan by the counter. "Well, it's better than waltzing around with your sister on your arm. How gross is that?"

Shane watched Morgan's lips move with every word, not hearing one syllable. White teeth gritted tight together, begging Shane to pry them apart with her tongue. She stopped within a foot of Morgan. Morgan's chest heaved, pushing those breasts closer to Shane. Her gaze fell to them on their own accord.

Morgan followed her gaze then looked back up at Shane. "What's wrong? Didn't get enough of them the first two times?"

Shane felt the smile lift the corners of her mouth. "As a matter of fact, no, I didn't."

Morgan stiffened against the counter. Shane had rendered her speechless. That was a good thing. Words weren't what she wanted to hear anyway. Screams, pants, moans and groans, were the only things she wanted to hear escape those lips.

A thought came to Shane. Why was Morgan being so cold? After all those messages she'd left? Why would she be so cold now? Shane had told her how sorry she was and how it was okay if she wanted Dawn back ... no hard feelings.

Shane looked at her curiously. "Did you get any of my messages?"

Morgan's smile slid back across her lips. Shane felt an urge to grab her, drag her into a stall and plunge her fingers to the palm inside her. She stilled the impulse and watched a serious look spread over Morgan's face.

"Nope. Glad I didn't. You don't have anything to say that I'd want to hear." She turned and started around Shane.

"I have a whole lot to say, and you *will* hear it, whether you like it or not."

Shane grabbed her hand. Morgan yanked it back. "Take your fucking hands off me," she said through gritted teeth.

Shane bit her lip, wanting to tell Morgan when she got them on her, Morgan would never want them off her again, but instead, she moved toward Morgan, trying to quiet her words. "We need to talk, Morgan."

Morgan's eyes filled with rage. She leaned her face within inches of Shane's. "And I told you. I don't want to hear anything you have to say. You make me sick."

Morgan's breath blew into Shane's. Liquor stung her nose. Those perfect pink lips, only a breath away. Morgan leaned back, stood straight and tall, and held her ground, arms crossing over those rounded breasts in her tight-fitting shirt.

"Get out of my way, Shane. And stay the hell away from me."

"We need to talk, Morgan. I have some explaining to do."

"You don't hear very well do you?" Morgan's teeth were gritted so tight Shane feared they might crack.

"You're going to listen to me dammit."

Morgan's free hand was in motion before Shane could blink. She threw her head back to dodge the blow. Morgan's open palm slapped the side of her head instead. Her hands were slapping and flailing everywhere, a wildcat unleashed. Shane grabbed at them, missing, grabbing again.

Morgan's face was contorted in obvious hatred, eyes blazing with fire. "Stop it, Morgan."

Shane managed to grab the hand pulling at her hair. "You make me sick!" Morgan screamed at her.

Another hand captured. Shane held both of them in her tight grasp and pushed Morgan's back against the counter. "Just listen to me."

"Get ... your fucking hands ... off me."

"When you hear what I have to say, I *will*."

Morgan's blond hair, tangled around her face, stopped Shane from another syllable. Those fiery blue eyes stared at her with more hatred than she knew Morgan could possess, with a heart so sweet and kind. Her breath ragged, heaving her chest. Shane stepped into Morgan, pinning her fully against the counter. She begged her mind to get control over her body, to stop what she was about to do. Neither listened.

She leaned down, watching Morgan's eyes round in surprise, and pressed her lips to Morgan's, feeling a soft moan rumble inside her. Heat burrowed between her legs.

Pain shot through her lip while sharp teeth bit down. She yanked her head back, releasing one of Morgan's hands. She lifted a finger to her lip and brought back a bloody tip. She looked back at Morgan who had a satisfied look plastered on her face.

"Do you feel better now?" She swiped the back of her hand across her lips.

"Nope. I have more if you want. I left the pathetic Morgan at home. Sorry." Morgan's lips sneered wickedly at her.

"You're anything but pathetic."

The urge to clamp her lips back over Morgan's came forward again, stopping when she saw blood on the back of her hand.

"Will you please listen to me?"

"What choice do I have? I'm pinned against a sink. Talk dammit. I can't *wait* to hear what pitiful excuses you need to say to screw me again. All you had to do was say, "Um, Morgan, all I want's a piece of ass; then you can scurry on your way.' I might have been more inclined to endure the bullshit."

Shane hung her head, remembering too well the harsh words she'd said to Morgan right before she fled in tears. "I'm sorry. I had my reasons. And if you'd listen, I'd tell you."

"Forget it, Shane. It doesn't matter anymore."

"It matters to me."

Morgan's eyes, blue as the ocean, looked back at Shane with that fiery glow disappearing. Her breath steadied. Her delicate wrists were still clamped in Shane's grasp.

Tell her you idiot. It's your last chance.

* * * * *

Dawn drove down the street, barely slowing to turn onto Morgan's street. Determination is what carried her. Morgan was her target.

She'd created a monster, a monster she wanted to feel tremble beneath her. She couldn't get Morgan from her mind no matter what she did, no matter who she fucked. She had to have her; even it was the last time.

She pulled along the curb and stumbled from the truck. A beer can landed on the street. She kicked it away and started toward the front door.

Jay opened the door before she could turn the knob. "What do you want, Dawn?"

"Stupid question coming from a stupid faggot. Get out of my way, twerp." Dawn pushed past him and started up the stairs. She heard Jay's door slam and darted up the remaining steps, knowing he'd be calling the cops.

She slammed her fists against Morgan's door. The gold doorknocker bounced under her strength. "Morgan!" She screamed, her voice echoing around the tiny hall. She rammed again, jolting pain through her knuckles. "Open the fucking door."

She kicked the door. "Get your ass out here." She leaned her forehead against the door, heart screaming in her chest. "I love you, Morgan."

"She's not here, Dawn, and the cops are on the way." Phil, her other faggot friend, screamed up the hall. She moved away from the door and peered down the stairs at him.

"And where exactly did she go?"

"None of your fucking business."

Dawn started down the stairs. Now she would get her chance to beat his ass into a bloody mess. He'd learn to stay out of Morgan's business once and for all. She was tired of all these people putting thoughts into Morgan's head. If they'd leave her alone, she'd come back, where she belonged.

"Yes, it is my fucking business."

A misstep sent her tumbling down the remaining steps. The last thing she heard was Phil's laughter echoing around the room.

Chapter Eighteen

Morgan stared at Shane, heat licking her crotch, love sheltered in her heart for a woman she barely knew.

Shane loosened her grip on Morgan's wrists and stepped back. "It matters to me. I ..."

Morgan held her breath and watched confusion wash over Shane's face. *You what? Love me? Wanna fuck my brains out? What?* Morgan screamed the questions in her head.

"You what, Shane?" she calmly asked.

Shane stepped forward, freezing every ounce of blood flowing through Morgan's veins. She squeezed the edge of the counter with all her might while Shane's mouth closed over hers.

A burst of light flashed behind her closed lids while warmth spread down her arms and legs, burrowing between her legs. Why did she want this woman so bad? What force was behind this attraction?

Shane slid her tongue into Morgan's mouth with a soft moan. Morgan loosed her fingers from the counter, slid them to Shane's face then wove them through her hair, pulling her deeper for the kiss. Shane's hands snaked around her waist, pulling her tighter against her. Their tongues danced together, exploring each other again.

Shane ended the sensual kiss and leaned her forehead against Morgan's. "We really need to talk. I have so much to tell you."

Morgan only nodded, words escaping her mind. Only heat and desire remained.

"Can we please get out of here?" Shane whispered.

Again, Morgan nodded.

Shane leaned back, staring down at her. "Are you sure?"

"Shane, I'm mad, confused, and hurt ... don't give me a chance to change my mind."

Shane eyed her curiously then extended her hand. Morgan's heart swelled then plummeted. Was this just another trick to get in her bed? Would she be fleeing Shane's bed within an hour, her heart wrenched again? Was she willing to take that chance?

She let her gaze fall to Shane's fingers. A spark of light flashed before her eyes, bringing forth the image of those fingers stroking her to an orgasm, drive after drive, inch by inch. Fire slithered between her legs.

She slid her fingers out and let them entwine in Shane's. They slipped through the bathroom door and down the hall. Morgan spotted Matt in a deep conversation with Scott. His eyes rounded with amusement as Shane pulled Morgan near them.

Morgan pulled her fingers from Shane's and walked toward Matt. He turned to face her. A knowing smile lifted the corners of his lips.

"Thanks for bringing me." She nodded her head toward Shane. "We're going to have a chat."

"I think that's a great idea." He leaned forward and gave her a tight squeeze.

"Tell Dan how you feel. It's not fair to him." Morgan whispered in his ear.

She felt his grin against her cheek. "I will. I promise."

She leaned back and gave him a wink. She turned and found Shane talking to her sister. Shane motioned her over with an outstretched hand. Morgan walked toward them, embarrassed at the devious look she'd given her sister.

Shane slinked her fingers into Morgan's. "This is my sister, Teresa. She flew in with me."

Gorgeous, happy green eyes stared back at her. "It's nice to meet you, Morgan." She turned back to Shane. "Scott's taking me bar hopping after this. I'm sure we'll crash at his place when he's done flirting with every Tom, Dick, and Harry so I'll just call you tomorrow." Her eyes twinkled with the mischief.

Shane nodded her head, smiled, then pulled Morgan across the floor and out the front doors.

Cool night air wrapped around them, doing little to cool the burning embers inside Morgan. Her heart flew into her throat. Was this a mistake? Was she asking for trouble and more heartache by going with Shane? She wanted to stop, but the fire burning between her legs needed a fire extinguisher. Her fire needed Shane.

They walked toward Shane's truck with fingers entwined. Shane held the door open while Morgan lifted herself inside. When the door closed, a shiver shot down her spine. Goose bumps prickled her arms. She heard a faint voice and froze.

Shane slid into the seat beside her and gave her a curious stare. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she lied, giving her a smile.

She wasn't okay. Something was wrong, but what, she didn't know. The faint voice still tickled her ears, begging to be heard. She strained to hear the words. Nothing.

* * * * *

Dawn awoke with a grunt to the blinding light over the hospital bed. Pain pierced the back of her skull like a knife. She squeezed her eyes together, filtering out the light, doing little for the pain.

Someone moved from beside the bed. She opened her eyes, pain slicing her head, and turned toward the noise.

"Hello, Dawn." Rachel rose from her slouched position in the chair by the bed, a smirk painted on her mouth.

Dawn rolled back over. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Just making sure you're okay." Rachel walked around the foot of the bed. "To my disappointment ... you are."

"Get the hell out of here, Rachel."

"Not until you promise you'll leave Morgan alone. She's tired of these games and she's tired of you." Rachel made her way to the other side of the bed and slammed her hand flat down on the pillow holding Dawn's head. "Do I make myself clear, you ungrateful, undeserving, piece of shit?"

Dawn flew to a sitting position, holding her head tight between the palms of her hands, pain shooting behind her eyes. "You fucking bitch! Get the hell out of here."

Hurried footsteps rushed down the hall and a nurse skidded into the room, looking between Rachel and Dawn. "What's going on in here?"

Dawn looked up at the nurse, taking in her perfect figure eight under blue scrubs. Her gaze rose and met a pair of sparkling blue eyes. "I'm sorry to cause trouble."

She snapped a look to Rachel. Rachel glared at her, no doubt trying to figure out how to kill her right where she stood.

Dawn turned back to the nurse, ignoring Rachel, and smiled her magnetic smile. "She's mad because I broke up with her. I've been trying to make her see its over."

Dawn saw Rachel's mouth drop from the corner of her eye. She found the twinkle in the nurse's eyes more amusing. She gave her a wink then watched a flush spread across her cheeks. A smile lifted the corners of her pretty mouth.

"I think I'm gonna have to ask you to leave," The nurse said to Rachel. "She has a concussion and needs to rest before she's released."

Dawn turned to Rachel, giving her the very best "fuck you" smile she could manage with stars flashing from the pain.

Rage flashed in Rachel's eyes. She turned her gaze on the nurse, giving her a glare, then turned back to Dawn. She eased forward, her hands flat on the bed, and brought her nose right against Dawn's ear.

"As God is my witness, if you so much as come near Morgan again, I'm going to slice you from head to toe and watch your blood spiral down a water drain."

Dawn felt her heart skip a beat. She'd never heard Rachel so mad or so defensive.

"That's it. If you don't leave now, I'm calling security." The nurse pointed toward the door. Her blonde hair sparkled under the bright lights.

"No problem." Rachel pushed away from the bed, making sure she shook the bed, sending more bolts of pain through Dawn's head, and then headed for the door. "Hey, Dawn?"

Dawn turned to look at Rachel, terrified of what was going to come out of her mouth. "What, bitch?"

"Since you're at the hospital, you should really think about getting those blisters looked at. I don't think their normal ... especially down there."

Dawn felt her heart plummet. The nurse's mouth dropped open and she took a step back. "Don't believe her. She's just mad because I don't want her."

"With all those blisters on your pussy ... who would?" Rachel grinned wickedly at her and left the room.

She watched the nurse ease out behind her.

"Fucking bitch." Dawn cursed under her breath then lay back down with a thump, cursing again at the pain throbbing in her brain.

"Where are you, Morgan?" She slid her hand over her eyes to shield out the light. "Bitch."

* * * * *

Shane pulled the truck into traffic and before Morgan knew it, Shane's house came into view. She eased out of the truck with Shane's help and followed her across the porch, legs quivering, crotch heated.

The voice was gone now with only passion and desire audible in her mind. All she wanted now was to make love to Shane, to be carried over the brink of passion by the hands of this skilled lover.

Shane locked the door behind them and turned to look at Morgan. Her blazing green eyes spilled over with want. Morgan held her breath while Shane closed the space between them, snaking her hands around her waist, leaning her lips down to capture Morgan's.

Morgan's arms slipped around her neck, fingers weaving through waves of her hair, pulling her tongue deeper into her mouth. Their tongues danced together. Heat splashed

Morgan's crotch, soaking her, stinging her clit. She squeezed her legs together to ease the pain aching between her legs.

Shane pulled away, breaking the fiery kiss. "Talk. We have to talk." Breathless words rang between them.

"I don't want to talk right now. We have all night."

Morgan yanked Shane's shirt into a fist ball, pulling her back for another kiss. A soft cry escaped her while Shane's head descended, and then lips plastered to lips. A fire roared to life inside Morgan.

They shed each others clothes as they stumbled up the stairs, letting each garment fall where it may. They made the landing at the top of the stairs, tripping and falling all over each other in haste to get to the bed. Shane plucked Morgan off her feet and carried her the rest of the way and placed her gently on the bed.

Morgan's insides quivered and screamed for attention. She couldn't remember ever needing or wanting Dawn with such fire blazing in her gut. Every nerve in her body was alive, jumping with desire.

Shane pressed in beside her. Her fingers slid down Morgan's chest, over her stomach, then slipped between her legs. A suppressed moan escaped her lips. Her legs drifted apart while fingers probed her clit, dropping further to dive into her.

She whipped her head back into the comforter, arching, loud moans escaping her lips. Shane's lips slid down her chest and swiftly sucked an erect nipple into her mouth, sending more jolts of electricity between her legs. She matched Shane's rhythm, one dive after the next, pulling more moans, more cries of pleasure and her orgasm closer to the edge.

Morgan inched her hand between their bodies, between Shane's legs to find her clit. Her nipple was released while Shane's head fell back, face grimaced in ecstasy.

Morgan stared up at her, her heart swelling with love, her insides coiling like a spring. She was in love with this woman. How could this have happened? How could she have let herself fall for a woman she barely knew?

Shane slipped her fingers out, found Morgan's clit with a fingertip, and began circling. Morgan's orgasm leapt to the edge, ready to spill from within her. She fought back, not yet ready to unleash its power, wanting and needing to wait for Shane, to have their orgasms crash together.

Shane hunched her hips over Morgan's hand, riding her wave of pleasure. She leaned her face over Morgan's. Her lips captured Morgan's and her tongue snaked inside. Their tongues swirled with each others, bodies quivering with need, and thumping against each other. Morgan held tight to control her orgasm, demanding to be set free.

Shane froze, released the kiss, and let her head fall back. Morgan watched every facial expression that danced across her face while her orgasm rocked through her body. She slid

her fingers further between Shane's legs and drove them to the hilt inside her, feeling her pumps of pleasure squeeze her fingers.

Her need to control her own orgasm was lost. Her orgasm ricocheted over the edge. Pumps coursed through her. Shane's fingers drove back inside of her, stretching, spreading, and pulling more pumps from within Morgan.

Their bodies rocked together on the bed. Screams of pleasure filled the room.

They went limp beside each other, released of energy. A smile lifted the corners of Shane's mouth while she opened her eyes to stare at Morgan. Morgan smiled back, nestling into her. Shane wrapped her arms around her and gave her a loving squeeze, brushing kisses across her forehead.

"I can't get enough of you," Shane said, brushing her fingers into Morgan's hair.

Morgan leaned on her elbow to look at her, curious to the meaning of her words. "Why?"

"I don't know."

Shane turned on her side, staring at Morgan.

"Thank you, I think." Morgan gave her a smile, wishing Shane would tell her what was really on her mind.

Did Shane love her? She'd never said as much, but Morgan could feel it in every touch, every mesmerizing stare. As much as she wanted to tell Shane how she really felt, she couldn't. She couldn't set herself up for another fall. She was determined to get past Dawn, and on with her life, no matter what obstacles she had to endure to get there.

"We really have to talk. There's a lot you have to know ... to hear."

"Why, Shane? Why do I have to know this secret of yours?"

"You have to know the truth about me, the whole truth. What I have to say to you might change the way you look at me, something that will surely break my heart."

"Why? I've asked you why a hundred times, and you still dance around the answer. Why, Shane?"

Shane only stared at her, reading her face as if it held the answer. "Because I want you to know. I like you and you deserve to hear the truth."

Morgan cringed. Like? She likes me? A wave of disappointment washed over her. She was sure Shane was going to tell her she loved her. What a letdown! *Why am I waiting for her to say it? Just tell her, stupid.* Morgan tossed the thought from her mind. She'd only lead herself to more misery if she did.

Morgan eased off the bed and started searching for her clothing. She found her crumpled jeans at the top of the steps.

"Where are you going?"

Morgan gritted her teeth and slid her legs into her thong and jeans. "You want to talk, so let's talk."

"We can talk all night long ... naked as jay birds."

Shane came up behind her and slipped her arms around Morgan's stomach, lifting her off her feet and making her way back to the bed. Morgan giggled while Shane dropped on the bed, playfully tugging her jeans back over her hips. Her jeans slipped over her heels and landed on the floor with a thump.

"Ah. That's better." Shane slid on the bed beside her. "Now, where was I? Oh, yeah."

Her head dipped and caught Morgan's lips in another heated kiss, tongues melding, arms snaking around each other. Morgan's heart twisted with so much love, she felt it might burst and leave her dying right here in Shane's arms. She couldn't shake this feeling of falling. It was terrifying, yet the most perfect feeling in the world. To fall in love again ... she never thought it could ever happen. She never dreamed she'd ever have room inside her heart for anyone but Dawn.

Shane pulled her lips free and leaned on her elbow. "I don't know where to start."

Shane trailed a fingertip across Morgan's nipple, dipping between her breast, heading for the other. Her gaze followed.

"Well, I can't help you there since I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

"How do you feel about me, Morgan?"

Morgan felt her breath catch, wanting desperately to tell her that she'd fallen head over heels in love with her, but knowing she could never say such a thing and risk the heartbreak.

"I like you, too. You're fun to be around and well, the sex is okay too."

Morgan laughed as Shane's mouth dropped open. Shane gave her nipple a slight pinch. "Okay? Sex is okay?"

Morgan squealed through her laughter, slapping at Shane's fingers. They settled back into a serious manner and looked at each other.

"So, you like me?"

Morgan watched disappointment wash over Shane's face.

Morgan had the perfect chance to tell her, to just blurt it out, get it over with, and then wait for the fate of the words. Instead, she nodded her head. "Yes. I like you, Shane."

"Would you still like me if I'd robbed a bank?"

"Will you share?"

Shane inched her fingers toward Morgan's other nipple.

"Would you still like me if I'd stolen something?"

"Only if it was diamonds and you let me wear them too."

Shane gave her a playful smirk, inching her fingers closer, making Morgan's breath stall.

"Would you still like me if I'd killed someone?"

"I have a few people I'd pay you to take out."

Shane's fingers flew to Morgan's nipples before Morgan could react. She squealed with laughter again while gentle fingers pinched at her nipples.

Shane ducked her head and slithered her tongue across it, calming Morgan instantly. She licked the tip with a slow draw of her tongue then sucked it into her mouth. Nerve endings came to life between Morgan's legs.

As fast as Shane had sucked it into her mouth, she released it. Morgan gave her a grunt.

"We have to finish this conversation before I chicken out."

Morgan rolled over, bringing Shane with her, and straddled her. She brought Shane's hands over her breasts, circling her hands over Shane's.

"I'm never going to finish if you don't stop."

"Is that a threat?" Morgan smiled down on her, grinding her hips over Shane's pelvic bone.

Shane circled her nipples with her thumb. Morgan moaned, grinding her hips faster. Shane slid her hand down Morgan's stomach, slipped a thumb over her clit and started circling. Spontaneous heat ignited between Morgan's thighs.

Shane rose, catching Morgan's nipple in her mouth, gently chewing its peak between her teeth. A soft cry escaped her lips while Shane's thumb circled faster. Morgan caught Shane's rhythm, her head falling back, panting.

Shane grabbed around her waist and flipped her onto her back then slid down the length of her. Her head fell between Morgan's thighs, and she quickly sucked her clit between her lips. Fire sparked and then flamed to life.

Morgan hunched her hips against Shane's mouth faster and faster with every suck. Shane's fingers teased her hole then rammed into her. She screamed with surprise and pleasure.

"Oh, God ... Shane!"

Her orgasm catapulted over the edge, racking through her body pump after glorious pump.

Shane's fingers slowed while her pumps diminished. Morgan's body relaxed, suspended of energy yet again. Shane removed herself from between her legs and came to lie beside her, slowly dragging her fingers along Morgan's heaving chest.

"Now, maybe you'll lie there and listen to me?"

"Yes, ma'am," Morgan said, body still quivering from the inside out.

"I don't want you to freak out on me. You have to listen to all I have to say and give me a chance to explain." Morgan opened her eyes to stare at her.

"Okay."

Morgan's heart jumped. She couldn't believe how in love with this woman she was.

She gave Shane her full attention by turning onto her side and leaning on her elbow. Gorgeous green eyes stared back at her. She pushed back the urge to lean over and place her lips on Shane's.

"I killed someone, Morgan." Shane's brow creased. "Wait. That didn't come out right."

My pants are on the floor beside the bed. My shirt is somewhere between here and the downstairs. I have no idea where my shoes are and how in the hell am I going to get them all on and get my ass out of here before she tries to kill me too?

Morgan prayed her face didn't show the horror coursing through her veins while she stared at Shane.

Morgan heard a faint ringing in her ears. No. It was a cell phone, ringing from downstairs. Her cell phone! If she could just get to it, she could call the police and hopefully escape unharmed. Would Shane let her leave the room? If she flew from the bed and down the stairs, could she make it before Shane caught her?

"Do you want to go answer it?" Shane yanked her from her escape plans.

"Yes."

Before Shane could change her mind, Morgan was off the bed, jeans in hand and fleeing down the stairs. She took the steps two at time, praying she didn't miss a step and find herself flat on her ass at the bottom full of broken bones.

She grabbed for her purse and yanked the cell from inside. She flipped the phone open just in time to miss the call. She cursed and looked up to see Shane reaching the bottom of the landing.

Her heart jumped into her throat while Shane came to stand beside her. Her chest heaved from the leaps she'd taken down the steps, along with the fright of being near Shane. How in the hell had she gotten herself into this, and how the hell was she going to get herself out of it now?

Chapter Nineteen

Shane watched Morgan flee the bedroom. She knew she was scared out of her mind. How stupid could she be for blurting out those words? After all the years of living with the sole responsibility of Shelby's death on her shoulders, and after finally letting loose of that blame, she still couldn't find a way to shake the words from her mouth.

She eased off the bed, dressed and then started down the steps. Morgan cursed under her breath when the phone stopped ringing. Obviously she'd missed her call. Shane was sure the caller was Dawn. An instant jealous streak coursed her spine. *Here we go again. Dawn ... Dawn ... Dawn. I'm so fucking sick of Dawn.*

She made it to the bottom. Morgan turned to look at her, eyes full of fear. Shane felt the urge to laugh but suppressed it instead. She'd lived such a sheltered life, steering clear of people so she wouldn't have to see this type of fear in their eyes. Now that she'd tossed that blame to its sole owner, and the look that she'd feared for so long was before her, it was more amusing than anything. She didn't think Morgan would find any humor in her reasoning, even though fear was just as beautiful as the expression that slid across her face while her body was racked with an orgasm.

"Did you miss your call?" Shane watched Morgan's chest heave.

"Yes. It was Rachel."

Shane's gut instinct had been wrong. So, where was Dawn? She'd wanted to ask Morgan, but didn't want to bring the bitch up during any time she had to share with her, let alone in the middle of sex. Why hadn't Morgan brought her up? Had they broken up for good? Was it over? Wasn't that too much for Shane to wish for?

"Call her back."

"Okay"

Morgan continued to stare at her, not moving a muscle to dial any numbers. She'd better finish this conversation before too much time went by.

"Morgan, you don't have to be afraid of me. I didn't kill anyone with my bare hands, but ... I think I would have if I'd gotten my hands on her."

Morgan's brow creased while she stared at Shane. She could see the gears churning behind Morgan's eyes, taking in the new information.

"You didn't kill anyone?"

"No. But I've blamed myself for all these years ... until you."

Morgan let out a sigh and gave Shane a faint smile. "Will you please explain?"

She led Morgan to the couch and told her everything, starting with her relationship with Shelby then ending with her saying goodbye.

"You gave me the courage to tell her goodbye and to stop blaming myself."

Morgan's eyes glazed over with tears. "Me? How did I do that?"

"My night with you brought me back to earth. I don't want to live my life alone. I have way too much love to give and I want to be happy in love. It's the most awesome feeling in the world." Although in love was part of it, happy was not ... yet.

Morgan's head hung down to her chest. "That's great. I'm so glad you stopped blaming yourself. It really wasn't your fault."

"But, I couldn't see that until you."

Morgan's mesmerizing blue eyes rose back up to meet Shane's, stopping her heart. She held back from yanking Morgan into her arms and telling her how in love with her she was, how she never wanted to be without her, how she didn't have a damn clue how she would ever get over her.

"I don't know what to say."

Shane could think of a few things she'd like to hear right now. Starting with an "I love you." Just those simple words would change her whole life, but she knew in her heart, sex was all Morgan had to offer.

"You hungry?" Shane asked wanting to take Morgan away from the words she knew she couldn't say.

"As a matter of fact, I'm starving."

"I've worked up quite an appetite myself." She gave Morgan a wink then eyed her naked body.

She licked her lips playfully. "I can think of a delicious entrée."

Morgan giggled then started pulling on her jeans and shirt. Shane leaned over, not able to control the need to feel her, and placed her lips against Morgan's soft cheek. She pushed away from the couch and headed to the kitchen. A few seconds later Morgan entered the room and slid onto a stool at the food bar.

"Aren't you going to call Rachel back?"

"It was Dawn."

Shane felt her heart pump extra blood through her veins, giving her an instant head rush. "You don't have a reason to lie to me, Morgan."

"I know, and I'm sorry."

Shane turned to the chrome double fridge and yanked open the door, pulling breakfast items from inside, tossing them hard on the counter.

"Morgan, I can deal with the truth, but I can't deal with liars."

"I said I was sorry." Morgan gave a sigh. "You scared the shit out of me, and I'm not very happy with Dawn right now."

Shane knew the difference between not happy and over with. So this was just a fling to get revenge on Dawn? Should she be surprised? Did she care, as long as she had Morgan for any amount of time? However, she needed to start caring. Morgan would be back with Dawn before she knew it, leaving her with a broken heart. But tonight ... oh, tonight, Morgan was all hers.

"I'm sorry. You're right." Shane turned to look at her. "I shouldn't have blurted that out like I did."

"It's okay."

"So, are you going to call her back?"

"No. I don't want any interruptions tonight."

A smile slid across Morgan's face. Shane's heart pumped double time at the mischief plainly written on her face. She walked across the tiled floor and propped her arms on the food bar across from Morgan. She leaned into Morgan's face, watching her eyes round with anticipation.

"Neither do I."

Shane's lips closed over Morgan's. She inhaled her sweet melon scent, wanting to eat her like a ripe piece of fruit. Their tongues explored each other. She could never get enough of this woman. She wanted nothing more than to lock the doors and never leave the safety of this house again. She could shelter Morgan from the world while giving her everything her heart desired.

She pulled back from the kiss and went back to whipping up something fabulous for this woman ... this woman that she loved more than anything in the world ... if only she could just tell her.

* * * * *

Dawn slammed the cell phone down on the seat beside her.

"Bitch! Where the fuck are you?"

She was parked across the street from Morgan's apartment, waiting against the curb. The oak tree above her blocked the light, making her less noticeable to anyone pulling to the front of Morgan's apartment or anyone looking through their windows.

Pain still singed her forehead, but not as severely as it had. The pills she'd taken seemed to be taking the edge off. However, they weren't taking the burning edge off her need for Morgan. She'd never wanted Morgan so much. She wanted her right now, naked and screaming for more, or better yet, screaming for her to stop. From the second Morgan had stared at her with those beautiful eyes, she knew she had to do anything it took to win her back. No price was too high.

As a car pulled to the curb, she ducked then eased up enough to see over the door frame. Rachel got out of her car and entered the apartment lobby.

"Bitch!" Dawn cursed under her breath. "You totally screwed up my fuck for the night."

Dawn remembered the nurse with her blonde hair and huge tits screaming to have their hardened nipples sucked into her mouth. The nurse wouldn't even look her in the eye when she'd been released. Screw her. She'd find others, but Rachel would pay for those comments sooner or later.

The lobby door opened again bringing Rachel, Jay, and Phil onto the sidewalk.

"If we could just find Dawn, she'd be able to handle Morgan." Rachel said to the faggots.

"I've called everyone I know. I can't find her anywhere and she's not answering her cell." Phil said.

Dawn perked to the conversation. What was wrong with Morgan? And why wasn't her cell ringing. She reached for the phone, flipped it open and saw Morgan's face on the display window. No missed calls. Stupid worthless phones!

"We've got to find her. Morgan was screaming for her."

"I'll go back in and call Seth. Maybe he's heard from Dawn by now." Jay said then walked back through the lobby doors.

What happened? Is something wrong with Morgan? Is she hurt? *She was screaming for me. The bitch. I knew she'd come crawling back.*

Rachel let out a sob and threw her face into her hands. Phil pulled her into his chest, consoling her.

Fear gripped Dawn. What if something horrible had happened? Morgan might need her. She grabbed her cell, pushed open the door and flew across the street before she could change her mind.

"What's wrong with Morgan?" She screamed while she darted across the deserted lane.

Rachel gasped. "Dawn! Oh, my God. We've been looking for you everywhere and calling you for hours. Morgan needs you. She's gone crazy. She's out of her mind."

“Where is she?” Dawn felt a vice grip tighten around her heart.

“She’s hiding in the woods. She said she wouldn’t talk to anyone but you.” Rachel let out another loud sob. “Dawn, she said she was going to kill herself if we didn’t find you. She has a gun!”

Dawn’s heart stalled in her chest. Morgan loved her and couldn’t live without her. Her pride puffed in her chest while she stared at Phil.

“Take me to her, now.”

“Let’s go.” Phil ordered then ran around to the driver’s side of his Honda.

Dawn raced around and jumped into the passenger side, heart pumping wildly in her chest.

“We’ll follow in Dawn’s truck. Are the keys in it?” Rachel asked from beside the car.

“Yes and you better not put a scratch on it.” She tapped the dashboard for Phil to go, who eagerly floored the gas.

“How far is it?” Lights blurred past them with Phil’s speed.

“Just up the street.” Phil said, never taking his eyes off the road.

Phil turned down one street, then another, cursing as he whipped around and headed in another direction.

“Do you have a clue where you’re going? You’re so stupid, you probably don’t even know where the hell it is.”

“Don’t be mean, Dawn. I’m trying to help Morgan. It’s just ahead. Calm down.”

“Faggot.” Dawn cursed under her breath.

“Yes, I am.”

“Just hurry and get us there.”

Phil’s cell rang and he flipped it open with ease while steering his tiny car.

“Hello? Yep. Okay.”

He flipped the phone shut, not offering any information.

“Who was that?” Dawn screamed at him after a few seconds ticked by.

“It was Rachel. They had to make a stop.”

“In my damn truck? The bitch. If she puts one scratch on my baby, she’s dead.”

A few minutes later Phil slowed the car then turned onto a dirt road.

“You moron! You’re lost aren’t you?” Dawn screamed at him. She’d never wanted to punch anyone so badly in her life.

Phil remained quiet, a smirk glued to his face.

The road ended abruptly by a pond. Rachel and Jay stood looking out over the water.

Dawn jumped out of the car. “Where’s my damn truck?”

Rachel turned. The headlights shining on her gave her eyes a green, eerie glow. "Do you remember what I told you at the hospital?"

She looked between all three of them, anger rising with every step she took toward Rachel. "I'm going to ask you one more time ... where's my fucking truck?"

"You don't listen very well do you, Dawn?" Rachel kept her distance, grinning at her.

"What the hell are you freaks up to? You're not scaring me. I could whip all three of you and still be home in time to fuck Morgan's brains out." She laughed. She'd have her back in control before daybreak ... that was for sure.

Police sirens grew louder while they stood staring at each other. Gurgling from the pond caught her attention. She strained to see what could be causing the noise, to no avail.

"What's out there?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"What fucking question."

"Do you remember what I said at the hospital?" Rachel crossed her arms over her chest, staring at her.

"Yes. To stay away from Morgan and get my herpes checked. You'll pay for that one. I could be at home getting a nice piece of ass right now."

"Exactly. And you don't listen." Rachel took another step toward Dawn. "You see, we love our best friend. You're scum, and we want you to leave her alone so she can have a happy life."

"Screw you, Rachel. Tell me where the truck is and I'll be on my way." Dawn had a feeling this wasn't going to turn out pretty.

"Can't do."

"Why not, you stupid bitch?"

"Because, I'm watching your blood gurgle down the drainpipe."

Rachel turned back to the pond, smiling wickedly. Dawn strained again to see the pond. Only a glint shimmer slid across the pond from the sliver of moon above their heads.

High beams flashed on behind her. She gasped and froze. Her truck ... her baby ... in the middle of the pond ... was sinking.

She screamed and ran for the pond. Sirens shrilled around them. She dove into the water knowing it was useless. Air bubbles were erupting a few feet in front of her as the truck's front end sank deeper into the water. She slammed her fists in the water as fire erupted inside her chest. She was going to kill all three of them if it was the last thing she did.

She sloshed toward the shore, determined to get her hands on one of them. It didn't matter which one. Bright, blue lights beacons around the wooded cul-de-sac. She emerged on land just in time to watch two police cars slide to a halt beside Phil's car.

Rachel and Jay ran toward one of the cars, fake cries piercing the quiet night. "Officer. That woman is drunk. She was driving like a maniac and almost drove us into a tree. Then, she ran her truck into the pond." Rachel cried to the officer and pointed toward the water and Dawn.

"Oh, my God!" Jay's raspy, ear-splitting voice started. "I thought I was going to die. I was so afraid I would never get to see my lover or my grandmother again ... or my cat. I would have never gotten to wear my fluffy bunny slippers again. My life totally flashed before my eyes." His hands dramatically flailed in the air.

"Calm down." One of the officers started. "Who's the driver of this car?"

Phil raised his hand. "I am, sir. You might want to take a peek inside her truck. I'm sure she's drunk. She was a total maniac."

The bright lights from Phil's car blinded Dawn while she stood immobile listening to the trap she'd walked eagerly into. How stupid could she have been? And here she was, stuffed with pride because she thought Morgan wanted and needed her.

"Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to raise your hands above your head." Dawn whipped around to a police officer approaching her with regard. "Drop down to your knees slowly and place your hands behind your head."

Dawn gritted her teeth, made an about face, dropped to her knees, and placed her hands behind her head. She took a long hard look at her truck, sinking deeper with every second that ticked by, and cursed herself for being such a moron.

Handcuffs were slapped around her wrists and she was yanked back to her feet. A police officer led her back to his car and held open the door for her. She glanced at the "faggot crew" and watched their wicked smiles pass between each other. She knew they wouldn't give up their protection of Morgan from this day forward. It was time to give up and start hunting a new life.

Morgan wasn't worth this bullshit.

* * * * *

Morgan watched Shane walk around the enormous kitchen pulling pans from their brass hooks above the island stove. Garlic and butter stung her nose, making Morgan's stomach grumble for food.

What had Dawn wanted? She thought Dawn had given up on her ... prayed she'd given up hope of reconciliation. Was the same old shit going to start again? How was she supposed to deal with Dawn's desperation to get her back and hold on to hope that she could start a relationship with Shane?

Shane ... how could this have happened? Was Morgan desperately reaching for love? Did Shane love her in return?

She watched Shane flip the omelet over, her strong arms protruding from her T-shirt sleeve, long fingers gripping the handle of the spatula. Heat scalded her inner thighs, reminding her how easy it was for Shane to put out the fire.

Shane covered the pan with a lid, pulled plates from the white wood cabinets behind her, then turned to look at Morgan. Her green eyes flickered with passion.

"I bet you're hard to get over." Shane's soft voice floated between them.

Morgan's breath caught with her sweet words. She felt a lump rise in her throat.

Tell her, stupid ass. Just say the words ... let her take it from there. Toss the ball in her court and let her take control of the game.

"Shane ... I ..."

Shane's brow rose, eyes rounding. "You what?"

Morgan's lump choked her. She cleared her aching throat. "I'd like something to drink."

Shane stared at her for a few seconds before she pulled her gaze from Morgan's. She pulled a soda from the fridge and turned back. Morgan saw disappointment on her face while she handed over the can, hating herself for being such a chickenshit.

"Thank you."

"Welcome."

Shane walked back to the pan and slid omelets onto plates, stuck a fork under each one then placed one in front of Morgan. She walked around the food bar and sat on the stool at Morgan's side.

They ate in silence. Morgan's head screamed at her to tell Shane the truth, to tell her that she was in love with her. *What does it matter? She's either going to laugh and send me on my way, or she's going to yank me into her arms, happy to finally hear the words. Just tell her dammit. Get this shit over with.*

Morgan shoved her fork under the omelet and turned to Shane, determination filled her. "Shane, I need to tell you something."

Shane dropped her fork on the plate and swiveled her stool to face Morgan. Morgan's breath caught again, heart pounding in her chest. Those gorgeous eyes stared at her, waiting patiently.

"My relationship with Dawn is over." *Good start, Morgan.*

"I'd like to say I'm sorry, but I'd be lying."

Shane's tousled hair begged for Morgan to rip her fingers through it. A lone strand hung over her forehead. Morgan wanted to push it aside and crush her lips to Shane's.

"Morgan, I don't want to sound like a pessimist, but just because your relationship is over doesn't mean you're over your relationship."

Morgan heard her words loud and clear. And, she knew she was over Dawn and the relationship. She wanted Shane. God only knew why or how, but she did. So, why couldn't she just say it?

She took a deep breath, filled with determination to say the words. "Shane I ..."

Morgan's cell phone rang from the living room. She resisted the urge to run for it and calmly eased off the stool. She crossed the living room, reached inside her purse, and grabbed the cell just in time to miss the call again. She eyed the display screen to see it was an odd phone number, one she didn't recognize. With a renewed determination, she cut the power off. No more phone calls tonight and no more disturbances. She wanted the night free to get to know Shane and possibly find the balls to tell her she loved her.

She walked back to the food bar and finished her food with thoughts of their long night ahead creeping into her mind. Fire crashed between her thighs as images flipped through her mind at what Shane could do to her ... what she wanted Shane to do to her.

When the plate was empty, Morgan felt impatient to get back up the stairs, into Shane's king-size bed, and sink back into making love.

She turned to Shane and saw the same passion crossing her face that matched the one spreading through her own body. Shane gave her a simple knowing smile, a saucy wink raised her eyebrows, and before she knew it, they were racing up the stairs, breathlessly tearing at each other's clothes and shoving each other toward the bed.

Shane tumbled down on top of her, fingers melding into the strands of Morgan's hair, cupping her face with the palm of her hands. Her lips crushed against Morgan's, her tongue snaking inside her mouth.

Morgan released a pent up moan and slithered her fingers through the silken strands of Shane's hair. When Shane's lower body fell between her thighs, Morgan draped her legs over her hips and locked her ankles at the small of her back, grinding against her.

Shane pressed against Morgan's crotch, rotating her hips in hard, lazy circles.

Morgan released her hold on Shane's hair, raked her nails down her back, grabbed hold of her ass, and shoved her crotch against Shane's pelvic bone. A low moan escaped her throat and into Shane's mouth as fire crashed between her legs, soaking her crotch.

Shane released the deep kiss, ducked her head, and sucked at the skin on Morgan's neck. While teeth nipped at her skin, Morgan's head fell back, lips parting.

Shane dipped further and sucked an erect nipple into her mouth, pulling a soft cry from Morgan.

"Your skin is so soft." Shane breathed hot air across Morgan's breast then gently pulled it back between her teeth, rolling her tongue across the hardened tip.

Morgan bucked her hips faster, digging her fingers into Shane's firm ass. "You're driving me crazy."

Shane gave a gentle chew on Morgan's nipple then released it. "Good."

She moved to the other nipple to give equal attention, making Morgan breathless beneath her. "It's not good. I'm burning alive down here."

"Burn, baby, burn." Shane chuckled against her breast and rammed her hips against Morgan.

Morgan gave a soft cry. "Show me again, Shane."

Shane rose above her, still grinding her hips, and gave Morgan a heated smile. She unlocked Morgan's legs from her waist and opened the nightstand drawer beside the bed.

Morgan watched a vibrator emerge and licked her lips in expectation. "Uh huh."

Shane turned back to her with a passionate glare then turned the device on. A low humming started and then steadily grew louder as Shane's smile stretched across her face. "You want something?" Her eyebrows arched playfully.

"As a matter of fact," Morgan grabbed Shane's wrist with her free hand and pulled her down flat over her body. "I do."

She tugged the vibrator out of Shane's hand, turned it off, and tossed it on top of the covers.

Shane stared at her. Morgan felt consumed by her brilliant green eyes.

Morgan slid her hand between their bodies until she encountered Shane's wiry bush.

Shane slid off the side of her body, giving her hand room to roam between her legs. Her hand started exploring as well, running her fingertip across Morgan's swollen nipples, down the flat of her stomach, and then dragging lazy circles through the black bush between her thighs.

Morgan's lips parted with heated expectation as her fingers slipped between Shane's legs, found her clit and circled her fingertip over it.

Shane let out a soft moan and then plunged her fingers inside Morgan.

Morgan released a cry and dug her head back into the bed, arching her back.

Shane's lips sucked at the skin of Morgan's neck, nipped and licked, before she leaned above her and claimed her lips.

Her tongue slithered inside Morgan's mouth, exploring, dancing her tongue around Morgan's.

Morgan bucked her hips as Shane circled her thumb over her clit, dragging her orgasm closer to the edge.

Shane humped steadily over Morgan's hand, moaning against her mouth.

The sound of Shane's moans and irregular breathing shoved Morgan's orgasm over the brink. She released her lips from Shane's and screamed in pleasure. Her body bucked and bounced on the bed as tremors rocked through her.

A soft cry escaped Shane and soon her body trembled and shook over Morgan's hand.

Their bodies convulsed together for what felt like hours. Breathing returned to normal and insides lessened to light pulses around each other's fingers.

With a sigh, Morgan pulled her hand from between Shane's legs.

Shane pulled her fingers from inside her, slithered up Morgan's body, and delicately kissed her neck, cheeks, and lips.

Morgan responded by opening, allowing Shane's tongue to meld with hers, dancing around each other. She'd never felt so cherished as she did right this very second. Warm gentle fingers caressed her cheek while her body still hummed with pleasure. She wanted to wrap up inside Shane and fall asleep in her arms.

Obviously, Shane had the same thing on her mind. While Morgan lay immobile on top of the covers, Shane yanked the blanket from the end of the bed and threw it over their bodies. She rolled Morgan on her side and spooned in behind her, wrapped her arms tightly around her, and snuggled her head against Morgan's neck.

Morgan breathed a satisfied sigh as Shane's fingers intertwined with hers. She pulled their hands close to her heart and drifted off to sleep, a smile plastered on her face.

Chapter Twenty

Morgan awoke, vaguely aware of warm lips pressing against her cheek. Shane whispered something about breakfast and then slid out of bed. Morgan pulled the pillow back under her head, snuggled under the warm blankets and drifted back to sleep, happier than she'd been in a very long time.

The next time she opened her eyes, Shane was standing over her, a pleasant smile creasing her thin lips, holding two plates of something that watered Morgan's mouth. She stretched, rolled over and eyed what was on the plates.

Steamy hot French toast drenched in maple syrup greeted her sleepy eyes. She inhaled the delicious aroma and gave Shane a bright smile.

"I can't remember the last time I was served breakfast in bed." She leaned over and pressed her lips to Shane's, felt her heart leap to the base of her throat at the sweet gesture. "Thank you."

She took the plate from Shane's outstretched hand and scooted over to give her room on the bed beside her.

"You're very welcome. It's been a long time since I served anyone breakfast in bed." She gave Morgan a saucy wink. "By the way, Rachel called. She was squealing about something. I told her to come over. Also, Scott called. Turns out, there's love in the air."

Morgan's eyes widened. "No way. Him and Matt?"

Shane nodded her head. "Turns out, Dan didn't want to out himself for anyone. Him and Scott hit it off rather quickly."

Morgan giggled and bit into another bite of French toast. "That's fantastic."

"He's also coming over."

"Shit. I have to get dressed." Morgan pushed off the headboard.

Shane reached out and stopped her. "I told them all to give us time, um ... I told them we were indisposed at the moment. They won't be here for another hour or so." She wiggled her eyebrows at Morgan and gave her a bright smile.

Morgan couldn't resist the urge to lean forward and crush her lips against Shane's. The feeling taking over her was the most amazing feeling she'd ever had. She could only hope Shane felt the same way.

She broke the kiss. "Did you now?" Morgan took Shane's plate and laid it on the nightstand. She turned back to find a heated expression on Shane's face. Heat flooded her body while fire crashed between her thighs. "And how much time do we have before our friends barge in?" She straddled Shane's lap.

"Enough." Shane grabbed her waist and pushed against Morgan's crotch. "This won't take long." She leaned forward and claimed Morgan's mouth in another frazzling kiss.

Shane slid down to lay flat on the bed, dragging Morgan down with her. Her tongue danced inside Morgan's mouth, bringing the fire sizzling throughout her body.

Morgan pulled away and slithered down her body, dragging Shane's thin boxer shorts with her. She tugged the shorts over her feet and then rested between Shane's lean thighs. "Since you cooked ... I'll eat." She winked at Shane right before she licked the tip of her tongue across her clit, and felt her body go rigid.

Shane panted and fisted sheets in her grasp as Morgan sucked her clit hungrily into her mouth.

Love bloomed inside Morgan with every moan she managed to pull from Shane. It was breathtaking to be back in love again.

Shane arched her back and sank her fingers into Morgan's hair.

Morgan released her suctioned hold on her clit and pressed her lips against her clit. She drove her fingers inside Shane, heard her gasp of breath before her soft moan of pleasure. Her insides pumped tightly around Morgan's fingers as she slid in and out of her.

When Shane's body relaxed on the bed and her fingers went limp in her hair, Morgan slithered back over her body and lay on top of her, kissing her chin and lips.

Shane smiled with satisfaction and wrapped her arms around Morgan. "Wow." She opened her eyes.

Morgan felt her heart spin out of control at the depths of such hypnotizing eyes. She merely smiled, even though her gut was fisted tight in a knot. The words she longed to tell her were lost in the kaleidoscope of color floating in Shane's eyes. *Does she love me, too?*

Morgan was suddenly afraid to tell her, terrified Shane might think this was only a casual affair, soon to be bored with her. What if she wanted to play the field now that she'd put her past behind her? Morgan would have to play her cards wisely and keep her ace in her pocket until it was time to play it.

She pecked a quick kiss on Shane's lips. "We'd better get dressed before our nutty friends arrive." She freed herself of Shane's embrace and started picking up her clothing.

Not long after they were dressed and downstairs in the kitchen tidying up, did Scott and Matt waltz into the house. Morgan squealed and ran to Matt, and gave him a tight hug. She couldn't believe how much she loved this guy. She'd felt an instant bond with him at the gallery, making two people jealous that they cared about, even though his didn't work quite the way he might have wanted. By the look on his face, it was obvious things had turned out better than he'd ever dreamed.

"It's so great to see you again." He pulled back and gave her a knowing smile.

Shane came up behind her and wrapped her arms around her waist, nodding at Matt and Scott.

Morgan's insides melted on contact. She feared she might burst with so much love flooding through her body. She eased her hands over Shane's and knew immediately she had to tell her. One way or the other, she would spill her guts before this day ended.

Shane tightened her grip around Morgan and nuzzled against her cheek. "Do you have any idea how much trouble you're asking for by being around the likes of this guy?" Shane gave Matt a playful wink.

Matt smiled and looked over at Scott, who shrugged his shoulders and rolled his eyes.

"Someone needs to tame the tiger in me. Why not this hot ass man?" He smacked Matt on the ass and gave him a sheepish grin.

Footsteps pounded across the porch. All heads turned as the glass door flew open and Rachel, Phil, and Jay came barging in.

Morgan had expected Rachel, not all three of them. Something must be up for all of them to show up. Her insides tensed.

Jay came within a few feet of her, his eyes roaming over Morgan and Shane snuggled together. "You so owe me big time."

"Why is that?" Morgan smiled at him and glanced at Phil. His eyes sparkled with mischief.

Rachel all but bounced beside him, ready to spill her guts.

Morgan couldn't love her life anymore at this moment in time. Here she stood in the arms of a woman she'd fallen head over heels with while their friends joined in her happiness, as well as Shane's. She waited to feel herself burst with so much love and affection.

"We took care of little Miss Dawn last night. Oh, my God! You should have seen the look on her face." Jay flailed his hands in front of him.

Morgan tensed immediately, and then Shane released her hold around her. She knew Shane must have felt it, too and hated she'd let Dawn's name have so much impact on her. Not her name so much as what her friends were about to tell her. It must be something

horrid for them to show up so early to spill their guts. She knew how spiteful the three of them could be.

"We drowned her truck." Rachel blurted, unable to hold her tongue another second.

Blood rushed to Morgan's face. "You did what?"

"We drove her truck into a pond and called the cops on her drunk ass." Phil calmly said, but bounced on his tipsy toes.

"You did not." Blood boiled in Morgan's veins.

She caught sight of Shane beside her while Matt and Scott busted out laughing.

"No fucking way. Did you really?" Scott reached his hand in the air and leaned toward Jay who obliged him with a high five.

"Yes fucking way we did. I'd give anything to have it on film. It would make us millions." Jay laughed along with Scott.

"How could you do that to her?" Morgan heard the tone of her voice, hated that she had to use it, and hated that she sounded like she was defending Dawn. No matter what, it was a cruel thing to do to anyone, no matter how much she deserved it.

"It was easy. She was drunk, just about beat your door down, fell down your stairs and knocked herself out. We called the cops, who called the ambulance, who came and carted her ass away." Phil started the story.

"And, I met her at the hospital and warned her to stay away from you and let you be happy for a change. She didn't heed my warning and parked her ass across the street from your apartment." She nudged Jay with a smile. "So, we decided to put my warning to good use and teach her ass a lesson." Rachel's smile was super bright while she added her two cents.

Morgan looked between them, praying they were lying, yet wanting to laugh her ass off at the thought of Dawn's truck sinking in a pond. Even though she felt pity, it was still a rotten thing to do.

In a blinding second, Morgan knew what she had to do. "Where is she?"

All eyes were on her now.

"She's in jail. We told the cops she was drunk as hell so I'm sure they threw her ass in the tank to sober up," Jay said and then busted out laughing again.

The finale to Morgan and Dawn played through her mind. She had her own scheme she wanted to play. She wanted this over and done today. No more Dawn and no more miserable days. She had a life to get on with, and she wanted to make sure an end was put to the old one today.

"Will someone please give me a ride to the jailhouse?" Morgan looked at Shane.

Shane hung her head with a slow shake. When no one else bothered to offer, Shane looked back up, met her gaze with a disgusted look on her face. "I'll give you a ride, but I think you should think long and hard before I do." Her eyes bore that of a very hurt person.

Morgan wanted to blurt out her plans, but knew she had to remain quiet in order to see them through to the end. She didn't want anyone to talk her out of what she wanted to do. She had to have her final say and she was damned if she was going to let Shane's hard gaze, or the hard faces of everyone there, stop her.

"I've already thought about it." She gave a firm nod. "I'd appreciate the ride."

She turned back and found disgusted looks plastered on her friends' faces. They might be cruel and heartless sometimes, but the love they held for her was shining bright right now. For them to have done all of that for her, to protect her from Dawn's hurtful ways, filled her heart with more love than she could ever know. She vowed to thank them as soon as she got back.

Matt and Scott left the living room and made their way toward the kitchen. Rachel, Phil, and Jay followed suit, giving her a few more nasty looks as they passed her.

"We'll stay here and wait for you, Shane." Scott called out.

When Morgan turned back to Shane, an icy stare had replaced the loving one she'd seen all morning. Her stomach tightened into a fist as Shane shoved past her and stomped out the front door.

She followed Shane out the door.

* * * * *

Shane drove Morgan down the streets, her heart wrenching in her chest. She thought what they did to Dawn was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. She wished she had friends who'd go to so much trouble to keep her from harm. Morgan was lucky to have them, yet too blinded by her love for Dawn to see how much they cared for her and wanted to help her.

And, after the glorious morning they'd shared, and the gut-wrenching night, for Morgan to even think about running to Dawn made Shane sick to her stomach.

She was done. There was no more fight left in her. It was time to start healing and get past this. Morgan would always belong to Dawn, no matter what. She couldn't live with that, no matter how in love she was with her.

Her body, her mind, and her soul would scream for Morgan day after day ... night after night.

"Shane, will you wait for me at the jailhouse? I really need to talk to you." Morgan's soft voice broke the tense silence.

"Do you really think that's necessary?"

"Yes, I do."

"You don't have to explain anything to me you know? You can't help how you feel."

"That's not it. I ... *dammit*." Morgan stomped her foot down on the floorboard then turned away to stare out the window. Her cheeks were flushed. Her jaw was tight and tense. "You don't understand."

"It's okay, Morgan. Don't say another word. I'd rather not hear a lie."

Morgan whipped around to stare at her. "I have to do this. My future depends on it."

The jailhouse came into view. Shane pulled into the parking lot and stopped at the front doors. As much as she wanted to drop her off and never look back, she knew she'd be sitting right here when Dawn and Morgan walked back out together. She was a pathetic moron and she knew it. But to see Morgan walk out with Dawn at her side might snap her eyes open, make her see the truth staring her in the face, and help her forget the fresh memories burning in her mind.

Morgan still watched her. "Please?"

"Hurry." Shane gritted her teeth and propped her elbow against the window. *I'm such an idiot.*

Morgan scurried out of the truck and shoved through the glass doors.

Shane gripped the steering wheel. "What the fuck am I doing? I have got to be the biggest idiot on the planet."

* * * * *

Morgan stepped inside the lobby. Bright lights spilled overhead. An officer looked up from a magazine behind the counter.

"Can I help you?" He stretched and tossed the magazine on the counter, not excited that he'd been interrupted.

"I'm here to talk to one of your prisoners."

"Name?"

"Dawn Sellers." Morgan glanced around the room while the officer pecked at the keyboard. A woman sat in one of the hard, plastic chairs. Mascara was smeared under her dark eyes and her brown, frizzy hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She stared somber eyes out over the parking lot.

The officer chuckling drew Morgan's attention back to him. "Your friend will have visitation in ten minutes. We towed her car to the impound. When she posts bail, she'll have to pay the tow fee as well as the impound fee."

Morgan nodded that she understood.

"Walk through those doors." Morgan followed the direction he was pointing. "You'll see the glass wall on your right. Each booth has a phone. They'll bring her there." He

plopped back down in his chair and pulled the magazine up to his face, blocking out the sight of Morgan.

On unsteady legs, Morgan walked toward the doors. A buzzer sounded as soon as she neared them. She turned the knob, opened the door and the buzzer stopped. The door closed with a click that sounded like a bomb exploding down the cold white hall. Morgan immediately tensed and hurried her steps down the hall.

She came to a set of glass, sectioned with a plank of wood and a phone perched on one side. She slid onto the hard chair to wait, her heart hammering in her chest with a hint of excitement. She tried to gather her thoughts as a door on the other side of the glass opened.

A tall man in a black uniform walked with Dawn in his grasp into the room. Handcuffs, a gun, and a baton were perched snugly on his hip.

Dawn wore an orange jumpsuit, her hands firmly encased in a set of shiny silver cuffs.

Morgan suppressed a laugh and met Dawn's hard stare.

Dawn sank onto the chair and picked up the phone. Morgan copied her and lifted the phone from the cradle.

"Are you going to fucking bail me out of here, or what?" Dawn screamed at her.

Morgan felt all worries flee from her heart and soul, felt the weight of them release from her body. She gave Dawn a sweet smile. "As a matter of fact, that depends on you."

"Don't fucking play games with me, Morgan. Your faggot crew will pay for what they did to me."

"Well, in that case, no, I'm not here to bail you out."

Dawn's eyes widened. "You're going to leave me here after what they did to me?"

"If I have to, yes. Because you see, they were looking out for me because I've had enough of your bullshit. I told you to stay away from me. Rachel warned you to stay away from me. You don't listen because you're going to do whatever the hell you want to do."

"That bitch can't tell me what to do." She leaned toward the glass separating them. "Do you miss me, Morgan?"

"Hell no. I can't miss a piece of scum. I only came here to give you a choice." She leaned back in the chair and crossed one arm over her chest. "If you promise to leave me alone and never bother me again, and promise that you won't seek revenge on my friends, I'll bail you out. If you refuse, then I'll leave you in here to find another way out. I'm sure one of your few hundred fucks would be more than happy to come get your ass out of here. Don't you think?"

Dawn sneered at her, teeth gritted so tight, Morgan feared they might break. Dawn opened her mouth to speak, but Morgan interrupted.

"I wasn't done. You will walk away today and never look back. My friends were only looking out for me because I'm in love and they don't want you to fuck it up for me. You've

done enough damage over the past ten years. They're through with watching it. Do we have a deal?"

"I can call any number of people to come and get me out of here. I don't need you to do it."

"You're right. And by all means, do that. All I'm saying is you've seen how far my friends will go to make sure you stay away from me. Last night was only a sample of what they're capable of doing. And that's not a threat by any means. It's just a promise because I don't love you anymore and I want you to stay the hell away from me from this day forward." Morgan took a deep breath while butterflies flapped in her gut. "Now, what's it gonna be, Dawn?"

Dawn leaned all the way to the glass. "Kiss me, Morgan." She pressed her lips to the glass.

Morgan took a long hard look at the lips flattened against the glass. Those lips she used to die for, couldn't dream of living without, and yet she couldn't stand to see them right now. Shane oozed through her mind, made her heart strum in her chest, made her gut tighten knowing she was waiting for her in the parking lot. She couldn't wait to get back to her and tell her how fucking in love with her she was.

Morgan leaned forward, never taking her eyes off of Dawn. When her face was within a foot of the glass, she brought her hand up and popped the glass where Dawn's lips rested.

Dawn didn't flinch.

God, but it felt good to be out of love with this egotistical, self-centered woman ... and in love with one that would give up her pride to sit in a parking lot and wait for only God knew what.

"It looks like I'll be seeing an awful lot of you, Dawn. It'll be my pleasure to sit back and watch the people that love me torture your ass. You already see what they are capable of doing. Please don't think I won't play a part as well. Don't forget, the cops already think you're a stalker. One more phone call and your ass will be right back in here." Morgan dropped the phone on the desk, rose from the chair and walked back down the hall with pride.

She could hear Dawn screaming through the earpiece. She stopped, turned around and met Dawn's blank stare. She couldn't hear what she was saying, nor did she want to. But, the look on Dawn's face assured her, she would never see her again.

When she turned back to the door, her heart was free at last.

She all but ran back through the doors, across the lobby and outside. Shane's truck was still parked at the curb. Morgan jumped inside, pushed across the seat and planted her lips on Shane's. She snaked her fingers through Shane's hair and felt her respond even though she didn't move a muscle.

Morgan leaned back, stared at Shane's gorgeous green eyes, and felt her heart leap into her throat. "I'm in love with you. Don't ask me how and don't ask me why, just know that I am."

Shane's eyes widened and glazed over with tears. She gave a tiny chuckle, hung her head and eased her hand over Morgan's. "Do you have any idea how long I've waited to hear those words?"

"No." Morgan smiled, hooked her fingers under Shane's chin and lifted her gaze up to meet Morgan's. "Tell me."

Morgan's heart leapt to the base of her throat as love fisted a knot in her stomach.

"I'll show you."

Shane pulled away from Morgan, yanked the truck into drive and peeled rubber leaving the empty lot.

Morgan settled against her, so happy she knew her heart would burst wide open.

* * * * *

Shane pushed open the door to the gallery and flipped on the lights. Her life, her home, her freedom from the world, surrounded her. And, the woman she was in love with stood by her side, loving her in return.

Shane couldn't be happier or any more in love.

She walked zombie-like down the hall, opened the closet door and pulled out the tall box.

She carried the bulky carton back to the lobby, lifted the framed portrait from inside, and held it at arms length. The beauty of Morgan caught her breath, wrenched her heart. Tears welled in her eyes while she leaned the frame against the counter.

Morgan stared at her, still where Shane had left her by the front door. She gave her a meek smile, set the frame on an easel facing away from Morgan, and walked back to her.

She took Morgan's hands. "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

Morgan smiled, confusion written all over her beautiful face. "I think so."

"I've never had love at first sight ... never believed it was real ... until you."

Morgan smiled as she waited for Shane to continue.

Shane gently tugged her arm, walking her slowly back to the painting. "Do you remember our meeting for the interview?"

Morgan gave her a smirk. "Yes. The one you never showed for."

"I was there, Morgan."

Morgan's eyes narrowed. "You were not."

Shane nodded. "Yes. I was. And I took one look at you ... and fell flat on my face in love."

Morgan swallowed, eyes glazing over with tears. "You did not. You're just saying that. I was there ... you never showed."

Shane stepped around to the front of the painting.

She watched Morgan's face as she caught sight of herself on canvas, trapped in her sad world, every frown, and every saddened feature of her face, frozen in time.

Morgan's hand flew to cover her mouth as tears slid down her cheeks. "That's beautiful ... and so damn sad." She turned her gaze on Shane. "I was so damn pathetic."

Morgan looked back to the canvas, reached out her hand, and ran her fingers across the painting.

"I've been in love with you from the second I laid eyes on you."

Morgan turned her gaze on Shane. "That's the most romantic thing I've ever heard." She turned and slipped into Shane's arms.

Warmth from love rushed through Shane's body as she wrapped her arms tightly around Morgan ... her love ... her future.

"I promise to never break your heart."

Morgan smiled against her cheek, releasing a sob. "You better not. I just got it back." She gave a soft sob. "I love you."

"I'm going to paint you a perfect life." Shane leaned back and looked down into Morgan's beautiful tear-stained face. "I love you, too. More than you could ever know. And, I'm ready to spend the rest of my life showing you."

Morgan crushed her with a tight squeeze. "You've already made me happy."

After a long time holding each other, crying and kissing like crazy, they settled back to stare at the painting.

Shane gave her a gentle nudge.

Morgan turned those sky-blue eyes on her, catching her breath. "You ready to go home, kick our friends out of the house, so I can show you just how much I love you?"

Morgan giggled and stepped into her. "You can show me right here."

Shane claimed her lips as they pulled at each other's clothes, and headed for the back room.



Sheri Livingston

Sheri lives in the beautiful state of South Carolina with her partner and their beautiful and bratty children.

She writes lesbian erotic romance...where sex is not behind closed doors and hot, steamy passion is at its finest. Love and seduction colliding is what she aimed for...and succeeded.

Even though fantasies and dreams roamed her mind, she never realized it was stories screaming to be told until finally giving into temptation, and writing the damn thing.

Soon, *In the Eyes of Love* was born. Following close behind is *I Dare You*, published with Cobblestone Press.

The stories continue to come to life with the pecking of a keyboard, and seem to get hotter and more enticing, with every new idea.

Visit Sheri on the Web at www.sherilivingston.com.